
Christ the Only Savior of Interpretation

—
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The *Westminster Theological Journal* has long provided a platform for creatively investigating implications of Reformed theology. In this article, I endeavor to continue the tradition by sketching some implications of Reformed soteriology for biblical hermeneutics.

Since human interpretation is corrupted by sin, it no less than other human activities stands in need of redemption. Interpretive sins no less than other sins can find a remedy only in the sacrifice of Christ (Acts 4:12). Hence we must affirm that Christ is the Savior of interpretation. We acknowledge this truth indirectly whenever we speak of the indispensable work of the Holy Spirit in illumining to us the message of Scripture (1 Cor 2:14-16). Yet this work of the Holy Spirit can never be independent of the work of Christ in dying and rising in order to save us. Hence it is worthwhile to make explicit ways in which Christ redeems our human interpretation, as one aspect of his redemption of the total creation (Rom 8:18-27; Col 1:20).¹⁽¹⁾

We are accustomed to thinking of biblical interpretation as Christocentric. Biblical theologians correctly observe that the NT use of the OT is consistently Christ-centered in character (note Luke 24:25-27,44-49). “No matter how many promises God has made, they are ‘Yes’ in Christ” (2 Cor 1:20). Certainly this conviction should affect our hermeneutical procedure: we ought to come to any particular passage of the Bible asking

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the question of how the passage speaks about Christ. In a real sense, Christ is the central content of the Bible’s message.

But Christ is the center of interpretation in at least two more senses besides this familiar one. First, he is the Lord of interpretation. As the omnipotent God and the eternal Word he is not only the author and speaker of Scripture, but also the creator, the providential ruler, and the standard for every step in every person’s interaction with the Bible.²⁽²⁾

Second, Christ is our redeemer with respect to interpretive sinfulness. He is the substitute, sin-bearer, and purifier for our interpretive rebellion. On this second point I propose to concentrate. For convenience, I will employ the categories and perspectives developed in my earlier article on God’s Lordship.³⁽³⁾

1. Christ as Savior in relation to divine authority, control, and presence

All human interpretation takes place in subjection to God's authority, control, and presence. But sin perverts interpretation because sinners hate this subjection to God. Our sin corrupts our relationship to God and thereby calls forth God's judgement. We remain under God's authority (Deut 32:39), but in sin we seek to set up our own rival, counterfeit authorities. We remain under God's control (Prov 21:1), but in sin we seek to have exhaustive control of ourselves. We remain under the scrutiny of God's presence (Ps 51:4; 139:7-13), but in sin we seek to hide ourselves from him. Hence God's authority impinges on us as judicial condemnation; God's control operates on us to punish and destroy us; God's presence in blessing is withdrawn, and he is present in cursing as an enemy to war against us and terrify us (e.g., Deut 28:15-68).

Christ saves us from our desperate lostness. He is the eternal God who has God's own authority, control, and presence to save us. He becomes man, subjecting himself to our misery, and takes away our lostness by bearing it himself on the cross. We can explain Christ's work in terms of reconciliation to

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God's authority, control, and presence. Christ reconciles God's authority to us by bearing judicial condemnation. By his vindication in the resurrection we receive God's authoritative pronouncement that we are justified.

Next, Christ reconciles God's control to us by utterly submitting to God, dying in weakness and desolation. Therefore we are not destroyed but made alive by God's power at work in Christ's resurrection.

Finally, Christ reconciles God's presence to us by being alienated from God's presence, forsaken by God (Matt 27:46). Through Christ's resurrection and ascension we ascend to the heavenly places with him (Eph 2:6).

In sum, in the cross and the resurrection Christ definitively reasserts God's authority, control, and presence over a fallen world. He asserts God's utter goodness by blessing and saving in the midst of the wickedness of the people who crucify him. He asserts God's utter control over evil by fulfilling the prophecies of the OT. In addition, his own predictions are fulfilled in the very midst of the worst crime of human history (Acts 2:23; 4:26-28). He asserts God's assured presence to the end of time by manifesting his glory to the world in the resurrection, the foundational act that has power to fill the world with God's glory.

