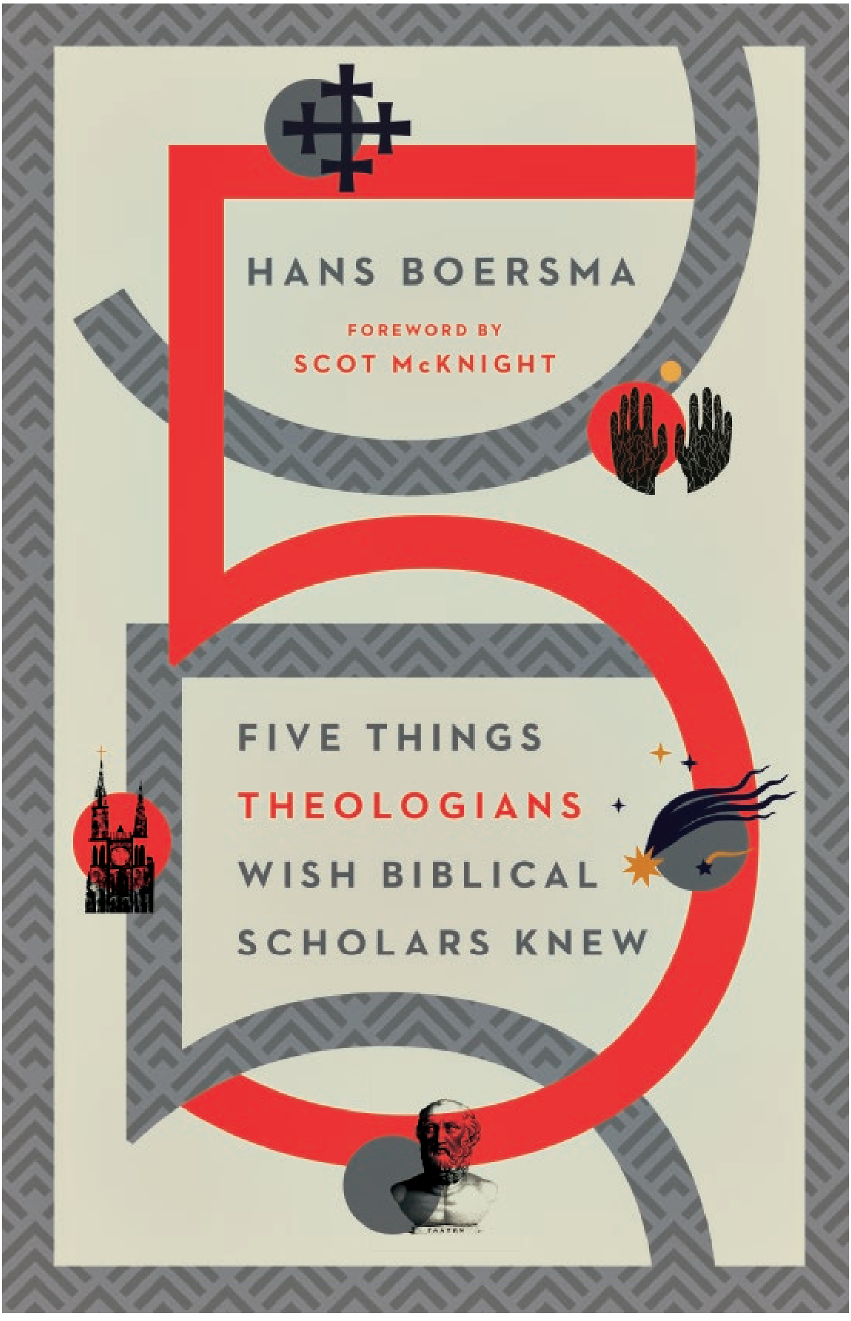

HANS BOERSMA

FOREWORD BY
SCOT McKNIGHT

FIVE THINGS THEOLOGIANS WISH BIBLICAL SCHOLARS KNEW

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INTRODUCTION

BIBLICAL AND DOGMATIC THEOLOGY

Neither this book's title nor its implied topic should be taken too seriously. Talk about the relationship between theologians and biblical scholars assumes the existence of two distinct academic disciplines—even more, it extends this division from the disciplines to the people embarking on them: apparently, some scholars engage in dogmatic (or systematic) theology while others are biblical scholars. Both presuppositions are terribly wrong.

