

Beyond Prooftexting: Gathered Church and Gathered Text

I. Ecclesiological Roots of Prooftexting: In the history of modern Christian debate, few charges insult interpreters more profoundly than the charge of prooftexting, which asserts starkly that the interpreter has not read scripture responsibly. Though the terminology has meant different things to different people over the years, the word usually entails the claim that an interpreter has taken a passage out of its literary and historical context in service of an agenda that runs counter to the sense of the text as a whole.¹ In Protestant circles committed to the ideal of sola Scriptura, the indictment has particular force. If one cannot interpret the perspicacious Scripture well, then one's entire doctrinal foundation is sure to be replete with error, and all hope is lost.²

Though the notion of a prooftext broadly conceived is an old one,³ the term itself is characteristic of the post-Enlightenment era, with its emphasis on rational proof (or, for that matter, disproof) for faith claims. According to the OED, the word does not appear until 1801 in an English translation of German scholar Johann Michaelis' *Introduction to the New Testament*. As prooftexts are usually employed, the very presence of a particular verse in the Bible provides prima facie evidence that one's theological position is true, and thus proves it without argument or appeal to the various traditions within which a particular interpretation exists. The prooftext proves

¹ In many Christian communities, the term is much more likely to be perceived positively than it is outside of those communities. For an example of prooftext understood this way, see John L. Dagg, *A Decisive Argument Against Infant Baptism: Furnished by One of Its Proof-texts* (Southern Baptist Publication Society, 1850).

² In the conflict over Charles Augustus Briggs' orthodoxy, Briggs charged back against conservatives that "Higher Criticism was taking away their [his conservative opponents] very bread and butter. For it is destroying their prooftexts, which is the very stuff of their sermons." Cited in James L. Kugel, *How to Read the Bible: A Guide to Scripture, Then and Now* (New York: Free Press, 2007), 43. Here, Briggs does not deny the existence of such prooftexts, but instead asserts that the methods of historical criticism had rendered them useless.

³ Throughout the Old and New Testaments, certain texts are described as fulfilling prior textual witnesses. These are not normally described as "proofs," however. "Proofs" appears only in reference to the resurrected Jesus' actions in Acts 1:3, and these are not always related to textual predictions. For examples of fulfillment language in the OT, see Josh 21:45, 2 Kgs 15:12, and 2 Chr 6:4. In the NT, see Luke 20:17, Acts 1:20, and Romans 3:10.

without the help of an interpreter, except insofar as such readers cite the particular text in question within a larger framework, whether a doctrinal confession, commentary, or other religious document. Often the new context of the text is part of what is at the very least an implied debate. The proof-text proves one thing, but disproves another. The various contexts of the interpreters themselves are ignored altogether, since to admit the act of interpretation is to admit doubt that the text speaks without human aid. Though the word “proof-text” is itself relatively new, the concept of scriptural proof in Christian communities is centuries old.

The practice of proof-texting in the Reformed tradition is best embodied by John Calvin, whose hermeneutic pointed out that each individual text was divinely inspired and that all scripture must be understood in relation to the rest of scripture.⁴ This laudable interpretive principle of holistic reading ought always to lead a reader more deeply into the biblical literature, and not further away from it.⁵ Yet the appeal to individual proof-texts so common in the generation immediately following the first Protestant reformers shows that this lesson was rarely heeded, but instead encouraged the memorization of catechisms at the expense of Scripture itself. Why appeal to Scripture when an adequate summary of the doctrines Scripture supports already exists? The Protestant Reformation failed to the extent that it did not escape tradition, as its proponents so often claimed to do, so much as challenge the existing tradition and create its own. It did this in part by appealing to proof-texts, a practice that ultimately discouraged interaction with the Bible.

In its emphasis on the believer’s contact with the Bible and God, Protestants encouraged a great deal of individual creativity in biblical interpretation, but they also encouraged a great multiplicity of interpreters who could not see and would likely never admit that they were themselves interpreters, and not only simple observers of what the Bible itself had already made

⁴ *Institutes* I.8.1.

