The Holy Spirit and Scriptural Interpretation
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A. Introduction: The Problem of Valid Interpretation

In his useful book introducing contemporary hermeneutics[1], Terence J. Keegan rightly describes the dilemma for the heirs of the Reformation, those who broke away from the Roman church in the 16th century. He says that, for the Reformers, the Bible became a weapon against the church, which development drove a wedge between the Bible and the Church (19) and ensured that the Bible would no longer be "given its continuing meaning by the Church" (18). This, he says, led to a severe problem, the problem of "private interpretation' (19). After the "more sober" attempts of the classical reformation, the Anabaptists, the Quakers, and others, arose, under whom private interpretation "went haywire" (19). When the "sober, sensible Protestant scholars and churchmen, Lutherans, Calvinists, and Anglicans" insisted that corrective measures were needed, two options were available to give a "clear and secure method" for interpreting the Bible: the use of critical methodologies, on the one hand, and "allowing the text to speak for itself, the reader being guided by the light of the Holy Spirit", on the other (19). We may say that the former, using Enlightenment scholarship, developed into the historical-critical method to obtain "objective" meaning.[2]   The latter relied upon the "internal testimony of the Holy Spirit." to provide guidance in understanding. In the first case the method itself was seen to provide validity for interpretation (since the results were "objective"); in the case of the latter, the Spirit, speaking to the interpreter, lent validity to interpretation.

A significant problem is apparent with each of these procedures. The first is afflicted with Modernism, with its devotion to the dominance of reason, the closed universe, and its belief in the impossibility of unique events and actions such as the incarnation. The latter is afflicted with Schwärmerei with no effective fly-wheel upon the assertions of the individual interpreter.

There must be a better way. There is, and insights of Post-Modernism can be of great help.

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[1] *Interpreting the Bible: A Popular Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics*, Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1985.

[2] Keegan says that this move effectively "took the Bible out of the Church's lectern and put it into the scholar's study" (20). He contends that this was no difficult move, because the Bible had already been divorced from the church.

B. The Answer Suggested by Post-Modernist Insights

We begin by examining a diagram which details the distinction between the reader, the text, the author, and the story of a text, considering narrative as the Bible's basic literary genre:[3]
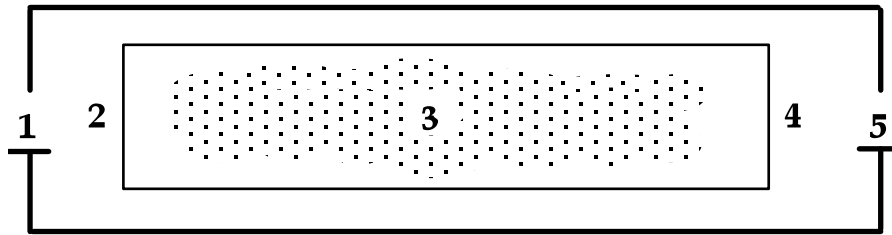
The inner, thin-lined box represents the (physical) text. The actual author (#1) and the actual reader(s) (#5) are concrete entities in the world outside the text (the outer, thick-lined box), while the action of the story (#3), which constitutes the "world" of the text, is not physically in the text (not as the marks are on the page) but is depicted by the signifiers of the text itself.[4] What, then, is the relationship between the reader, on the one hand, and the text, author, and story, on the other? The reader (#5) reads the text, and in so doing he "(re)constructs" the author in his own imagination = the "implied author" (#2), plus, he brings the story (#3) to life ("actualizes the text") from the marks which he sees on the written page.

But what is on the other side (i.e, opposite) the implied author (#2) in the scheme: (#4)? The answer is, the obverse of, the complement of, the left side, namely a reader of whom the author is conscious, one who may also be called "implied." And this implied

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[3] The diagram presented is my own variation of a standard diagram (see, e.g., Keegan, 94), normally attributed to Seymour Chatman (*Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film.* Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1978,146–151).

