

## *What Does it Mean?*

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This paper deals with some of the more apparent issues involved in the interpretation of the Bible: more far-reaching issues are dealt with later in David Clines's paper.

### **1. PRELIMINARY REMARKS**

The Bible was not intended to be a book of riddles. Each part of it was meant to be understood by the people for whom, in the first instance, it was written. Sometimes, indeed, they found the message unpalatable and complained that it could not really mean what it appeared to mean, but that was perhaps because, its meaning was all too plain. (One sometimes gets the impression that certain objections to modern versions of the Bible may be due to the starkness with which they thrust the plain sense on the reader, whereas the more archaic idiom of the older versions carries a kind of 'distance' with it.)

The Bible is composed in human language: the Word of God comes in the words of men and women. The biblical languages are foreign to most of us, but they were not foreign to the first readers and hearers. Since about a hundred years ago it has often been emphasized, sometimes to the point of exaggeration, that the Greek of the New Testament, which was once described as a special 'language of the Holy Ghost', has turned out to be the language of the common people. Quite a number of the idiomatic expressions of the original languages have been translated literally into our common versions and have become naturalized in our own tongue—not always, however, in the sense which they bore at first.

A debate has been conducted for long, and is still in progress, about the best technique for Bible translation. Many modern versions aim at the ideal of 'dynamic equivalence'—that is to say, they endeavour to make the same impression on the modern reader or hearer as was

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made on the original readers or hearers when the words were first written or spoken in Hebrew, Aramaic or Greek. This is a praise-worthy ideal, but its attainment is more difficult than is often realized, because the impression made by the words depends so much on the presuppositions and the social and cultural circumstances of those addressed. It is doubtful, for example, if any version of one of the cultic psalms can make the impression today that was made on worshippers attending a sacrificial service in the Jerusalem temple. This consideration is independent of translation: even a modern Israeli or Greek, reading the Hebrew Bible or the New Testament in the original, is unlikely to experience the same response as was experienced by a reader in the first century A.D. or earlier.

The Bible student who has no direct access to the Hebrew or Greek texts will probably find it helpful to use two versions—one in more traditional 'Bible English', like the Revised Standard Version, which preserves something of the flavour of the original idiom, and on in

more contemporary language, like the New English Bible. In this way it will be possible to sense the remoteness of the Bible's historical and cultural setting simultaneously with the immediacy of its moral and spiritual impact (Since I have Bible students in mind, rather than Bible readers in general, I say nothing here of such simplified versions as the Good News Bible or the Living Bible.)

## 2. PRIMARY AND PLENARY INTERPRETATIONS

The question, 'What does it mean?', may be understood in more ways than one. It may imply, 'What does it mean for me, or for us, today?' Or it may imply, 'What did it mean when it was first said? What did the speaker or writer intend to convey by this, and how was it understood by those for whom it was first designed?' When we have found the answer to the last question (or set of three questions), we have found the primary interpretation. We have to do more thinking if we are to discover what it means for us today, but if its meaning for us today is to have any validity it must arise out of its primary meaning. The plenary sense of Scripture consists of its primary meaning plus whatever further meaning has been validly discerned in it by the people of God in succeeding generations. The plenary interpretation of Scripture in the church, it has been said, accrues like compound interest, but there must be a secure relationship between the compound interest and the primary deposit.

For example, the story of Jacob's encounter with the unnamed stranger at the ford of Jabbok (Genesis 32:22-32) is not all that easy to

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interpret even in its primary sense, but it was plainly a crucial occasion in Jacob's experience of God. We know what Charles Wesley made of the story in the twelve stanzas of his 'Wrestling Jacob'. 'The story', according to A. S. Peake, 'has been so filled with deep, spiritual significance (Charles Wesley's "Come, O thou traveller unknown" is a classic example) that it is difficult for the modern reader to think himself back into its original meaning.' But Wesley's hymn is, in fact, a superb example of plenary interpretation. If Jacob's experience taught him the lesson which Paul summed up centuries later in reference to a disability of his own—'When I am weak, then I am strong' (2 Cor. 12:10)—then Wesley got to the heart of the matter in his concluding couplet:

