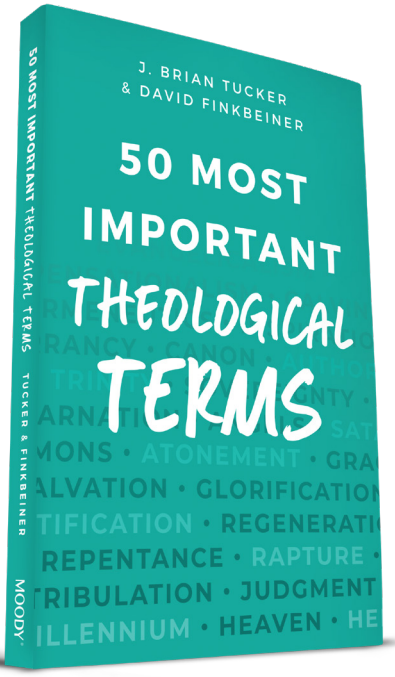

Theology can be intimidating, full of big words and lofty ideas. Yet theological terms aren't just for academicians. These powerful words belong to everyday Christians, too. The authors offer clear explanations of key terms from Bible doctrine. Beyond mere explanations, the authors help the reader understand why these terms matter.

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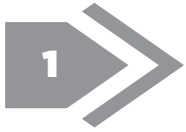
THEOLOGICAL PRACTICE AND IDENTITY

(Theological Prolegomenon)



Theological Hermeneutics

Why do some people believe that you can lose your salvation while others say, "Once saved, always saved"? The answer is hermeneutics. Why do some people baptize infants while others only baptize believers? You guessed it—hermeneutics. Why do some churches allow women pastors while others do not? You know the drill by now—hermeneutics. Hermeneutics is the starting point for our theology. What we do here determines the kind of theological system that develops. Get your hermeneutical practices right, and you have a great chance to develop sound theology. So, what is theological hermeneutics?

Processes associated with understanding and interpreting the Bible, its historical culture, and its contemporary readers—along with various theological texts written to explain

them—constitute the primary focus of theological hermeneutics. Hermeneutics, more broadly, builds on a Greek noun *hermēneutēs*, which in context may signify a person who engages certain interpretive processes to help another understand the significance of words (1 Cor. 14:28). An associated Greek verb, *hermēnuō*, highlights the processes associated with helping a person uncover the meaning and application of a group of texts (Luke 24:27). The lexical setting of these two words suggests the goal of hermeneutics: to draw out the original meaning (*exegesis*) along with its application (*contextualization*).

Theological hermeneutics also recognizes the role of the interpreter—sometimes this is called "exegeting the exegete." An interpreter's background plays an important part in the interpretive process. It is essential to reflect on and make explicit this location throughout the interpretive journey, so that this and other presuppositions are seen as welcomed guests and not invisible tricksters leading away from the goal of virtuous reading. A couple of these socio-theological locations will be discussed later in this chapter.

One important method, the *literal-grammatical-historical*, serves as a primary means for uncovering the author's intended meaning of Scripture by those whose socio-theological location is dispensationalism. In this approach, the interpreter focuses on the plain meaning of words in their context; he or she seeks to uncover the human author's intent by paying attention to the text's grammar, syntax, and genre. Words, phrases, clauses, and sentences are read in a "normal" or literal manner in order to uncover the theological message the author intended.

The historical context and the background of the Bible's message is also an important part of this process, since Scripture was written over thousands of years to people in diverse cultures in the Ancient Near East, Jewish, and Greco-Roman worlds. Paying attention to genre helps us discern the way the text communicates its message through guidelines specific to various literary types (e.g., law, narrative, poetry, letters, prophecy). Thus, the goal of the literal-grammatical-historical method is to help readers understand the original message in its original context. It is sometimes described as finding an answer to a simple question: "What did it mean?" It is important to ask that question before a reader pushes forward and asks the contemporary question: "What does it mean to me?" A helpful maxim to remember is that the Bible can't mean to us what it couldn't have meant to them. This will help navigate debates over the contemporary theological significance of Scripture.

