

Poaching on Zion: Biblical Theology as Signifying Practice

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I must begin this lecture by offering a small handbasket overflowing with thanksgivings: to my children and parents, who have accommodated my busyness and abstractedness over many years; to friends, who have put up with my limitations and opened for me a path toward greater wisdom; to my students, who teach me more every time I *dare* stand up before them; to the schools and foundations that have supported and encouraged my studies; to Margaret, in every way my better half; and this afternoon, particularly, the congregations in which it has been my privilege to serve. All of you have played a decisive role in the my understanding of ministry, of biblical theology, and of how much we stand to benefit from allowing these two activities to shape one another more actively and deliberately.¹

From its beginnings, the discourse concerning biblical theology has been marked by a sense of loss, of lack: Sometimes the lack was deliberate, as when biblical theologians deliberately excluded dogmatic considerations from their interpretations of biblical texts; at other times, however, they bemoaned the lack of richness, strength, and vigor for which theologians and their readers sought, when they turned to biblical theology. Some scholars make that lament their explicit theme; others pursue their deliberations in the silent shadow of the wound of biblical theology, aiming to revive, to mend, what has been missed.

The problems that beset biblical theology are many-faceted, and only a fool would attempt to resolve all aspects of them at once. One element to these problems, however, derives from the linguistic captivity of biblical interpretation, the constricted understanding of semiotics that takes “language” as its paradigm. This narrow approach to theological meaning effects a restriction of interpretation to a model that lends itself to polemics and exclusion, to the *enclosure* of a realm of expression in which meaning’s abundance can be restricted to authorized, legitimized expressions. The reflections that follow will propose a hermeneutic that opens the Scriptures to interpretations that are not authorized in advance

¹ I owe more specific thanks also to Lynette Sweet, Laura Jackson, and Michelle Warriner-Bolt, who engaged in a seminar on Meaning and Ministry with me in the Michaelmas Term of 2004; to Laura and Micah Jackson, for help in attaining perspective on the argument at which this lecture aims; to Nathaniel Adam, for conversation about musical improvisation and textuality; and to Prof. David Aune and the Colloquium on Christian and Jewish Antiquity at the University of Notre Dame, for a generous invitation to talk through some of these issues beforehand.

– in the trust that a biblical theology that develops out of the divine abundance of semiosis² will more powerfully equip the imagination of the saints for their work of ministry, for the signifying practice of making known the good news of God’s joy and peace to all people.

The Background of Lack

The “lack” to which I allude comes to light in a variety of ways. The most explicit manifestation of “lack” comes from the titles of prominent works in the history of the field; we may take *The Strange Silence of the Bible in the Church*³ and *Biblical Theology in Crisis*⁴ as two examples of the genre, but very little effort would disclose numerous other, more recent examples of books and essays that bemoan the absence of some elusive, desired characteristic.

We should not be surprised if something seems amiss in the field of the theological interpretation of the Bible; the discourses of biblical theology emerge under vexatious circumstances. If we agree to the common judgment that Johannes Gabler founded this study as an academic endeavor – in his own inaugural lecture of 1787! – then we can detect several ominous midwives attending the discipline’s birth. Gabler proposes in the lecture’s title (“On the Proper Distinction Between Biblical and Dogmatic Theology”) that biblical theology serve as a limit and guide to systematic theology. The very opening words of Gabler’s essay invoke “the fatal discords of the various sects.”⁵ In the course of his essay, he contrasts biblical theology with the simple faith of pious people – biblical theology must be more learned, more rigorous than simple religion.⁶ He distinguishes biblical theology from spiritual interpretation, saying “let us not by applying tropes forge new dogmas about which the authors themselves never thought.”⁷ Gabler advocated a synthetic, critical approach in preference to what he took to be literalism and proof-texting.

Over the two centuries since Gabler gave formal birth to the field, “biblical theology” has stood over against a variety of alternatives: over against strictly historical analysis (as when biblical theology stands for the good, appropriately theological way of reading Scripture), over against skepticism on one hand or fundamentalism on the other. Biblical theology can stand for objective scholarship (when contrasted with “pneumatic” exegesis)

² For this essay, I should stipulate that I’m using “semiosis” and related terms to designate “meaning-making” in general, without specific allusion to the accounts of semiotics, semiology, seminalysis, and so on, that semi-oticians provide in such great quantity and detail.