*And when my all of strength shall fail,  
I shall with the God-Man prevail.*

One specially important aspect of the plenary sense is that which a biblical passage acquires not in its own immediate context but in the context of the whole Bible. In that context we can see better the part it plays in the progress of divine revelation. This is so particularly in the application which New Testament writers give to Old Testament texts which they quote. This application cannot be allowed to obliterate the primary sense of those texts, but the primary sense may be seen to present a preliminary or limited instance of a principle which has a wider reference in the completed revelation. For instance, when Paul and Peter apply to the ingathering of the Gentiles Hosea's prophecy about 'Not-my-people' becoming 'My-people' and 'Not-pitied' becoming 'Pitied' (Hos. 2:23; Rom. 9:25, 26; 1 Pet. 2:10), we may say that a pattern of divine mercy which was first manifested in Hosea's domestic life and in the nation of Israel is re-enacted on a wider scale in the Gospel age. Or if we are perplexed at first by Matthew's application of Old Testament texts in his nativity narrative (when their original reference is to something quite different), light may dawn when we realize that he is bringing

out the way in which the experiences of the messianic people are recapitulated in the history of the Messiah himself. This is one of many ways in which the New Testament writers emphasize the christocentric relevance of Old Testament prophecy: 'to him bear all the prophets witness' (Acts 10:43).

### **3. HISTORICAL, GEOGRAPHICAL AND LITERARY FACTORS**

The biblical writings have come to us out of the past, and inevitably bear features which belong to their historical setting. Not only so: they

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represent a wide chronological range; when the Gospels and epistles were being written in the Graeco-Roman world of the first century A.D., the earlier Old Testament writings, to which they frequently make reference, belonged to what for their authors and readers was the distant past. The revelation recorded in the Bible is progressive in the sense that each of its phases points on to something which lies ahead. Moreover, each of its phases reflects in some degree the cultural background against which it was given. It is anachronistic, therefore, to pass moral judgments on the people who figure in one stage of the record by the standards of a later stage. This consideration by no means solves all the 'moral problems' of the Old Testament, but it helps.

For example, when our Lord replaced the law of exact retaliation by the principle of non-retaliation, he referred to Exodus 21:23-25 ('...eye for eye, tooth for tooth...'). But no criticism is implied of the men of old by whom or to whom these words were spoken. On the contrary, when the law of exact retaliation was first laid down, it marked an ethical advance by limiting the operation of vengeance: one life, and no more, for a life; one eye, and no more, for an eye. The law of exact retaliation, as it was applied in the ancient Near East, must be assessed in the light of the unlimited blood-feud which it replaced and not in the light of the principle of non-retaliation which our Lord recommended to his own followers.

Any one who visits the Holy Land comes back with an impression of its geography and climate which proves to be very helpful in reading the Bible. 'The shadow of a great rock in a weary land' is more than a memorable figure of speech to one who has gratefully enjoyed the shade provided by such a rock in the Judaeian desert. But the help given by some knowledge of the geography and climate of Bible lands is more than literary. These factors powerfully influenced religious beliefs and customs. When the Israelites were on their way to the promised land, they were told how different that land was from Egypt, which they had recently left. The fertility of Egypt depended on the annual rise of the Nile, which also determined the Egyptians' religion and whole way of life. The fertility of Canaan, on the other hand, depended on regular rainfall, and the whole rationale of Baal-worship was based on this fact. It was important therefore that the Israelites should learn as early as possible that the fertility of the land to which they were going depended not on Baal but on the God of their fathers: it was 'a land which the LORD your God cares for' (Deut. 11:10-12). They were long in learning this lesson properly: as late as Hosea's day the God of Israel had to complain that the nation 'did not know that it was I who gave her the grain, the wine and the oil' (Hos. 2:8). And if

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we wish to understand how they found the lesson so difficult to learn, we must recognize the close relation which existed for ages between Baal-worship and the local weather patterns.

Again, to take quite a different example, there are nuances of emphasis in the seven letters to the churches in Revelation 2-3 which can be appreciated only by some acquaintance with the history and topography of the cities in which those churches were planted.

