

# Holy Scripture, Holy Church, Holy Spirit

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**ABSTRACT:** This editorial essay takes up Dietrich Bonhoeffer's correlation of Scripture as the book of the church and true church as the church of the holy Scriptures to argue for the salience of his reconceptualization of the Protestant doctrine of sola scriptura. Correlating scripture and church, Bonhoeffer put both under the saving Lordship of Jesus in the concrete circumstance of the German church struggle. At the same time, he legitimated historical critical scholarship so far as it was exercised in theological exegesis rather than history of religions scholarship at a time when the latter was producing an Aryan Christ coordinated with the Nazi world. Theological exegesis is then shown to be the way of Christian reading of the Bible giving form to the language of faith in confessing Christ alone today. As the work of the Spirit both in the production and canonization of the Bible as well as in its reception by theological exegesis, the Bible ministers the scandalous justification of the ungodly, promising life to the dead. When this work of the Spirit is neglected in reading the Bible, however, Scripture itself becomes an unholy work, a Spiritless letter dealing death with which to shame and exclude.

The church of Holy Scripture—and there is no other “church”—lives from the end. Therefore, it reads the whole of holy Scripture as the book of the end, of the new, of Christ.... The Bible is after all nothing other than the book of the church. It is this in its very essence, or it is nothing. It therefore needs to be read and proclaimed wholly from the viewpoint of the end. In the church, therefore, the story of creation must be read in a way that begins with Christ and only then moves on towards him as its goal; indeed one can read it as a book that looks for Christ only when one knows that Christ is the beginning, the new, the end of our whole world.... Theological exposition takes the Bible as the book of the church and interprets it as such. This is its presupposition and this presupposition constitutes its method; its method is a continual returning from the text (as determined by all the methods of philological and historical research) to this presupposition. That is the objectivity in the method of theological exposition. (*Creation and Fall in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Works* III:22)

## Bible as the Book of the Church— Church as Community of the Book

Bonhoeffer describes Christian “reading” of the Bible, based upon the Christian “presupposition,” as *brought* by the reader to engagement with Scripture just as the texts are otherwise understood to be historical human artifacts exegeted by relevant, though fallible, scholarly techniques. He makes no claim for a Bible that comes to life to speak for itself apart from definite presuppositions that readers bring. Acknowledging this reality certainly makes the Bible vulnerable to an almost infinite number of misreadings since one can, and many do, approach the Bible with other presuppositions connected to intentions other than faith’s knowledge of God in Christ in the communion of saints.

For Bonhoeffer, the presupposition of Christian “reading” simply is the church’s rule of faith concerning Christ, that this diverse collection from multitudinous authorships spanning over a millennium (thus without coordination between authors) nevertheless finds “dramatic coherence” (as Robert Jenson put it) in Christ. In this way, the predominance of the narrative genre in the Genesis-to-Revelation story is recognized even as the Christ event at the center provides the key that opens the lock on this literature, unveiling its plot and saving import. The gospel of Jesus Christ proclaimed by the Spirit to create and sustain human faith in him as saving Lord provides the epistemic access through by which one properly reads the Spirit’s historic testimonies in the prophets and apostles. These testimonies have been written down, selected, collected, and so preserved as holy *writings* (literally, scriptures), preserving the traces of their historical occasions but transcending those immediate circumstances to speak to the continuing community of faith. Opened by the Spirit and read with this Christ key, canonical Scripture provides to the Christian reader the basic language of faith with which to navigate in this world and interpret experience.

Interestingly, a similar hermeneutical structure has been true for Judaism through the centuries, privileging the Torah with interpretive primacy just as Christianity privileges the proclaimed gospel of Christ, crucified and risen. Likewise, the highly revisionist Islamic “reading” of the Bible privileges Mohammed’s supposed recitation of the final revelation of God as recorded in the Qur’an, a claim accusing Jewish and Christian scriptures of having corrupted the primal Abrahamic revelation of submission to Allah. We could mention several other parallels, e.g. the Book of Mormon and other sectarian literature, as well as openly hostile readings of the canonical Bible by Deists, like Thomas Jefferson’s scissors and paste edition of the New Testament, or various modern portraits of “the historical Jesus” by questers. It is simply a fact of cultural pluralism that the Bible as such remains open to being read in many ways and that the Christian reading of it must make its way through this maelstrom, now more than ever. Neglecting this task in our circumstances only means that many other ways of reading the Bible than the Christian way will penetrate and subvert congregational life. As we shall see, Bonhoeffer’s Christian

“reading” of Scripture is well grounded in the fact that the selection of New Testament literature for canonization in union with the Scriptures of Israel was already guided by the primitive “rule of faith,” which itself had developed out of the baptismal renunciation of the kingdom of the devil and profession of allegiance to the triune God of salvation.

Significantly, Bonhoeffer, in 1933 Berlin, employed certain historical critical insights to overcome what Pannenberg would later call “the crisis of the Scripture principle” caused by the historical criticism of the Bible. Bonhoeffer utilized the insight that the account of creation by the sovereign word of God in Genesis I was composed during the Babylonian exile as a critique of creation by intra-divine combat in the myth of Marduk slaying Tiamat. This insight enabled Bonhoeffer to recognize the biblical doctrine of creation as “hope projected backwards” from Israel’s knowledge of the saving God of the Exodus even as Christ too finds us at the center between primordial beginning and eschatological end.