³ James D. Smart, *The Strange Silence of the Bible in the Church* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962).

⁴ Brevard Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970).

⁵ “On the Proper Distinction Between Biblical and Dogmatic Theology and the Specific Objective of Each,” translated in “J. P. Gabler and the Distinction Between Biblical and Dogmatic Theology,” by John Sandys-Wunsch and Laurence Eldredge. *Scottish Journal of Theology* 33 (1980), 134.

⁶ “Proper Distinction,” Sandys-Wunsch and Eldredge, 136.

⁷ “Proper Distinction,” in Sandys-Wunsch and Eldredge, 140.

or for subjectivity (when contrasted with interpretations by theologically-disinterested scholars). Through all these transitions and conflicts, biblical theology has borne the marks of its polemical upbringing; since the Bible occupies uniquely desirable high ground in the theological battle zone, the discourses that seek to define biblical theology have continually been implicated in the very theological struggles they set out to resolve.⁸ While every discipline may be able to tell a story of its birth from the fire of controversy, biblical theology shows a particularly long-lasting inclination to enlist, or to be drafted into, ever-new struggles for interpretive authority.

As biblical theology has grown in persistent conflict, so its adherents have tended to cast their rhetoric in terms of stark alternatives, some of which have attained the status of commonplaces. We've already observed the distinctions between biblical and dogmatic theology, between theology and religion; we can likewise cite distinctions between theology and history, between historical study of the Bible and pastoral or devotional study, between church and academy, between theological interpretation of Scripture and the history of early Christian religion. This pattern of refinement, of constriction, has contributed to an interpretive ethos within which the appropriate method of reading Scripture has been enclosed in order to fend off erroneous, misguided interpreters, and to defend the correct approach to interpretation (always, of course, as we practice it) from the possibility that dangerous others might propose plausible readings of Scripture that undermine the stature of our legitimate interpretive modes.

If I were to devote more time to this element of my argument, I would explore the possibility that this flattening of discourse into polarities accelerates with the Reformation. When one may fairly expect that almost everyone's a Christian of roughly the same sort, acknowledging roughly the same structures of authority, then one will expect to see interpretive diversity concomitant with the catholicity of the church's teaching authority; once Christian bodies defined themselves in opposition to the Catholic tradition, and cited the Bible as their primary criterion for that separation, each debater needed to erect an interpretive enclosure that sequestered the Bible on their home terrain. If I am right – and I emphasize that I make no claim to having plumbed the history of ecclesiastical controversy to back up this speculation – then as Protestant, Bible-identified bodies distinguish themselves from one another as well as from the Catholic church, we might expect to find that the temperature in conflicts over biblical interpretation would also rise. As factional polemicists draft the [silent] Bible as a witness for partisan pleading, those who volunteer to tell us what the Bible really means show an increasing tendency toward minimizing the ambiguity of their evidence, toward maximizing the certainty of their conclusions. The heat of ecclesiastical battle sacrifices nuance and precision to the cause of clear, simple, undebatable interpretive axioms.

Controversy has not supplied the only force that drives biblical interpretation toward oversimplified polar extremes, however. Such forced choices correspond to the work most typically associated with biblical scholarship, namely, translation. However sophisticated one's theory of translation, however erudite one's grasp of the subtleties of Greek and

⁸ That does not differentiate the present essay from its forebears, of course.

Hebrew, Latin and Aramaic, when one prepares a translation one eventually must select a single expression in the target language to correspond to the expression in the original, ancient text.⁹ A translator does not usually enjoy the liberty to translate the preface to Luke's Gospel as,

Inasmuch as many have set their hands, really sort of “tried,” if you know what I mean, to compile, or put together, a narrative concerning the things have have taken place – really, “fulfilled” as you might say – among us, just as those who were eyewitnesses or who became ministers of the word handed them down to us, I too figured that after having followed everything precisely in order from the beginning, to write for you (most excellent Theophilus, which means “Godlover”), in order that you might learn (with overtones of “recognize”) about the things you have been instructed, the certainty – or “you might learn the secure facts about what you've been taught.” Something like that.