The literary features of the biblical documents come even closer to the heart of interpretation than their historical and geographical settings, important as these are. It is an elementary principle of interpretation to recognize that poetry and prose differ in their modes of expression. While most of the biblical material is in prose, much is in poetry, and not only those documents which are conventionally called the 'poetical' books. There are poems embedded here and there in the prose narrative (such as Deborah's song in Judges 5; David's dirge over Saul and Jonathan in 2 Samuel 1, his song of thanksgiving to God in 2 Samuel 22). Many of the prophetic oracles are poetical in form; so is much of the teaching of Jesus, both in the synoptic record and in the Gospel of John. The language of poetry is more figurative than that of prose. To force a literal interpretation on the metaphors of poetry would be ludicrous in any literature; yet attempts to do this with the poetry of Scripture have been defended on the supposed ground that a literal interpretation is more honouring to God.

Biblical poetry—especially in the Old Testament, but also in the New Testament—is characterized by parallelism, a repetitive feature which serves the same kind of purpose as rhyme does in our own tradition. Parallelism may take several forms: the same thought may be repeated in different words, or a statement may be followed by its antithesis, or part of a statement may be repeated and its sense amplified or completed in the next clause. An author who, following the laws of what is called synonymous parallelism, makes a statement and then repeats it in a fresh set of words, is liable to have his meaning distorted if an interpreter insists that, because there are two different sets of words, there must therefore be two different thoughts. I have known it to be asserted that God in the days of the wilderness wanderings dealt with Moses otherwise than he did with the Israelites, on the ground that Psalm 103:7 says:

He made known his ways to Moses,  
his acts to the people of Israel.

No doubt God did deal with Moses in a special way, but I should infer this from a passage like Numbers 12:6-5 and not from the synonymous parallelism of Psalm 103:7. A similar failure to recognize parallelism

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for what it is could lead to the supposition that the prophet who described the Messiah's entry into Jerusalem pictured him as riding on two animals, 'upon an ass, and upon a colt, the foal of an ass', as the A.V. of Zech. 9:9 has it, whereas the 'colt' in fact is as much synonymous with the 'ass' as 'the king's son' in Psalm 72:1 is with 'the king' in the preceding line.

In biblical literature, as in all other literature, it is important to determine the literary genre with which we are dealing and interpret it according to the interpretative principles appropriate to that genre, be it prose or poetry, praise or prayer, history, parable or story with a moral, legislation or exhortation.

#### 4. PROPHETIC INTERPRETATION

Whereas many of the literary genres in the Bibles are familiar to us in other literatures, biblical prophecy, which bulks so prominently in the Old Testament especially, is a genre that we are not likely to have met elsewhere.

Biblical prophecy may include prediction, but is by no means limited to prediction. Among the rules laid down for distinguishing a true prophet from a false one, one simple test is to wait and see if his predictions are fulfilled: 'when a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the word does not come to pass or come true, that is a word which the LORD has not spoken' (Deut. 18:22). But he is not necessarily a true prophet just because 'the sign or wonder which he tells you comes to pass', if he tries to entice his hearers away from the worship of the true God: 'that prophet or that dreamer of dreams shall be put to death' (Deut. 13:1-5). When Jeremiah's predictions of doom were contradicted by more popular prophets, the only effective argument he could use to prove that their sayings were false and his were true was to invite them to wait and see whether his predictions or theirs came true. But some of Jeremiah's prophecies could not be validated in the experience of his hearers: his prophecy of the new covenant, for example, had to wait six centuries for its fulfilment (Jer. 31:31-34). And even his more immediate prophecies were not bound to be fulfilled: prophecies of doom might be averted if the people paid heed to them and amended their ways (Jer. 18:5-10). Jeremiah's prophecies of doom were not averted because his hearers did not repent, but Jonah's preaching at Nineveh had a happier outcome. Jonah was not proved a false prophet because Nineveh was not overthrown in forty days, as he had announced. Indeed, he was sure in advance that his announcement would not be fulfilled, that it would be effective in

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bringing the Ninevites to repentance, and that God would pardon them. The fact that much Old Testament prophecy is morally conditioned has to be borne in mind by the interpreter: it will not do to argue that, because this or that prediction has never yet been fulfilled, it must be fulfilled in the future if God is to be true to his word.