More immediately, however, Bonhoeffer’s enunciation of the Christian reading the Bible was announced at the beginning of his lectures on the opening chapters of the First Book of Moses in the Jewish Tanakh, re-framed as the Old Testament of canonical Christian Scripture; this selection of a lecture topic in theology executed a timely and provocative choice in 1933. A scientifically literal interpretation of Genesis I as in a creationist “young Earth made in seven 24-hour days” proposition claiming scientific truth had been widely discredited by contemporaneous geology and cosmology, reducing the chapter in the eyes of educated people of the time to little more than Jewish mythology; according to this cultural trend favoring Darwinism’s account of human origins, humans are not, as the saying went, “fallen angels, but rising beasts,” thus by nature fitted to claim sovereignty over themselves, over others, and over the earth in the natural struggle for domination and living space, invoking not the blessed shalom of Genesis I but the violence of Marduk’s slaying of Tiamat.

In the cultural milieu of rising Hitlerism, Bonhoeffer boldly undertook an expressly Christian theological “reading” of Genesis 1-3. He took up the Adam-Christ typology of the apostle Paul in Romans 5 to counteract the burgeoning anti-Judaism of his theological opponents, the German Christians allied with Nazism. These voices called for the complete eradication of all traces of Jewish influence on the Christian religion of Germany. Indeed, this call to purge Christianity of its scriptural origins was perceptive. Nothing more offended Nazi sensibilities in their social-Darwinian aspirations to sovereignty, enslavement, racial purgation and territorial conquest with corresponding demand for a racially “positive Christianity” than the portrait of *one* humanity *universally* fallen from paradisaical peace with God, nature, and among themselves into the recurring cycles of violence as portrayed in the ensuing narratives of Genesis. For Nazis, this biblical opening act of universal humanity in Adam inculcated an obsequious religion of crippling guilt by which the physically weaker but devilishly shrewd Jews exercised their own covert will-to-power to stricken the conscience of stronger but guileless Aryans, paralyzing them with imaginary fear

of divine retribution and so inhibiting them from asserting their own will against these cunning and malicious manipulators.

Bonhoeffer's lectures on *Creation and Fall* doubly provoked his detractors: he would overcome historical criticism with historical criticism by taking the biblical beginning of creation and fall as the indispensable starting point of the Christian reading of canonical Scripture. Indeed, Bonhoeffer placed himself in good company. Historically, Jesus, Paul, and the rest of the New Testament authors knew no other Bible than the Hebrew Bible, whether in the Hebrew language or in Greek translations. As a pupil of the Luther Renaissance, moreover, Bonhoeffer, undertook this nuanced restatement of the Reformation Scripture principle, by drawing upon certain well-known if precritical insights from Luther's lifelong scholarly engagement with Scripture. For Bonhoeffer, the Old Testament professor Luther might well be imagined to say to this present day: "Take Christ out of the Bible and what remains falls to pieces. What is canonical is what compels Christ as God's promised salvation of the fallen creation. For this cause of creation's redemption, Jesus Christ was born a Jew."

The Bible of Old and New Testaments exists as the canon ("rule") of the church where and when the church is ruled by the gospel proclamation that first creates this community of faith (*communio sanctorum*) and ever sustains it; likewise, the gospel of the resurrection of the crucified Jesus and his promised Parousia for the "redemption of our bodies" was the norm of its life prior to canonization, being formalized in early Christian creeds organically developing from the rite of baptism. This proto-creedal norm sieved literature and selected from multiple candidates to form the New Testament witness, now joined to the prophetic witness of the Hebrew Bible, rendering it in turn as the Christian "Old Testament."

The knowledge claim of Holy Scripture as rule of faith is not, consequently, *primarily* a reference to "what really happened" in the world and human history so far as that can be ascertained by methodologically atheistic modern historiography. As Jonathan Rowlands has recently shown in his *The Metaphysics of Historical Jesus Research*, historical criticism in the 19th century especially had argued in a vicious ideological circle when claiming to discover the absence or impossibility of the God who acts in human history in so far as this absence or impossibility has been presupposed methodologically in its reconstructions of what actually happened. This exemplifies how the Bible is factually vulnerable to readings other than Christian. In fact, during Bonhoeffer's time, such "history of religions" methodology was *au courant*. History of religions, which today appears as "religious studies," subsumed historical criticism to treat Christianity as a religion alongside other religions, repositioned today in the hermeneutical framework of the universal history of the "rise of man" from biological polygenesis and bestial barbarism to civilization. Henceforth Christianity with its literature and thought was to be studied in that secular framework "objectively," i.e. without privileging theological presuppositions of canonization, even though it was the process of canonization that prevented this

literature from falling into the dust heap of history, thus resulting in its preservation for modern scholars to study “objectively.”

