THE BIBLICAL TEXT AS SOURCE OF DOCTRINE

The topic of tonight's session places this question before us: What is the role of Scripture in the formation of Christian theology? Or, to put it another way, what is involved in a theological reading of the Bible?

As a teacher of theology, I speak regularly on this topic in my classes. A typical lecture to ministerial students takes the following form. Theology, I tell them, is essentially an attempt to interpret the Bible. As such, it has a great deal in common with preparing a sermon. Both seek to express the meaning of the Bible for people living today. Accordingly, the first task of both theologian and preacher is to discover the original meaning of a biblical passage; the second is to apply that meaning to our modern situation.

To recover the original meaning of a biblical passage, I continue, we need a knowledge of the language in which it was written, and an understanding of its historical and literary contexts. Greek and Hebrew grammars and lexicons, Bible dictionaries and commentaries, along with some reliable works on the history of ancient Near Eastern and Mediterranean cultures and civilizations, largely equip us for this endeavor. It also helps to know the rudiments of textual criticism and to be familiar with recent translations of the Bible.

Thus armed, preacher and theologian, or better, preacher-theologians, are prepared for exegetical work. In their study of a passage, they need to keep in mind the following hermeneutical considerations: the literary type
or genre represented (poetry, parable, allegory, prophecy, etc.), the larger literary units involved (sentences, paragraphs, chapters, books, etc.), and the immediate and remote historical contexts—all of which have a bearing on its meaning. In addition to working with individual passages, good biblical interpreters will compare Scripture with Scripture, seek to harmonize contrasting biblical statements, and allow the Bible to serve as its own interpreter.

I ordinarily devote much less time to the second theological task, that of applying the meaning of the Bible to our modern situation, and my comments on this topic are usually much more general in nature. I often do little more than tell my students they should develop an awareness of the world we live in. As the effective preacher seeks timely illustrations in order to illuminate the biblical message for his congregation, I suggest, the responsible theologian will develop a knowledge of the human situation today.

This emphasis on exegesis is typical of the way Seventh-day Adventists approach theology, I believe. It reflects the general format of several courses in Christian doctrines I took at the Seminary in the late sixties. Righteousness by Faith concentrated on Paul's writings, particularly his letter to the Romans. In Christology, we studied biblical passages that dealt, explicitly or implicitly, with the incarnation, taking special note of important words such as monogenes. And Doctrine of the Sabbath began with a study of Genesis 2:1-3 and concluded with a review of the first-day texts in the New Testament.

On this model, biblical exegesis is not merely the source of theology, it is theology. Instead of providing theology with a "point of departure," the biblical text defines the boundaries within which theology appropriately moves. Consequently, the only thing that theology adds to
biblical exegesis is the systematic arrangement of exegetical conclusions around selected doctrinal themes.

A somewhat broader conception of the theological task which still emphasizes the role of biblical exegesis appears in the first volume of Millard Erickson's recently completed work, *Christian Theology*. In a section entitled, "The Process of Doing Theology" Erickson outlines "the actual task of doing theology," in nine steps, beginning with "collection of the biblical materials," "unification of the biblical materials," and "analysis of the meaning of biblical teachings." Next come "examination of historical treatments," "identification of the essence of the doctrine," and "illumination from sources beyond the Bible." The list concludes with "contemporary expression of the doctrine," "development of a central motif," and "stratification of the topics." Erickson allows for variation in the order in which these steps are taken, so he does not propose this format as an ironclad procedure for theological work. But, as these nine steps show, he insists on the priority of exegesis to systematic theology.¹ On what we shall call the "exegetical model," then, theological reflection always begins with a study of the biblical text, draws conclusions as to what the Bible teaches, and only then moves on to other considerations.

This approach to theology has the important feature of proximity to the biblical text. This minimizes the risk of losing the biblical message in an attempt to "translate" it into modern thought forms—a danger which Paul Tillich acknowledges, significantly.² And it has the support of important historical precedents. The Protestant Reformation, for example, began with Luther's recovery of the Gospel through a study of the Bible, notably Psalms and the letters of Paul, and the Great Advent
Movement of the nineteenth century originated in William Miller's careful analysis of biblical prophecy.