The predictive element in biblical prophecy can be helpful in dating. A genuine prediction is to be dated earlier than the events which it foretells but not earlier than the events which it presupposes as a background. Thus, if a prophet, speaking against the background of Cyrus's meteoric rise to power, foretells his capture of Babylon, his prophecy can be dated within a few years. The dating of a document, whether prophetic or not, can be quite important for the wider task of interpreting it.

Some interpreters of prophecy have made play with the 'apotelesmatic' principle of interpretation—the principle according to which, in Francis Bacon's words, 'divine prophecies... have springing and germinant accomplishment throughout many ages, though the height or fulness of them may refer to some one age.' The 'apotelesmatic' principle is sometimes used as a device for circumventing problems raised by a lack of congruity between prediction and event, but it certainly makes a positive contribution to biblical interpretation, as may be appreciated especially when we consider the NT application of OT prophecy.

According to the consensus of NT writers, the dominant theme of the OT prophets was the forthcoming person and work of Christ. According to 1 Peter 1:10-12, the OT prophets had themselves to 'search and inquire' in order to identify the person and time indicated by the Spirit who spoke through them, when he bore witness in advance to the 'sufferings of Christ

and the glories to follow'. But Peter and his readers had no such need: the person, they knew, was Jesus; the time was now. To quote Peter's words from another context, over the whole Gospel story could be written the confident declaration: 'This is that which was spoken by the prophet' (Acts 2:16).

For example: the prophet like Moses whom God promises to raise up in Deut. 18:15-19 is identified with Jesus in the NT: twice explicitly (Acts 3:22, 23; 7:37) and several times by implication. We know that about the same time other circles in Israel expected the prophet like Moses to be raised up in the last days. But in the context where the promise appears no one individual appears to be intended. There the people of Israel are told by Moses that when they settle in Canaan and wish to know what to do in unforeseen circumstances they must not imitate their neighbours and have recourse to mediums: when God wishes to make his will known to them he will raise up a prophet and

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speak through him. It is easy for us to see how this promise, repeatedly fulfilled in the course of OT history, received its definitive fulfilment in Jesus. But when the NT speakers and writers applied the promise to him, did they make allowance for those partial and preliminary fulfilments? Perhaps they did, but we cannot be sure.

Again, when we read Isaiah 40-66 we can see how these chapters largely point forward to the events leading up to Judah's return from exile and the sequel to that return. We can see, too, how the figure of the obedient and suffering Servant depicted from time to time in the course of these chapters remained unrealized when the prophecies which form its context were fulfilled. But in the NT not only are the Servant oracles presented as fulfilled in Jesus: the whole corpus of twenty-seven chapters is interpreted not of the liberation experienced under Cyrus but of the greater liberation procured by the redemptive act of Christ. The 'voice' of Isa. 40:3 is the ministry of his forerunner John; the new heaven and new earth of Isa. 65:17 and 66:22 mark the consummation of his saving work, and all that falls between these two poles bears some relation to the Gospel: the feet upon the mountains (Isa. 52:7) belong to the preachers of the Gospel, the question of Isa. 53:1 is their comment on unresponsive hearers, especially the 'rebellious people' to whom God spreads out his hands (Isa. 65:2), whereas those who did not ask for him but now prove as ready to find him as he is to be found by them (Isa. 65:1) are the Gentiles who embrace his salvation so eagerly (Rom. 10:15, 16, 20, 21). We may say, and rightly so, that the earlier liberation foreshadowed the later one, just as the still earlier liberation of the Exodus foreshadowed it; but is there any sign that the NT writers recognized the immediate reference of Isa. 40-66 to the deliverance from Babylon and its aftermath as well as its final reference to the event and proclamation of the Gospel? Again, perhaps they did, but we cannot be sure.