[4] I have made the outline of this somewhat amorphous, because the content of a story will be different when read by different readers or when read repeatedly by the same reader.

reader stands in the same relationship to the actual reader as the implied author stands to the actual author; he is, again, a construct, not in the real world, and he is detectible (only) in the text.[5] This **implied reader is a person, a receptor, with that knowledge, those abilities, that competency, which enables him to "actualize" the text.** He is a conception of the author—it is for him which the author writes (though he in no actual fact corresponds to any actual reader of the text). Who, then, is a valid interpreter of a text? **It is he who conforms to the expectations of the author.** It is he who conforms himself to the given text's assumptions. It is he who becomes the implied reader—and only such a one—of a given text. Which means that an "objective" reading of a text is not only impossible; it is **not** to be **desired!**

Where does one find the implied readers of the Bible or any other text? The answer of post-modern criticism[6] is and of the church traditionally has been: One does not find them by looking for an individual, for a reader is not alone. Readers are taught to read. Readers handle language, because they are instructed.[7] Readers develop beliefs and attitudes—a personal or "second" text—by conversation and discussion. That is to say, **readers interpret in a community,** with other readers, with other receptors, with those who are their contemporaries, and with those who have gone before. Therefore, readers can become the implied reader, only as they are trained to be that implied reader, within a context where the implied reader of a text is appreciated and understood.

A valid interpreter of a text, then, is that person, that man or that woman, who assumes the role "required," as it were, by a given text—who becomes the reader "implied" or called for by that very text. And such a one is formed to assume that role by a community, a community which has assumed that role itself.

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[5] It may also be said that the detection of the implied reader is accomplished only by a reader in the act of reading.

[6] See especially Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics, and the Study of Literature*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975, 113–130 and Stanley Fish, "Interpreting the Variorum," Critical Inquiry 2 (1976) 465–485.

[7] Community instruction encompasses such basic things as grammar. For example, does a ἵνα clause ever convey result in the NT? (The answer is disputed.) It also, of course, extends to such complex things as matrixing or connecting of events, as well as "filling in the blanks" in a narrative. It is because of the commonality of community that one can communicate at all. A community gives us a common understanding of language and of life.

Therefore, the question really is, "Are all **community** interpretations equal?" There is probably no agreement on this answer,[8] and a fully reader-oriented answer would be "probably" or "definitely, yes!" But I would propose the following: **that community which has produced, received, and preserved a given set of documents—or, better put, that community whose personal formation includes the production, reception, and preservation of a given set of documents—is likely to teach its members to read those documents in a way "congenial" to them**—that is, in such a way as to find in them what reasonably may be found (= what intended meaning there may be) and to allow further meanings to arise, meanings which are congruent with what intended meanings there might be. In such a community there will be, to use terminology we have used above, people who can assume the role of the "implied reader" of the documents. That is to say, that community's members will **possess the competencies for interpretation called for by its documents**, for they will operate by a set of beliefs, standards, and knowledge (= personal, "second" text) congruent with the beliefs, standards, and knowledge of those who produced those documents and, therefore, congruent with the beliefs, standards, and knowledge assumed by the texts themselves. Therefore, to be able to assume the role of the "implied reader" for a given set of documents, one must be a member of the community of those documents and be taught to read by it.[9] What does this mean for a reading of the sacred Scriptures? It means, it would seem, the following: As far as the NT is concerned,[10] these books were produced, received, and preserved by the Christian community.[11] Therefore, that community is likely to teach its members to read these documents in a way "congenial" to them, to assume, as we have said, the role of the "implied reader" as they read. And, therefore, to be able to assume the role of the "implied reader" of the documents of the NT,

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[8] See especially Culler and Fish . See also chapter 7 in Stephen D. Moore, *Literary Criticism and the Gospels: The Theoretical Challenge*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989, 108–130, for an excellent overview of the problem.