There is no question that biblical exegesis has an essential role to play in any attempt to do Christian theology that is worthy of the name. At the same time, the exegetical conception of theology makes several presuppositions which deserve careful scrutiny and leaves unanswered some important questions about the relation between Scripture and doctrine. In what follows we shall not propound an alternative definition of the theological task, nor propose a list of procedural measures similar to Erickson's. Instead, our purpose will be simply to suggest some of the important things involved in a theological reading of the biblical text which variously affirm and correct this exegetical model of theology. Our comments will elaborate three basic theses.

1. To read the Bible theologically is to accept its authority.

To identify the biblical text as "source of doctrine" is, first of all, to invest it with authority. In one sense, the word "doctrine" is synonymous with religious belief. It can simply refer to what the members of a religious community hold to be true. In another sense, however, the word has more formal connotations. A church's doctrines are the official expression of its faith. They pertain to matters of central concern to the community. The doctrines of a church are not merely an inventory of what its members happen to believe, but statements of what the community stands for. They give the church its basic identity. Consequently, if the biblical text is its source of doctrine, then the identity of the community is drawn from the Bible, and its beliefs must have biblical authority to achieve doctrinal status.

A number of important questions arise when we ascribe doctrinal authority to the biblical text. First, what is there about the biblical text
in general that makes it authoritative? Second, what is it in the biblical text that exerts authority? And third, just how is the biblical text properly brought to bear upon a doctrine in order to authorize it?

Answers to the first of these questions tend to fall into two categories—those which emphasize the role or function of the biblical text in the church and those which emphasize some quality inherent in the text itself. One answer in the first category is that the biblical text is authoritative because of its antiquity. It expresses the faith of the earliest Christians, so it provides a standard for all subsequent Christians. The operative principle here is that older is better.

A related answer is that the biblical text is authoritative because of its honored place in the church. The familiar statement that the church created the canon suggests that the biblical text derives its authority from the church. In other words, it has authority for Christians because they accept it as authoritative, not unlike the authority which the Constitution of the United States acquired in 1787 when the American colonies ratified it.

The functional approach to biblical authority has received considerable attention in recent years. In part it represents a reaction to the tendency in biblical scholarship to emphasize the historical features of the biblical documents and ignore their role in the community of faith. Supporters of this approach maintain that one may construe the biblical text in a variety of ways, so we can consciously decide to regard it as the word of God, regardless of how the documents actually came into existence. Thus Charles M. Wood asserts, "We may ... read scripture as if it were a whole, and as if the the author of the whole were God."3

Answers in the second category focus on the content, rather than the ecclesiastical function, of the Bible. For some, such as neo-orthodox
theologians, the biblical text is authoritative because of the events to which it bears witness. They believe that God revealed (and reveals) himself in the saving events recorded there. They also find the Bible authoritative because of its potential existential impact, its capacity to generate certain experiences in the lives of its readers.

For others, the authority of the Bible resides in its conceptual content. They believe that it contains propositions, or truths capable of propositional expression, which deserve to be believed. Ironically, this view is held by both liberal and evangelical theologians. According to classical Protestant liberalism, the Bible expresses certain ideas (and ideals) that appeal to human reason, and this warrants our believing them. And a number of contemporary evangelical theologians, most notably Carl F. H. Henry, maintain that the propositional content of the Bible is eminently reasonable because God is both author of the biblical text and creator of the human mind.⁴

For conservative Christians purely functional accounts of biblical authority are unsatisfactory because they fail to do justice to the essential nature of the text. Conservatives believe that the contents of the Bible deserve to be believed primarily because God was uniquely operative in their production. The biblical text represents the written record of the messages which God delivered to His servants the prophets, so it richly merits the honored place it occupies in the Christian church.

