

SCRIPTURE AND FAITH:
A RESPONSE TO NELSON KLOOSTERMAN

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I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate Mid-America Reformed Seminary with the publication of the first issue of its own journal. Many of us welcome your perspective and the deliberate and forthright Reformed commentary that inspires the content of your journal.

In particular I wish to express my thanks to Professor Kloosterman for his fine review of my recent book, *Interpreting the Bible in Theology and the Church* (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1984; see *Mid-America Journal of Theology*, 1:1, 97-104). I welcome his sympathetic and yet probing analysis. So, with some eagerness to continue the discussion, I would like to respond especially to Professor Kloosterman's closing questions.

As a way of taking those questions up, I would like to respond to one of the reviewer's compliments. Kloosterman's mention of the importance of my inclusion of the theme of consummation in circumscribing the biblical storyline is intriguing. I am praised for incorporating it in my designation of the Bible's basic motif or narrative structure.

I gather however that Professor Kloosterman is not convinced that I have taken full advantage of this inclusion. Though I am not, in the reviewer's perception, a moral triumphalist, I do seem to load the "experience of faith" (faith's apprehension of the Bible's story line) with a certitude that might better have been reserved exclusively for the Word of God itself. I make a rather uncompromising case for creation-fall-redemption-consummation as the Bible's fundamental motive. With Dooyeweerd, I call it "the key" to true knowledge. Although I am probably right about this, according to the reviewer, the nagging question keeps occurring to him of how I can be so sure. Queries Kloosterman: "But how can

we certify that the beginning-middle-end *character of the narrative* necessarily yields the creation-fall-redemption-consummation storyline to the eyes of faith?" What, for example, do I make of the alternative pattern of, say, a Karl Barth, for whom the Bible's center is the dynamic of eternal election and reconciliation? In the light of these other readings born of genuine faith, would it not be the better part of wisdom and modesty to admit that my fourfold scheme is "the *product* of faith's reflection" and thus not the key itself to the Word of God? In stressing as much as I do "faith's apprehension," have I not merely "shifted the problem of verifying Scripture's authoritative message from the subjectivity of biblical criticism to that of faith's experience?" According to Kloosterman, it is not clear that I have avoided the appearance of the very subjectivism I oppose so sternly in my polemic against historical criticism. It is to this claim of Kloosterman's that I now turn my attention. Let me say that I welcome the probing inquiry since it touches on the heart of the contemporary hermeneutical debate.

First, I already mentioned in my book, though I probably did not emphasize it enough, that most modern theologians themselves admit that creation-fall-redemption-consummation is the structure of what is phenomenally there in the Bible's narrative (cf. pp. 72 and 84-85 of my book). Bultmann, for example, insists that demythologization is necessary because the text as received thinks in prescientific, and therefore for Bultmann, primitive and unacceptable terms. Even radical critics presuppose that the creation-recreation structure represents the world view of the authors and final redactors of the text of Scripture. They located the creation materials of the Bible in first place, regarded the redemption of the Messiah as a mid-point in the time-line of history, and looked to an eschatological completion in which the "accident" of sin would be eliminated. At least the authors and redactors of the Bible thought in realistic, straightforward, and naive terms.

The real question comes, then, at the point where theologians take it upon themselves to evaluate and judge this vision from another vantage point, say, from the world view of modern times. It is too complex a matter to deal with elaborately here, but suffice it to say that many of the circumstances (intellectual and practical) of modernity make it impossible to remain content with the verbally realistic perspective of the authors of the biblical documents. For moderns that perspective is, simply put, just too magical and unsuspecting. As a case in point of this position within the Reformed world itself I cite extensively from the work of Hendrikus Berkhof

in the sixth chapter of my book. For Berkhof historical criticism has put an end to verbal realism, to the posture of naive experience in print. The substitute patterns of Barth, Pannenberg, and Moltmann, to name just a few, are born, to one degree or another, of the critical mind, a mind that will henceforth always distinguish the apparent from the real and call on critical scholarship to inform us in an at last reliable manner about the latter. A methodologically reductionist angle on the Bible comes thus frequently to displace the fullness of the naively given biblical pattern itself. However much this may be contrary to the best in any one of these thinkers (I think in particular of the great work of Barth and Pannenberg), it is not clear that the proper order of life and science has not been subjected to an odd reversal.

Getting back, then, to Kloosterman's query, I would say that none of the theologians he cites would disagree with what I say about what is phenomenally there in the text of Scripture as a whole, in the final redaction as we now have it. The real difference between these theologians and myself is that what is there phenomenally is Word of God for me but only the human vehicle of its transmission for them. If we set out to reconstruct what is there (or "interpret" it in the modern hermeneutical sense), we are implicated in the modern intellectual way of escaping from it. Hence, in my book I call for letting what is there reconstruct the world (and world view) of the reader rather than be reconstructed or decoded by him.

