



RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Prayer, formation, and scriptural interpretation

Jonathan Rowlands 

St Mellitus College, Nottingham, UK  
Email: [jonny.rowlands@stmellitus.ac.uk](mailto:jonny.rowlands@stmellitus.ac.uk)

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## Abstract

In this article, I argue for the centrality of prayer within Christian interpretation of scripture. This argument is made in two stages. First, Christ on the road to Emmaus is the interpreter of scripture *par excellence*, such that scriptural interpretation is fruitfully understood as participation in Christ's interpretation of scripture to and for the church. Second, scriptural interpretation must take prayer as central to an appropriate scriptural hermeneutics, since prayer is one way in which the reader of scripture becomes conformed to person of Christ.

**Keywords:** biblical interpretation; Sarah Coakley; formation; prayer; sanctification; Katherine Sonderegger

The newly resurgent interest in the 'theological interpretation of scripture' is an amorphous phenomenon, defying easy definition. As Brad East notes, 'theological interpretation resists movement status: it lacks a common method. It is more a posture, a set of shared judgements about how to approach the Bible, prior to details of exegetical procedure.'<sup>1</sup> In this article I am concerned with the hermeneutics of the burgeoning interest in the 'theological interpretation of scripture' and the proper relationship in which prayer should stand to hermeneutics within this sensibility.<sup>2</sup> In what follows I hope to show that this sensibility might benefit from another 'shared judgement' in recent Anglophone theology: an emphasis on prayer as a central precondition of any theological speech. Here I take Sarah Coakley and Katherine Sonderegger as two particularly instructive examples of the role prayer should play in theological speech and scriptural interpretation.

In particular, I make two points in what follows. First, the risen Christ on the road to Emmaus is the interpreter of scripture *par excellence*, with the *telos* of scriptural interpretation being participation in Christ's reading of scripture. Second, prayer must be a

<sup>1</sup>Brad East, 'The Hermeneutics of Theological Interpretation: Holy Scripture, Biblical Scholarship and Historical Criticism', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 19/1 (2017), p. 32. Note also Joel Green's comments: 'Theological interpretation is not a carefully defined "method" . . . [but] is identified more by certain sensibilities and aims.' Joel B. Green, *Practicing Theological Interpretation: Engaging Biblical Texts for Faith and Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2012), p. 10.

<sup>2</sup>As I note in more depth below, I myself am reticent to speak of *theological* interpretation of scripture, instead preferring instead to speak of *Christian* interpretation of scripture. My reasons for this are detailed towards the end of this article.

crucial component (but not the totality) of a hermeneutics of scriptural interpretation, insofar as prayer is a key locus of formation wherein the pray-er proleptically becomes conformed to the image of Christ and, thus, participates in his interpretation of scripture within and for the church.<sup>3</sup>

### Reading scripture on the road to Emmaus

On the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13–35), Christ both ‘interprets’ scripture (διερμήνευσεν, v. 27), and ‘opens’ it (διήνοιγεν, v. 32). This way of reading scripture is unique in the biblical texts; the New Testament authors speak of various modes and degrees of ‘knowing’ (εἰδότες, Mark 12:24; ἤδεισαν, John 20:9), ‘understanding’ (συνιέναι, Luke 24:45), ‘believing’ (ἐπίστευσαν, John 2:22), ‘searching’ (ἐραυνᾶτε, John 5:39), ‘examining’ (ἀνακρίνοντες, Acts 17:11), and ‘reasoning from’ (διελέξατο, Acts 17:2) scripture, but it is only Christ that ‘opens’ it as he does on the Emmaus road. The Emmaus road passage functions as the second part of an extended *inclusio* along with the young Jesus in the temple in Luke 2:41–51. Both accounts take place in the aftermath of the Passover festival in Jerusalem (2:41; cf. 22:1–13); in both accounts Jesus is discovered on the third day (2:46; 24:7, 21); in both accounts Christ is surprised by the questions asked of him (2:49; 24:25–6). Christ as interpreter plays a crucial role at the beginning and end of Luke’s Gospel; by framing his Gospel with these passages, the importance of Christ as interpreter of scripture *par excellence* is made clear.

The bifurcated nature of Christ’s reading of scripture (‘interpreting’ and ‘opening’) may be mapped onto the two-step process of Christian interpretation of scripture that Hays speaks of when he stresses the need ‘to develop modes of interpretation that recognize the historical sense of the biblical texts [thus, to “interpret” them] but then take their original meaning up into a larger theological framework in which the texts rightly are seen to mean more than their original authors and readers had in mind [thus, to “open” them]’.<sup>4</sup> It is this second task – the ‘opening’ of scripture – that is unique and proper to Christian interpretations of scripture in particular as they seek not to obliterate or dominate over historical-critical considerations and interpretations, but to use the findings of historical-critical enquiry as one source for moving beyond them to ‘open’ the texts to interrogate their ‘final’ or ‘ultimate’ meaning in the light of Christ.