Instead, the translator gets one unit of translated expression for each unit of text – and may indicate a few alternative readings only in footnotes. The translator's responsibility militates against ambivalence.

The habits that derive from translation shapes the behavior of biblical interpreters, however, even when they're off translation duty. Our articles and essays promulgate the assumption that we're restricted, in our interpretive reading, to a *single best option* for apprehending any given passage from the Bible. Our exegetical arguments assert with vigor that now, at last, we've detected the decisive clue for clarifying interpretations that have eluded two thousand years of close readers. We treat the biblical texts as cryptograms with a concealed key that, once discovered, will reveal a recognizably definite correct answer beyond any shadow of disagreement. Yet disagreements remain, demonstrating by their very durability that the mirage of textual determination has again retreated beyond the grasp of its pursuers, however brilliant, however faithful.

The paradigm that identifies all the work of biblical interpretation more or less forcefully with translation exercises further power over our imaginations to the extent that we assent to the conduit metaphor for language.¹⁰ According to many figures of speech in English, words serve as vessels of meaning, containers or pipelines through which one pipes a meaning that one can distinguish from the pipe that contains it. We say, “I can't get into that book,” or “I couldn't get anything *out of it*”; we commonly define “exegesis” as “leading meaning *out of* the text” (as opposed to *eisegesis*, “reading meaning *into* the text”); we discuss interpretation as though meaning were within the words we exchange, and as

⁹ The weight of this obligation falls especially on those who translate the Bible for major authorized editions; a translator's decision at Isaiah 7:14 or Romans 3:22 stands to affect theologies, liturgies, sermons, Sunday School lessons, and academic instruction in incalculably far-reaching ways.

¹⁰ George Lakoff and Mark Johnson discuss the conduit metaphor in *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 127, 206ff.

though we arrive at a successful understanding by siphoning the meaning out from its containment in words.

The combination of the translation paradigm, the conduit metaphor, and the ethos of interpretive competitiveness bring about a sort of *enclosure* of meaning. On the accounts of meaning that prevail in biblical theology, the church should permit only expert biblical scholars determine the meaning of scriptural texts; these experts alone can correctly translate the best possible representation of the text's meaning into the language of the contemporary church. These scholars should study the text with no partiality, but if scholars communicate their interpretive conclusions in a way that doesn't evoke fervent affirmation of the gospel, then – apparently – something is lacking.

From Lack to Abundance

It's odd that anyone might perceive a lack in biblical interpretation, since the Bible must be one of the most-interpreted texts in the world. The sheer staggering plenitude of biblical interpretation may to some extent account for scholars' artificial restriction on attention-worthy interpretations: if we wall off the sorts of interpretation to which we need to pay attention, we stand a slightly better chance of managing the flow of interpretations. We can carve out a space where the rules are clearer, the price of entry higher, the permitted gestures more limited. Once we've established this manageable domain of hermeneutical tidiness, we can name it "True Biblical Theology," or "Legitimate Theological Interpretation," or what we will.

This safe zone of orderly biblical interpretation will remain, however, a fortified outpost isolated from the teeming flux of signification outside its secure walls. While cloistered biblical theologians debate the developmental pattern of the Pauline epistles (or lack thereof), emergent-church congregations gather and grow, flourish and dwindle, worship and preach and argue. Theological interpretation thrives outside the walled precincts of academic biblical theology even as biblical theologians wonder how they lost their mojo.

The "enclosed" version of biblical theology aptly illustrates Michel de Certeau's analyses of reading and meaning.¹¹ Certeau notes that intellectuals tend to establish informal regimes that regulate interpretive legitimacy; schools, public criticism, lectures such as this series, inculcate the sense that there's a right way of reading, to which the highly-trained, sensitive interpreter is privy. These interpreters commonly represent such a restrictive gesture as necessary due to the nature of the text, or the well-being of less expert readers (who might be misled without help from accredited scholars¹²).

The use made of the book by privileged readers constitutes it as a secret of which they are the "true" interpreters. It interposes a

¹¹ "Reading as Poaching," in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1984) 165-176.

