The exegetical work of John Calvin, as well as the theological system associated with his name, can be of great help as we seek to develop principles and methods of interpretation. Calvin's commentaries are a model of clarity and excellence. In addition, his work—in line with the doctrine of common grace—reflects a critical appreciation for the contribution that unbelievers can make to our understanding of truth, and this feature has some interesting implications for modern evangelical scholarship.

A more controversial question has to do with the relationship between theology and exegesis: While biblical scholars tend to ignore or even reject the value of systematic theology for their work of interpretation, it can be argued that theological commitments inevitably affect the process of exegesis and that such an influence is both essential and desirable.

Finally, among the doctrinal distinctive of Calvinism, none is more fundamental than an emphasis on the sovereignty of God. An appreciation for this teaching will greatly enhance our understanding of biblical narrative. It will give us, through the concept of covenant, a sharpened focus on the meaning of Scripture as a whole; it will even help us to see how the very process of interpretation itself is guided by the wisdom of a loving and all-powerful God.

Moisés Silva

The word Calvinistic in the title of this chapter (aside from any negative connotations it may have for some of my readers) contains an ambiguity. Am I interested here in the methods of interpretation used by John Calvin, the sixteenth-century Protestant reformer, in his biblical commentaries? Or does the title refer to the system of theology that, originating in Calvin's Institutes of the Christian Religion, was brought to full expression a century later by the Westminster Confession of Faith?1

The ambiguity is deliberate, since one of my aims here is to stress the close connection between biblical interpretation and systematic theology. True, it would be an exaggeration to claim that Calvin’s exegetical method in the commentaries is absolutely identical to his use of the Bible in the Institutes, but one must recognize that during the course of over two decades, Calvin’s theological thought guided his exegesis, while his exegesis kept contributing to his theology. (The first edition of the Institutes appeared in

1. In North America, the Calvinism of the Westminster Confession was further developed by the Puritans, especially Jonathan Edwards, and then by the great Princeton theologians of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, Charles Hodge and B. B. Warfield. (The latter wrote the article “Calvinism” for The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge [reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977], 2:359–64, which may serve as a brief but useful introduction.) After 1929, this theological tradition became associated primarily with Westminster Theological Seminary, particularly because of the work of John Murray and Cornelius Van Til. There is more than a verbal coincidence between the title of this chapter and that of Van Til’s book The Case for Calvinism (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1964).
1536 and the last one in 1559, and during those two decades most of the commentaries were produced.)

Again, some might object that there are significant differences between Calvin himself on the one hand and later Calvinism on the other. These differences, however, have been greatly overstated. While undoubtedly there are features that distinguish these two expressions of theology (e.g., organization, formulation, and emphases), such distinctions are far outweighed by the fundamental commitments that bind them together.

In all fairness, the reader should be warned that I teach in an institution that, having derived its name from the Westminster Confession of Faith, seeks to preserve, propagate, and build on the theological position set forth in that document. In other words, my objectivity in this area is open to challenge. It is also worth mentioning, however, that I was not raised in a Calvinistic environment and that my initial training in theology came from quite a different tradition.

Curiously, the very conservative circles of which I was a part—indeed, American evangelicalism generally—have depended heavily on the publications of such Reformed scholars as B. B. Warfield, J. Gresham Machen, and E. J. Young but have at the same time been rather critical of the alleged ‘cold intellectualism’ in the Princeton-Westminster tradition and of the distinctively Calvinistic features in their theology. We should, no doubt, be quick to retain what is valuable and reject what is damaging in any book we read. But is it only a coincidence that this theological tradition, more than any other, has furnished the means to preserve the intellectual integrity of evangelicalism? Does it make sense to cast aspersions at the academic rigor of these scholars while freely using the results of their academic labor? And could it be that what evangelicalism finds objectionable in their theology is precisely what has made possible their contribution to conservative scholarship?

Whatever our answer to these questions, we can certainly profit from considering the distinctive of “Calvinistic hermeneutics.” Note, however, that I cannot adequately defend here all of my claims, especially since some of them would require extensive theological discussion. (The occasional biblio-

graphical comments in the notes may be of value to readers who want to pursue these topics.) Neither do I wish to suggest that the positive qualities described below are the exclusive property of Reformed scholarship. If I set Reformed distinctive over against broad evangelicalism, that is only to clarify the issues. Indeed the Calvinistic tradition, which suffers from its own weaknesses, can learn a great deal from Christians of other persuasions.