In his recent book The Scripture Principle, for example, evangelical theologian Clark Pinnock asserts that the pattern of divine revelation includes "its scriptural objectification."⁵ In his view the biblical text is not merely a record of divine revelation, or the human testimony to revelation. It is intrinsic to the revelatory process, and God was directly involved in its production.⁶ So the authority of the Bible ultimately derives from God, who directed its composition and inspired its contents.
By attributing the contents of the biblical text rather directly to God, the evangelical position gives the doctrinal authority of the Bible a more solid footing than do other views, and by and large Seventh-day Adventists are more sympathetic toward this understanding of the Bible than the alternatives. But those who take this position often have difficulty doing justice to the humanity of the Bible, as the ongoing debate among evangelicals over the question of biblical inerrancy indicates.

If we grant that the biblical text has doctrinal authority for any of the reasons described above, or others similar to them, we face the further question of just where within the text that authority resides. Is it to be found in specific verbal formulas, certain literary forms, or in particular symbols or symbolic patterns? Do certain biblical documents have more authority than others? Or is the essential message of the Bible more apparent or accessible in some books or passages than others? Is there a thematic center in the biblical text, a material norm, or a canon within the canon in light of which the Bible as a whole should be read?

On a purely practical level, making distinctions within the Bible is unavoidable. The most cursory examination of its contents reveals an enormous variety of material. And nobody, not even the most faithful three-chapter-a-day reader, finds it all equally illuminating or uplifting. For practical religious value, the genealogies of 1 Chronicles, for example, are simply not on a par with the Sermon on the Mount. And there are passages that no one in his right mind would select for a public Scripture reading or use as the basis of an expository sermon, unless he planned to resort to a highly allegorical method of interpretation and had great confidence that his audience were capable of similar abstraction.

It is undeniable that some portions of the Bible serve certain
purposes better than others, and this holds when we come to the pressing question of doctrine. To read the biblical text as source of doctrine is to read it in light of what is central to Christian faith. And what is central to Christian faith is what deals with Christ. In Luther's memorable words, "All the genuine sacred books agree in this, that all of them preach Christ and deal with him." ⁷

Those who object to the attempt to identify a center in the Bible may be fearful that it leads to reductionism, as it seemed to do in Luther's case. Perhaps they see it as forcing Scripture within the mold of human preconceptions, rather than yielding to its authority. But to read the Bible as a source of Christian doctrine is to read it from a certain perspective. This is not a perspective arbitrarily imposed on the Bible, but one which arises from Scripture itself. We can see it in the way the New Testament deals with the Old Testament, emphasizing those parts which relate more directly than others to the meaning of Jesus for Christian faith. And we see it in the decision of the early Christian church to disregard certain Mosaic requirements as not binding on Gentile converts.

The attempt to identify a specific aspect of the biblical text as authoritative can go to extremes. Schubert M. Ogden, for example, argues that doctrinal authority does not reside in the biblical text as a whole, but in "the so-called Jesus-kerygma of the Synoptic tradition," that is, "in the earliest layer of Christian witness accessible to us today by way of historical reconstruction of the tradition of witness lying behind the New Testament writings." ⁸

But there is no need to go so far. It is not inherently reductionistic to distinguish levels of doctrinal significance in the Bible. It simply involves emphasizing what the Bible emphasizes as central for faith and reading the rest of Scripture in light of this norm. Such a reading of the
Bible represents an extension of the generally accepted principles that the Bible is its own interpreter and that we should interpret its more difficult and obscure passages in light of those whose meaning is clear.

It is also the case that a theological reading of the Bible will focus on its conceptual content. The natural language of theology is the statement, as the natural language of devotion may be an exclamation or a petition. This is why expressions of faith like the early Christian creeds consist of statements affirmed to be true. This does not mean that only straightforward biblical propositions provide material for doctrine. But insofar as theology is concerned with the meaning and truth of religious beliefs, the cognitive claims of Scripture, implicit as well as explicit, will dominate its concern.