Hence Christ's life, death, and resurrection bear directly on every human act of interpretation. First, every step and every act of interpretation takes place in the context of standards, whose ultimate reference point is divine authority. Only through the effect of Christ's

work do we receive approval from his standards. Second, every act of interpretation takes place under the control of God. And only through the effect of Christ's work does God's control renew us rather than destroy us. Moreover, only through Christ do we subjectively cease to have the sinful impulses to replace God's authority with our counterfeits, to throw over the bonds of God's control, and to hide from God's presence. Third, every act of interpretation takes place before the presence of God. Only through the effect of Christ's work does God become our friend, and the blessed intimacy of his presence is reestablished.

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These conclusions about the implications of Christ's work apply preeminently in the case of interpretation of the Bible. When we are interpreting the Bible, we are interpreting God's own speech to us, so that the influence of our sin is most prominent. Hence only through Christ can we come to interpret the Bible rightly. But the implications also hold in the case of interpretation of all human communication. Human communication derives from people who are made in God's image. As God's image, human authors have limited but real authority, control, and presence. Hence we are able to say analogous things concerning divine and human communication. Moreover, love of God and love of neighbor go together. Hatred of God is the ultimate source of all human enmity. Sin will therefore affect interpretation of human writings in a manner analogous to the effect on divine writing in the Bible.⁴⁽⁴⁾

To many people these claims must seem unbelievable. Surely the situation is not that bad, they say. We have only to look around us. Many non-Christians achieve creditable and valuable interpretations of human writings and of the Bible as well. To this complacency there are several replies.

First, the subtlety of a sin does not imply its triviality. Some of the worst sins—hypocrisy, for example—are the most subtle. What to the human eye may seem like a tiny, almost undetectable deviation from ethical perfection may be a symptom of raging wickedness in the heart (see Matt 5:21-42).

Second, no sinner, however violent and fanatical, escapes God (Ps 139:7-12; Heb 4:12-13; Acts 17:28). The inescapable knowledge of God (Rom 1:20) causes people in spite of themselves to acknowledge truth—sometimes a truth that a Christian has overlooked and can profit from.

Third, the sacrifice of Christ causes benefits to flow even to those who are not saved. The Bible nowhere speaks directly of these broader benefits, but we can produce an indirect argument. The promise made to Noah concerning the preservation of the world is a response to Noah's sacrificial offering (Gen 8:20-22). The sacrificial offering can have no ultimate

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value before God unless it faintly points forward to the efficacious sacrifice of Christ. Moreover, the preservation of the world in a broad sense involves the good gifts that God gives to unbelievers such as in Acts 14:17. Hence all good things that unbelievers temporarily enjoy in this life flow from the goodness of God in Christ. We could also argue simply from general principle. When God restrains his judgement against those who deserve it (Luke 13:1-5), it must be because he has found a way to be merciful for a time, and that mercy can harmonize with perfect holiness only because of Christ's suffering. From these arguments we conclude that we owe the achievements of unbelieving interpretation to the broader implications of the work of Christ.⁵⁽⁵⁾

Fourth, no one can fully assess how much the practice of interpretation in the Western world is still living on "borrowed capital" from the Christian world view of its past. What may happen once this capital is consumed? From where will the culture obtain standards for interpretation? Though a few voices of warning and despair are raised, most secularists do not realize the abyss of interpretive arbitrariness and demonic deception into which they may gradually slip. If one looks at consumerist propaganda, Nazi propaganda, and Communist propaganda, one gets some foretaste. But abysses of Hinduism, sadism, occultism, Satanism, and animism lurk beyond.

The exalted character of human beings as the image of God becomes their terrible curse when they apostasize. In a horrible way they do become like God, knowing good and evil (Gen 3:22). That is, human beings who are sinners continue to image God, but now in a horrible way. They pretend to determine good and evil by their own standards, just as God determines good and evil by the standards of his own divine being. Moreover, human beings exercise a dominion that is an image of God's dominion. In this dominion their own idolatrous determination rules themselves and all their works. Once they repudiate God, they have no anchorage except in

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the overwhelming judgement of God making them slaves to Satan (1 John 5:19). They are capable of indefinite degeneration and destruction, limited by the bounds of hell. We do not dream of what is possible for human perversity to do in interpretation.