Excellence and Clarity of Exposition

In attempting to make the case for a Calvinistic approach to biblical interpretation, one must first appeal to those biblical commentaries for which Calvin became justly famous. Numerous scholars, some of whom would be the least inclined to accept Calvinism, emphasize the extraordinary virtues of Calvin as an expositor of Scripture. A brief summary of opinions on this matter is given by Philip Schaff, the dean of nineteenth-century church historians: “Calvin was an exegetical genius of the first order. His commentators are unsurpassed for originality, depth, perspicuity, soundness, and permanent value. . . . Reuss, the chief editor of [Calvin’s] works and himself an eminent biblical scholar, says that Calvin was ‘beyond all question the greatest exegete of the sixteenth century.’ . . . Diestel, the best historian of Old Testament exegesis, calls him ‘the creator of genuine exegesis.’”

It is even more remarkable that professional exegetes in our day continue to refer to Calvin as a master of this when commenting on the biblical text. Quite likely, no commentator prior to the middle of the nineteenth century is alluded to more frequently than Calvin is, even though he lived long before the development of the modern scientific outlook.

Among the characteristic features of Calvin’s work as a commentator, none was so important as his desire for clarity and brevity. These were not two separate aims, but rather twin ideals that he pursued in conscious distinction from much of the work that had preceded him. As he looked back on the history of commentary writing, he found that one theologian stood out as a model for biblical expositors, and that was the fourth-century Antiochene
preacher John Chrysostom. When compared against Chrysostom’s expositions, most subsequent writers appeared verbose.

But if Calvin objected to long-winded commentaries, the reason was not merely impatience with a particular kind of style—it was rather the inevitable obscuring of the message of the text that concerned him. The task of the expositor is to clarify the author’s meaning, whereas the accumulation of material normally moves the expositor away from this goal. In keeping with this principle, Calvin consciously refrained from dealing with contrary opinions (unless the omission was likely to confuse the reader) because, he said, “I have held nothing to be of more importance than the edification of the church.” Moreover, it appears that he sought to write in a style that was patterned after the Scriptures themselves. The Bible has its own eloquence, and it is the eloquence of simplicity.

Not all of Calvin’s followers imitated him in this matter. The seventeenth-century Puritans tended to write massive expositions, such as William Gurnall’s influential work *The Christian in Complete Armour*, a treatment of Ephesians 6:11–20 filling nearly 1,200 pages. In the last couple of decades, the growth of learning has led many scholars to write lengthy works as well. It would be foolhardy to ignore the wonderful contribution that some of these commentaries have made to our understanding of the biblical text. Still, Calvin’s example should remind us of what our primary goals ought to be. It is all too easy to become mesmerized either by exegetical problems or by perceived devotional needs; in both cases, we allow the central and simple message of the text to recede into the background. If, however, we keep in mind that no motive is more important than the edification of the church—the basis for which is God’s own teaching and not our imagination—our efforts will remain focused on the historical meaning intended by the biblical author.

**Common Grace**

A second feature that distinguished Calvin’s method of interpretation was his full appreciation of human learning. In this respect, Calvin was a child of the Renaissance and, inevitably, a follower of the humanism associated with Erasmus. Prior to devoting his life to the Christian ministry, Calvin had been trained in the humanities and had produced a detailed commentary on *De clementia*, a philosophical work by Seneca, the first-century Spanish Stoic. Whatever else one may think of that commentary, it clearly reveals that Calvin had honed his skills in the best methods of philological and literary analysis available in his day. It is also clear that subsequently, far from abandoning his devotion to classical scholarship (as Jerome did—or so he claimed), Calvin put it to the service of biblical interpretation and theological reflection. As he expressed it in his *Institute*, “Men who have either quaffed or even tasted the liberal arts penetrate with their aid far more deeply into the secrets of the divine wisdom.” And again: “But if the Lord has willed that we be helped in physics, dialectic, mathematics, and other like disciplines, by the work and ministry of the ungodly, let us use this assistance. For if we neglect God’s gift freely offered in these arts, we ought to suffer just punishment for our sloths.”

Calvin’s use of “secular” learning is of special significance because it reflected a key theological concept, namely, his view of so-called common grace. This is a crucial point, because Calvin’s approach must be distinguished from that of many evangelical scholars who make free use of critical methods, although these have been developed without consideration of (and sometimes in opposition to) biblical faith. The problem here is not precisely that those methods are used, but rather that they are used without careful reflection on their theological implications. To put it differently, one seldom sees an attempt to integrate the principles of critical scholarship with the distinctives of evangelical thought. The impression one usually gets is that, unless a specific conclusion of scholarship explicitly contradicts a tenet of “conservative” theology, we should freely appropriate the work of “liberal” critics. This attitude, however, can only undermine the integrity of evangelicalism. For one thing, the very coherence of the evangelical faith is likely to be crippled as potentially incompatible elements are adopted without critical evaluation. In addition, the approach does not sit well with non-evangelical scholars, who argue, with some justification, that the credibility of conservative thinking becomes suspect. In short, the desire to gain intellectual respectability backfires.