We can and do, at any rate, heartily accept the Christian interpretation of OT prophecy as set forth by our Lord and the apostles. But if we see in their interpretation an example of the 'apotelesmatic' principle, let us beware of thinking that therefore we can go on to envisage further and future fulfilments of prophecies which they declared to be definitively realized in the Gospel. For instance, if Peter on the day of Pentecost told his hearers that the outpouring of the Spirit the effects of which they witnessed was the outpouring spoken of in Joel 2:28-32, we are not justified in arguing that a fuller realization of that prophecy is yet to be experienced. True, the Spirit was not poured out literally on 'all flesh' on that one day, but that day saw the beginning of an outpouring which is still going on and increasing and will continue so to do until the promise is totally fulfilled. Strictly speaking, there was

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only one Pentecost just as there was only one Good Friday and only one Easter Day; but we live for ever in the good of the acts of God associated with these unrepeatable days.

As has been said above, the NT interpretation of the OT is a special form of plenary interpretation, but there is a basic analogy between the plenary interpretation and the primary interpretation. The primary interpretation foreshadows the plenary; the plenary interpretation reflects the primary.

## **5. APOCALYPTIC LITERATURE**

Apocalyptic literature is a special development of prophecy. As its name indicates, it is devoted to the 'unveiling' of things normally hidden from human knowledge, like the mysteries of outer space or, as in the canonical apocalypses, the mysteries of future time. The principal examples of apocalyptic in the Bible are the visions in the book of Daniel and the NT Revelation to John—the Greek title of which (*apokalypsis*) has given its name to the whole genre.

In both these biblical apocalypses the events of the future are already recorded in a heavenly book, the contents of which are made known, in one way or another, to the seer, who in turn discloses them to his readers. Thus the interpreting angel, about to give Daniel the forecast of things to come contained in Dan. 11:2-12:4, says to him, 'I will tell you what is inscribed in the book of truth' (Dan. 10:21): and 'the revelation of Jesus Christ' is given to him by God in the form of a seven-sealed scroll, the contents of which are imparted to his people through 'his servant John' (Rev. 1:1; 5:7).

Apocalyptic literature makes lavish use of symbolism, which is sometimes accompanied by an explanation and sometimes not. Even when it is accompanied by an explanation, we find ourselves at this time of day asking what the explanation means: one may think, for instance, of the various interpretations of the explanation of the beast's seven heads and ten horns in Rev. 17:7-14. The Revelation to John, in particular, has been described as a 'rebirth of images'; images from primaeval times (like the dragon, the woman and the man-child of chapter 12) are revived in it and given a fresh significance in keeping with the purpose of the work. This imagery is sometimes so foreign to our way of thinking that its elucidation calls for patient study. Sometimes the meaning of a symbol may be lost beyond recall. Many, but not all, of the symbols are taken over from pictorial OT language. But patient study will yield its reward if it is kept in mind that the purpose of the book is to affirm the triumph of Christ, in his own person and in

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his people. In a day when the defeat and obliteration of Christianity seemed certain, John's readers are encouraged to believe that the victory of the Lamb, which has already been won, is the guarantee of the victory of his hard-pressed followers, and that their victory will be won, as his was, 'by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony' (Rev. 12:11).

## **6. TYPOLOGY AND ALLEGORY**

Typology involves the recognition of recurring patterns in the course of biblical history—patterns of divine action and patterns of human response. The outstanding instance of typology in the biblical narrative is provided by the account of the Exodus and accompanying events. As an archetypal example of divine deliverance the Exodus supplied a form of language and symbolism which was applied centuries later to the release of the exiles from Babylon, and centuries later still to the redemption accomplished by Christ. As at the Exodus God made 'the depths of the sea a way for the redeemed to pass over', so the exiles in Babylon are assured that 'the ransomed of the LORD shall return and come to Zion with singing' (Isa. 51:10, 11). So too in the NT Christians are reminded that, because 'Christ, our paschal lamb, has been sacrificed', they should have done with 'the leaven of malice and evil' and keep festival 'with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth' (1 Cor. 5:7, 8). There is a noteworthy passage in 1 Cor. 10:1-11 where the Israelites' passing through the Red Sea and feeding in the wilderness on bread from heaven and water from the Rock are viewed as anticipations of Christian baptism and the Lord's Supper—sacred experiences which nevertheless will no more protect Christians against divine judgment if they indulge in wrongdoing than the Israelites were protected against it when they were disobedient during the wilderness wanderings. Of their wilderness experiences Paul says that they happened to them 'typically'—that is, as a warning—and he adds that 'they were written down for our instruction' (v.11). That this application of the wilderness narrative was common to early Christian teachers and not peculiar to Paul is evident from Heb. 3:7-4:11 and Jude 5.