Another question arising from an affirmation of the Bible's doctrinal authority is just how the biblical text authorizes doctrine. How is Scripture appropriately brought to bear upon a theological proposal? Our title identifies the biblical text as "source of doctrine," and the exegetical approach to theology sketched earlier assumes that doctrinal statements are more or less summaries of biblical exegesis. But it is by no means the case that doctrines derived from the biblical text always have biblical authority. There are beliefs and practices that originate from the Bible which Seventh-day Adventists do not regard as "biblical," in the sense of "authorized by the Bible." These include baptism for the dead, which Mormons practice, the refusal of blood transfusions advocated by Jehovah's Witnesses, and the phenomenon of speaking in tongues characteristic of Pentecostal groups.

On the other hand, Adventists adhere to certain beliefs and practices which do not have a straightforward biblical mandate, such as the doctrine of the Trinity, the abolition of slavery, and abstinence from alcoholic
beverages and t...e may originate from the biblical text and still lack biblical authority, and conversely, that the biblical text may authorize a doctrine even though it is not, strictly speaking, the origin of the doctrine.

David H. Kelsey examines the theological function of the Bible in his book *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology*. His analysis of seven theologians' work discloses a variety of ways in which the biblical text provides doctrinal authority. At times the biblical text bears directly on a theological proposal: biblical quotations provide the data from which theological conclusions are drawn. At other times, however, the biblical text plays a less direct role. It often operates in a theological argument without actually providing the data for conclusions. The biblical text may provide a "warrant" which justifies the move from certain data to a theological conclusion. Seventh-day Adventists, for example, conclude from medical evidence that tobacco is harmful to human health that Christians should not smoke on the strength of 1 Corinthians 6:19. To use other terms Kelsey employs, the biblical text may also serve in a theological argument as "backing" for a warrant, or even as "conditions for rebuttal."¹⁰

These observations require us to give careful attention to the precise relation of the biblical text to the formulation of doctrinal proposals. As it appears in our title, the word "source" is intriguingly anarthrous. We do not read, "the biblical text as a source of doctrine," which implies at least the possibility of other sources. Nor do we read, "the biblical text as the source of doctrine," which implicitly excludes alternative sources, or relegates them to distinctly secondary status. The title leaves open the question of whether the biblical text is the exclusive source of Christian doctrine, or one among several contributing factors. Kelsey's careful
analysis of the way in which Scripture actually functions in the work of theology indicates that the relation of biblical text to doctrine is too complex to label simply as "source," or "origin." We find a similar complexity in the factors that stimulate doctrinal development in the first place.

At times, of course, doctrines arise because people study the Bible from a simple desire to know what it teaches. But at other times, probably much more frequent, doctrines develop because people are driven to the Bible by other concerns. In his book Evangelicals at an Impasse: Bible Authority in Practice, Robert K. Johnston examines some of the recent evangelical discussions of homosexuality, social ethics, and the place of women in the church. He observes that the church's interaction with society and the conflict between different ecclesiastical traditions exert a major influence on theological development, and he attributes the current disarray among evangelicals in part to their failure to appreciate this fact. In response to this problem, Johnston calls for a "constructive evangelical theology" that will provide "a dynamic blend of Biblical, traditional, and contemporary sources."

I believe Johnston is essentially correct, in both his analysis and his appeal. There are significant factors besides the contents of the biblical text which influence doctrinal development. We must acknowledge this as a matter of fact, and we should affirm it as a matter of principle. No one reads the Bible in a vacuum. Extra-biblical factors contribute to our interpretation of the Bible, and we need to identify them and appreciate the role they play. Our two remaining theses seek to do this.

