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Who and What is Theological Interpretation For?

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years "theological interpretation" has consolidated itself as a key contributor to the series of conversations that make up contemporary theology.[1] As a movement it has spawned commentary and book series, dedicated journals, countless monographs, and edited volumes. Amidst this flurry of activity is the particular contribution made by the edited volume that Andrew and I produced whilst we worked together at the University of Gloucestershire, *Christology and Scripture: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*. The volume arose out of an intensive and memorable weekend spent in a diocesan retreat house in the company of systematic theologians, church historians, and biblical scholars. At the heart of our discussions, and subsequently the book, was the question, "What is the relationship between the biblical texts and the way that Christian doctrine and tradition has cap-

1. In writing this essay it is a pleasure to record my debt of gratitude to Andrew, as mentor and friend.

tured the significance of Jesus?" The diversity of the group of scholars the volume gathered together points to one of the key features of theological interpretation, namely its desire to break down the disciplinary boundaries academic theology has erected as part of fixing itself within the modern university, boundaries that inhibit a full exploration of the meaning potential of Scripture. Nearly ten years after the publication of this volume it is worth reflecting that the inter-disciplinarity we aimed to foster had its limits, or perhaps better, blind spots. There were two (related) groups of theologians that the symposium and volume did not embrace to the full, namely practical theologians and public theologians. It is worth asking how the book's contribution to theological interpretation might have been deepened had these disciplines and their concerns been incorporated more intentionally. Provoked by this reflection on Andrew's and my practice, I want, in this short essay, to ask two related questions.

1. How might we "pick out" theological interpretation as a distinctive movement within theology?
2. What difference might it make to the future directions of this movement if it more intentionally attends to the insights and impulses of both practical and public theology?

The essay is therefore an exercise in testing the methodological foundations and initiating principles of theological interpretation. There will, of course, be those who say it is more important to *do* theological interpretation ahead of clarifying *how* it is to be done. Does theological interpretation need to do any more throat clearing? It is certainly true that we should do all we can to encourage more theological interpretation being evidenced in practice. Yet, the justification for returning to methodological questions must be because "all major methodological decisions have implications for the whole of the theological edifice."[2] The pursuit of theological interpretation's ends—what we think it is *for*—depends on how it is practiced and with whom. Quite simply, questions surrounding how theological interpretation is carried out are of signal importance and need to be returned to periodically so that the doing of theological interpretation might be refreshed. When Stephen Fowl says that "*if there is to be a revival of theological interpretation of Scripture among scholars and students, theological concerns must be given priority over other concerns,*" it only begs the question of the nature, articulation, and ownership of these theological concerns.[3] Just what is it

2. Volf, "Theology, Meaning, and Power," 99.

3. Fowl, "Theological and Ideological Strategies of Biblical Interpretation," 169 (emphasis original).

that makes theological interpretation theological? Who gets to define what counts as "theological"?

Before exploring these questions however we first need to explore what has distinguished theological interpretation in recent years. How might we pick out theological interpretation?

WHAT IS THEOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION?

Theological interpretation is not a monolithic movement and it is characterized by a notable diversity of approaches. One can see this by observing the different ways in which different contributors to the Brazos Theological Commentary series have tackled their brief as articulated by the series editor, R. R. Reno, namely to demonstrate that "doctrine provides structure and cogency to scriptural interpretation."[4] Stanley Hauerwas' theopolitical reading of Matthew is very different in style and tone from Jaroslav Pelikan's historically focused treatment of Acts. Not all see such diversity of approaches as evidence of a movement in healthy and quite proper contest about how it is best practiced. Stanley Porter, in a gloomy assessment, characterizes theological interpretation as little more than "an under-defined and varying set of tendencies or interests, with some overlap between proponents."[5] D. A. Carson labels theological interpretation "a disorganized array of methodological commitments" and argues that the disparate nature of the movement is a significant weakness.[6] It is possible, I would argue, to capture theological interpretation a little more positively—as a series of related moves and debates centered around ensuring that theological thinking and biblical reading are mutually informing activities, rather than understood (implicitly or explicitly) to be estranged from one another. Theological interpretation is a project of recovery,[7] in that proponents re-articulate in and for our time the implications of integrating the reading of Scripture with a host of convictions about the living God and the life of discipleship. What is now a self-conscious agenda was of course, at one time, the dominant, if not the only, mode of reading Scripture available. If there was once no