¹² The staggering popular phenomenon of *The da Vinci Code* testifies to the level of success that academic interpretive authority brings to bear on egregiously misleading interpretive claims – none at all.

frontier between the text and its readers that can be crossed only if one has a passport delivered by these official interpreters, who transform their own meaning (which is also a legitimate one) into an orthodox “literality” that makes other (equally legitimate) readings either heretical (not “in conformity” with the meaning of the text) or insignificant (to be forgotten).¹³

Certeau argues that readers are not bound by the conventions that privileged interpreters impose on the text; they are more like nomads than like a lockstep military formation.¹⁴ Where biblical theologians try to seclude the meaning of Scripture in a closed field to which only the scholar has legitimate access, Certeau reminds us that the Bible remains open to *unauthorized* readers, who traverse the textual landscape as poachers, or perhaps more fittingly as *gleaners*. While the privileged interpreters fastidiously redecorate the landscaping inside their gated community, unlicensed readers of the Bible continue to discover precious meaning in the dumpsters of academic criticism.¹⁵

In order to recuperate from what ails us, biblical theologians need to recognize that our experience of lack derives to a great extent from the self-imposed constraints on our discourse. Even if those constraints now seem obvious, natural, or theologically necessary, we may find that we simply can’t have the vibrant, profoundly biblical theology for which our essays lament at the same time that we stipulate a series of exclusions, qualifications, and preconditions for our discourse. If Augustine rightly asks, “what more liberal and more fruitful provision could God have made in regard to the Sacred Scriptures than that the same words might be understood in several senses,”¹⁶ then the biblical theologian’s task must more appropriately involve learning how to flourish in that divine abundance than in devising conventions whose function is to attenuate the variety God provides for our well-being.

For these purposes, the inherited mandates of biblical theology will persistently betray us. Though scholar after scholar proposes new and improved ways of doing the same interpretive thing, we will not thereby attain different results. A theological hermeneutic that develops out of the translation model, relies on the conduit metaphor, and relegates interpretive ventures to “either/or” characterizations will not equip its advocates to deal

¹³ “Reading as Poaching,” 171.

¹⁴ A highly-organized settled social group can look on nomadic wanderers as lawless, disorderly, for disregarding the dominant group’s conventions; nonetheless, the nomadic group itself operates by a very strong array of social sanctions. These simply differ from the ones that the dominant, settled group accepts as natural and necessary for civilized life.

¹⁵ This overwrought metaphor harks back to the point ably made by Carlos Mesters in *Defenseless Flower: a New Reading of the Bible*, trans. Francis McDonagh (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1989), and advocated in James Dawsey, “The Lost Front Door Into Scripture: Carlos Mesters, Latin American Liberation Theology, and the Church Fathers.” *Anglican Theological Review* 72 (1990): 292-305.

¹⁶ *de Doctrina* 3.27.38, trans. J. F. Shaw, *NPNF II* at <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf102.html>>.

productively with semiotic abundance. A hermeneutic that respects the full catholicity of meaning needs to start by accepting abundance as a positive condition.

Coping Critically With Abundance

As the interpretive imaginations of so many readers have been formed decisively by the habits that *enclose* meaning, they recoil from the confusing prospect of semiotic abundance. Such readers adhere to this approach, which Stephen Fowl has categorized as “determinate interpretation,”¹⁷ and I as “integral hermeneutics,”¹⁸ for plausible theological and philosophical reasons. If the familiar rules do not apply, these readers wonder whether one can say that texts mean whatever one likes. They wonder what criteria one might apply if the familiar criteria no longer determine legitimacy in interpretation.

These problems derive most of their force from the sheer unfamiliarity of critical interpretation outside the precincts of the cloister. As Steve and I have argued, however, interpreters have always applied criteria for evaluating interpretations, and – contrary to parodic representations of pre-modern hermeneutics – those criteria do not simply amount to fanciful caprices.¹⁹ The rule of faith, the spiritual senses of medieval interpretation, the reader’s engagement with a network of other readers,²⁰ as well as various other aesthetic and ethical criteria, abound to ensure that interpretation doesn’t float free of its accountability to standards. Indeed, even conventional critics tacitly appeal to a tremendous array of hermeneutical norms; the risk of arbitrariness dwindles markedly once one brings to conscious awareness the range of norms against which disciplined, faithful readers may check their interpretations.