In other words, to read scripture theologically is to read scripture like the risen Christ does on the road to Emmaus; it is to participate in Christ’s reading the scripture in and for the church. This is a task unique to the risen Christ and, as such, Christ is the interpreter of scripture *par excellence*, by virtue of his ‘opening up’ of the biblical texts to demonstrate the manner in which they witness to him. Thus, whilst the risen Christ’s ‘opening’ of scripture is not interchangeable with the act of ‘interpreting’ scripture in its original context, it remains an act of interpretation *per se* since it remains concerned with the ‘meaning’ of scripture, albeit from within a different horizon (to put it in Gadamerian terms). John Webster resists speaking of scriptural interpretation, preferring instead to speak of ‘reading’, as a

<sup>3</sup>Here and throughout I distinguish between the pray-er (the person praying) and the prayer (that which is prayed).

<sup>4</sup>Richard Hays, ‘Response to Robert Wilken, *In Dominico Eloquio*’, *Communio* 25 (1998), p. 256.

more practical, low-level term, less overlain with the complexities of hermeneutical theory ... The term 'interpretation', on the other hand – at least as it has been shaped in the mainstream of theological hermeneutics since Schleiermacher – tends to devote much more attention to the immanent explication of the activity of the interpreting subject as that through which the text achieves its 'realisation': for this reason, 'reading' is much to be preferred.<sup>5</sup>

Webster's resistance to the language of interpretation is certainly understandable, and he is right to note that the term is often suffused with overtones of philosophical hermeneutics and its attendant difficulties. However, such resistance is also unhelpful with regards to scripture, since it is precisely Christ as the interpreting subject that achieves scripture's supreme 'realisation' on the Emmaus road. The moment of Christ's interpretation of Israel's scripture's to his disciples (Luke 24:27) is also, the disciples later reflect, the very moment of Christ's opening of these texts also (Luke 24:32). As such, with Darren Sarisky, I suggest 'interpretation as a term has not been so spoiled that it cannot be redeemed by a clear specification of the meaning it carries in this discussion'.<sup>6</sup> Given the need for such specificity then, to speak of Christ's expansive and 'opening' interpretation of Israel's scriptures is to speak of an interpretation added to the text; not an interpretation that replaces or obliterates what has gone before. The act of the risen Christ in 'opening' scripture is an act of interpretation, even if its expanding of the meaning of scripture cannot merely be reduced to or identified with the act of post-Schleiermachiian hermeneutics. It is to realise the 'meaning' of scripture in such a way as to invite further realisations of its meaning.

How, then, might believers read scripture with Christ on the road to Emmaus, 'opening' it as a source of knowledge of God? If Christ is the reader of scripture *par excellence*, then the act of becoming like Christ qua a reader of scripture must be central to an ecclesially situated reading of scripture. In other words, the personal formation (or conformation to the image of Christ) of the reader(s) of scripture must be a central component of participating in Christ's reading of scriptures, such that formation must be a central part of any hermeneutics employed in the service of reading and explicating scripture within and for the church. Properly understood, such a formation is to be understood eschatologically if, with Colin Gunton, we think of eschatology not merely as 'futurology',<sup>7</sup> but as 'life according to the promise of that humanity which belongs in the divine future but may be realised, by anticipation, in the here and now'.<sup>8</sup>

As Nicholas Lash famously argued, scriptural interpretation is akin to artistic performance. For any text, he writes, some form of engagement with the text must serve as 'the fundamental form of their interpretation'.<sup>9</sup> Just as one most properly 'interprets' a map by following it to the intended destination, the biblical texts are primarily to be performed: 'The fundamental form of the *Christian* interpretation of Scripture is the life, activity and organization of the believing community ... Christian practice, as

<sup>5</sup>John Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* (Cambridge: CUP, 2003), p. 86.

<sup>6</sup>Darren Sarisky, *Reading the Bible Theologically* (Cambridge: CUP, 2019), p. 284.

<sup>7</sup>Colin E. Gunton, 'Dogmatic Theses on Eschatology: Conference Response', in David Fergusson and Marcel Sarot (eds), *The Future as God's Gift: Explorations in Christian Eschatology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), p. 139.

<sup>8</sup>Colin E. Gunton, *Enlightenment and Alienation: An Essay Towards a Trinitarian Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2006), p. 104.

