

*How Do You Read It?: Exegesis, Religious Coping, and Spiritual Growth*

By

*Michael R. O'Shea*

*Date: April 12, 2021*

*Approved:*

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*First Reader*

*Will Willimon*

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D.Min. Director

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Ministry in  
the Divinity School of Duke University

2021

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## Abstract

This thesis analyzes critical and non-critical approaches to the interpretation of scripture against the four psychological features of religious coping identified by Ken Pargament—differentiation, integration, flexibility, and security—to argue that an *ecclesial-critical* approach to biblical interpretation is best suited to nurture the psychological resources necessary to successfully navigate spiritual crisis and produce ongoing spiritual growth.

## **Dedication**

To all those who have contributed to my spiritual growth.

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## Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge several people who, if not for their support and encouragement, this work would not have been possible.

I want to thank the many leaders who have invested in me over the years. This project reflects the myriad ways in which I have been influenced by generous men and women of faith who, though differing in so many ways, share a deep love of God and an insatiable desire to live a faithful life. Thank you for your teaching and your model.

I want to thank the many professors who taught our DMin cohort. You expanded my vision and cultivated in me a deeper love for God and a more profound appreciation for both the gift and responsibility of leadership. I would like to especially thank Dr. Christopher Beeley and Dr. Will Willimon for their personal investment in this project. Their academic expertise and pastoral willingness to guide me through the research and writing process was invaluable.

I want to thank my parents who raised me to know God and always supported my spiritual journey, despite it taking unexpected turns. It is one of the great privileges of my life to be able to share with you a mutual love for Jesus.

I want to thank both the leadership and members of Waterville Community Church who supported this vision and through their encouragement and providing a gracious space for me to experiment with these ideas, brought it to life. I have learned from you as much as you have learned from me.

To my staff team, you are some of my closest friends and fiercest allies and I cannot thank you enough for the weight you have shouldered during my time in this program. I am a better leader because of you.

And to my wife, Kari. Thank you for agreeing to allow me to undertake this project and for encouraging me along the way. You have always supported me following my dreams and you have always seen greatness in me even when I have failed to live into it. I love you.





## Introduction

In 2019 I conducted a small ethnographic study with members of my congregation analyzing the impact of a particular approach to the interpretation of scripture on increased engagement with practices of spiritual formation. I employed a two-part methodology. The first phase of the study was a survey to establish an empirical correlation between the interpretive approach and increased engagement with practices of spiritual formation. The second phase was a focus group to discuss with certain survey participants what about the interpretive approach had been most impactful. Of the 60 survey responses I analyzed,<sup>1</sup> 88% indicated that the interpretive approach “highly influenced” their increased interest in and engagement with practices of spiritual formation. The most significant finding, however, something I did not expect, was that the focus group participants identified spiritual struggle as the vital link between biblical interpretation and spiritual growth. Every focus group participant testified, in one way or another, that learning to read the Bible differently helped them overcome some inner struggle regarding God and faith that was, at that time or at some point in the past, to blame for spiritual inertia. Their testimonies became the motivation for this project. Mary Clark Moschella writes that for pastoral ethnographers “interested in transformative growth, it is important to learn about what is working well and moving the faith community forward.”<sup>2</sup> My small study is obviously not conclusive and I do not

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<sup>1</sup> Gender: 42% male/58% female, Age: 51% +56yrs/19% 46-55/19%36-45/11% 26-35, Yrs attending WCC: 30% 10+/22% 7-10/33% 3-7/15% 1-3, Attendance Frequency: 52% weekly/37% 3-4x per mo./8% 1-2 x per mo./3% less than 1x per mo.

<sup>2</sup> Moschella, Mary Clark. *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice: An Introduction* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2008), 164.

reference here because it plays a role in this project.<sup>3</sup> I cite it because it motivated me to ask the question this thesis hopes to answer; is there an approach to the interpretation of scripture best suited to facilitate spiritual growth?

My motivation is largely pastoral. As a Christian leader I want to see those whom I lead grow into spiritual maturity. I do not believe I am alone in this. That is, I assume it is every Christian leader's desire to see people develop mature spirituality. As I understand it, this is the very purpose of Christian leadership.<sup>4</sup> And while our experience tells us that growing spiritually is a developmental process, many leaders, myself included, struggle to understand how it "works" so that we can more intentionally nurture it along. This often begins with clearly defining Christian spirituality's goal. What is the *telos* of faith? In other words, what do we mean by spiritual maturity? In the pages that follow I will answer that question as pointedly as I can. In my experience, however, my perspective is by no means universally accepted.

Once defined, however, how does one grow into Christian maturity? This is a question of spiritual formation and according to Justin Barrett Christians hold a continuum of perspectives on the topic. Some believe spiritual growth is solely the work of the Holy Spirit apart from any human involvement, like a flowing river that carries the passive traveler. Others believe the Holy Spirit initiates growth, but human beings actualize it or not based on their response, like a river that is not flowing; if the traveler hopes to move, he will have to row. Barrett considers these exclusive perspectives

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<sup>3</sup> A single congregation is an inadequate sample size. The results may reflect our particular context, history, demographics etc. Not to mention my personal involvement in the study certainly influenced the outcome.

<sup>4</sup> See Ephesians 4:11-13

"scientifically naïve and theologically worrisome," arguing instead that the "natural mechanisms," human psychology for instance, that God creates provide the framework in and through which the Holy Spirit works.<sup>5</sup> I am inclined to agree with Barrett. I believe spiritual growth is a particular aspect of psychological growth more generally. Or as Edel Bahati says it; "grace builds on nature."<sup>6</sup> In this thesis I will analyze different ways of approaching biblical interpretation against a specific aspect of human psychology—the psychology of religious coping. Staying in the river analogy, while there may be times the spiritual river flows calmly and the traveler floats effortlessly or the river stops flowing and the traveler has to do more "work," the river also contains dangerous rapids; successful navigation requires a certain psychological willingness and ability, willingness and ability shaped by how one reads scripture.

Experts who research faith and spirituality generally agree that spiritual formation is a complex phenomenon involving many variables. What is uncontested, however, at least among Christian researchers, is that a key variable is how we experience the Christian scriptures. As Will Willimon says, "The biblical text holds a privileged place in congregational conversation. As we submit to the text, we are formed and reformed as

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<sup>5</sup> Barrett, Justin, "Give up Childish Ways or Receive the Kingdom Like a Child: Spiritual Formation from a Developmental Perspective," in *Psychology and Spiritual Formation in Dialogue: Moral and Spiritual Change in Christian Perspective*, ed. Thomas Crisp, Steven Porter, and Gregg Ten Elshof (Downer's Grove: IVP Academic, 2019), 256.

<sup>6</sup> Bahati, Edel. "Psychological Aspects of Religious Formation," *African Ecclesial Review* 45, no 1 (March 2003): 30.

God's people."<sup>7</sup> In other words, any formation that is to be uniquely Christian will involve engagement with the Bible.

Not, however, merely knowing what the scriptures say. When asked by a religious lawyer what he must do to experience eternal life (think full or mature life), Jesus replied with two questions of his own, both concerning the scriptures; "What does the law of Moses say?" and "How do you read it" (Lk. 10:26 NLT)? "What does the law of Moses say?" may have been Jesus' first question but his second question, "How do you read it?", was the consequential one. The lawyer knew what the law said—"love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind and love your neighbor as yourself" (Lk. 10:27)—but his attitude toward his neighbor ("And who is my neighbor?"), which prompted Jesus' famous parable of the good Samaritan, revealed that *how he read* scripture was keeping him from experiencing the life he sought. That distinction is at the heart of this project.

To take it a step further, the lawyer's interpretation reflected an interpretive school. In other words, like all people he *learned* how to read and interpret scripture and, in his case, how he learned constrained rather than nurtured spiritual maturity. It is a warning to those of us who interpret and teach the Bible that how we teach people to read scripture can have serious consequences, for good or ill, on spiritual formation. Janet Hagberg and Robert Guelich actually suggest that one of the common features of a person's faith journey is the need to heal from trauma caused by early (negative)

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<sup>7</sup> Willimon, Will, *Leading with the Sermon: Preaching as Leadership* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2020), 155.

religious experience, experience often tied to the interpretation and application of scripture.<sup>8</sup>

In my experience, this is because how we read scripture shapes our image of God, which in turn shapes our understanding of what it means to be made in God's image, ultimately influencing how we live. As AW Tozer wrote; "What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us."<sup>9</sup> For many Christians, because of how they have been taught to read and interpret scripture, what comes into their minds when they think about God is not one, integrated image but a collection of images, often mutually exclusive, that must somehow be fit together, perhaps like trying to complete a puzzle without the aid of an image on the box. Is God the kind of God who commands people to slaughter their enemies or is God someone who wants us to forgive our enemies and pray for those who persecute us? I contend that these irreconcilable images create psychological dissonance that make it more difficult for believers to grow toward spiritual maturity; some give up on faith entirely, others simply put questions out of their minds and resolve to stay where they are. If as teachers and leaders we want people to grow into Christian maturity, all other factors being equal, I contend that we must clearly define for them what maturity is, understand how people spiritually develop as a psychological phenomenon, and provide for them an interpretive approach to

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<sup>8</sup> Robert Guelich and Julie Hagberg, *The Critical Journey: Stages in the Life of Faith* (Salem: Sheffield Publishing Company, 2005), xxiii.

<sup>9</sup> A.W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (New York: HarperCollins, 1978), 1.

scripture that reinforces the psychological resources we know allow for healthy human development more broadly.

### **What is at Stake?**

The future of the church and God's mission to reconcile all things to Godself are at stake in this. I do not mean that apart from human faithfulness God is incapable of achieving God's good ends. But we believe that God's means of achieving God's ends is to work in and through a peculiar people called the church, a living body that, like its savior, gives its life for the sake of the world. If the church cannot figure out how to raise people into Christian maturity, I fear it will continue to; 1) see them leave, 2) refuse to join, or 3) opt for more polarizing, even violent alternatives.

It is a well-established fact that people in western culture are disengaging with religious institutions at an alarming rate. In an article published in October 2019 the Pew Research Institute found that 65% of people in America identify as Christian, down from 77% in 2009, while the religiously unaffiliated—atheists, agnostics, and "nones"—continues to increase, currently at 26% of the population, up from 17% a decade ago. Both Catholic and Mainline Protestant denominations are consistently declining, people attend religious services less frequently, and younger generations identify as less Christian and less religious than older generations.<sup>10</sup> While there are certainly a myriad

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<sup>10</sup> Pew Research Center, "In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace: An update on America's changing religious landscape," [pewresearch.org](https://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/), October 17, 2019, <https://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/> (accessed May 20, 2020).

of factors causing this shift, one reason may be that how many Christians are taught to read the Bible is simply incompatible with modern ways of knowing.

Sociologists Christian Smith and Melinda Denton conducted a massive study in 2002-2003 called the National Survey on Youth and Religion. They surveyed and interviewed thousands of teenagers across the United States from different religious traditions and Christian denominations. In their book, *Soul-Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, they suggest that at least one of the reasons teenagers in particular<sup>11</sup> are leaving faith is that many of them uncritically accept the logical positivism and empiricism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. According to Smith and Denton, logical positivism and empiricism assume that "everything we legitimately hold to has beneath it an indubitable and universally accessible foundation of knowledge" through "sensory observation of the material world."<sup>12</sup> Despite living in a world where technological revolutions continue to reveal how little we know, many teenagers continue to assume that one should not commit oneself to a belief if it cannot be objectively proven through empirical evidence. Because religious faith is often "superempirical," Smith and Denton argue that these kinds of uncritical, antiquated, but powerfully held assumptions can have a "corrosive effect on religious faith and practice" for many and result in some losing faith altogether. Though Smith and Denton do not take up the issue in their book, I will suggest in this thesis that this corrosive effect is

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<sup>11</sup> One of Smith and Denton's conclusions is that teenagers are conventionalists when it comes to spirituality. That is, they happily take on the spiritual identities of their parents. That is important to note as we distinguish teenagers from adults because it is possible that the reason teenagers leave faith is simply a mirror of why adults leave faith.

<sup>12</sup> Melina Denton and Christian Smith, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 181.

most threatening among Christians who learn to read the Bible in ways that are psychologically incompatible with and even hostile toward other ways of knowing.

This is certainly not the only reason why churched people abandon religious faith. It may not even be the most influential one. But it does seem to be among the top reasons unchurched people reject religious faith. The so-called "New Atheists" (Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins, et.al) have written numerous books in the last decade attacking religious faith in general and Christian faith in particular based largely on the same assumptions of logical positivism and empiricism. Harris, for instance, in his book, *Letter to a Christian Nation*, after aggressively pitting religious ways of knowing against scientific ways of knowing, writes;

The choice before us is simple: we can either have a twenty-first century conversation about morality and human well-being—a conversation in which we avail ourselves of all the scientific insights and philosophical arguments that have accumulated in the last two thousand years of human discourse—or we can confine ourselves to a first-century conversation as it is preserved in the Bible.<sup>13</sup>

The problem Harris has with Christian faith is that it favors religious ways of knowing, often anchored in idiosyncratic ways of reading a sacred text, over scientific and philosophical ways of knowing, which can often be empirically verified. In other words, unchurched people reject religious faith because, based on how they perceive Christians view and read the Bible, it seems intellectually childish.

But it is not just incredibility that causes many to reject religious faith. It is also hypocrisy. Harris argues that if Christianity were true and that believing in the claims of

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<sup>13</sup> Sam Harris, *Letter to a Christian Nation* (New York: Vintage Books, 2008), 50.



the Bible were necessary to produce a more moral world than Christians on the whole should be more moral than their atheistic counterparts, a fact he argues to be empirically untrue. He cites the United Nation's Human Development Report from 2005 that indicated the least religious nations in the world are among the healthiest as measured by life expectancy, adult literacy, per capita income, educational attainment, gender equality, homicide rate, and infant mortality. The United States, on the other hand, which is far more religious than places like Australia or the Netherlands, is "uniquely beleaguered by high rates of homicide, abortion, teen pregnancy, sexually transmitted disease, and infant mortality," despite being among the wealthiest nations in the world.<sup>14</sup> He acknowledges that this type of data does not prove a cause and effect relationship between belief in God and societal dysfunction, his concern being only to argue that atheism is "compatible with the basic aspirations of a civil society" and therefore Christianity is unnecessary. But his broader argument is that Christianity is ultimately hypocritical; "Christians have abused, oppressed, enslaved, insulted, tormented, tortured, and killed people in the name of God for centuries," often justifying these behaviors with reference to scripture.

While the purpose of this thesis is not to take on the new atheism, on this second score they have a point. In his book, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church*, Alan Kreider argues that the pre-Constantinian church grew impressively despite significant cultural barriers not because it was focused on evangelism and mission but because;

The faith that these fishers and hunters embodied was attractive to people who were dissatisfied with their old cultural and religious habits, who felt pushed to

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<sup>14</sup> Harris, 44.

explore new possibilities, and who then encountered Christians who embodied a new manner of life that pulled them toward what the Christians called ' rebirth' into a new life.<sup>15</sup>

In Kreider's opinion, the pre-Constantinian church grew because its members were characterized by what we might call Christian maturity and that maturity was attractive to a great many in their culture. It is this same moral maturity that atheists like Harris find lacking among Christian believers, including when it comes to responding to his criticism,<sup>16</sup> and he at least associates this lack of moral maturity to the role the Bible plays in many Christian communities.<sup>17</sup> It seems clear that at least a contributing factor to many leaving the faith from the inside and still others refusing to come in from the outside is the perception of intellectual and moral immaturity among Christian believers based significantly, if not entirely, on certain ways of viewing and reading scripture.

This may not be all bad. While many people no longer identify as religious, a significant percentage still consider themselves spiritual, leaving open the door for possible reengagement with Christian faith.<sup>18</sup> Smith and Denton suggest that a positive outcome of the technological advancements in digital communication is that teenagers have easy access to a wealth of information about different religions and spiritual practices which *may* "broaden their religious horizons and kindle new spiritual

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<sup>15</sup> Alan Kreider, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church: The Improbably Rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 12.

<sup>16</sup> Harris, vii.

<sup>17</sup> Harris, vii and 23.

<sup>18</sup> In his book, *Spiritual Passages: The Psychology of Spiritual Development* (2019), Benedict Groeschel observes that people of all ages are showing renewed interest in spiritual values and teaching, arguing for the importance of a more well-informed Christian spirituality to meet that interest (98-99). He also cites Daniel Yankelovich (*New Rules: Searching for Self-Fulfillment in a World Turned Upside Down*, 1982) who makes a similar observation writing, "there are now scraps and shreds of evidence that American culture is evolving toward a new ethics of commitment."

interests.”<sup>19</sup> We can only hope. The other side to this, however, is the prospect that those who continue to identify as religious may begin opting for more polarizing, even violent expressions. In his book, *Not in God's Name: Confronting Religious Violence*, Rabbi Jonathon Sacks suggests that where the seventeenth century was a century of secularization, the 21st century will be a century of desecularization.<sup>20</sup> He reasons that as people become increasingly disenchanted by secular modernity's inability to provide meaning and purpose, the reality of globalization, made possible by the same technological advancements Smith and Denton hope may broaden user's religious horizons, may actually cater to religious extremism. Atheists like Harris seem to share the same concern. "Religion," he writes, "raises the stakes of human conflict much higher than tribalism, racism, or politics ever can" because religion alone can cast differences between groups "in terms of eternal rewards and punishments," making it possible, for instance, for college-educated, middle-class people to blow themselves up in the sincere hope of receiving rewards in paradise.<sup>21</sup>

Again, the purpose of this project is not to take on the new atheism. I reference them only because I believe they represent the feelings of many people in western culture toward religious faith, Christian faith in particular. If the Christian church cannot figure out how to raise believers in western culture into Christian maturity there is good reason to believe it will continue to see them leave, refuse to come, or opt for polarizing

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<sup>19</sup> Denton and Smith, 181.

<sup>20</sup> Jonathon Sacks, *Not in God's Name: Confronting Religious Violence* (New York: Schocken Books, 2015), 18.

<sup>21</sup> Harris, 80-83.

alternatives. And while helping people grow into Christian maturity involves a number of interrelated factors, a crucial ingredient is how leaders teach people to engage the Christian scriptures. Christian maturity is linked to *how* we read the Bible. There may not be a more significant need in the western church than to theologically reflect on its approach to scripture as it impacts spiritual formation.

### **What is the Solution?**

My basic claim is that the Christian life is a developmental journey toward conformity to Christ who IS love (1 Jn. 4:8, 18). In other words, I will argue from scripture, Christian tradition, and the psychology of religion and spirituality that the goal of Christian faith *in this life* is to become perfect in love or compassionate as God is compassionate (Lk. 6:36). Furthermore, I will argue that an inevitable and necessary aspect of this developmental journey is *crisis* and that how one navigates crisis powerfully influences whether one continues growing, stagnates, or regresses. I will attempt to show that successful navigation of crisis requires certain psychological resources and that what I will call an *ecclesial-critical* approach to biblical interpretation is best suited to nurture those resources and therefore, all other variables being equal, best suited to foster ongoing spiritual growth.

This *ecclesial-critical* model is a strategic integration of both *non-critical* and *critical* perspectives. For the purpose of this project, I will distinguish between the two historically. In other words, the difference between “critical” perspectives and “non-critical” perspectives, at least as far as this project is concerned, is the dawn of modernity and the development of literary criticism as an academic discipline. That is an important

distinction to bear in mind throughout this project because the term “non-critical” can be misleading if it communicates an unwillingness to consider certain critical questions (historical, lexical, textual, etc.) or to apply critical tools to the interpretive task. That is not what I have in mind. We will see that patristic interpreters like Origin and Saint Augustine, “non-critical” interpreters in the technical sense, did both. Why Origin and Saint Augustine should be considered “non-critical” interpreters is because their reading and interpreting of scripture was controlled by an *a priori* faith commitment concerning both the nature and purpose of scripture. That is, they read the Bible as Christian believers committed to a received faith. What makes a non-critical reading non-critical, at least as I will use the term, is that it sees the Bible as the church’s book, useful for establishing and reinforcing the church’s peculiar identity as a people of faith. The dawn of modernity and the development of literary criticism as a formal academic discipline not only made it possible for interpreters to approach the Bible as just another piece of ancient literature, something no Bible reader prior to the enlightenment would have thought to do, but demanded such an approach if it was to be considered authentically critical. The *ecclesial-critical* model I propose in this project will integrate certain convictions that characterized pre-modern, “non-critical” exegesis with aspects of “critical” exegesis. Consequently, it may be helpful to think of this *ecclesial-critical* model as specific example of what others have more generally labeled “post-critical;” an approach that takes historical-critical concerns seriously but within a broader ecclesial framework.

### Laying Out My Argument

My basic methodology for this project is to bring scripture and Christian tradition into conversation with the discipline of developmental psychology to better understand the nature of the Christian life and to identify a shared point of emphasis I can analyze against different approaches to the reading and interpretation of scripture. Though faith formation and developmental psychology have become distinct disciplines in the academy, Bruce Hindmarsh argues they should not be viewed as pre-existing, isomorphic categories.<sup>22</sup> Both are concerned with the unified person. They may differ in their respective understandings of what the human person is, something Hindmarsh argues is at the heart of being mutually beneficial,<sup>23</sup> but that does not mean there are no similarities in their respective observations regarding human development that cannot be leveraged to assist believers in spiritual growth. In fact, as Hindmarsh argues, we will see that "spiritual formation and human development coincide in a theological anthropology that understands human growth as essentially a matter of the redirection and intensification of love."<sup>24</sup> Spiritual formation and psychological development may not be coincident with one another, but they are linked. Faith formation is a psychological phenomenon and therefore inextricably linked to other types of human development and therefore it will be important for us to contextualize our understanding of spiritual

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<sup>22</sup> Bruce Hindmarsh, "Christ as End of Faith as Its Beginning: Human Development and Spiritual Formation in Theological Perspective," in *Quarterly Journal of Christian Thought and Opinion*, Vol. 51/No. 2 (Summer 2015), 16.

<sup>23</sup> Hindmarsh, 17.

<sup>24</sup> Hindmarsh, 20.

growth within a "grasp (of) the nature of the development of a living thing" more generally.<sup>25</sup>

Both sage Christian thinkers and developmental psychologists, for instance, in language germane to their respective disciplines, argue that healthy faith formation culminates in a person who is more deeply engaged with himself, others, the world, and the object of his faith. Christian thinkers would apply theological language and talk about a person being perfected in love. Developmental psychologists, on the other hand, might describe a person who is free of debilitating behaviors, better able to cope with stress, and having the capacity to form healthy, mutually beneficial relationships. Both disciplines are describing a person who is more mature in love. Both sage Christian thinkers and developmental psychologists describe a process that one cannot short-circuit and that, while expressed linearly, is more cyclical and ascending than strictly progressive. Christian theologians acknowledge that each person is unique, the role of the Holy Spirit cannot be systematized, and often develops after other developmental faculties are formed. Consequently, worshippers will generally progress through certain stages, but the process allows for reversions, digressions, and pauses. Similarly, developmental psychologists acknowledge there are certain stages of development that human beings must process through, but stages overlap and there may be long periods of time where a given person experiences prominent qualities of two different stages. Both Christian theologians and developmental psychologists indicate that for a person to

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<sup>25</sup> Benedict Groeschel, *Spiritual Passages: The Psychology of Spiritual Development* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 2019), 41.

progress from one stage to the next a type of "crisis" is required. Walter Breuggeman uses the language of orientation, disorientation, and reorientation.<sup>26</sup> Other Christian thinkers refer to this as a "desert experience" or a "dark night of the soul."

Developmental psychologists recognize too that people progress through various stages of psychological growth when their experience, context, or physical development forces a type of disorientation.

As we will see, there is significant overlap between how Christian theologians talk about spiritual formation and how developmental psychologists describe the process of faith formation in those being observed. As we drill more deeply into these areas of overlap we will borrow insights from psychological research on religion and spirituality to help shape an approach to the reading and interpretation of scripture that facilitates spiritual growth by reinforcing necessary psychological resources.

I plan to lay out my argument in four moves. The first move is to establish developmental "journey" as a reliable paradigm for describing the Christian life. For instance, Jesus' use of the language "blade, ear, and grain" in Mark 4:28 suggests three progressive stages of spiritual growth. Paul, Peter, and the author of the book of Hebrews liken spiritual growth to biological development, referring to young, inexperienced believers as "infants" and older believers as "mature."<sup>27</sup> Christian thinkers throughout the history of the church, in both the eastern and western traditions, have

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<sup>26</sup> See *Praying the Psalms: Engaging Scripture and the Life of the Spirit* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2007).

<sup>27</sup> For "infants" see 1 Cor. 3:1, 1 Cor. 14:20, and 1 Pt. 2:21. For "mature" see 1 Cor. 14:20 and Heb. 5:14.



described the Christian life using some form of journey language.<sup>28</sup> In addition, we will see that developmental psychologists who study religion and spirituality tend to view the human person as essentially in the process of becoming.

My second move will be to analyze the two essential features of this developmental journey: path and destination. Beginning with the destination, again appealing to biblical literature, church history, and developmental psychology, I intend to argue that, like all journeys, Christian spirituality is movement toward a particular destination or *telos*—conformity to the likeness of Christ who IS love. Thomas Aquinas, for instance, writes;

A thing is said to be perfect in so far as it attains its proper end, which is the ultimate perfection thereof. Now it is charity that unites us to God, who is the last end of the human mind, since "he that abideth in charity abideth in God, and God in him (1 John 4:16). Therefore, the perfection of the Christian life consists chiefly in charity.<sup>29</sup>

There are certainly different ways of thinking about the goal of the spiritual life. Origen, for instance, in his "Homily XXVII on Numbers" describes the soul's ascent as being that from earth to heaven.<sup>30</sup> While certainly not trying to minimize the importance of a believer's future hope, this project will focus on that perfection which, according to

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<sup>28</sup> Origen, in his *Prologue to the Song of Songs* famously used the three books of Solomon—Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs—to describe three stages of spiritual maturation. His insight became the basis for the "three ways" school—the way of illumination, purgation, and union—espoused by the likes of Gregory of Nyssa, John Cassian, Anselm of Canterbury, St. Bonaventure, Thomas Aquinas, Teresa of Avila, St. John of the Cross, and others. More recently thinkers like Evelyn Underhill (*Mysticism*, 1955), Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange (*Three Ages of the Interior Life*, 1947), Walter Brueggemann (*Praying the Psalms*, 2007), Benedict Groeschel (*Spiritual Passages*, 2019), and Julie Hagberg and Robert Guelich (*The Critical Journey*, 2005) have all endorsed some type of stage-like description of spiritual growth.

<sup>29</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica 2a, 2ae, q. 184 a.1.*, in *Encyclopedia Britannica: The Great Books of the Western World*, ed. Robert Maynard Hutchins (Chicago: William Benton Publishing, 1952), 629.

<sup>30</sup> Origen, "Homily XXVII on Numbers," in *Origen: An Exhortation to Martyrdom, Prayer, and Selected Works*, trans. Rowan Greer (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1979), 251.

Reginald Garrigou-Langrange, can be "attained on earth, the Christian perfection that may be realized here below."<sup>31</sup> That perfection, I will argue with Aquinas, is love.

Analyzing the nature of the path is where we will spend the bulk of our time. Because my ultimate intention is to show how particular approaches to reading and interpreting scripture may inhibit or promote a believer moving toward the desired *telos*, it is vital that we "understand" how people develop, both in general and spiritually. As I acknowledged above and will repeat throughout this project, human development, spiritual development included, is highly complex. I will not attempt in this project to argue for a universal model. What I will do, by bringing biblical literature, church history, and developmental psychology into conversation with one another, is identify and focus on a particular aspect of spiritual development shared by each discipline—the experience of crisis—and argue that how one navigates crisis is key to spiritual growth.

To better understand the experience of navigating crisis from a psychological vantage point we will turn to research in the field of religious coping. We will identify four specific psychological factors—differentiation, integrity, flexibility, and security—that psychologist Ken Pargament argues determines the degree to which religion is helpful or harmful in navigating crisis. I will then analyze two different approaches to the reading and interpreting of scripture—critical and non-critical—against these four factors to argue that a creative integration of aspects of each, what I call an *ecclesial-critical* model, is ultimately necessary for a psychologically healthy

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<sup>31</sup> Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, *The Three Ages of the Interior Life: Prelude to Eternal Life Vol. 1* (London: Herder Book Co., 1947), 144.

reading of scripture and therefore necessary for ongoing spiritual growth. The practical end of this project will be a curriculum that can be used by churches to teach growing Christians how to read the Bible in this way.

The nature of both my argument and methodology opens itself to several reasonable critiques. I will do my best to acknowledge them throughout but because they tend to group themselves under one primary concern, I thought I would address it at the outset. Human development in general and faith formation more specifically are remarkably complex phenomena. As John Newton wrote;

The manner of the Lord's work in the hearts of his people is not easily traced, though the fact is certain, and the evidence demonstrable from Scripture. In attempting to explain it we can only speak in general, and are at a loss to form such a description as shall take in the immense variety of cases which occur in the experience of believers.<sup>32</sup>

Origen said something similar in his "Homily XXVII on Numbers." There he describes the Christian life as a pilgrimage but acknowledges that "we understand these pilgrimages only dully and darkly so long as the pilgrimage lasts," conceding that the "understanding of the preacher may not be sufficient to explain it nor the capability of the listener great enough to take it in."<sup>33</sup> "The wind blows where it wants," Jesus famously said. "Just as you can hear the wind but cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going, so you cannot explain how people are born of the Spirit" (Jn. 3:8 NLT). I acknowledge at the outset that spiritual growth is a "progressive work of grace" that cannot be universally

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<sup>32</sup> John Newton, *Select Letters of John Newton* (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 2015), 18.

<sup>33</sup> Origen, "Homily XXVII on Numbers," 250-251.

systematized. I recognize that faith is mysterious and I hope to demonstrate a humility and tentativeness in light of that fact.

In addition, because human development in general and spiritual development more specifically are highly complex, no single variable, like how one reads the Bible, can be isolated and leveraged in a specific way to guarantee spiritual growth. There are simply too many other variables at play. I would never attempt an argument that ambitious. I intend, rather, to focus on one specific aspect of the spiritual journey—the experience of crisis—and suggest that based on the psychological nature of that experience, all other variables being equal, that a strategic integration of critical and non-critical interpretive principles may be most conducive to fostering ongoing spiritual growth because of how this approach nurtures differentiated, integrated, flexible, and secure religious psychology. That is not to suggest that anyone who reads and interprets the Bible in other ways has not or cannot grow into Christian maturity. Again, spiritual development is highly complex. Just as it is possible for people to grow into Christian maturity without any access to the Bible, the reality for the vast majority of Christian history, it is also possible for people to grow into Christian maturity while reading and interpreting the Bible in different ways. I will simply propose that an *ecclesial-critical* approach matches the contours of the psychology of religious coping and is therefore well-suited to equip believers to navigate experiences of crisis whereby fostering ongoing spiritual growth.

I am, of course, making some assumptions at the outset of this project. I am assuming that reading and interpreting the Christian scriptures is important to my

audience. That is, that the reading and interpreting of the Bible plays a central role in the life of the person or faith community engaging this argument. To take this assumption a step further, my argument presupposes that the Bible plays a central role in the life of the individual or faith community because it is believed to be somehow authoritative. That is, the reader believes that "what the Bible says" is intended to shape and direct life and therefore the reader has some degree of humility when reading and interpreting it. To put it perhaps more clearly, I am assuming that the reader cares "what the Bible says" and would, therefore, find value in reflecting on how one's approach to interpretation influences spiritual outcomes.

In addition to acknowledging some anticipated concerns and a couple of my own assumptions, it may be helpful at this stage to clarify a few terms that appear throughout this work. Because I am primarily concerned with spiritual growth, words like "growth," "development," and "formation" appear throughout this project. While I understand these terms are used in more technical ways in the social sciences, I will use them interchangeably to refer to the general process of someone growing over time toward Christian maturity. When I refer to "scripture" or "the Bible" I have in mind the canon of 66 books shared by both Roman Catholic and Protestant church traditions.

### **To Whom am I Writing?**

This project is primarily for those engaged in the discipleship of others, whether ordained or lay leaders. I have spent my entire career as both a non-profit director and church pastor discipling others. And while I have read several books on the topic, if I am being vulnerable, I never really took the time to think critically about what I was discipling

them toward or to research how people actual develop something like faith. Like most leaders, I imagine, I thought Christian maturity was a "you know it when you see it" kind of phenomenon and that if I just kept encouraging people to read and pray they would grow up.

After years of mixed results, I began to focus more on how I was teaching people to read the Bible. That is, I spent more time thinking about and talking about what scripture was, what it was for, and how best to interpret it. To my surprise, I began to see people growing in ways I had never seen them grow before. Unexpectedly, they did not have fewer questions, often presumed to be a sign of great faith, they had more. But their questions were not coming from a place of cynicism or doubt. They were coming from a place of deep trust and a desire to reconcile inconsistencies between their beliefs and their experiences as spiritual people in the world.

That was when I began to think more critically about the connection between our approach to scripture and the phenomenon of faith formation. To what extent is faith formation a psychological phenomenon that is, more-or-less, universal and is there a way of thinking about and approaching scripture that integrates well with that process to foster more consistent growth? That is what this project is all about and the conclusions I will draw, albeit tentative, are to assist pastors, teachers, and leaders like me to think more critically and systematically about how we engage the craft of discipleship, specifically as it relates to engaging people with the Christian scriptures.

Counselors, whether Christian or non, may also find this project helpful. During the early stages of its development I spoke with a psychologist who mentioned to me

that when engaging patients she often senses part of their struggle with faith has to do with the scriptures, but as a trained psychologist and not a biblical scholar she feels ill-equipped to approach the topic. Because this project brings the disciplines of biblical interpretation and the psychology of religion and spirituality into conversation with one another, albeit in a very limited way, it may assist counselors working with individuals on faith matters to address issues of biblical interpretation that may be at the center of their spiritual struggles.

Lastly, my thesis may be of interest to any Christian seeking to better understand the connection between spiritual disciplines, like reading the Bible, and faith formation. Not only did I spend years hoping that people would grow up if they just read their Bibles more, I also spent years hoping I would grow up by the same process. And while I certainly did grow in part from getting up every day and faithfully reading scripture, my particular way of reading scripture also led to a number of irresolvable conflicts between my professed beliefs and experiences I could not ignore, conflicts that threatened to stall my faith or derail it altogether. Fortunately, I was able to rework my approach to scripture, which opened up new vistas for growth for me. This project was born out of that personal transformation, assuming that there are many more like me looking for ways to rethink their approach to faith.

As I said earlier, if you are a Christian leader you want to see those whom you lead grow into Christian maturity. If you are a Christian, I hope you want the same for yourself. While this project does not aim to offer a comprehensive, holistic model for

spiritual growth, it does take one angle on the phenomenon of faith formation that I believe leaders and journeyers alike will find profitable.



## Chapter One Christian Spirituality as Journey

### Journey Paradigms in Scripture

To argue that the Christian life is a developmental journey feels like something that should not have to be argued. So ubiquitous is this kind of language in both the scriptures and Christian tradition it is hard to imagine anyone challenging someone depicting the Christian life in this way. It is important, however, that we begin here because how we view the Christian life informs how we engage the Christian life. Viewing the nature of the Christian life as transactional, for instance, rather than participatory, or the goal of the Christian life as leaving earth to get to heaven rather than helping bring heaven to earth will, I presume, shape a very different type of spirituality.