[9] Note that this analysis does not mean that a text is a "waxen nose," as many who evaluate positions such as this seem to fear (cf. Anthony Thiselton, New Horizons in Hermeneutics: The Theory and Practice of Transforming Biblical Reading. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992, 538–539, 546–550), though it is far more waxen than many do believe. A text, because it is an item of intention, because it is not an arbitrary pattern with no preconceived intentionality, does have the ability to judge the community of which it is a part. In other words, a text can "rise up on its hind legs," as it were, and say to the very people whom it serves: "You are wrong! You must rethink!" And this dialectical relationship between text and community, between the produced and those who produce and who preserve, is seen repeatedly within the history of the church.

[10] The OT raises special issues, because it comprises books claimed both by Jews who became Christians and by those who did not.

[11] Note that the question of canon comes immediately to the fore.

one must be within the Christian community and be taught to read by it. Put into the terms of this argumentation: as one is in the church and adopts what is confessed (its beliefs, standards, etc. [= *fides quae*][12]), one's "personal text" becomes congruent with the "personal text" of those who produced, received, and preserved those NT texts.

Much more traditionally expressed, to be in that Christian community is to adhere to, to confess, and to interpret within the context of the creeds and the *regula fidei* [13], which underlies them.[14] Such creeds and *regula* are not something foreign to the books of the NT.[15] On the contrary, they are—and from the first were seen as—"of a piece" with these very books,[16] *viz.*, drawn from the same apostolic source.[17] Therefore, to live within the creeds

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[12] That is, the faith which is believed, i.e., the doctrine.

[13] The regula fidei or Rule of Faith (also called the Rule of Truth) did have a general content, though it appeared in different localities expressed slightly differently, addressing slightly different concerns. Hence, one can speak of regulae fidei or of "rules" (plural) of faith. A typical example is given by Irenaeus in Adversus Haereses I, 10, 1 ("Against Heresies," in Ante-Nicene Fathers: The Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325, Vol. 1, edited by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, revised and chronologically arranged, with brief prefaces and occasional notes by A. Cleveland Coxe, reprint edition of the American Editon of the Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 1, published in the United States by the Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), 330:

> The Church, though dispersed throughout the whole world, even to the ends of the earth, has received from the apostles and their disciples this faith: [She believes] in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all things that are in them; and in one Christ Jesus, the Son of God, who became incarnate for our salvation; and in the Holy Spirit, who proclaimed through the prophets the dispensations of God, and the advents, and the birth from a virgin, and the passion, and the resurrection from the dead, and the ascension into heaven in the flesh of the beloved Christ Jesus, our Lord, and His [future] manifestation from heaven in the glory of the Father "to gather all things in one," and to raise up anew all flesh of the whole human race, in order that to Christ Jesus, our Lord, and God, and Saviour, and King, according to the will of the invisible Father, "every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth, and that every tongue should confess" to Him, and that He should execute just judgment towards all;....

See Robert W. Wall, "Reading the Bible from within Our Traditions: The 'Rule of Faith' in Theological Hermeneutics," in Between Two Horizons: Spanning New Testament Studies and Systematic Theology, edited by Joel B. Green and Max Turner (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000) 89 and 101-102 for further discussion.

[14] The creeds were either materially identical with the regula fidei or a minimal summary of it, according to R. P. C. Hanson (*Tradition in the Early Church* [Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962], 64–68). Wall (89) describes the relationship between the creeds and the various regulae in this way:

> Precursors to the later, more formal creeds of the ecumenical church, these "rules" summarized the heart of Christian faith and served as theological boundary markers for Christian identity...."

[15] What is said here concerning the creeds and regula is true also with regard to the OT, as can be seen from the quotes below.