<sup>9</sup>Nicholas Lash, *Theology on the Way to Emmaus* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2005 [1986]), p. 40.

interpretative action, consists in the *performance* of [the biblical] texts.<sup>10</sup> Thus, in this way, ‘the scriptures are the “constitution” of the church ... the “meaning” of the constitution is never definitely “captured”; it is, ever and again, sought and constructed’.<sup>11</sup> Or, as Shannon Craigo-Snell writes, ‘Christian communities interpret Scripture by acting out, embodying, creating the events called for by Scripture. Our understanding of Scripture comes to fullness within our performance of it.’<sup>12</sup>

This performative dimension of Christian interpretation of scripture means that such interpretation can never be reduced to a mere intellectual endeavour but is always already a task that demands the engagement of and subsequently results in the transformation of the whole person of the interpreter, and of the people who comprise the interpreting community. To return to Lash: ‘if the texts of the New Testament are to express that which Christian faith declares them capable of expressing, the quality of our *humility* will be the criterion of the adequacy of the performance’.<sup>13</sup> To interpret scripture like Christ, then, is to perform the texts like Christ. This is to say, proper scriptural interpretation necessarily involves christological conformation, precisely because:

If the Bible, like a script, does in some sense command performance and create event, then this says something about the nature of Biblical interpretation. In church, as in theatre, interpretation is neither an individual, nor an exclusively mental, matter. Indeed, it involves the entire person – mind and body, voice and spirit – and the entire community.<sup>14</sup>

This direction from interpretation to performance is seen too in the Emmaus road story, where ‘Jesus’ words about Scripture are neither the whole of his interpretation nor its heart. Jesus’ text talk on the [Emmaus] road leads to his table act in the house. When it comes to Scripture, words cannot count as the full interpretation of the text, even when the words are Jesus’ own.’<sup>15</sup> It is precisely *because* Jesus’ interpretation leads to performative praxis that his scriptural interpretation itself becomes normative. Thus,

As Luke has told the story, Jesus is *the* theological interpreter of Scripture, one whose command of sacred text was revealed at age twelve (2:41–51, esp. v. 47), whose interpretation overpowered the devil in the wilderness (4:1–13), whose embodiment of Scripture was named at the inauguration of his ministry (4:17–21) ... Jesus’ status as truthful interpreter was vindicated by God when God raised him from the dead. It is this Jesus, validated by events and vindicated by resurrection, who interprets Scripture on the road.<sup>16</sup>

As paradigmatic scriptural interpreter, then, the risen Christ is also the paradigmatic scriptural performer; as paradigmatic interpreter, he himself is also paradigmatic

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 42.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., pp. 43–4.

<sup>12</sup>Shannon Craigo-Snell, ‘Command Performance: Rethinking Performance Interpretation in the Context of *Divine Discourse*’, *Modern Theology* 16/4 (2000), p. 482.

<sup>13</sup>Lash, *Way to Emmaus*, p. 46.

<sup>14</sup>Craigo-Snell, ‘Command Performance’, p. 482.

<sup>15</sup>D. Brent Laytham, ‘Interpretation on the Way to Emmaus: Jesus Performs His Story’, *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 1/1 (2007), p. 103.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 104.

interpretation.<sup>17</sup> As such, central to any hermeneutics of Christian interpretation of scripture must be a concern for formation and, more specifically, christological conformation. Formational concerns are not only a proper *outworking* of scriptural interpretation, but also a vital *precondition* of it, too. If the interpreter is to interpret scripture in all its fullness leading to proper Christian praxis, so also must the interpreter become more like the one who most fully interpreted and performed scripture on the Emmaus road.

Moreover, it should not be overlooked that this paradigmatic interpreter is precisely the *risen* Christ. In this respect, Webster is right to suggest that ‘the nature of Holy Scripture, its interpreters and their acts of interpretation are all to be understood out of the resurrection of Jesus Christ’.<sup>18</sup> As such, Christian interpretation of scripture must resist any hermeneutics that ‘fails to grasp what is metaphysically fundamental in biblical hermeneutics: Christ is God, and he is speaking’.<sup>19</sup> Accordingly, Christian hermeneutics must take seriously that Christian praxis which ‘forms in the reader the ability to engage truth at the highest intellectual level, that is, the ability to participate more and more deeply in the dynamic presence, through faith and the gift of the Holy Spirit, of God’s *own knowledge* in our frail minds’.<sup>20</sup> This involves (but admittedly cannot be reduced to) taking seriously and placing centrally to its method the kind of transformation of the mind that Paul speaks of in Philippians. In Philippians 2:3 Paul exhorts the congregation to be of one and the same mind (φρονῆτε ... φρονοῦντες). This unity of mind is correlated explicitly to the mind of the risen Christ in Philippians 2:5. That is not to say the Philippians are encouraged to adopt a mindset that is mindful of Christ as an example to them, but that they themselves are to possess the *very same* mind that the risen Christ himself possesses (Τοῦτο φρονεῖτε ἐν ὑμῖν ὁ καὶ ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ) so that unity of mindset is achieved through the corporate christological conformation of individuals. Here in Philippians 2:3–5, Paul is clear that ‘fellowship in Christ Jesus changes a person’s identity, including their way of thinking, because this space [i.e. this fellowship] is shaped by Christ and his way of thinking’.<sup>21</sup>