With this opening salvo I don't mean to take a swipe at the editors of IVP Academic. David McNutt is an excellent editor, and his suggestion that I write a book titled *Five Things Theologians Wish Biblical Scholars Knew* had my immediate and warm support. After all, though I may be convinced that the disciplinary boundary between biblical studies and doctrinal reflection is illegitimate, this boundary does exist in practice. And current academic trends worsen the situation. The drift is toward ever-shorter programs of seminary and other theological training, which allow for fewer and fewer opportunities for biblical and doctrinal students to take courses in each other's disciplines. As a result, it is increasingly common for students to obtain a PhD in biblical studies without ever having seriously engaged in dogmatic theology and vice versa. By publishing two books, one by a biblical scholar and one by a theologian, IVP Academic is doing its part to bring the two disciplines closer together (or, as I hope, to render the very distinction obsolete).

The division between biblical and dogmatic theology goes back at least to 1787, when Johann P. Gabler delivered an inaugural address at the University of Altdorf titled *De justo discrimine theologiae biblicae et dogmaticae regundisque recte utriusque finibus* ("On the Proper Distinction Between Biblical and Dogmatic Theology and the Specific Objectives of Each").[1] Whatever we may think of the distinction between biblical and dogmatic theology, the reality is that since then seminaries and theological departments have almost universally adopted the distinction.

Gabler sharply delineated biblical theology, defined as the historical study of positive sources (Scripture), and dogmatic theology, which he thought of as the speculative or philosophical engagement of religious truths. Explaining this distinction, he writes: "There is truly a *biblical theology*, of historical origin, conveying what the holy writers felt about divine matters; on the other hand there is a *dogmatic theology* . . . of didactic origin, teaching what each theologian philosophises rationally about divine things, according to the measure of his ability or of the times, age, place, sect, school, and other similar factors."[2] Gabler, deeply shaped by Enlightenment thought, maintained that biblical theology was grounded in historical criticism. Biblical theology's task was one of historical reconstruction, followed by the dogmatic attempt of ferreting out the theological themes that continued to be of significance.

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[1] For an English translation and commentary, see John Sandys-Wunsch and Laurence Eldredge, "J. P. Gabler and the Distinction Between Biblical and Dogmatic Theology: Translation, Commentary, and Discussion of His Originality," *SJT* 33 (1980): 133-58.

[2] Gabler in Sandys-Wunsch and Eldredge, "J. P. Gabler," 137; emphasis added.

Dogmatic theology was, for Gabler, a second step, one that takes account not just of the theology found in the Bible but also of the various demands of one's own historical context. As John Sandys-Wunsch and Laurence Eldredge put it: "Gabler saw the particular need of his period to be for a dogmatic theology that was in agreement with reason, clearly expressed, and aware of the new human wisdom especially in philosophy and history."[3] Gabler explained that the multiplicity of theological traditions and dogmatic developments could be explained by the fact that these were not grounded in biblical theology alone.

Two things stand out in Gabler's account. First, biblical theology is a purely historical discipline. And second, dogmatic theology is strictly a second step. Gabler's procedure neatly divided the two disciplines, and this has served to render much of the subsequent history of biblical theology impervious to ecclesial and dogmatic concerns. To be sure, not all biblical theology proceeds along the lines of Gabler's inaugural lecture. Many biblical scholars, especially those of a more conservative bent, question the legitimacy and value of searching for the history behind the text. Grammatical-historical exegesis is much more firmly wedded to the text itself, and its practitioners typically don't share Gabler's skepticism vis-à-vis the miraculous or supernatural events that are recounted throughout the biblical narrative. Mostly, however, they do adopt Gabler's approach by working from the ground up, moving from positive (biblical) theology to speculative (dogmatic) theology.