2. To read the Bible theologically is to participate in the life of the Christian community.

The relation between the church and doctrine is complex and
ambiguous. In the case of factual origin rather than authority, it is really the church, not the Bible, which serves as the primary source of Christian doctrine. As Dietrich Ritschl writes, "The church, that is the geographically and sociologically describable community to which one belongs, is foremost, although not exclusively, the place where theological reflection begins." 13

A church's doctrines are more obviously statements of what the community believes than summaries of biblical exegesis. For this reason theology is often defined with reference to the faith of the Christian community rather than simply to the contents of the Bible. Thus, Paul Tillich defines theology as "the methodical interpretation of the contents of Christian faith" 14; and John Macquarrie, as "the study which, through participation in and reflection upon a religious faith, seeks to express the content of this faith." 15

We may speak of the biblical text as "source of doctrine," but Christians typically do not read the Bible and then form doctrinal conclusions. Instead, they come to the Bible with a set of doctrinal beliefs, and read the biblical text under their influence. And if the church's doctrines do not predetermine the results of biblical study, at the very least they pose the agenda of issues that receive attention.

The fact that the General Conference has sponsored committees to study the book of Daniel, rather than say, the book of Numbers or of Romans, reflects specific doctrinal concerns which the scholars who serve on them are well advised to keep in mind. Our presence here together in this society testifies not to a coincidental agreement in the conclusions we have reached by independent Bible study, but to a mutual participation in the life of a religious community. So, as it actually functions in the experience of the church, the biblical text may provide a standard or
criterion for assessing the validity of doctrines, but is far less likely to serve as the origin of these beliefs.

We should not assume that the typical priority of doctrine to biblical text just described is something negative. To the contrary, a doctrinal framework can be immensely helpful in the study of Bible. It can introduce us to the themes in the Bible that are most likely to have spiritual benefit. This is how John Calvin described his greatest work: "It has been my purpose in this labor to prepare and instruct candidates in sacred theology for the reading of the divine Word." 16 "Although Holy Scripture contains a perfect doctrine, ... yet a person who has not much practice in it has good reason for some guidance and direction, to know what he ought to look for in it, in order not to wander hither and thither, but to hold to a sure path, that he may always be pressing toward the end to which the Holy Spirit calls him." 17

A theological reading of the Bible presupposes that it speaks to the whole Christian community. To read the Bible in light of a doctrinal framework is to read it in conversation with other Christians. We can benefit from their insights and learn from their mistakes. And we can build on their achievements. There is no compelling reason to ignore the what others have learned from studying the Bible as we undertake our own exegetical efforts. Indeed, to do so only obscures the fact that our reading of the Bible is inevitably affected by our ecclesiastical history, and it actually makes us more, rather than less, susceptible to its influence. To quote Ritschl again, "Our questions are already shaped by two thousand years of tradition, even if we are unaware of the details of this tradition. The less one knows about it the more he is vulnerable to be influenced unduly by it." 18

These observations about the inevitable influence of doctrine on
biblical interpret on raise the important question. Scripture and tradition. This brings to mind the famous principle of *sola scriptura*. As developed and practiced by the Reformers, this principle is better understood as an affirmation of the authority of the Bible than as a hermeneutical or exegetical principle. For the great Reformers themselves, the biblical text was by no means the only object of theological reflection. Their writings contain references, appeals, and allusions to a great variety of sources. The principle stands for the superiority of the Bible to all other authorities, including ecclesiastical officers and church councils, and it calls for a direct appeal to Scripture in matters of faith rather than relying on subsequent interpretations. Those who are faithful to this principle allow nothing to substitute for the reading of the Bible and insist that the biblical text itself stand over against any interpretation of it. The principle of *sola scriptura* does not require us to ignore the doctrines of the church as we study the Bible. (As we have seen, they will have an effect on us whether we like it or not.) But it means that we consciously resist the tendency to see in the biblical text only what we bring to it and that we adjust our doctrines to the biblical text whenever we encounter a discrepancy, rather than vice versa.