The aforementioned allegorical approach to interpretation has long suffered the primary burden of modern deprecation. According to the reformers, allegorical interpretation made of the text a wax nose, “and wrest[ed] it this way and that way.”²¹ Yet Henri de Lubac’s analysis of medieval exegesis underlines the extent to which medieval interpretation ranged far indeed from arbitrariness, and recent studies have brought to the foreground ways in which de Lubac’s account of medieval interpretation might strengthen contemporary discourses of theological interpretation. David Steinmetz has long defended

¹⁷ “Stories of Meaning,” in *Engaging Scripture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 32-61.

¹⁸ “Integral and Differential Hermeneutics,” in *The Meanings We Choose*, ed. Charles Cosgrove (pub data).

¹⁹ Frederic Farrar quotes John Milton as having said, “Whatsoever time or the heedless hand of blind chance hath drawn from of old to this present in her huge Dagnet, whether Fish or Seaweed, Shells or Shrubbs, unpicked, unchosen, those are the Fathers”; this outlook, left over from the conflict between ecclesiastical and academic authority, still prevails in many circles, though rarely expressed as deliciously. Cited in F. W. Farrar, *History of Interpretation* (London: Macmillan, 1886).

²⁰ Fowl and L. Gregory Jones expound this vital dimension of hermeneutics in *Reading in Communion*.

²¹ William Tyndale, quoted by H. C. Porter in “The Nose of Wax: Scripture and the Spirit from Erasmus to Milton,” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 14 (1964), 155.

the hermeneutical superiority of medieval exegesis to contemporary interpretation²²; Lewis Ayres has offered an extended defense of allegorical interpretation as a soteriological exercise in cultivating a transformed, purified soul²³; Margaret Adam suggests that the varied interpretive approaches of contemporary academic exegetes provide a complementary contemporary reflection of the four-fold interpretive schema of medieval interpreters²⁴; Graham Ward proposes allegoresis, spiritual reading, as a mode of critical differentiation from interpretive approaches that restrict their attention to the material world, apart from the spiritual ramifications of textual meaning.²⁵ These represent only a thin selection from a growing body of scholarship that shows how we can take allegorical interpretation seriously as a contemporary possibility for critical reading.

These, however, remain bounded by the captivity of our interpretive imagination to the representation of meaning in *words*. The world around us, however, teems with meanings expressed in non-verbal visual, auditory, gestural signs. Indeed, the more one attends to the ways we encounter and reason through meaning in non-verbal understanding, the more parochial and limited the domain of words seems. To the extent that we suggest and infer meaning in countless non-verbal modes of expression, a hermeneutics that takes verbal communication as the definitive case of evoking and apprehending meaning inappropriately generalizes from the most formalized and unusual sphere of meaning-making to the more common and less specific spheres.²⁶

(Two side notes: First, this point marks one basis for my dissent from the way theologians have appropriated speech-act theory's commendable advocacy of construing verbal and non-verbal communication together for philosophical and ethical evaluation; their version of speech-act theory still takes speech as the central focus of its analysis, tending to relegate "action" to the margin of meaningfulness. Second, the urgency of taking non-verbal meaning more seriously grows as an increasing proportion of communicators have access to increasingly refined tools for the production and transmission of audio and video expression online.²⁷)

²² "The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis," *Theology Today* 37 (1980), 27-38.

²³ "The Soul and the Reading of Scripture: De Lubac's Doctrinal Implications," paper read to the Christian Theology and the Bible Section, Society of Biblical Literature Annual Meeting, Nov. 20, 2004.

²⁴ "Beyond the Plain Sense: Why Frei When You Can de Lubac?" paper read to the Christian Theology and the Bible Section, Society of Biblical Literature Annual Meeting, Nov. 20, 2004.

²⁵ "Allegoria: Reading as a Spiritual Exercise," *Modern Theology* 15 (1999), 271-295.

²⁶ (Anthony Thiselton has made enthusiastic use of Wittgenstein's aphorism, "A picture held us captive"; my point here turns Thiselton, though I would argue not Wittgenstein, up-side down: The word has held us captive; not the theological Logos by which the second person of the Trinity is made known to us, but the prominence of verbal communication in our interpretive discourses.

²⁷ Cf. "This Is Not A Bible," in *New Paradigms for Bible Study*, ed. by a bunch of people.