[16] See, e.g., the argumentation by Irenaeus in Adversus Haereses I, 22, 1 ("Against Heresies," 347):

> The rule of truth which we hold, is, that there is one God almighty, who made all things by His Word, and fashioned and formed, out of that which had no existence, all things which exist. Thus saith the Scripture, to that effect: "By the Word of the Lord were the heavens established, and all the might of them, by the spirit of His mouth." And again, "All things were made by Him, and without Him was nothing made."

and *regula* gives one an orientation to the books of the NT, an orientation which is "congenial" to them and which enables one to interpret them in accordance with their intention.[18] To interpret from outside this context risks what Irenaeus says of the Valentinians and other heretics: their teachings, which "neither the prophets announced, nor the Lord taught, nor the apostles delivered," cause them "to adapt...to their own peculiar assertions the parables of the Lord, the sayings of the prophets, and the words of the apostles....," and in so doing they "disregard the order and connection of the Scriptures, and so far as in them lies, dismember and destroy the truth," (*Adversus Haereses* I, 8 1).[19] Wall, treating the regula specifically, puts it thus: "Scripture is not self-interpreting...but is rather rendered coherent and relevant by faithful interpreters whose interpretations are constrained by this Rule."[20] It was for this reason that some of the early church fathers contended that the heretics had no right to use the Scriptures against the church in their argumentation (see Tertullian, *De Praescriptione Haereticorum*, 15–18).[21]

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[17] This is what Martin Chemnitz (Examination of the Council of Trent, Part 1, translated by Frederick Kramer [St. Louis: Concordia, 1971], 231) calls, following Irenaeus, "[t]he tradition of the apostles, which has been made known in all the world." See Chemnitz's outstanding discussion of different kinds of tradition (Topic 2, "Concerning Traditions," 223–307) and the relationship of these different kinds of tradition to the interpretation of the Scriptures. For a fine contemporary treatment, see Wall., 96-99.

[18] To focus on one portion of this in the present terminology, we can say that adherence to the creeds and *regula* enables one to "matrix" or connect what one encounters in a text for interpretation and then to interpret that matrix in a way which is "congenial" to the text, for the creeds and *regula* are of one piece with that text and provide, as it were, the interpretive "key" to the matrix at large.

[19] "Against Heresies," 326. Irenaeus goes on to illustrate this with a vivid example (326): such people act as a man would do if he, having "a beautiful image of a king...constructed by some skillful artist out of precious jewels," were to "take this likeness of the man all to pieces,...re-arrange the gems, and so fit them together as to make them into the form of a dog or of a fox...and...then maintain and declare that this was the beautiful image of the king which the skilful artist constructed, pointing to the jewels which had been admirably fitted together by the first artist...."
Chemnitz (244) expresses this truth with a slightly different focus: "[T]here is no doubt that the primitive church received from the Apostles and apostolic men, not only the text (as we say) of the Scriptures, but also its legitimate and natural interpretation."

[20] Wall, 97. See, e.g., the argumentation by Irenaeus in Adversus Haereses I, 10, 3 ("Against Heresies," 331): "...one may...bring out the meaning of those things which have been spoken in parables, and accommodate them to the general scheme of the faith...."
        It is for this reason that the *regula* and creeds had a normative function when interpretations of Scripture were in dispute. In the words of Wall (89): "The [regulae] were statements of core theological affirmations, which might continue to serve the church as criteria for assessing the coherence of one's interpretation of Scripture." Similarly, Frances Young (*The Making of Creeds* [London: SCM, 1991], 9) says that the early church regarded the creeds as "a normative over-view, as 'apostolic' and as the standard to which appeal was to be made when controversy about the content or interpretation of scripture arose."