4. Reno, "Series Preface," 14.

5. Porter, "What Exactly Is Theological Interpretation of Scripture?," 247.

6. Carson, "Theological Interpretation of Scripture," 187. The charge of Porter and Carson is very odd. To give just one example, studies of the historical Jesus take on a huge variety of forms and embody great differences, yet no-one sees this diversity as a weakness, or a sign that one could not pick out a historical Jesus scholar.

7. Only when it is misconceived is theological interpretation a project of repristination. All theological interpretation necessarily involves some kind of negotiation with our context now.

such thing as theological interpretation as a distinguishable activity this was purely because in pre-modernity there was assumed to be little distinction between thinking theologically, liturgical action, scriptural reading, and a life lived in response to the grace of God. The reading of Scripture, for a pre-modern reader like Maximus the Confessor, was bound up with an integrative vision of life and liturgy.[8] Theological interpretation is the attempt to render a little less problematic what modernity slowly unpicked—the relationship between theology, the church, Christian living, and the Bible.

If we do wish to retain a sense that theological interpretation is a distinguishable movement then leverage in pinning it down can be gained by attending to a helpful insight provided by Nicholas M. Healy. We can, Healy argues, distinguish between a theologian's (and by extension, a theological school's) "agenda" and "argument," the two being necessary to advance a theological "project."

A theological agenda "is constituted by a set of desired changes in the life and thought of Christians and the church." This agenda is necessarily advanced by the arguments the theologian draws upon, the rationale that persuades "others of the reasonableness and benefits of the desired changes." It follows, Healy points out, that theologians can agree on a common agenda, but differ in the arguments they judge to be appropriate in supporting the agenda. Equally, it may well be that theologians can agree on an agenda and articulate a series of broadly similar arguments.[9] Applying Healy's reflections to theological interpretation one can represent the movement as being united around an agenda to rejuvenate (in the academy and, by extension, those parts of the church conversant with academic theology) attention to Scripture as a revelatory text that has pulsated and continues to pulsate through the life of the church and its members.[10] United behind this agenda there is considerable diversity in the arguments constructed to advance the agenda. There are those whose arguments are tilted more towards theocentric approaches.[11] There are those who place more emphasis on Scripture in the life of the church as reading community than they do on God's action in relation to the text and its readers.[12] Some take on a highly rhetorical, almost caustic, tone in their assessment both of historical criticism and

8. Blowers, "Theology as Integrative, Visionary, Pastoral."

9. Healy, *Hauerwas*, 4–5.

10. If we were to follow this definition then Andrew Lincoln's recent work on the virgin birth would clearly fall within the category of theological interpretation. See Lincoln, *Born of a Virgin?*

11. John Webster is an exemplar of this type of argument. See Webster, *Domain of the Word*.

12. See Hauerwas, *Matthew*.

modes of reading developed outside the life of faith,[13] whilst others adopt a more emollient tone and attempt to enlist historical criticism with theological ends in mind.[14] In many contributions to advancing the agenda there is a pronounced attempt to bring together the dynamic connection between the biblical text and the church's doctrinal tradition.[15] What unites all these different and often overlapping arguments is a shared agenda, what John Webster characterizes as a common desire to:

> treat the Bible as Scripture, that is, as more than a set of clues to the history of antique religious culture, and so as a text which may legitimately direct theological reason because in some manner it affords access to God's self-communication.[16]