For instance, in a much-quoted article, New Testament scholar D. A. Carson approvingly refers to a four-level interpretation approach as devised by Graham Cole:

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[3] Sandys-Wunsch and Eldredge, "J. P. Gabler," 148.

> At the first level, the Bible itself must be understood exegetically, within its literary and historical contexts, with appropriate attention devoted to literary genre, attempting to unfold authorial intent so far as it is disclosed in the text. At level 2, the text must be understood within the whole of biblical theology, including where it fits into and what it contributes to the unfolding storyline and its theology. At level 3, the theological structures found in the text are brought to bear upon, and understood in concert with, other major theological emphases derived from Scripture. At level 4, all teachings derived (or ostensibly derived) from the biblical text are subjected to and modified by a larger hermeneutical proposal (e.g., Trinitarian action, God's love and freedom, or something vague such as "what was disclosed in Jesus").[4]

I suspect that Cole and Carson see level one as engaging in a traditional form of grammatical-historical exegesis, with level two then placing the exegetical outcome within the broader theological trajectory of Scripture. (This second level is where much of the study of biblical themes of individual books—and of Scripture as a whole—typically occurs, something that has flourished greatly through the growth of biblical theology in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.) Levels three and four are obviously more theological in character. It is here that other biblical themes (at level 3) and broader theological teachings (at level 4) enter into the picture. Carson observes that whereas traditional interpreters of Scripture operate mostly at levels one and two, recent advocates of the so-called theological interpretation of Scripture often operate mostly at levels three and four, sometimes at the cost of paying attention to levels one and two.

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[4] D. A. Carson, "Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Yes, But . . . ," in *Theological Commentary: Evangelical Perspectives,* ed. R. Michael Allen (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 206-7.

I shouldn't run ahead of myself. In every chapter that follows, I propose an angle of reintegrating levels one and two with levels three and four, while simultaneously questioning the neat division of these levels in the first place. Let me simply observe here that Carson's brief summary of Cole's approach gives little indication of how Christology, metaphysics, providence, ecclesiology, and heavenly contemplation affect one's exegetical work. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that Carson and Cole—along with many other evangelical scholars—advocate an approach that treats theology as an afterthought. Indeed, if one takes Gabler's distinction seriously, it is easy to imagine dogmatic theology as simply disappearing from the scene, except perhaps in continuing to serve by way of a posteriori checks and balances, ensuring that one's interpretation of the biblical text isn't out of line with biblical teaching found elsewhere in Scripture. Why engage in dogmatic theology at all if biblical theology has already managed to establish the biblical-theological content apart from philosophical and doctrinal presuppositions?

THE OBJECT OF THEOLOGY

Now, I may actually be sympathetic to the abolition of dogmatic theology; that is to say, a dogmatic theology that accepts its consignment to the third and fourth stages of biblical engagement is simply not worth its salt. Inasmuch as Scripture has God himself for its subject matter, it is theological (that is to say, doctrinal or dogmatic) from the outset. The notion that we begin with trying to understand the text and subsequently arrive at theological or dogmatic conclusions fails to capture what the Bible is all about—and it also fails to understand what theologians are supposed to do. The primary task of theology (and let's forget here about the distinction between biblical and dogmatic theology) is not to explain the historical meaning of the text but to use the Scriptures as a means of grace in drawing the reader to Jesus Christ. In other words, biblical interpretation is not a historical discipline. To use a patristic expression, it is *mystagogical* in character: biblical interpretation leads the reader into the mystery of God in Christ. The theologian's terminus does not lie in the history behind the text or even in the text itself. The theologian attends to Scripture as a sacramental means of entering into the mystery of God. Theology (and Scripture as a means) aims at nothing less than the divine life itself.