There are, of course, a number of ways to conceptualize Christian spirituality—that of a soldier in an army (1 Cor. 9:7, Phil. 2:25, 1 Tim. 2:3-4), a member of a body (1 Cor. 12:27, Rom. 12:5), part of a spiritual family (Lk. 8:21)—and perhaps no one metaphor captures the complexity of the reality. But there is one image that appears so consistently one might argue it functions like a meta-metaphor; *journey*. Beginning with Adam and Eve's disobedience in the garden, the biblical narrative depicts human beings as wanderers. In fact, one gets the sense that journeying is the very process by which God is putting right what has gone wrong; humans have wandered away from God and therefore must journey back home. In response to Adam and Eve's disobedience God drives them east from the garden. Not retributively, but to prevent them from eating from the tree of life and making their spiritual condition permanent (Gen. 3:22-23). This eastward migration continues with Cain after he murders Abel. God sentences Cain to a

life of *homeless wandering* (Gen. 4:12) but pledges to protect him, suggesting the journey was as necessary as it was punitive (Gen. 4:16). Eventually Cain stops wandering, settling in the land of Nod, but the settlement does not last long. No sooner does Cain settle down then evil begins to multiply, first Lamech promising seventy-seven times vengeance against anyone who harms him (Gen. 4:24), until the entire earth is described as corrupt and full of violence (Gen. 6:11). Settlement, it seems—at least premature settlement—makes the problem worse. Following the flood people once again attempt to settle by constructing the Tower of Babel and once again God intervenes to get them journeying (Gen. 11:9).

The journey paradigm continues throughout the Abraham narrative. When God initially calls Abraham, it is to leave his native country and journey toward a land he will be shown (Gen. 12:1). Abraham's obedience is described as "departing;" he *heads* for the land of Canaan, eventually arriving and setting up camp at Shechem (Gen. 12:6). From there he *travels* south and sets up camp in the hill country between Bethel and Ai (Gen. 12:8). After building an altar and worshipping God he continues *traveling* south *by stages* (Gen. 12:9). A famine forces him to travel south to Egypt (Gen. 12:10), but he does not stay long. After attempting to deceive Pharaoh he and Sarai are *escorted* out of the country (Gen. 12:20) and they *travel* back north toward the Negev (Gen. 13:1). They continue *traveling by stages* until they return to the altar between Bethel and Ai (Gen. 13:3). Abram eventually settles in the land of Canaan (Gen. 13:12).

Abraham's physical movement from one place to another parallels a spiritual journey that is also taking place. Ellen Davis suggests that while Abraham's willingness to leave his native country and travel to an unknown land demonstrates a willingness to be obedient, his deception of Pharaoh over Sarai demonstrates an inability or unwillingness to trust. It is this issue, says Davis, that God is forcing when God commands Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. According to Davis, God desires a relationship of mutual vulnerability. Vulnerability comes from the Latin root *vulnus*, which means the ability to be wounded. Trust, not just blind obedience, is the key to a relationship of shared vulnerability.<sup>1</sup> Abraham demonstrates obedience when he responds to God's initial call, but he develops trust over time by journeying with God.

The clearest journey image in the Hebrew scriptures, however, is the story of the Exodus. Interestingly, there are many parallels between Israel's journey into and out of slavery and Abraham's journey from blind obedience to trust. Israel and his sons originally arrive in Egypt because of a famine (Gen. 41:57-42:3), similar to Abraham. Just as God visited plagues upon Pharaoh for mistreating Abraham's wife (Gen. 12:17), God visits plagues upon Pharaoh for his mistreatment of the Hebrew people. Abraham and Sarai leave Egypt with great wealth (Gen. 12:16). Similarly, Exodus 12:16 says that when the Hebrew people leave Egypt they strip the Egyptians of their riches. In the same way that Abraham travels north from Egypt by stages, the Hebrew people travel from Egypt to Moab in stages. Just as Abraham and Lot divide the land and separate, the people of Israel divide up the promised-land and settle in different locations. And just as after

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Davis shared these thoughts during a class lecture on August 13, 2018 at Duke Divinity School.

dividing up the land Abraham fights a war against the allied forces of King Kedorlaomer, after dividing up the promised-land the people of Israel fight several wars against local tribes.

The point here is that just as Abraham's physical journey was truly about his spiritual journey, the Hebrew people's physical exodus from slavery in Egypt to the land of promise is also a picture of spiritual journey. They are learning to trust God just as Abraham learned to trust God. They learn to trust God when God commands them to leave Egypt. They learn to trust God at the Red Sea as the Egyptians close in on them. They learn to trust God's provision of water, bread, and meat in the wilderness. In fact, the book of Numbers frames Israel's forty years of wandering in the wilderness as punishment for refusing to trust God in the wilderness of Paran.<sup>2</sup> One gets the impression when reading the Christian Old Testament that Israel is like a developing child, growing as she journeys with God. Indeed, Old Testament authors often refer to the people of Israel as God's child. For instance, the prophet Hosea writes,

"When Israel was a child,  
I loved him,  
And I called my son out of Egypt" (Hos. 11:1 NLT).

Not only does Hosea refer to Israel as a child but connects Israel's childhood with a specific moment in their history—when God called them out of Egypt. Moses seems to hold a similar view.<sup>3</sup> So we see in the Old Testament not only journey language but developmental imagery as well. Humanity, first represented by Adam and Eve and then

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<sup>2</sup> See Numbers 14:9-12.

<sup>3</sup> See Numbers 11:12 where Moses says that God gave birth to the people of Israel and therefore God should carry them like a mother.

by Abraham and the people of Israel, is on a developmental journey toward a mature relationship with God, one characterized by trust and mutual vulnerability.

The language of developmental journey continues throughout the New Testament. In his parable of the growing seed Jesus likens the growth of the kingdom of God, either in the world or in the life of the individual believer, to the three stages of a plant;

The Kingdom of God is like a farmer who scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, while he is asleep or awake, the seed sprouts and grows, but he does not understand how it happens. The earth produces the crops on its own. First a leaf blade pushes through, then the heads of wheat are formed, and finally the grain ripens (Mk. 4:26-28 NLT).

The image of growth and bearing fruit appears regularly in Jesus' teaching. In Mark 11 he curses a fig tree because it refuses to bear fruit. It is clear from the structure of Mark's chapter that the fig tree is meant to represent the people of Israel who refuse to grow into spiritual maturity. Similarly, in Luke 13 Jesus tells a parable of a man who plants a fig tree. For three years the tree fails to produce fruit. Frustrated, he decides to cut it down, the action delayed for an additional year by a gardener who holds out hope that it may yet bear proper fruit with the right intervention. Again, it is fairly clear that the tree represents people who should be spiritually mature but are not.

Catholic theologian Reginald Garrigou-Lagrance organizes the disciples' life with Jesus into three developmental stages, each corresponding to a higher level of spiritual maturity. The first stage, often referred to as that of "beginners," is marked by Jesus' words, "I am with you," (Jn. 13:33) and lasts from the moment of their first calling to the Passion. The second stage, referred to as that of "proficients," is marked by Jesus' words,

"I am going away," (Jn. 8:21) and extends from the Passion to Pentecost. During this stage the disciples experience the "great privation of the sensible presence of Christ after his ascension into Heaven," forcing them to "continue their way in naked faith."<sup>4</sup> The third and final stage, that of the "perfect," is marked by Jesus' words, "when the Spirit comes," (Jn. 15:26) begins at Pentecost when the disciples experience a "third conversion...a spiritual transformation...marked by an increasingly closer union with God and deeper self-oblation, even unto martyrdom."<sup>5</sup> Learning, growing, failing, repenting, and trying again characterize the disciples' first stage of spiritual formation. Jesus is present to them as their teacher and model. During the second stage Jesus is physically absent and the disciples are forced to walk by a faith not dependent on constant sensory reinforcement. By the third stage, infused by the power of the Holy Spirit, the disciples demonstrate a faith that is thoroughly stable and the moral virtues of fortitude and mercy that compel them to take the message of Jesus to the "ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

Though not one of the original apostles, even arguing at one point he did not deserve to be called an apostle (1 Cor. 15:9), the apostle Paul claims to have been given great wisdom and understanding regarding the things of Christ and he often used developmental language to describe the Christian journey. He regularly distinguishes between "mature" and "childish" believers (see 1 Cor. 2:6, 1 Cor. 14:20), language also

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<sup>4</sup> Garrigou-Lagrance, *The Three Ages of the Interior Life*, 229-230.

<sup>5</sup> Garrigou-Lagrance, *The Three Ages of the Interior Life*, 230.

used by the author of Hebrews (Heb. 5:12-14) and the apostle Peter (1 Pt. 2:1-2).<sup>6</sup> In his letter to the church in Philippi he links the concept of maturity to that of "progress," indicating that maturity is not a static state given to some believers and not others but a quality of spirituality attained as a product of growth (Phil. 3:15). This, it seems, is why Paul labors so tirelessly to share the mysteries of the faith with others. He desires to present them perfect to God (Col. 1:28), a word that functions as a stand-in for mature. Paul understands his role as a leader in the church as one responsible for helping others to become "mature in the Lord, measuring up to the full and complete standard of Christ" (Eph. 4:13 NLT).

### **Journey Paradigms in Christian Tradition**

Early thinkers in both the Greek-speaking churches of the east and those of the Latin west, appealing to many of the biblical examples just given, also describe the Christian life as a type of developmental journey. In the east, Saint Irenaeus uses the imagery of clay in the hands of a potter to describe the Christian experience of being formed over time into the image of God. Clement of Alexandria speaks of the interior soul ascending through successive stages of growth which he refers to as spiritual mansions.<sup>7</sup> Origen, in his "Homily XXVII on Numbers," typologically interprets Israel's journey from Egypt to the promised-land to refer to the soul's spiritual pilgrimage. He writes;

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<sup>6</sup> I will add here that Peter seems to view this developmental journey as a process of growing in virtue (see 2 Pt. 1:5-8) and the author of Hebrews sounds a tone of frustration that people are not growing, suggesting that spiritual growth is not a given, like biological growth for instance, but that it is an expected feature of the Christian life as one intentionally submits to spiritual training (see Heb. 5:12-14).

<sup>7</sup> Irenaeus (*Adv. Haeres* 4.39, 5.9, 4.33), *Clement of Alexandria* (Cf. *PG. IX, 416*) in Garrigou-Lagrance, *Three Ages of the Interior Life*, 231.

Moreover, when the soul sets out from the Egypt of this life to go to the promised-land, it necessarily goes by certain roads and, as we have said, observes certain stages that were made ready with the Father from the beginning.<sup>8</sup>

He identifies 42 such stages, each corresponding to a place named along the Israelites' physical pilgrimage from Egypt to Moab. For example, because the name *Rameses* means "confused agitation" and the name *Succoth* means "tents," Origen argues that the journey from Rameses to Succoth represents the first stage in spiritual progress when the believer learns to leave behind "earthly agitation" to live as a "wanderer...unhindered and free."<sup>9</sup>

Perhaps concerned that no one would be "found worthy" to describe all 42 stages of the journey, in his *Prologue to the Song of Songs* Origen uses the three books of Solomon—Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs—to condense the spiritual pilgrimage into three stages; moral, natural and contemplative.<sup>10</sup> We will discuss these stages more in our chapter on the nature of the spiritual path, but suffice it to say here that Origen's model became the basis for the "three ways" school—the way of purgation, illumination, and union—espoused by the likes of Didymus the Blind, Saint Basil, Saint Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa, John Cassian, Anselm of Canterbury, Saint Bonaventure, Thomas Aquinas, Teresa of Avila, Saint John of the Cross, and others.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Origen, Homily XXVII on Numbers, 250.

<sup>9</sup> Origen, Homily XXVII on Numbers, 258.

<sup>10</sup> Origen, "Commentary on the Song of Songs," in Origen: An Exhortation to Martyrdom, Prayer, and Selected Works, trans. Rowan Greer (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1979), 231.

<sup>11</sup> Bruce Demarest makes this point and lists many of these thinkers in his article, "Reflections on Developmental Spirituality: Journey Paradigms and Stages," in *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care*, 1 no 2 (Fall 2008), 149-167. Garrigou-Lagrance does the same in *Three Ages of the Interior Life*, 233.



In the Latin west Saint Augustine uses similar language to describe the soul's ascent to union with God. In *De Doctrina Christiana* he says that the goal of the spiritual life is to enjoy God but to do so requires a journey of purification;

Wherefore, since it is our duty fully to enjoy the truth which lives unchangeably, and since the triune God takes counsel in this truth for the things which He has made, the soul must be purified that it may have power to perceive that light, and to rest in it when it is perceived. And let us look upon this purification as a kind of journey or voyage to our native land. For it is not by change of place that we can come nearer to Him who is in every place, but by the cultivation of pure desires and virtuous habits.<sup>12</sup>

Many of the stages from Origen's "Homily XXVII on Numbers" likewise concern the cultivation of virtue as the means by which the soul perceives God. As the soul passes from one stage to another, growing in virtue, it gains an "increase of enlightenment until it grows accustomed to the Light Himself...and can endure looking upon him and bear the splendor of His marvelous majesty."<sup>13</sup>

In his *Summa Theologica*, Saint Thomas Aquinas compares the three stages of the spiritual life—beginners, proficients, and the perfect—to three stages of biological/psychological development—childhood, adolescence, and adulthood.<sup>14</sup> We will return to Thomas' comparison when we consider the psychological dimensions of spiritual formation, specifically as it relates to the struggles that accompany movement from one stage to the next. Just as humans experience struggles associated with the movement from childhood to adolescence and from adolescence to young adulthood, many Christian thinkers have noted that struggles also accompany movement from one

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<sup>12</sup> Augustine of Hippo, *De Doctrina Christiana* (1.10.10), 627.

<sup>13</sup> Origen, "Homily XXVII on Numbers," 252.

<sup>14</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* (2a, 2ae, q. 24 a.9.), 496-497.

spiritual age to another. Origen, for example, notes how often the believer must pass through temptation if he hopes to develop strong faith. Saint John of the Cross identifies two specific struggles, what he calls the “passive purification of the senses,” which is associated with the movement from the way of purgation to the way of illumination, and the “passive purgation of the spirit,” which accompanies movement from the way of illumination to the way of contemplation.

This is important for our purposes because an essential component of my primary argument is that how maturing believers navigate these seasons of struggle determines the quality of their spiritual formation. It is here where I will argue that how one reads the Bible can contribute to believers progressing to higher stages of faith, confine them to lives of immaturity, or derail their faith entirely. As I have already noted, not only does how one reads the Bible inform, if not determine, one's image of God and one's understanding of the goal of the spiritual life, as we consider psychological research in the field of religion and spirituality I will also argue that how one reads the Bible helps to shape a believer's religious psychology, which functions like a bank of resources one draws from to navigate challenging experiences like those associated with movement from one faith stage to another.

The Christian tradition is not limited to three-stage models. Many thinkers propose models of various stage lengths. The Benedictine monk Bernard of Clairvaux, for instance, argues that believers progress through four stages—what he calls the four stages of love; 1) love of self for self, 2) love of God for self, 3) love of God for God, and 4)

love of self for God.<sup>15</sup> More recently, Janet Hagberg and Robert Guelich propose six stages; 1) recognition of God, 2) life of discipleship, 3) productive life, 4) journey inward, 5) journey outward, and 6) life of love.<sup>16</sup> The number of spiritual stages described by Christian thinkers is not essentially important, nor is it important at this point to make any claims regarding the nature of these stages or how people progress from one to another. What is important at this point is to note that viewing the Christian life as a type of developmental journey is justified both biblically and by a broad sampling of Christian tradition. As Bruce Demarest says, "Since as unified beings we develop physically, intellectually, morally, socially, etc." through stages "we should not be surprised that human spiritual development likewise unfolds incrementally and possibly in identifiable seasons, phases or stages."<sup>17</sup> To make the case I aim to make in this project I do not need to endorse any particular model and I do not intend to do so. I need only for the reader to accept that the Christian life ought to be thought of as a type of developmental journey toward some destination that we are, for now, simply calling maturity. Several writers, both Christian theologians and secular psychologists, raise reasonable objections to the claim that Christian spirituality progresses linearly through discreet stages, arguing that in its systematization of the spiritual life such language oversimplifies what is a mystery of God's grace. I noted this objection in my introduction and we will now discuss it in more depth as we consider what developmental psychologists have to say about spiritual growth.

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<sup>15</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux, *On Loving God* (Pickerington: Beloved Publishing, 2014).

<sup>16</sup> Guelich and Hagberg, *The Critical Journey: Stages in the Life of Faith*, 17.

<sup>17</sup> Demarest, "Reflections on Developmental Spirituality: Journey Paradigms and Stages," 153.

## Journey Paradigms in the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality

Because faith formation concerns faith it is naturally the domain and preoccupation of Christian theologians, thinkers, and writers. But as an aspect of human development, it also falls within the purview of psychology—the discipline concerned with human development more broadly. Psychologists have always been interested in religion and spirituality as central to the human experience,<sup>18</sup> acknowledging religion to be "a psychological force that can influence the outcome of the lives of individuals."<sup>19</sup> One of the first social scientists to take a cognitive/structural approach to religion was David Elkind. In a study focusing on children's religious cognition Elkind concludes that religious cognition follows a Piagetian trajectory from concrete, egocentric thinking about topics like God and prayer to more abstract and socio-centric thought,<sup>20</sup> suggesting a stage-like progression of faith development. It was not until 1981, however, that a Methodist minister and clinical psychologist named James Fowler offered a comprehensive stage-based theory of faith-formation in a book entitled, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*.

Fowler argues that human beings progress through seven discernible stages of faith; Undifferentiated, Intuitive-Projective, Mythic-Literal, Synthetic-Conventional,

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<sup>18</sup> Chris Boyatzis and Pamela King, "The Nature and Functions of Religious and Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence," in the *Handbook of Child Psychology and Developmental Science: Socioemotional Processes* Vol. 3, ed. Richard M. Lerner (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons Inc., 2015), 975 cite William James' (1902/1982) "deep exploration of religious and spiritual experience and Freud's (1927/1961) "dismissal of religion as a universal neurosis" as early examples.

<sup>19</sup> Laura DeHaan, Chelsea Schnabelrauch, and Julie Yonker, "The relationship between spirituality and religiosity on psychological outcomes in adolescents and emerging adults: A meta-analytic review," in *Journal of Adolescence* 35 (2012), 299.

<sup>20</sup> Chris Boyatzis and Pamela King, "The Nature and Functions of Religious and Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence," 981.

Individuative-Reflective, Conjunctive, and Universalizing. Fowler defines faith as an individual's "ultimate concern."<sup>21</sup> He prefers a broad definition because, borrowing from thinkers like Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich, he believes that faith is a "universal human concern."<sup>22</sup> In his view, faith cannot be restricted to religious commitment and should not be reduced to mere belief. Faith is a "person's way of seeing him- or herself in relation to others against a background of shared meaning and purpose."<sup>23</sup> Faith as "ultimate concern" is the universal human response to the fact that all human beings "need purpose and priorities,"<sup>24</sup> "some grasp on the big picture,"<sup>25</sup> and are "concerned with how to put our lives together and with what will make life worth living."<sup>26</sup> Fowler acknowledges, however, that faith must have an object, what he refers to as a "center of value and power."<sup>27</sup> Again, he prefers a broad definition so as not to reduce faith to religious belief, but Fowler refers to a person's center of value and power as, by definition, "transcendent,"<sup>28</sup> and therefore refines his definition of faith as a "relation of trust in and loyalty to" this transcendent center of value and power.<sup>29</sup> According to Fowler, faith develops over time as an individual places greater trust in and pledges greater loyalty to this transcendent object and that this progression can be described as stages having discernible and somewhat distinct characteristics. Fowler's research

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<sup>21</sup> James Fowler, *Stage of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (New York: Harper One, 1981), 4.

<sup>22</sup> James Fowler, *Stage of Faith*, 5.

<sup>23</sup> James Fowler, *Stage of Faith*, 4.

<sup>24</sup> James Fowler, *Stage of Faith*, 4.

<sup>25</sup> James Fowler, *Stage of Faith*, 4.

<sup>26</sup> James Fowler, *Stage of Faith*, 5.

<sup>27</sup> James Fowler, *Stage of Faith*, 14.

<sup>28</sup> James Fowler, *Stage of Faith*, 11.

<sup>29</sup> James Fowler, *Stage of Faith*, 11.

certainly correlates well with both revelation and tradition and, not surprisingly, Fowler acknowledges that while he believes his model to be universal, it does describe what would appropriately be labeled "radical monotheism."<sup>30</sup>

The most recent research in the field of the psychology of religion, however, suggests that faith development is too complex to be reduced to a "grand theory,"<sup>31</sup> criticizing stage models for "failing to capture the diversity of faith at any one age, especially the unevenness and nonlinear nature of faith progression"<sup>32</sup> and arguing that "an obsession with stages impedes our understanding of both the gradualness and the complexity and uniqueness of individual religious development."<sup>33</sup> Some studies, for instance, show concrete and abstract thought may exist simultaneously in an individual (Wooley, 2000), challenging Elkind's Piagetian assumption that people develop from one to the other. Other studies argue that stage-theory wrongly assumes children are limited to less mature forms of faith (Balswick, King, and Reimer, 2005).<sup>34</sup> Chris Boyatzis argues that even the subjects of Fowler's study exhibit characteristics of multiple stages, seemingly invalidating any neat, linear conceptualization.<sup>35</sup> This is an important critique. How we think about how faith develops in people influences how we as spiritual leaders and caregivers help that development along. Boyatzis suggests that, at least when it

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<sup>30</sup> James Fowler, *Stage of Faith*, 204.

<sup>31</sup> Boyatzis and King, "The Nature and Functions of Religious and Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence," 980.

<sup>32</sup> Boyatzis and King, "The Nature and Functions of Religious and Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence," 982.

<sup>33</sup> Chris Boyatzis, "Examining Religious and Spiritual Development During Childhood and Adolescents" in *The International Handbook of Education for Spirituality, Care, and Well-Being*, ed. Marian de Souza (New York: Spring Publishing, 2009), 66.

<sup>34</sup> Boyatzis and King, "The Nature and Functions of Religious and Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence," 981-982.

<sup>35</sup> Boyatzis, "Examining Religious and Spiritual Development During Childhood and Adolescents," 65.

comes to understanding spiritual development in children, "stage theory has constrained our understanding."<sup>36</sup>

According to Boyatzis and King the most current research in the field of the psychology of religion and spirituality, at least regarding adolescent spirituality, endorses models built on a what they call a "relational developmental systems perspective."<sup>37</sup> In this view, "religious and spiritual development occur through ongoing transactions between individuals and their multiple socio-cultural contexts." In other words, ontogeny "happens" in the context of relationships; "relationality is central to spirituality."<sup>38</sup> Relational developmental systems theory does not ignore intrapersonal psychological concerns like attachment and cognition but seeks to understand the development of these "key psychological processes" as products of how individuals relate to their surrounding environment.<sup>39</sup> This approach recognizes that the complexity of spiritual development cannot be reduced to a strictly intrapersonal, linear, largely cognitive explanation but involves both "interactions *within* the individual and *between* individual and context."<sup>40</sup> This conviction is central to Boyatzis and King's own conceptualization of spiritual growth, what they call *reciprocating spirituality*. In their model, "spiritual development involves the growing capacity to transcend the self," which

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<sup>36</sup> Boyatzis, "Examining Religious and Spiritual Development During Childhood and Adolescents," 66.

<sup>37</sup> Boyatzis and King, "The Nature and Functions of Religious and Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence," 983.

<sup>38</sup> Boyatzis and King, "The Nature and Functions of Religious and Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence," 983.

<sup>39</sup> Boyatzis and King, "The Nature and Functions of Religious and Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence," 984.

<sup>40</sup> Boyatzis and King, "The Nature and Functions of Religious and Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence," 983.

requires reciprocating growth in capacities that both enable the individual to transcend the self (*between* individual and context) as well as increase in self-knowledge and understanding (*within* the self).<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, this reciprocating growth happens through reciprocating relationship. More than just relational spirituality, their reciprocating model stresses the importance of bidirectional interaction, influence that goes both ways.

Researchers who endorse a relational developmental model may be drawing too stark a line between their theories and those of their stage-advocating colleagues. Fowler, for instance, includes "social and relational dimensions" in his model, acknowledging that faith forms within "covenantal patterns."<sup>42</sup> In fact, he argues that it is one's community of faith that often limits an individual's faith development by establishing what he calls a "modal developmental level."<sup>43</sup> In effect, a "modal developmental level" is a faith stage where the community as a whole tends to function optimally and therefore serves as a tacit ceiling, preventing any higher development within the community. So Fowler's stage theory does not deny the importance of a "social ecology." In addition, while Fowler's stages are progressive—each stage building on capacities developed in previous stages—he does not suggest they are neatly linear, acknowledging the potential for overlap, regression, and premature "equilibrium." He also acknowledges that even subjects of his own study exhibit characteristics of different

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<sup>41</sup> Boyatzis and King, "The Nature and Functions of Religious and Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence," 984.

<sup>42</sup> Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 92.

<sup>43</sup> Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 294.



stages and he does not go so far as to argue that spiritual growth advances lockstep with other types of development. In fact, he concedes that few people, even those who would otherwise be considered psychologically mature, ever reach what he calls “universalizing faith.” In short, Fowler’s theory seems to acknowledge faith’s ineffability, perhaps more than his critics care to acknowledge. Stage-theorists may need to revise their models to more substantially account for complex socialization, but models based on a relational systems perspective do not entirely delegitimize stage paradigms.

It seems that what contemporary psychologists of religion and spirituality are pushing against when they critique stage theory *as a model* is the suggestion that spiritual development neatly parallels other aspects of psychological or biological growth over time. As if adolescents going through puberty will necessarily begin making their faith system the object of critical scrutiny<sup>44</sup> or that people in late adulthood will, by definition, concern themselves with issues of overall meaning and purpose.<sup>45</sup> So perhaps we should take Bruce Demarest's suggestion and consider stage-theory less a model and more a paradigm. Models, by definition, suggest a systematization that promises repeatable patterns, which we have already acknowledged cannot account for the idiosyncratic nature of individual spiritual growth. A paradigm, on the other hand, may attempt to identify and explain patterns based on "set convictions," but does so flexibly, allowing it to "respect elements of mystery" and account for existential experience.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Fowler argues this is the step required for individuals to move from synthetic conventional to individuated-reflective faith.

<sup>45</sup> Something Benedict Groeschel, borrowing from the work of Erik Erikson, argues is a trademark of psychological adulthood.

<sup>46</sup> Demarest, "Reflections on Developmental Spirituality: Journey Paradigms and Stages," 150-151.

There is no “one brand fits all” pattern of growth that accommodates every saint in every respect. Since the sovereign God deals with His children uniquely (within, of course, the parameters of the Gospel), no two saints travel identical paths. With God, as Friedrich von Hügel (1852-1925) stated, there are no dittos; We all take the same journey and must pass through similar stages and ways. But like travelers across a continent, we have different experiences of the same reality.<sup>47</sup>

In other words, it is reasonable to assume that individuals will progress through what might be fairly described as similar stages, but that they will not necessarily do so in any universal, scientifically predictable way. In addition, the "stages" are "not linear and rigid," but might be represented as “upward trending spiral movements that permit digressions, reversions, stopping places, and advances on the way.”<sup>48</sup>

Taken together, what the body of psychological research on religion and spirituality seems to agree upon is that faith is a psychological phenomenon and that, however defined, develops over time. It is clear that spiritual development may be analogous to other types of biopsychosocial growth (e.g. childhood, adolescence, adulthood) but is not coincident with them. Stage theories such as Fowler's tend to emphasize spiritual progression's cognitive dimension while more recent research focuses on the multidimensional and relational quality of spiritual growth. What these theorists agree upon, however, is that spirituality does follow a "developmental trajectory" toward a particular end,<sup>49</sup> which we will see closely parallels the *telos* of faith proposed by Christian revelation and tradition. It is to that topic that we now turn.

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<sup>47</sup> Demarest, "Reflections on Developmental Spirituality: Journey Paradigms and Stages," 167.

<sup>48</sup> Demarest, "Reflections on Developmental Spirituality: Journey Paradigms and Stages," 149.

<sup>49</sup> Boyatzis and King, "The Nature and Functions of Religious and Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence," 984.

## Chapter Two

### The Nature of the Journey: Destination

It has been said that if you do not know where you are going any path will get you there. Sadly, in my experience as a pastor that is the way many laypeople approach faith and the way many spiritual leaders approach leading. To what end do we walk the road of faith? Where does the journey lead, or where is the journey supposed to lead? *Is it* supposed to lead somewhere? Many operate as if faith has no specific destination, no objective point, no *telos*. Judging by many, faith is little more than holding certain beliefs, the ultimate point of which is to help us along in life. But if faith is a journey it must lead somewhere, for one of the defining characteristics of a journey is its destination. The destination may be a return to the place where the journey began, a place the journeyer never anticipated, or precisely where one intended to go but, regardless, intentional or not, anticipated or otherwise, a journey has a destination, or it is not a journey; it is just wandering. The spiritual journey is no different.

Others, however, perceive they know precisely what the goal of the spiritual life is and they know exactly how to get there. They are convinced that the goal of the spiritual life is to secure a spot in an afterlife paradise. Faith is essentially transactional. If we believe "A" or do "B" we get "C," in this case heaven, or avoid getting "D," in this case hell. To be clear, the hope Christians have for life in the age to come is an essential aspect of faith. The apostle Paul says that if our hope in Christ is only for this life, we are to be pitied more than anyone in the world (1 Cor. 15:19). I do not want to devalue eternal life as an appropriate goal of Christian spirituality. Many of the great writers of the early church spoke about the spiritual journey in these terms. For example, Origen,

in his "Homily XXVII on Numbers," which I referenced earlier, says that the 42 stages of Israel's journey from Egypt to Moab are stages 'by which the soul journeys from earth to heaven."

But as we have seen in the numerous examples given above, when the biblical authors and great writers of Christian tradition employ journey language they are not always, and often rarely, referring to how to secure one's preferred place in the age to come. When Jesus speaks about the kingdom of God growing like a plant, "First a leaf blade pushes through, then the heads of wheat are formed, and finally the grain ripens" (Mk. 4:26-28 NLT), he is not talking about how to get to heaven when you die but how the kingdom grows, either in the world or in the life of the believer. Again, Abraham's journey, which is a precursor to Israel's journey, is about learning to trust God so as to live more faithfully with God. The three ways school pioneered by Origen and accepted by so many later Christian thinkers is not about leaving earth to get to heaven but about engaging a process whereby one experiences spiritual union with God that results in conformity to the likeness of Christ—"to measure up to the full and complete standard of Christ" (Eph. 4:13 NLT).

We need to distinguish between what Garrigou-Lagrange calls the "end of the interior life," in other words the end of our spiritual journey here on earth, and the "final end." The final end is eternal life, eternal union with God in the age to come when the believer will know as he is fully known (1 Cor. 13:12). But the end of the interior life, that is the journey of Christian faith, what Lagrange calls "Christian perfection," is what "may

be realized here below."<sup>1</sup> The *ultimate end* of Christian faith may be life in the age to come. What is the *penultimate end*? We walk the road of faith in this life, "here below." Is it not supposed to lead somewhere *in this life*? Again, turning to the witness of scripture and the great writers of the Christian tradition I believe the answer is yes.

Garrigou-Lagrance suggests that throughout human history three different "ideals of human perfection...tend to reappear."<sup>2</sup> The first is fortitude or courage. "To make human perfection consist above all in fortitude, is the idea of a warrior, a soldier, an explorer, or an aviator." It is the vision espoused by the "barbarian races." Much of the human experience, especially in ancient times, is characterized by suffering and toil. Fortitude is the willingness to embrace difficulty, to face circumstances that require great energy. The Christian life demands patience and longsuffering. Fortitude is key. And yet, fortitude is not primary. Garrigou-Lagrance points out that even the greatest example of fortitude in the Christian life, martyrdom, is not a pure act of courage but an act of courage motivated by something more fundamental.<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps then the ideal of human perfection is wisdom, as espoused by much of Greek philosophy. Garrigou-Lagrance notes that, according to Greek philosophers, the distinguishing feature of man is his intellect and therefore human perfection lies in the perfecting of the intellect, which consists in the knowledge or contemplation of the sovereign good.<sup>4</sup> And while contemplating the sovereign good may cause the

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<sup>1</sup> Garrigou- Lagrange, *Three Ages of the Interior Life*, 144.

<sup>2</sup> Garrigou- Lagrange, *Three Ages of the Interior Life*, 145.

<sup>3</sup> Garrigou- Lagrange, *Three Ages of the Interior Life*, 145-146.

<sup>4</sup> Garrigou- Lagrange, *Three Ages of the Interior Life*, 147.

philosopher to love the sovereign good, as Garrigou-Lagrange points out was Plato's intent, it does not always turn out that way. It is possible for someone to be a good thinker but a bad person. As the apostle Paul warns the believers in Corinth, speculative knowledge can "puff up" rather than "build up" (1 Cor. 8:1).

Love, Paul says, not fortitude or wisdom, is what builds up. Love is what Paul has in mind when he envisions believers becoming "mature in the Lord, measuring up to the full standard of Christ" (Eph. 4:13). He says as much later in the same passage. As leaders do their part to help believers grow into Christian maturity the entire body grows and becomes "full of love" (Eph. 4:16). In Colossians 3 he tells the Colossians to put on Christian character like clothing; "clothe yourselves in tenderhearted mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience" (Col. 3:12). Above all of these virtues, however, they are to put on love (Col. 3:14). Love is the outer garment. Love is what binds people together in perfect harmony. Of the "theological virtues" that will last forever—faith, hope, and love—love is the greatest (1 Cor. 13:11-13). The ultimate goal of Christian faith may be perfect union with God in the age to come, but the penultimate goal, the goal that can be realized "here below," the destination that is our concern in this project, is achieving a type of union with God that results in the believer becoming perfect in love.

That is because we are made in the image of God (Gen. 1:26) and God's essential nature, what it is we are created to reflect, is love. The German Cardinal, Walter Kasper, in his book, *Mercy: The Essence of the Gospel and the Key to Christian Life*, argues, not

surprisingly given the book's title, that mercy is God's essential nature.<sup>5</sup> He says that mercy is often treated by theologians as but one of God's attributes, often only after highlighting those attributes that derive from metaphysical considerations. Mercy, however, an attribute not derived from metaphysics but from God's concrete self-revelation in history, is God's essence.<sup>6</sup>

The fulfillment of God's self-revelation in history is the incarnation. Jesus is the visible image of the invisible God (Col. 1:15), the fullness of God in bodily form (Col. 2:9). Jesus expresses the very character of God (Heb. 1:3). And what is the character that Jesus reveals? In his Christ-hymn in Philippians 2 the apostle Paul says that Jesus, though being in very nature God, did not cling to his divine prerogatives but emptied himself (*kenoo*). Paul is not just describing a one-off act of humility on the part of the second person of the Godhead. He is expressing God's ontology. According to revelation and Christian tradition God reveals Godself to us as a relationship of persons; Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. "Let us make human beings in *our* image, to be like *us*" (Gen. 1:26). The essence of healthy relationship is self-giving or self-emptying, each party submitting to the other. The Godhead is the ground of relationship. Not *a* relationship but relationship as such. In other words, the relationship between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is kenotic by definition. The apostle John simply states it as, "God is love" (1 Jn. 4:8, 16). God is not

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<sup>5</sup> Walter Kasper, *Mercy: The Essence of the Gospel and the Key to Christian Life* (New York: Paulist Press, 2013), 51.