This essay presumes that there is a united project we can term "theological interpretation of Scripture," in that there is a school of approaches and arguments with a broadly shared agenda. As an active contributor to this agenda it will not be surprising to learn that it is an agenda I keenly support and wish to advance.[17] Precisely with this advancement in mind I am aware that it is necessary to push at some shortcomings of the way the agenda has been supported by dominant arguments. As hinted at above, we can characterize these dominant arguments as the "theocentric" approach and the "ecclesiocentric" approach. The shortcomings of each are closely related and invite a new set of challenges to be posed for theological interpretation. Both the shortcomings and challenges will be brought out by appealing to the insights of public and practical theology. However, before we get to that stage in the argument I need to outline some of the features of ecclesiocentric and theocentric approaches to theological interpretation.

Stanley Hauerwas can be taken as representative of an ecclesiocentric approach to theological interpretation. For Hauerwas, disciples enjoy an interpretative privilege when it comes to reading the Bible. Practices and reading are mutually informing and necessarily sustain one another. With his customary flair for the provocative statement Hauerwas claims that only those who are pacifists can interpret the Sermon on the Mount correctly.

13. Much of Robert W. Jenson's writings lead the reader to the conclusion that the biblical world is an all-encompassing description of reality, the implication being that interpretative approaches not starting from this shared premise are likely to mislead. See, for example, Jenson, "The Strange New World of the Bible."

14. Billings, *Word of God for the People of God*, 54–61.

15. Jenson, "Identity, Jesus, and Exegesis."

16. Webster, "Theologies of Retrieval," 591. Cited in Sarisky, *Scriptural Interpretation*, 135.

17. See Paddison, *Theological Hermeneutics*, and *Scripture*.

Divorced from the non-violent community that Matthew presupposes the text has no meaning.[18] For Hauerwas therefore, a theological reading prioritizes the church and its performance of the gospel, an ecclesial emphasis entirely in line with the rest of his theology.[19] The following gives an indicative sense of how Hauerwas reads Scripture (in this case Matthew) theologically:

> A theological reading of Matthew, therefore, reaffirms that the church be an alternative politics to the politics of the world. The reading I try to provide of Matthew's gospel is not for "anyone," although I hope many "anyones" will be attracted to Matthew through the reading offered. Rather, this commentary is guided by the presumption that the church is the politics that determines how Matthew is to be read.[20]

In this ecclesiocentric approach to theological interpretation church and Scripture are mutually dependent. The way to Scripture is through the life—and witness—of the church. Theological interpretation is dependent on and determined by ecclesial performance. Healy understands Hauerwas' approach to be the displacement of a *sola Scriptura* stance in favor of a "*sola ecclesia* hermeneutic."[21] What is also noticeable in Hauerwas' account of Scripture is the slender role given to God and God's prevenient action. The emphasis is firmly on the church as reading community. The following statement typifies this stance:

> The authority of Scripture is mediated through the lives of the saints identified by our community as most nearly representing what we are about. Put more strongly, to know what Scripture means, finally, we must look to those who have most nearly learned to exemplify its demands through their lives.[22]

Although not always with the same striking intensity, one can see traces of an ecclesiocentric focus at work elsewhere in theological interpretation. A more nuanced account (what we might term theological interpretation expressed in an ecclesial mood) than Hauerwas' can be found in Matthew Levering's pathology of modern exegesis. For Levering, the church's liturgical performance is a means of conveying the participatory sense of history Scripture invites and makes possible, the church's history participating in God's history. It is this participative sense of history that modernity has lost

18. Hauerwas, *Unleashing the Scripture*, 64.
19. See Healy, *Hauerwas*, 17–38.
20. Hauerwas, *Matthew*, 29–30.
21. Healy, *Hauerwas*, 60.
22. Hauerwas, *Peaceable Kingdom*, 70.