We see the importance of the living community of faith for the development of doctrine when we recall that the biblical documents themselves express the faith of a community. As James Barr observes, "The Bible is in its origin a *product* of the believing community." Christians are sometimes described as "people of the book," along with Jews and Moslems. But the book played a much less influential role in the earliest generation of Christians than it came to play later. It was not the contents of the Hebrew scriptures (or their Greek translation) that produced Christianity, but the conviction that a new reality had appeared
in human history it the person of Jesus Christ. The claims made for him by the official eye-witnesses of the resurrection formed the doctrinal basis of the Christian church before they were committed to writing. Ironically, then, the people in the Book, to speak of the earliest Christians, were not themselves people of the Book.

3. To read the Bible theologically is to seek its message for today; it is the attempt of Christians now to hear the Word of God.

A doctrinal approach to the biblical text presupposes that it has present significance. The Bible may be a collection of ancient documents, but it nevertheless speaks with divine authority to living men and women, and they can understand and respond to its message. This presupposition requires us to consider a number of important issues. One is the role of reason in theological reflection.

Theology is by definition a rational enterprise. It is often described as the application of reason to the contents of the Bible, or of faith. Yves M.-J. Congar, for example, defines it as "as reasoned account about God, a body of knowledge which rationally interprets, elaborates and ordains the truths of revelation." Consideration for the rational character of theology customarily leads to the development of a theological system. "Systematic theology," as the discipline is often identified, seeks the careful organization of the various Christian beliefs into an arrangement that is both logically attractive and faithful to the relevant biblical materials. But basic to all such work with the biblical text is the conviction that its contents can be intellectually appropriated by modern readers. The Bible makes sense. We can grasp and accept the truth(s) it contains.

For many theologians, this conviction is an unquestioned assumption.
They believe that the contents of the Bible are inherently intelligible, so they only have to be announced to be understood. This is frequently the case with those who follow the exegetical model of theology described earlier. For other theologians, however, this conviction must be argued for. They firmly believe that the Bible makes sense, but they also believe that the intelligibility of its contents is not self-evident. It must be demonstrated rather than simply assumed. For them, adequately interpreting the biblical text is more than simply repeating its contents; it involves expressing those contents in ways that people today find meaningful. Some theologians identify their work as "constructive theology," perhaps to emphasize that their objectives include more than doctrinal organization.

The task of theology is sometimes described as if the theologian occupied a neutral position between modern thought forms, on the one hand, and the conceptual world of the Bible, on the other. From this vantage point he can grasp the message of the biblical text in its conceptual terms and then translate it for modern men and women into their language and concepts.

This description of the theological enterprise is misleading. There is no neutral vantage point which the biblical interpreter occupies. We saw earlier that the notion of doctrine arising directly from the biblical text is simplistic; doctrinal concerns are at work when we first approach the Bible. The point here is similar. We do not--we cannot--lay aside the terms and concepts of our world and hear the Bible purely "on its own terms." Rudolf Bultmann correctly insists that exegesis without presuppositions is impossible. To the extent that we grasp the biblical message at all, we grasp it within our conceptual framework, and this framework inevitably reflects the world in which we live. So, instead of
understanding the biblical text and then undertaking to translate it, we find translation already underway in the very act of understanding.

Although contemporary thought-forms inevitably affect our understanding of the biblical text, their influence is not unlimited. If they completely determined its meaning for us, of course, it would be impossible to learn anything new from the Bible; we would hear nothing in the text but the echo of our preconceptions. It is precisely to prevent this from happening that we need to develop an explicit awareness of our own perspective. This will help us to determine whether a given biblical interpretation is merely a projection of our own needs and desires, or a faithful reading of the biblical text.

An appreciation of the distance between our conceptual perspective and that of the biblical text lies behind the critical study of the Bible (along with the recognition that the biblical documents themselves have a history, as well as their collection and transmission). The results of this method, or methods, are often disturbing to conservative Christians, because they frequently reflect an antisupernaturalistic bias and conflict with traditional beliefs. There are those who suggest abandoning such an approach to the Bible in order to avoid these difficulties. However, many of its results are not only compatible with a traditional view of the Bible’s divine inspiration, but actually serve to strengthen conservative beliefs. Moreover, the belief that the Bible has a human as well as a divine side calls for a historical reading of the text.