The distinction I am alluding to here is reminiscent of the sharp debate between the Princetonians and the Mercersburg theologians in the mid-nineteenth century. This in-house Reformed debate pitched the Common Sense philosophy advocated by the Princeton school of Charles Hodge over against the idealist Romanticism of the Mercersburg theology of John W. Nevin and Philip Schaff. Common Sense philosophy was grounded in the empirical, Baconian tradition and as such adopted nominalist presuppositions, which William DiPuccio summarizes as follows: "(1) Only individual things are real. (2) Since every individual is unique, there can be no common nature or essence among them. Nominalism concludes, therefore, that (3) the common names used to designate groups of individuals according to similar attributes are merely subjective abstractions."[5] As DiPuccio explains, Hodge's Princetonian theology was grounded in the modern dualism between mind and matter and between God and world, a dualism that he inherited from Immanuel Kant and René Descartes.[6] As Nevin saw it, the propositionalism of the Princetonian tradition erred in identifying the object of faith with the propositions or teachings of Scripture rather than with Christ.[7]

In contrast to Hodge, the Mercersburg theologians took their starting point in Christian Platonism and, in line with this, in a realist epistemology. For Nevin, this meant the following: "(1) Universal ideas are objective and ontological realities rather than creatures of the mind. (2) These ideas constitute the essence or nature of individuals and natural laws. (3) Universal ideas, therefore, are the foundation of all knowledge."[8] Nevin's acceptance of Christian Platonism rendered him sympathetic to the catholicity of the Great Tradition as well as to aspects of the Romanticism of Friedrich Schleiermacher and Samuel Taylor Coleridge.[9] As a result, Nevin and his Mercersburg colleagues worked with a participatory ontology: they regarded signs and reality as inwardly linked, so that they treated the language of Scripture as the sacramental means that links the believer directly to God in Christ as the object of faith.[10] For Nevin, explains DiPuccio, "the object of theology is neither speculation nor abstraction, but the realities themselves—that is, the ontic and the holy."[11] As Nevin saw it, the soul's capacity to behold God himself means that it is through intuition rather than induction that the soul has immediate communion with God.[12]

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[5] William DiPuccio, *The Interior Sense of Scripture: The Sacred Hermeneutics of John W. Nevin*, Studies in American Biblical Hermeneutics 14 (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1998), 11.

[6] DiPuccio, *Interior Sense of Scripture*, 9.

[7] DiPuccio, *Interior Sense of Scripture*, 13.

My project is in basic continuity with that of Nevin and the Mercersburg theologians. Both are deeply sympathetic to the patristic treatment of Scripture, which treats the Bible not as an end in itself but as a sacramental means of making God present to the church and to the individual believer.[13] Nevin's approach offered a basic reiteration of the sacramental hermeneutic that he found in the church fathers and the medieval tradition, and that has continued unabated in Eastern Orthodoxy and can be traced also in various strands of Catholic and Anglican thought. It is an approach that rejects a modern epistemology that begins with individual objects or events and that instead takes its starting point in eternal forms, christologically conceived as "located" within the eternal Logos. Put differently, it is the Christ-centered faith in eternal providence that motivated the Great Tradition to treat the biblical text as a sacramental means of grace drawing believers into the life of God rather than as a mere repository of historical and doctrinal truths.

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[8] DiPuccio, *Interior Sense of Scripture*, 10.

[9] Throughout this book, I speak of the Great Tradition as referring to the patristic and medieval tradition (East and West), which was grounded in a Christian Platonic (realist) metaphysic. Without in any way minimizing the numerous individual differences among theologians of the Great Tradition, it is nonetheless fair to distinguish it as a whole from Western modes of theologizing that originate in the late medieval and early modern nominalist turn in metaphysics.

[10] DiPuccio, *Interior Sense of Scripture*, 65-74.

[11] DiPuccio, *Interior Sense of Scripture*, 74.

[12] DiPuccio, *Interior Sense of Scripture*, 149.

[13] See my discussion of a sacramental hermeneutic in *Scripture as Real Presence: Sacramental Exegesis in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017).

Needless to say, Scripture does present a history of salvation, and it does make theological truth claims. The point, therefore, is not to downplay history or doctrinal truth. But what Nevin and others discovered is that Scripture in the Great Tradition never simply identifies the meaning of the text with authorial intent. Since the purpose of the biblical text is sacramental, it is only when, in faith, the believer has arrived at Christ himself that the Scripture truly yields its highest meaning. The reason, therefore, that the Great Tradition moved from history to spirit (or from the historical level to the allegorical, moral, and eschatological levels) in interpretation is that these earlier Christians recognized that meaning occurs in the encounter of faith between the believer and the sacramental reality to which Scripture points.