[21] Tertullian, "On Prescription Against Heretics," in *Ante-Nicene Fathers: The Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325*, Vol. 3, edited by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, revised and chronologically arranged, with brief prefaces and occasional notes by A. Cleveland Coxe, reprint edition of the American Editon of the Ante-

It must be noted, however, that the NT Scriptures do retain their **authority** on their own, and that interpretations dependent upon the creeds/regulae should always be able to appeal to matrices/complexes of signifiers and meanings which appear within these Scriptures and which support assertions in the creeds/*regulae* .[22] In other words, the issue under discussion is not the authority of Scripture but the **interpretation** of sacred Scripture—the problem of what Scripture actually says—and the creeds and *regulae* help to determine which readings of Scripture are the apostolic/Christian readings which may legitimately be drawn from them.[23]

C. The Role of Faith and the Work of the Holy Spirit

When one becomes an "implied reader" of the NT, one's "personal text" becomes congruent with the beliefs, standards, and knowledge of those who produced those documents and, therefore, of the texts themselves. Such a "personal text" includes subjective faith (= *fides qua)*[24]—one must also **embrace** the faith. St. Paul writes "to the saints" (τοῖς ἁγίοις, e.g., Rom. 1:7). St. Luke says explicitly to Theophilus (Luke 1:4): "that you may **know** the surety of those matters in which you were first instructed" (ἵνα **ἐπιγνῷς** περὶ ὧν κατηχήθης λόγων τὴν ἀσφάλειαν). **A *believer* is implied**. And only such a one can read and read correctly. What part, then, does faith actually play? Otherwise expressed, what role does the Holy Spirit play in "faith-full" interpretation? Two possible answers may be given. The first is both the more traditional and the post-modern(!) position and asserts the following:

Position A

(i)   The Holy Spirit inspired the sacred writers and desires their message to be heard, understood, and believed.

(ii)   The Holy Spirit does so, not by giving quantum leaps of understanding (e.g., instant knowledge of history [eliminating need for study] or total linguistic

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Nicene Fathers, Vol. 3, published in the United States by the Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), 250-251.

[22]One does the same with a Greek grammar, e.g., as one uses it to help determine the meaning of a given construction in a NT text. One does not learn Greek grammar from Scripture alone, yet this does not make the grammar book the ultimate norm (*norma normans*).

[23] Ambiguities and difficulties, of course, remain in this position. Who is a Christian, which texts are canonical, which creeds are normative, etc.—all such questions must be explored and are impossible to answer cleanly.

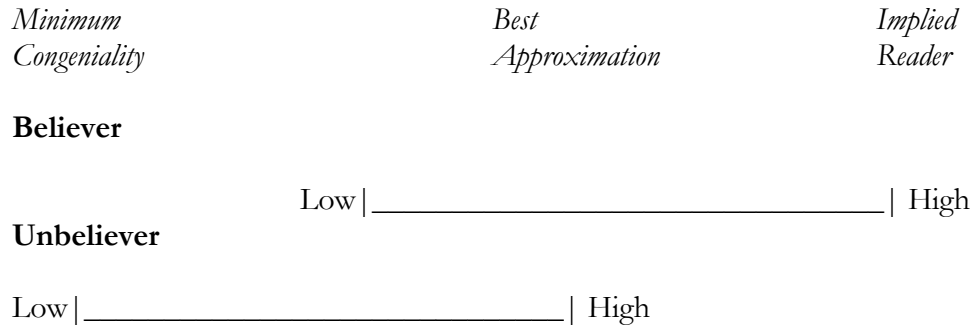[24]That is, the faith by which one believes.

competence [enabling the interpreter to fill in all ambiguities of meaning and referent or to "matrix" signs and interpret them without difficulty, etc.]), but by giving readers/hearers "congeniality" with the text—**utter openness** to and **acceptance** of it (= **faith**).

(iii)   In giving such congeniality with the text (i.e., faith), he enables one to become fully the implied reader of the sacred Scriptures.[25]

(iv)   Therefore, the true implied reader must be a Christian.

(v)   But the converse of (iv) is not true: a Christian as such is not automatically a full implied reader, since the Holy Spirit is not a "trump card," making up for lack of knowledge, skills, etc. (cf. (ii)). Otherwise expressed, believing does not give one ultimate insights into the meaning of texts, otherwise all good Christians would be excellent interpreters of Scripture.