This leads to a further, deeper matter that must in modern times be brought to the fore again and again because so much militates against it. In the introduction to my book I said (and probably should have explored more fully, or said time and time again) that my book represents a defense of the notion of literal sense because I believe that the "phenomenally given linguistic word" is trustworthy. In the background here stands my concern for and interest in the doctrine of creation. In the Christian and biblical view of creation the immediately given is pronounced by God himself to be very good, and that time and time again as if we would have trouble remembering it. Creation is exactly that, creation; it is not God! And this means that it is not to be compared with God either in any philosophical or ontological sense. I reject the analogy of being and the infinite-finite distinction between God and the world on which it is based; and I do so on the basis of the doctrine of creation. The creaturely is not in any sense *less* than God, or commensurate with God's being in any way. It is not a reminiscence of the divine either.

Rather it is *other* than God, and because other, therefore also very good *on its own terms*. I deny in no uncertain terms the ancient and modern intimation that creation is intrinsically deficient (which it would necessarily be if able to be compared to God).

All of this means that creation, which includes language, human knowledge, the human action of faith, and the phenomenally given word, is perfectly capable of bearing God and his revelation, if that is what God wishes to have happen. I gather that he wishes it to happen because he has declared it capable of and destined to sanctity and holiness in his creation of it on the seventh day in particular. The potential for divine residence in it was conferred on creation to complete it. Creation is not complete without its being ordered to the Sabbath, and thus to the divine indwelling.

This being the case according to the biblical doctrine of creation, we must regard as false the following view, which in modernity has even trickled down to the highschool level. Twitted as the position over against which he develops his own view, the dominant modern view is reproduced by the great philosopher Hegel in one of his major works. In this view, according to Hegel, the Absolute (truth) must be distinguished from the instruments by which we attempt to take possession of it. This being the case, modern philosophy up to Hegel has held that therefore the Absolute, the truth itself, can never be had by the human being because the instrument of knowledge never leaves unaltered what it seeks to possess in itself. We thus receive the truth only as it is through and in the medium of human knowledge and thus never as it is in itself. It is this view, to which modern philosophy had led, that Hegel thinks himself to have overcome in his *The Phenomenology of Mind*. But I believe that serious questions can be raised about whether Hegel did not himself dig the relativistic hole even deeper.

In any case, Protestant theology accommodated to Germanic philosophy is profoundly dependent on an ontology of creaturely qualities (what it prefers to call "finitude" in recollection of Plato) that regards them as in principle unfit and inadequate to God, the Absolute (in Hegel's language). Every instance of putative knowledge tells us more about the agent, instrument, or subject of the act than about that to which it is directed. Moreover, each angle of entrance to the truth is by the nature of the case at best only a partial contribution to the whole, which can and will thus only be had (if ever) at the end of history itself, in a cumulative process of evolution to the omega point. Moreover, language is unreliable, finite to the core.

This position, I dare say, Professor Kloosterman thoroughly and rightly rejects. But does an orthodoxy that stresses the Word's "out-there-ness" as much as it often does, not fall prey to the same result as liberal Protestantism: namely to the idea that the best that we can possess is, to use the language of Kloosterman himself, "the *product* of faith's reflection"? I ask this question because it seems to me that a Word out there that can never be connected up with a human word, or a human idea, or a human act such as the act of faith, is finally an unknowable and undoable Word, a *Ding an sich*. What help is it to have such a Word anyway? Either I should address this question to Prof. Kloosterman, or I must suggest (frankly, I am dying to) that Prof. Kloosterman's query about this matter does not sound like a very characteristically conservative one.

In pursuance of the question rather than the final suggestion, I would add, furthermore, that a view of the Word strictly distinguished from man's response to it is, I believe, incompatible with the Bible's own rather naive portrayal of the connection. The Bible speaks in the most uncomplicated, natural, and self-evident ways about the connection between God's Word and man's actions, or heaven and earth.

Allow me an example from Scripture itself. When Saul, persecuting Christians, is confronted on the Damascus road by Christ himself, Christ asks: "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" The fact of the matter was that Saul had been pursuing Christ's disciples, not Christ himself. Yet Christ makes no con-torted distinction between himself, his divine being, on the one hand, and his followers on the other. He allows his own to be identified with him, in all their creatureliness. There is no hint here that Christians are incapable of representing God himself, or that their deeds are at best by the nature of the case only "analogies" of the kingdom, signposts of the divine. The unreflected sense of identity present in these words of Christ reproduces, I believe, the overall view of Scripture itself. (See also in this connection the story of the last judgment in Matthew 25 for a similar view of identity.)