⁵ For modern interpretations of holistic reading, see Peter Ochs, “Returning to Scripture: Trends in Postcritical Interpretation,” *Cross Currents* 44: 437-52.

clear (note, for example, the Protestant commitment to the ideal of Scripture's plain sense).⁶ Since texts prove things without benefit of interpretation, the one making the appeal to Scripture is left out of the equation altogether, not to mention the religious community in which the reader finds themselves and for which they are interpreting. Of course, taking the long historical view it is easy to perceive that certain texts only prove certain ideas within particular communities. For the Catholic interpreter, Matthew 16:18-19 clearly supports the papal office, whereas for the Protestant reader such proofs fail to convince. From the Protestant side, the words of institution in Matthew 26:26 and elsewhere must not be understood literally, as the Catholics take them, but must be understood as figurative language. Proof texts do not prove across reading communities, but instead provide further confirmation of what those communities already believe.⁷ Yet the connection between the religious communities and their interpretive practice is often obscured, for their texts are not interpretations, and they are in fact *the* church and not only part of it. This connection between ecclesiology and hermeneutics is a key one, and is not coincidental.

Protestant interpretive practice mirrored the ecclesial organization and ecclesiological assumptions of those churches that broke with Rome, which had removed themselves from the larger tradition of which they were a part only to recontextualize themselves in new communities of faith that were subsequently relatively independent. Yet these churches struggled then and struggle now with splits and enduring conflicts, an unfortunate side effect of their newfound independence from Rome. In much the same way, the phenomenon of proof texting as it has been practiced among the ancestors of the radical Reformation tradition has tended to fracture the text and make of

⁶ For an excellent review of the phenomena addressed in these paragraphs, see Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1974): 60ff. For the plain or literal sense of scripture, see Brevard Childs, "'The Sensus Literalis of Scripture: An Ancient and Modern Problem", in H. Donner (ed.), *Beiträge zur Alttestamentlichen Theologie. Festschrift für Walther Zimmerli zum 70. Geburtstag* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1977) 80-93.

⁷ On this point, see Brian Malley, *How the Bible Works: An Anthropological Study of Evangelical Biblicalism* (Lanham, MD: Altamira, 2004).

it a catena of proofs from which one may draw to construct subtle theological arguments. Yet this state of affairs need not be the case, as there exist considerable ecclesiological resources within Protestant tradition to encourage greater attention to the text as a whole. In short, greater attention to the ecclesiological doctrine of the gathered church might also lead to better attention to what I here call the “gathered text.”

By means of an analogy between these concepts I argue for a necessary interpretive shift in Christian theological interpretation generally and Baptist hermeneutics specifically. Since in the Baptist tradition proof-texting has proven such a persistent characteristic of their way of reading, they provide a useful test case for considering the possible effects of a shift in ecclesiology and hermeneutics. One of the basic assumptions herein is the idea that the last two centuries’ advances in critical biblical scholarship need not be perceived as antithetical to the practice of theological interpretation. One can say (as many have) that the earliest historical critics made some crucial errors as theological interpreters, but it is impossible after even a cursory reading of their groundbreaking studies to gainsay their earnest attempts at interpretation in and for the church. Of course, many of the higher critics maintained that the traditions of the church could only lead to skewed interpretations of the biblical literature, but they were usually hoping for a return to the church once scholars had the opportunity to state what the texts themselves meant.⁸ In this paper, the assumption is that one’s theological position cannot be so easily separated, and that in the task of theological interpretation such a separation would be undesirable anyway, especially as it relates to the relationship between one’s ecclesiology and their practice of biblical interpretation.

⁸ See K. Stendahl, “*Biblical Theology, Contemporary*” in *IDB I*: 418-32.

In relatively recent years, the narrative shape of Christian theology has become especially important, for Baptists most notably in the theology of James McClendon.⁹ But to be a story-formed people, the stories themselves must be read and not only mined for doctrinal proofs. Gen 18 must be read in its entirety (not to mention Genesis itself) and not only employed as a proof that the Trinity existed in the ancient period. No story exists when texts are placed side by side without any discernible structure, and in the final analysis scripture is subordinated to the wider “story” of a doctrinal statement. That story privileges one’s beliefs over their actions and leaves one with far fewer moral and spiritual resources from which to draw. Baptists in North America have had considerable trouble relating their story (and its concomitant theology) to the story of scripture, in the first place because we do not always read the Bible’s story, but also because our story has itself been informed deeply by internecine conflict over that story. Thus conservatives laud the right application of Scripture against the liberal drift of the Southern Baptist Convention, and moderates challenge the same interpretations. In short, prooftexts have become such an integral part of the story within our “community of reference” that they overshadow Scripture’s story. Both sides of the North American debate tell a story quite different from that found in the gathered text of Scripture.