2. Christ as Savior of the self, the law, and the world

Now let us consider how Christ accomplishes the salvation of various aspects of interpretation. Every act of interpretation is simultaneously interpretation of oneself, interpretation of the law or standard, and interpretation of the world.⁶⁽⁶⁾

It is easy to see how Christ is the Savior of the self. Christ provides the forgiveness of our sins and the Father translates us from the kingdom of Satan into Christ's kingdom (Col 1:13). We

are renewed in the image of Christ and made sons of God (Rom 8:29; Gal 4:5). All interpretation is in a sense necessarily interpretation of one's own thoughts and impressions. How is this interpretation changed by Christ? Having died and risen with Christ, we are new people whose own thoughts and impressions have been subject to death and resurrection. They are the same yet not the same, for they have been judged, what is sinful has been crucified (Gal 5:24), and they have undergone renewal by the resurrection power of Christ.

Christ is also the Savior of the law. First of all we may speak of the law in an objective sense, that is, the standard of God governing our activity of interpretation. Christ comes into the world as the truth, as the very embodiment of God's standard. But people reject this truth. The truth of God is crucified. Christ's crucifixion is thus the archetypical accomplishment of that crucifixion of God's truth to which we all incline in our sin. But then Christ is raised. Thus the truth of God is vindicated and established. Christ releases us from condemnation for having crucified God's truth in our previous interpretation (justification). Christ also bring us into real (though imperfect) conformity with God's standard (sanctification).

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We begin to conform our interpretive acts to God's norms instead of violating them.

Second, we may consider the law from the point of view of what the interpreter actually knows. Interpreters in fellowship with Christ come to know Christ's purity, and hence have a renewed knowledge of the purity required of them in interpretation. Knowing Christ the truth, they are open to the knowledge of the subordinate truths of the text. Through the power of Christ's death they daily die to self, repudiating sinful desires for perverse substitutes for God's law. Through the power of Christ's resurrection they daily come alive to God in celebrating the wisdom of God's law.

Next, Christ is the Savior of the world. Sinners desire to be like God, and this desire inclines them to sovereignly dictate the facts, including the facts that confront us in interpretation. Christ in submitting himself to the facts of his earthly existence accomplishes the healing of our desires to set aside the facts. Moreover, as we have observed, the broader benefits of Christ's sacrifice include the preservation of the world and the giving of gifts even to unbelievers. We are provided with the resources of textual copying, lexicons, and historical information through the benefits of Christ.

In the previous article on Lordship I argued that non-Christian interpretation tends to create idols and thereby produce tensions between law, world, and self.⁷⁽⁷⁾ Rationalism, empiricism, and subjectivism in interpretation arise from an idolatrous absolutization of law, world, and self, respectively. Against this background, we can simply say that Christ came to save

us from these idolatries. Let us make explicit the meaning of his salvation.

Christ was crucified because of the Pharisees' idolization of law, their human standard of tradition. But by his death the power of idolized law was broken, and even what was temporary in character in the Mosaic law was abolished (Eph 2:15). The law henceforth must always be the "law of Christ" (1 Cor 9:21). Even in the OT the law was never a rationalized abstraction. But since the resurrection and ascension of Christ his law and standard is inseparable from the personal presence

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of Christ and the historical facts of his incarnation and life in the world.

Christ was crucified because of the empiricist pragmatism at work in Pilate's concern to keep intact Roman peace and order and his own position (Luke 23:1-25). But now we must live in the light of the supremely empirical facts of the crucifixion and the resurrection of Christ. These are not bare facts or neutral facts, but facts inseparable from the plan of God and the abiding presence of the crucified and resurrected Christ who now rules over all the empirical kingdoms of the world. Moreover, a thoroughgoing attention to facts includes attention to the fact of the certainty of coming judgement of Christ. Only what is done in service to Christ will stand the "pragmatic" test of judgement by fire.

Christ was crucified because of the subjective emotivism of the crowds who were stirred up to demand his crucifixion and the release of Barabbas. As a result, Christ demonstrated on the cross the supreme subjective depth of his love for us. His love is not mere unbridled subjectivity, but obedience to the Father and to his plan. As the risen one Christ pours out his love and demands of us a love that is not a contentless gush of woozy feeling, but obedience to his law, his commandments, and his person (John 14:15-24).