<sup>6</sup> Walter Kasper, *Mercy: The Essence of the Gospel and the Key to Christian Life* (New York: Paulist Press, 2013), 10, 11, 50.

just *loving* but love as such. "For what preserves the glorious and ineffable Unity of the blessed Trinity," asks Bernard of Clairveaux, "except love?"<sup>7</sup>

To be made in the image of this God is to reflect this same self-emptying, self-giving love in our lives. As Edel Bahati says;

Jesus fulfilled his Father's will with total submission. This is the "self-giving," the "self-emptying" — the kenosis required in religious obedience. It is a willingness to make sacrifices and accept the call of the community for mission. It is a call to forego one's personal interests and comforts, to go to places one would not have liked to go and drain one's whole life for others. Obedience is self-emptying — it is being at the disposal of God's will and use in mission.<sup>8</sup>

Matthew Drever says something similar. He notes that human love depends on the nature of divine love because God is the origin of human persons and argues that in Augustine the nature of God's love must be referred to the "relation of the Trinitarian persons;" a love that "gifts without loss, where the Father is himself principium precisely in giving himself completely and eternally to the Son and Spirit."<sup>9</sup> God's ontology is kenotic and therefore that love that resides in us, not "engrained within the structure of our being or as an abstract principle in which we participate," but "mediated through Christ within the person of the Spirit"<sup>10</sup> is this same self-emptying, what we would otherwise call "love" or "charity."

According to Jesus, growing into this self-emptying nature is the end or goal of faith. In his famous Sermon on the Mount, he tells his disciples they must become perfect as their heavenly Father is perfect (Mt. 5:48). Matthew uses the Greek word,

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<sup>7</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux, *On Loving God*, 37

<sup>8</sup> Bahati, "Psychological Aspects of Religious Formation," 36-37.

<sup>9</sup> Matthew Drever, "Loving God in and through the self: Trinitarian love in St. Augustine," in the *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology* Vol. 78, No. 1-2, (2017), 11.

<sup>10</sup> Drever, "Loving God in and through the self: Trinitarian love in St. Augustine," 11.



*teleios*, which refers to ends or completion. The end or completion of the Christian journey is to become as God is. Luke clarifies the command by substituting the word merciful (*oiktirmon*) for perfect (Lk. 6:36). The end or goal of faith is to become like God, merciful, or "full of love." And as Charles Koa points out, *teleios* is the closest Greek equivalent of the English word "maturity."<sup>11</sup>

To reach Christian maturity then is to become perfect in love. In his letter to the church in Galatia Paul describes the law as a guardian or teacher (*paidagogos*). Its role was to protect people until the better way of faith was made available through Christ (Gal. 3:23). When children are young, incapable of caring for themselves, they need clear rules and strict consequences. This is for their protection. Rules and consequences function to keep them safe as they grow. The hope, however, is that when they are grown they will have learned to live by a higher standard than simply that of laws and consequences. If the only reason a grown adult refrains from lying or cheating or stealing is because a rule says he should not or because he might get caught and punished, that might be better than the alternative, but we would not refer to him as morally mature.

To offer an example, I live in a residential neighborhood teeming with young children. The specific street on which I live connects two much busier arteries in our community's street network. Consequently, drivers often cut through our neighborhood to get from one to the other. The posted speed limit on our street is twenty-five miles-per-hour, which drivers daily ignore. To drive forty-five mph through a neighborhood

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<sup>11</sup> Charles Koa, "Identity, Faith, and Maturity," in the *Journal of Psychology & Theology*, 3 no 1 (Winter 1975), 42.

where at any moment a child could run out into the street is morally reckless. The person who abides by the speed limit, but only because it is a law and if he does not he may get pulled over and given a ticket, is certainly better than the person who wantonly disregards the law, but we might say is still not morally mature. True maturity would be the person who, upon entering the neighborhood, is wise enough to conclude that families reside here and self-governs his speed out of concern for the safety and well-being of the residents, especially children. Love of one's neighbor is the mark of maturity.

Jesus says love of God measured by love of neighbor is the greatest commandment (Mk. 12:30) and why Paul says love of neighbor "fulfills the requirements of God's law" (Rom. 13:8). Those who have grown to live lives according to the fruit of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control—require no law to govern them (Gal. 5:22-23). They will not lie, cheat, or steal, not because a law tells them they should not or because they may get caught and punished, but because they recognize the harm these behaviors cause to others and, having grown into mature love, are simply no longer constitutionally capable of them. But mature love goes even further. Love may be the fulfillment of the law because love does no harm, but as Soren Kierkegaard argues, obeying the law does not fulfill love.<sup>12</sup> Jesus did not simply tell his disciples to love God and their neighbor. He put a finer point to it. He gave them the new commandment to love one another as he had loved them

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<sup>12</sup> Soren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, trans. Howard and Edna Hong (New York: Harper Perennial, 2009), 132.

(Jn. 13:34). This brings us back to the self-emptying, kenotic, sacrificial love that is God's very essence and is therefore, as creatures made in God's image, meant to be ours as well.

The journey that humanity has been on since the garden, the journey of the church as an extension of Israel, the journey that every individual is called to travel is the spiritual journey toward the realization of our created nature, to reflect the nature of the God in whose image we are made. To borrow language from the apostle Peter; to "become partakers of the divine nature" (2 Pt. 1:4). In fact, we might say, as many Christian theologians have, that journey toward this union with God is the very essence of what it means to be human. In his book, *That All Shall Be Saved*, David Bentley Hart argues that "we are finite beings in a state of becoming, and in us there is nothing but action, dynamism, and emergence into a fuller (or a retreat into a more impoverished) existence."<sup>13</sup> As rational creatures, every decision we make is toward what we perceive to be our good. We may, of course, be deceived in our choice, but the very definition of rationality assumes that we seek what we do because in our finite, limited capacity we perceive it to be a proximate good. Because, however, God is the ultimate good, every decision to pursue a proximate good is ultimately a decision to pursue the very ground of goodness as such, God. In other words, we exist only in the "act of moral and ontological desire for the Good."<sup>14</sup> What it means to be human is to journey toward union with the Good wherein we realize the perfection of our design, love.

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<sup>13</sup> David Bentley Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved: Heaven, Hell, and Universal Salvation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), 153.

<sup>14</sup> Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved*, 165.

This is what the great Christian writers predominantly have in mind when they talk about the spiritual life as a developmental journey. For instance, earlier I mentioned Origen's use of the three books of Solomon—Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs—as a condensation of the spiritual journey into three basic stages; moral, natural, and contemplative. The book of Proverbs corresponds to the moral stage of development. This is spiritual childhood where "an honorable manner of life is equipped and habits conducive to virtue are prepared."<sup>15</sup> The moral stage provides obedience training that equips the developing believer with the basic character traits necessary for higher levels of growth. The book of Ecclesiastes represents the natural stage of development. In this stage the believer begins to consider the nature of things, distinguishing between those things that are useful and necessary from those that are empty and vain. The effect is the abandonment of vanity, which is ultimately associated with the corporeal and corruptible, and the pursuit of what is useful and right, namely God.<sup>16</sup> This is spiritual adolescence when the believer begins to experience divine illumination and based on that illumination more consciously chooses the spiritual path. Origen associates the third and final stage—the contemplative stage—with the book of Song of Songs. He views Song of Songs as a wedding song written in the form of a play recited by a bride betrothed to a bridegroom for whom she burns with love.<sup>17</sup> The bridegroom is the Word of God, Jesus, and the bride is either the individual soul or the church. Spiritual

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<sup>15</sup> Origen, "The Prologue to the Commentary on the Song of Songs," in *Origen: An Exhortation to Martyrdom, Prayer, and Selected Works*, trans. Rowan Greer (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1979), 231.

<sup>16</sup> Origen, "The Prologue to the Commentary on the Song of Songs," 232.

<sup>17</sup> Origen, "The Prologue to the Commentary on the Song of Songs," 217.

adulthood is characterized by love. With moral virtues in place and divine illumination having convinced the growing believer of truth and goodness, maturity is marked by a voluntary giving and receiving of love.

In *De Doctrina Christiana* Saint Augustine, teaching people how to properly interpret scripture, implies this is the proper end or goal of the spiritual life because it is the ultimate purpose for reading scripture. He writes, "Now Scripture enjoins nothing except charity, and condemns nothing except lust, and in that way fashions the lives of men."<sup>18</sup> By "charity" he means "that affection of the mind which aims at the enjoyment of God for His own sake, and the enjoyment of one's self and ones neighbor in subordination to God."<sup>19</sup> In other words, scripture, when read properly, fashions people into those who love God, self, and neighbor. Augustine is thoroughly Pauline in his outlook here who said the goal of his instruction to Timothy was *charity* that comes from a pure heart, clear conscience, and genuine faith (1 Tim. 1:5), a verse Augustine quotes directly at the end of *De Doctrina* Book I.<sup>20</sup>

In his four-stage model, Bernard of Clairvaux also envisions love as the ultimate goal of faith. In fact, he describes the entire journey as an evolution of love, using language similar to that of Augustine. The believer begins with love directed toward the self for the sake of the self but progresses toward love of self (and others) for the sake of God. At first, before any spiritual awakening, one's love is "carnal," driven by nature to

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<sup>18</sup> St Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana* (3.10.15), 661.

<sup>19</sup> St Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana* (3.10.16), 662.

<sup>20</sup> See 1.40.44.

"accommodate our purposes and aspirations to these fragile, sickly bodies of ours."<sup>21</sup>

The next developmental step is love directed toward God but still for the sake of the self.

In this stage the developing believer, typically through tribulation, "learns that in God he

can accomplish all things that are good, and without God he can do nothing."<sup>22</sup> The

believer loves God, but for himself. Enough trials and experience of God's beneficence

and eventually the believer "praises God for His essential goodness, and not merely

because of the benefits He has bestowed."<sup>23</sup> This is the third stage; love of God for God.

The fourth and final stage might be described as love of self for God. Here one has fully

given oneself to God, heart, mind, soul, and body and all other loves, love of self and

others, are manifestations of one's undivided love of God. Bernard suggests that

because of our mortal, corruptible nature stage four is not attainable during our earthy

lives but only when we have been clothed with the incorruptible in the age to come.<sup>24</sup>

Nevertheless, it stands that spiritual maturity in this model is measured by the evolution

of love in the believer's life.

Psychologists of religion and spirituality conclude the same, though they

communicate their findings using domain specific language. While acknowledging some

of the shortcomings of his stage-model, Fowler maintains that one of the most intriguing

aspects of stage-theory is the claim that there is a normative end of faith.<sup>25</sup> The

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<sup>21</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux, *On Loving God*, 24 & 30.

<sup>22</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux, *On Loving God*, 26.

<sup>23</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux, *On Loving God*, 28.

<sup>24</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux, *On Loving God*, 30.

<sup>25</sup> James Fowler, "Stages of Faith: Reflections on a Decade of Dialogue," in *Christian Education Journal* 13, no. 1 (1992), 15.

"normative end," as far as he is concerned, is the "realization of love."<sup>26</sup> According to Fowler, mature faith is when a person reaches such a level of "trust in and loyalty to" their center of value and power that life becomes about "spending and being spent for the transformation of present reality in the direction of a transcendent actuality."<sup>27</sup> What he means is that as people progress in their faith they become more other-centered and committed to the enactment of universal principles and values even at great cost to themselves. This echoes the self-emptying language we hear in the apostle Paul.

William James believed the core of spirituality at the personal level was about "being whole, being wholly human, and being a part of the whole that is existence."<sup>28</sup> Drawing back on Hart's insights regarding human freedom, what it means to be "wholly human" is to realize our creaturely nature. If we are creatures made in the image of a God who IS love than it is our creaturely nature to reflect this same love. It is no surprise, then, that psychologists who study religion and spirituality describe this "being whole" using language like "pro-social concern."<sup>29</sup> Developmental psychologists, stage theorists and relational developmental advocates alike, acknowledge that spiritual maturity is marked by a self-transcendence that enables and compels the individual to "contribute to the greater good."<sup>30</sup> One of the outcomes that defines the end of the "developmental

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<sup>26</sup> Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 200.

<sup>27</sup> Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 200.

<sup>28</sup> Boyatzis and King, "The Nature and Functions of Religious and Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence," 1014.

<sup>29</sup> Boyatzis, "Examining Religious and Spiritual Development During Childhood and Adolescents," 16-17.

<sup>30</sup> Boyatzis and King, "The Nature and Functions of Religious and Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence," 983-984.

trajectory" of spiritual growth according to Boyatzis and King is "contribution," which is measured by such things as "prosocial involvement," "civic engagement,"<sup>31</sup> "empathy," and "helpfulness toward others."<sup>32</sup>

In a meta-analytic study on the impact of religion and spirituality (S/R) on psychological outcomes in adolescents and emerging adults, the largest study of its kind at the time (2012), researchers concluded that higher levels of religion and spirituality correlated with greater general well-being, measured by indicators such as life-satisfaction, happiness, self-esteem, and positive mood, decreases in at-risk behaviors like drug/alcohol use and delinquency (stealing, vandalism, etc.), and a stronger presentation of personality traits like agreeableness and conscientiousness.<sup>33</sup> This last finding is especially enlightening because individuals who are more agreeable and conscientious, all other outcomes being equal, have a greater capacity for developing healthy relationships. In short, developmental psychologists measure spiritual maturity in the same way the great writers and thinkers of Christian tradition do. Spiritual "thriving" is when a person, compelled by her connection to the transcendent, is able to transcend the self toward and participate more deeply in relationship with others. The "realization of love," to borrow Fowler's phrase, is where Bruce Hindmarsh says that

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<sup>31</sup> Boyatzis and King, "The Nature and Functions of Religious and Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence," 1007.

<sup>32</sup> Boyatzis, "Examining Religious and Spiritual Development During Childhood and Adolescents," 16-17.

<sup>33</sup> DeHaan, Schnabelrauch, and Yonker, "The relationship between spirituality and religiosity on psychological outcomes in adolescents and emerging adults: A meta-analytic review," 299-314.



Christian revelation/tradition and the social sciences converge; "Becoming more deeply Christian means becoming more deeply human."<sup>34</sup>

It is true that if you do not know where you are going any path will get you there. When it comes to the spiritual journey that is Christianity, however, revelation, tradition, and even secular psychology suggest we do know where we are going. "The answer Christian revelation gives to the question," writes Lagrange, that is the question of what constitutes Christian perfection "here below," is the "precept of love."<sup>35</sup> As for tradition, Saint Thomas Aquinas sums it up best;

A thing is said to be perfect in so far as it attains its proper end, which is the ultimate perfection thereof. Now it is charity that unites us to God, who is the last end of the human mind, since 'he that abideth in charity abideth in God, and God in him' (1 John 4:16). Therefore the perfection the Christian life consists chiefly in charity.<sup>36</sup>

And while many current developmental psychologists who study religion and spirituality challenge stage theory and may not put quite as fine a point to their conclusions as Fowler does his, few if any it seems would reject the spirit of his conclusion; that the *telos* of faith is "the realization of love."

Christian faith is a spiritual journey toward a type of union with God that results in the believer reflecting God's self-giving, self-emptying ontology of love.

At its core, the developing spiritual journey involves transformation of heart (the integrating center of the human person), to the end that apprentices of Jesus progressively become more fully conformed to the character and behaviors of Jesus Christ.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Hindmarsh, "Christ as End of Faith as Its Beginning: Human Development and Spiritual Formation in Theological Perspective," 23.

<sup>35</sup> Garrigou-Lagrange, *Three Ages of the Interior Life*, 149.

<sup>36</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 2a, 2ae, q. 184, a.1.

<sup>37</sup> Hindmarsh, "Christ as End of Faith as Its Beginning: Human Development and Spiritual Formation in Theological Perspective," 162.

It is important for us to clarify the spiritual journey's destination because where we perceive we are going should influence how we engage practices like reading and interpreting scripture, especially in light of the psychological nature of the path, to which we now turn.

### Chapter Three

#### The Nature of the Journey: Path

It is one thing to suggest that the Christian spiritual life is a type of developmental journey. It is quite another to propose that all believers progress the same way or to try and explain precisely how they do so. As we have noted, spiritual and psychological theories are more paradigms than models; they attempt to capture the broad contours of the spiritual journey but cannot account for the idiosyncrasy of individual experience. Any attempt then to universalize the spiritual path is a fool's errand.

For our purposes, however, it is not necessary to conceptualize the spiritual journey in its entirety. We need only focus on one specific aspect of the journey that all those who have given themselves to contemplating and researching this topic identify as universal and consequential to the journeyer successfully reaching the desired destination. To borrow Bruce Demarest's imagery from our chapter on spiritual journey, if multiple people set out to travel from Washington D.C. to Los Angeles by different routes, trying to "understand" their respective journeys by appealing to some universal model would be senseless. Their journeys will take different lengths of time, they will travel across different terrain, encounter different people along the way, etc. What might be enlightening, however, would be to consider what experiences they will certainly share that, despite their differences, will influence their respective journeys in very similar ways.

For instance, each will have to be intentional about choosing a route. One might reflect on how that initial choice influences the overall journey by "determining" the path taken. Each traveler will have to be equipped for the journey. It might be enlightening to

reflect on the differences and similarities between the travelers in terms of the resources at their disposal when the journey begins. And it is likely that each journeyer will encounter unexpected obstacles along the way. Whether or not each person reaches the destination, how long it takes, and their respective conditions upon arrival will certainly be influenced by how they navigate unanticipated conflict.

As we have seen, revelation, Christian tradition, and secular psychology seem to share the view that the human person is in the process of becoming and that maturity is measured by how one lives in this world in relation to others, or as James and Evelyn Whitehead put it; “effective adult living consists in the abilities to love well and work well.”<sup>1</sup> The mature person is the one who is able to transcend the self, self-empty, sacrifice for the sake of the well-being of others. Another important area of overlap between revelation, tradition, and secular psychology, however, is an emphasis placed on *crisis* as an unavoidable and integral aspect of maturation.

I am using the word *crisis* as Evelyn and James Whitehead define it; “a term to signify the developmental challenges that can be expected to accompany a person's movement through adult life,”<sup>2</sup> whether we are talking about psychological adulthood in general or spiritual adulthood more specifically. *Crisis*, therefore, is not inherently negative. The Whiteheads acknowledge that many experience *crisis* as the consequence of what Daniel Levinson calls a “marker event” (Levinson, 1978)—divorce, profound loss, etc.—but marker events are not always nonpreferred. They can be any event, positive or

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<sup>1</sup> Evelyn and James Whitehead, *Christian Life Patterns: The Psychological Challenges and Religious Invitations of Adult Life* (New York: Crossroads, 2016), 18.

<sup>2</sup> Evelyn and James Whitehead, *Christian Life Patterns*, 49.

negative, preferred or unwelcomed, that "invites serious reflection, and, possibly, reorientation."<sup>3</sup> Marriage, for instance, can be a marker event. Regardless, central to our use of the word in this project is the notion that crisis, preferred or non-preferred, "scheduled," "misscheduled" or "overscheduled,"<sup>4</sup> is a "time of challenge and disorientation," where "one's normal perspective no longer holds," typically resulting in some type of experience of "loss."<sup>5</sup> *Crisis* may be brought on by an acute "marker event" or more gradually, but our focus will be the "reflection" and "reorientation" it precipitates which revelation, Christian tradition, and secular psychology insist is an unavoidable and integral aspect of the spiritual journey.

Adam and Eve's expulsion from the garden is a "marker event" that certainly caused existential disorientation. They were created and commanded to "be fruitful and multiply" (Gen. 1:28), but now Eve will experience greater pain in childbirth and her relationship with Adam will be somehow more difficult (Gen. 3:16). They were created and commanded to "reign" over the earth, but now Adam will struggle to "scratch a living" from it (Gen. 3:17). Though we do not get to follow their story beyond the birth of Cain and Abel, we can be relatively confident that how Adam and Eve navigated the "marker event" of their dislocation and altered relationship with God, one another, and creation heavily influenced the rest of their journey.

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<sup>3</sup> Evelyn and James Whitehead, *Christian Life Patterns*, 49.

<sup>4</sup> The Whiteheads argue that part of what makes a crisis event particularly difficult is timing. Crisis is marked by three stage—entry, duration, and resolution. Some crisis events are "scheduled" in the sense that they can be accurately anticipated. The offer menopause as an example. Other crisis events are "misscheduled" in the sense that they happen prematurely or are delayed. Still others, like the expectation that one gets married in his early twenties can be "overscheduled," leaving someone feeling inappropriately constrained (50-51).

<sup>5</sup> Evelyn and James Whitehead, *Christian Life Patterns*, 52.

At the heart of Abraham's journey from blind obedience to trust is the "marker event" of God's command to sacrifice Isaac. Abraham and Sarah wait well beyond typical child-bearing age (Gen. 18:11) for God to fulfill the promise to grant them a son who will be the firstborn of a lineage that outnumbers the stars (Gen. 15:4-5). But soon after blessing them with Isaac God commands Abraham to offer him up as a sacrifice (Gen. 22:2). Though Abraham's initial obedience might suggest that God's request did not precipitate a crisis of faith for him, his response to Isaac when asked about the offering suggests otherwise (Gen. 22:8). One way to read Abraham's insistence that God will provide an animal for the sacrifice is as Abraham's way of reconciling the crisis created by his loving God asking him to do the unthinkable.

Israel's season in the wilderness is easily the most conspicuous example of crisis in the Hebrew scriptures. As I mentioned earlier, there are clear parallels between Israel's journey and that of Abraham, including a marker event that would have been the cause of spiritual crisis. For Abraham, as I just noted, it was God's command to sacrifice Isaac. For the people of Israel, it was God sentencing them to forty years of nomadic life in the Sinai wilderness. Walter Brueggemann refers to it as their season of "disorientation" and suggests it was a necessary phase in order for the Hebrew slaves securely oriented in Egypt to become the people of Israel reoriented in the promised-land.<sup>6</sup> Like Abraham, the people of Israel were journeying from blind obedience to trust. God tells Moses that when he approaches the elders of the people with the message that God has heard their cries for help and intends to rescue them that they will accept his message (Ex. 3:18).

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<sup>6</sup> Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms*, 1-15.

They are ready to obey. But throughout the journey they demonstrate a reluctance to trust. They question Moses at the Red Sea when they realize the Egyptians are in pursuit (Ex. 14:10-12). They grumble about not having enough food to eat (Ex. 16:3). They complain about thirst (Ex. 17:3). They abandon Yahweh when Moses is too long coming back down Mt. Sinai (Ex. 32:1).

Each of these are examples of the people struggling to place their practical trust in Yahweh and it comes to a head in the wilderness of Paran when God instructs them through Joshua and Caleb to enter the promised-land. They choose instead to listen to the testimony of the scouts who terrify them with tales of formidable cities and unconquerable giants and refuse to enter, preferring instead to return to the "orientation" of slavery in Egypt (Nu. 14:3-4). God's response is to sentence them to forty years of wandering the desert wilderness (Nu. 14:34-35). This is the marker event that precipitates a season of spiritual "wandering," coming to terms with a new reality (that most of them, including Moses, will not see the promised-land after all) and wrestling with God's ultimate trustworthiness. As the story is told, it is this season of crisis that prepares them for "reorientation" in the promised-land. Before it they refuse to enter. Afterward, they follow Joshua without complaint or hesitation (Josh. 1:16).

Crisis is also a conspicuous aspect of the New Testament conceptualization of the spiritual journey. We have already noted Lagrange's organization of the life of the disciples into three phases or stages; calling to passion, passion to Pentecost, and Pentecost onward. To borrow Brueggemann's terminology, one might say that their time with Jesus between their initial calling and Christ's passion was a season of orientation or

equilibrium. Their abandonment of Jesus at his arrest and his subsequent death become the marker event creating "disorientation," a season of spiritual crisis. Though they receive the consolations of Jesus' resurrection and occasional appearances, the disciples spend most of the time between the passion and Pentecost deprived of Jesus' physical presence, forced to continue on with what Lagrange calls "naked faith."<sup>7</sup> The sending of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost finally reorients them to a new spiritual reality. But their experience of disorientation between Christ's passion and Pentecost was pivotal to developing the vision and receptivity to live in the new spiritual age.

The disciples' experience is a representation of precisely how Jesus said the spiritual life works. "Unless a kernel of wheat is planted in the soil and dies, it remains alone. But its death will produce many new kernels—a plentiful harvest of new lives (Jn. 12:24, NLT). Jesus is speaking primarily about his role as the one whose death would somehow mysteriously produce life for others, but he connects their experience to the metaphor as well; "Those who love their life in this world will lose it. Those who care nothing for their life in this world will keep it for eternity" (Jn. 12:25, NLT). Just as life will somehow come through death in Jesus' case, spiritual life comes by way of a type of dying. This paradox at the heart of the Gospel invitation, if properly understood, is disorienting. It disrupts any sort of secure equilibrium we might have in the world, forcing the one who hears it to reflect and reconsider life's meaning and purpose. This is crisis in the broad sense.

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<sup>7</sup> Garrigou-Lagrange, *Three Ages of the Interior Life*, 229-230.



In fact, the Greek word *krisis* in the New Testament means *judgment or decision*. Crisis is an experience that requires a person to make a judgment. Interestingly, James and Evelyn Whitehead explicate the author of Hebrews' use of the term in Hebrews 9:27 to suggest that temporal experiences of crisis parallel the "crisis" (judgment) that follows death because each experience of crisis in this life may not "signal the end of one's life, but it does mark the end of one stage of life."<sup>8</sup> Crisis is the experience or season that forces the believer to take stock of his situation, to reflect, to acknowledge that one season of life has ended and to make a judgment regarding what life moving forward will look like.

Previously I referenced Origen's comparison of the spiritual journey to the exodus in his "Homily XXVII on Numbers." The Hebrew slaves set out from *Rameses* on their way to *Succoth*. Because *Rameses* means "agitation" and *Succoth* means "tents," Origen argues that the spiritual journey begins when the individual leaves behind a world characterized by agitation toward a life "unhindered and free." The next "stop" on the spiritual journey, however, one Origen says the believer undertakes "when the soul thinks it is ready," is *Buthan*, which means "valley." Valley represents the "struggle against the devil and the opposing powers." This season of struggle represents crisis in the broad sense we have used it here; a developmental challenge that accompanies a person's spiritual movement. Without gaining "victory" in these valleys of struggle, the

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<sup>8</sup> Evelyn and James Whitehead, *Christian Life Patterns*, 59.

believer cannot progress to the "villages" (*Pi-ha-hiroth*, Num 33:7) that represent the first fruits of virtue like "self-control."<sup>9</sup>

Perhaps the most well-known description of spiritual crisis in Christian tradition is Saint John of the Cross's "dark night of the soul," though David Perrin points out that the popular understanding of John's "dark night" as any general "soul-searching after some calamity in life" is not what John meant when he coined the phrase; "The metaphor of night...reflects the darkness the human soul experiences at the beginning, middle, and end of the journey to union with God."<sup>10</sup> Following the three ways school originally proposed by Origen, John divides the spiritual journey into three stages; purgation, illumination, and contemplation, what Perrin refers to as the "beginning, middle, and end of the journey." *Night* characterizes both the stages themselves and the experience of moving from one stage to the next. John uses the metaphor of night to describe the beginning of the journey, the way of purgation, because during this stage of the journey the believer must "deprive itself of desire for all worldly things by denying these things to itself." The soul experiences this season of self-denial as a kind of "night to the human senses."<sup>11</sup> This leads to the way of illumination where the believer is learning to walk by faith. Night is used here because faith is often "dark as night to the understanding." Lastly, final union with God is described as night because God is so mysterious that, despite the soul's experience of intense love of and for God, God remains *in this life*

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<sup>9</sup> Origen, "Homily XXVII on Numbers," 258.

<sup>10</sup> David B. Perrin, "John of the Cross: The Dark Night," in *Christian Spirituality: The Classics*, ed. Arthur Holder (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2009), 225.

<sup>11</sup> St. John of the Cross, *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, ed. Henry Carrigan, Jr (Brewster: Paraclete Press, 2002), 13. St. John of the Cross, *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, 13.

somewhat dark. John says the darkness of the first stage is like the beginning of night "when things begin to fade from sight," the middle is like midnight when the darkness is "total," and the end is like dawn—"near the light of day."<sup>12</sup>

Though John's "dark night" does not refer to a season of spiritual struggle following some calamitous event, John is clear that the believer will experience the darkness as "spiritual and temporal trials...so numerous and so profound that human knowledge is not fully capable of describing them."<sup>13</sup> If these trials are so profound that human knowledge cannot adequately describe them, the believer going through them will almost certainly experience them as moments which call for reflection and reorientation, what we have generally called *crisis*. They may not be associated with a specific "marker event" and, according to John, they may involve the believer's active participation or passive reception of a work of grace, but they will be experienced as challenging.

John Newton uses the word "conflict" to describe the same reality. In fact, in his conceptualization of the spiritual journey, "conflict" is the single word that characterizes the second stage of the spiritual journey, what he calls "stage B."<sup>14</sup> Newton also turns to the exodus as his biblical model. Like the people of Israel, the believer on the spiritual journey, having passed through stage A (rescue from slavery in Egypt), "thinks his difficulties are at an end, and expects to go on rejoicing til' he enters the promised land." Nothing could be further from the truth. "His difficulties are, in a manner, but beginning;

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<sup>12</sup> St. John of the Cross, *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, 13.

<sup>13</sup> St. John of the Cross, *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, 7.

<sup>14</sup> Newton, *Letters of Spiritual Counsel*, 19.

he has a wilderness before him, of which he is unaware." The wilderness is the place where God will "humble" and "prove" him, showing him what is in his heart, "that he may do him good in the latter end."<sup>15</sup> Here we see the same emphasis placed on purification and the struggle associated with it. What Newton calls "conflict" is the crucible in which the believer is made ready for union with God.

So ubiquitous is the theme of crisis as an integral aspect of the spiritual journey in both revelation and tradition that it should be no surprise that secular psychologists interested in psychological development in general and spiritual development more specifically also highlight this crucial element. Erick Erikson, for example, in his eight-stage psychosocial model of human development argues that healthy growth is the result of an individual resolving psychosocial tensions or "crises" inherent in each stage. The crises arise when the individual is asked to make adjustments to changing environmental demand and expectations.<sup>16</sup> For instance, in infancy the child needs to resolve a tension concerning basic trust. A newborn has no capacity to care for its own needs. Lacking reflective consciousness, it does not even "know" it has needs in a reflective sense. This is a sensorimotor stage. The child "feels" or "senses" a need that it did not sense *in utero* because of its uninterrupted symbiotic relationship with the mother. Dislocation from the womb and the new sensation of need calls for the immediate establishment of a mutuality between the newborn and a caregiver. According to Erikson, the baby is reconciling the mistrust created by the trauma of childbirth with new experiences of trust

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<sup>15</sup> Newton, *Letters of Spiritual Counsel*, 19.

<sup>16</sup> Ellery Pullman, "Life Span Development," in *Introducing Christian Education: Foundations for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Michael J. Anthony (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001).

reinforced daily through rituals of care. Provided the new environment is healthy, the baby will reconcile this tension and develop the virtue of hope.<sup>17</sup>

Borrowing insights from Erikson, Lawrence Kohlberg, and Jean Piaget, Fowler's model also includes struggle as a component of spiritual development because, as we have seen with Erikson, struggle is a component of development more generally. For example, Fowler calls the second stage of his model *mythic-literal*. This stage coincides with the development of concrete-operational thinking and is characterized by a person taking on the "stories, beliefs and observances that symbolize belonging to his or her community."<sup>18</sup> Fowler notes that transition from stage 2 to stage 3, *synthetic-conventional faith*, usually coincides with development of formal-operational thinking and involves a "clash or contradiction in stories that leads to reflection on meanings."<sup>19</sup> In the *mythic-literal* stage meaning is carried by and essentially "trapped" in the community's symbols, specifically the community's narratives. A person in a mythic-literal stage lacks the ability to reflect conceptually on the symbols. This changes as people develop formal-operational thought. But as a person begins to reflect conceptually on the symbols of meaning within his community, he must reconcile contradictions. Fowler uses the example of reconciling a literal reading of creation in Genesis with evolutionary theory.

Some type of struggle precipitates movement between all of Fowler's stages. One that we will look at a little more closely in our next chapter is the transition from

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<sup>17</sup> Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 54-55.

<sup>18</sup> Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 149.

<sup>19</sup> Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 150.

stage 3, *synthetic-conventional*, to stage 4, *individuative-reflective*. According to Fowler, transitioning from stage 3 to stage 4 requires the individual to make her faith system, tacitly accepted up to that point,<sup>20</sup> the object of critical scrutiny,<sup>21</sup> which can create a "sense of loss, dislocation, grief, and even guilt."<sup>22</sup> The reason that this transition is of particular interest to me as it relates to this thesis is that Fowler argues that most faith communities actually function best when the majority of participants find spiritual equilibrium in stage 3.<sup>23</sup> In other words, religious communities function best if people do not learn to critically evaluate their tacitly held beliefs, something necessary if they are to continue growing spiritually! I hope to show that one's willingness to engage in this kind of critical reflection is connected to the community's view and use of scripture.

Again, I am not here affirming that spiritual development progresses through discreet, linear stages or that movement from one stage to another necessarily requires successfully navigating a particular type of crisis. I am merely highlighting how tradition, revelation, and the psychology of religion and spirituality acknowledge, in their respective ways, that navigating what we have called *crisis* in this chapter is an unavoidable aspect of spiritual growth. James and Evelyn Whitehead, citing studies by Vaillant (*Adaptation to Life*, 1977), Levinson (*Seasons of a Man's Life*, 1978), Sheehy (*Passages*, 1976), and Lowenthal (*Four Stages of Life*, 1976), go so far as to say that healthy adulthood is less a state to be reached as a "an effective mode of adaptation to the challenges of life."<sup>24</sup> In

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<sup>20</sup> Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 161-162.

<sup>21</sup> Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 177.

<sup>22</sup> Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 180.

<sup>23</sup> Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 164.

<sup>24</sup> Evelyn and James Whitehead, *Christian Life Patterns*, 19.

other words, crisis is not something that happens "once-and-for-all" in the life of the believer but is a recurring experience. Catholic theologian Richard Byrne says it this way; "Secure orientation, painful disorientation, and surprising reorientation are three foundational moments repeated throughout life's journey."<sup>25</sup> The Whiteheads say that developmental crises intervene throughout a person's maturing process and serve as "opportunities for growth."<sup>26</sup>

*Opportunity*, however, is the operative word because growth is the result, not of the crisis itself, but of how one navigates the crisis. In an article entitled, "Identity, Faith, and Maturity," Charles Koa argues that crisis is an issue of identity formation suggesting there are three possibilities at every identity crisis;

a) to become closed to the new environment by reinforcing the old identity; (b) to be so totally overwhelmed by the new environment that he or she suffers from identity diffusion or confusion; and (c) to be open enough to the new challenge while maintaining one's internal integration in the process of identity reformation.<sup>27</sup>

Crisis can inspire growth if the individual is willing and able to embrace it without losing his "internal integration." Otherwise, crisis will, at best, solidify one's existing status or, at worst, damage an individual's faith causing spiritual regression. In our next chapter we will explore more deeply the psychology involved as an individual responds to crisis with the goal of identifying features that can be influenced, positively or negatively, by different approaches to scripture.