We are justified in exercising caution in applying such methods to the biblical text, and we should closely examine the conclusions reached by critical study in light of relevant biblical evidence. But to discredit them out of hand would be to discard a good many positive contributions to
our understanding... the Bible and to adopt an obscrquentist stance which, in the long run, would only weaken our theological position.\textsuperscript{23}

We have said that a theological reading of the Bible involves an attempt to hear its message for us today, and we have argued that this requires us to appreciate the distance between our conceptual outlook and the thought-world of the Bible. It also requires us to give the biblical text freedom in several different ways.

First, the biblical text must have the freedom to correct any interpretation of it. A commitment to the present significance of the Bible will lead us to place the biblical text overagainst any previous understanding of it. We must refuse to identify its message exclusively with any theological system.

Second, the biblical text must be free to speak to us with personal immediacy. To read the Bible theologically is to listen to its message in every situation. It is to approach the biblical text as if it were addressed to us today for the first time. As Rudolf Bultmann says, "The word of God never becomes our property. The test of whether we have heard it aright is whether we are prepared always to hear it anew...."\textsuperscript{24}

Third, the biblical text must be free to reveal things that have never been understood before. The Bible has present significance partly because its contents have never been fully and finally formulated. It contains food for thought that has never been digested, or--to change the metaphor--depths that have never been fully plumbed. To read the Bible theologically is to anticipate that we will always learn something new from it. For this reason, the biblical text never ceases to function as a source of doctrine, and the task of theology is never complete.

Our discussion of the biblical text as source of doctrine has led us to a number of considerations, but we have not attempted to formulate a
step-by-step met. for deriving theological conclusions from biblical data. We have found several things make this inadvisable. One is the variety of factors that stimulate theological reflection. Another is the subtlety involved in all attempts at conceptual translation.

A third that deserves mention is the protean character of the biblical material itself. Its complexity and variety stimulate a continual quest for better means of interpretation, which the different sessions of this meeting suggest. There is a certain artificiality about all theological constructs. The content of the Bible requires conceptual clarification, and for this reason the task of theology is inescapable. But the same content always resists precise conceptual expression, and for this reason the task of theology is always unfinished. In Heinz Zahrnt's picturesque words, "the cathedral which theologians are building is never finished, nor may it ever be finished if it is genuinely to be a cathedral in which God is preached and worshipped." 25

The most important thing which prevents the formulation of a definitive theological program is the transcendent Subject of the biblical text. Precisely because it is God's word, the Word of God can never be encapsulated or incarcerated within a tidy conceptual framework, or mastered with neat procedural techniques. We must pursue the theological task with all the intellectual rigor at our disposal, but we must recognize all the while that our efforts are doomed to fail. 26 To read the Bible theologically, therefore, is to read it with humility. It is to read it with the recognition that we have never read it enough.

Richard Rice
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NOTES


2. Of his use of philosophical and psychological concepts rather than biblical quotations, Tillich writes, "I am not unaware of the danger that in this way the substance of the Christian message may be lost" (Systematic Theology [3 vols.; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951-63], 3:4).


6. Ibid., p. 27.


10. Ibid., pp. 139-44.


12. Ibid., pp. 76, 151-54.


22. Erickson and Pinnock each devote a chapter of their most recent work to a carefully nuanced analysis of critical methods of Bible study (Erickson, *op. cit.*, 1:81-104; Pinnock, *op. cit.*, pp. 130-152).


26. Heinz Zahrnt’s study concludes with these memorable words: “The reason for the failure of theology is the greatness of its object. Yet it is a task which we can never cease to carry out, and which we may not cease to carry out. We must always begin to build once again, and we must always dare once again to do the unheard of thing, which consists of men, sinful, finite, imperfect and mortal men, daring to speak in human words about God. Here too it is God’s grace alone which can make good what in every case man does badly. God must also forgive us our theology, our theology perhaps most of all” (ibid.).