All non-Christian accounts of hermeneutics necessarily fail at this point. In failing to acknowledge God as the source of law, world, and self, they open themselves to idolatry and so contribute to the deepest hermeneutical difficulties and alienations rather than solving them. Non-Christians examining hermeneutics may be admirably sensitive to human weakness and perversion in many respects. Frequently, it seems, they have achieved much greater intellectual penetration than Christians. But by refusing to call human corruption sin, they obscure its roots. In addition, they are blind to the only remedy. Growth in autonomous hermeneutical self-consciousness and sophistication never reveals the radical character of sin or its remedy, but only spreads the cancer of sinful pride. Human beings who have made themselves like gods (Gen 3:22) cannot rectify their mistake, because their gods control their interpretation. Only the foolishness of the cross can save.

3. Christ as Savior of meaning, personal fellowship, and worldly application

The word of God in Scripture expresses propositional meaning, confronts us with the presence of the person of God himself, and exercises control over us and over the world. In fact, these three functions of Scripture each characterize the whole of Scripture: they are perspectives on one another. But they become a curse to us rather than a blessing apart from the work of Christ.

First, the propositional meaning of Scripture is a witness against us (Deut 31:26-29). Its truthfulness witnesses to our untruth, its statements of fact witness against our denial or contradiction of facts, its pure ethics witnesses against our failures and compromises. We do not wish to come to the light, lest our deeds should be exposed (John 3:19-20). In conformity with the intrinsically fissiparous character of evil, rebellion against truth takes many forms. Some of us may hypocritically acknowledge the truth in the hope that we will conceal our lack of obedience and conformity. Others may try to destroy meaning altogether. And truly there is no meaning apart from God's creation, or apart from his wisdom and plan that has decreed each fact and assigned to each thing its role. Hence modern people feel the malaise of what seems to be a meaningless world, a meaningless self, and empty or meaningless standards. Christ came as the truth to save us from our propensity to untruth. He came as the way and the life to save us from our meaninglessness and evaporating morals. He was crucified and so underwent an "absurd" destruction. He descended into the meaninglessness of the absence of the Father. We too will descend into the meaninglessness of hell, or else find our meaning in the life of another, in the resurrection life of Christ's reign.

In the beginning Adam and Eve found meaning in all the world through their fellowship with God. All the world contained facts ordained by God for their blessing. They had no need of reconciliation from sin. But now, when we are sinners, we will not find the secret of any meaning at all in the world except if our hatred of the glory of God is removed through Christ's substitution.

Next, the word of God confronts us with God's presence, the presence of personal fellowship. But we can never experience his presence in neutral fashion. We are either a friend of God or an enemy. We are made uncomfortable and we grow in hatred, or we are made admirers and we grow in love. God came to earth and become supremely present to us in Jesus Christ. In Christ's crucifixion the world expressed its hatred of God's presence and declared its enmity. Echoing this supreme hatred, unbelievers in interpreting Scripture react in fundamentally the same way. But Christ's crucifixion also means the salvation of the world. Christ overcomes enmity with

God and establishes friendship, because he has borne God's enmity and wrath on the cross. He has suffered God's abandonment and hatred (Matt 27:46), in order that in Christ we might be indwelt by the Father and the Son.

These facts apply to the interpretation of Scripture. Christ by the power of his death takes on himself the enmity of God, and opens the way for God to come to us as we interpret Scripture as our divine lover and friend. Christ by the power of his resurrection brings us into heaven as we interpret Scripture, and we meet God in person without dying.

Next, the word of God controls us. God's word hardens us, darkens us, and announces our death when we hear in unbelief (Isa 6:9-10; Mark 4:11-12; 2 Cor 2:15-16). By God's prophetic word Christ was put to death, and the world became dark (Luke 23:44), in order that through Christ's resurrection the message of the gospel might come as a power of life (2 Cor 2:5-6; 4:6). When we are united to Christ, we experience the word of God as gospel, as saving life, because Christ's own resurrection life is not only announced but imparted (John 15:7-8, 10).

4. Christ as Savior of author, discourse, and audience

To interpret responsibly, we must pay attention to author, discourse, and audience. That is, we must attend to the particularities of the discourse we are interpreting, we must bear in mind that the discourse expresses the intention of a particular author, and we must bear in mind that the author intended to address a particular audience in a particular sit-

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uation to persuade, motivate, or command them. The same sequence of words can mean different things if used by a different author in a different situation.