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<sup>25</sup> Richard Byrne, "Journey: Growth and Development in Spiritual Life," in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, ed. Michael Downey (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1993), 568.

<sup>26</sup> Evelyn and James Whitehead, *Christian Life Patterns*, 21.

<sup>27</sup> Charles Koa, "Identity, Faith, and Maturity," in *Journal of Psychology & Theology* 3, no. 1 (Winter 1975), 44.

## Chapter Four

### The Psychology of Religious Coping

Kurt has been attending church his entire adult life. He attends a regular Bible study, serves on the Deacon team, and he and his wife sing regularly in the church band. By most measures, Kurt is a mature Christian. Several years ago Kurt's pastor had an affair and left the ministry. It was a painful experience for Kurt and his family, but they navigated the transition and eventually welcomed a new pastor whom Kurt and his wife became very fond of. After a couple of years, however, Kurt's new pastor began to share some ideas from the pulpit that were foreign to Kurt; ways of interpreting scripture and perspectives on what Kurt considered to be central doctrines. Kurt and his wife struggled with their pastor's "new teaching" for about a year. They made several appointments to speak with him and attended a few question-and-answer sessions to better understand his perspective. In the end, however, they simply could not reconcile what they were hearing with what they had "always believed" and they left the church.

Kate's parents, like Kurt and his wife, were also heavily involved in their church. Kate and her siblings felt like they "grew up in the church." Like most kids who grow up in religious homes, Kate never thought to question or challenge what her church taught her about God and faith. She just accepted it all as true. When Kate graduated from high school and went to college, however, she encountered ideas and perspectives she had never heard or considered before. Some were exhilarating. Some were scary. As her freshman year progressed, she felt the faith she knew slipping away. She did not give up on belief in God, but it was harder for her to read her Bible and she became disenchanted with church as she knew it. She never went back.



These cases represent experiences that play out regularly in the lives of an untold number of people in the church, experiences that qualify as crises; either the expected struggles that accompany adult development or seasons that require reflection and, perhaps, reorientation. As we have seen, how people like Kurt and Kate navigate these seasons will impact their ongoing growth. To return to Koa's identity construct for a moment, will the experience reinforce their existing identities, be so overwhelming that it causes identity diffusion or confusion, or will they be open to the new challenge in such a way that it promotes growth without threatening their sense of identity integrity? To answer these questions, we need to drill more deeply into the psychological mechanics at work when an individual experiences crisis. More specifically we need to understand how religious faith in particular influences the process and, ultimately, the outcome. Psychologist Ken Pargament wrote the book on this specific subject; *The Psychology of Religion and Coping: Theory, Research, and Practice*.

Pargament defines religion as "the search for significance in ways related to the sacred."<sup>1</sup> His definition is more functional than philosophical, his primary concern being how religion influences coping rather than religion in general. Functionally speaking, this definition of religion works for Pargament's purposes because it incorporates the two features often found in narrower definitions of the term. He notes that traditional definitions of religion often focus on either religion's sacred or "substantive" nature—religion's concern with the divine—or on its functional nature—religion's concern with

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<sup>1</sup> Ken Pargament, *The Psychology of Religion and Coping: Theory, Research, and Practice* (New York: The Guildford Press, 1997), 32.

helping adherents "come to terms with ultimate issues in life."<sup>2</sup> Pargament's definition incorporates both; the phrase, "search for significance," accounts for religion's functional role and the phrase, "related to the sacred," with its sacred or substantive role

Coping, Pargament says, is like religion in the sense that it is also a search for significance, only during a particular time—a time of stress or crisis—rather than related to a sacred object.<sup>3</sup> Where religion and coping intersect is when the moment of stress or crisis involves the sacred. The search for significance, according to Pargament, is not essentially religious. That is, people with no religious faith still experience crisis and wrestle with "ultimate issues in life." The search for significance becomes religious when the search involves a sacred object, which could be any "specific entity, idea, belief, or practice."<sup>4</sup>

Pargament suggests that religion as a search for significance related to the sacred is a journey and therefore, affirming what we have argued throughout, involves both a path and a destination.<sup>5</sup> He refers to the path as the "means to significance" and the destination as the "ends of significance." Pargament notes that to satisfy its functional dimension, helping adherents wrestle with "ultimate issues in life," all religions provide a pathway for their members to follow. The pathways are "designed to reach significance, to hold on to it once it is found, and to discover new forms of significance when old ones are lost."<sup>6</sup> But religions may differ markedly in their respective paths and,

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<sup>2</sup> Pargament, *The Psychology of Religion and Coping*, 25.

<sup>3</sup> Pargament, *The Psychology of Religion and Coping*, 90.

<sup>4</sup> Pargament, *The Psychology of Religion and Coping*, 26.

<sup>5</sup> Pargament, *The Psychology of Religion and Coping*, 34.

<sup>6</sup> Pargament, *The Psychology of Religion and Coping*, 43.

important to note for our purposes, Pargament argues that "some paths are better designed than others."<sup>7</sup>

The religious destination or the "end of significance" often has to do with God; "Developing, maintaining, and fostering the relationship of the individual to the sacred is the essence of religion."<sup>8</sup> But religious faith also offers people social ends. Pargament notes that when studying religion from a psychological perspective it is important not to reduce faith to one particular end. Some pursue religious faith to connect with God, but others may do so for comfort, to escape the world, or for self-development. For Pargament's insights to be helpful to us it is not necessary to elevate my contention that the primary end of the Christian journey is a union with God that leads to the believer becoming perfect in love over and above other ends that Christian faith may also provide. It is only important to note that Pargament affirms that religious faith, by definition, is going somewhere.

The reason that paths and destinations are so important for Pargament's work is that they represent the two dimensions of faith that must be adjusted when a believer navigates crisis. Coping as a search for significance in times of stress is "rooted in a transactional perspective that assumes a reciprocal and evolving relationship between the individual and the world."<sup>9</sup> In other words, coping is more than a defense mechanism. Coping involves choice and at the heart of the choice is the goal of

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<sup>7</sup> Pargament, *The Psychology of Religion and Coping*, 43.

<sup>8</sup> Pargament, *The Psychology of Religion and Coping*, 44.

<sup>9</sup> Pargament, *The Psychology of Religion and Coping*, 82.

maintaining "the greatest gain to significance at the least cost."<sup>10</sup> Coping involves calculation; holding on to what one perceives he must hold on to and giving up no more than is necessary to conserve whatever he considers to be of greatest significance. When it comes to religious coping, this calculation means transacting one's means to significance, his end of significance, or both.

Pargament organizes religious coping strategies into two main categories; conservation and transformation. When stressed, the individual will first try and conserve either or both the path and the destination. Pargament calls this strategy *preservation*. Simply ignoring his pastor's "new teaching" while remaining in the church might represent Kurt choosing a preservation strategy. What Kurt actually did, is what Pargament calls *reconstruction*. Reconstruction is when a person attempts to conserve the destination, in Kurt's case a specific set of beliefs, by altering the path, in this case the church he was attending. Both preservation and reconstruction are essentially conservation strategies; maintenance is the individual's principal aim.

But as we have argued throughout, progress, not maintenance is the nature of the Christian journey. Consequently, preservation and reconstruction strategies that cause a person, to borrow Koa's language again, "to become closed to the new environment by reinforcing the old identity," may prove to be effective in terms of assisting someone through a season of crisis, but will prove inadequate for leveraging crisis to produce growth. This is where we break with Pargament's research. For his

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<sup>10</sup> Pargament, *The Psychology of Religion and Coping*, 90.

purposes, simply researching the role that religion does play in the process of coping, no one strategy is necessarily preferable to another. Each person must decide in any given situation the strategy that will lead to the greatest gain in significance at the least cost. But our purpose is not to consider the role that religion *does* play in the process of coping, but the role religion *should* play in the process of coping. As we have seen, the goal of navigating crisis ought to be propulsion into a new stage of spiritual maturity, not simply staying where one is. Conservation strategies like preservation and reconstruction may be appropriate if the goal in crisis is nothing more than to weather the storm and stay afloat. But for crisis to lead to transformation, better strategies are necessary.

The two strategies that fall under the general heading of transformation in Pargament's model are *reevaluation* and *recreation*. *Reevaluation* is when a person conserves significant means but allows for the transformation of significant ends. In Kurt's case, reevaluation might have been remaining in the church but allowing some of his beliefs to change. *Recreation* is when an individual adjusts both the ends and means to significance. We might say Kate represents someone engaged in a recreative coping strategy. Faced with challenging new information she alters some of her sacred beliefs (significant ends) and chooses a new faith community (significant means). Both reevaluation and recreation are transformative strategies. A person's principal aim when engaging these strategies is not to stay where she is but to move toward something better.

But to engage in these transformative strategies a person must 1) be able to effectively appraise the crisis and 2) possess an "orienting system" that seeks

transformation rather than conservation. Pargament identifies three necessary appraisals. A "primary appraisal" is one's capacity to accurately diagnose the problem; to assess the impact of the event on one's well-being. Is this benign or potentially harmful? "Secondary appraisal" is one's capacity to properly assess the resources and burdens he brings to the encounter. Resources and burdens represent the commodities being transacted in the coping process. Think of it like a bank account. Maximizing significance requires increasing deposits and minimizing withdrawals. And lastly, "tertiary appraisal" is one's ability to decide on a coping strategy that will effectively maximize significance at minimal cost to his resources and burdens. A person may struggle to cope with a stressful event, therefore, on one or more levels; because she 1) lacks the capacity to properly diagnose the risk the event poses to her well-being; 2) she cannot recognize the resources and burdens she brings to the encounter or; 3) because she chooses an ineffective strategy. What this means is that the efficacy of coping has less to do with the effectiveness of any one specific strategy as it does with having a well-integrated system where all the parts and pieces are working smoothly together.<sup>11</sup> This brings us to the central importance of what Pargament calls the "orienting system."

People do not enter stressful encounters as blank slates. We bring with us what Pargament calls an "orienting system;"

A general way of viewing and dealing with the world. It consists of habits, values, relationships, generalized beliefs, and personality. The orienting system is a frame of reference, a blueprint of oneself and the world that is used to anticipate and come to terms with life's events.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Pargament, *The Psychology of Religion and Coping*, 316.

<sup>12</sup> Pargament, *The Psychology of Religion and Coping*, 99-100.

What is so important about the orienting system for our purposes is that Pargament identifies four characteristics that make for healthy orienting systems, which, in turn lead to effective coping. The presence of their opposite, "may contribute to the specific failures of religion in coping."<sup>13</sup>

The first characteristic is *differentiation*. Pargament notes that psychologists generally agree that people develop "from states of globality to states of greater differentiation." He cites examples such as babies learning to distinguish their bodies from the physical world around them and young athletes developing more finely tuned movements as they age. The point Pargament is making is that developing the ability to make fine distinctions is pivotal to surviving and thriving in the natural world. It is also pivotal to thriving spiritually.

Religious traditions are vitally concerned about differences: how virtue differs from sin, what is sacred and what is profane, who is a member and who is not a member of the group, pathways to follow and pathways to avoid.<sup>14</sup>

The problem, Pargament argues, is that these kinds of distinctions are often "summarized" for laypeople in "shorthand form through commandments, catechisms, and codes" even though the religious tradition may have much richer, more complex histories of interpretation available. In other words, the average religious person may be "unaware of the fine distinctions among beliefs, practices, and moral codes that are a part of their faiths," leading to an undifferentiated religious orienting system. A system less capable or incapable of recognizing and appreciating fine distinctions in religious

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<sup>13</sup> Pargament, *The Psychology of Religion and Coping*, 342.

<sup>14</sup> Pargament, *The Psychology of Religion and Coping*, 342-343.

thought and expression will have greater difficulty coping with experiences of crisis, especially those that challenge or seem to threaten well-established beliefs. A lack of differentiation may be blame when an experience of crisis causes what Koa calls identity diffusion or confusion.

The next quality Pargament mentions is *integrity*. Integrity has to do with alignment between religious belief, practice, motivation, and reality. He calls its opposite, fragmentation. An example of fragmentation might be when a church member demands the church be fiscally responsible but he himself is fiscally irresponsible. Or when a person behaves as if she believes something but then claims she does not. Years ago, a congregant approached me with a question about doctrine. She framed the question by stating that she believed Jesus was going to return during her lifetime and she wanted to make sure she was aligning herself with "proper teaching." I interpreted the fact that she couched her question with reference to Jesus' immanent return to indicate that she was afraid something bad might happen to her on that day if she were not aligned with proper teaching, so I asked, "what are you afraid of?" To which she replied, "Oh I'm not afraid." But what, other than fear, could have motivated her to frame the question in that way? It is an example of religious fragmentation and it was making it more difficult for her to cope with the stress of trying to accommodate new ideas into her faith system.

In addition to one's orienting system being well-differentiated and integrated, Pargament also suggests it must be flexible. He lists *rigidity* among the qualities that prevent religion from positively aiding in coping. When Koa speaks of someone being



closed to a new environment to reinforce an old identity, a lack of flexibility may be the reason. A rigid religious system is, by definition, unable or unwilling to change or adapt to new information and new experiences. But new information or a new experience is typically the cause of a stressful event. Naturally, then, religious rigidity will make it harder to cope. Pargament notes that rigid religious systems can be positive, offering members a clear worldview and an unambiguous picture of how life ought to work, but for that to be the case it must operate in a "predictable, stable, and homogenous environment."<sup>15</sup> In other words, religiously rigid people can "cope" so long as they avoid stressors outside their predictable worldview. When it comes to the Christian faith, however, it should go without saying that an orienting system that keeps us from crossing barriers and experiencing that which makes us uncomfortable flies in the face of the basic identity of the church as a witnessing community. Not to mention that in our globalized, digitized culture isolation is virtually impossible. For people to cope in such a way that leads to transformation and growth they must have an orienting system flexible enough to accommodate new and challenging information and experiences.

Last among the religious qualities that impair coping is what Pargament calls *insecure attachment*. In the same way that healthy attachment to a parent figure provides the security necessary for a newborn to hit developmental milestones, a secure attachment to God provides a "base for learning, growth, and exploration."<sup>16</sup> Those whose image of God is conflicted or whose attachment to God is insecure will have a

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<sup>15</sup> Pargament, *The Psychology of Religion and Coping*, 354.

<sup>16</sup> Pargament, *The Psychology of Religion and Coping*, 355.

harder time accommodating new information and reconciling challenging experiences, especially as they relate to God.

To review the ground we have covered in this chapter, we have applied the term *religious coping* to the experience a person of faith has when confronted with crisis. In response to crisis a person naturally seeks to maximize significance at minimal cost by adjusting either her *means to significance* (path) or her *end of significance* (destination). To do so she must choose a specific strategy. Some strategies are geared toward conservation while others toward transformation. For transformative strategies to be effective a person must enter the experience of crisis with a well-integrated "orienting system" that equips her to make effective appraisals of the situation. A well-integrated orienting system is characterized by differentiation, integration, flexibility, and security. When an individual's orienting system is undifferentiated, fragmented, rigid, or insecure not only will it not positively assist a person with coping, but it may actually make the coping process more difficult, leading to either spiritual stasis or regression rather than progress.

Which brings me to the question I would like to wrestle with in the remainder of this project. All other variables being equal, how influential is a person's approach to the reading and interpretation of scripture on the development of his orienting system? If we propose the answer to that question is relatively substantial, are certain approaches to the reading and interpretation of scripture more or less likely to produce an orienting system that is differentiated, integrated, flexible, and secure?

In my introduction I referenced Jesus' interaction with the religious lawyer in Luke 10. We saw from that encounter that *how* one reads scripture has as significant an impact on spiritual outcomes as *what* scripture says. Luke 10 is not an isolated incident. In fact, *how* scripture was being read and applied was often at the heart of Jesus' conflicts. For example, when accused of violating the law by performing miracles on the Sabbath in John 7 Jesus tells his accusers to "look beneath the surface so you can judge correctly" (Jn. 7:24 NLT). They knew what the Bible said but, according to Jesus, there was a deeper, integrating narrative that should have been controlling their interpretation. One might argue, using language from Pargament's religious coping model, that Jesus' life and teaching created crises for the people of his day and their go-to coping strategies were aimed at conservation rather than transformation. Pargament's explanation for that might be that they possessed orienting systems that were undifferentiated, fragmented, rigid, or insecure.

For instance, after Jesus reads the scroll of Isaiah in Luke 4 Luke notes, "Everyone spoke well of him and was amazed by the gracious words that came from his lips" (Lk. 4:22 NLT). Jesus then mentions the widow of Zarephath and the healing of Naaman as examples of God's clear love for non-Jews and Luke notes the same people "were furious" and tried to assassinate him (Lk. 4:28-30). Is this an example of people whose orienting systems are not differentiated enough to appreciate the complexity of their own sacred narrative? How about when Jesus heals a man with dropsy on the sabbath while eating at the home of a prominent religious leader? He senses their disapproval and asks, "Which of you doesn't work on the Sabbath? If your son or your cow falls into a

pit, don't you rush to get him out" (Lk. 14:5 NLT)? They respond with silence. Is this an example of religious fragmentation, denying Jesus the right to discern when working on the sabbath is appropriate while extending that privilege to themselves? We could go on. Jesus labeling some religious leaders as "old wineskins" (Mt. 9:17) certainly speaks to spiritual rigidity and it would not be inappropriate to blame their entire hostile attitude toward Jesus on a kind of insecurity related to God and their national hopes.

The nature of Jesus' altercation with the religious leader in Luke 10 is, for me, representative. Almost all of Jesus' altercations with the religious establishment involved a difference in the reading and interpretation of scripture and I can see evidence of undifferentiated, fragmented, rigid, and insecure faith in each one. I conclude this to indicate that *how* they learned to read and interpret scripture shaped their orienting systems in such a way that made it harder for them to leverage the crises caused by Jesus' life and teaching for the sake of transformative growth, but instead to choose conservation strategies that reinforced their old identities. It is my belief that some approaches to the reading and interpretation of scripture will lead to orienting systems that are differentiated, integrated, flexible, and secure making it more likely for individuals to transform through crisis. In the next chapter we will survey two approaches that, practiced in the strictest sense, represent a *scylla* and *charibdis* that an *ecclesial-critical* approach will enable us to navigate between.

## Chapter Five

### Scripture and the Orienting System: Naming the Problem

If you are following thus far, spiritual life is a developmental journey toward becoming perfect in love. This journey involves the recurring experience of crisis. How the believer navigates crisis impacts spiritual growth. From a psychological perspective, navigating crisis is an experience of coping which involves a person transacting elements of what Ken Pargament calls his orienting system; that "general way of viewing and dealing with the world" consisting of "habits, values, relationships, generalized beliefs, and personality." Orienting systems that are differentiated, integrated, flexible, and secure enable the believer to cope in ways that promote ongoing growth. Orienting systems that are undifferentiated, fragmented, rigid, and insecure, on the other hand, will make coping more difficult, potentially resulting in spiritual stagnation or regression. What concerns us now is the interplay between how one reads scripture and the developing orienting system. Is there an approach to the reading and interpretation of scripture, presumably a practice of central importance for the Christian, that is most likely, all other variables being equal, to help an individual develop a differentiated, integrated, flexible, and secure orienting system, whereby better positioning him to navigate seasons of crisis in ways that lead to spiritual progress?"

There are, of course, many "ways" of reading and interpreting scripture, too many to consider with any serious depth. One can read scripture devotionally or scholastically. One can approach scripture with an explicit "advocacy" agenda such as liberationist, feminist, or womanist or with the intention of being "value-neutral." To complicate matters, the many ways of reading and interpreting scripture often overlap. One can

read scripture devotionally without ignoring scholarly concerns or insights. Similarly, a seminary professor primarily concerned with issues of scholarship may very well devotionally benefit from her work as a scholar. Those who care about this topic can get lost in the pursuit of a "right" or "most faithful" way to read the texts and, while there is certainly much to be gained from the diverse scholarship on the topic, our primary goal is not to declare the "right" way to read the Bible, but to identify an approach to the interpretation of scripture that, given what we have learned about human development and the importance of the orienting system, may be best suited to cultivate differentiation, integration, flexibility, and security. The best place to begin this part of our investigation is where any conversation regarding biblical interpretation should begin but rarely does; with one's *a priori* view of what the Bible is and what it is for.

David Kelsey in *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology* shares a metaphor that may be helpful here. Imagine observing a group of kids in a field. They have a ball, roughly the size of a grapefruit, but it is not identifiable to you as any particular kind of ball. Suddenly one of the kids says, "Come on, let's play ball." What the kids then do with the ball will reveal to you what game they are playing. In other words, before they can do anything meaningful with the ball, they have to agree what game it is they intend to play; the nature of the game will determine how they use the ball.<sup>1</sup> His most basic point is that all interpreters (the kids) approach the Bible (the ball) with an already established conviction regarding what it is they are trying to do in the interpretive task (what game they are playing). Given the plethora of interpretive strategies I just

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<sup>1</sup> David H. Kelsey, *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 110.

mentioned, to simplify our analysis I want to consider two general approaches to scriptural interpretation that, borrowing Kelsey's metaphor, assume two different games are being played; *critical* and *non-critical*.

A non-critical approach, sometimes referred to as "traditionalist," "fundamentalist," "confessionalist," or "creedal" is so labeled because one's interpretation is said to be controlled by one's *a priori* commitment to the confessional faith of the church. That is, a non-critical interpreter reads the Bible for the purpose of cultivating a specifically Christian spirituality; she interprets the text as a believer. But what constitutes the "confessional faith of the church?" During the New Testament and patristic periods, at least, one answer is something called the "rule of faith" (*regulae fidei*). The "rule of faith" refers to a proto-creedal statement regarding the nature of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Though the earliest interpreters of the Bible did not use the kind of developed language consistent with Nicaea, what was most important to their interpretive strategy was the conviction that the God of the Hebrew Bible was the same God who took on flesh in the person of Jesus Christ. Chris Beeley says it this way;

Patristic trinitarian doctrine was not a grand effort to define the categories of *ousia* and hypostasis, or any other metaphysical construct, let alone to establish the veracity of the creed of Nicaea, as it has often been imagined. Rather, what unites the orthodox theologians of the patristic period is their attempt to make sense of the biblical text within the lived practice of the catholic faith and vice versa.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Christopher A. Beeley and Mark E. Weedman, *The Bible and Early Trinitarian Theology* (Washington: Catholic University Press, 2018), 23-24.

By “lived practice” he means the church’s experience of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. For interpreters of the patristic period, the biblical text only made sense to the degree that it bore witness to God as ultimately revealed in the person of Jesus Christ.

In addition to the “rule of faith, “ however, many of the earliest Christian exegetes believed that the primary purpose of reading scripture was the transformation of the contemporary reader in love. Saint Augustine, for instance, writes;

Whoever, then, thinks that he understands the Holy Scriptures, or any part of them, but puts such an interpretation upon them as does not tend to build up this twofold love of God and neighbor, does not yet understand them as he ought.<sup>3</sup>

For patristic interpreters like Augustine, love is the *telos* or goal of faith and, consequently, the goal of all of our reading and interpreting of scripture.

That, however, was then. Two-thousand years of church history and what constitutes a “traditional” reading of scripture, at least on a popular level in Protestant circles, has grown to incorporate a larger body of church teachings, including various positions taken on the nature of the Bible itself. Where the Apostle's Creed, for instance, omits any dogmatic statement about the Bible because the creed itself is meant to be the statement about the Bible, effectively summarizing what the church declares to be the Bible's essential subject matter,<sup>4</sup> later church traditions generated and then elevated dogmatic claims about the Bible's nature to a level seemingly on par with the church’s most basic trinitarian convictions. Just casually browse Protestant church websites at

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<sup>3</sup> Augustine of Hippo, *De Doctrina Christiana* (1.36.40), in *Encyclopedia Britannica: Great Books of the Western World* Vol. 18, ed. Robert Maynard Hutchins (Chicago: William Benton Publishing, 1952), 634-635.

<sup>4</sup> Michael F. Bird, *What Christians Ought to Believe: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine Through the Apostle’s Creed* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2016), 23-24.



random. In most cases the first statement of belief, before anything is said about God or Jesus, will be a statement about the Bible. Perhaps driven by the same concern expressed by Augustine, that if the authority of the Bible should be shaken faith will totter,<sup>5</sup> many Christian traditions transfer the inscrutability of God to scripture, believing that because God is truthful and coherent scripture must be as well.<sup>6</sup> When scholars talk about a traditional or confessional reading of scripture this is what they often have in mind; not simply that a traditional reader's interpretation is somehow guided by a conviction regarding the nature of God but with a predetermined conviction that the Bible itself is essentially truthful and coherent because it reflects the truthfulness and coherence of the divine will.<sup>7</sup> This can become problematic when actually interpreting the text.

According to John Barton, an interpreter most noticeably reveals his *a priori* belief regarding what the Bible is and how it "works" when responding to inconsistencies or discrepancies in the text. When presented with an inconsistency or discrepancy in the text, say the difference between the creation accounts in Genesis 1-2 or any one of the discrepancies between the gospels, a confessional interpreter may deny it outright, as Origen says, "make no inquiry into such matters,"<sup>8</sup> because to acknowledge it would be to threaten the essential coherence of scripture, which in turn threatens the coherence of the divine will, or she may argue that the inconsistency is only perceived and employ a

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<sup>5</sup> St. Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana* (1.37.41), 635.

<sup>6</sup> Jon Levenson makes this observation in *The Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, and Historical Criticism* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 5.

<sup>7</sup> Barton, *The Nature of Biblical Criticism*, 27.

<sup>8</sup> Origen, *On First Principles* (4.3.2), 291.

harmonizing exegesis to "resolve" the issue. For instance, she may argue that Genesis 2 is simply an expanded view of Genesis 1 or that Matthew and Mark's omission of a second angel at the empty tomb does not mean a second angel was not present, as Luke states, but that Matthew and Mark simply chose to emphasize one. A non-critical approach to the reading and interpretation of scripture in many contemporary settings is controlled, not just by a traditional doctrine regarding God or an integrating interpretive goal, but by a conservative conviction regarding the essential truthfulness and coherence of scripture that ends up limiting what one sees in the text because it limits what one is allowed to see.

As I said in the introduction, this thesis assumes that anyone engaging my argument believes the Bible holds a privileged, authoritative place in Christian life. I affirm a non-critical commitment to reading the Bible as a Christian believer. But does that mean we have to carry with us all of the theological baggage regarding the Bible the church has accumulated over the years? I suggest not. Much of our contemporary reading of scripture is mired by the same modernist assumptions that sour non-Christians toward the Bible. In an essay entitled "On the Reading of Old Books," CS Lewis writes;

Every age has its own outlook. It is especially good at seeing certain truths and specially liable to make certain mistakes. We, therefore, need the books that will correct the characteristic mistakes of our own period. And that means the old books.<sup>9</sup>

Many contemporary readers of the Bible, both those who profess faith and those who reject it, tend to share the same modern approach to its interpretation. Atheists, as we

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<sup>9</sup> Clive Staples Lewis, "On the Reading of Old Books," in *God in the Dock* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1970), 202.

have seen, attack Christianity on the grounds that if Christians believe that the content of the Bible is “true” they are scientifically out-of-touch, intellectually naïve, and morally bankrupt. Christian fundamentalists strike back by maintaining that the Bible is essentially truthful and coherent as a modernist might understand those terms. Ironically, both are reading the Bible the same way, making the same modern “mistake” while coming to opposite conclusions. Part of our solution to this modern, fundamentalist problem will be to introduce contemporary Bible readers to ancient ways of reading and interpreting scripture, not because ancient interpretation is essentially better, but because the ancient approach I have in mind differs from a typical modern approach and therefore may be able to reveal our modern commitment as the unique “mistake” it is and breakup the spiritual logjam that such commitments create.

A critical approach, sometimes equated with what is called the "historical-critical method,"<sup>10</sup> is also marked by a pre-determined belief regarding the truthfulness and essential coherence of scripture; that it is not *necessarily* truthful or coherent. Barton says that criticism is concerned with scripture's “plain sense;” “a sense not colored by any particular prior confessional attachment to the truth of Scripture or its self-coherence.”<sup>11</sup> In other words, a critical reader does not approach the text as a believer interested in cultivating Christian faith. A critical reader approaches the Bible as a piece of ancient literature that ought to be subject to the same critical analysis as any other ancient

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<sup>10</sup> Barton argues that equating biblical criticism with historical-critical method is a misnomer because biblical criticism is not essentially an historical enterprise but a literary one, concerned with history only as a tool to help assess a text's semantics and genre, and that criticism is too broad to a practice to be considered a specific “method” (39, 67).

<sup>11</sup> Barton, *The Nature of Biblical Criticism*, 101.

document. He *may* determine that scripture is true or that it coheres in some way, but only after subjecting scripture to critical analysis and only if the resultant evidence supports the claim. Critical readers aim to be "objective."

While it is a broad and diverse field, Barton argues that biblical criticism's distinguishing characteristics are its concern with semantics and genre<sup>12</sup> and a willingness to "bracket out truth."<sup>13</sup> The first is its concern with semantics. Biblical criticism assumes that meaning is transferred through words and phrases, words and phrases that do not necessarily hold their meaning across time and culture. Barton uses the contemporary example of the phrase "to table an issue." He notes that in Britain that phrase means to bring an issue up for formal discussion, to "put it on the table." In America, however, it means the exact opposite. Tabling an issue means to postpone discussion for another time, what someone from Britain would call "shelving it." This same phenomenon happens across time. To understand what a text might mean in a contemporary setting, one should seek to understand what it meant in its original setting. This is an historical question but one focused more specifically on the historical meaning of words, which also involves genre. A critic assumes that the kind of information one should expect from a piece of literature or the kinds of questions appropriate to pose to a piece of literature depend on the type of literature it is. To expect, for instance, internal coherence from a book like Proverbs, simply because it exists in the Bible and one believes the Bible must be internally coherent, denies the very nature of Proverbs as a collection of aphorisms

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<sup>12</sup> Barton, *The Nature of Biblical Criticism*, 113.

<sup>13</sup> Barton, *The Nature of Biblical Criticism*, 27.

that are sometimes mutually exclusive.<sup>14</sup> Criticism's concern with semantics and genre make it essentially a literary enterprise despite it being often thought of as primarily concerned with history.<sup>15</sup>

The other defining characteristic of a critical reading of scripture according to Barton is a willingness to "bracket out truth."<sup>16</sup> This is where critical and non-critical readings essentially differ. Where the non-critical reader approaches scripture with a pre-determined view of what truth will be found there, the critical reader does not expect the Bible to be true simply because it is the Bible. The Bible may be true, but that determination must be made as the second of a two-step interpretive process. The first step is to understand what a text meant by attending to language and genre. Johann Philip Gabler refers to this as a text's "biblical theology, of historic origin, conveying what the holy writers felt about divine matters."<sup>17</sup> Once a reader believes she understands what a text meant, she must then make determinations regarding its truthfulness and applicability. This Gabler refers to as "dogmatic theology, of didactic origin, teaching what each theologian philosophizes rationally about divine things, according to the measure of his ability or of the times, age, place, set, school, and other similar factors."<sup>18</sup> Important to note is that this second step, establishing a didactic theology from the

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<sup>14</sup> See Proverbs 26:4-5

<sup>15</sup> Barton, *The Nature of Biblical Criticism*, 101.

<sup>16</sup> Barton, *The Nature of Biblical Criticism*, 171-172.

<sup>17</sup> Johann Philipp Gabler, "On the Proper Distinction between Biblical and Dogmatic Theology and the Specific Objective of Each," in *Old Testament Theology: Flowering and Future*, ed. Ben C. Ollenburger (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2004), 501.

<sup>18</sup> Gabler, "On the Proper Distinction between Biblical and Dogmatic Theology and the Specific Objective of Each," 501.

perceived biblical theology of the text, must be subject to other ways of knowing. Gabler says it this way;

theology is subtle, learned knowledge, surrounded by a retinue of many disciplines, and by the same token derived not only from the sacred Scripture but also from elsewhere, especially from the domain of philosophy and history.<sup>19</sup>

Critical readers assume a distance between themselves and the thought-world of the Bible. One can only "overcome" that distance by seeking to understand the meaning a text originally had and then subjecting that meaning to analysis of truthfulness and applicability by using other available tools.

Barton likens the process to someone listening to a weather report while staring out the window. If a meteorologist says, "it is raining in Whitehouse" and you happen to be in Whitehouse looking out the window at the time, you can instantly discern whether the meteorologist is speaking the truth. Barton suggests this is a good picture of much non-critical reading of the Bible. The non-critical reader assumes no distance between himself and the text; he is in Whitehouse staring out the window. Consequently, he can already see that it is raining and therefore expects to hear the meteorologist say, "it is raining in Whitehouse." He hears what he expects to hear, and the two-step interpretive process has been collapsed into one. The critical reader, on the other hand, assumes he is not in Whitehouse at the time of the weather report, that there is some distance between himself and the report. His interpretation of the report becomes a clear two-step process. First, he must try and understand the report. In this analogy that is not

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<sup>19</sup> Gabler, "On the Proper Distinction between Biblical and Dogmatic Theology and the Specific Objective of Each," 500.

difficult to do, but when it comes to understanding a word or phrase used thousands of years ago in a different culture as part of a different language, understanding is more challenging. If the critical reader, employing certain critical tools, feels she has "unearthed" the meaning of the text in its original setting, that is, she has understood the report, she then has to verify its truthfulness. Because she is not in Whitehouse at the time of the report, she may have to call someone she knows who lives there and ask them to verify the report. Her friend may say yes, and that would confirm the report. Her friend may say no, which *might* invalidate the report or simply require further investigation. Perhaps it is raining in Whitehouse, but it is not raining in *all* of Whitehouse. The meteorologist's report would still technically be true though not precisely. In a similar way, critical readers assume an essential distance between themselves and the biblical text and therefore engage in a two-step interpretive process; first employing critical tools to try and understand what a text meant in its original setting and then subjecting that meaning to other ways of knowing to determine its truthfulness or applicability in a contemporary setting.

Many have argued that both confessional and critical approaches to scripture, in their strictest applications, are problematic.<sup>20</sup> Jon Levenson attributes that to a shared fundamentalist impulse. He argues that the challenge facing the interpreter today is the "existence of the Bible in non-fundamentalistic minds."<sup>21</sup> What he means is that as the

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<sup>20</sup> Kenton Sparks is a notable example because he identifies as a conservative evangelical. See *God's Word in Human Words: An Evangelical Appropriation of Critical Biblical Scholarship* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008).

<sup>21</sup> Levenson, *The Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, and Historical Criticism*, 10.

world becomes increasingly pluralistic interpreters in both the critical and non-critical camps will struggle to find a credible hearing. "Fundamentalists who give historical criticism no quarter and historical critics who are fundamentalistic about their own methods will be unable to participate in the multisided discourse."<sup>22</sup> Traditionalists will be rejected by modernists for refusing to take seriously the "hard" evidence presented by critical approaches and critical readers will be rejected by post-modernists for refusing to acknowledge that, despite their claim to objectivity, they too represent a type of tradition—a community of interpretation—that, according to Levenson, is unique and ironic in the sense that it depends on other communities of interpretation, the communities its method tends to delegitimize, to validate its very existence and importance.<sup>23</sup>

I would like to pick up on Levenson's concern and consider it in the specific context of the believer's developing orienting system. Levenson argues that both critical and non-critical approaches to the reading and interpretation of scripture, again in their strictest applications, will prove inadequate in a pluralistic world because an increasingly pluralistic society presents people with new and unique challenges. Levenson cites Wellhausen as an example. He suggests that underlying Wellhausen's theological program was an assumed direct connection between historical description and normative theology, but that the archeological discoveries in the decades following the publication of Wellhausen's *Prolegomena* (1878) invalidated the "anomian individualism

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<sup>22</sup> Levenson, *The Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, and Historical Criticism*, 124.