So, the Christian religion was to be studied by a strictly historical method within the progressive Darwinian 19th century teleological framework in which the Christian *religion* was unsurprisingly still deemed supreme, unsurprisingly, since most of these scholars were the enlightened products of this religion. Christianity, in its liberal Protestant iteration, was coronated the evolutionary victor whereas, by comparison in today’s post-Christendom, religious studies repudiates this triumphalist claim rightly enough as Western ethnocentrism. In any event, this alternative framework of universal evolutionary progress in religion in Bonhoeffer’s time discredited itself and its self-professed pretensions to scientific objectivity and ideological neutrality. Indeed it was hard at work in Germany manufacturing an “Aryan Christ,” which it represented as the supposedly scientifically ascertained “historical Jesus of Nazareth,” the illegitimate child of a Roman centurion and a “Jew fighter,” a Gentile “Galilean” patriot who died battling the Jews and whose cause Adolf Hitler was now resuming. As Doris Bergen and Richard Steigman-Gall show, the ranks of the German Christians largely filled with such “anti-doctrinal” partisans of the history of religions school.

For Bonhoeffer, the Christian claim to truth lies in the knowledge of God whose kingdom comes, as Jesus taught disciples to pray, accessed by faith in him “as the beginning, the new, the end of our whole world,” who thusly invites disciples into his own relation to the Abba Father, the God of Israel. Just so, the first dogmatic decision of early Christianity was the canonical recognition of the unity of this New Testament gospel with its Old Testament prophecy, i.e. the Hebrew Bible. This “presupposition” of gospel proclamation and new covenant faith in it makes faithful community and holy scripture into correlative concepts. This is what Bonhoeffer affirmed by calling the Bible “the book of the church,” correlatively denoting “the—*only*—church” as the “church of the Holy Scripture.” Jesus is Lord of both scripture and church so that these together proclaim the coming fulfillment of God’s reconciling reign over the alienated creation as the public demonstration at the Parousia of this very claim to theological truth, that “Jesus is Lord.” Under the Lordship of Jesus, the *primary* reference of Scripture is thus to the One who is God truly, revealing who *this* God is and what is *His* will for us and towards us. The Bible is about God, or it is about nothing. God exists as its reality reference; knowledge of God is its claim to truth *in the world*. Because this is so the Bible demands theological exegesis for proper understanding. The Bible, to be sure, also narrates human history on the earth because this God speaks Himself into the human story in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit. In this light, the Bible becomes a “world absorbing narrative” (Lindbeck), the language in terms of which Christian believers understand God, the world, and themselves.

Christian triumphalism dies hard, and triumphalist variations on this truth are frequent and notorious, ranging from medieval Christian crusaderism to American

manifest destiny. That is why Lindbeck told the cautionary tale of the Crusader who yelled “Christ is Lord!” as he lopped off the head of the infidel, pointing out that the ethical performance of the Crusader substantively contradicted the theologically exegeted proposition that Jesus is Lord. If the primary reference of the Bible is to the One who is God truly, that should remind and enable practices of *epistemic humility*—we can only know God in so far as God makes Himself known to us in the promise which elicits faith. If God makes Himself known to us through history-like narratives recognized as Scripture, culminating in the passion and resurrection of Jesus as a promise for us, we must test our practices by the measure of these representations of the crucified Son shrouded in the sin of the world. That is the self-critical function of theological exegesis.

Theological exegesis of Scripture is not backwards looking apologetics, which tries to establish Christian truth on the same rationalist basis as the putatively critical but ideological “history of religions” method. The Bible references events in human history, but these serve the primary purpose of the Exodus and Easter theological identification of the One and only who is God truly in the very acts of the rescue of the enslaved and the justification of the ungodly summoning a new creation into being. Theological exegesis, the critical Christian reading of the Bible, is accordingly the forward thinking from the historical event of Christ in the proclaimed gospel that takes Scripture as a narrative of hope in Christ for the sinful self, perishing humanity, and the groaning creation.

Scripture is so inculcated by the Spirit for faith that the unity of the Testaments that the gospel of Christ requires and effects works to provide the very language of it. The Bible yields the terms and their syntactical syntheses and so elicits in Christian theological exegesis explication of its grammar and semantics. Luther called this theological explication of Scripture the Spirit’s production of *nova lingua* in reference to the creedal formulas that regulate scriptural speech to properly refer to the gospel’s God who alone demonstrates the truth of Christ’s promises. Manifestly, this demonstration is not because supposedly neutral eyes already see a rationally compelling fulfillment of predictive prophecy but because the eyes in those captured by the gospel have been opened to read the Bible. “Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the Scriptures” (Luke 24:27). The Christian “reading” of the Scriptures therefore begins with the risen Christ himself!