Christ comes as the light of the world to restore and renew our interpretation of authors, discourses, and audiences. Though all these areas are linked, let us consider each separately.

First, Christ is the Savior of our interpretation of authors. His saving power preeminently affects our knowledge of God, the divine author of Scripture and the source of all general revelation. Only through Christ is our knowledge of God renewed. "No one knows who the Son is except the Father, and no one knows who the Father is except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him" (Luke 10:21). Our knowledge comes supremely through Christ's death and resurrection. "When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know who I am and that I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me" (John 8:28). Since all interpretation must continually adjust itself to what an author is likely to have meant, all interpretation of the Bible, and subordinately all interpretation of general revelation, must adjust itself in the light of the Son's revelation of the Father on the cross. In the light of the cross and the resurrection we understand the seriousness of God's assertions of his justice, his holiness, his

power, his mercy, and his love. Thus, only through the cross do we really understand what Scripture says as the speech of this God who has revealed himself in Christ.

Christ also renews our knowledge of human authors, including not only the human authors of the books of the Bible but authors of uninspired writings. To see how, we must first appreciate some of the difficulties. All interpretation of authors presupposes a knowledge of human nature. We must know something about the similarity of other human beings to ourselves, in order to have confidence that they are talking about experiences and insights in terms with which we are familiar. We must share at some level common institutions of marriage, family, work, and religious cult, a sense of right and wrong, of justice and injustice. But we must also be aware of the possibility of deep differences between different human

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beings, lest we simply project our own ideas onto another person. We must know something of differences among male and female, young and old, wise and foolish, worshipers of Yahweh or of Krishna or of Mammon, participants in an industrial technological culture, a nomadic culture, an agricultural tribal culture, or an ancient city culture. We must know what human beings are like in their depths. But how do we obtain knowledge of human nature? Are its depths to be revealed by psychoanalysis, or existentialism, or biblical teaching about the creation and fall? How do we know what is possible here, when people do not necessarily know themselves? How do we make judgements about human intention, if such intention includes not only the differences of human beings but the depths of the unconscious?

We may naively suppose that there is agreement among thinking people about these matters. But why should we ignore the controversies in philosophical hermeneutics that touch on the nature of human beings? Why should we ignore the kind of perversion of understanding human nature that arises in behaviorism, or in Communism, or in Hitler, or in Marquis de Sade, or in the Pharaoh who opposed Moses? People with ideologies like these interpret virtually all human communication in a manner globally different from what we approve. Who is to say what human nature is?

People who no longer acknowledge their creatureliness and who bury their sin are self-deceived and perverted in knowledge of human nature. They cannot rescue themselves, neither can they even define themselves or find the meaning of humanity. There is no way back to unfallen Adam. Even the Bible gives us only a small amount of information about Adam. We can renew our knowledge of human nature only by anchoring ourselves in what human nature will be, through the man Jesus Christ. As perfect man, his knowledge of himself and of human nature is unperverted. Through him we see that now, after the fall, our purpose as human beings is to serve God through the renewal that comes from his death and resurrection. The destiny of human nature is to worship God in being conformed to the image of his Son (Rom 8:29). Such worship

reaches a climax when we receive a body in the likeness of the man from heaven (1 Cor 15:49).
Only in union

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with Christ's death and resurrection do we any longer understand what human beings are. The implicit intention of every Christian author must be to promote the reflection of the glory of Christ in us. The implicit intention of every non-Christian author must be to suppress the light (John 3:19-20). Thus, only through Christ can we understand authorial intention.

Second, Christ IS the Savior of our interpretation of discourses. Self centeredness tempts us to overwhelm texts and read into them what we want, rather than respect their objective factuality. We make a god of our own desires. Even the ancient textual copyists were tempted by their own desires to "improve" on the text. This impulse needs redemption through crucifixion of the flesh (Gal 5:24). In addition, as I have already argued, the whole idea of meaningfulness presupposes a context of God-given order, including the orderly structure of human language. Some instances of modern deconstructionist interpretation make it plain that stable meaning can disappear when the presence of God is denied.