So how was Calvin’s approach different? As is well known, the Swiss reformer actually begins his *Institutes* by discussing epistemology, that is, by reflecting on fundamental questions of knowledge: just how can we know God? His answer was that the knowledge of God and the knowledge of

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8. Though not always accurate or fair, James Barr, in his *Fundamentalism* (London: SCM, 1977), esp. chap. 5, raises questions that demand our attention.
ourselves are intimately related. We cannot look at ourselves, he argued, without thinking about God. "For, quite clearly, the mighty gifts with which we are endowed are hardly from ourselves; indeed, our very being is nothing but subsistence in the one God. Then, by these benefits shed like dew from heaven upon us, we are led as by rivulets to the spring itself." Adam's rebellion has indeed brought ruin, but even that fact "compels us to look upward." Nevertheless, he continues, we cannot expect to acquire a clear knowledge of ourselves—inclined to hypocrisy as we are—unless we look carefully at God and judge everything by his standard.9

In subsequent chapters, Calvin has much to say about general revelation and about the other evidences of God's grace toward humanity in general. Of special interest for us is his discussion of human learning as a gift of the Spirit:

Whenever we come upon these matters [art and science] in secular writers, let that admirable light of truth shining in them teach us that the mind of man, though fallen and perverted from its wholesomeness, is nevertheless clothed and ornamented with God's excellent gifts. If we regard the Spirit of God as the sole fountain of truth, we shall neither reject the truth itself, nor despise it wherever it shall appear, unless we wish to dishonor the Spirit of God. For by holding the gifts of the Spirit in slight esteem, we condemn and reproach the Spirit himself. ... No, we cannot read the writings of the ancients on these subjects without great admiration. ... But shall we count anything praiseworthy or noble without recognizing at the same time that it comes from God?...

But lest anyone think a man truly blessed when he is credited with possessing great power to comprehend truth under the elements of this world, we should at once add that all this capacity to understand, with the understanding that follows upon it, is an unstable and transitory thing in God's sight, when a solid foundation of truth does not underlie it.10

It is essential to appreciate Calvin's balance here. By recognizing at once the marvel and praiseworthiness of human learning as a divine gift and also its basic instability because of the fallen and perverted mind of the sinner, he could do justice to the coherence of biblical teaching.

Later Reformed theology was not always consistent in working out the implications of Calvin's ideas. In the Dutch tradition, however, the doctrine of common grace has played a prominent and controversial role, and few have given more attention to it than Cornelius Van Til. Without attempting to describe his apologetic system, we can point out certain features that are of particular relevance for biblical hermeneutics. Central to Van Til is the importance of presuppositionalism and thus the denial of neutrality. Over against the traditional Roman Catholic distinction between nature and grace—and thus between reason and faith—Van Til argued that, according to Scripture, all human beings know full well that God exists and that his power has created the world. Moreover, they have all rejected that knowledge and rebelled against him (see esp. Rom. 1:18–23). Human beings, therefore, are not neutral observers who need to be persuaded by rational arguments that there is a God so that subsequently they can be brought to faith. On the contrary, they have willingly chosen to worship the creature rather than the Creator, and their whole thinking is distorted by the presence of sin. Readers will note that this formulation is a specific way of expressing the Reformed doctrine of total depravity.

Van Til also emphasizes, however, that men and women are not as sinful as they can be. Sin has fundamentally distorted, but it has not destroyed, their character as God's image. To put it differently, they are inconsistent both in their thinking and in their conduct. It is here that the doctrine of common grace shows up clearly. God continues to send the warmth of the sun to this sinful world; he restrains the progress of evil in human society as a whole. As a result, many people who reject God's goodness manage to live apparently exemplary lives, even though their starting point should lead them to full-blown licentiousness. Similarly, their minds, in spite of having spurned the knowledge of the only wise God, accomplish remarkable feats. To the extent that they make intellectual progress, however, they do so only on "borrowed capital," that is, by taking advantage of the very truths that contradict their most basic commitments. Van Til's approach, then, while radically antithetical, does not at all lead to contempt for human accomplishments but makes possible our appreciation for them.11