This opening quite precisely identifies the difference between the Christian reading of the Hebrew Bible and continuing Judaism’s reading of the same. Beginning with the rabbis, post-Temple Jews read the Bible as the “Torah [‘instruction’] of our Rabbi Moses” with supporting narrative; following the risen Christ, Christians read the Bible as a promissory narrative supplemented by moral instruction from Moses and the prophets but parsed by the Spirit-given formulas of the ecumenical creeds and Reformation confessions. Consequently, neither Jews nor Christians can claim a direct ownership and unmediated reading of Scripture, but each approach-

es the Hebrew Bible as Scripture on the basis of its own originative theological presuppositions. Sound reading takes the Hebrew letters as the Spirit intends to accord with such definite theological presuppositions. The church is the place in the world where the originative event of the resurrection of the crucified Jesus for us and our salvation is ever proclaimed and actualized. For that reason, there is “no private interpretation of Scripture” (2 Peter 1:20), but the work of understanding is undertaken by Spirit-gathered disciples together across time and space in theological exegesis.

### The Bible at Work in the Spirit's Hands

Canonical Scripture provides the sanctifying Spirit with linguistic means to cultivate the basic and irreplaceable language of faith invested in Christ by the grace of God. This entails lifelong Christian learning. For, by this specification, the chief message of the Bible gets fully and radically grasped as divine action in Christ to justify the ungodly, to dethrone satanic tyrannies, and to form disciples for following the Author and Pioneer of faith through many trials and tribulations on the way to entering the eternal kingdom.

It is important to differentiate Bonhoeffer's foregoing theological program for biblical exegesis from the modern distortion of fundamentalism (the Bible as direct object of *human* faith rather than the Spirit's instrument of providing for *divine* faith). The slogan, *sola scriptura*, accordingly, needs Bonhoeffer's nuanced reconceptualization insofar as the slogan was conformed in the modern period to the foundationalist aspirations of rationalist epistemology as if somehow the Bible presented evidence that demands from the rational reader a verdict of assent to geological, biological, astrophysical, and/or sundry other scientific truth claims. The modern biblicists asked, in reference to the unique and perfect revelation of a perfect Being, how could the Bible be otherwise? Scripture was conceived a priori as a uniquely miraculous text providing a fully modern epistemological foundation on which to construct a “positive” theology, but this approach entailed that all its individual propositions must also be credible as scientific propositions.

Just as Humpty Dumpty had a great fall, such a Bible with its representations of history being seriously and increasingly queried seemingly *had* to disintegrate under the modern knowledge regime of empirical science. Certainly, this elicited apologetic counterthrusts, yet they were to no avail. The very act of questioning, no matter the results, unveiled and forced not only a plausibility crisis but a recognition of the undeniable variety of genres within Scripture, all systematically ignored in their diverse semantics and forced into the Procrustean bed of across-the-board propositionalism claiming scientific validity. Hermeneutically, Jonah's days in the belly of the whale bore the same propositional weight as the entombment of Jesus, which it foreshadowed. Tortuous claims to truth stand and fall together on this rationalist schematization and hermeneutical malpractice, but this bad faith belief

in Scripture not only *had* to be but *deserved* to be discredited “as determined by all the methods of philological and historical research” that it had provoked for clumsy and misleading readings of biblical texts and for putting, in Luther’s words, dialectics (logical analysis) before grammar (syntactical parsing, i.e. theological exegesis). In modern form, this approach only yielded a Protestant recrudescence of medieval scholasticism (at its hermeneutical worst).

The Islamic reference above is relevant because the model of revelation as divine dictation strictly connected to unadulterated human recitation without any interference from human receptivity accompanied the Qur’an’s polemical attack on the supposed corruption of the Hebrew and Christian Bibles. This polemic increasingly impressed Western Christendom as an ideological advantage with Islam’s advance and apparent success in forging a unified culture in support of imperialist expansion. Historians have often remarked that articulate theories of plenary inspiration arose and predominated only in the post-Reformation authority dispute between Protestantism and Catholicism, a time of acute pressure also from advancing Islam. These polemical pressures coupled with the correlation between perfect being metaphysics (“ontotheology”) produced a corresponding notion of inerrancy as a criterion of putative divine revelation in a written book.

With this background in mind, it is not surprising that contemporary practitioners of history of religions scholarship have turned their critical eyes upon the Qur’an. Stephen J. Shoemaker, in *Creating the Qur’an: A Historical-Critical Study*, unabashedly articulates the secularist and progressivist ideology of the method (he likens his approach to that of Bart Ehrman, a post-Christian and post-theological scholar of early Christianity) in his pioneering deconstruction of Islam’s holy book. He argues that the text we have emerged as a later, standardized edition superseding diverse early Muslim textual traditions of the Qur’an to support the imperial ambitions of the caliphate. What matters from this is the disestablishment of *any* conceit to possess a miraculously produced and protected human text beyond the reach of “philological and historical research.” Christian faith need not fear such research into the humanity of the Bible any more than sober inquiry into the historical profile of Jesus. As we have argued, what matters is the gospel presupposition on the basis of which we read the Bible, the resurrection knowledge that makes remembrance of Jesus as necessary as it is integral to the sense of resurrection as His vindication. For Bonhoeffer’s “church of the Scripture” to become functional again, biblicist disillusionment, *so understood* as disillusionment regarding the covert modern epistemological foundationalism hidden behind the biblicist boast of “orthodoxy,” must take place. This disillusionment has in fact much afflicted liberal Lutheranism which has largely given up on Bible teaching and catechesis because no alternative to discredited biblicism is available. Polling shows specifically that young men leaving for nondenominational Christianity account for the move with the complaint that they never learned the Bible in the Lutheran church. What an indictment! The alternative is Bonhoeffer’s theological exegesis!