Our hermeneutics should begin from the general phenomena of semiosis, of meaning-making. Once we have learned what we can say about meaning and interpretation in non-verbal domains, we can take on the special case of verbal communication with less risk that this outlying example of semiosis provides the key for all interpretive discourses.

In the context of theological hermeneutics, this attention to all the dimensions of meaning and communication obliges us to acknowledge that the windows that surround us exemplify biblical interpretation, that the worship for which this space is customarily used constitutes an exercise in biblical interpretation, that the architecture, the musical accompaniment or lack thereof, all these and more take part in a the expansive, diverse, practice of re-presenting the significance of the Bible in words, images, sounds, and gestures.

Biblical Theology As Signifying Practice

Hence, I propose that we think of biblical theology not on the model of translation, not on the basis of a conduit metaphor, but as a signifying practice. On this account, biblical theology would not involve just, or primarily, the verbal interpretation of verbal texts, but as a way of living that deliberately enters into the ocean of signification that encompasses us, and seeks out a way to learn, to perpetuate and to propagate the significance of the biblical proclamation. The signifying practice of biblical theology will include a great amount of textual interpretation, no doubt – but this practice will conduct its textual exploration toward the end of submitting visible, tangible, audible, *effectual* claims concerning the Bible's importance for our lives.

The term “signifying practice” came into currency through the work of Julia Kristeva, who deployed it in the context of analyzing two ways that language functions in a text. In the first function, language cooperates with the rules, conventions, expectations, that constitute conventional usage – the predictable elements that make satisfactory communication possible. The second function involves the ways that linguistic communication operates beyond or athwart rule-governed patterns of expression.²⁸ Kristeva characterized the convergence of these functions as the way that all signifying takes place (even, as she allows, outside linguistic utterances).²⁹

Subsequently, the Birmingham School of cultural criticism (particularly Stuart Hall and Dick Hebdige) took up the term to apply it not simply to the tension between linguistic system and specific utterances, but to the multifarious ways that people express themselves. In Hall's account, we participate in reciprocal social activities (including, but not limited to,

²⁸ “I shall call signifying practice the establishment and the countervailing of a sign system. . . .” from the glossary that Léon Roudiez appends to Kristeva's *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1980), 18; Roudiez quotes from *La Traversée des Signes*, without further specification.

²⁹ *The Kristeva Reader*, 120-123, citing from *Revolution in Poetic Language*. Roland Barthes makes illuminating use of Kristeva's distinction between phenotext and genotext in his essay, “The Grain of the Voice,” in *Image – Music – Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 179-189.

speech and writing) in ways that affirm, amplify, and perpetuate meanings for our behavior; a particular integrated set of these words and actions constitutes a signifying practice, a complex tapestry of expression by which we assert the sorts of meaning by which we (and the culture around us) define our identities.³⁰ Hebdige applies this cultural semiotics to the ways that non-dominant social groups define themselves over against the networks of meaning that prevail in the dominant social groups.³¹ Thus gangstas, punks, goths, and various subcultures use their appearance, the sounds with which they make their presence audible, their distinct vernacular, the gestures by which they interact with one another and with outsiders – making meaning by the ways that they *signify*, in dress and music and speech and action.

As a provocative digression, I will here propose in one paragraph my working axioms of semiotics: First, that everything signifies: our dress, our posture, our tone, our stride. In a Word-created world, everything signifies. Second, signification can't be controlled. We often make to control signifying under the rule of intention ("I didn't intend to scandalize you, so it's not my responsibility if you're hurt by what I did."). The rule of intention has long been known to lead to Hell, though, and no other mode of policing signification has proved more effective. If I wear an orange jacket through the wrong neighborhood on St. Patrick's Day, that'll signify, whether I intend it to or not, and the significance may be enforced with sanctions that pay no respect to refined arguments about the nature of human intention, or the legitimacy of reader-oriented interpretation. If my word or gesture hurts you unintentionally, you're still injured regardless, and I'm complicit in that injury. Third, then, there is no ethic intrinsic to signification – the signifying Spirit blows where it will, and we know not whence it comes or whither it goes – but only in our practices of expression and apprehension. We interpret significance in particular ways, and we speak and gesture certain ways, relying on provisional expectations and conventions. Those derive their sanction, however, not from the nature of signification, but from our understanding of how we ought to live in a world that's more complex than we're capable of controlling. As surfers, we do not control the waves of signification, but we negotiate their flux, riding forces we cannot command. (That's for Frank Yamada.)