Christians, therefore, are not (at least, not in an ultimate sense) people of the book. The book, while indispensable and properly venerated as a sacrament of the Word, is not itself God's final revelation: only Christ is. Because Christ is sacramentally present in the Scriptures—even in the Wisdom literature and the historical narratives of the Old Testament—we turn to the Scriptures as a means to God's final revelation in Christ. God assumes flesh in Christ, so that Christ truly is the Word incarnate. Yes, Scripture too makes God present—incarnation and inscripturation are closely analogous. But Scripture is not the Word of God itself.[14] The eternal Logos hypostatically (personally) identifies himself with human nature, not with a book. A single-minded emphasis on authorial intent shifts the focus from Scripture's spiritual telos to its historical point of origin. In doing so, it runs the real risk of bibliolatry: the substitution of a book for God in Christ.

HOW TO UPHOLD SCRIPTURE: A CHAPTER OVERVIEW

In no way do I mean to downplay the significance of Scripture. My concern is to reiterate that Scripture's ultimate meaning is not this-worldly but otherworldly. Scripture is not the sacramental reality (*res*) itself, but the indispensable outward means (*sacramentum*) that makes Christ present. We venerate Scripture, lifting it high in liturgical procession, but we worship God alone.

It is my conviction that only when we treat Scripture as sacramental rather than as an end in itself do we truly hold a high view of it. In a nominalist metaphysic, created things (including human words) are unhinged from their ideal, invisible realities. The result is that Scripture ends up being treated as a mere object, from which we attempt to wrest its original meaning by way of empirical research. For the purposes of finding meaning, such an objective or empirical approach to Scripture *treats* it as a purely natural, purely human book—regardless of what our faith commitments about inspiration may tell us. In applying scientific methodology to the Bible, we devalue it: it becomes a mere object. Just like Baconian science tries to master the natural world, so Baconian interpretation tries to master the biblical text. The irony here is that precisely when we exalt the outward object (Scripture) as the be-all and end-all of our interpretive endeavor, our methodology treats it as an inert, lifeless object, which we have at our scholarly disposal. When we unhinge Scripture from the reality that gives it meaning we lose any and all spiritual significance.

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[14] For Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, Scripture is a *witness* to revelation and should not be identified with it. Accordingly, he maintains, "You cannot put revelation in your pocket like a book you carry around with you." *God's Word: Scripture—Tradition—Office*, ed. P. Hünermann and T. Söding, trans. H. Taylor (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2008), 52. In response, the evangelical theologian Douglas A. Sweeney insists that Scripture actually *is* revelation, which "in this day and age, can be packaged, transported, and carried in our pockets." "Ratzinger on Scripture, Tradition, and Church: An Evangelical Assessment," in *Joseph Ratzinger and the Healing of the Reformation-Era Divisions*, ed. Emery de Gaál and Matthew Levering (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Academic, 2019), 367-68. I would suggest that a way forward may be found here by treating Scripture as analogous with but not identical to the incarnation. Scripture sacramentally participates in divine revelation and makes it really present, but only Christ himself is the fullness of God's revelation. So, in an indirect sense Sweeney's statement may be allowed to stand. But (using Chalcedonian Christology) it is more fully the case that God suffered on the cross than that we hold divine revelation in our pocket, for God does not *assume* text in Scripture; he *assumes* flesh in Christ.

I have purposely, therefore, used the term *Scripture* in each of the chapter titles. The exegetical efforts of biblical scholars are often motivated by a deep desire to do justice to Scripture as the Word of God. This desire animates many a search for the original meaning of the text. The underlying idea is that only when we subject ourselves as readers to what the text actually says (rather than impose our own subjective notions onto the text) do we retain its authority. I am genuinely sympathetic to this concern of much historical-biblical scholarship. Surely, we must eschew any arbitrary imposition of our subjective sentiments onto Holy Scripture. I am convinced, however, that the elusive search for *the* true, historical meaning of the text in actual fact places ordinary believers at the mercy of individual scholars, who rarely if ever come to exegetical agreement among one another. Moreover, the elusive search for the Bible's historical meaning downplays Scripture's intent to encounter the believer sacramentally as it is read.