Both sides of this debate, however, would likely agree with the ecclesiological concept of the gathered church. The fourth edition of the RGG describes the concept of the gathered church well:

The free church impulse, in its most absolute form, is often fuelled by the idea of a gathered church. According to this view, the church should comprise only those who have freely responded to the gospel and voluntarily accepted the responsibilities of membership. The church must maintain its own purity by ensuring that no one is considered a member who does not have a living faith and an upright character. A territorial view of the church, by contrast, is rejected.

⁹ For which, see Paul S. Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces: Baptist Identity in Church and Theology* (SBHT 13; London: Paternoster, 2003), 10-12.

Voluntarism in the gathered church emphasizes the initiative of the Christian in their baptism and the necessity of the community's purity as a group of believers. Having joined the gathered church, the believer has a commitment to the others who have made a similar decision and exists in deep connection to them. She has joined them by her own choice, and thus also recognizes at a basic level her responsibility to that community and within that community. This ecclesiological doctrine provides important resources to the Baptist believer for excellent biblical interpretation, but before turning to these interpretive opportunities, it remains to expound upon the idea of the gathered text. What does such a phrase mean?

II. Gathered text and Childsian canonical criticism: To describe scripture as “gathered text” is to emphasize both its composite nature and its unity. The Bible was clearly composed over many years by many different human authors, some of which held to mutually exclusive theological/ideological positions. It was, quite literally, gathered in religious communities over centuries, so that absolute theological consistency and coherence is not to be expected. Nevertheless, this diversity need not be perceived as a catastrophic flaw that undermines scripture's authority, but as a strength of the biblical tradition. Those who gathered the texts of the Bible surely perceived its diversity, but they also saw therein a rough but sturdy unity. United but diverse, the Bible witnesses to *différence* not only in its contents but also in its producing communities. The gathered text, then, may be most readily understood by readers that similarly understand their own constitution, not as hierarchies or “autonomous” groups, but as a diverse group gathered around a common religious commitment and a true manifestation of something beyond themselves: the gathered church.

More specifically, I intend by the term “gathered text” a greater attention to the canon as Brevard Childs understood it (in contrast to the canonical criticism of James A. Sanders). For Childs, canonical criticism not only entails close readings of the literature as a whole, but attends

most deeply to the ongoing “canonization” of that literature from its earliest inception. The Bible is a text gathered together from disparate sources, but gathered and redacted in such a way as to continually retell Israel’s most ancient traditions. Canon thus understood is not only an external designation applied to the text after its gathering, but a name applied to the very nature of the literature as it was brought together. Childs describes the situation with respect to the Bible thus:

The heart of the canonical process lay in transmitting and ordering the authoritative tradition in a form which was compatible to function as scripture for a generation which had not participated in the original events of revelation. The ordering of the tradition for this new function involved a profoundly hermeneutical activity, the effects of which are now built into the structure of the canonical text. For this reason an adequate interpretation of the biblical text, both in terms of history and theology, depends on taking the canonical shape with great seriousness.¹⁰

The Bible is produced as religious literature by and for religious communities. To understand the Bible any other way, Childs contends, is to misunderstand the purposes for which it was originally produced.

Canonical criticism places a premium on connecting the biblical text to the religious communities that produced and received it. The gathered text, then, reflects the needs of the gathered communities of ancient Israel, and not only the agendas of individual actors (though of course these occasionally become apparent as well). Perhaps most important in this equation for the modern reader is the fact that the Hebrew Bible was gathered for a community and not only for an individual reader. This is apparent throughout the text, but is especially significant in this context for public readings of Scripture. The *locus classicus* for this type of public reading is Nehemiah 8, where the scribe Ezra reads the law to the entire congregation of Israel. The Torah of YHWH, whatever its intended extent in this context, was meant for public reading in the context of worship. Indeed, the Hebrew word for “congregation” (קהל) connotes a group of worshippers, so that sacred texts are imagined primarily as useful for just such contexts. In this way, then, Childs’

¹⁰ Brevard Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 60.

reconstruction of the composition of the Bible contends that the latter composers of the Old Testament had gathered congregations in mind as its receiving audiences.¹¹