How, then, do we find a remedy for the abuses of human language and discourse? Such abuse is remedied by the abuse that was suffered by Christ the Word. From the beginning to the end of his life he was misunderstood (John 1:10-11; 3:4; 4:11; 6:52, 66; 12:37-40; Matt 27:47). The destructive power of human language was typified in the accusations and taunts about the "King of the Jews" during Jesus' crucifixion. Such destructive power is remedied in part by the fact that the gospel records place those taunts in the new narrative context of the resurrection, in which they speak better than they knew. The gospel records cause even those words to serve the purposes of God.

Third, Christ is the Savior of our interpretation of audiences and their situations. As we have observed, our interpretation is influenced by our understanding of the intended audience and their situation. As before, interpretation of the audience presupposes knowledge of human nature. But now the most prominent issues concern the profitability of discourses and the responsibilities of audiences. Our evaluations must be based on the standards of God and God's goal for human

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existence. Christ as the man from heaven is both our standard and our goal

Not only the persons of the audience, but the situation of the audience, and what the audience is to do with the situation, depend on knowledge imparted through Christ. We must know what is the proper goal for the situation. Our interpretation thus depends on our vision of the new Jerusalem as the final situation, and the light of the Lamb as the defining component of

that situation (Rev 21:22-23).⁸⁽⁸⁾

5. Christ as Savior of the dynamics of interpretation

Let us see how the framework developed above can explicate the process of interpretation in a particular case. Let us suppose that Sally (a Christian) is studying Ps 23:1., “The LORD is my shepherd.” Sally grows in understanding of the content of the passage by integrating it with the surrounding literary context and the context of general revelational facts about shepherds and sheep. In doing so, Sally overcomes not only ignorance characterizing all finite creatures, but sinfulness resisting facts. Sally may have sinful pride that causes her to think that there is nothing to be learned about shepherds or sheep, or that there is nothing to be learned about a passage like this one that is already familiar, or that there is nothing to be learned from a passage from the “inferior” revelation of the OT. She may have a distorted otherworldliness that makes her think that shepherds and sheep are not worthy of attention, or that makes her think that it is not worthwhile asking about the applications of this passage to mundane affairs like her use of money and her attitude toward her work. God overcomes the sinfulness of her pride by the humiliation of Christ in his death, and overcomes her false form of otherworldliness by the worldliness of Christ’s death and the tangibility of his resurrection body

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We may also view the same process as a process of understanding God. Through Christ’s salvation Sally grows in understanding the God who speaks Ps 23: 1a. Suppose that previously Sally had thought of God only as a teacher, or only as a helper in immediate difficulty. These inadequate thoughts had caused a truncated interpretation of the implications of Ps 23:1a. The effect sprang partly from sinful blindness that caused her to retreat from the full-orbed impact of God’s fellowship. As Sally reads, Christ overcomes her misconceptions by removal of fear and retreat, because he himself suffered ultimate “retreat” from God in his death.

Next, the same process is a process in which Sally grows in understanding herself. Through sinfulness she has resisted the humiliation involved in being compared to sheep, or resisted the truth about the incompetence of sheep to look after themselves. She has desired to be autonomous and so resisted the implications about comfort, guidance, and nourishment in the psalm. Christ gives her true self-knowledge because in the cross he shows the deep dimensions of Sally’s sin and in the resurrection he gives her the confidence to look at her sin without shrinking, because of the promise of new life. And so Sally puts to death her former resistance.

Much of this process may take place without Sally consciously being aware of all the ways in which the work of Christ is implicated in her growth. But Sally’s subjective consciousness is not the only measure of what is going on. In view of God’s holiness, the seriousness of God’s

curse on sin, and the frightfulness of God's giving people over to evil (Rom 1:18-32), we know that Christ's work must be the objective basis by which Sally overcomes sin at any point in her life. It is so even when Sally is not self-consciously aware that she is overcoming sin, much less self-consciously aware of how and why she does so.

6. Christ as Savior of the hermeneutical circle

As I observed in my earlier article, Sally's growth in understanding involves several instances of hermeneutical circles.⁹⁽⁹⁾ Her understanding of any one passage (Ps 23:1a) is

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affected by the surrounding passages (Psalm 23 as a whole; the Book of Psalms; the Bible as a whole); her understanding of God is affected by her previous understanding of God; her understanding of herself is affected by her previous understanding of herself; and all these influence one another. We who are analyzing Sally are ourselves like her. Our self-conscious hermeneutical reflection is still one more circular influence. Hence our sinfulness in each aspect also contributes to the continuation of sinfulness in all the aspects. The radical nature of human depravity means that sin contaminates every aspect of human life. The hermeneutical circle simply traces ways in which such contamination operates.