Though the term "hermeneutics" often appears in books and articles without any further discussion, it is a crossroads for various theological systems. It is vital, then, to discern the hermeneutical approach an author presupposes and practices in their writing. For example, an author who claims Israel and the church are distinct in God's plan presupposes a literal-grammatical-historical method, while one who claims the church is the new Israel likely does not.

There are complex reasons for choosing one theological hermeneutical method over another, and it should be noted that there is significant overlap between these differing

approaches. In this case, though, a prior commitment to the hermeneutics of covenant theology—and the role of, say, typology, the application of earlier literary forms to later texts—provides the basis for understanding the church as the new Israel. In this way, the literal-historical-grammatical method has been revised and may now be described as *redemptive-historical-grammatical*.

This approach recognizes an inherent weakness in the literal-historical-grammatical method: it is ill-equipped to explain the full meaning of the whole Bible. The overarching redemptive message of the Scriptures can get lost in the atomistic readings of the literal approach. Even though the literal-historical-grammatical approach acknowledges the progress of revelation, its focus on the *human* author's intent fails to account fully for the Holy Spirit's agency as the primary author of Scripture. This theological-hermeneutical crossroad will have massive implications in the way theologians put together their Bible (e.g., the fulfillment of prophetic passages such as Daniel 9:24–27 and Hosea 3:5).

Despite the differences between these two hermeneutical approaches, they generally share a commitment to the authority, inspiration, and inerrancy of Scripture (see **The Characteristics of Scripture**). However, another hermeneutical approach should be noted: the *historical-critical method*. Whereas the literal-historical and redemptive-historical approaches find patterns of meaningfulness internal to the Scriptures, the historical-critical method finds it primarily outside of the Bible.

The locus of authority belongs to the wider academic fields and adjunct disciplines. Generally, when armchair theologians come across claims that set aside the historic teaching of the church, reject the reality of miracles, or account for biblical details via natural explanations, a historical-critical hermeneutic is being used. This doesn't mean that this method must be jettisoned fully. When it is shorn of its naturalistic presuppositions (e.g., a denial of miracles), it can yield historical insights that inform theological readings of the Bible and provide bridges of empathy toward larger concerns raised in a contemporary context.

Others find the historical-critical method an unacceptable dialogue partner. The *theological interpretation of Scripture approach* takes an inward focus for interpretation and draws exclusively on the canon (see **Canon of Scripture**) and the creeds of the church as a way to understand the meaning of the Bible. This approach has much to commend it, and given the presuppositions of both the literal-historical-grammatical and the redemptive-historical-grammatical methods, both may be labeled as types of theological interpretation of Scripture.

Evangelical

Are you an evangelical? It's complicated. I thought I was until someone told me that since I was, I was also a white

supremacist. This is what happens when theological terms are defined by the broader culture. So let's clarify what it means.

"Evangelical" is a contemporary grouping of Protestant Christians that have their roots in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century revivalism. They generally share four characteristics, the well-known Bebbington Quadrilateral: biblicism (the centrality of the Bible), conversionism (the individual acceptance of Jesus as Savior), activism (the requirement for evangelism and mission), and crucicentrism (the atoning work of Jesus on the cross). While some of these characteristics may be shared with other Christian traditions, evangelicals are also further located in the context of the twentieth-century debates between theological liberals and conservatives. These three ideas—Protestant Christianity, revivalism, and Bebbington's Quadrilateral—triangulate the social identity of evangelicals in the United States today. The term is not used the same way in other parts of the world. In Europe, for example, it refers to an ecclesial identity that is not Roman Catholic. In the UK, it shares some similarities with the use in mainland Europe; however, it is also used as a subgroup identity for low-church Anglicans, as well as for those not attached to the Church of England but still identified by the above three ideas. This suggests that "evangelical" is not simply a political identity, as it is all too often presented in the early twenty-first century, though it is a contested and somewhat malleable term.