However, the antecedent disillusionment was created *not only* by the history of religions method of historical criticism but also by failed defenses against this criticism in the doctrine of inerrancy and its Procrustean bed propositionalism in Protestant biblicism. Overcoming biblicism to learn the Bible anew as the very language of faith will not come about by sheer contradiction or an aloof disregard for the very real “crisis of the Scripture principle.” Rather, the gospel must take the initiative to reframe the very question of truth by reasserting *the saving Word of God* in the Easter report of the resurrection of Jesus as articulated in “word of the cross” in I Cor 1-2, the “folly of God that is wiser than the wisdom of men,” this reframing figured in the Johannine confrontation of Jesus and Pilate.

As NT Wright has correctly insisted, incredulity about resurrection is not an objection to the Easter kerygma but an essential component of its meaning. How so? The resurrection claim to truth concerns the knowledge *of God* “who gives life to the dead and calls into being things that are not.” This apocalyptic reframing to require knowledge *of the saving God* forces Pilate helplessly to ask, “What is truth?” His worldly certainties, even at their best, are now made moot. Likewise, unbelieving defenses of the Bible premised on worldly methodological presuppositions must also be abandoned. The animating anxiety for such apologists has been the desire for recognition as a modern person of science. Historically, the consequent reduction of the Bible to an archaeological artifact can only be weakly contradicted, not met and overcome, by asserting a priori the Bible’s inerrancy against the evidence of its own pages while in the process absurdly reducing faith to a dogmatic dismissal of contrary evidence while claiming to be scientific. Indeed, it has been a fool’s errand to defend the Bible on such Qur’anic grounds of unfiltered divine dictation flawlessly recorded since the very presupposition of Christian reading of Scripture is a perduring folly to Greeks and a stumbling block to Jews. The Christian reading of the Bible does not transcend this scandal of “Christ crucified” but insists upon it as the only proper way to read the Bible at all. The folly of God truly is wiser than human wisdom as the folly of God is the crucified Christ risen for the creative destruction of the self-certain world so that it be created anew for the clean fresh air of self-entrusting faith in its rectification and redemption. Such is the gospel’s claim to truth, and its claim on the Bible yields the language of faith.

The problem herein originated in early Protestantism, which, in a subtle but profound distortion of its original meaning, took “Scripture alone” to mean the sole miraculously given source and ground of authority over Roman claims to papal magisterium. This is a subtle but profound distortion of its original meaning. *Sola scriptura*, in paralleling *sola gratia* and *sola fide*, is in the Latin ablative case with an instrumental meaning modifying the *solus Christus*, in the Latin nominative case. *Sola scriptura* does *not* mean that we read *only* the perfect Bible from which we then deduce *perfectly lucid* propositions to systematize in constructing a revealed worldview. Indeed, the originative, intentionally *paradoxical* gospel proclamation of the “Christ crucified,” or what is the same, “this crucified body raised from the dead and exalted to lordship,” can easily be lost amid Scripture’s diverse testimo-

nies through many centuries. The Gospel's paradoxical assertion of divine truth to confound Pilate was thus obscured from the view of theologians busy harmonizing discrepancies between propositions to preserve biblical "inerrancy."

*Sola scriptura* means that we know God in Christ solely by means of the apostolic and prophetic testimonies to Him and in which, as the risen One, He ever presents *Himself* bearing the ignominious bodily scars as trophies of surpassing love for us and for our salvation. Apart from this key, the Bible becomes a closed and locked book, no matter how wildly it is swung about or how dramatically it is pounded. Usually lying dusty and unread on a bookshelf or opportunistically invoked to sanction some secular politics, the text is rarely studied seriously on its own terms and in its own voice in the Christian reading of it, but is censored by frightened religious authorities, falsified in revisionist makeovers, or even superseded by supposedly new revelations. However, when Christ-keyed and Spirit-opened, the Bible is actually read in Bonhoeffer's way for the holy communion of Christian faith, serving the content of the proclaimed word of God in the Holy Spirit's sanctifying action of opening minds and hearts to the saving Lordship of Jesus.

### The New Battle over the Bible

Perceiving this integral and dynamic relation of the sanctifying Spirit to the Bible allows us to see clearly how the battle line has shifted in the recent generation from the increasingly passé rationalist challenge to biblical historicity to the contemporary assault on its *holiness*. Professor Jeff Kloha drew attention to this challenge in his January 2026 article in *Promissio* by exhibiting a revolting billboard image of an enslaved person alongside the biblical citation, "Slaves, obey your masters." An Association of Atheists erected the propaganda to defame and discredit the Bible. The Bible, which can be read in many ways, is indeed dynamite; it is to be handled with care, for the *closed Bible is unholy* and indeed works *unholiness*, exploding in the hands of misusers.