In this situation, hermeneutical self-consciousness can be an instrument that we use to discover, criticize, and root out sin. But it can be so only if our own self-consciousness is purified by the work of Christ. In other words, our hermeneutical reflection must itself be an instance of "working out our own salvation in fear and trembling, because God is at work in us both to will and to act according to his good purpose" (Phil 2:12-13). On the other hand, hermeneutical self-consciousness can easily become a way of saving ourselves instead of believing in God's salvation. Then it becomes a curse. From this curse as well Christ came to save us. Christ in his death suffered the destruction of his own understanding (Matt 27:46) in order that in his resurrection he might communicate to us perfect wisdom (Luke 24:45). Christ's cry of dereliction in Matt 27:46 is so deep that it is not exhaustively analyzable. But we can say that Christ's suffering included great intellectual and emotional distress, not merely physical pain. As a man he ceased to understand himself, because in his intellectual agony he did not comprehensively understand the action of God toward him. By contrast, in his resurrection he perfectly understands himself, because out the fullness of Messianic accomplishment and wisdom he communicates what all the Scriptures say about him (Luke 24:44-45). Christ undergoes, as it were, a hermeneutical death and resurrection with respect to his understanding of himself and the OT, in order that we may be saved from our hermeneutical sin

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7. Conclusion

The fundamental implication of these reflections is similar to that of my earlier reflections on God's Lordship in interpretation. Just as there is no metaphysical interpretive standpoint free of the Lordship of God, and just as no moment in interpretation escapes his exhaustive mastery, so no human standpoint is free of the conflict of sin and redemption, and no moment in interpretation escapes the penetrating influence of our relation to Christ's life, death, and resurrection. There is no neutrality. There is no "objectivity" even, in the sense of which Enlightenment rationalism dreams. The only ultimate objectivity is also an exhaustively personal subjectivity, namely the eternal objective fact of intra-Trinitari In communion in truth, power, and personal fellowship. The only finite replicas of such objectivity are never to be found in the realm of the lie (John 8:44), but in the freedom of the sons of God. As we are subjectively indwelt by the Spirit of truth, we bow before God's majestic wisdom and drink our fill of the water of life flowing from the throne of the Lamb. Only through this deeply subjective experience do we have unfettered access to objective truth. All interpretation present and future is controlled by these realities.

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Endnotes

1 (Popup - Popup)

¹ I assume that the Bible consistently teaches not universal salvation by salvation of the cosmos—that is, a total world-system and a renewed human race united in Jesus Christ. This salvation includes the aspect of purification that takes place when God finally and eternally cuts off unclean individuals (Rev 21:8, 27; 2 Thess 1:8-10). See Benjamin B. Warfield, “God’s Immeasurable Love,” in *The Saviour of the World* (reprint; Cherry Hill, NJ: Mack, 1972) 69-87.

2 (Popup - Popup)

² I have explored some implications of this Lordship in an earlier article, Vern Sheridan Poythress, “God’s Lordship in Interpretation,” WTJ 50 (1988) 27-64.

3 (Popup - Popup)

³ Ibid.

4 (Popup - Popup)

⁴ In terms of older categories of systematic theology, I am simply reasserting the doctrine of total (radical) depravity.

5 (Popup - Popup)

⁵ Here I am simply applying the Reformed doctrine of common grace to the question of human interpretation. See, for example, the penetrating discussion of Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1955) 155-78; id., *Common Grace* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1947).

6 (Popup - Popup)

⁶ See Poythress, “God’s Lordship in Interpretation,” 34-39.

7 (Popup - Popup)

⁷ Ibid., 37-39.

8 (Popup - Popup)

⁸ From within the liberal/modernist tradition, the emphasis on the importance of history and its goal is especially prominent in the writings of Pannenberg. See, e.g., Wolfhart Pannenberg,

Theology and the Kingdom of God (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969); id., *Human Nature, Election, and History* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977); id., *Basic Questions in Theology* (3 vols Philadelphia: SCM, 1970-73).

9 (Popup - Popup)

⁹ Poythress, "God's Lordship in Interpretation," 54-63.