Another feature of Childs' canonical criticism is that it assumes a certain degree of intentionality in the production of the Old Testament as a literary whole. In the gathered text, there is less room for a haphazard concatenation of texts and an assumption that the earliest redactors and composers took great care in producing a document that would make sense as literature. Thus, Childs would not ask, for example, what blood has to do with roses at the end of Amos, as Wellhausen famously did, but would instead point out the wider canonical effect of the hopeful message found therein. This is not to say, as so many of Childs' critics contend, that every passage can be explained by some sort of literary intentionality, but to say more generally that the ancient redactors were far more careful than is often allowed. The text is gathered, and is therefore a composite document authored by numerous writers and redactors, not a jumble of barely related phrases and sentences. In the final analysis, Childs is a form critic who has taken the question of *Gattungen* in the Hebrew Bible beyond its constituent elements to the level of the book and beyond. What, Childs forces the interpreter to ask, is the form of the Old Testament, and as a result how can it best be read? What is the *Sitz im Leben* for the Bible itself?

Given the low rate of literacy in the ancient near Eastern world (as high as 10%, but these are the more liberal estimates), individual readings of Scripture were rare indeed, so that the kind of highly personalized readings conducted by modern readers would surely have seemed wholly foreign to ancient readers of the text. Moreover, even if an ancient Israelite was literate, they were highly unlikely to possess their own texts, a result of the fact that the cost of such a thing would have been prohibitive. Gathered churches, then, have the most in common with the ancient audience when

¹¹ Of course, texts cannot absolutely determine how they are received, but they can be constructed in such a way as to encourage particular kinds of readers/hearers. The book of Jeremiah, for example, consistently constructs an audience that hears the divine word, but does so with an awareness that their hearing comes via a text.

they receive the text via a text and a public reader. This does not mean that they are necessarily always in the best position to understand what the sacred text is trying to say, but that in this position they have an affinity with the ancient community that the individual reader does not have.

The fact that there is a gathered, worshipping community both in front of and behind the production of the biblical literature ought to encourage readings in and around gathered communities of believers, and indeed those do take place. The question is whether individualized readings have scriptural support, or whether by their very nature they are likely to be misinterpreted when applied primarily or solely to individual readers. On this point Baptists in the Western world have a special need to be wary, as our tradition has so greatly emphasized the individual encounter with the divine and the word of the divine via Scripture. Lost in this encounter is the public interpretation of Scripture in the religious community, the gathered church's encounter with the gathered text. The misapprehension of Scripture exists in reciprocal relationship with an impoverished ecclesiology that has forgotten its true nature as community, instead focusing primarily on the individual believer and their personal relationship to the divine. Greater attention to the gathered church, however, may encourage greater attention to the gathered text, and vice versa. But how exactly does this take place?

III. More subtle ecclesiology yields better interpretation: First, greater emphasis on the ideal of the gathered church would focus attention on human communities as participants in the mystical body of Christ. Human actors exist behind the biblical literature as well, so that any awareness of their presence might help to guard against the practice of removing biblical verses from their original contexts and providing them as absolute proofs of particular doctrinal positions. Second, the notion of the gathered church, it is hoped, would draw greater attention to the concept of the gathered text, and thus greater support for reading more broadly in the biblical literature. As the church must be brought together for the body of Christ to be present, so also must the divine word be brought

together to understand its import most fully. Finally, the significance of the reading community itself as a group of interpreters would admit implicitly that the task of interpretation is a real one, and that texts do not speak without an interpreting audience to give life to the words. The church must gather to read the Bible, and the words themselves are meaningful only among those to whom the Spirit has given the meaning. Texts do not prove anything to those to whom the Spirit has not given the proof. For these and other reasons, a more robust ecclesiology is necessary.

Of course, it may be the case that better interpretation of the Bible must precede a better ecclesiology. It is not at all clear that ecclesiology always precedes hermeneutics, or vice versa. On the contrary, the ideals exist in reciprocal relationship one with the other so that as one increases in subtlety, so also does the other. In this particular case, the theological ideal both illuminates the historical production of the text and shows one way forward for its best interpretation. In gathered communities, the gathered text was produced and is best read. According to Thomas Grantham, the refusal to take part in every “form of godliness” has the potential to lead to “an unknown conceit, every man being at liberty to follow what he supposes to be the motions of the Spirit of God...”¹² Only in the act of worshipping together with the gathered church was the ability to avoid such individualization made manifest..

¹² Curtis W. Freeman, James Wm. McClendon, Jr., C. Rosalee Velloso da Silva, eds., *Baptist Roots: A Reader in the Theology of a Christian People* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1999), 89.