a grip on and, if it is to be recovered, church and Scripture are to be plotted along the same figural movement.[23] Contemporary figural readings of the biblical text have been offered by Ephraim Radner: history as the church is to know and witness to it is as narrated by Scripture.[24] In this appeal to enveloping the church in figural and typological reading it is possible to hear echoes of a key turn in postliberal theology, George Lindbeck's call for an intra-textual theology in which "the text, so to speak . . . absorbs the world, rather than the world the text."[25] Indicatively, Fowl asserts that if theological interpretation is about granting theological concerns priority over other concerns then this will "involve a return to the practice of using Scripture as a way of ordering and comprehending the world, rather than using the world as a way of comprehending Scripture."[26] We will explore later how attention to the insights of practical theology render this slogan more complex and unstable, serving to remind us of the ways in which church, Scripture, and the church's context are mutually influencing. What unites the different arguments highlighted here is an ecclesial emphasis to the point of ecclesiocentric, a stance that often leads to the conclusion that Scripture is an all-embracing text embodied in the self-contained culture of the church.[27] Notions of the text absorbing the world are bound together with robust notions of the church as culture.

We need to say something about theological interpretation carried out in a "theocentric" vein. The work of John Webster is influential on a cluster of related arguments.[28] Although, of course, Webster emphasizes the role

23. Levering, *Participatory Biblical Exegesis*.

24. Radner, *Hope among the Fragments*.

25. Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 118.

26. Fowl, "Theological and Ideological Strategies of Biblical Interpretation," 169.

27. This last sentence needs to be glossed in two ways. First, it is necessary to remind ourselves that theological interpretation is systematic in that it is webbed within a wider set of theological assumptions. It relies upon theological notions of God's work and the life of the church. One simply cannot understand Hauerwas' or Jenson's mode of theological interpretation unless one is alert to their ecclesiology. Precisely because this is so, it is necessary always to query some of the foundations of theological interpretation from time to time. To query Hauerwas' theological interpretation one needs to destabilize the ecclesial foundations on which it is based. Second, to defend myself against the charge of polemical characterization of the church/world distinction the following pronouncement from Jenson could be appealed to: "The church must always know and show forth that she is one thing and the world another, which includes that she is one thing and any civilization is another." See Jenson, "Christian Civilization," 158.

28. Webster's influence is considerable on theological interpretation. If one reads the earlier work of Stephen Fowl or Kevin Vanhoozer and then some of their later work, for example Fowl, *Theological Interpretation*, or Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*,

of the church, it does not lie at the center of his theological approach. The ordering evident in the following sentence is not incidental in this regard. "[W]e will remain unclear," Webster advances, "about Scripture as long as we are unclear about God, providence and church."[29] For Webster, decisions about the nature of Scripture, its role in the divine economy, and our role as readers are all issues that can be resourced by attending to *God's* action. Webster's account of Scripture can be typified as "God in relation to this text and its readers," in contrast to Hauerwas' "the church in relation to the biblical text." God's relationship to the text is active and direct, whilst the reader's and the church's action is responsive. God "initiates and directs," he calls and commissions the biblical authors, through the Spirit he illuminates the text, he elects to be communicatively present within a people—the church—and the resultant disposition of the scriptural reader is passive, for they should expect "a disappointment of interpretation, a *being formed*, receiving rather than bestowing meaning."[30] Church and Scripture are bound together, but not as co-constitutive partners—rather, the church *hears* and *receives* the text. God, for Webster's account of Scripture, is always "antecedently present and active."[31] A theological account of Scripture is orderly insofar as it attends first to God, disorderly at the point it is diverted first to talk of the church and its practices.

What do these theocentric and ecclesiocentric approaches to theological interpretation share? Both prefer to work with accounts of Scripture abstracted from the life of the tangible, concrete church. Both have a tendency to work with "ideal" types of readers. Both presume that the church needs to take a clear (counter-)cultural stance. For Webster, one can choose poetics *or* obedient reception of the Word.[32] (It seems fair to assume that he has in his sights the fractious debates within the Anglican Communion on homosexuality.) For Hauerwas, the first priority for the church as a reading community is to recover "what it means for the church to be an alternative politics in the world in which we find ourselves."[33] Both stances are not immediately amenable to the articulation of public theology offered by Duncan Forrester, as that "theology which seeks the welfare of the city before

Webster's fingerprints on their thinking is evident. Webster's influence on emerging scholars like Sarisky (see *Scriptural Interpretation*) is also plain.