The benefits of adopting the terminology of “signifying practice” for biblical theology are manifold. First, when we frame biblical theology as signifying practice, we point *away*

³⁰ Stuart Hall, ed. *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: Sage Publications, 1997), 15-64, particularly p. 28f.

³¹ Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Routledge, 1979).

from an exclusively verbal model of signification and expression, toward a model that encompasses all our activity. We break out of the circle of texts interpreting texts, into a world in which every sphere of human action expresses our biblical interpretations, and invites critical analysis. Biblical interpretations formulated as stained-glass windows or paintings, as oratorios or praise songs, as eucharistic prayers or indeed as ecstatic pentecostal utterance take a coherent place in our reflection on the theological meanings of our Bible. Moreover, when we take up biblical theology as a signifying practice, we direct our attention toward ways that our lived practice as biblical interpreters constitutes an on-going interpretation of the Bible. Since the God of the Bible (in the varied forms in which Christians and Jews receive it) expresses especially vivid interest in how one orders one's life, and since most biblical theologians profess some sort of allegiance to this God who was made known to Israel, to whom Jesus of Nazareth pointed as uniquely good and holy, we have strong reasons *as biblical theologians* to not separate our lived interpretive practice from our academic, verbal interpretive deliberation. The segregation of ethics, or homiletics, or liturgics, from biblical interpretation dissolves into a critical study of the ways that particular expressions and practices fittingly or inappropriately bespeak the meanings we infer from biblical precedents.

Once we adjust our expectations to regard biblical theology as a signifying practice rather than as puzzle in an arcane code, pieces of the theological vocation that have fallen apart come together again in gratifying and challenging ways. Interpretive disagreement no longer requires that we slug it out until one reader's proposal show all others to be inferior; indeed, we must expect disagreement as an authentic representation of biblical theologies that emerge from divergent contexts, represented by divergent practitioners; just as any two harpsichordists will perform a shared score differently, so two biblical theologians will perform their shared scriptural score differently.³² The biblical theologian studies Scripture for the cues for his or her particular performance, imbibes the characteristic directions and gestures, the prohibitions and requirements, and improvises a biblical response to the

³² I believe Frances Young to have brought the matter of "performance" to the seminar table of biblical hermeneutics, in *The Art of Performance: Toward a Theology of Holy Scripture* (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 1990) [published in the USA as *Virtuoso Theology: The Bible and Interpretation* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1993)]. See also, however, Nicholas Lash's pivotal article "Performing the Scriptures" in *Theology on the Way to Emmaus* (London: SCM Press, 1986), 37-46 (originally published in *The Furrow* in 1982), indeed, all of Part II of *Theology on the Way to Emmaus*.

congregation, the pastoral situation, the social circumstances she confronts.³³ Some degree of innovation will prove intolerable to us, and we will resist and oppose it; other degrees of innovation will seem appropriate to our text, and we will welcome the fresh light they shed on Scripture.

Our exemplifications, our embodiments of biblical theology will always in some respects depart from their biblical precedents, so that we cannot *simply* assert that our practice fulfills the mandates of our biblical score. Our practice of biblical theology will express our sense of Scripture more or less faithfully, more or less recognizably, and observers of our practice will assess it differently depending on their own apprehension of biblical theology. This befits the Bible, which itself is not monophonic, but comprises a tremendous variety of material for us emphasize, defer, mute, harmonize, and resolve in ways that themselves always change; in the words of Hans Urs von Balthasar, “truth is symphonic.”³⁴ We who are Anglicans may appropriate this criterion to the instruction in Article XX of our Articles of Religion, which stipulates that the church may not “so expound one place of Scripture, that it be repugnant to another.” Confronted by possibly ugly perplexities in the score of our performance, we may not simply adopt one passage and reject the other, citing one passage as the basis for *negating* the other. Instead, the Articles instruct us to seek the way of reading by which our exposition resolves apparent discord into a more profound, unexpected harmony.