By placing the word *Scripture* as the second element in each chapter title, I make the point that we properly uphold Scripture only if and when we acknowledge also the term that precedes it. I should, however, insert a caveat about the kind of claim I intend to make with the various titles. The type of claim is not identical in each case. The five pairings vary in kind and significance. While I'm convinced, for instance, that without the church there simply is no Scripture, I wouldn't dare make the claim that someone who rejects Christian Platonism cannot uphold Scripture's authority (though I do think authority looks far more attractive from a realist than from a nominalist standpoint). Still, in an important respect, each title does a similar thing. Each refers to something that has come under suspicion in the modern period—for example, a Christ-centered reading of Scripture, the centrality of the church for biblical exegesis, or heavenly contemplation as Scripture's ultimate aim. And in each case, I make it my goal to retrieve an important aspect of the Great Tradition's reading of Scripture, suggesting that our doctrine of Scripture suffers in some way when we fail to do justice to the first element of each chapter title.

Christ is the heart of all Scripture, and all Scripture points to him and makes him present. He is the reason we treat Scripture as authoritative and meaningful. So, in the first chapter I make the point that only by acknowledging Christ as Scripture's true content can we retain Scripture as Scripture. Hence the title of this chapter: "No Christ, No Scripture."

The same goes for the other four chapter titles. "No Plato, No Scripture" is meant to highlight that we all read Scripture through a metaphysical lens (whether we acknowledge it or not) and that Christian Platonism best allows us, by faith, to recognize Christ as the sacramental reality present in the biblical text. The sacramental hermeneutic of the Scriptures is dependent, or so I argue, on a Christian Platonist metaphysic.

The third chapter turns to the doctrine of providence ("No Providence, No Scripture"), and it points out that Scripture is treated rightly only when we do justice to its role in God's providential care. An acknowledgment of Scripture's place within divine providence recognizes that the Word of God shines through more clearly in Scripture than in any other human witness; Scripture participates in a unique manner in God's eternal Word, and it is this unique mode of participation that renders it special and authoritative for believers.

By linking Scripture to the church in the title of the fourth chapter ("No Church, No Scripture"), I aim to caution against academic elitism, arguing that the proper site for reading Scripture is not the university but the church. By allowing the academy to set the rules for biblical engagement, we have far too easily let methodological naturalism creep into our biblical interpretation. I make a plea, therefore, for a return to an ecclesial mode of reading Scripture, which allows canon, liturgy, and creed to shape how we understand the Bible. Again, my point is that the recognition of an ecclesial setting for biblical interpretation is a way of upholding rather than of undermining Scripture's unique and high position.

The title of the final chapter, "No Heaven, No Scripture," emphasizes that Scripture posits neither itself nor any other created good as our ultimate aim or telos. Scripture's sacramental truth is otherworldly, contemplative, heavenly. The modern turn away from contemplation toward a life of action flouts Scripture's true function and serves to undermine its sacramental role. Only when we read Scripture with a view to its ultimate, spiritual end—the beatific vision itself—do we do justice to its intended role. When we ignore or downplay Scripture's mediatory role in drawing us to the heavenly contemplation of God and reduce Scripture to a this-worldly guide in the service of political or social-justice concerns, we domesticate and naturalize it. Scripture is Scripture because of the heavenly future of God in Christ that it holds out to us.

The "five things" in this book's title may worry some readers that I have caved in to an instrumentalist or utilitarian approach to hermeneutics. Let me assure you: I have a strong dislike of "how-to" books, and in no way do I set out to provide yet another "method" on how to read the Bible. My aim is simply to offer a reminder of the theological focus of biblical exegesis. The unfortunate divide between biblical and doctrinal theology will disappear, I am convinced, wherever Christ is the theological starting point, center, and goal of our biblical engagement.

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