29. Webster, *Domain of the Word*, 3.

30. Ibid., 10, 24 (emphasis original).

31. Ibid., 26.

32. Ibid., 130–32.

33. Hauerwas, *Approaching the End*, 92. Hauerwas is not speaking directly of theological interpretation here, but the wording is portable.

protecting the interests of the Church."[34] Exploring some of the dissonances between the impulses of recent theological interpretation and public theology marks the next step of the essay, in which we will both critique and challenge these two dominant moods in theological interpretation.

THEOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION, PRACTICAL THEOLOGY, AND PUBLIC THEOLOGY

We now need to turn intentionally to the second question we set ourselves at the outset:

> What difference might it make to the future directions of this movement if it more intentionally attends to the insights and impulses of both practical and public theology?

In this part of the essay we will be considering practical and public theology as closely related enterprises. Practical theology is the enterprise that reflects theologically on how the Word is received and embodied contextually, in the lives of congregations and individual Christians. Its focus is on "Christian life and practice within the Church *and* in relation to wider society."[35] As theology it is "dedicated to enabling the faithful performance of the gospel and to exploring and taking seriously the complex dynamics of the human encounter with God."[36] Part of this complex dynamic is each individual Christian's and every congregation's involvement in the world, a world that is the proper object of Christian concern. Practical theology, as public theology, looks to "the world as the place of the coming reign of God."[37] If theological interpretation is, according to Fowl's quote we highlighted earlier, in the business of prioritizing theological concerns ahead of other concerns, then what might be the result of prioritizing practical and public theological concerns? How might the impulses of public and practical theology reshape theological interpretation? Here are three thesis statements in response.

> *Thesis one: Theological interpretation needs to be less about ensuring the text absorbs the world and more about encouraging intensive forms of living, both with the text and in the world.*

34. Forrester, "Scope of Public Theology," 6.
35. Ballard and Pritchard, *Practical Theology in Action*, 1 (emphasis added).
36. Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, 4.
37. Volf, "Theology, Meaning, and Power," 112.

An orientation of theological interpretation towards the impulses of practical theology is likely to make how we imagine the relationship between the text and the world more nuanced. Lindbeck evoked a competitive imaginary when he spoke of the need to ensure the biblical text "absorb[ed]" the world, "rather than the world the text."[38] This is an imaginary that has captured the attention of theological interpreters like Stephen Fowl and Robert W. Jenson, the latter being especially aware that an omnivorous text relies upon a robust notion of the church as a distinct culture. There is a sharp dissonance here with the impulses of practical and public theology for whom the relationship between the biblical text and the world in which readers are located is bound always to be framed as a negotiation and overlap of different authorities—the authority of the text, of reason, and above all of experience. Seeing the text and the world in relationship with one another is a constantly shifting, dynamic process of inhabitation, both of the text and of the world. In this sense it is more helpful to articulate the relationship between the biblical texts, culture, and context not as one of the text absorbing the world, but as reciprocal and fluid. Miroslav Volf points to the limitations of Lindbeck-inspired models, which imagine a text absorbing the world, models that he sees as distortive of how the church inhabits and shapes its cultural context:

> We can look at our culture through the lenses of religious texts only *as we look at these texts through the lenses of our culture.* The notion of inhabiting the biblical story is hermeneutically naïve because it presupposes that those who are faced with the biblical story can be completely "dis-lodged" from their extra-textual dwelling places and "re-settled" into intratextual homes. Neither dis-lodging nor resettling can ever quite succeed; we continue to inhabit our cultures even after the encounter with the biblical story[;] . . . *there is no pure space on which to stand even for the community of faith*.[39]

There is a need, in other words, to resist talk of biblical imagination being associated only with the proposal that the text is to *absorb* our world. Theological resources are needed to destabilize this competitive zero-sum game, in which it is imagined that the text absorbs the world, or finds itself absorbed by the world.