The proper name for the Bible is the *Holy Scriptures*, the product once given and ever utilized for our reception by the *Holy Spirit*, the Lord and giver of life to the dying, grace to the disgraced, and righteousness to the sinner—*only* the dying, the disgraced, the sinner in whose fellowship the holy Church of Christ consists. Truthfully, the only proper Scriptural defense occurs via opening the text with its Christ key for its Spirit-proper use, to articulate a proper and saving work of surpassing love. When this proper designation of the sanctifying Spirit's book for the Spirit's sanctified community in this still contested and unredeemed world gets grasped, we become acutely aware of how the Bible has come under assault today as the *unholy* source of all sorts of *evils*: ecclesiastical triumphalism, know-nothing fundamentalism, inferiorizing stratagems of cruel racism, and sexism and/or class elitism.

"Indeed, yes! How good of you to notice," children of the Reformation might respond to this new line of attack, *if only* they recalled how controversial was the

Spirit-driven Jesus—by public reputation, “a drunkard and a glutton” for initiating fellowship with “tax collectors and sinners” and at length *legally* crucified as an apparent antinomian and blasphemer, a would-be insurrectionist mockingly crucified as “King of the Jews.” Such narrative material filling the Bible is as *scandalous* as the lonely loaf and mere wine cup seated on the Christian altar, profane things no longer bloodied by animal sacrifice but repurposed as a table at which the Spirit provides the same fellowship of Jesus with his forgiven sinners. Like the Holy Spirit at work in both author and reader of the Bible to convict concerning sin, righteousness and judgment, the Spirit’s scandalously “holy” Bible is, therefore, materially *dangerous*; like the Lord’s Supper it is poison for those, whether would-be friend or self-understood foe, who do not discern the body of Christ hidden at the cross but now present in the loaf. Here we witness a six-shooter Bible brandished about, a closed book weaponized to beat down others, *as if* Bible-toting Christians had swallowed the Holy Spirit as if to make the Bible come alive and come true. In the hands of such *unbelieving believers* trying to make the Bible do *something, anything*, the Bible becomes a weapon advancing the very unholiness the sanctifying Spirit would expose and uproot what is at root, namely, *we* who read. Manifestly, we have here a *bad fact*: the Bible can be, and too often has been, used as a *closed* book by closed-minded Christians to build themselves up by putting others down, and so in *unholy* ways when the Christ-key to its actual holiness is unknown because his Spirit is neglected in our reading.

Indeed, the foregoing list of biblical abuse could continue as it characterizes much of the toxic Christianity today, although it does not need to do so to convince those with genuine Reformation insight into the serious problem caused by imposing on the Bible alien notions of holiness with which to keep it closed and weaponized. By shutting out the Spirit in whom alone the “literal” sense of the biblical text is given and found, the reference ever and only to God in Christ befriending sinners gets lost. Heirs of the Reformation, though, should know better about the Bible’s real material problematic: the Holy Spirit’s convicting narratives of Adam’s disobedience and despicable scapegoating of Eve, Cain’s murderous envy, naked Noah’s hungover cursing of his son, the hubris of the tower builders of Babel, Abraham’s cowardice at the expense of Sarah, the pious near murder of Isaac, cheating Jacob’s conniving, and the treachery of Joseph’s envious brothers in a brief list of only the brutally realistic narratives about common sense morality in post-paradisiacal history. The holiness of Scriptures does not consist in the alien presumption that the narrative provides a unique and perfect treasure chest of admirable portraits of human behavior providing readers with ethical models.

The actual holiness of the Bible is shown in the sanctifying Spirit’s scandalous election of such unmistakably fallen humans: the creator clothing the guilty and exposed Adam and promising to Eve the seed that will crush the serpent’s head, preserving the murderer Cain’s life from vengeance with a mark, giving aged Abraham and Sarah the promised child in spite of infirmity and barrenness crowned with mocking doubt, preserving Isaac’s life by repeal of God’s own command,

wrestling with the rascal Jacob until he is made new, blessed and renamed Israel, even preserving the lives of Joseph's wicked brothers who had sold him into slavery, exposing him to death, but now are saved from starvation by this very brother whom they had cruelly betrayed. In neglecting such saving acts of God for humans on behalf of Luther's "real, not fictitious sinners," we no longer find in this biblical narrative the point of the election of grace that sanctifies the disgraced. Apart from this key, the supposed Morality Play that remains in the Bible cannot but function as a toxic recommendation to a perverse morality of divinely sanctioned status and authority. As such, the closed Bible is rendered an *unholy* Scripture. Consequently, Kant thought he could do Christian ethics better without the confusing Bible, especially the Scriptures of Israel, without dogma, and without theological exegesis. He actually had to get rid of these to distill an ethic of duty and claim it as the rational legacy of Christian religion for an enlightened age. However, one cannot do Christian ethics apart from Christian doctrine, the saving knowledge of the justifying God of sinful humanity.