<sup>23</sup> Levenson, *The Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, and Historical Criticism*, 123.



that he considered to be the essence of Christianity."<sup>24</sup> Levenson's point is that in 1878 it was easy for someone like Wellhausen to assume a direct connection between historical description and normative theology. That is no longer the case. "In this century," writes Levenson, "the relationship between historical description ("was") and normative theology ("ought to be") has become a pressing problem," precisely because new discoveries and the ease of sharing information and perspectives that characterize our pluralistic world continually challenge settled systems. "Among students of the Bible, only fundamentalists, who do not think historically, and those critical scholars who lack religious commitment will fail to feel its (pluralistic culture's) claim."<sup>25</sup> In other words, believers will face more and increasingly unique challenges in a pluralistic society and I agree with Levenson that a fundamentalist approach to scripture, whether of a traditionalist or critical type, will make it more difficult for believers to navigate these challenges. I am arguing that one of the reasons for this is that fundamentalist approaches to scripture produce undifferentiated, fragmented, rigid, and insecure orienting systems, leaving believers psychologically ill-prepared to evaluate the seriousness of perceived crises or psychologically under-resourced to integrate new experiences into a growing faith.

For instance, a strict confessionalism has the advantage of providing the believer with a clear and compelling picture of God ("Rule of Faith"), which should engender a sense of security. Pargament cites Lee Kirkpartrick's (1992) insight that images of God

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<sup>24</sup> Levenson, *The Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, and Historical Criticism*, 15.

<sup>25</sup> Levenson, *The Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, and Historical Criticism*, 16.

that surface from factor-analytic studies are "strikingly similar" to images of parental figures and how certain impressions of God may contribute to more secure attachment to God; an image of God as comforting, loving, and supporting rather than avenging, hard, severe, or wrathful.<sup>26</sup> In addition, a confessional reading can direct interpretation toward a specific goal; recall Augustine's position that the ultimate purpose of interpreting scripture is the building up of the two-fold command of love.

Pargament notes that "few people have airtight, comprehensive religious orienting systems," but that is not a problem because most people can tolerate some degree of inconsistency and fragmentation. Problems arise, however, when religion and life become so disconnected, when "practices are unrelated to beliefs" or "motivations have little to do with practice" that growing inconsistencies overwhelm a person's tolerance and "religious beliefs prove empty, the institutions alien, and the rituals hollow."<sup>27</sup> A confessional reading that can always point people back to a single imperative can have a powerfully integrating effect.

On the other hand, however, confessional readings, especially those that carry with them predetermined convictions regarding the essential truthfulness and coherence of scripture, as we have seen many do, may leave the believer undifferentiated by either implicitly training her to look away from the ambiguities and complexities posed by critical scholarship or explicitly training her to apply shallow harmonizing techniques to "resolve" them. In addition, traditionalist approaches to scripture may be more likely to

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<sup>26</sup> Pargament, *The Psychology of Religious Coping*, 355.

<sup>27</sup> Pargament, *The Psychology of Religious Coping*, 351.

produce spiritual rigidity to the extent that "a commitment to an inerrant set of teachings about God and humanity, and to an unchanging set of life practices" means an "unwillingness to question religion." According to Pargament, such a posture leaves the believer psychologically "vulnerable to a changing, increasingly diverse world."<sup>28</sup>

A strict critical approach cannot be the solution either, however, because it too fails the orienting system litmus test. Where criticism is most helpful is precisely where traditional approaches struggle; differentiation and flexibility. Pargament argues that "indiscriminate pro-religiousness," one way of characterizing fundamentalist traditions, can be helpful in that it protects faith communities from perceived threats. But this protective, defensive posture "also protects the faith against the critical scrutiny that is so necessary for religious development and growth."<sup>29</sup> I think Fowler would agree. Recall from earlier that according to Fowler's research, the typical religious community "works best" when the majority of its members exhibit stage 3—synthetic-conventional—faith, which is characterized by an inability or unwillingness to make one's faith system the object of critical scrutiny.<sup>30</sup> In other words, a person cannot and will not grow in faith unless at some point he is willing to face critical scrutiny, something "indiscriminate pro-religiousness" avoids. A critical approach to scripture invites the believer to welcome critical scrutiny as a means to truer understanding and, in that way, contributes positively to helping the believer develop a differentiated orienting system. In addition, criticism has the capacity to engender flexibility. Flexibility is the capacity to

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<sup>28</sup> Pargament, *The Psychology of Religious Coping*, 353.

<sup>29</sup> Pargament, *The Psychology of Religious Coping*, 345.

<sup>30</sup> Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 164.

"adapt to change, internal and external."<sup>31</sup> Pargament writes that the "power of any religious system lies in its ability to offer compelling answers to life's most pressing and profound questions." As Levenson notes, in a pluralistic culture those questions are constantly changing. A critical approach to scripture has the capacity to engender religious flexibility in a believer by normalizing the experience of needing to adapt to new insights, creating a new type of religiousness that is marked not by rigid certainty but an ability to hold certainty and uncertainty in critical tension.

Having said that, critical readings struggle precisely where confessional readings excel. Because critical approaches have the tendency to undermine the notion that scripture is essentially truthful and coherent, they struggle to present a clear, stable, compelling image of God. And because critical approaches are not interested in cultivating Christian spirituality, they struggle to provide an integrating goal regarding faith in general or reading in particular, which can leave a developing believer insecure and fragmented.

The solution, I propose, is an approach that honors the best of non-critical and critical readings, what Kenton Sparks calls a "constructive response."<sup>32</sup> A "tertium quid option" that holds together the essential convictions of the believing church while also honoring the insights of modern biblical criticism is the only way to navigate between the

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<sup>31</sup> Pargament, *The Psychology of Religious Coping*, 351.

<sup>32</sup> Sparks, *God's Word in Human Words*, 20.

*scylla* and *charibdis* of extreme non-critical and critical approaches, what Jean-Loup Seban says devolves into “fanaticism and skepticism.”<sup>33</sup>

Some scholars argue on ideological grounds that this cannot be done. Mutual exclusivity is truer in theory, however, than in practice. While Barton says in one place that the essence of confessional reading is antithetical to the essence of critical scholarship,<sup>34</sup> he concedes that “pure objectivity” is not really possible, that most critical scholars are confessional believers and that a critical reading does not preclude other types of reading.<sup>35</sup> On the non-critical side of the debate, Rowan Williams similarly concedes that both critical and non-critical insights are necessary for effective biblical interpretation. In an article entitled, “Historical Criticism and Sacred Text,” he navigates between postmodern and post-critical responses to the historical-critical method, affirming the need for criticism while also acknowledging that, for the Christian, the ‘transparent’ meaning of the text is not to be found in the text at all.<sup>36</sup> The biblical text is by its nature “unresolved, unfinished, self-reflexive, and self-questioning.” The only “transparent” meaning is the “action of Jesus” who is “transparent to God not as a speaker of unmediated divine truths, but as an agent who effects the purpose or desire of God without interruption,”<sup>37</sup> a belief consistent with confessional faith.

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<sup>33</sup> Jean-Loup Seban, “From Joseph-Juste Scaliger to Johann Gottfried Eichhorn: The Beginnings of Biblical Criticism,” in *Biblical Theology: Problems and Perspectives*, ed. Steven J. Craftchick, Charles D. Meyers Jr., and Ben C. Ollenburger (Nashville, Abingdon, 1995), 46.

<sup>34</sup> Barton, *The Nature of Biblical Criticism*, 147.

<sup>35</sup> Barton, *The Nature of Biblical Criticism*, 6.

<sup>36</sup> Rowan Williams, “Historical Criticism and Sacred Text,” in *Reading Texts, Seeking Wisdom: Scripture and Theology* (2003), 220.

<sup>37</sup> Williams, “Historical Criticism and Sacred Text,” 227.

The truth is that many scholars, recognizing both the merits and limitations of biblical criticism, have attempted to integrate critical method with traditional theology.

As Christopher Beeley notes;

While most would agree that nineteenth and twentieth-century scholars were right to insist that the interpretation of the Bible should be subject to historical inquiry and human reason, there is a growing consensus that they erred in claiming that those processes are mutually exclusive with theological and devotional meanings.<sup>38</sup>

On the other side, J.J.M Roberts argues canonical approaches are just as problematic as critical ones and that a critical approach is actually unavoidable in the study of scripture.<sup>39</sup> The motivation for most of these constructive theologians, like those who argue such a middle position is not possible, is largely ideological—attempting to articulate an approach to the reading and interpretation of scripture that best relates to scripture as it is. My concern, while wanting to teach and train people to interact with the actual text they have before them, is more practical. I want to join those scholars who attempt to chart a course between strict critical and non-critical interpretation because I believe it is necessary for shaping a differentiated and flexible orienting system that is also secure and integrated. It is now time to consider what such an integrative solution might look like.

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<sup>38</sup> Beeley and Weedman, *The Bible and Early Trinitarian Theology*, 13.

<sup>39</sup> J.J.M. Roberts, "Historical Critical Method, Theology, and Contemporary Exegesis," in *Biblical Theology: Problems and Perspectives*, ed. Steven J. Craftchick, Charles D. Meyers Jr., and Ben C. Ollenburger (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 131-141.

## Chapter Six

### Scripture and the Orienting System: Naming the Solution

#### The Hidden Gem

In their book, *Creating Great Choices*, Roger Martin and Jennifer Riel argue that the key to great decision making is *integrative thinking*—the ability to create tension between ideas and leverage that tension to design new answers to challenging problems.<sup>1</sup> They highlight four critical components to integrative thinking; taking more into account than is originally apparent, exploring complex causal relationships, structuring the problem holistically, and refusing to settle with unacceptable trade-offs.<sup>2</sup> The Bible, while the source of much life for the church, has from the very beginning also been something of a "problem" calling for creative "solutions." The history of biblical interpretation could be thought of as the church's ongoing commitment to integrative thinking. Critical and non-critical perspectives have both been instrumental in helping the church take more into account when reading and interpreting scripture than it otherwise might have. Engagement between critical and non-critical interpreters has forced the church to consider the complex causal relationships involved with the production, transmission, and interpretation of scripture. In addition, critical and non-critical approaches to scripture are different ways of trying to frame the experience of biblical interpretation more holistically; critical interpreters by focusing on the nature of texts and the thought-worlds of ancient authors and non-critical interpreters by focusing

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<sup>1</sup> Roger L. Martin and Jennifer Reil, *Creating Great Choices: A Leader's Guide to Integrative Thinking* (Boston: Harvard Business Review Press, 2017), ix.

<sup>2</sup> Roger L. Martin and Jennifer Reil, *Creating Great Choices*, x.

on the nature of the canonical whole as a coherent narrative used by a faith community for a specific religious purpose. What we saw in the previous chapter, however, is that critical and non-critical approaches, when practiced at the exclusion of the other, create unacceptable trade-offs. Strict confessional approaches have a tendency to ignore or paper over some of the challenging insights posed by critical scholarship and critical approaches can, if not practiced with care, reduce scripture to a collection of atomized bits of history with little to no relevance for a believing community. What I have suggested thus far is that what makes this trade-off unacceptable is that it leaves the believer with a spiritual orienting system ill-prepared to navigate the challenges that are both inevitable and necessary for spiritual growth.

I am suggesting that we take Martin and Riel's advice and refuse to settle for this unacceptable trade-off, to instead develop an approach to the reading and interpretation of scripture that leverages the strengths of both critical and non-critical reading. How do we do that? Martin and Riel suggest three steps. The first is metacognition. Coined by developmental psychologist John Flavell in the 1970's, metacognition is "capturing our knowledge about cognition and our regulation of the cognitive process."<sup>3</sup> Metacognition is thinking about thinking. Developing a more effective way of reading and interpreting scripture begins with a focus, not on our conclusions, but on making "our data and reasoning more explicit, to us and to others."<sup>4</sup> In other words, getting clearer on why we prioritize certain passages over others in the interpretive process. Martin and Riel argue

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<sup>3</sup> Roger L. Martin and Jennifer Reil, *Creating Great Choices*, 43.

<sup>4</sup> Roger L. Martin and Jennifer Reil, *Creating Great Choices*, 46.



that the problem with most decision-making processes, like how we assign meaning to a biblical text, is that they are "conclusion oriented."<sup>5</sup> Because of the overwhelming amount of data available to us our brains are wired to select a relatively small sample from the available pool and draw conclusions based on inferences that are often implicit and unexamined. Better decision making, they argue, focuses less on the *what* and more on the *how* and *why*. We have to ask critical questions like: "What data did we select? How did we make sense of it? And where did we make a big leap from concrete data to abstract inference?" In many ways our immersion into the history of biblical interpretation has been about metacognition and, as we will see, the critical and non-critical perspectives we will integrate to form our *ecclesial-critical* model will enable us to know why we are choosing to prioritize certain passages over others or why we are offering a particular interpretive conclusion over another. In other words, an intentional interpretive strategy allows us to be metacognitive during the interpretive process.

Empathy, according to Martin and Riel, is the second step in integrative thinking. Empathy is seeking to understand the perspective of another, to experience what they are experiencing "as if" you were them. When it comes to developing creative solutions to challenging problems, like how to read the Bible in a way that fosters ongoing spiritual growth, empathy is key because the solution is all about solving a problem for the "end-user."<sup>6</sup> We have to try and deeply understand the experience the average Bible reader has when she enters the complicated world of the biblical text. What questions does she

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<sup>5</sup> Roger L. Martin and Jennifer Reil, *Creating Great Choices*, 45.

<sup>6</sup> A term Martin and Reil borrow from design thinking, *Creating Great Choices*, 50.

ask? What questions does she not ask? Where does she struggle? Where does she not struggle? How does she use the text? Borrowing from design thinking, Martin and Riel suggest that to deeply understand the end-user you have to observe, engage and experience. As leaders who want to help our people grow into spiritual maturity, knowing the Bible plays a pivotal role in that process, we need to spend time observing how people actually read it, engage them directly on the topic so they can articulate their struggles and desires, and even attempt to experience the text as they do, to the degree that is possible. I have been in vocational ministry for almost twenty years. During that time, I have spent countless hours reading scripture with others, listening to them share their struggles trying to integrate the mysterious and complex content of the Bible with their lived experience, much of which, if I had to try and explain it, stems from not having an approach to scripture that satisfactorily integrates their tacit assumption regarding the sacredness of scripture with insights and experiences from living in the modern world. The creative solution I propose below is the result of empathizing with those I have had the privilege to journey alongside.

The third and final step in integrative thinking is creativity. Martin and Riel caution would-be integrative thinkers from assuming that creativity is a hard-wired gift given to some but not all. Creativity, they suggest, is something that everyone can cultivate by practicing a specific process. The first step is to start with the problem to be solved. We have done that. Our problem is to develop an approach to the reading and interpretation of scripture that will foster a differentiated, integrated, flexible, and secure orienting system so believers can more successfully navigate spiritual struggle and

achieve ongoing spiritual growth. The next step is to "escape the tyranny of the blank piece of paper."<sup>7</sup> They suggest that trying to creatively solve a problem from scratch by "thinking outside of the box" actually frustrates the integrative thinking process. They suggest, rather, to make use of existing models as "raw materials to spur new ideas." Critical and non-critical approaches to the reading and interpretation of scripture serve as our "raw materials."

The basic methodology is to articulate the problem and find two opposing solutions. In our case those opposing solutions are critical and non-critical readings of scripture. The bulk of the work is in examining and articulating the merits of each solution, which we did in the previous chapter. Once done, a decision has to be made regarding what elements of each solution are important and how those elements will be combined into a new model given the unique nature of the problem. They offer three pathways. The first is what they call the "hidden gem." The creative solution here is to take one desirable element of each opposing model and combine them into a new model. The second pathway is called the "double-down." In this pathway the object is to keep one of the solutions in its entirety while adding to it one desirable element from the opposing model. The third pathway, the one reserved for more "wicked" problems, they call the "decomposition." Here the solution lies in decomposing the problem itself into two separate problems and applying each of the opposing solutions in their entirety to the discreet parts of the problem.

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<sup>7</sup> Roger L. Martin and Jennifer Reil, *Creating Great Choices*, 55.

As we have seen, neither critical nor non-critical approaches to the reading and interpretation of scripture in their entirety, at the exclusion of the other, is desirable for our particular problem. Critical approaches may leave believers insecure and fragmented while non-critical approaches may fail to help believers become flexible and differentiated. That seems to rule out the "double-down" and "decomposition" solutions, both of which require accepting at least one of the solutions in its entirety. That leaves us with the "hidden-gem." Can we take a particular element from each approach and combine them in a creative way to solve the unique problem of developing an interpretive approach to scripture that nurtures a differentiated, integrated, flexible, and secure orienting system? I suggest there are two non-critical elements that are necessary for nurturing security and integrity and one critical element that is necessary, especially in the modern world, for nurturing differentiation and flexibility.<sup>8</sup> I refer to the intentional synthesis of these critical and non-critical elements as an *ecclesial-critical* approach to reading and interpretation.

### **Non-Critical Solutions**

It makes sense that we should turn to ancient, non-critical approaches to the reading and interpretation of scripture to help us navigate between the unacceptable trade-offs of dead literalism and critical skepticism because this is the role ancient exegesis has played before. In an article entitled, "Patristic Interpretation of Scripture within God's Story of Creation and Redemption," William Kurz argues that methods of

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<sup>8</sup> Though we will see that the critical element I have in mind is as old as the New Testament (and even older) and present in many pre-critical interpreters.

interpretation pioneered and modeled in the patristic era were essential in helping the early church navigate between the heretical poles of Gnosticism and Arianism, both of which tended to take biblical passages out of their natural contexts and apply to them an exaggerated literalism that ignored the broader sweep of the biblical story, as we have seen both strict traditionalist and critical readings tend to do.<sup>9</sup> The patristic solution, according to Kurz's analysis, was to pay attention to textual detail the way a modern scholar might while also reading passages within a broader theological context like the one established in the creeds. I am advocating a similar approach. Rather than be forced to accept everything that historically comes with traditionalist approaches, like an *a priori* commitment to scripture's essential truthfulness and coherence, I suggest we focus strategically on two specific elements of non-critical interpretation that feature prominently in the patristic era, elements I introduced previously; 1) an emphasis on the "rule of faith" and 2) the goal of transforming the present reader by building up the two-fold command of love.

Let us return to David Kelsey's metaphor from *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology*. Recall that Kelsey's basic argument is that there is an *a priori* relationship between the Bible and the interpretive community. Before an interpretive community (the kids) can meaningfully use the Bible (the ball) it must first decide what the Bible is and what it is for (what game it is playing). To say this in reverse, how an interpretive

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<sup>9</sup> William Kurz, "Patristic Interpretation of Scripture within God's Story of Creation and Redemption," in *Letter and Spirit, Vol. 7: The Bible and the Church Fathers: The Liturgical Context of Patristic Exegesis* (Steubenville: Emmaus Road Publishing, 2011), 40.

community uses scripture reveals its theology regarding scripture.<sup>10</sup> A non-critical reading of scripture assumes that the historic church represents the kids in the field. But as I have already mentioned, I think it is problematic to take everything the Christian church has said about scripture throughout its history as equally authoritative. Rather, I suggest we focus on what the earliest interpreters of scripture emphasized; the “rule of faith” and the building up of the two-fold command of love. These points of emphasis suggest to me that the game patristic exegetes believed they were playing when they read and interpreted scripture was; 1) perceiving God rightly and; 2) living rightly.

As I have said, the "rule of faith" was a proto-creedal conviction regarding the trinitarian nature of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Trinitarian doctrine that was eventually formalized at councils like Nicea was very much evident in pre-Nicene theologians, including of course the New Testament writers themselves. Though not appealing to the more developed language of *homoousios*, New Testament writers like Paul, John, and the author of Hebrews make clear on multiple occasions that the substance of the Father is seen in the Son.<sup>11</sup> New Testament writers believed that the same God attested to in the Hebrew Bible took on flesh in the person of Jesus Christ and that conviction became their most important guide to reading and interpreting the Hebrew scriptures. The New Testament cites the Hebrew scriptures over 350 times, not

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<sup>10</sup> Kelsey argues that when a theologian claims that the Bible is to be used to authorize theological claims he has not really said anything prescriptive. It is not until we observe how a theologian uses the Bible to authorize a theological claim that we can see how that theologian views the specific nature and function of scripture. In other words, before a theologian uses the Bible to authorize a theological claim he has already, whether he knows it or not, decided what the Bible is and how it ought to be used in the life of the church to authorize theological claims, 111.

<sup>11</sup> John 1:18, John 10:30, 2 Cor. 4:4, Philippians 2:6, Colossians 1:15, Heb. 1:3, 1 John 5:20.

including the book of Revelation. If you were reading a Bible without study notes that would amount to roughly four citations per page. Jesus' earliest followers could not say anything without referencing the Hebrew scriptures. And yet they clearly interpret those scriptures in light of their experience with God in the person of Jesus. Saying nothing of his allegorical strategy, Paul's interpretation of Sarah and Hagar in Galatians 3 and the rock that followed the Israelites in the wilderness from 1 Corinthians 10 are notable examples.

This commitment to the fact that the God depicted in the Hebrews scriptures and the God who took on flesh in the person of Jesus were of the same essential nature continued into the patristic era. For example, Origen, in his book *On First Principles* sought to describe "the manner in which they (the divine scriptures) are to be read and understood"<sup>12</sup> and first among his guiding principles is "the rule of the heavenly church of Jesus Christ through the succession of the apostles,"<sup>13</sup> which he makes clear concerns the nature of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.<sup>14</sup> The central problem he sees with various "heretical sects" is that they read passages from the Hebrew scriptures that ascribe violence and evil to God and, because these images look nothing like the God revealed in the person of Jesus Christ, conclude that they represent a different God—a "creator God"—and that Jesus came to "proclaim a more perfect God."<sup>15</sup> Such thinking contradicts the church's "rule" that Jesus is the image of the invisible God.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Origen, *On First Principles* (4.2.1), 269.

<sup>13</sup> Origen, *On First Principles* (4.2.2), 272.

<sup>14</sup> Origen, *On First Principles* (1.preface.2-4), 1-3.

<sup>15</sup> Origen, *On First Principles* (4.2.1), 269-270.

<sup>16</sup> A point Origen reemphasizes in 4.4.1, *On First Principles*, 314.

Similarly, Saint Augustine, in the first three books of his four-volume work, *De Doctrina Christiana*, sets out to teach people "the mode of ascertaining the proper meaning" of scripture and the first principle he covers is the doctrine of God, whom he refers to as "the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit."<sup>17</sup> Augustine argues that human beings are only ultimately able to know God the Father *through* God the Son. Because our "inward sight is weak and dim" God "condescended" in Christ "to make Himself manifest to the outward eye."<sup>18</sup> In other words, the incarnation is the external *sign* that signifies the fullness of God's nature. In Christ, God who "was Himself our home...made Himself also the way by which we should reach our home."<sup>19</sup> The same God who is our destination is also the incarnate path we take to reach that destination. Again in 1.34.38 he writes, "For when we come to Him (Christ), we come to the Father also, because through an equal an equal is known" and in 2.41.62 he refers to Christ as "equal to the Father." And like Origen with the "heretical sects," Augustine shows how the "rule of faith" practically influenced interpretive decisions. In 3.2.3 he rejects a particular translation of John 1 because the language of the translation challenged the "equality of the Trinity."

Commitment to the "rule of faith" as a guiding interpretive principle in the patristic era was not idiosyncratic, limited to a few thinkers like Origen and Augustine. Kurz argues that the "doctrine that the Son was of the same being, nature, or essence as

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<sup>17</sup> Augustine of Hippo, *De Doctrina Christiana* (1.5.5), 625.

<sup>18</sup> Augustine of Hippo, *De Doctrina Christiana* (1.12.11), 627.

<sup>19</sup> Augustine of Hippo, *De Doctrina Christiana* (1.11.11), 627.



the Father," was "generally recognized" as the "key to scripture."<sup>20</sup> Keith Johnson goes so far as to argue that the entire Latin pro-Nicene tradition as well as the Greek-speaking theologians of the east shared the trinitarian conviction that supported Augustine's approach.<sup>21</sup>

The value in recapturing a commitment to the "rule of faith" as a guide controlling our reading and interpretation of scripture is the security it can engender in the reader regarding the fundamental nature of God. I referenced A.W. Tozer in the introduction; "what comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us."<sup>22</sup> We saw in Origen that problems often arise when readers encounter passages in the Bible that ascribe violence or evil to God. Lacking the secure conviction that God is essentially like Jesus, the conviction provided by the "rule of faith," Origen saw that readers "tend to believe such things about him (God) as would not be believed of the most savage and unjust of men."<sup>23</sup> In other words, apart from the conviction provided by the "rule of faith," readers of the Bible are left to piece together a composite picture of God based on countless, often mutually exclusive passages, which can result in people believing monstrous things about God or unsure what to believe altogether. Drawing back on the connection between one's image of God and a parental figure we noted in our chapter on the nature of religious coping, we might compare this situation to a child growing up in an abusive home. The abusive parent may demonstrate love and kindness

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<sup>20</sup> Kurz, "Patristic Interpretation of Scripture within God's Story of Creation and Redemption," 45.

<sup>21</sup> Keith Johnson, "Augustine's 'Trinitarian' Reading of John 5: A Model for the Theological Interpretation of Scripture?" in *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 52, no. 4 (December 2009): 806.

<sup>22</sup> Tozer, *Knowledge of the Holy*, 1.

<sup>23</sup> Origen, *On First Principles* (4.2.1), 269-270.

but may also be severe. The child, never knowing which parent will show up, cannot possibly cultivate a secure, healthy attachment. The "rule of faith," an aspect of non-critical interpretation, is essential for believers developing a secure orienting system that will enable them to navigate struggle and experience consistent spiritual growth.

The second element of a non-critical interpretation that I believe is essential to an interpretive strategy able to cultivate a healthy orienting system is a focus on the transformation of the reader by interpreting scripture in such a way that it builds up one's love of God and neighbor. One of the common distinctions made between critical and non-critical approaches to interpretation is the emphasis placed on what a text "meant" rather than what it "means" for the contemporary community.<sup>24</sup> It is assumed that critical approaches are primarily concerned with what a text originally meant while non-critical approaches with what a text means for the believing community in the present. Recall that one of the trademarks of criticism is a willingness to bracket out truth. In other words, for criticism to be truly critical it must approach the Bible academically, as one might approach any other piece of ancient literature. Though Barton argues that a critical approach, while primarily concerned with what a text meant, does not preclude other types of reading or application,<sup>25</sup> the point here is that between a critical and non-critical approach only a critical approach can be applied with no necessary concern for how the text functions as a sacred document for a specific believing community.

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<sup>24</sup> Stendahl, "Biblical Theology, contemporary," 420-421.

<sup>25</sup> Barton, *The Nature of Biblical Criticism*, 6.

A non-critical approach, on the other hand, while not necessarily disregarding what a text meant in its original setting or entirely rejecting interpretation as an academic discipline that invites modern methodology, is primarily concerned with how the biblical text functions to transform the reader as a member of the believing community called the church. Origen believed transformation of the reader was the "aim of the Spirit" in inspiring the biblical authors. He writes;

And in the first place we must point out that the aim of the Spirit who, by the providence of God through the Word who was 'in the beginning with God,' enlightened the servants of the truth, that is, the prophets and the apostles, was preeminently concerned with the unspeakable mysteries connected with the affairs of men--and by men I mean at the present moment souls that make use of bodies.<sup>26</sup>

The very purpose of inspiration, as Origen sees it, is that people "at the present moment," that is, the reader in the contemporary setting, might be taught the "deep things revealed in the spiritual meaning of the words" and become "partakers of all the doctrines of the Spirit's council." The purpose of the Bible is how it spiritually impacts the reader. Against any modern, critical approach to reading and interpretation that cares nothing for the Bible's spiritual relevance to the believing community but only for its historical value, Origen would say, "Who would dare to say that what is written 'by the Word of God' is of no use and makes no contribution to salvation, but is merely a narrative of what happened and was over and done a long time ago, but pertains in no way to use when it is told."<sup>27</sup> Origen's principle concern was spiritual transformation and he understood scripture to play a primary role in that process. Adonis Gorospe says it

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<sup>26</sup> Origen, *On First Principles* (4.2.7), 282.

<sup>27</sup> Origen, "Homily XXVII on Numbers," 428.

well; "For him (Origen), the interpretation of the Bible was none other than the contemplation of the deep mysteries of the divine. The knowledge of God attained by this contemplation and God's own beneficence would transform the contemplative into God's likeness."<sup>28</sup>

Augustine begins his exploration into the art of biblical interpretation with a rudimentary introduction to the discipline of semiotics or the study of signs. "All instruction is either about things or about signs," Augustine writes.<sup>29</sup> A *thing* is that which is never used to correspond to something else, whereas a *sign* is a *thing* used to indicate something else. All *signs* are *things* but not all *things* are *signs*. Some *things*, however, are always *signs*; words, for instance. Augustine writes, "No one uses words except as signs of something else." This lesson in semiotics is important to the task of biblical interpretation because the bible is full of words that serve as *signs* of other *things*. To properly interpret the Bible, one must have a working knowledge of the *things* to which the *signs* point. For Augustine, the "thing" to which the signs of scripture ultimately point is God. He argues that all things can be categorized as either useful or enjoyable, or both. "To enjoy a thing is to rest with satisfaction in it for its own sake," he writes. "To use, on the other hand, is to employ whatever means are at one's disposal to obtain what one desires, if it is a proper object of desire."<sup>30</sup> He reasons, then, that because God is the only *thing* a person ought to "rest with satisfaction in...for its own

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<sup>28</sup> Adonis Abelard Gorospe, "Spiritual Formation and the Contextualization of Christology," in *Journal of Asian Evangelical Theology* 18, no. 2 (September 2014): 51.

<sup>29</sup> Augustine of Hippo, *De Doctrina Christiana* (1.2.2), 624-625.

<sup>30</sup> Augustine of Hippo, *De Doctrina Christiana* (1.4.4), 625.

sake," all scriptural *signs* must be *things* intended for use to reach that place of satisfactory rest. God is the "fatherland" to which we must return if we are to "live happily" and the world is full of *things*, including scripture, that "must be used" toward that end, "not enjoyed," so that we do not become "engrossed in factitious delight" and become "diverted from that home whose delights would make us truly happy."<sup>31</sup> Like Origen, Augustine views scripture's primary purpose and value in the spiritual impact it has on the contemporary reader. In fact, James Andrew's analysis of *De Doctrina Christiana* suggests that, for Augustine, interpretation requires a turn to application in the contemporary setting.<sup>32</sup> In other words, biblical interpretation has not actually happened until what has been understood from the text has been communicated in some way to the believing community for its spiritual benefit. And again, Origen and Augustine were not anomalies in this regard in the patristic period. Chris Beeley writes that "most theologians of this period...aimed to read, interpret, and teach the scriptures in a way that produced spiritual growth in Christ."<sup>33</sup> Paul Decock takes it a step further and argues that the non-critical emphasis on reading scripture for the primary purpose of transforming the contemporary reader "has been the dominant view in the history of Christianity."<sup>34</sup>

But what specifically did this transformation consist of as far as patristic exegetes were concerned? The answer put simply is love. Because God IS love and the purpose of

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<sup>31</sup> Augustine of Hippo, *De Doctrina Christiana* (1.4.4), 625.

<sup>32</sup> James A. Andrews, "Why Theological Hermeneutics Needs Rhetoric: Augustine's *De Doctrina Christiana*," in *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, 12 no 2 (Apr 2010): 184-200.

<sup>33</sup> Beeley and Weedman, *The Bible and Early Trinitarian Theology*, 11.

<sup>34</sup> Paul B. Decock, "Origen of Alexandria: The study of the Scripture as transformation of the readers into images of the God of love." *HTS Teologiese Studies/ Theological Studies* 67(1), Art. #871 ( 2011), 3.

reading and interpreting scripture is to be conformed to the image of this God, proper interpretation is anything that builds up our love of God and neighbor. As previously mentioned, Origen saw the spiritual life as a progressive journey through three stages, the last of which was a "never-ending progress in knowledge and love for God."<sup>35</sup> Love, for Origen, was the goal of the Christian journey and he considered the sacred words of scripture to be the reader's guide on that journey.<sup>36</sup>

Like Origen, Augustine saw the Christian life as a journey of conforming one's life to the loving nature of God revealed in Christ and the scriptures were primarily to be read and interpreted to facilitate that process. Augustine did not lack what today we might consider modern concerns, like an author's intention, nor did he advise readers to reject what might be considered secular, academic sources of knowledge such as history, natural sciences, and semiotics as aids in the interpretive process. It is clear, however, that whatever an author may have originally meant or however outside sources may be helpful in uncovering a passage's original meaning, correct interpretation is always that which builds up the double love of God and neighbor.

Whoever, then, thinks that he understands the Holy Scriptures, or any part of them, but puts such an interpretation upon them as does not tend to build up this twofold love of God and neighbor, does not yet understand them as he ought.<sup>37</sup>

That which builds up love is always a correct interpretation of scripture because, for Augustine, love is ultimately what all scripture means. "Now scripture enjoins nothing

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<sup>35</sup> Decock, "Origen of Alexandria," 8.

<sup>36</sup> Decock writes, "Origen approached the Scriptures as divine instruction, that aims at the transformation of the present readers and not merely at information about the past (see 2 Tm 3:16–17). The purpose of reading is that readers will grow in existential wisdom." "Origen of Alexandria," 3.

<sup>37</sup> Augustine of Hippo, *De Doctrina Christiana* (1.36.40), 635.

except charity and condemns nothing except lust"<sup>38</sup> and therefore whatever one's specific interpretive strategy, all biblical readers should "carefully turn over in our minds and mediate upon what we read til' an interpretation be found that tends to establish the reign of love."<sup>39</sup> In fact, Augustine goes so far as to say that even if a reader were to mistake a biblical author's original intention, provided his interpretation builds up love of God and neighbor, he may be in error but in the same way that a journeyer takes the wrong path to arrive at the right destination. Whatever the original author may have meant, correct interpretation of scripture is always that which builds up one's love of God and neighbor.<sup>40</sup>

Patristic emphasis on the transformation of the reader into someone who possesses greater love for God and neighbor has powerful implications with regard to spiritual integrity. Recall that Pargament names disintegration as one of the qualities of religious orienting systems that make coping more difficult. Integrity is about alignment or consistency between one's professed beliefs and behaviors. One of the most common struggles I have seen among people in the church is the inability to integrate lived experience with their impression of the Bible. If God commands us to love our enemies and pray for those who do us wrong, how is it that in the end there will be people who remain unforgiven? How can we call a God who commands the slaughter of women and children a loving God who deserves our allegiance and worship when, if a person were to do something similar, we would condemn him? How can I say my gay friend is wrong for

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<sup>38</sup> Augustine of Hippo, *De Doctrina Christiana* (3.10.15), 661.

<sup>39</sup> Augustine of Hippo, *De Doctrina Christiana* (3.15.23), 664.