Practical theology has little time for what Heather Walton calls "canonical narrative theologies," where the presumption is that we must insert our story within the larger biblical story. Walton terms theological reflection a

38. Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 118.

39. Volf, "Theology, Meaning, and Power," 103 (emphasis original).

form of weaving, "in which elements of experience and aspects of Scripture and tradition are woven together into innovative forms."[40] This represents a way of preserving the integrity and significance of our stories, and the stories of the world, alongside the scriptural narratives. We cannot presume that there will not be times when it is necessary for the church to interrupt and disrupt the stories of the world (one thinks of Apartheid South Africa or 1930s Germany) but it is not helpful for theological interpretation to presume that the biblical text exists automatically in a competitive relationship to the world. An imaginary alternative to that of a text absorbing the world will seek to understand theological interpretation as open and attentive to the contexts around us. Theological interpretation responsive to the world, and to our contexts, is not any the less theological. Indeed, it is *more* theological than the imaginary of a text absorbing the world. "Belonging completely to Christ, one stands at the same time completely in the world."[41] Theological interpretation formed by *this* imagination will want to say that living with the biblical text requires intensive engagement with the world. Being ready to think theologically about the resonances between the biblical text and the world is an alternative way to capture what counts as a "biblical imagination."[42]

> *Thesis Two: Theological interpretation needs to be alert to the risks of ecclesiocentric approaches.*

As we saw, theological interpretation has placed heavy emphasis on the distinctiveness of the church as reading community. Yet, in the light of the first thesis above, there is a need to be alert to two risks that this ecclesiocentric emphasis bears. First, there is a risk that theological interpretation will be inhibited from listening to insights that can properly correct the church. It is hard to see how theological interpretation could hope to make a public contribution without a healthy alertness to issues raised by ideological readings,[43] or to issues raised by those who have been publicly wounded by the text and now position themselves outside the church. Theological interpretation needs to guard that it does not deafen itself to such voices. Quite simply, the church is a necessary but not a sufficient resource. Again, we must resist a competitive imaginary between attention to the church and to

40. Walton, *Writing Methods*, 95.

41. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 62.

42. If one had to highlight an exemplar of paying attention to the text and to the world as a text one could very well point to the work of Ellen Davis. See Davis, "Surprised by Wisdom: Preaching Proverbs." For the imagery of "resonances" see Bennett and Rowland, "'Action is the Life of All.'"

43. Moberly, "What Is Theological Interpretation of Scripture?" 168.

the world here. Craig Hovey writes, "[t]he church's learning so to recognize Christ in and as the church *entirely depends* on its success in discovering him outside the church."[44] So too, theological interpretation needs to equip itself for the task of discovering the Bible outside the church. A worldly attentiveness will help ensure that the church has the capacity to read the text against itself, a theological imperative rooted in the Gospels. The second risk that ecclesiocentric arguments bear is that such emphases make it hard to prioritize regard for the world ahead of the church's self-interest. It is not of course true that those who have promoted ecclesiocentric accounts of theological interpretation have no regard for the world.[45] It would be more accurate to say that a robust emphasis on the church can obscure the emphasis that is proper (as we saw above) to place on the world. The more piercing the attention on the church the greater the risk that theological attention to the world is eclipsed. There has been too much focus on the Bible in the church, too little focus on the biblical reader's prosaic yet intensive engagement with the world.