To accept typology like this, which is part of the text of Scripture, is one thing; to search for typological analogies without setting sober criteria for their recognition is quite another.

Much that is commonly called typology is really allegory (and it may be noted in passing that when Paul in Gal. 4:21-31 attaches an 'allegorical' lesson to the story of Hagar and Sarah, he means by 'allegory')

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what we understand by 'typology'). There are some passages in the Bible that are self evidently allegorical in intention—one thing is said, but another is meant. When Ezekiel (17:2-10) describes the great eagle that broke off the topmost shoot of the cedar of Lebanon, he really refers to Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, carrying King Jehoiachin into captivity; when later (19:2-9) he describes a lioness and her whelps, he really refers to the royal family of Judah. It would be wise to restrict the allegorical interpretation of Scripture to passages which are clearly intended to be interpreted thus. It is unwise to extend it to the historical narratives of the OT, to the details of the levitical cultus, or even (as has been done) to the record of Paul's voyage and shipwreck in Acts 27. When one comes across an allegorization of the book of Esther in which Esther represents the church, Ahasuerus represents our Lord and Mordecai represents the Holy Spirit, it is necessary to protest that even in allegory there should be some moral affinity between picture and reality. Or when one is asked who is meant by the 'nearer kinsman' of Ruth 3:12, it is assumed by the questioner that the whole story is to be allegorized, and he is shocked if he is asked in return why the 'nearer kinsman' should stand for any one other than himself. The best advice that can be given to those about to engage in allegorical interpretation of Scripture is: 'Don't!'

## **7. INTERPRETATIVE FRAMEWORK**

Many students of Scripture have felt the need of some organizing principle by which the greater part, if not the whole, of the biblical material can be classified and brought into some

kind of order. To use some such organizing principle or interpretative framework can be quite helpful, provided it is borne in mind that it serves the purpose of scaffolding and is not part of the building proper.

For example, 'covenant theology' has recommended itself to many as a framework of this kind. Biblical history knows of a succession of covenants made by God with his people, and these have been viewed as stages in the outworking of the divine purpose. The first of these covenants (so far as the use of the actual term is concerned) is that made with Noah, but one well-known system of covenant theology envisages an earlier and quite crucial 'covenant of works' made with Adam. God did indeed lay an injunction on Adam, but it did not take the customary form of a covenant. Yet the notion of the covenant with Adam, while many have found it helpful, has been responsible for a good deal of trouble, as will be realized by any one who recalls early

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nineteenth-century controversies over the degree to which our Lord was involved (if at all) in Adam's 'federal headship'.

Another framework widely accepted is that which arranges the stages of divine revelation in a sequence of 'dispensations'. There is no harm in dispensationalism, provided it is borne in mind that it is one of our convenient devices for organizing the biblical material, and not necessarily God's own chosen way of dealing with mankind.

A more adequate organizing principle than either of these is 'salvation history'. This views the biblical record as the process of God's saving purpose, promised with increasing clarity throughout the OT age and fulfilled in Christ. It traces from first to last the biblical witness to the bringer of salvation (the Son of God), the way of salvation (faith in God) and the heirs of salvation (the people of God). But even salvation history can be pushed too far as an organizing principle, to the point where some important elements in Scripture (e.g. the Wisdom books) are left out of the scheme because they cannot be fitted into it. Our systems of classification are useful, but none of them is perfect.

The biblical witness cannot be properly appreciated without the illuminating aid of the Spirit. The illumination which he imparts to the believing reader may differ in degree, but does not differ in kind, from the inspiration which moved the original speakers or writers, so that their words became the vehicle of God's Word. The Spirit's role is to testify of Christ, and he does so not least in Scripture. The Christocentric understanding of Scripture is not imposed on it from without, and not read into it by allegorization or any other artificial means; it is implicit in the message of Scripture, as that message is made plain by the Spirit. To grasp the witness of Scripture to Christ is the chief end of biblical interpretation.

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