The term "evangelical" draws from the lexical setting of the New Testament Greek noun *euangelion*, which can have a

contextual meaning such as "good news" or, as some English translations of the Bible translate it, "gospel" (Gal. 1:11; Rom. 1:1, 16). The rationale for this group label is that those committed to biblicism, conversionism, activism, and crucicentrism may properly be understood as those who have aligned their patterns of belief and embodiment with the aims of the gospel. It is the message that God has acted in Jesus of Nazareth in order to redeem humanity, establish the kingdom, and restore creation. The ecclesial communities who identify themselves as evangelical understand their mission as the proclamation of this good news throughout the world. While there is significant debate as to the social implications of the gospel, there is agreement on the centrality of Jesus to the message.

When the diverse ecclesial label "evangelical" is attached to the term "theology," it raises a perennial challenge: How does one define *evangelical theology*? It is a theology that has its focus on the gospel of Jesus Christ from beginning to end. Several implications may be detected from this. Evangelical theology is fully Trinitarian, orthodox in its Christological teaching, and animated both by Christ's atoning work on the cross and by the centrality of the Christian community of faith, gathered for worship and mission.

Two terms mentioned in the opening sentence of this entry need further definition: (a) Protestantism and (b) revivalism, since evangelicalism is a nested social identity within these two movements from church history. *Protestantism* is a sixteenth-century movement of protest concerning the

beliefs and practices of the Roman Catholic Church, itself a branch of Christendom that resulted from an earlier split with the Orthodox Church in 1054. The *material* principle of the Protestant Reformation—what made it possible—is that justification of sinners occurs by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. The *formal* principle—its unique shape—is Scripture alone. Scripture formed the doctrine that made possible a movement to reform the church for the glory of God alone. Since a protest movement is inherently unstable, though, Protestantism quickly branched into four streams: Lutheran, Reformed, Anglican, and Anabaptist. As these grew, further movements developed: Baptists, Methodists, and eventually Pentecostals.

The second movement important for understanding evangelicalism is *revivalism*, a conversion-and-renewal movement in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Its roots were in the Reformation's Lutheran stream in Germany that developed into *pietism*—an approach to the Christian life emphasizing holiness and personal experience in contrast to the dry orthodoxy that had overtaken much of Europe. A shared spiritual ethos also developed with Puritanism, especially in England and America, along with the Great Awakening and eventually the Pentecostal outpourings. Revivalism was characterized by (a) longing for repentance, (b) confident expectation for revival, (c) gospel proclamation, and (d) renewal of ardor and scripturally based worship and mission practices.

Why does this matter? In the last several years, there has

been a move to give up on the "evangelical" label, with some referring to themselves as "ex-evangelicals." It has also, no doubt, been co-opted by political leaders and has drifted from its original gospel orientation. Labels matter, though, and sometimes we need to revisit what they indicate. When my evangelical identity reconnects the gospel with my theology and the church, it is functioning the way it should. But when it only connects an inward-focused subgroup, a condition referred to as *koinonitis*, then an intervention is needed—one that requires more than Dr. Phil.

Calvinism

Theologians refer to Calvinism in several different ways. It can indicate the specific teachings of John Calvin (1509–64), though that use is probably too narrow. It can also describe the views of his immediate followers as they sought to organize his views; while more accurate than the previous category, this is still too limited. It can also function as a metonym for Reformed or covenant theology. Generally, Calvinism is abridged by the use of the acrostic TULIP: total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, and perseverance of the saints. These are later formulations that represent closely the type of Calvinism that emerged from the Synod of Dort (1618–19).

While it is popular to highlight TULIP as the prototype of Calvinism, it is more precisely understood as a particular response to *Arminianism*, or the five articles of Remonstrance put forth by those who aligned themselves with the teachings of Jacobus Arminius (1560–1609). While not as well known as TULIP, one recent summary of the five articles built on the acrostic ACURA: all are sinful, conditional election, unlimited atonement, resistible grace, and assurance of salvation. These five phrases are a close approximation of the Arminians' concerns with the theology of the Dutch Reformed Church in their 1610 debates. So, while TULIP may be helpful as a way to remember the doctrines of grace, it will not do as a taxonomic definition for Calvinism.