<sup>40</sup> Augustine of Hippo, *De Doctrina Christiana* (1.36.40), 635.

being gay when he describes his same-sex attraction in precisely the same way I describe my attraction to the opposite sex? People who have grown up in churches learning to read the Bible in certain ways struggle to integrate what they have read (or heard) with life experience and their own God-given consciences. The Spirit within them seems to be encouraging one perspective but what they perceive the Bible to say, again based on how they have learned to read and interpret it, seems to demand something different. I am suggesting that the patristic emphasis on the building up of the two-fold command of love may be the integrating principle that can help believers bridge these two ways of knowing.

Jonathon Kim argues persuasively that effective Christian education requires this kind of integration, a strategy that coordinates two different ways of knowing; rationality and relationality.<sup>41</sup> Learning is part comprehension where individuals assimilate data by using an “underlying rational substructure” called *schema*. But learning is also part apprehension where individuals assimilate data by using a “relational structure” called *thema* to “conceive and validate empirical knowledge.” Kim argues that the history of Christian education has oscillated between these two epistemic poles. His suggestion is a more holistic approach that takes into account the way *schema* and *thema* influence one another in a dialectic relationship. In other words, effective Christian education requires consistency between schematic-theoretical knowledge and thematic-praxis knowledge.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Jonathan Kim, "Cognition and Faith Formation: A Reflection on the Interrelationship of Schema, Thema, and Faith," in *Christian Education Journal Series 3*, Vol. 4, no. 2 (2007): 308.

<sup>42</sup> Kim, "Cognition and Faith Formation: A Reflection on the Interrelationship of Schema, Thema, and Faith," 314.



I am suggesting that an interpretive approach to scripture that emphasizes the building up of love of God and neighbor contributes to integrating a person's theoretical knowledge based on what they have been taught to believe from scripture with the praxis knowledge gained from experience in the world.

I suggest this is precisely what Jesus tried to do on more than one occasion. For instance, in Luke 14 while eating at the home of a prominent religious leader on the Sabbath, a man with a condition known as dropsy is present for the meal. Jesus asks the Pharisees and experts in religious law, "Is it permitted in the law to heal people on the Sabbath day, or not?" They refuse to answer. Jesus proceeds to heal the man and then turns again to the Pharisees and religious experts with another question; "Which of you doesn't work on the Sabbath? If your son or your cow falls into a pit, don't you rush to get him out?" Again, no response. What Jesus is trying to do in this scene is bridge the Pharisees and legal experts' schematic-theoretical knowledge—what they believe to be true based on how they have been taught to read and interpret scripture—with their thematic-praxis knowledge—what they know to be good and right based on their own lived experience, by modeling how genuine love of God must be expressed as love of one's neighbor.<sup>43</sup> The Bible has a lot of information that is not easy to internally reconcile or apply. The rule that all scripture ought to be interpreted in such a way that the ultimate meaning is that which builds up one's love of God and love of neighbor has the ability to cut through the clutter. The question the Bible reader ought to always be asking is, "What does love require of me?" He may not always live up to the answer, but

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<sup>43</sup> 1 John 4:20-21

knowing what the ultimate point is will give him an integrating focus that has the added benefit of resonating with his lived experience whereby creating less cognitive dissonance and the greater likelihood of spiritual growth through seasons of crisis.

### Critical Solutions

Security and integrity are only two of the four essential elements to one's orienting system we need to account for when adopting an interpretive approach to scripture best suited to equip believers to navigate spiritual struggle. The remaining two are differentiation and flexibility and, as we have seen, traditionalist readings prove less helpful here, though in ways one may not anticipate. Recall Barton's argument that the primary distinction between critical and non-critical approaches to interpretation lies not in one's willingness to acknowledge discrepancies or inconsistencies in the text, but how one deals with those inconsistencies once acknowledged. Patristic interpreters like Origen and Augustine were just as willing to acknowledge technical inconsistencies in the biblical text as are modern biblical critics, and in that way were "modern" long before the dawn of official modernity. Origen, for instance, admits that "woven into the story" of scripture are things "which did not happen, occasionally something which could not happen, and occasionally something which might have happened but in fact did not."<sup>44</sup> Augustine also acknowledges that scripture contains "ambiguous signs" that have the capacity to deceive translators.<sup>45</sup> For both Origen and Augustine, however, the primary problem is not with "ambiguity in the original language," but the fact that many

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<sup>44</sup> Origen, *On First Principles* (4.2.9), 286.

<sup>45</sup> Augustine of Hippo, *De Doctrina Christiana* (2.12.18), 640-642.

interpreters read the text with a strict literalism. Both, for example, suggest that the reason Jesus was rejected by "his own people" (Jn. 1:11) was because they interpreted the ancient prophecies about the coming of the Messiah literally and Jesus, while claiming to be Messiah, did not satisfy their literalist expectations.<sup>46</sup>

Origen's solution to this literalist dilemma is to argue that scripture should be read on three different levels; body, soul, and spirit. In the same way a person is made of body, soul, and spirit the scriptures have a body, soul, and spirit level of meaning.<sup>47</sup> The body corresponds to the surface level meaning. This ultimately has to do with plain passages from which we can fairly easily discern the essential doctrines of the faith.<sup>48</sup>

Origen believed that Christians have varying levels of spiritual capacity. Though everyone has the capacity for growth, some may never grow to be able to benefit from scripture's deeper levels of meaning.<sup>49</sup> For those individuals, scripture's surface sense is available for spiritual nourishment, like food fit for a particular kind or status.<sup>50</sup> For those who possess greater capacity, having been nourished on these surface level passages, a deeper, soul level is available. As we saw a moment ago, interpreters like Origen had no problem acknowledging that the surface level of scripture contained ambiguities, inconsistencies, even things that did not happen or could not have happened despite being recorded as though they had. This is only a problem, however, if one refuses to look beneath the text's literal, surface level for deeper meaning. In fact, Origen argued

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<sup>46</sup> See Origen, *On First Principles* (4.2.1) and Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana* (3.6.10)

<sup>47</sup> Origen, *On First Principles* (4.2.4), 275-276.

<sup>48</sup> Origen, *On First Principles* (4.2.7-8), 282-283.

<sup>49</sup> Origen, *On First Principles* (4.3.14-15), 311-312.

<sup>50</sup> Origen, "Homily XXVII on Numbers," 245.

that surface level inconsistencies existed for precisely this reason, to inspire the reader to investigate the text more deeply.<sup>51</sup> In most cases, the soul level refers to a tropological reading.

Origen referred to the deepest level of meaning in scripture as the spiritual level. At this level of depth, the reader interprets the scriptures, especially the Hebrew scriptures, anagogically, seeing Christ as the mystical fulfillment of all preceding revelation. For an example, in his "Homily 7 on Leviticus" Origen compares Leviticus 10:8-11, a command given to Aaron and his sons not to drink wine before entering the temple, to the Last Supper. In the same way that Aaron was forbidden to drink wine before entering the temple, Jesus, the true Aaron, refused to drink wine before approaching the "altar" of his death. Jesus' reason, however, was not because Leviticus prohibited it. According to Origen, Jesus could not drink wine because wine is associated with celebration and how could Jesus celebrate so long as any of his children were missing from the party.<sup>52</sup> This is how Origen explains that Jesus will drink wine again with his disciples in the coming kingdom. Origen takes a Levitical command, which on the surface pertains only to Aaron and his sons, and interprets it anagogically to reveal a deep mystery regarding salvation.

For many patristic exegetes like Origen the only way to successfully dig below the surface level of a passage to find the deeper meaning was to read the passage figuratively. In other words, to spiritualize passages that when read literally created

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<sup>51</sup> Origen, *On First Principles*, 4.2.9 (285) & 4.3.2 (290).

<sup>52</sup> Origen, "Homily 7," in *Homilies on Leviticus, 1-16*, trans. Gary Wayne Barkley (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1990), 131-132.

irresolvable problems or absurdities. Origen's preferred method for reading passages figuratively was allegory. For example, he interprets the "2-3 firkins" of water held in the stone water pots at the wedding feast in John 2:1-12 that were used for ceremonial washing as standing for the three levels of scripture—body, soul, and spirit—meant to cleanse the reader inwardly that he might be "purified through the word of the scriptures."<sup>53</sup> Allegory was not the only method employed to read passages figuratively, but reading passages figuratively was the general strategy that unlocked scripture's deeper sense.

For Augustine, learning to read scripture figuratively was the watershed experience that made Christian faith "intellectually respectable."<sup>54</sup> During his teenage years Augustine turned to the Christian scriptures to "find out what they were like," only to be disappointed. Compared to the "dignified prose" of Cicero, on which his formal education had been centered, he found them to be "unworthy,"<sup>55</sup> believing at the time that something was more likely to be true if spoken eloquently or false if it was spoken in "uncouth language," a belief he would eventually come to see as erroneous.<sup>56</sup> Augustine's education eventually moved him to the city of Carthage where, in part because of his disappointing experience with the Bible, he joined a pseudo-Christian sect called Manichaeism. Manichaeism was grounded in gnostic dualism; goodness was represented by light and associated with knowledge, spirit, and soul and evil was

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<sup>53</sup> Origen, *On First Principles* (4.2.5), 278.

<sup>54</sup> Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 94.

<sup>55</sup> Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*, 42.

<sup>56</sup> Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*, 82.

represented by darkness and was associated with ignorance, matter, and the body. Manichaeism rejected the Hebrew scriptures because of their carnal depictions of God and was highly critical of the New Testament as well. Manichees read the Bible, especially the Hebrew scriptures, literally, and on that basis believed that they depicted a God unworthy of their devotion. Already disappointed that the Bible did not match the eloquence of Cicero, Augustine was primed to accept Manichaeism's gnostic dualism. For years he was convinced that "nothing could be advanced against the Manichean opponents" by the Catholic faith.<sup>57</sup>

That is until he met Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, through whose teaching he began to realize that Christianity was "intellectually respectable." Of particular importance to Augustine was how Ambrose took difficult passages from the Old Testament, passages that Augustine says "had been death to me because I was taking them literally," and interpreted them figuratively, making it possible for Augustine to "unravel all those cunning knots of calumny in which the sacred books had been entangled,"<sup>58</sup> so that "passages which used to seem ridiculous in the Church's holy books" could be "understood in a different and quite acceptable way."<sup>59</sup> Ambrose's rule regarding the interpretation of scripture, taken from 2 Corinthians 3:6, that the letter of the law kills but the spirit of the law gives life, opened Augustine's eyes to the fact that scripture contained layers of meaning. What he once considered "unworthy" compared to the "dignified prose" of Cicero he now saw as a kind of "holy humility;" in "plain words and

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<sup>57</sup> Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*, 94.

<sup>58</sup> Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*, 100.

<sup>59</sup> Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*, 113.

very humble modes of speech" scripture "offered itself to everyone." But those same plain words and humble modes of speech also represented "narrow openings," guarding what Augustine called a "mysterious dignity" in scripture's "deeper sense," able to "stretch the understanding of those who were not shallow minded."<sup>60</sup> He came to adopt Origen's "leveled" reading of scripture and offered his own "rules" for when to read a passage literally and when to read it figuratively.<sup>61</sup>

One might want to argue at this point that a leveled reading of scripture controlled by the rule of faith with an emphasis on the transformation of the reader in love passes all four points of the orienting system litmus test. The rule of faith has the capacity to cultivate secure attachment, an emphasis on the transformation of the reader in love provides an integrating focus, and a leveled reading, especially the permission to read difficult passages figuratively, appears to provide for flexibility and allows for fine distinctions. Augustine certainly recognized that a leveled reading would result in people reading different meanings into the same texts and went so far as to argue that, provided each person could justify his interpretation by appealing to other texts, the Holy Spirit envisioned this kind of "interpretive pluralism."<sup>62</sup>

I would argue that while this may have been true in the pre-modern era when figural reading was an accepted strategy imported from the reading of other classic

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<sup>60</sup> Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*, 104.

<sup>61</sup> See for example *De Doctrina Christiana*, 3.12.18

<sup>62</sup> Augustine of Hippo, *De Doctrina Christiana* (3.27.38), 668. I am employing the phrase "interpretive pluralism" as used by Christian Smith in his book *The Bible Made Impossible: Why Biblicalism is Not a Truly Evangelical Reading of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2012). Smith argues that the reality of "pervasive interpretive pluralism" invalidates perspicuity. Arguing that scripture is inerrant is a meaningless discussion when fallible people are the ones who ultimately have to interpret its meaning.

texts,<sup>63</sup> in an historically conscious world, that is one aware of how culture and communication evolve over time, figural exegesis as a primary interpretive strategy becomes as problematic as it might be helpful. Reading scripture figuratively certainly allows for flexibility, but without guards provided by critical methodology it might provide too much flexibility. A modern reader reflexively recoils against interpretations that clearly "stretch" what a passage appears to say on a surface level. But you do not have to be shaped by modernity to see this as an inevitable consequence of figural exegesis. Even interpreters in the patristic era challenged Origen's penchant for allegorizing scripture as seeing meaning in the text that simply was not there. And as far as differentiation is concerned, a leveled reading, figural exegesis in particular, does not actually address scripture's complexity; it more sidesteps it. Figuratively interpreting God's command to Samuel to have Saul slaughter the Amalekites, including the women and children, may yield a "kernel of meaning" for the "nourishment of charity," but it does not address the modern concern of whether God actually told Samuel to give that command. I appreciate David Graham's position that a critically informed figurative exegesis has the potential to "furnish Christian formation" while also maintaining "intellectual credibility...amidst the academy,"<sup>64</sup> but we are not primarily concerned here with intellectual credibility in the academy and we have already shown that figurative exegesis, however critically informed, does not satisfactorily address the psychological struggles that difficult biblical passages tend to produce for modern readers. The

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<sup>63</sup> Sparks, *God's Word in Human Words*, 186.

<sup>64</sup> David Graham, "Defending Biblical Literalism: Augustine on the Literal Sense," *Pro Ecclesia* 25, no. 2 (April 2016): 173.



modern reader wants to know if the God depicted in the Hebrew scriptures, the "carnal" God whom the Manicheans rejected as unworthy of their devotion, actually did and said many of the deplorable things ascribed to him. If he did, were the Manicheans right to suggest God is unworthy of our devotion? For better or worse, the modern mind is preoccupied with truth as "historical fact." When someone approaches the scriptures they want to know, "did this happen or not," and the fact is that the Bible depicts God in ways that are morally problematic to the modern reader. Figurative exegesis does not make that struggle go away.

This is where we need the help of modern criticism. We need a critical insight capable of honoring the rule of faith and serving the transformation of the reader in love, while also dealing seriously with what the texts actually say and cultivating spiritual flexibility and differentiation. I suggest that principle is the principle of accommodation. Kenton Sparks defines accommodation as "God's adoption in inscripturation of the human audience's finite and fallen perspectives."<sup>65</sup> Unlike a strict fundamentalist approach, which views everything in the Bible as literally true by virtue of it being in the Bible, the principle of accommodation suggests the Bible may contain content that while technically untrue reflects a kind of divine communication that was necessary at the time given the audience's developmental capacity.

We might liken it to a child's developing perception of her parent. Let us imagine my eleven-year-old daughter keeps a journal where she routinely records her experience with me as her father. If I were to ground her for disobedience and she were to miss her

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<sup>65</sup> Sparks, *God's Word in Human Words*, 230.

best friend's birthday party as a result, we can imagine the sorts of things she might record in her journal. "My dad is ruining my life." "My dad doesn't care about me." "My dad is being unfair." Those documented perceptions of me do not tell the entire story. They capture her experience with me at a particular time in both her personal development and in our relationship together. In other words, my communication with her will be limited by her capacity to understand and appreciate what I have to say. Now let us imagine that I opened her journal and read the various things she wrote about me. Knowing that they failed to paint a fully accurate picture of me as a loving Father who has his daughter's best interests in mind, would I force her to rewrite it? No, I would not. Because I know that what she has written reflects where she is in her journey with me as her father and that someday that record, in light of future experiences and fuller revelation, will be an essential part of her story. The principle of accommodation works in a similar way. It does not assume that every time the Bible presents God as having said or done something it is disclosing a full and accurate revelation about God. Passages are like journal entries documenting people's experience with God in time and space. They are divine in the sense that they are the product of God's divine interaction with people, inspiring them to write what they were capable of writing, but human in that God catered God's self-revelation to the finite capacities and perspectives of people, inevitably resulting in misinformation and even mischaracterization.

It is important to note even as I refer to the principle of accommodation as a "modern" or "critical" principle, many pre-modern theologians applied the principle of accommodation in their exegesis. In *Against Celsus* Origen writes;

Just as when we are talking to very small children we do not assume as the object of our instruction any strong understanding in them, but say what we have to say accommodating it to the small understanding of those whom we have before us...so the Word of God seems to have disposed the things which were written, adapting the suitable parts of his message to the capacity of his hearers and to their ultimate profit.<sup>66</sup>

For an example of how Origen applied the principle of accommodation, he argues in *On First Principles* that the law given to the people in Leviticus was made more complete when given to Moses in Deuteronomy and that it reached perfection in the coming of Jesus and the "precepts of the Gospels."<sup>67</sup> Augustine also made use of the principle of accommodation. In *De Doctrina Christiana* he explains the Jews' rejection of Jesus as their being in bondage to signs rather than to the reality to which the signs were meant to point.<sup>68</sup> Again, God's self-disclosure in the mediated signs of scripture is progressing toward God's unmediated communicative action in Christ. To misunderstand this, to believe the signs themselves are examples of God's full self-disclosure, is to miss the point. Elsewhere when suggesting how readers ought to interpret commands given to previous generations, which in a contemporary setting would be considered immoral—such as having multiple wives—Augustine argues that what was permissible in times past reflected the developmental level of the people at the time and God catered revelation to their situation like medicine able to act upon the "special weakness of each member."<sup>69</sup> In addition to Origen and Augustine, Sparks notes that the principle of

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<sup>66</sup> Quoted from Sparks, *God's Word in Human Words*, 237.

<sup>67</sup> Origen, *On First Principles* (4.3.12), 309.

<sup>68</sup> Augustine of Hippo, *De Doctrina Christiana* (3.6.10), 660.

<sup>69</sup> Augustine of Hippo, *De Doctrina Christiana* (3.17.25), 664.

accommodation can be found in the writings of Justin Martyr, Athanasius, Gregory of Nyssa, Basil the Great, Gregory of Nazianzus, John Chrysostom, and even John Calvin.<sup>70</sup>

My point here is that the principle of accommodation is not strictly "modern" or "critical" in the sense that it is the product of what we now refer to as the modern era. It *is* "modern" and "critical" in the sense that it grounds meaning in the thought-world of the author(s). It does not assume, like a fundamentalist approach would, that a stone-age author's perception of God and reality is fully accurate simply because it is recorded in the Bible. On the contrary, accommodation assumes that what someone understands to be "true" is a product of that person's cultural location. To understand what a biblical text might mean for us today we need to be honest about the limitations of ancient perception. This is thoroughly critical as we have understood that term.

But the fact that so many early theologians appeal to the principle of accommodation in their own writing is what makes it so attractive as the critical principle to combine with our already identified non-critical commitments. First, accommodation as a critical interpretive principle honors the "rule of faith." In fact, the principle assumes that God's self-disclosure in scripture is moving toward some *telos*. In the same way that my daughter's perception of me should become fuller or more accurate as she develops the capacity to experience more of me, the principle of accommodation assumes that as people grow, experience more of God, and develop greater capacity they will come to a fuller, more accurate understanding of God. Scripturally speaking, that is precisely the claim that the New Testament authors make regarding God's revelation in the person of

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<sup>70</sup> Sparks, *God's Word in Human Words*, 236-242.

Jesus Christ. Prior to the advent of Jesus all of God's self-disclosure recorded in the Hebrew scriptures was, by definition, inadequate. Jesus, not scripture, is God's full and complete self-disclosure. To borrow a phrase from Francis Watson, Jesus is God's only unmediated "communicative action."<sup>71</sup> The critical principle of accommodation, far from undermining ecclesial authority, actually reinforces the church's commitment to trinitarian orthodoxy.

It also honors the faith community's emphasis on interpretation leading to the transformation of the reader in love. Because the principle of accommodation assumes that God's self-disclosure is progressing over time toward its fullness in Christ, Jesus becomes the final authority on the goal of Christian spirituality and everything else the Bible says serves his envisioned, proclaimed ends. And as we have seen, Jesus declared that the goal of faithfulness to God was becoming merciful as God is merciful (Mt. 5:48/Lk. 6:36). As Sparks argues, the principle of accommodation is simply an explicit theological rationale for what, as Christian interpreters of scripture, most of us already do.<sup>72</sup> We know that God's command to Samuel to have Saul slaughter the Amalekites does not give us permission to slaughter our enemies. In other words, we know that Jesus' command to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us carries greater theological weight than other revelation where God appears to be advocating the opposite. The principle of accommodation gives us an explicit rationale for making that choice. God's command to have Saul slaughter the Amalekites was either God

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<sup>71</sup> Francis Watson, *Text and Truth: Redefining Biblical Theology* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1997), 123.

<sup>72</sup> Sparks, *God's Word in Human Words*, 257.

accommodating the sinful predilections of an ancient, tribal culture or it reflects Israel's penchant for retribution wrapped in the perception of divine justification; similar to terrorists flying planes into buildings under the assumption that Allah wills it. We believe that God is love and that the goal of Christian faith is to grow perfect in love and the principle of accommodation enables us to reconcile conflicting images of God and spirituality in the Bible through the rationale of progressive revelation.

The fact that more Christians, especially those raised in an evangelical culture, are unfamiliar with the principle of accommodation is unfortunate. In fact, Ronald Frye says accommodation's loss among many contemporary Bible readers, especially evangelicals, is "one of the gravest calamities in the intellectual history of Christianity."<sup>73</sup> Unlike figurative exegesis, the principle of accommodation deals seriously and directly with the actual content of scripture, owning the complexity of our faith tradition. Accommodation does not suggest that readers overlook historic realities in favor of a spiritual application, but rather that they acknowledge how complex divine revelation and inscripturation is. In other words, the principle of accommodation is key to psychological differentiation.

It also has the capacity to cultivate spiritual flexibility. We have seen that traditionalist readings tend to produce spiritual rigidity because a preformed commitment to scripture being essentially truthful and coherent in a particular way leads to a defensive posture when such approaches encounter information that cannot be reconciled. The principle of accommodation provides the non-critical reader with a way

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<sup>73</sup> Cited from Sparks, *God's Word in Human Words*, 258.

of reconciling what the Bible says with modern information, whereby reducing the reader's perceived need to be defensive.

In summary, an *ecclesial-critical* approach to scripture satisfies the orienting system litmus test. A non-critical emphasis on the “rule of faith” and the transformation of the contemporary reader in love has the capacity to cultivate security and integration while the critical use of the principle of accommodation can nurture differentiation and flexibility. It should be noted that Kenton Sparks advocates for a similar approach, which he calls believing criticism. I have chosen *ecclesial* instead of *believing* because I do not want to communicate that a critical approach to scripture is antithetical to belief but rather I want to communicate that my approach creatively blends essential church commitments, like the “rule of faith” and the transformation of the reader in love, a more narrow focus than Sparks, combined with one essential critical insight. I will also say again, elements of this *ecclesial-critical* approach can be seen in pre-modern, non-critical exegetes. While I would not go so far as to say with Maico Michelein that there is very little difference between what patristic interpreters and modern interpreters do with scripture, patristic interpreters like Augustine are closer to modeling what I have in mind than are strict literary critics. The key is a willingness to ask critical questions and engage critical tools but to do so with some “a priori commitment to a spiritual construal of the text’s subject matter.”<sup>74</sup> My *ecclesial-critical* model simply asserts that the most traditional and psychologically beneficial “spiritual construal of the text’s subject matter” has to do with the nature of God and the nature of the Christian life, addressed

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<sup>74</sup> Maico Michelein, “Augustine’s Interpretation of John’s Prologue,” in *Theology Today* 67 (2010), 299.

respectively by a focus on the “rule of faith” and the transformation of the reader in love. I believe this creative integration of critical and non-critical exegesis, what I am calling an *ecclesial-critical* approach, has the promise to cultivate healthy religious psychology, leading to transformative growth through crisis.



## Conclusion

I began this project by saying that my motivation in undertaking the research was deeply pastoral. As a Christian leader I want to see those whom I lead grow into Christian maturity and I believe how one reads the Bible plays a significant role in that process. I have simply focused on one aspect of Christian development—the experience of crisis—and analyzed the way one particular approach to scripture, what I have called an *ecclesial-critical* approach, may positively influence religious coping and thus spiritual development more broadly. My pastoral concern is not limited to the individual believer, however. Recall from my introduction that I said the future of the church depends on its being able to raise Christian believers up into spiritual maturity. If the church fails to do this it will continue to see people leave, refuse to join, or opt for more polarizing, even violent alternatives. In other words, raising people into Christian maturity is essential for the flourishing of the church as a cultural institution. But my concern is deeper still. If the flourishing of the individual is essential to the flourishing of the church, the flourishing of the church is essential to the flourishing of western, American civilization more broadly.

In his book *An Anxious Age: The Post-Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of America*, Joseph Bottum describes America as a three-legged stool, historically supported by the interplay between democracy, free-market capitalism, and religion, specifically Christian religion, Mainline Protestant Christianity even more specifically. Each force provides some essential ingredient to the American recipe; democracy provides a sense of national identity, capitalism an opportunity to pursue one's ambitions, and religion

provides “meaning and narrative, a channel for the hunger of human beings to reach beyond the vanities of the world.”<sup>1</sup> Apart from the counterbalancing influence of the other forces, all three tend toward the worst versions of themselves, threatening the stability of the civilization they exist to support; democracy tends to become shortsighted, placing human hope in the temporal, capitalism always threatens to erode human virtue for the sake of profit, and religion can become about “hegemony and conformity.”

It is religion’s influence on the forces of democracy and capitalism, however, that Bottum is most interested in because it is the decline of religion in America, specifically the decline of Mainline Protestant Christianity, that explains for Bottum the current state-of-affairs in American society.

Almost every one of our current political and cultural oddities, our contradictions and obscurities, derives from this fact: Mainline Protestantism has lost the capacity to set, or even significantly influence, the national vocabulary or the national self-understanding.<sup>2</sup>

Like any political arrangement, Bottum argues that “the American experiment had always relied on an implicit theo-politics, a generally agreed upon understanding of the relation of God and man.”<sup>3</sup> In America’s case, however, that implicit theo-politics was specifically Christian. Both liberal democracy and free-market capitalism, the political and economic systems that define American culture, derive from Christian religious convictions.

Though many of the Founding Fathers were enlightenment deists, the freedoms they

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph Bottum, *An Anxious Age: The Post-Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of America* (New York: Image, 2014), 84.

<sup>2</sup> Bottum, *An Anxious Age*, 85.

<sup>3</sup> Bottum, *An Anxious Age*, 231.

enshrined in the Constitution and Bill of Rights were either directly borrowed from a Christian worldview or the product of America's unique Protestant roots.<sup>4</sup> In addition, leaning on insights from Max Weber's *The Protestant Work Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Bottum argues that modern economics was not the cause of modern Christianity, contra Marx's materialist view, but that Christianity was the cause of modern economics.<sup>5</sup> According to Weber it was religious faith, specifically Protestant Christianity, that defined the virtues—"self-denial, restraint, honesty, trust, foresight"—that made the accumulation of capital possible.<sup>6</sup> In other words, Protestant Christianity provided the moral and theological foundation that made both liberal-democracy and free-market capitalism possible as well as the moral affirmation necessary for their continued flourishing.

But Protestant Christianity also provided a necessary voice of critique, preventing democracy and capitalism from taking on religious significance. The decline of the mainline churches, which Bottum attributes largely to the influence, intended or otherwise, of the social gospel movement of the 1970's, left American culture without this explicitly religious voice critique. This is what he means when he says Mainline Protestantism has lost its ability to influence America's "national vocabulary" and

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<sup>4</sup> For instance, the belief that all men are created equal and endowed with certain inalienable rights was a belief birthed into human consciousness by the resurrection and then promulgated by the church. In addition, Bottum argues that the primary reason America ended up with a freedom of religions, practically speaking, was that the country's diverse Protestant culture made it impossible for the framers to identify any one state religion, 82.

<sup>5</sup> Bottum, *An Anxious Age*, 50.

<sup>6</sup> Bottum, *An Anxious Age*, 51.

“national self-understanding”—America has become a two-legged stool. And we are beginning to see the consequences.

Nature abhors a vacuum so as the Mainline Protestant church began to lose its status as the “accommodating help and the criticizing prophet of the American experiment,”<sup>7</sup> Bottum argues that a new class of social “elites” emerged to take its place. He refers to this class as the “poster-children” of post-Protestantism. Typically college-educated and mostly unchurched, the poster-children descend from Mainline Protestant ancestors. According to Bottum, whether they would like to admit it or not, it was the Mainline Protestant church that “launched them into the cultural positions they occupy today,”<sup>8</sup> and it is the spirit of Mainline Protestantism, “the noble range and insufferable self-righteousness of their moral and spiritual concerns,”<sup>9</sup> that continues to animate their post-protestant worldview, the obvious and defining difference being that the post-Protestants have jettisoned Christianity’s metaphysical commitments that anchored and guided those concerns for their Protestant forebears. In other words, they passionately hold onto a semblance of Christian morality without the inconvenience of religious belief, what Canadian law professor John Humphrey, after helping draft the UN’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 called “tommyrot.”<sup>10</sup> The result is a world of both indiscriminate affirmation as well as unrelenting critique. The new social magisterium seems unable to discern differences in moral categories, affirming all manner of self-

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<sup>7</sup> Bottum, *An Anxious Age*, 85.

<sup>8</sup> Bottum, *An Anxious Age*, xviii.

<sup>9</sup> Bottum, *An Anxious Age*, xix.

<sup>10</sup> Bottum, *An Anxious Age*, 107.

contradictory beliefs and self-destructive lifestyles, and is quick to cancel with almost inquisition zeal anyone who suggests something of the old moral order. Like uprooted flowers that look and smell beautiful for a time but eventually rot and die because they are no longer growing out of a nutrient-dense substrate, much of the current social-justice movement looks and sounds like Christian piety when, according to Bottum, it is really post-Protestant elites working out their spiritual anxieties—their need to believe themselves to be among the saved—by merely voicing outrage against social ills. In this new world, soteriological concerns are worked out in the political realm; “how we vote is how our souls are saved.”<sup>11</sup> Left without an affirming and critiquing voice grounded in metaphysical belief and historic witness to set and safeguard a “national vocabulary” and “national self-understanding,” democracy and capitalism have been “elevated to the status of strange divinities” and now threaten to undermine American society. This is the context in which the church now finds itself. How does the church navigate these waters?

John’s telling of the Passion narrative begins in an olive grove. Jesus has recently celebrated Passover with his disciples where, through pregnant imagery, he communicates, yet again, that he will suffer and die. The one who would betray him, Judas, leaves the meal early to gather soldiers and weapons, his motivation for betraying Jesus unknown. When the meal is over Jesus takes his disciples to an olive grove, a place he often took them for prayer and teaching. Soon Judas arrives with his militia, dispatches from the Jewish temple and Roman Praetorium, and The New Living

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<sup>11</sup> Bottum, *An Anxious Age*, xiii.

Translation says, “Jesus fully realized all that was going to happen to him, so he stepped forward to meet them” (Jn. 18:4 NLT).

Stepping forward to meet his betrayer was, of course, not Jesus’ only option. He could have run and hid, bought his time and resurfaced in some other place to continue his kingdom work. Not only does Jesus not run, he does not even try and hide. John tells us he took his disciples to a familiar place, a place where he knew Judas would be able to find him. He could have fought instead, taken up arms against those standing in the way of truth and justice. He does not do that either. Throughout his ordeal he never resorts to coercive force for, as he would later tell Pilate, ““My kingdom is not an earthly kingdom. If it were, my followers would fight to keep me from being handed over to the Jewish leaders. But my kingdom is not of this world” (Jn. 18:36 NLT). Fighting, according to Jesus, is the trademark of human kingdoms, but not the kingdom of God. An angry mob threatens Jesus, but he overcomes our two most instinctive impulses, fight or flight. Instead, he chooses a third way—he steps forward to meet them. Not because he was naïve. He fully realized all that was about to happen to him. He knew he was going to be arrested. He knew he was going to be tortured. And he knew he was going to die. Knowing all that, he stepped forward anyway.

When I use the term “Christian maturity,” this is something of what I have in mind, a self-surrendering way of being in the world that avoids, on the one hand, the temptation to hide from our most important convictions—those metaphysical claims and their moral implications that make Christianity uniquely Christian—while on the other hand avoiding the temptation to build the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven just

as we have built the great empires of human civilization, by force. In our current context, Bottum's post-Protestantism may represent the temptation to run and hide. Post-Protestantism's allure is the morally righteous nature of its goals. What morally healthy person would argue against values like unity, equality, and social justice? The Christian person has a moral obligation to participate in the healing of social ills.

If a man has drawn any real religious feeling from Christ, his participation in the systematized oppression of civilization will, at least at times, seem an intolerable burden and guilt.<sup>12</sup>

But post-Protestantism is not just alluring. In some ways it feels compulsory. If members of the church do not participate in certain social causes or fail to participate in ways prescribed by the new social magisterium, they are labeled part of the problem and culturally anathematized. One temptation the church currently faces is to hide from its most important metaphysical convictions and their moral implications to avoid being further marginalized by society. The issue of abortion may be the clearest example. In contemporary American society the once take-for-granted commitment to the sanctity of human life, anchored in the theological conviction that all humans are of equal value because they are made in the image of God, has been transferred to a seemingly ubiquitous commitment to "reproductive rights." For the Christian in contemporary culture to continue to insist that abortion is a moral evil is to almost guarantee being labeled provincial or a participant in the oppression of women. The temptation is to hide.

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<sup>12</sup> Walter Rauschenbusch, *A Theology of the Social Gospel, in An Anxious Age*, Bottum (New York: Image, 2014), 56.

The other temptation, however, is to fight. The rise of secular post-Protestantism was not inevitable. In its search for a spiritual thought system to replace Mainline Protestantism as a source of national vocabulary and self-understanding, American culture looked, for a time, to Catholicism and evangelicalism. Catholicism failed to answer the call for any number of reasons—inability to overcome its outsider status and general strangeness in the public eye, loss of moral authority after the sexual scandals of the early 2000's, or its own liberal slide into cultural syncretism—and evangelicalism, according to Bottum, simply lacked the intellectual heft and organizational resources to do for American culture what the Mainline churches once did. What it did not lack, however, was enthusiasm and something of the same self-righteous justification Bottum notices in the secular post-Protestants. Evangelicalism has become the church militant—in some cases literally—hoping to return American society to a specifically Christian order through a type of religious nationalism. The most recent example, of course, is the raiding of the US Capital building. But fighting does not always manifest itself in violence. Many Christians, angry about the state of American culture and anxious about its future, adopt a militant posture in the way they relate to ideas as well. It is a rare thing in today's culture, especially in public space, to see people who disagree with one another engage each other with civility and open-mindedness. A militant posture on one side, for a refusal to listen is visible on both left and right, leads to militant posturing on the other and the divide grows.