The history of both "Old Princeton"12 and Westminster exemplifies

9. Calvin, Institutes, 1.1.1–5 (pp. 35–39).
10. Ibid. 2.2.13–16 (pp. 273–75).
11. See Cornelius Van Til, The Defense of the Faith, 3d ed. (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1967), chap. 8, and idem, Common Grace (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1947), esp. p. 91, on the correlative character of common grace and total depravity, and p. 95: "It is only when we thus press the objective validity of the Christian claim at every point, that we can easily afford to be 'generous' with respect to the natural man and his accomplishments. It is when we ourselves are fully self-conscious that we can cooperate with those to whose building we own the title." In other words, only if we are unequivocal about the antithesis between the Christian and the non-Christian viewpoint can we legitimately use the work of the unbeliever.
12. Ironically, much of Van Til's work was developed in reaction to the apologetic system that had been used at Princeton. By correcting certain features in the Warfieldian
how this Calvinistic understanding of sin and common grace can affect theological scholarship. The best-known theologians at Princeton Theological Seminary, Charles Hodge (1797–1878) and Benjamin B. Warfield (1851–1921), were not only fully abreast of contemporary progress in the sciences, the humanities, and critical biblical scholarship; it is also clear that their own thinking was positively affected by those advances. While much of their work had a strong polemical edge against unbelieving scholarship, it is undeniable that their own thought reflected an integration of so-called secular knowledge and biblical teaching. This was not, however, a naive adoption of unbiblical ideas but simply a recognition that Calvin was right when he insisted that the Spirit of God is the source of all truth and so we should not despise it, regardless of where it appears; in other words—to use a profound saying that for some has become an ambiguous cliché—"all truth is God's truth."

Specifically in the area of biblical scholarship, no one illustrates this principle more powerfully than J. Gresham Machen (1881–1937), who taught New Testament at Princeton until 1929 and then, because of the modernist-fundamentalist conflicts at that time, led several of his colleagues to found Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia. Having studied under some prominent liberal theologians in Germany, Machen struggled with the challenges brought against the authority of Scripture and the integrity of his evangelical faith. In the end he became the leading intellectual opponent of modernism while at the same time making full use of the biblical scholarship associated with that movement.

Machen's two major works—The Origin of Paul's Religion (1925) and The Virgin Birth of Christ (1930)—are brilliant examples of evangelical learning, in both of which he attempts to dismantle, logically and patiently, major tenets of liberal theology. It is important to emphasize, however, that Machen did not master liberal scholarship merely to build his intellectual ammunition against it (as more than a few evangelical scholars are wont to do). The seriousness with which he regarded that scholarship is evident on every page, as is the fact that he was not at all afraid to learn from it. Not surprisingly, a well-known German critic who disputed Machen's thesis wrote a twenty-page review article of The Virgin Birth of Christ in which he described the book as "so circumspect, so intelligent in its discussions, that it must be recognized unqualifiedly as an important achievement." Still, we cannot ignore the fact that Machen himself viewed his approach as "a thoroughgoing apologetic."\(^\text{13}\)

In our day, the growing presence of evangelicals in scholarly forums, such as the Society of Biblical Literature, is at once encouraging and unnerving. Sometimes, one fears, this participation reflects a tendency to compartmentalize the intellect. Commitments to biblical truth are suspended, not merely for the temporary purposes of discussion, but perhaps as a reflection of the view that the issues have a neutral character. (In principle, it is quite proper to engage nonevangelical scholars on a whole spectrum of issues without having to raise the bugaboo of theological presuppositions. The question is rather whether, in the process of discussion, our own thinking becomes independent of our faith.) Apart from the occasional disagreement expressed against specific ideas, one seldom detects an effort, or even a desire, to assess the fundamental character of critical approaches in the light of evangelical faith. Perhaps a consideration of how Calvin and some of his successors have related their study of Scripture to human learning can assist modern conservative scholars as they seek to do the same in these challenging times.

Theology and Exegesis

As the previous section may have suggested to the reader, it is not feasible to separate biblical interpretation from theology.\(^\text{16}\) The relationship between exegesis and systematic theology has been one of the most controverted issues in the history of biblical scholarship. Many scholars doubt, or even deny, that it is really possible to use the Bible for the purposes of developing a systematic theology. In their view, the various biblical authors had different, indeed incompatible, theologies, so that the attempt to treat them as a unity can result only in distorting the text.

Evangelical biblical scholars would reject such an approach, but that

15. J. Gresham Machen, The Virgin Birth of Christ, 2d ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1932), p. x. It is sometimes thought that Machen's approach was incompatible with Van Til's; this misconception is adequately handled by Greg L. Bahnsen, "Machen, Van Til, and the Apologetic Tradition of the OPC," in Pressing Toward the Mark: Essays Commemorating Fifty Years of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, ed. C. G. Dennison and R. C. Gamble (Philadelphia: Committee for the Historian of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 1986), pp. 259–94. More to the point, however, I wish to suggest that the character of what Machen and some of his predecessors did (whatever their conscious apologetic principles) provided a model for Van Til regarding the proper use of unbelieving scholarship.
16. Some of the material in this section is taken from "Systematic Theology and the Apostle to the Gentiles," forthcoming in TJ.
does not mean they have a particularly high view of systematic theology. Exceedingly few of them show much interest in the subject—if anything, it is viewed with suspicion. Particularly objectionable to them would be the suggestion that systematics should influence our exegesis. Yet that is precisely the claim that I wish to make, and here again Calvin provides a remarkable model.