Calvinism is broader than the "five points" of TULIP. It is a diverse theological tradition whose encompassing logic allows for several streams within its confessional standards, some of which do not map precisely onto TULIP, though they remain within its orbit. This suggests that Reformed theology and Calvinism do not have the same boundaries. In the United States, the "new Calvinists" are those who identify with the five points. Some of these continue to identify as Baptists, identifying with Charles Spurgeon or other Puritan divines. A Calvinist minister may also lead a nondenominational congregation, drawing from TULIP but holding to a truncated Reformed doctrine of the church and the sacraments. These would all be Calvinist but not altogether Reformed.

What are the boundaries for *Reformed theology*? Theologians offer a consistent set of answers. First, their churches

trace their roots to the sixteenth-century magisterial Reformers, rather than to the later seventeenth-century radical Reformers who are the genealogical descendants of Baptists and other nondenominational churches. Second, Reformed churches allow Scripture to serve as its "norming norm," with the various creeds and confessions functioning in a secondary way. These would include the Heidelberg Catechism, the Canons of the Synod of Dort, and the Westminster Confession. Third, the ecclesial identity of those embracing fully Reformed theology will organize their churches via Presbyterian and Episcopal church-polity structures. They will not be nondenominational or congregational. Fourth, a sacramental approach to ministry will mark Reformed theology, so the Lord's Supper and baptism will be seen as means of grace and not mere memorials or public testimonies. So, being Reformed and being a Calvinist are not the same thing. A Calvinist emphasizes TULIP, though not necessarily Reformed ecclesiology. Calvinism, then, is a bounded set of doctrinal emphases with a variety of ecclesiological expressions.

A recent example of this diversity is evangelical Calvinism, a loosely affiliated group of interpreters who have misgivings regarding the federal or orthodox understanding of Calvinism. This divergent form of Calvinism finds fruitful dialogue partners in Thomas and James Torrance as they function as interpreters of Karl Barth. Evangelical Calvinism is not to be confused with the new Calvinism, which is popular among younger evangelicals who espouse Reformed soteriology via the five points from Dort and who are disaffected

with dispensationalism. This broad grouping of evangelicals includes those with differing eschatological views as well as those with differing positions on whether the miraculous spiritual gifts (see **Spiritual Gifts**) continue today. There are also diverse views among this group in regard to believer or infant baptism (see **Baptism**). This eclecticism, however, does not typically extend to dispensationalism.

4 Dispensationalism

When did you first discover the joy of being uncool? For some of us it was when we blew out the candles on our eighteenth . . . no, wait, our twenty-ninth . . . okay, maybe our forty-ninth birthday cake. Once we free ourselves from the desire to be accepted or part of the "in crowd," it allows us to orient our lives in a way that doesn't depend on what the cool kids or adults think. When it comes to theology, dispensationalism suffers from a lack of the cool factor; a lot of people raised in churches that teach it are looking to blow out the candles on this so-called naïve way to read Scripture. Often, though, they're rejecting a caricature of the hermeneutical and theological system, not a clear understanding of it. So, let's clarify what it is before we blow out the candles.

Dispensationalism is a set of hermeneutical processes practiced by some evangelical Protestants beginning in the

late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries but continuing into the twenty-first century. One of its presuppositions is a rejection of *supersessionism*, an interpretive position that maintains the church has fulfilled or replaced Israel in God's plan. A corollary of this stance is that Israel and the church are distinct (see **Israel and the Church**). These concepts are evident in Scripture through the consistent application of the literal-historical-grammatical approach to hermeneutics.