The *Christian* problem of taking the Scriptures literally in primary reference to human history but not spiritually in primary reference to the saving God in action in the darkness of human history is an ancient issue. The same scandal offended ancient Gnostics from the earliest times through Augustine's autobiographical account of the decade he spent in the Manichaean sect. We have ample evidence of it in the moralistic revisionism attempted in the early apocryphal gospels, as Simon Gathercole demonstrates in his *The Genuine Jesus and the Counterfeit Christs*. Indeed, when the media a decade ago sensationalized the scholarly rediscovery of the third century apocryphal *Gospel of Judas*, which suggested that Judas alone understood the captivity of the divine spark in the physical body and soul of Jesus and came to its rescue by betraying physical Jesus to crucifixion in order to liberate the divine spark from its material and social imprisonment, I wrote a letter to the editor of the local paper chastising the sensationalist reporting, countering that no responsible "philological and historical" scholar gives a lick of historical credibility to the *Gospel of Judas*. To my amazement, a relative newcomer to the congregation I was serving vigorously complained to me about his disillusionment by my letter—he had hoped the *Gospel of Judas* would give us the truth about Jesus, set us free from Christian dogma, indeed expose the biblical *canon* as the retroactive imposition of an exclusionary rule upon the healthy diversity of early Christianity and its gloriously heterodox literature.

The attack on the holiness of the Bible comes in a variety of forms. From a conservative direction, it comes from a puritanical "don't drink, don't smoke, and don't dance" hygienic regimen that privileges personal self-control over social responsibility, not to mention impugning simple Ecclesiastes-joy in created life, including the erotic celebration of the Song of Solomon. From a liberal sensibility, "inclusivity" works as an ironically exclusionary trump card which gets played ultimately against the particularities of the human body, the people of Israel, and

the apocalyptic Jew Jesus. From the more radical revisionist perspective, freedom to reimagine a supposedly more relevant Jesus than the biblical version to be the symbol of our emancipatory struggles is the very task undertaken in much so-called “public” theology. Each of these assaults turn on the same axiomatic, *Spiritless* literalism of decaying modernism, cherry-picking their ways through the closed Bible to stitch together usable facts with which to take sides rather than make sides in the identity wars of contemporary culture.

Central for Scriptural holiness is the scandalous particularity of the crucified Jew Jesus, who was made to be ugly as sin under the dreadful curse for the sake of the saving deed of God. By His resurrection from the pollution of death, the correspondingly scandalous justification of the ungodly is proclaimed to those who put away idols to put their trust in this risen Jesus. This complex event of the Holy Spirit spiritually effecting the cross and resurrection of Jesus in believers is nothing other than the true holiness of the life-giving Spirit of Jesus and His Father who for this cause inspired, elected, collected, and united prophetic and apostolic writings around this saving deed, the Spirit who as well continually provides for proper interpretation in the linguistic matrix of Christian faith. If we neglect this work of the Spirit, the Bible undoubtedly falls into the hands of impenitent, unforgiven, and unforgiving sinners to be used for unholy self-justification and scapegoating, making the Bible doubly unholy precisely by “burying Christ” contrary to the Spirit’s purpose. In the hands of the sanctifying Spirit, though, the Bible gets deployed to articulate the risen Christ bringing divine justification of the ungodly, the dethronement of satanic tyrannies and formation in discipleship. In order for the Bible to be the holy matrix of faith, this crucial differentiation must be observed. The letters of Scripture can be read either according to the Spirit who raised crucified Jesus from the dead or spiritlessly according to the letter in many different ways. So Paul, Augustine, and Luther insisted. Ironically, then, contemporary critics of the Bible’s alleged holiness are right, although they do not understand why—the letter *in fact* kills. The Spirit *actually* gives life, above all to these letters!

### The Letter Must Also Be Known

Attack on the holiness of the Bible forms a contemporary battle line that supersedes while still presupposing the previous attack on the Bible’s credibility that came from *untheological* historical criticism. The same difficulty emerges when defenders of the Bible’s historicity give its critics further ammunition with which to attack. Basically, historical criticism proposed to illuminate and also critique the literary representations of biblical narrative by reconstructing the history of what actually happened. Supplied with this reconstruction, one could deconstruct biblical representations and reveal ideological motivations. Such criticism of Scripture by historical reconstruction is how theology experienced the rise of the sciences within its own domain.

We see today after several centuries, however, that the grand ambition of historical criticism has come to a dead-end because, given the nature of the sources, the reconstruction of what really happened lies beyond scholarly grasp. Still, the destabilization of the doctrine of inerrancy in the process elicited witless defenses of the Bible in arguments on exactly the same lines that one could demonstrate with historical evidence sufficiently to lend credence to the biblical narratives. “Evidence that demands a verdict” apologetics provided an endless supply for mockery: remnants of Noah’s Ark or the Tower of Babel, sea monsters that could have swallowed and regurgitated Jonah, astronomic singularities that could account for Joshua’s sun standing still or the star of Bethlehem, and young Earth theories of God planting dinosaur fossils in the earth to try the faith the Bible believers. All of this amounts to so much bad faith distraction because biblical history is not about history in any modern sense but about the knowledge of God in humanity’s history with God. Anyone who is rigorously concerned with what the text says sees this focus of the literature.