The first edition of the Institutes was published when Calvin was a very young man, and the subsequent revisions and expansions reflect both his growing knowledge of historical theology (references to the Fathers and medieval theologians increase sharply in each subsequent edition) and his greater attention to exegetical work. No one is likely to argue that these two sides of his work were independent of each other—as though he forgot about his theology when he exegeted (and that is why his commentaries are good!) or did not pay attention to the Bible when he did theology (and that is why the Institutes are so bad!). My own thesis is that both his expositions and his theology are superb precisely because they are related. But even if one has little use for Calvin’s system, I wish to suggest that exegesis stands to gain, rather than to lose, if it is consciously done within the framework of one’s theology.

Such an approach, admittedly, seems to be diametrically opposed to the aims of grammatico-historical exegesis. Three centuries ago scholars were already arguing, with great vigor, that systematic theology—especially in its classical form—must be kept quite separate from biblical interpretation. Indeed, it was not difficult to show that theological biases had frequently hampered the work of exegetes, even to the point of distorting the meaning of the text. True “historical” exegesis was understood, more and more, as interpretation that was not prejudiced by theological commitments. Leopold Immanuel Rückerl, in the preface to his 1831 commentary on Romans, stated that the biblical interpreter must abandon his own perspective.

In other words, I require of him freedom from prejudice. The exegete of the New Testament as an exegete...has no system, and must not have one, either a dogmatic or an emotional system. In so far as he is an exegete, he is neither orthodox nor heterodox, neither supernaturalist nor rationalist, nor pantheist.

17. Calvin himself saw his two projects as complementary. In his introductory statement to the Institutes (“John Calvin to the Reader”), he tells us that his aim in this work was to help “candidates in sacred theology” grasp “the sum of religion in all its parts” and thus guide them in the study of Scripture. Such a compendium would make it possible for him, when writing his commentaries, to avoid long doctrinal discussions. In his view, the proper use of the commentaries presupposed that the student was “armed with a knowledge of the present work, as a necessary tool” (pp. 4–5).

not any other ist there may be. He is neither pious nor godless, neither moral nor immoral, neither sensitive nor insensible.18

One of his contemporaries, the great New Testament exegete Heinrich August Wilhelm Meyer, expressed the same idea as follows:

The area of dogmatics and philosophy is to remain off limits for a commentary. For to ascertain the meaning the author intended to convey by his words, impartially and historico-grammatically—that is the duty of the exegete. How the meaning so ascertained stands in relation to the teachings of philosophy, to what extent it agrees with the dogmas of the church or with the view of its theologians, in what way the dogmatician is to make use of it in the interest of his science—to the exegete as an exegete, all that is a matter of no concern.19

Today most people would view these two formulations as strikingly naive. But we should not be fooled. The underlying commitment is alive and well. Moreover, there are plenty of exegetes around who might vigorously disown these statements, but whose work, unwittingly perhaps, is a perfect expression of the same viewpoint. In contrast, I wish to argue that proper exegesis should be informed by theological reflection. To put it in the most shocking way possible: my theological system should tell me how to exegete. Can such an outrageous position be defended? Three considerations make that position not merely defensible but indeed the only real option.

In the first place, we should recognize that systematic theology is, to a large extent, an exercise in contextualization, that is, the attempt to reformulate the teaching of Scripture in ways that are meaningful and understandable to us in our present context. Sometimes, it is true, theologians have given the impression (or even claimed) that their descriptions are no more and no less than the teachings of Scripture and that therefore, being independent of the theologian’s historical context, those descriptions have permanent validity. But the very process of organizing the biblical data—to say nothing of the use of a different language in a different cultural setting—brings to bear the theologian’s own context. Even Charles Hodge, who claimed with great pride that no original ideas had ever been proposed at Princeton,20 was a truly creative thinker, and his Systematic Theology reflects

19. Ibid., p. 111.
20. The reference was specifically to the journal edited by him (see Noll, “The Princeton Review,” p. 288). Hodge was clearly not as naive as those words might suggest. His use of hyperbole was intended to focus on doctrinal substance, not on the way the doctrines were formulated. Indeed, some modern writers have emphasized—and severely criticized—the
through and through an innovative integration of some strands of nineteenth-century philosophy with classic Reformed theology.