The temptation to flee from or fight against the challenges to Christian allegiance are, of course, nothing new. They are as old as the olive grove where Peter first took up



a sword to defend Jesus and later denied even knowing him. Jurgen Moltmann frames this perennial struggle as the double crisis of identity and relevance.<sup>13</sup> When the church focuses too much on its identity, those metaphysical claims and their moral entailments that make it peculiar, it loses relevance in the world; Christianity becomes too strange for anyone outside the church to be willing to take the time to investigate it. On the other hand, when the church focuses too much on being relevant in the world it tends to lose sight of what makes it the kind of unique institution that might be of some help to the world; Christianity becomes a prop used to support culture. Ross Douthat argues this tendency toward accommodation or resistance has plagued American Christianity, both Protestant and Catholic, since midcentury. The political polarization, sexual revolution, globalization, wealth accumulation, and class distinction that marked the 1960's were forces that threatened the establishment position Christianity achieved in the postwar Eisenhower era. Christianity's response was to accommodate these cultural shifts or resist them. Douthat notes that each was called upon to solve Christianity's problem and both were blamed for what would eventually be Christianity's decline.<sup>14</sup> Behind Protestant thinkers like Harvey Cox (*The Secular City*, 1965) and Jesuits like Teilhard de Chardin, the accommodationists shifted the church's focus from preaching salvation in Christ to preaching salvation by social reform, from dogma and liturgy to social ethics, from the church becoming an outpost of the kingdom of God on earth to the church "seeking to

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<sup>13</sup> Jurgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015).

<sup>14</sup> Ross Douthat, *Bad Religion: How We Became a Nation of Heretics* (New York: Free Press, 2012), 83.

make a human habitation for all to live in.” Douthat notes that the spirit of these reforms was inclusion, but the outcome was instead dramatic decline.

The more firmly accommodationist Christianity defined itself by taking sides in this give-and-take, the more it came to be seen as just another faction, just another interest group, with nothing particularly transcendent to offer.<sup>15</sup>

Resistance, however, did not fare any better. In response to accommodation’s failure to bring about a Christian golden-age, an unlikely coalition of Catholic and Evangelical thinkers,<sup>16</sup> theological and ecclesial “enemies” up to that point, signed a joint resolution subtitled “The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium,” affirming their shared faith and focusing their shared energies on what they called a “widespread secularization” that was, in their opinion, descending into “moral, intellectual, and spiritual nihilism.”<sup>17</sup> Like the accommodationists, however, their intent was as much cultural reform through political action as it was church reform through theological reflection and dialogue. The results were mixed. The resistance did manage to create a stigma around certain moral issues, like abortion, that broader culture was forced to take more seriously, but it also led to the public perception that conservative Christians were nothing more than political activists for the right and their political activism made them targets for public scrutiny, scrutiny that would eventually uncover the sex abuse scandal in the Catholic church and a host of moral, ethical failings among high-profile Evangelicals that all but discredited the movement.

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<sup>15</sup> Douthat, *Bad Religion*, 106.

<sup>16</sup> For instance, Catholics like Richard John Neuhaus and Evangelicals like Charles Colson, Bill Bright, Richard Mouw, J.I. Packer, and Mark Noll.

<sup>17</sup> Douthat, *Bad Religion*, 114.

The relationship between the church and broader culture has been the focus of countless books and official church documents. Perhaps the most well-known example, at least in American Protestant circles, is Reinhold Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture*. In Niebuhr's five-fold typology we see the same polar temptations to fight or flee in his *Christ against culture* and *Christ of culture* that Peter faced in the olive grove and that the church in America has faced since midcentury. But the position that the church has most often sought is captured by Niebuhr's *Christ above culture*, what he called the "church of the center;" a posture that maintains there is a gap between Christ and culture, something a Christian tempted by the allure of post-Protestantism might not take seriously enough and a Christian nationalist cannot overcome, while still insisting that Christ is sovereign over culture as well as the church.<sup>18</sup> Niebuhr refers to Christians of the center as "synthesists." Best represented by the medieval Catholic scholastic, Thomas Aquinas, the synthesist cares deeply about the state of culture and desires to see the Christian faith impact human life but roots his concern in the theological convictions provided by Christian dogma, especially creation and incarnation. I see this middle position in Jesus' willingness to step forward and meet his betrayers. Very little of popular Christianity, that is the Christianity practiced by actual professing Christians in daily life, seems to parallel Jesus' willingness, knowing all that was about to happen to him, to simply step forward to meet the challenges of the day. We are far more likely to

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<sup>18</sup> D.A. Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited* (Grand Rapids: William Eerdmans Publishing, 2008), 21.

succumb to the temptation to run and hide from the peculiar claims of the Christian faith because such claims may make us targets for attack, or fight back, trying to impose our agenda on the world by force. The church in contemporary American culture needs to find this synthetic place again.

To do that, however, those who claim allegiance to Jesus must overcome their anxieties. What most intrigues me about Bottum's thesis is that he suggests the "spirit of our age" is anxiety. What drives the post-Protestant "elites" to rage against social injustice is the same impulse that drove their Mainline Protestant ancestors to squabble over doctrinal differences and then plunge head-first into the social Gospel movement of midcentury. It is also what animates fundamentalist Evangelicals today—a general anxiety regarding their own salvation. Each is a manifestation of spiritual uncertainty. Human beings have a universal and unavoidable need to know that they are justified before God. Prior to the reformation that assurance was provided by one's participation in the Catholic church. The Reformation, paradoxically, introduced anxiety by anchoring salvation in faith alone. But detached from ecclesial authority the nagging question became, "how much faith?" Bottum argues that what became known as the Protestant work ethic was, in many ways, Protestants' attempt to answer that question by shifting focus to the kind of virtues that led to the accumulation of wealth and social capital; I know I am saved because I am honest and successful. The same thing may be happening among a new generation of Catholics who find their assurance in being members of a spiritual intelligentsia, Roman Catholicism providing the most intellectually robust option. And then there are the fundamentalist Evangelicals who seem to find their assurance in

their unwavering commitment to certain beliefs such as the inerrancy of scripture and their militantly held convictions regarding proper moral order. All of this is adding to the divide and damaging authentic Christian witness in the world.

I have heard it said that the church undergoes a transformation every five-hundred years. The first began with the birth of Jesus of Nazareth whose life, death, and resurrection birthed the church into the world. The second came when the Roman Empire, the Christian church's bedfellow, collapsed in 480AD. Roughly five-hundred years later (1054AD), after centuries of theological and political conflict, the church divided into the Catholic church of the west and the Orthodox church of the East. Then came the invention of the printing press and the Protestant Reformation five-hundred years after that (1517). 2017 marked the 500-year anniversary of Martin Luther posting his *ninety-five theses* to the door of All Saints' Church in Wittenburg, Germany, the date most popularly recognized as the beginning of the Protestant Reformation, and it feels like the church is experiencing something of a global transformation. As before, perhaps what should animate this transformation as well as provide it proper guidance is a fresh engagement with the Christian scriptures.

The revolution that Jesus sparked involved challenging people to rethink the way they read their sacred texts. Matthew 19:1-9 is a particularly interesting example because Jesus seems to employ the very approach I have lifted up in this thesis. A group of Pharisees approach Jesus with a question about divorce;

When Jesus had finished saying these things, he left Galilee and went down to the region of Judea east of the Jordan River. <sup>2</sup>Large crowds followed him there, and he healed their sick.

<sup>3</sup>Some Pharisees came and tried to trap him with this question: “Should a man be allowed to divorce his wife for just any reason?”

<sup>4</sup>“Haven’t you read the Scriptures?” Jesus replied. “They record that from the beginning ‘God made them male and female.’” <sup>5</sup>And he said, “‘This explains why a man leaves his father and mother and is joined to his wife, and the two are united into one.’ <sup>6</sup>Since they are no longer two but one, let no one split apart what God has joined together.”

<sup>7</sup>“Then why did Moses say in the law that a man could give his wife a written notice of divorce and send her away?” they asked.

<sup>8</sup>Jesus replied, “Moses permitted divorce only as a concession to your hard hearts, but it was not what God had originally intended. <sup>9</sup>And I tell you this, whoever divorces his wife and marries someone else commits adultery— unless his wife has been unfaithful.”

Jesus' interpretation of Mosaic law seems “controlled” by a clear image of God. Jesus knew God intended for human beings to reflect God’s loving nature by their love for one another, a commitment reflected in the covenant of marriage but not in the act of divorce, especially when done flippantly and callously. He knew this, of course, because he came from God and was himself God. Jesus was able to respond to his interlocutors as he did because he was clear on the nature of God, a nature he perfectly embodied. The early church anchored its interpretations in the same general conviction, calling it the “rule of faith.” Jesus also seems primarily concerned with the lives of those posing the question. That is, his interpretive concern seems to be that his interlocutors learn to interpret scripture in such a way that it compels greater fidelity to God and one another. We have seen that patristic theologians referred to this as a commitment to the transformation of the reader in love. But Jesus also models what we have called the principle of accommodation. Knowing that God is love and that God desires for his people to grow more perfect in love, Jesus had to reconcile why the Bible would permit

men to divorce their wives. His explanation is that divorce was an accommodation because people at the time were sinful. In other words, men were going to divorce their wives regardless. Requiring them to issue their wives divorce certificates was God's way through Moses of accommodating sinful nature while also caring for the vulnerable women in the process. As Jesus makes clear, however, this was not God's will from the beginning. Jesus concedes that scripture includes content that ultimately contradicts God's will for his people and he often tried to get people to reread these sacred texts with a particular conviction regarding God's nature, a focus on the goal of love, but also employing a critical flexibility that acknowledged an evolving spirituality. Embracing this strategy may have been what enabled his disciples to overcome the spiritual anxieties associated with his death and resurrection as well as the continuing anxieties that accompanied the changes their faith community would be forced to navigate in the years that followed. A great example might be their willingness to modify their adherence to Jewish custom to accommodate Gentile inclusion (Acts 19). Similarly, the Reformation was the result of reformers like Luther challenging established church practice in light of fresh readings of passages like Ephesians 2:8-9 and Douthat notes that one of the most promising outcomes of the Catholic-Evangelical partnership that grew out of the conflicts of midcentury was a willingness to reexamine fundamentalism's approach to biblical interpretation, shifting from a strict inerrantist position to what became known as "limited inerrancy," not a repudiation of the concept but a reimagining of its implications, allowing that an inerrant text may communicate truth using figurative or allegorical language as well as factual narrative, the very position held by patristics like Augustine

and Origin as well prominent reformers like John Calvin.<sup>19</sup> In my experience, however, the promising possibilities of this dialogue has not impacted the local church. As Mark Noll notes, the disaster of fundamentalism is still holding much of American Christianity back.<sup>20</sup>

If Bottum is right, if what Douthat calls “bad religion” is the manifestation of spiritual anxiety, then the solution should be to deal with the cause of that anxiety, not to just try and change that which people seem to be anxious about. If what is keeping Christians in our culture from reaching spiritual maturity, that self-surrendering posture that resists the temptation to flee from or fight against the challenges to Christian faith, but instead to step forward and meet it in love, is spiritual anxiety, then the church needs to seriously reflect on what is causing the anxiety. The kneejerk assumption among outsiders to the faith is that we have too much religion in culture. Religion is what poisons the well. The kneejerk assumption among those inside the church is that we have too little religion in culture. Our problem is that culture has abandoned its religious roots. Douthat suggests its neither too much nor too little religion, but bad religion. I agree. It is easy for contemporary clergy to think that the problem in their churches is that people are not paying attention. Perhaps the problem is that people are paying attention and that what we are teaching them, anchored in particular ways of reading and interpreting scripture, is producing the very outcome we rail against. Perhaps the solution today is the same as it has always been, a fresh engagement with the Christian

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<sup>19</sup> Douthat, *Bad Religion*, 124-125.

<sup>20</sup> Mark Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1994), in *Bad Religion*; Douthat (New York: Free Press, 2014), 125.



scriptures. That is what this project has been about. What I have called an *ecclesial-critical* model is simply one viable option focused on one subset of spiritual development. I am suggesting that if individual church leaders would model and teach a biblical interpretation controlled by the “rule of faith” and focused on the transformation of the reader in love while also employing the principle of accommodation it would cultivate in individual believers a secure and integrated internal world that is also differentiated and flexible enough to seriously engage their contemporary context without compromising the spiritual integrity or witness. If an *ecclesial-critical* approach achieved any kind of broad-based ecumenical support, perhaps Christians in America might once again be known by what Alan Kreider called “patience,” a “new manner of life” that people dissatisfied with the existing spiritual atmosphere may feel pulled toward, and American culture in general may be lifted toward that loftier vision Jesus calls the kingdom of God.<sup>21</sup>

I began this project by saying that my motivation in undertaking this research was deeply pastoral. As a Christian leader I want to see those whom I lead grow into Christian maturity and I believe how one reads the Bible plays a significant role in that process. What I did not know prior to this research project was specifically how or why certain approaches to biblical interpretation positively or negatively impact spiritual growth. Pargament's research on the psychology of religious coping mapped against the

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<sup>21</sup> Alan Kreider, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church: The Improbably Rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 12.

ubiquitous experience of spiritual struggle provided me with at least one plausible answer.

The Christian life is best thought of as a journey toward becoming perfect in love. Crisis, and the disorientation it produces, is an unavoidable and essential aspect of the journey. As we saw, the experience of orientation, disorientation, and reorientation is a recurring cycle in the life of the believer and how one navigates these seasons of crisis determines whether they continue to grow spiritually, stay where they are, or regress. To successfully navigate life, especially seasons of crisis, one's orienting system—that "general way of viewing and dealing with the world," must be sufficiently differentiated, integrated, flexible, and secure. My primary argument has been that a particular way of approaching biblical interpretation is best suited to produce this kind of orienting system. I am not arguing that an *ecclesial-critical* approach to biblical interpretation<sup>22</sup> is the "right" way to read scripture at the exclusion of other ways of reading and interpreting. Over the course of my career, I have worked with countless people stuck in their spiritual journeys because of what I now believe to be, at least in part, orienting systems that were not suited to the challenges of the spiritual life, orienting systems that had been shaped by years of learning to read the Bible in counterproductive ways. My contention in this project is that essential to nurturing growth is helping people to develop inner worlds that are differentiated, integrated, flexible, and secure and that an *ecclesial-*

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<sup>22</sup> It should be noted that Sparks advocates for a similar approach, which he calls believing criticism. I have chosen *ecclesial* instead of *believing* because I don't want to communicate that a critical approach to scripture is antithetical to belief but rather I want to communicate that my approach creatively blends essential church commitments with an essential critical insight.

*critical* approach controlled by the “rule of faith” and an integrating focus on the transformation of the reader in love of God and neighbor combined with the application of the principle of accommodation is best suited for that.

There are certainly many opportunities for further research based on the integration of biblical interpretation and the psychology of religious coping presented in this work. Psychologists might develop inventories to measure the impact of an *ecclesial-critical* approach to interpretation on the different aspects of the orienting system. Faith leaders may experiment with teaching this model to segments of their populations and, like I did, engage their own ethnographic studies to measure the impact. What I have tried to accomplish in this project is to offer psychologists a connection between a dimension of psychology, coping, and a practice, the interpretation of the Bible, that for people of Christian faith may be directly affecting it, as well as offering faith leaders both a theological rationale for and practical tools to lead their people into a particular way of interpreting scripture that shows promise for cultivating spiritual growth. In the appendix that follows I have included a curriculum that can be used to facilitate an adult education class (Appendix 1), which I hope to modify so that it can also be used for student ministry. In addition, I have included a theological reflection applying the principle of accommodation to the topic of sacrifice (Appendix 2).

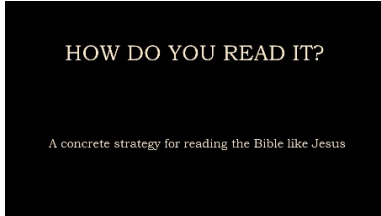
I count it a privilege to be called into Christian leadership and, with the apostle Paul, I believe that my role is to help God's people become "mature in the Lord, measuring up to the full and complete standard of Christ" (Eph. 4:13). The future of the church depends on it. The health of culture depends on it. I believe how we read the

Bible is central to it all and I hope this project, offered in humility, helps enable individual believers and the church at large to step up and meet the always present and ever-changing challenges to faith. To God be the glory, forever and ever.

## Appendix 1

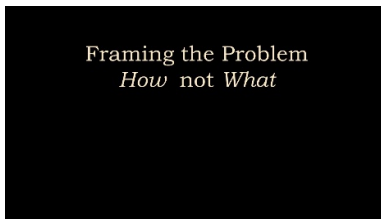
(A six-week curriculum for teaching the *ecclesial-critical* model)

### Week 1



#### Introductions

- Have the students introduce themselves and share why they are taking the class



#### Framing the Problem

- Read Luke 10:25-29
- Jesus distinguishes between WHAT the Bible says and HOW one reads it. His disagreement with the religious lawyer was not over WHAT the Bible said. It was over HOW the two interpreted WHAT the Bible said.
- Most of Jesus' confrontations involved interpretation issues (examples)
  - o Mt 12:1-8 (discussion about sabbath)
  - o Mt 12:9-14 (does the law permit work on the sabbath)
  - o Mt 15:1-20 (law vs age-old customs)
  - o Mt 19:1-12 (marriage and divorce)
  - o Mt 22:34-40 (greatest commandment)
  - o Mt 22:41-46 (whose son is the Messiah)
- WHAT the Bible says is important, but HOW one reads WHAT the Bible says may be more important.
- All reading is interpretation and therefore all readers are interpreters.
- Often the reader is unaware of the interpretive strategy he/she is employing in the process of interpretation.
- This class is about getting as explicit and intentional as we can regarding HOW we're reading the Bible.

To deal seriously with *what* the Bible says we have to deal seriously with *how* we read it

To deal seriously with the WHAT the Bible says we have to deal seriously with HOW we read it.

- When we talk about HOW we read something we are talking more specifically about HOW we assign meaning to the text.

What does it mean for a text to mean something?

What does it mean for a text to mean something?

- Discuss
- The reference a text makes
  - o Meaning has to do with the reference the text is making, perhaps to some event or some principle.
- What an author(s) intended to communicate
  - o Meaning has to do with some kind of message a communicator is encoding and sending through certain symbols.
- Something like the impact a text has on the beliefs, attitudes, values, and behaviors of the one who encounters it.
  - o Think of a song or poetry. The text may mean something to you that could be very different from any meaning the composer intended it to mean.

Meaning has BOTH a past and a present

The healthiest interpretive strategies acknowledge that dynamic and negotiate it honorably

Meaning has both a past and a present. The healthiest interpretive strategies acknowledge that dynamic and negotiate it honorably.

Who gets to decide what a text means?

Who gets to decide what a text means?

- Discuss
  - This is an issue of authority. Who has the authority to decide what a text means?
- There are four sources of authority when it comes to interpreting the Bible.

Author  
Reader  
Text  
Community

- The author(s)
  - The author(s) encodes some intended meaning in the words they use.
  - In other words, all writing has some originally intended purpose.
- The reader(s)
  - Regardless of what a text originally meant, what a text means in a contemporary setting with by influenced by the reader's interpretive location.
- The text itself
  - Meaning is encoded in symbols like words which carry a certain semantic range.
  - Part of determining what a text originally meant is to determine what range of meanings certain words could have had in their original context.
- The believing community
  - What a symbol communicates in a given cultural setting depends on a social agreement regarding the meaning of the word itself.
  - In other words, the community in which the word is being used defines what the word means.

When it comes to reading the Bible, which of these sources of authority is definitive?

When it comes to reading the Bible, which of these sources of authority is definitive?

- In other words, when a Christian person says the Bible is authoritative in matters of faith and conduct, what does he/she mean? Who has the authority?
- Discuss
- Problems with ultimate authority lying with any one source
  - o Biblical author(s)
    - Not always possible to know for sure who the author was.
    - Biblical books do not always have a clear intention.
    - If the author is the ultimate authority is meaning locked in the past with no relevance for us today?
    - If the author is the ultimate authority, then the interpretive process ends when we figure out the original meaning. To move beyond it to any sort of contemporary application would require the reader and the community.
  - o The reader(s)
    - If the reader is the ultimate authority the result could be idiosyncratic interpretations.
    - What Christian Smith calls “pervasive interpretive pluralism.”
      - Smith, Christian. *The Bible Made Impossible: Why Biblicism is Not a Truly Evangelical Reading of Scripture*. Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2012.
  - o The text itself
    - Words and phrases do not retain a single meaning over time or across cultures.
    - Example; the phrase “tabling an issue” in Britain means to bring an issue up for discussion, to “put it on the table.” In America that same phrase means the opposite, to set an issue aside for a time, what in Britain they would call “shelving it.”
  - o The believing community
    - In the same way that meaning controlled by the individual reader can lead to the abuse of idiosyncratic interpretations, meaning controlled by an ecclesial authority can lead to the abuse of thought control and manipulation.



Healthy interpretive strategies account for all the sources of authority in meaning-making; author, reader, text, and community

Healthy interpretive strategies account for all the sources of authority in meaning-making; author, reader, text, and community.

## Week 2

### HOW DO YOU READ IT?

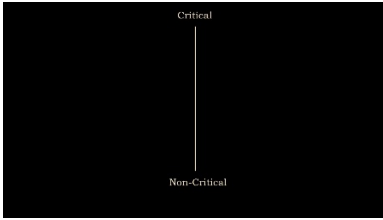
A concrete strategy for reading the Bible like Jesus

#### Review from Week 1

- Framing the problem: HOW not WHAT is the pivotal question when it comes to reading and interpreting a text like the Bible.
- To deal seriously with what the Bible says we have to deal seriously with how we are reading it.
- This is about how we assign meaning to a biblical text.
- Meaning has both a past and a present (sender, receiver, encoded message in signs transmitted through time) so interpretation must take both into account.
- Author, reader, text, and community all have a say in defining the meaning of a particular text.

Attempts to navigate the past/present tension of meaning and the sources of authority get lumped into one of two categories; critical and non-critical

Historically speaking, attempts to navigate the past/present tension of meaning-making that involves authors, readers, texts, and communities, interpretive approaches can be mapped on a grid with critical and non-critical strategies at opposite ends.



## Critical vs Non-Critical

**Non-Critical Approaches**

- Also called "confessionalist," "traditionalist," "canonical," and "fundamentalist"
- Assumption is the Bible is the church's book and therefore must be read according to the church's theological commitments
- Interpretation controlled by a predetermined commitment to the essential truthfulness and coherence of scripture

- Non-critical
  - o Also referred to as traditionalist, confessional, and fundamentalist.
  - o Marked by predetermined commitment to scripture's essential truthfulness and coherence
  - o Often called confessional because interpretation is said to be controlled by one's adherence to the confessed faith of the church.
  - o Confessional faith originally referred to the church's commitment to creedal affirmations, specifically regarding the nature of God, but in some Christian circles has also come to refer to certain dogmatic statements about the nature of the Bible itself.
  - o Practically speaking, a non-critical reading often elevates the essential coherence and truthfulness of scripture to parallel the essential truthfulness and coherence of the divine will.

**Critical Approaches**

- Sometimes referred to as the "historical-critical method"
- Interpretation controlled by:
  - Concern for semantics
  - Attention to genre
  - A willingness to bracket out truth

- Critical
  - o Sometimes equated with the historical-critical method.
  - o A critical reading is not, by definition, a religious reading. The critical interpreter does not assume, prior to reading it, that the Bible is true or coherent in any specific way based on a confessed faith.
  - o Critical interpretation focuses on the nature of texts and the historic worlds that produced those texts.
    - Emphasis placed on;

- Semantics
- Genre
- A willingness to “bracket out truth.” Interpretation is a two-step process. The first step is determining what a text originally meant. The second step is analyzing its truthfulness or applicability in light of other ways of knowing.

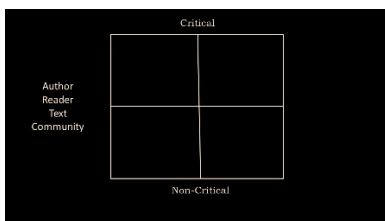
The difference is often observable in how an interpreter deals with a difficult text

The difference between a critical and non-critical approach is often observable in how an interpreter deals with a difficult text.

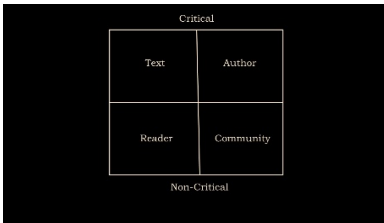
- What might a critical vs non-critical approach to a difficult passage like Genesis 1-2, 2 Samuel 24/1 Chronicles 21, Mt 28/Mk 16 and Lk 24 (account of angels at resurrection) look like?
- Discuss

What sources of authority does each approach tend to emphasize?

When it comes to our sources of authority, what sources of authority do you think each approach tends to emphasize?



- Critical = text and author
- Non-Critical = reader and community



Critical vs Non-Critical is not an issue of right vs wrong but one of historic emphasis

Both critical and non-critical approaches, at their best, are deeply concerned with what the Bible means and how it ought to inform the life of faith. This is not a spectrum of right vs wrong but where emphasis in the interpretive process has been historically placed.

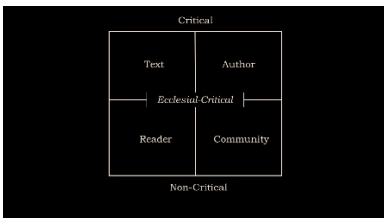
Where have you been taught to place emphasis in your own Bible reading?

Reflecting on your own Bible reading, where have you been taught to place emphasis or where has your temperament naturally pulled you to place emphasis?

- Discuss

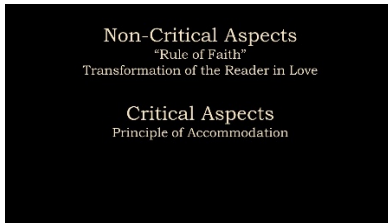
Our attempt will be to chart a both-and approach

- What I call an *ecclesial-critical* model



Read Matthew 19:1-12

Use this scene to identify the principle components of the ecclesial-critical approach

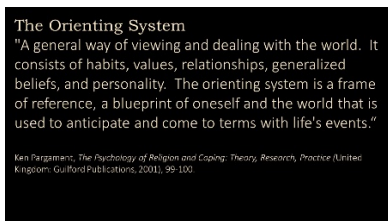


- Rule of Faith
  - o Jesus is the one who ultimately gets to decide what a text means
  - o Scripture points to Jesus; Jesus as the Bible's interpretive "center."
- Interpretation is ultimately about the transformation of the present reader in love
  - o Jesus is concerned that his interlocutors learn greater fidelity to God by expressing greater fidelity to one another
- Principle of Accommodation
  - o Jesus reveals that something in the Bible represents an accommodation for human sinfulness, not the ultimate will of God.
  - o This interpretive move allowed Jesus to both take what Moses wrote seriously while also applying it in a way that moved his audience in the direction of greater faithfulness to God and one another.

We will see that the “rule of faith” and the commitment to the transformation of the reader in love are key aspects of historic non-critical interpretation and that the principle of accommodation is a critical tool that has a long history of use in the church.

These critical and non-critical aspects of biblical interpretation are necessary for psychological health as a key factor in overall spiritual growth.

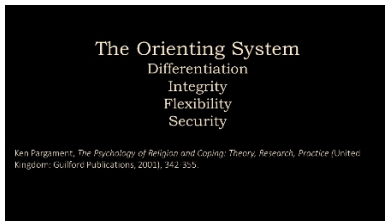
Introduce the concept of religious coping and the orienting system



Orienting System

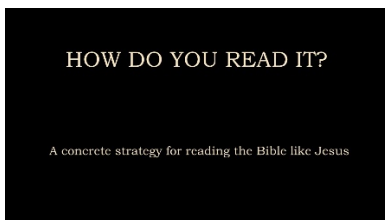
- "A general way of viewing and dealing with the world. It consists of habits, values, relationships, generalized beliefs, and personality. The orienting system is a frame of reference, a blueprint of oneself and the world that is used to anticipate and come to terms with life's events."
  - o Ken Pargament, *The Psychology of Religion and Coping: Theory, Research, Practice* (United Kingdom: Guildford Press, 2001), 99-100.

Spiritual health and growth require an orienting system that is differentiated, integrated, flexible and secure.



- Differentiation
  - o The ability to recognize and appreciate complexity.
- Integrity
  - o Consistency between what one claims to believe and how one lives.
- Flexibility
  - o The ability to adapt and change to new information and experiences.
- Security
  - o Secure attached to God is as vital to spiritual growth as a secure attachment to a parental caregiver is to physical, emotional, psychological growth.

### Week 3



#### Review from weeks 1-2

- How we read the Bible is the pivotal question when it comes to the text influencing faith formation.
- Meaning has both a past and a present so interpretation must take both into account.
- Who gets to define meaning has to consider the authority of author, reader, text, and community.
- Strategies tend to fall on spectrum ranging from critical to non-critical
  - o Critical approaches tending to emphasize textual and historical authority.
  - o Non-critical approaches tending to emphasize ecclesial and reader authority.
- My suggestion is that Jesus modeled a both-and strategy
  - o Ecclesial-critical model

What is the relationship between the confessing community and the Bible?

What is the relationship between the confessing community (the church) and the Bible?

- Return to Luke 10:25-29
- The lawyer's response to Jesus and Jesus' acceptance of his response reveal that both were part of a faith community that had taken its long, complicated history, some of which had been written down, and decided together what the essential point was; love of God measured by love of neighbor.
- The Christian church did something similar with both Old and New Testaments in the Apostle's Creed.

The community produces the book based on real experience in time and space for the continual shaping of a peculiar identity

There is a relationship between the confessing community and the Bible. It is the confessing community that produces the book based on its experience with God in time and space for the continual shaping of a peculiar identity.

- David Kelsey illustration
  - o *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 99-100.
  - o Whatever game we decide to play will require us to construe the ball (and everything else) accordingly. The church has decided what game it is playing. That decision will determine how we construe the ball. In other words, the strategies we employ in our interpretation of scripture (critical or non-critical) will serve the goal of the game we are playing as determined by the church.

What does the church say is the goal of reading scripture?

What does the historic church say is the goal of reading scripture?

Perceiving God Rightly  
Living Rightly

I'm going to suggest two things; 1) perceiving God rightly and 2) living rightly.

- Patristic examples

"It is therefore to be desired that each one according to his capacity will ever 'reach out to the things which are before, forgetting those things which are behind,' that is, will reach out both to better works and also to a clearer understanding and knowledge, through Jesus Christ our Saviour, to whom is the glory for ever."  
Origen, *On First Principles*, 4.3.14

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- Origen identifies “better works” and “clearer understanding and knowledge through Jesus Christ” as the goal of Christian growth which correlate to perceiving God rightly and living rightly.

"Whatever there is in the word of God that cannot, when taken literally, be referred either to purity of life or soundness of doctrine, you may set it down as figurative. Purity of life has reference to the love of God and one's neighbor; soundness of doctrine to the knowledge of God and one's neighbor."  
- Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, 3.10.14.

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- Similar to Origen, Augustine references “purity of life” and “soundness of doctrine” which correlate to perceiving God rightly and living rightly.

Perceiving God Rightly



From the beginning the church was convinced that the God of the Hebrew scriptures and the God revealed in the person of Jesus were of the same essential substance

From the very beginning, the church insisted that the God of the Hebrew scriptures and the God revealed in the person of Jesus Christ were of the same essential substance.

New Testament Examples  
John 1:18  
John 10:30  
2 Cor. 4:4  
Philippians 2:6  
Colossians 1:15  
Heb. 1:3  
1 John 5:20

Review New Testament examples

- John 1:18, John 10:30, 2 Cor. 4:4, Philippians 2:6, Colossians 1:15, Heb. 1:3, 1 John 5:20

This conviction became known as the "Rule of Faith"

The early church began to refer to this trinitarian conviction as the "Rule of Faith."

"But the following fact should be understood. The holy apostles, when preaching the faith of Christ, took certain doctrines, those namely which they believed to be necessary ones, and delivered them in the plainest terms to all believers...First, that God is one, who created and set in order all things...Then again: Christ Jesus, he who came to earth, was begotten of the Father before every created thing...emptied himself and was made man, was made flesh, although he was God."  
Origen, *On First Principles* Book I, 1:preface:2-4.

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"The Trinity, one God, of Whom are all things, through Whom are all things, in Whom are all things. Thus the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, and each of these by Himself, is God, and at the same time they are all one God; and each of them by Himself is a complete substance, and yet they are all one substance."

Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, 1.5.5.

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The "Rule of Faith" became THE central principle of biblical interpretation

This trinitarian conviction became THE interpretive principle when it came to reading scripture.

The Bible is about God  
God and Jesus are of the same substance  
Sometimes the Bible says stuff about God that doesn't look like Jesus

- Early interpreters committed to the belief that the scriptures are about God
- God and Jesus are of the same substance
- Sometimes the Bible testifies to God in ways that do not look anything like Jesus

"Moreover, even the simpler of those who claim to belong to the Church, while believing indeed that there is none greater than the Creator, in which they are right, yet believe such things about him as would not be believed of the most savage and unjust of men."

Origen, *On First Principles*, 4.2.1.

"Moreover, even the simpler of those who claim to belong to the church, while believing indeed there is none greater than the Creator, in which they are right, yet believe such things about him as would not be believed of the most savage and unjust of men. Now the reason why all those we have mentioned hold false opinions and make impious or ignorant assertions about God appear to be nothing else but this, that scripture is not

understood in its spiritual sense, but is interpreted according to the bare letter...what are the methods of interpretation that appear right to us who keep the rule of the heavenly church of Jesus Christ through the succession of the apostles." - Origen, *On First Principles Book IV, 4.2.1-2*.

"Now look at some examples. The heretical pointing, 'In principio erat verbum, et verbum erat apud Deum, et Deus erat,' so as to make the sentence run, 'Verbum hoc erat in principio apud Deum,' arises out of unwillingness to confess that the Word was God. But this must be rejected by the rule of faith which, in reference to the equality of the Trinity, directs us to say: 'et Deus erat Verbum,' and then to add: 'hoc erat in principio apud Deum.'"

Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, 3.2.3.

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"Those things, again, whether only sayings or whether actual deeds, which appear to the inexperienced to be sinful, and which are ascribed to God, or to men whose holiness is put before us as an example, are wholly figurative, and the hidden kernel of meaning they contain is to be picked out as food for the nourishment of charity."

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"Because of the predominate role played by the incarnation in the biblical account of salvation, the key to scripture was generally recognized to be the doctrine that the Son was of the same being, nature, or essence as the Father"

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Why is the Rule of Faith so important for healthy interpretation?

Why is the "Rule of Faith" so important to healthy interpretation?

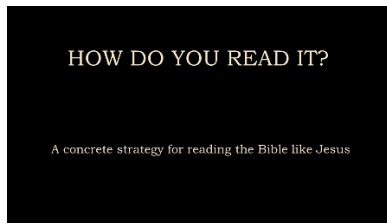
It takes the believing community seriously as a source of authority

- The Bible documents the experience of the people of God and is read to reinforce that peculiar identity
- This begins and ends with how the community of faith thinks about God and the church answers with the apostle Paul (2 Cor. 4:4); we perceive the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

It is necessary for cultivating security as an aspect of the orienting system

- Like a child develops healthy attachment to the degree that she perceives a parental figure as loving, compassionate, and supportive, believers will develop secure attachment to God to the extent that they know this God to be "complete in mercy."
- An ecclesial commitment to the rule of faith gives us the security to know that no matter what we think a text might mean, God is just like Jesus

#### Week 4



Review weeks 1-3

- HOW we read is as important as WHAT we are reading
- Meaning has both a past and a present influenced by author, reader, text, and community
- Strategies for how to attend to meaning's past and present dimensions and four sources of authority tend to break into critical and non-critical approaches
- Jesus models a both-and strategy
- What we are calling an *ecclesial-critical* model
  - o Some aspects of our strategy governed by non-critical commitments (ecclesial)
  - o Some aspects of our strategy informed by critical insights and methods (critical)
- How we choose which aspects will control what has to do with the psychological nature of spiritual growth
  - o Need an approach that cultivates a differentiated, integrated, flexible, and secure orienting system
- From the beginning the church has said that the purpose of reading scripture is to; 1) perceive God rightly and 2) to live rightly
- Identified "Rule of Faith" as non-critical commitment aimed at perceiving God rightly
- Leads to a secure orienting system

Return to Matthew 19:1-12

What appears to be Jesus' goal in his interpretation?