This position may be diagrammed thus, with the scale coordinating the degree of insight into the meaning of the Biblical text with the interpreter's congeniality with that text and indicating the range of insight possible:

Minimum	*Best*	*Implied*
Congeniality	*Approximation*	*Reader*

Believer

Low|_____| High

Unbeliever

Low|_____| High

It expresses the traditional belief that one must be a Christian to understand the sacred Scriptures fully or to interpret them "for all they are worth."[26]

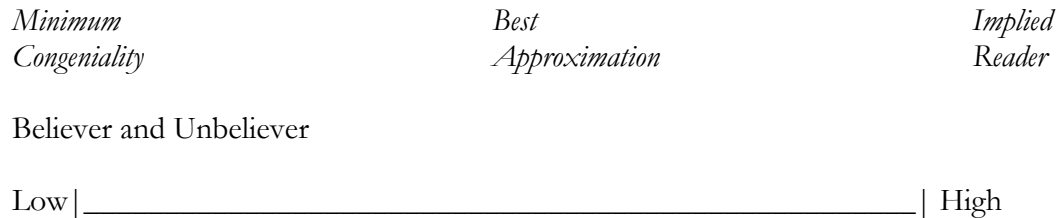The second position is, perhaps, less "post-modern" and asserts the following:

Position B

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[25] There is an argument among those who engage in the study of implied readers and authors (i.e., **reader-response critics**) concerning the existence of a so-called "ideal reader," i.e., one who has absolute competency to interpret a given text.

[26]One can, of course, understand some essential elements of the Scriptures with minimum congeniality.

(i)   The Holy Spirit inspired the sacred writers and desires their message to be heard, understood, and believed.

(ii)   One needs congeniality with the text for proper interpretation, but **one can have such congeniality without believing**, i.e., without the Holy Spirit and true faith, though one will be a **"provisional believer"** in such an instance.[27]

(iii)   The Holy Spirit, then, accomplishes his purpose, not by giving quantum leaps of understanding (e.g., instant knowledge of history [eliminating need for study] or total linguistic competence [enabling the interpreter to fill in all ambiguities of meaning and referent or to "matrix" signs and interpret them without difficulty, etc.]), but by working **faith** in interpreters, **which makes the "provisional faith" which they have real or "permanent."**[28]

(iv)   Faith is thus the bridge between the narrative world (where one believes provisionally) and the real world, i.e., it affirms that what it understands the text to be saying and signifying is, in fact, true.

This view may be diagrammed thus:

Minimum   *Best*   *Implied*
Congeniality   *Approximation*   *Reader*

Believer and Unbeliever

Low|_____| High

It may be noted that, according to either schema, adoption of the role of the reader implied by the text is an end truly to be desired.

D. Conclusion

Given our study, we can conclude that the role of the Holy Spirit in Scriptural interpretation is crucial, but, properly understood, limited. The Spirit does not make up for lack of knowledge or fauty understanding of language, geography, ancient farming methods,

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[27]Provisional belief is not an objective condition in which one knows that one is adopting foreign ideas and operating at a distance from them. It is more like a fine actor who adopts a role totally (e.g., he "becomes" Hamlet and thinks like him).

[28] Real belief, then, is the making of the actor's role a permanent condition (something like the actor continuing to think he is Hamlet after the final curtain).

conditions within the early church, etc. The Holy Spirit's function has to do with the reception of the text, whether that be congeniality with the text and thus a greater understanding of it, or belief that what the text asserts is, in fact, true and applicable to the interpreter's (and interpreter's community's) life. Furthermore, the Holy Spirit is not a "trump card" which one may pull out to validate one's interpretation without further proof.

One can interpret the Scriptures, often somewhat adequately, without faith and the possession of the Holy Spirit. But one can never fully and adequately interpret them without faith and the possession of the Holy Spirit.

April 30, 2008

NB: This paper represents an updating of the discussion in chapter 11, section c I, of James W. Voelz, *What Does This Mean?: Principles of Biblical Interpretation in the Post-Modern World*, 2nd edition, St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1997.