Intrinsically, there is nothing objectionable in attempting to understand and explain an ancient writing through contemporary categories, yet biblical scholars often assume that such an approach is off-limits. As one writer has put it, biblical exposition should be done "in terms of what the text itself has to say... Resorting to... later formulations is not only anachronistic but obscures the impact of the specific words [the writer] chose to use on the occasion. In short, such an approach is methodologically indefensible." In fact, however, the very use of English to explain the biblical text means resorting to subsequent formal expressions. If a modern writer wishes to explain Aristotle's thought, for example, we all acknowledge not only the legitimacy but also the great value and even the necessity of doing so by the use of contemporary philosophical terms that make it possible to express clearly an ancient thinker's writings. Someone who merely restated Aristotle's teachings using Greek words, or even strict English equivalents, would fail to explain those teachings precisely because no attempt was made to contextualize them.

In the second place, our evangelical view of the unity of Scripture demands that we see the whole Bible as the context of any one part. An appeal to the study of Aristotle is of help here too. The modern scholar looks at the whole Aristotelian corpus for help in understanding a detail in one particular work. To the extent that we view the whole of Scripture as having come from one Author, therefore, to that extent a systematic understanding of the Bible contributes to the exegesis of individual passages. Admittedly, there are some real dangers in this approach. On the basis of a questionable reading of Romans 12:6, Christians have often appealed to "the analogy of faith" in a way that does not do justice to the distinctiveness of individual writers of Scripture. Moreover, it is all too easy to fall into the trap of eisegesis, of reading into a particular text some broad theological idea because we (sometimes unconsciously) want to avoid the implications of what the text really says. It is therefore understandable that Professor Kaiser wishes to restrict the principle of the analogy of faith to the end of the interpretive process, and then only as a means of summarizing the teaching of the past.

Innovative use of Scottish realism made by Hodge. Without denying that some aspects of that background had a negative effect, attention must be paid to the positive benefits as well. In any case, it is my opinion that the indebtedness of Hodge and later Princetonians to realism has been greatly overstated.


23. It is perhaps worth pointing out that long before Rudolf Bultmann's emphasis on "preunderstanding" became a popular topic, and certainly before Thomas Kuhn challenged the neutrality of scientific investigation, Cornelius Van Til had, in an even more radical way, exposed the role of presuppositions for all of life.
learning. I would suggest, rather, that a student who comes to a biblical passage with, say, a dispensationalist background, should attempt to make sense of the text assuming that dispensationalism is correct. I would go so far as to say that, upon encountering a detail that does not seem to fit the dispensationalist scheme, the student should try to “make it fit.” The purpose is not to mishandle the text but to become self-conscious about what we all do anyway. The result should be increased sensitivity to those features of the text that disturb our interpretive framework and thus a greater readiness to modify that framework.24

God’s Sovereignty in Biblical Interpretation

Calvin’s theology is best known for its stress on divine sovereignty, particularly as expressed in the concept of election. For some people, it seems, that is all Calvin ever taught. The truth, however, is that few theologians have ever been as balanced as Calvin was in attempting to give expression to the breadth of biblical teaching. The very fact that he wrote commentaries on almost every book of the Bible should tell us something. Even in the midst of a strongly polemical setting, he managed to do justice to every theological locus.

His balance, ironically, is especially evident in his treatment of election. This doctrine does not have as prominent a place in the Institutes as many imagine. It is not covered in the first chapter or even the whole of book 1. One has to wait until book 3, chapters 21–24, and then the treatment consists of forty-four pages, that is, less than 5 percent of the Institutes. In short, an understanding of Calvin’s doctrine of divine sovereignty in salvation must take into account its place in the context of his whole teaching.

From another perspective, however, this doctrine was even more important to Calvin than is usually understood. The fact that it is not the explicit subject of discussion in books 1 and 2 hardly means that it is not present there. Quite the contrary. Calvin’s sense of awe at the majesty and power of God over all creation pervades the whole of his theology in a fundamental way. In the Calvinistic tradition, this emphasis has played a significant role. Far from annulling human freedom, total divine sovereignty alone makes such freedom meaningful.25 Because only in God do we have our

Being, freedom outside of his will is inconceivable. Accordingly, in the light of our slavery to sin (Rom. 6:16–23), it would be illusory to think that salvation can in any way depend on our effort or will (John 1:13; Rom. 9:14–16).