What I mean to suggest here is that, though Prof. Kloosterman's query about my tendency to ultimatize faith's construal of the biblical story may have a point, there is in this emphasis a reminiscence of the modern philosophical distinction between subject and object that fails to do justice to the Bible's rather more naive (in the positive sense of the word) view of the relationship between God and man. Was man not made to live in the truth, and,

thus, do his gropings after certitude not bespeak a condition for which he was created? Must the Word from on high be so separated from creation that it can be no more than a *Ding an sich*, a regulative ideal, or a thunderous objective authority from on high that simply overwhelms the human and brings it to naught?

Having lost a sense of realistic biblical narrative, or historized story, western theology has been prone to go either one of these two possible routes, which in substance are not as dissimilar as is often thought. What, then, is this Scripture in itself in relation to which every possible human reception or appropriation is always necessarily only "the *product* of faith's reflection"? Is it not itself as an idea a product of speculation that, as Calvin stresses so often, does us no good?

Finally, there is the closely related question of tradition as Professor Kloosterman raises it in this connection. He queries, in the same vein as mentioned above, whether my view that theology is called to interpret the interpretation of Scripture resident in the Christian community does not accord tradition a "status beyond that historically accorded it in Reformed theology?"

Here I should like first to respond by asking what status Professor Kloosterman thinks has been accorded tradition in Protestant thought. I dare say the Reformed tradition has no theory here, no precisely developed teaching—only a rather vague anti-Catholic polemic, which has usually done as much harm as good. To be sure, Reformed thought rejects the idea that tradition is an independent source of authority alongside of Scripture; or the idea that there is tradition in Scripture itself as well as outside and that, therefore, the process of revelation is ongoing. But I do not believe that it is incompatible with Reformed faith, and especially the praxis of the Reformers, to go farther and allege the following as well on the question of the status of tradition.

First, not everything that the church says aright either can be or has been directly extracted from the text of Scripture. There is (properly so) such a thing as working out of Scripture, of asserting what is not in the Bible but what is biblical nonetheless. I take it that that is, for example, what a dogma or doctrine is, and I take it that doctrines can be correct and that what is correct is authoritative. Furthermore, I take it that such truth (say the doctrine of the Trinity) may become a framework of understanding in terms of which Scripture will in turn become read (properly so).

Second, and most important for our purposes, Protestants need to reflect much more than they have on the exegetical and hermeneutical practices of the Reformers. For example, Calvin's works are filled, sometimes to the brim, with citations from the Fathers and medieval authors. One need only think of the frequency with which references to the following occur: Augustine, Bernard of Clairvaux, Peter Lombard, and John Chrysostom, to name but a few. Does this fact mean that Calvin regarded tradition as an authority alongside of Scripture, or that he accorded it a status beyond that accorded it by the Reformation? I think not.

And I think not because Calvin regarded much in the Christian thinkers of the past as repetitions of Scripture. The Fathers were useful because they helped Calvin gain deeper insight into Scripture; they, as many other believers in the history of the church, opened Scripture for Calvin and were thus a chorus of witnesses who in their own times repeated Scripture for Calvin and thus made it more accessible for his own times. Scripture is not just something out there or way back there; it is also what the Christian community has done with it aright in the present. Through the centuries Scripture has authored a tradition apart from which we in turn today have no access to the Word of God. The Word of God and the proper means of its appropriation are not to be kept so hermetically and clinically apart.

This fact alone, I believe, sheds light on Calvin's own exegetical practice. Moreover, it also illuminates our own. Just as Calvin had his authorities, we have Calvin and use him in that way, as an authority. We appeal to great leaders in our past as means by which better to make the Word of God relevant to our times. Naturally, these authorities do not become a part of the Christian teaching itself; though Calvin is a helpful means for us in our effort to understand and appropriate the Word, Calvin himself should never become part of the Christian teaching, another later phase in a putative ongoing history of revelation. With Scripture, revelation has received its once-for-all shape and source; all the revelation we need for our salvation is in. The Word has been spoken and now is hence the time for deeding that Word forth, making it effectual in our lives through the operation of the Holy Spirit.

But this does not mean that what is right in the Christian tradition is not authoritative, for what is right in the tradition is the only instrument by which the Word becomes real in our lives today. Whether this answers Prof. Kloosterman's question about my view

of tradition he can only say. But I believe that there is in this view something different than the common disdain for traditional authorities or the elevation of tradition alongside of Scripture as an additional source of revelation. Maybe we must think further along such lines to develop a proper Protestant doctrine of tradition. As of the moment, I am convinced, we do not have one.

In closing, let me again express my thanks for the time and attention and probing commentary given *Interpreting the Bible in Theology and the Church* by Prof. Kloosterman and this journal. Only with an initial attitude of affirmation will the theological conversation be advanced, as I believe Prof. Kloosterman has done. I thank him for it and look forward to future interchanges of this kind.