> *Thesis Three: Practical theology would shift attention from "the church" in the abstract to the actual church.*

"The church reads Scripture and tries to speak what it hears and orders its life accordingly."[46] This normative claim betrays the tendency of both theocentric and the ecclesiocentric approaches to talk of "the church" in abstraction from theological reflection on the actual church that variously wrestles and engages with the biblical text. If it is a truism that biblical readers always learn "discipleship in specific contexts and relations" then talk of the Bible and its reading that persistently avoids engaging with the vulnerability of this particularity is bound to be theologically deficient in some form.[47] There is an emerging literature in practical theology on the question of how "ordinary" readers—that is, those who are not in positions of leadership and/or have not had formal theological training—engage with the text.[48] How the church in its diversity wrestles and engages with the text urgently needs theological attention. The word "attention" is not used lazily.[49] To attend to the reader in front of me, perhaps the reader with whom I

44. Hovey, *Unexpected Jesus*, 46 (emphasis original).

45. Hauerwas, *Matthew*, 87, "[t]he difference between church and world is not that of realms or levels, but of response."

46. Webster, "'In the Society of God,'" 219.

47. R. Williams, "Making Moral Decisions," 8.

48. See Village, "The Bible and Ordinary Readers."

49. The influence of R. Williams, "Making Moral Decisions," is recognized in the reflections that follow.

share communion, is to take the reader seriously in their non-negotiable concreteness. Sometimes one's fellow reader will be a source of refreshment, as they open new vistas onto a biblical text that are far from ordinary. At other times one's fellow reader will be a source of exasperation and despair. Attention to the ordinary reader consistently offers theological interpretation an inbuilt resistance to talk glibly of "the church."

To pay attention to how individuals within churches read Scripture is constutuent to realizing that how the church learns to be a people formed in relation to *this* text in *this* place and in *this* time is part of the irreducible particularity of the Christian revelation. John Webster's warning to avoid the presumption "that context is fate" is helpful to the extent that it reminds us that descriptions of how the church engages with Scripture are not by themselves sufficient theologically.[50] Key here is that ethnography or empirical description should not by itself count as the completion of the theological task. Such descriptions need rather to be incorporated into the theological task.[51] Yet the warning that context isn't fate is unhelpful to the extent that its rhetoric suggests a nervousness about the historical, vulnerable conditions in which the gospel is always received *precisely as gospel*. In practice, if one delves into Webster's theological account of Scripture and its readers one will find scant reflection on how actual *churches* receive and read Scripture. This reveals a shortcoming in theological interpretation more broadly. Theological interpretation, as it has been dominantly carried out, employs the language of the church, yet ironically it is in effect a conversation largely carried out only with other theological interpreters primarily located in the academy. This carries the risk that theological interpretation will impact the academy ahead of the church.[52] Theological interpretation can be reminded by practical theology that it is first a practice, embodied in complex ways by a hugely diverse array of people bound together in the same body. Theological interpretation needs to work out, as a matter of priority, how the Bible's countless ordinary readers are already advocates of its agenda.

CONCLUSION

In this essay we have attempted to argue that far from being a disparate movement theological interpretation has a distinct agenda, and the arguments used to advance it have tended to cluster around theocentric and ecclesiocentric approaches. Neither of these dominant approaches have

50. Webster, "The Human Person," 220.

51. See Healy, *Hauerwas*, 98–99, for a related discussion.

52. See Miller-McLemore, "Five Misunderstandings about Practical Theology," 14

prioritized impulses that are central to public and practical theology. In the latter half of the essay I have turned to practical and public theology as a source of correction and challenge to theological interpretation. Theological interpretation is correct in its instinct that hearing the Word as "living and active" (Heb 4:12), and connecting this Word to our world, is a spiritually demanding task. There can be no short circuiting this difficulty, for example by merely repeating what theology has said in the past. Incorporating the impulses of practical and public theology within theological interpretation will highlight the concreteness of the way the Word is living and active in the lives of biblical readers, and the worlds of which they are part. Above all, public and practical theology offers to an academy at risk of talking only to itself the opportunity to fix as a permanent part of our landscape the question, "Who and what is theological interpretation for?"