Dispensationalism is also a philosophy of history, in that everything in history is oriented toward God's glory as He administers the affairs of the world in stages. The word "dispensation" comes from the Greek word *oikonomia* and can also be translated as "administration" or "economy." God administers the affairs of the world through promises, commandments, and principles by which to live. If humans fail to abide by these, judgment occurs, and the next stage of God's plan in the world emerges. While there is debate as to the number of these dispensations, seven are most common: innocence, conscience, human government, promise, law, grace/church, and kingdom/millennium.

Dispensationalism is the most distinctive approach to hermeneutics to survive from nineteenth-century revivalist evangelicalism. It can be traced back to the theology of John Nelson Darby and the Plymouth Brethren in mid-nineteenth century Britain. Popularized by Bible prophecy conferences, it evidenced the innovative position that ethnic Israel remains God's chosen people. In light of this, Israel will be restored in

an earthly millennial kingdom so that all of God's promises to the nation will be fulfilled in a literal, not a figurative or spiritual, way.

Dispensationalism also highlights two shared theological positions: premillennialism and a pretribulation rapture (see **The Millennium** and **The Rapture**). The unique teaching on the church, history, and the last things has led to warm debates between dispensationalists and covenant theologians. *Covenant theology* is also a set of hermeneutical processes practiced by some evangelicals, though its practitioners draw from writings of sixteenth-century Reformers such as Ulrich Zwingli and Heinrich Bullinger. It is central to Reformed theology and Calvinism. Its interpretation of Scripture revolves around the presence of a covenant of works, redemption, and grace rather than the seven distinct dispensations. It relies on creedal and confessional statements, though in a subordinate way to Scripture, which functions as the "norming norm" among Presbyterian and Reformed churches. In covenant theology, the church is seen in continuity with the people of God in the Old Testament and becomes the new Israel in the New Testament. In regard to eschatology, rather than dispensational premillennialism, the dominant position is amillennialism (see **The Millennium**).

There are several crucial points of distinction between dispensationalism and covenant theology, but the use of typology functions as one of the more important ones. In dispensationalism, the covenantal promises made to Israel

are not seen as types; they are continuing promises that will be fulfilled literally in the future. A corollary is that dispensationalists believe the author's intention, as evidenced by the grammar and syntax of an Old Testament passage, is not overridden by the Emmaus Road hermeneutic, where a New Testament passage is thought to provide new, Christocentric meaning to the earlier biblical passage.

In the mid-1990s, a group of dispensationalist theologians tried to carve a middle path between dispensationalism and covenant theology—this became known as *progressive dispensationalism*. It allowed for an already/not yet approach to the kingdom of God and the covenants of promise. Rather than the *literal*-grammatical-historical method followed by classical and revised dispensationalists, this new group practiced a *literary*-grammatical-historical method. This slight hermeneutical shift allowed for more continuity between Israel and the church by rejecting the traditional (and controverted) two-peoples-of-God framework. Progressive dispensationalists viewed Israel and the church as two salvation-historical embodiments of the one people of God. Jewish Christians, then, are part of the church but still have claims on the promises God made to the nation of Israel.

Some contemporary covenant theologians have sought to distance themselves from the supersessionist implications of traditional covenant theology. Others argue for a future for Israel within the context of covenant theology (Rom. 11:25–26). The most popular landing spot, the *via media*, is

new covenant theology or *progressive covenantalism*, a view that holds that God's revelation is revealed progressively over time and that this occurs through covenants that find their fulfillment in Christ. God's unified plan/promise climaxes in the new covenant. All of these theological systems are moving closer to each other on three important hermeneutical issues: Israel, the church, and the land.

Why does definitional clarity matter in this area? Well, what you decide in regard to dispensationalism will affect almost every area of your personal theology and the way you read your Bible. This does not mean, however, that those who follow one of the other theological systems are not one of the cool kids—we all are (John 17:21). The dispensational/covenantal divide has led to a lot of ingroup/outgroup categorizations. It would be preferable to practice hospitality and recognize there's a lot of room here for diverse interpretive practices as expressions of who we are in Christ.

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