What bearing does all this have on biblical hermeneutics? Here we can only illustrate its significance with a few examples. With regard to exegetical practice, the doctrine of divine sovereignty makes us particularly sensitive to God’s workings in the history of redemption. Biblical narrative nowhere suggests that the divine plan has been frustrated by historical accidents or human obstinacy. While free agency and responsibility are clearly assumed, these human realities are pictured as coordinate with—indeed, subsumed under—God’s will for his people. Particularly striking is the description of events in the days of Rehoboam, whose wicked decision to oppress Israel led to the tragedy of a divided kingdom: “So the king did not listen to the people, for this turn of events was from the LORD, to fulfill the word the LORD had spoken to Jeroboam” (1 Kings 12:15). The prophets understood well the significance of this principle:

The LORD Almighty has sworn,
“Surely, as I have planned, so it will be,
and as I have purposed, so it will stand.”

For the LORD Almighty has purposed, and who can thwart him?
His hand is stretched out, and who can turn it back?
( Isa. 14:24, 27)

The relevance of these concepts shows up unexpectedly in various exegetical problems. Redaction criticism, for instance, has pointed out how frequently biblical narrative colors and interprets historical events. For some scholars, this characteristic is evidence that the biblical writers have tampered with the facts. Conservative writers, afraid of the implications, often shy away from such features and prefer to downplay, for instance, the differences among the Gospels. Evangelical scholars who do appreciate the value of redaction-critical work have not always grappled with the serious theological challenges posed by this method. The Reformed view of biblical inspiration, however, goes hand in hand with a Reformed understanding of history. The

24. Or so one hopes—at this point, unfortunately, psychological disposition usually takes over!

25. As the Westminster Confession of Faith 3.1 puts it: “God from all eternity did, by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass; yet so as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures, nor is the liberty or contiguity of second causes taken away, but rather established” (my emphasis). This is hardly the place to provide a philosophical defense of the doctrine. Note, however, that a world in which anything at all happens outside of God’s will is a world inevitably ruled by contingency, that is, radical uncertainty. If God knows for certain what will take place in the future (the fundamental biblical doctrine of foreknowledge), then everything that takes place must take place. If, however, events are not “determined” in this sense, then God cannot know what will take place, which means that anything could take place and God would be quite limited as to what he could do about it.
God who controls the events of history is the God who interprets those events in Scripture, and thus there can be no inherent contradiction between the two. This hardly means that we are free to adopt any approach to the narratives even if it undermines their reliability, nor does it provide an automatic solution to many difficult problems. It does mean that we need not "protect" the credibility of Scripture by making sure it conforms to our expectations of history writing.26

The doctrine of divine sovereignty also helps us to appreciate the centrality of the concept of covenant in Scripture. As is well known, Calvinism has been characterized by an approach known as covenant theology. The term means different things to different people; it indeed serves as a conceptual umbrella covering a rich and wide variety of emphases, some more clearly biblical than others. Fundamentally, it refers to God's dispositions in his plan of salvation. It is God who takes the initiative in forming a people for himself, so that the assurance "I am your God and you are my people" provides an all-pervasive principle throughout the history of redemption (from Gen. 17:7–8 to Rev. 21:5).

Faithfulness to this principle should guide the exegete at numerous points, as in passages that bear on the doctrine of salvation by grace, or when assessing the function of the Mosaic law in relation to the Abrahamic covenant. The concept evidently has much to say about questions related to prophecy and the place of the people of Israel. Traditionally, for instance, dispensationalism has drawn a sharp distinction between Israel and the Christian church. More recent writers have recognized the important features common to both,27 but the organic unity of God's people throughout the ages is a distinctive emphasis of covenant theology. This emphasis in turn has profound implications for our understanding of ecclesiology (including questions of church government, baptism, etc.), of the Christian's use of the Old Testament, and much more.

Finally, an appreciation for the Calvinist or Augustinian (indeed, Pauline!) doctrine of divine sovereignty and election affects one's understanding of biblical interpretation as such.28 It is not sufficient to recognize God's lordship over biblical history without submitting ourselves to that lordship as interpreters. It is in fact quite silly, on the one hand, to affirm that the events

27. In chap. 8, Professor Kaiser seeks to mediate between dispensationalism and covenant theology on this issue. However, it is not clear to me that he has done justice to the emphasis with which the New Testament writers see the promises of the Old Testament fulfilled in the context of the church.

related in Scripture, as well as the actual writing of Scripture, are a fulfillment of God's will and, on the other hand, to assume that our interpretation of that material has some sort of neutral character or independent status. Yet some students of the Bible seem to think (or at least act as though they think) that God, after "going to all the trouble" of overseeing the writing of Scripture by many different individuals over the course of many centuries, decided to sit back and watch believers try to figure out what to do with it! On the contrary. The divine purposes are being worked out even now in the lives of believers as they listen to the Scriptures no less than when God was overseeing the events of redemptive history.29