In order soundly to *signify* Scripture, we need to know the Bible well, studying the Bible steadily and faithfully. In contradistinction to the ways that many prominent biblical theologians have framed their definitions and axioms, that entails studying the canonical biblical text. While speculation about precanonical sources may nuance our appreciation of the canon, Q is not a substitute for Matthew (as Francis suggested this morning). Similarly, we have much to learn from *post*-canonical commentary, particularly commentary from the saints who wrote during the time (described in Steve’s lecture last night) when *Sacra Doctrina* comprised all the theological specializations, but commentary does not substitute for the Bible. Perhaps above all, the signifying practice of biblical theology depends on our reading Scripture together, in conjunction with our lives of discipleship and worship. By hearing the Word together, by responding to the Word together, by conversing about the

33 The literature on performance, improvisation, and ethics has grown dramatically; the central work, for now, is Samuel Wells’s *Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2004). Nicholas Cook proposes an illuminating discussion of the relation of musical improvisation to a score in “Prompting Performance: Text, Script, and Analysis in Bryn Harrison’s *être-temps*,” *Music Theory Online* 11 (2005), <http://www.societymusictheory.org/mto/issues/mto.05.11.1/mto.05.11.1.cook_frames.html>. I depend for guidance on such matters on instruction from musicians, but the relation between musical improvisation has captured the imaginations of several interesting expositors: not only Wells, but also and Trevor Bechtel, “How To Eat Your Bible,” *Conrad Grebel Review* 21 (2003), 81-87; Stephen Barton “New Testament Interpretation as Performance” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 52 (1999): 179-208; and pianist/pastor Bill Carter. I suspect, though I have no textual evidence, that Charles Cosgrove’s perceptive reflections on the relation of Scripture to theology and ethics have been informed by his experience playing jazz trombone.

³⁴ *Truth is Symphonic*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987).

Word together, we encounter and embody at least a beginning measure of the richness that arises when different servants of the same Word practice together.

Thus, our worship – in a certain sense, the signifying practice of biblical theology *par excellence* – best serves our vocation when we tone down the liturgical expression of our *selves* and devote our energies to focusing attention on a gospel that we did not invent, in ways that direct attention away from us, away from our ingenuity, away from the urgent messages we need to convey, away from our resourcefulness, and toward the God whom we praise. Romano Guardini advises, “the priest of the late nineteenth century who said, ‘We must organize the procession better; we must see to it that the singing and praying are done better’ [should have rather] asked himself quite a different question: how can the act of walking become a religious act, a retinue for the Lord progressing through his land, so that an epiphany may take place?”³⁵

Our processional *walking*, however, must take our lives, fortified by the ritual expression of orchestrated praise, outward into a dissonant and disordered world. As biblical theologians, we endeavor to recognize God’s ways at work around us and to lend our lived testimony to strengthening, making more nearly visible and audible, the gospel Way. We shape our lives after the patterns we discern in Scripture, so that others may see our good works and give glory to God. We take up the imitation of Christ, the imitation of Mary and Moses, of Abigail and James, so that their significance resonates in the paths we walk. We study Scripture here not simply to learn a set of rules we must follow, but to learn a repertoire of rôles we enact. And by taking up the whole of our lives as a signifying practice of biblical theology, we make ourselves accountable to our neighbors. Without entrusting our signifying practice to the loving criticism of our sisters and brothers, we fall prey to the fallacy of assuming that we signify only what we intend. If we share our lives with reliable friends, their good examples can encourage our persistence in prayer and service, and they can help catch us when our intentions no longer match what our lives signify.

So – to conclude – our friends make us better biblical theologians, and our congregational worship makes us better biblical theologians, and the wisdom of the saints makes us better biblical theologians; and thus my opening litany of thanksgivings was no idle rhetorical convention, but a necessary affirmation that all that is true has come to us this afternoon as a *gift*. Since we have been so graciously surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, we squander our energy if we construct a hothouse of artificial scarcity within which to sit in splendid disciplinary isolation, bemoaning our lack; instead, as biblical theologians we process confidently, with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven, into the abundant flux of meaning that surrounds and suffuses us, practicing at every turn the harmony, the diligence, and the gratitude by which our biblical theology testifies to the grace of Christ.

³⁵ A multi-nested citation: Guardini as cited by Mark Searles in “Liturgy as Hermeneutics,” as cited by Graham Hughes, *Worship as Meaning* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2003), 39.