When I researched the biblical Book of Joshua in preparation for writing my Brazos theological commentary, I quite deliberately chose to study a variety of scholars spanning the usual spectrum. What I was quite surprised by, however, is how many of the so-called “conservative” biblical scholars freely employed not only the results of historical criticism but, within their theological limits or commitments, the method itself. This is because in spite of the method’s classical conceit that the history of “what really happened” can be so securely reconstructed and then deployed to criticize the biblical narrative, the very critical questioning of the text by the “philological and historical” inquiry opened up to understanding much of what was actually going on in the many genres of the Bible.

For instance, the Book of Joshua, which is seemingly a “genocidal” narrative of the extermination of the Canaanites by divine command, actually narrates the failure of *herem* warfare to accomplish the extermination of the Canaanites and instead highlights the paradoxical inclusion of Canaanites, paradigmatically the *prostitute* Rahab who confessed YHWH who fights for us, a confession noticeably superior to that of the Israelite spies whom she concealed and saved. Rather than nervously looking for archaeological evidence of the collapsed walls of Jericho or the slaughtered remnants of the Canaanites, attention is redirected instead to the biblical author’s sober realization that Israel under the subsequent monarchies had re-duplicated the very system of malice and injustice that prevailed in the Canaanite city states in cahoots with Imperial Egypt which Joshua was commissioned to replace with a covenant federation of the chosen people under the kingship of YHWH. The gospel message of the book—“Fear not. It is the Lord who fights for you!”—certainly makes a cognitive claim both historically and theologically by referring to the historical fact of Israel’s pre-monarchal occupation of Canaan, even if the varying representations of this serve the predominantly theological claim with a characteristic twist: the free God who fights for you as His chosen can also fight against you if you defect from his covenant purposes. That very twist was employed

by canonical Joshua to interpret Israel's history under judgment, thus leading to the present plight of the postexilic community now made into "slaves in our own land," as Ezra bitterly lamented.

### Bible's Best Defense? The Resurrection Gospel Offense!

What holds theological primacy, and thus theologically determines our reading of Scripture, is the proclaimed gospel of the resurrection of the crucified Jesus, powerfully revealing Him as the true Son of his Abba Father, the God of Israel, hence making him both Lord and Christ. In its rudiments, this is the basic language of faith, the content of which is discovered in studying the Scriptures that speak of Him. In just this faith, we come to read the Scriptures for instruction in true holiness by the sanctifying Spirit of Jesus and His Father, the very One who inspired, gathered, preserved, and united the prophetic and apostolic witnesses as the church's primary rule of faith. Accordingly, the criterion of New Testament canonicity was not, as often suggested in modern scholarship, either real or presumed "historicity," i.e. closeness to the historical apostles, just as historicity had not been the criterion of selection for the Hebrew Scriptures inherited by Jesus and the apostles. Rather, both the Shema in Israel and the baptismal rule of faith in the church provided the measuring stick by which the early communities of faith recognized which writings were authoritative, just as Luther intuited centuries later that what is apostolic is what compels Christ as saving Lord. Thus, the hermeneutical primacy of the proclaimed gospel is acknowledged as the "canon" (Greek: "rule") by which literature was canonized as Holy Scripture.

Opened up this way to attack unholy sanctimony by unveiling the true sanctification of Luther's "real, not fictitious" sinners by the election of the sanctifying Spirit to justifying faith in the risen Christ, the Bible becomes contemporary to believers of every time and place, providing the master narrative of human history with God and the language with which faith becomes articulate in the contested and groaning creation, readied for apocalyptic combat against sin, death, and the power of the devil. The Bible delivers the terms, the exclusive particles, and the purpose clauses with which to differentiate the juridical action of God in the law to reveal sin and execute judgment from the electing, rectifying, and sanctifying work of the promising God to give righteousness, life, and peace in the gospel proclamation. Enlightened by the Spirit in this way, we are keen to identify and repudiate unholy, human-all-too-human uses of the Bible to shame, humiliate, exclude, even exterminate others "not of our fold." Taught by the Spirit in the school of the Bible, however, we grow into the Spirit's work of uniting contrite sinners to the true and just judgment of the cross for the sake their vindication, exaltation, and inclusion in union with Christ to true and eternal life.

The best defense of the Bible is a good offense! We read the Bible in the conviction of Spirit-gifted faith that Christ is risen for us as for all sinners in the sight of

God. In this Easter light, we read the Bible rightly and use it for the holy purposes of consolation and new life. If we must, we rebuke unholy abuse of the Bible as a human weapon deployed against fellows rather than the Spirit's weapon against the "father of lies." Likewise, we commit the holy rebuke of sin to the only One competent to issue it, the sanctifying Spirit who instructs the world concerning sin, righteousness, and judgment. We are to know as martyr-witnesses that defensiveness betrays little faith. We do not get trapped, therefore, into defending the Bible on the basis of alien frameworks of supposed perfection or holiness, other than ad hoc public interventions to correct egregious and malicious falsehoods. Rather, the Scriptures are to be used to equip the people of God for living faith, articulate hope, and winsome love. —PRH

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