- Discuss
  - The goal is love.

What appears to be Jesus' interpretive goal in Matthew 19:1-12?

The goal appears to be *love*

Discuss the nature of law

- Galatians 3:23-25
  - o Law as guardian to keep us safe until the way of faith is available
- Romans 13:8-10
  - o Love is the fulfillment of the law

Patristic exegetes believed that the primary purpose/value of scripture was how it impacted the contemporary reader

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"Who would dare to say that what is written 'by the Word of God' is of no use and makes no contribution to salvation, but is merely a narrative of what happened and was over and done a long time ago, but pertains in no way to use when it is told"

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"Among all these things, then, those only are the true objects of enjoyment which we have spoke of as eternal and unchangeable. The rest are for use, that we may be able to arrive at the full enjoyment of the former."  
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"For most theologians of this period, the ultimate purpose of biblical exegesis was spiritual in nature. Following a method pioneered by Origen, pro-Nicene theologians and others aimed to read, interpret, and teach the scriptures in a way that produced spiritual growth in Christ."  
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More specifically, this transformation meant the building up of the love of God and neighbor  
  
Love is the *telos* of the journey of faith

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- Christian spirituality best thought of as a developmental journey

Christian spirituality best thought of as a journey whose destination is love

## Examples

- Adam and Eve, Cain, Abraham, Israel and the Exodus, Jesus and growing parables, developmental language in Paul, Peter, and Hebrews
- Origen, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas (childhood, adolescence, and adulthood)
- People in process of becoming (developmental theory, relational systems perspective, "developmental trajectory")

## The journey's destination is love

- Jesus; Mt 5:48, Lk. 6:36/Paul; Eph. 4:13
- Thomas Aquinas; a thing is said to be perfect when it realizes its nature and that nature for the Christian is charity
- Fowler; "realization of love."

Because love is the *telos* of the faith journey, love is also the *telos* of biblical interpretation.

"Whoever, then, thinks that he understands the Holy Scriptures, or any part of them, but puts such an interpretation upon them as does not tend to build up this twofold love of God and neighbor, does not yet understand them as he ought."

Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, 1.36.40.

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"Now scripture enjoins nothing except charity, and condemns nothing except lust, and in that way fashions the lives of men...Now Scripture asserts nothing but the Catholic faith, in regard to things past, present, and future. It is a narrative of the past, a prophecy of the future, and a description of the present. But all these tend to nourish and strengthen charity, and to overcome lust. I mean by charity that affection of the mind which aims at the enjoyment of God for His own sake, and the enjoyment of oneself and one's neighbor in subordination to God."

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"a rule such as the following will be observed, to carefully turn over in our minds and meditate upon what we read till an interpretation be found that tends to establish the reign of love"

Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, 3.15.23.

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"For Augustine, we are traveling to God, who has established Scripture as a means to help us reach him.<sup>37</sup> It provides signs that point to things and tells us how to relate to them. One does not understand Scripture unless this understanding builds up the double love of God and neighbor (1.36.40); that is Scripture's telos."

James A. Andrews, "Why theological hermeneutics needs rhetoric: Augustine's *De doctrina christiana*" in *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 12 no 2 Apr 2010, 195.

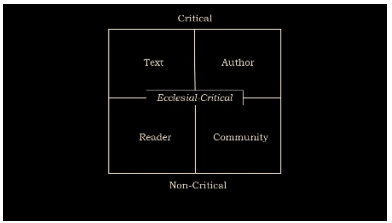
"For Augustine, we are traveling to God, who has established Scripture as a means to help us reach him. It provides signs that point to things and tells us how to relate to them. One does not understand Scripture unless this understanding builds up the double love of God and neighbor (1.36.40); that is Scripture's telos. So ethics are important, but they are the result of progression towards God by means of the vehicles he has given us, not the starting point."

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Why is the focus on the transformation of the reader and the building up of the double-love of God and neighbor so important?

Why is the principle of transformation of the reader and the building up of the double-love of God and neighbor so important?

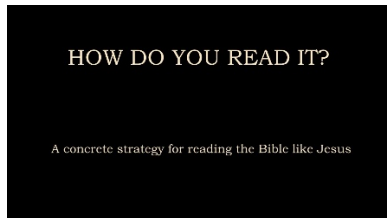
Takes seriously the reader as source of authority



Helps cultivate an integrated orienting system

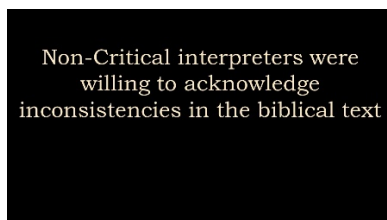
- Keeping the focus on love of God and neighbor (including enemies) gives faith in general and reading in particular an integrating focus
- We may not always live up to the ideals of our faith but we will struggle less with what it is we are supposed to be living up to.

## Week 5



### **Review weeks 1-4**

- HOW we read is as important as WHAT we are reading
- Meaning has both a past and a present influenced by author, reader, text, and community
- Strategies for how to attend to meaning's past and present dimensions and four sources of authority tend to break into critical and non-critical approaches
- Jesus models a both-and strategy, what I am calling an *ecclesial-critical* model
- We choose the non-critical commitment to the "rule of faith" because it honors the church as a source of authority and is necessary for cultivating secure attachment to God
  - o This is about perceiving God rightly
- We choose the non-critical prioritization of the transformation of the present reader in love because it honors the reader as a source of authority and is essential for integrity.
  - Love becomes the integrated focus of all of our reading



Non-Critical interpreters are willing to acknowledge inconsistencies in the biblical text

"But where in the narrative the accomplishment of some particular deeds, which had been previously recorded for the sake of their more mystical meanings, did not correspond with the sequence of the intellectual truths, the scripture wove into the story something which did not happen, occasionally something which could not happen, and occasionally something which might have happened but in fact did not. Sometimes a few words are inserted which in the bodily sense are not true, and at other times a greater number."

Origen, *On First Principles*, 4.2.9.

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"But hasty and careless readers are led astray by many and manifold obscurities and ambiguities, substituting one meaning for another; and in some places they cannot hit upon even a fair interpretation. Some of the expressions are so obscure as to shroud the meaning in the thickest darkness."

Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, 2.6.7.

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They saw the primary problem not that scripture contained these "errors" or "obscurities" but that many interpreters stumbled over them because they read them literally

They saw the primary problem as not that scripture contained these "errors" or "obscurities" but that many interpreters stumbled over them because they read them literally.

"Now the reason why all those we have mentioned hold false opinions or make impious and ignorant assertions about God appears to be nothing else but this, that scripture is not understood in its spiritual sense, but is interpreted according to the bare letter."

Origen, *On First Principles*, 4.2.2.

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"In the first place, we must beware of taking a figurative expression literally. For the saying of the apostle applies in this case too; 'The letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life.' For when what is said figuratively is taken as if it were said literally, it is understood in a carnal manner. And nothing is more fittingly called the death of the soul than when that in it which raises it above the brutes, the intelligence namely, is put in subjection to the flesh by a blind adherence to the letter."

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A good example would be how both Origen and Augustine explained Jesus' rejection by the Jews. They were interpreting certain prophecies quite literally and Jesus, not fulfilling those literal expectations, was branded an imposter.

This approach based on 2 Corinthians 3:6; "the letter kills but the Spirit gives life."

The non-critical solution was to see layers of meaning in the Bible, especially in those obscure or ambiguous passages that posed moral/ethical challenges.

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- See John 7:24 where Jesus says, "look beneath the surface so you can judge correctly."

"For just as man consists of body, soul and spirit, so in the same way does the scripture, which has been prepared by God to be given for man's salvation."

Origen, *On First Principles*, 4.2.4.

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- Body = plain or obvious sense
- Soul = tropological (moral training)
- Spirit = Anagogical (Christological)
- All scripture has a spiritual meaning but not all scripture has a bodily meaning (4.3.5)

"The authority of the sacred writings seemed to me all the more deserving of reverence and divine faith in that scripture was easily accessible to every reader while yet guarding a mysterious dignity in its deeper sense. In plain words and very humble modes of speech it offered itself to everyone yet stretched the understanding of those who were not shallow-minded. It welcomed all comers to its hospitable embrace, yet through narrow openings attracted a few to you--a few, perhaps, but far more than it would have done had it not spoken with such noble authority and drawn the crowds to its embrace by its holy humility."

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Early interpreters would go so far as to say the very reason that obscure passages existed was to provoke the reader to search for a deeper meaning.

"But if the usefulness of the law and the sequence and ease of the narrative were at first sight clearly discernible throughout, we should be unaware that there was anything beyond the obvious meaning for us to understand in the scriptures. Consequently, the Word of God has arranged for certain stumbling blocks, as it were, and hindrances and impossibilities to be inserted in the midst of the law and the history, in order that we may not be completely drawn away by the sheer attractiveness of the language, and so either reject the true doctrine absolutely, on the ground that we learn from the scriptures nothing worthy of God, or else by never moving away from the letter fail to learn anything of the more divine element."

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The primary strategy employed for discerning a text's deeper meaning was to read passages figuratively

The primary exegetical strategy for discerning a text's deeper meaning was to read passages figuratively.

"In the first place, then, we must show the way to find out whether a phrase is literal or figurative. And the way is certainly as follows: Whatever there in the word of God that cannot, when taken literally, be referred either to purity of life or soundness of doctrine, you may set it down as figurative."

Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, 3.10.14.

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"Now what man of intelligence will believe that the first and the second and the third day, and the evening and the morning existed without the sun, moon and stars? And the first day, if we may so call it, was even without a heaven? And who is so silly as to believe that God, after the manner of a farmer, planted a paradise eastward in Eden, and set in it a palpable 'tree of life,' of such a sort that anyone who tasted its fruit with his bodily teeth would gain life; and again that one could partake of 'good and evil' by masticating the fruit taken from the tree of that name? And when God is said to 'walk in the paradise in the cool of the day' and Adam to hide himself behind a tree, I do not think that anyone will doubt that these are figurative expressions which indicate certain mysteries through a semblance of history and not through actual events."

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#### Examples

- Origen and the town names in Exodus from Homily 27 on Numbers
- Origen and Aaron and the priests from Homily 7 on Leviticus
- Origen and the stone water jars from *On First Principles*

- Origen anchored this practice in Pauline passages like 1 Cor. 10 (these things were written down for us, v. 11/spiritual rock that followed the Israelites was Christ, v. 4) and examples like Paul's allegorizing of Sarah and Hagar (Gal. 3).

What are some potential problems with figurative exegesis?

What are some potential problems with figurative exegesis?

- Does not satisfactorily address the modern concern with God's behavior
- Does not actually appear to take the text seriously
- Allows too much flexibility (pervasive interpretive pluralism)
  - o Even patristic exegetes like Chrysostom and Basil struggled with the kind of allegorizing that was common in the Alexandrian school
  - o The very concept of flexibility or elasticity assumes a certain stasis

Doesn't address modern concerns  
Doesn't take the text seriously  
Allows for too much flexibility

We need a critical insight that can deal seriously with what a text/author may have originally meant without giving up a reading controlled by rule of faith and profitable for transformation in love.

**Principle of Accommodation;**  
"God's adoption in inscripturation of the human audience's finite and fallen perspective. Its underlying assumption is that in many cases God does not correct our mistaken human viewpoints but merely assumes them in order to communicate with us."  
Kenton Sparks, *God's Word in Human Words*, 230-231.

Principle of accommodation

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Examples in pre-modern interpreters

- Jesus (Mt. 19:1-12)

"Just as when we are talking to very small children we do not assume as the object of our instruction any strong understanding in them, but say what we have to say accommodating it to the small understanding of those whom we have before us...so the Word of God seems to have disposed the things which were written, adapting the suitable parts of his message to the capacity of his hearers and to their ultimate profit."

Origen, *Against Celsus*, 4.71.

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"If the trouble is that the moral precepts under the old law are lower and in the Gospel higher, and that therefore both cannot come from the same God, whoever thinks in this way may find difficulty in explaining how a single physician prescribes one medicine to weaker patients through his assistants, and another by himself to stronger patients, all to restore health."

Augustine, *Of True Religion*, 17.

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Examples of accommodation in interpretive action

- Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, 3.12.20.
  - o Scripture passes over things in the past done without lust but condemns them today because they could not be done without lust
- Origen, *On First Principles*, 4.3.12-13.
  - o Progression in clarity from Leviticus to Dt and fulfillment of Dt in the coming of Christ
- Case Studies for discussion
  - o Sacrifice
  - o Slavery
  - o Women teachers
  - o Where else might we apply this principle in biblical interpretation?



Why is the principle of accommodation so important?

Why is the principle of accommodation so important?

Takes seriously text and author as sources of authority.

- God's infinite wisdom simply cannot be communicated any other way than through imperfect human wisdom and words
- God cannot communicate with us except in language we can understand

God's infinite wisdom simply cannot be communicated in any other way than through imperfect human wisdom and words

Accommodation is "the rationale that allows us to choose one text over another without charging the error to God." (Sparks, 239)

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- Kenton Sparks, *God's Word in Human Words*, 239.

"Accommodation is simply an explicit theological rationale for what we already do."

Kenton Sparks, *God's Word in Human Words*, 257.

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- Kenton Sparks, *God's Word in Human Words*, 257.
- Everyone picks and chooses what verses they are going to prioritize over others. The key is knowing why you are choosing what you are choosing. The principle of accommodation, in light of Christ, allows us to make the right choices for the right reasons.

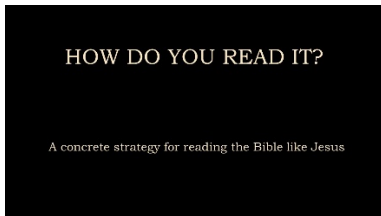
Helps cultivate a flexible and differentiated orienting system orienting system.

**Differentiation**  
Integrity  
**Flexibility**  
Security

- Flexibility
  - o Grants flexibility in the sense that the reader is not bound by some strict inerrantist stance but limits flexibility by anchoring contemporary meaning in original meaning and critically scrutinizing original meaning based on the thought-world of ancient writers (how they thought, what they could have known).
- Differentiation
  - o Helps us to appreciate how complicated the art of interpretation is and how complicated it is to appropriate texts in our own setting.

Have students bring difficult texts to class the last week to practice employing an ecclesial-critical approach

## Week 6



Review weeks 1-5

Address questions

Sample practice passages

- 1 Samuel 15
- Numbers 15:32-36

Interpret difficult texts provided by the class

## Appendix 2

(Applying an *ecclesial-critical* approach the biblical topic of sacrifice)

Statements like, “Jesus paid the penalty for your sin,” “Jesus suffered the punishment you deserve,” and “Jesus took on your debt” were ubiquitous in the protestant evangelical Christian culture of my formative years. They reflect a commitment to what is generally referred to as *satisfaction atonement*, a model first made popular by Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109) in his book *Cur Deus Homo* (Why Did God Become Human?). Anselm argued that Jesus’ death offered satisfaction *to God* for the debt owed *to God* by sinful humanity. According to Mark Baker and Joel Green, it was this singular emphasis on God as the one requiring satisfaction through sacrifice that distinguished Anselm’s explanation from other atonement theories in currency at the time.<sup>1</sup> It also continues to serve as the vine supporting a host of satisfaction offshoots that have developed since.<sup>2</sup> Satisfaction atonement is uncritically accepted by many as being virtually synonymous with the Christian gospel<sup>3</sup> but when scrutinized raises a number of biblical, theological, philosophical, ethical, and moral concerns.<sup>4</sup>

Chief among these concerns is the violent, bloodthirsty image of God satisfaction atonement assumes. Satisfaction models envision a God who, in order to forgive, first

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Baker and Joel Green, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross: Atonement in New Testament and Contemporary Contexts*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Downer’s Grove: IVP Academic, 2011), 151.

<sup>2</sup> Baker and Green caution against equating Anselm’s model with offshoots like Penal Substitutionary Atonement (151-152). While it is correct to say that satisfaction in general is not equivalent to more specific versions like PSA, views like PSA depend on Anselm’s logic.

<sup>3</sup> For example, in the introduction to her book, *Original Blessing* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016), Danielle Shroyer tells a personal anecdote about a conversation she had with a priest. When she mentioned that she did not believe in original sin the priest asked, “Than why do we need Jesus?” (ix).

<sup>4</sup> In his book *Violence Unveiled: Humanity at the Crossroads* (New York: The Crossroads Publishing Company, 1999) Gil Bailie refers to satisfaction atonement as “logically incoherent” as well as “morally and theologically inadequate,” 37.

demands a blood sacrifice, the ultimate example of which is the violent death of God's innocent son. Feminist theologians like Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker argue that this satisfaction atonement makes God the Father guilty of "divine child abuse,"<sup>5</sup> and Julie Hopkins says, "A God who punishes through pain, despair and violent death is not a God of love but a sadist and despot."<sup>6</sup> Satisfaction's image of God is radically inconsistent with the way in which Jesus portrays the nature of God,<sup>7</sup> which poses a serious threat to traditional Trinitarian theology.

Despite these concerns satisfaction atonement remains remarkably popular, especially among western, evangelical Christians. Based on my experience, the primary reason satisfaction atonement maintains a powerful grip on our theological imagination is a modern misunderstanding of sacrifice, specifically the type of sacrifice practiced in ancient Israel as recorded in the Hebrew Bible. Jesus certainly understood his death as sacrificial<sup>8</sup> and it is easy to see how a cursory reading of the cultic sacrifice practiced in ancient Israel could lead one to conclude that God requires satisfaction. But Jesus, whom

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<sup>5</sup> Denny Weaver, *Non-Violent Atonement* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2011), 155.

<sup>6</sup> Weaver, *Non-Violent Atonement*, 163.

<sup>7</sup> For instance, Jesus says that freely forgiving one's enemies is how his followers live as true children of their Father in Heaven (Mt. 5:43-45).

<sup>8</sup> Jesus chose Passover as the event to frame the significance of his death.

the New Testament writers clearly believed was the fulfillment of Israel's scriptures,<sup>9</sup> never spoke about his death in this way<sup>10</sup> and neither did his disciples.<sup>11</sup>

If we accept as fact that Jesus is the fulfillment of Israel's story and that Jesus understood his death as being somehow sacrificial, the fact that neither Jesus nor his earliest followers spoke about his death in terms of satisfaction should inspire a rereading of the Biblical phenomenon of sacrifice. As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks says, "The very texts that lie at the root of the problem, *if properly interpreted* (italics mine), can provide a solution.<sup>12</sup>" The remainder of this essay will not attempt to offer a "proper," exhaustive rereading of the practice of sacrifice in the Hebrew Bible but it will exegetically challenge the popular conception that supports views like satisfaction atonement and its portrayal of God as violent, retributive, and bloodthirsty.

Let us begin with the first recorded example of sacrifice found in the Hebrew Bible—the covering of Adam and Eve in Genesis 3. Following Adam and Eve eating the forbidden fruit Genesis 3:21 says, "And the Lord God made clothing from animal skins for

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<sup>9</sup> For example, the apostle Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15:3-4 that Jesus died and rose "just as the scriptures said." John records Jesus telling a group of religious leaders that the Hebrew scriptures point to him (John 5:39) and Luke makes note that a post-resurrection Jesus used the writings of Moses and the prophets to explain to the Emmaus road travelers "the things concerning himself" (Lk. 24:27).

<sup>10</sup> Jesus "predicts" his death twelve times in the synoptic gospels (Mt. 16:21, 17:12, 20:18; Mk. 8:31, 9:12, 10:33; Lk. 9:22, 11:46-51, 13:33, 17:25, 22:15, 24:25-27) and never once does he refer to God as the subject requiring his death as payment. In each reference the agent(s) requiring Jesus' death are "the elders, the leading priests, and the teachers of religious law" (Mt. 16:21). Additionally, in John's gospel Jesus refers to his death as the source of new life (Jn. 12:23-33), as "going away" (Jn. 16:5), and as "entering his glory" (Jn. 13:31), but similar to the synoptic gospels, never as a satisfaction offering required by God.

<sup>11</sup> There are six evangelistic sermons in the book of Acts (Acts 2:22-24, 2:36, 3:13-15, 4:8-10, 5:29-32, 7:51-53) and Jesus' death is never spoken of as offering satisfaction to God. The language consistently used instead is, "You killed him but God raised him from the dead" (Acts 3:15).

<sup>12</sup> Jonathon Sacks, *Not in God's Name: Confronting Religious Violence* (New York: Schocken Books. 2015), 24.

Adam and his wife (NLT).” While the author of Genesis makes no explicit reference to the killing of an animal, the reader is left with little choice but to assume that such a “sacrifice” took place in order to secure the necessary skins. If the text supports that conclusion, this is the first act of sacrifice in the Bible and God is the subject. But it should be noted that the purpose of the sacrifice is not to affect God, an essential aspect of satisfaction theory. God’s covering of Adam and Eve is connected to Adam and Eve’s covering of themselves in verse 7, something the text makes clear is because they “felt shame at their nakedness (NLT).” The first example of sacrifice in the Bible suggests that sacrifice is not for the purpose of affecting God’s posture toward sinful human beings, as satisfaction theory teaches, but for the purpose of affecting our posture toward one another; to support and protect human relationship in a context that now includes shame.

The next significant example of sacrifice in the Hebrew Bible is found in Genesis 4—the offering of Cain and Abel. Genesis 4 tells us that Adam had sexual relations with Eve and she became pregnant. Eventually she gave birth to a son and named him Cain. Sometime later she gave birth to a second son and named him Abel. The two sons grew up and assumed different “professions”—Cain, a farmer, and Abel, a shepherd. “When it was time for the harvest” (4:3a, NLT) Cain brought to God an offering of “some of his crops” while Abel brought the “best portions of the firstborn lamb from his flock” (4:3b-4a, NLT). The first observation we should make is that God does not demand or require these sacrificial offerings. Satisfaction theory portrays God as the one who requires sacrificial payment. The second example of sacrifice in the Hebrew Bible suggests rather

that sacrifice, at least originally, was a practice initiated by human beings unsolicited by God.

In addition, the story goes on to say that God accepted Abel's offering but rejected Cain's, making Cain "very angry." God responds to Cain's anger by saying, "Why are you so angry? Why do you look so dejected? You will be accepted if you do what is right. But if you refuse to do what is right, then watch out! Sin is crouching at the door, eager to control you. But you must subdue it and be its master (4:6-7, NLT)." Ancient interpreters struggled with why God rejected Cain's offering but accepted Abel's. Some suggested that Abel's profession was more noble,<sup>13</sup> others that Cain's offering was somehow defective,<sup>14</sup> and still others that Cain was unrighteous.<sup>15</sup> As important as these interpretive theories may be for answering the mystery of why God rejected Cain's offering in the first place they miss the point central to our purpose—sacrifice was apparently not necessary in order for God to accept Cain. Satisfaction atonement teaches that God cannot and does not accept sinful humanity apart from adequate payment. Here God blatantly tells Cain that he will be accepted, not on the basis of efficacious sacrifice, but if he does what is right. The Cain and Abel story progresses the plot begun with Adam and Eve. Where the Adam and Eve story seems to establish that the primary purpose of sacrifice is NOT to affect God's posture toward sinners, the Cain

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<sup>13</sup> For example, Philo in *Questions and Answers in Genesis 1:59*, Ambrose of Milan in *Cain and Abel 1.3.10*, and Josephus in *Jewish Antiquities 1:53-54*. References from James Kugel, *The Bible as it Was* (Cambridge: Belknap Harvard Press, 1997), 88.

<sup>14</sup> For example, *Genesis Rabba 22:5* and *Midrash Tanhuma 9*. References from Kugel, *The Bible as it Was*, 90.

<sup>15</sup> For example, *Targum Neophyti Gen. 4:8* and Hellenistic Synagogal Prayer, *Apostolic Constitutions 8.12.21*. Kugel, *The Bible as it Was*, 90.

and Abel story seems to establish that, consequently, God did not demand it as the basis for acceptance.

Let us now turn to the most infamous example of “sacrifice” in the early pages of the Bible—Abraham’s binding of Isaac in Genesis 22. God commanded Abraham to travel to the land of Moriah and there offer his only son, Isaac, as a burnt offering. If any sacrificial text seems to support satisfaction theory and the violent image of God it assumes, the binding of Isaac is it. God is the subject demanding the sacrifice and the sacrifice involves the blood of a human victim. Closer examination of the text, however, yields the opposite conclusion. First, Genesis 22:1 makes clear that God’s call for Abraham to sacrifice Isaac was a test, implying that God never intended for Abraham to actually go through with it. This was a detail that featured prominently in many ancient interpretations of this story,<sup>16</sup> including the perspective of the New Testament author of Hebrews.<sup>17</sup> This exegetical observation reinforces our conclusion from the Cain and Abel story; God does not require sacrificial offerings.

But in the same way that the Cain and Abel story advances the revelation regarding sacrifice begun with Adam and Eve, the binding of Isaac does more than just reinforce our previous insight. It is noteworthy that Abraham did not argue with God when asked to sacrifice his only son despite how the text emphasizes Abraham’s great

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<sup>16</sup> For example, Judith 8:25-27, Sirach 44:19-21, and 1 Maccabees 2:51-52. References from Kugel, *The Bible as it Was*, 167.

<sup>17</sup> See Hebrews 11:17.



love for Isaac<sup>18</sup> and God's promise to make him into a great nation. Why would Abraham not object? The answer may lie in God's original calling of Abraham.

Ancient interpreters wrestled with why God originally called Abraham from the land of Ur of the Chaldeans. One line of argument, relying on texts like Joshua 24:2-3 and Isaiah 51:2, was that Abraham grew up in a land of polytheists but had somehow come to the belief that there was only one God, an evolutionary jump for his historical context. God called Abraham out of Ur as a way of rescuing him from the idolatry of his homeland so that Abraham could serve God's redemptive purposes.<sup>19</sup> If that is true, based on the fact that pagan worship as depicted in the Hebrew Bible often involves child sacrifice,<sup>20</sup> it would be reasonable to conclude that even though Abraham rejected the notion of multiple gods in favor of one God he maintained the belief that this one God was just as committed to child sacrifice as the pagan deities of his homeland. Consequently, when God commands Abraham to sacrifice Isaac Abraham doesn't object. If this is an appropriate insight, the fact that God stays Isaac's execution and substitutes a ram in Isaac's place takes on new significance. Not only does the story reveal something about Abraham—namely his willingness to trust God—but it also reveals something critical about God; Yahweh does not require or engage in human sacrifice.<sup>21</sup>

Couple this conclusion with some of the observations that have already been made and we can appreciate why God would substitute a ram. If, in the ancient world,

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<sup>18</sup> Genesis 22:2

<sup>19</sup> For example, Pseudo Philo, *Biblical Antiquities* 23:5 and *Jubilees* 11:16-17, 12:2, 6-7. References from Kugel, *The Bible as it Was*, 136.

<sup>20</sup> For example, see Jeremiah 32:35.

<sup>21</sup> The prophet Jeremiah would stress over and over again that this truth is what distinguishes Yahweh from pagan gods (See Jer. 7:31, 19:5, 31:25).

human worship of God involved the unsolicited practice of sacrifice, the worst example of which was the sacrifice of one's own child, the binding of Isaac represents an intentional step on the part of God to restrict his people's sacrificial impulse to the sacrifice of animals with perhaps the larger objective of eliminating sacrifice altogether.

If the reader is willing to accept that conclusion as plausible, it serves as the foundational logic for rereading the sacrificial content in Leviticus 1-7 where God is clearly the subject demanding sacrifice and at least some of the sacrificial offerings appear to serve a satisfactory function. The twin sins in the Biblical narrative are idolatry and immorality—false worship and false living. The former always leads to the latter. Israel is often accused of idolatry in the Hebrew Bible, offering sacrifices to pagan gods, “on every high hill and under every green tree.”<sup>22</sup> The Biblical authors portray Israel as having such strong sacrificial impulses that they will offer sacrifices wherever, whenever, however, and to whom ever. If this is true, Leviticus 1-7 should be read as an example, not of God demanding sacrifice as a type of satisfaction, but as God creating a cultic apparatus that contains and channels Israel's sacrificial predilections. In other words, Leviticus 1-7 represents God saying, “Since you're going to offer sacrifices anyway, I only want you offering certain types of sacrifices at certain times and in certain ways, and only to me.”

The final sacrificial passage I would like to examine in this essay is the famous suffering servant chapter of Isaiah 53. Understandably, satisfaction atonement advocates have long equated the suffering servant figure in Isaiah 53 with the person of

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<sup>22</sup> For example see Isaiah 57:5 and Jeremiah 2:20.

Jesus Christ and, operating with the misunderstanding of Hebrew sacrifice proposed in this essay and an *a priori* commitment to satisfaction logic, see phrases like, “it was the Lord’s good plan to crush him and cause him grief” as irrefutable proof of satisfaction’s coherence. However, E. Robert Ekblad argues there is semantic evidence to suggest that God should not be thought of as the agent who “crushes” the servant. In his essay, *God is not to blame: The Servant’s Atoning Suffering According to the LXX of Isaiah 53*, Ekblad points out that the LXX of Isaiah 53:10 differs from the Masoretic Text in a crucial way. The two translations match regarding the word “delight/desire,” what sometimes is translated as “good plan,” but where the MT uses the word “crush” the LXX employs the word “purify.”<sup>23</sup> Ekblad argues that the distinction is the translator’s commitment to disassociating God from the violence done to the servant. “The Lord is not implicated as perpetrator of wrongdoing against the persecuted servant...Rather, the Lord’s desire is to restore his servant, purifying him of the plague.”<sup>24</sup> Ekblad’s perspective supports our rereading of sacrifice in the Hebrew Bible and more closely resembles Jesus’ and the early disciples’ interpretation of Jesus’ death than does satisfaction.

All of this might be eventually dismissed as exegetical gymnastics if not for the fact that the Hebrew prophets themselves take this perspective. If God is the kind of God who demands ritual blood sacrifice in order to forgive sin and sacrifice is, therefore, an indispensable part of Israel’s relationship with God (how else would they be forgiven?),

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<sup>23</sup> Robert Ekblad, “God is Not to Blame: The Servant’s Atoning Suffering According to the LXX of Isaiah 53,” in *Stricken by God?: Nonviolent Identification and the Victory of God*, Hardin and Jersak (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 197.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

why do Israel's prophets routinely and consistently devalue the practice? As early in Israel's history as 1 Samuel 15 prophets like Samuel say;

“What is more pleasing to the Lord:  
your burnt offerings and  
sacrifices  
or your obedience to his voice?  
Listen! Obedience is *better than*  
sacrifice,  
and submission is *better than*  
offering the fat of rams.<sup>25</sup>”

Similarly, the prophet Isaiah says;

“What makes you think I want all your  
sacrifices,”  
says the Lord.  
“I am sick of you burnt offerings  
of rams  
and the fat of fattened cattle.  
I get no pleasure from the blood  
of bulls and lambs and goats.<sup>26</sup>”

God gets no pleasure from the blood of bulls and lambs and goats?! Submission is *better than* sacrifice?! It should be virtually impossible to maintain the conviction that sacrifice is something God needs and desires when the Biblical prophets clearly and emphatically say God does not. And if satisfaction cannot be maintained than neither can the violent, retributive, blood-thirsty portrait of God it assumes.

The primary purpose of this essay was not to offer an exhaustive, alternative view of sacrifice but to provide an exegetical critique of a popular understanding of Hebrew sacrifice used to support satisfaction atonement and its violent, retributive portrait of God. That being said, I would like to offer a general alternative to the conventional

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<sup>25</sup> 1 Samuel 15:22 (New Living Translation)

<sup>26</sup> Isaiah 1:11 (New Living Translation)

reading by organizing and interpreting some of the observations made above. Ritual sacrifice is something offered to God by sinful human beings under the *false impression* that God needs/wants it and that it affects God's posture toward them. Like Cain, we hope God will accept us on the basis of a sacrifice rather than on the basis of us doing what is right. We want sacrifice to save us from sin's consequences even if we are not saved from sin itself.

I propose instead that we look at sacrifice, culminating in Jesus' death on the cross, as an act meant to save us from sin. As we've seen, the Hebrew Bible acknowledges from the outset our sacrificial penchant anchored in Cain's false impression of God and patiently moves us toward a different perspective. That trajectory reaches its terminus in the death of Jesus. Through the lens of the resurrection we are able to see Jesus' death on the cross not as a sacrifice made *to God* but as a sacrifice made *as God*. What happens to Jesus on the cross is the incarnation of human sin. Sin is, in essence, deicide. The resurrection of Christ is the incarnation of God's response to sin. God conquers sin by suffering it and repaying it with peace, mercy, and an offer of new life. Far from being a God who demands blood in order to forgive, God sheds blood *AS* forgiveness. Forgiveness is itself the sacrifice made on our behalf. It is *THE* sacrifice to end all sacrifice because it has the power to free us from Cain's false belief about God (idolatry) that fuels our false living toward God and one another (immorality). Through the resurrection we can finally see God for who God is—perfect in mercy—and, as Brian

Zhand notes, we can join the prophets in setting aside ritual sacrifice and instead pursue justice as actually doing God's will.<sup>27</sup> Timothy Gorringer says it this way;

“The atonement is the very central doctrine of Christianity in so far as it proclaims the supreme Christian truth that God is love, and that love is the most precious thing in human life. Christ's whole life was a sacrifice which takes away sin in the only way in which sin can really be taken away, and that is by making the sinner actually better.<sup>28</sup>”

God does require sacrifice but not the blood of bulls or lambs or goats, and certainly not the blood of an innocent human victim. The sacrifice God requires of us is the sacrifice God himself offers—the sacrifice of mercy.

AW Tozer is often credited with saying, “What you think about when you think about God is the most important thing about you.” I believe that is true. Idolatry, false belief or false worship, leads to immorality, false living. Satisfaction atonement portrays God as violent, retributive, and blood-thirsty, an image inconsistent with the person of Jesus Christ and a proper reading of the Hebrew Bible and, consequently, leads to the development of a faith that cares more about being freed from sin's consequences than sin itself. This essay has tried to argue that the key to breaking satisfaction's stranglehold on the western, evangelical theological imagination is to challenge the popular understanding of Hebrew sacrifice that supports it. My hope is that this essay will find those who have struggled with aspects of satisfaction atonement but have remained committed to it because of a misunderstanding of Hebrew sacrifice and equip them to reimagine sacrifice so they can finally reject satisfaction logic and, more importantly, its

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<sup>27</sup> Brian Zhand, *Sinners in the Hands of a Loving God: The Scandalous Truth of the Very Good News* (New York: Waterbrook Publishing, 2015), 105.

<sup>28</sup> Timothy Gorringer, *God's Just Vengeance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 214.

violent, retributive, and blood-thirsty portrait of God, finally declare with confidence that “God is love,<sup>29</sup>” and begin growing into Christian maturity.

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<sup>29</sup> 1 John 4:8. 18.

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