The implications of this truth are rather far-reaching. If nothing else, it should fill us with a sense of humility before the majesty of God; truly, without him we can do nothing (John 15:5), and it is only because he anoints us with his Spirit that we are able to learn at all (1 John 2:27). This principle also sheds light on the difficult questions surrounding such issues as the proper application of Scripture, the use of allegorical methods, and the claims of reader-response theorists. While I certainly share Professor Kaiser's concern with cavalier approaches to interpretation (especially in the typical church Bible studies), my attitude toward the common, popular study of Scripture is not nearly as negative. Although I neither approve of nor recommend Origen's hermeneutical methods, it is difficult for me simply to dismiss them without inquiring into the burning question: Why has allegorical interpretation spoken to the hearts of countless believers, and why does it continue to meet their needs even today?290 Similarly, a reader-response approach to the Bible, especially when set in opposition to historical interpretation, can easily turn into a subtle excuse for finding what we are looking for, but the challenges of this new approach are too serious to be ignored.

If we believe that God's Spirit is truly at work as Christians explore the Scriptures, and if his work of illumination is something more than identifying a bare textual meaning, isn't it true, then, that interpreters in some sense contribute to the meaning of the Bible out of their own context? God does not wait for us to become masters of the grammatico-historical method before he can teach us something. Instead, he uses even our ignorance to lead us to himself, and he resists to our capacity for associations as a means for us to

29. It is important to point out again that, paradoxical though this principle may sound, the doctrine of divine sovereignty in history does not suspend human agency, nor does it render God in any sense responsible for human sin. Similarly, the truth of God's sovereignty in our Christian lives neither guarantees that we will always do right nor excuses us when we do wrong.
30. See my discussion in Has the Church Misread the Bible? The History of Interpretation in the Light of Current Issues (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), chap. 3.
recognize his truth. Not long ago I heard a learned minister testify to God's goodness through a rather trivial incident. In the midst of some discouragement, he came across a branch lying on a sidewalk. For some reason, this sight reminded him of the biblical image of the staff and the various comforting truths associated with it. Shall we condemn this pastor for his allegorical interpretation of that event and forbid him to use such hermeneutics again? Or shall we recognize that God, in his wisdom and sovereignty, delights to work in us at whatever level of "receptivity" we may find ourselves?

The fact that God can use our ignorance for his glory is hardly enough reason to remain as ignorant as we possibly can—and we dare never appeal to divine sovereignty to excuse our failings. Accordingly, we should do everything in our power to help believers appreciate the historical character of Scripture and thus respect its original meaning. But in their reading of the Bible, especially for devotional purposes, do believers need to suppress associations that come to mind? Previous exposure to other parts of Scripture inevitably lead us to make literary connections that are, from an exegetical point of view, far-fetched. But as long as those connections are biblical in their own right—and as long as we do not make improper claims about the original meaning of the text we happen to be reading—need we really condemn this commonplace (and "time-honored") approach to finding solace and direction from Scripture? Should not a sense of God's power in our interpretive activity affect our evaluation of this problem?\footnote{For similar reasons, I am open to the possibility that the apostles, in their reading of the Old Testament, may have set some occasion used approaches that do not conform to what we usually consider "proper" exegetical method. Without for a moment blurring the distinction between the inspired work of the biblical writers and our use of Scripture, we must do justice to the controversy between them and us. Cf. G. Vos, Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 325–36. Professor Kaiser finds it difficult to believe that Paul could have used a scriptural argument that did not represent the sense literalis of the Old Testament text (see above, chap. 10). Admittedly, if the apostolic understanding of the Old Testament was fundamentally flawed, it would be impossible to defend the intellectual viability of the gospel message. But neither can I accept that an occasional "free" or "associative" type of allusion—even in the midst of serious argumentation—necessarily reflects a misunderstanding of the literary work being alluded to. See my article "The New Testament Use of the Old Testament: Text Form and Authority," in Scripture and Truth, ed. D. A. Carson and J. W. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), pp. 147–65, esp. pp. 157–58.}

selfishness, obduracy, deceit—a host of obstacles that would seem to wipe out all hermeneutical hopes!

Yet, a moment's reflection on God's sovereignty ought to set us straight. If the Lord assures us that his word will not return to him empty but rather will accomplish what he desires (Isa. 55:11), can we really think that his purposes will be thwarted and that his people will fail to "reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God" (Eph. 4:13)? May we learn to do all our biblical interpretation with assurance that "he who began a good work in [us] will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus" (Phil. 1:6).