Crucially, such an emphasis on the role of formation in Christian hermeneutics ought to result in a true opening, not a narrowing, of the meaning(s) of scripture. Whilst Christ indeed achieves scripture’s supreme realisation of meaning as the interpreting subject of scripture *par excellence*, ecclesially situated theological readers of scripture participating in Christ reading actualise the meaning(s) of scripture from within their own particular historical contexts, as a body of disparate historically effected consciousness scattered across time, space, and circumstance yet united in and through (amongst other things) the same mindset with which Christ ‘opened’ scripture on the road to Emmaus. Such a reading becomes a reading of scripture

<sup>17</sup>Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1997), p. 834.

<sup>18</sup>John Webster, ‘Resurrection and Scripture’, in Andrew Lincoln and Angus Paddison (eds), *Christology and Scripture: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (London: T&T Clark, 2007), p. 138.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 154.

<sup>20</sup>Matthew Levering, *Scripture and Metaphysics: Aquinas and the Renewal of Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), p. 37.

<sup>21</sup>Peter Wick “‘Ahmt Jesus Christus mit mir zusammen nach!’ (Phil 3,17): *Imitatio Pauli* and *imitatio Christi* im Philipperbrief, in Jörg Frey and Benjamin Schliesser (eds), *Der Philipperbrief des Paulus in der hellenistisch-römischen Welt* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015), 322 (my translation). The original reads: ‘Die Gemeinschaft in Christus Jesus verändert die Identität eines Menschen, auch seine Gesinnung, den dieser Raum ist durch Christus und seine Gesinnung geprägt.’

that actualises certain meanings within scripture by interpreting the text as though Christ himself were reading from within a certain horizon as that particular historically effected consciousness. Stated more plainly, whilst such a hermeneutics insists that an 'objective' meaning to scripture is possible, insofar as Christ himself determines that 'objective' meaning, it also forces readers to take seriously the subjectivity of historically effected consciousness in their reading of scripture and thus stresses the need for a plurality of readers and their interpretations to achieve this 'ultimate' meaning of scripture. In other words, the cry of James Cone (and others) that 'all theology is contextual theology', remains true.<sup>22</sup>

For these reasons scriptural interpretation must take seriously and place centrally the role of formation in Christian theology and hermeneutics. As Seth Heringer writes,

Christian higher education cannot merely focus on the transfer of knowledge; it must also train learners into habits and practices that lead to moral and spiritual maturity. These formative ends are essential to Christian education, and when institutions abandon them, they fail the church and the very people they have been entrusted to train.<sup>23</sup>

In what remains of this article, I wish to examine the ways in which prayer functions as one such habitual practice that leads to christological conformation, positing prayer as a central and inalienable pillar of a Christian hermeneutics for interpreting scripture.

### Prayer and theological speech

Certain recent systematic theologians share 'a common characteristic: the prioritization of prayer',<sup>24</sup> two clear examples being Sarah Coakley and Katherine Sonderegger. Prayer is central to Coakley's theological *oeuvre*. She notes: 'my whole understanding of "systematics" is founded on the practice of prayer', a claim that explicitly manifests itself in her project of *théologie totale*.<sup>25</sup> For Coakley, contemplation concurrently commits theologians to possible 'destabilization and redirection' by the Spirit, resulting in systematics 'remain[ing], in principle, *unsystematic* – if by that one means open to the possibility of risk and challenge'.<sup>26</sup> And yet, it simultaneously results in a *more* systematic systematics, insofar as contemplation attends to voices beyond mainstream systematics. *Théologie totale* 'puts contemplation at [its] heart, but spirals out to acknowledge the complexity of the entanglement of the secular and spiritual realms for those who dare to practise it. For there is no escape from such messy entanglement.'<sup>27</sup>

<sup>22</sup>This thought pervades and underpins Cone's work. See, for example the comment in James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, rev. edn (New York: Orbis, 1997), p. 99: 'The interplay of social context with Scripture and tradition is the starting point for an investigation of Jesus Christ's meaning for today. The focus on social context means that we cannot separate our questions about Jesus from the concreteness of everyday life.'

<sup>23</sup>Seth Heringer, 'Beginning with the End: 1 Timothy 1:3–6 and Formative Theological Education', *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 15/2 (2021), p. 377.

<sup>24</sup>Ashley Cocksworth, 'On Prayer in Anglican Systematic Theology', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 22/3 (2020), pp. 383–411. Cocksworth also highlights Graham Ward, *How the Light Gets In: Ethical Life I* (Oxford: OUP, 2016). There are also some affinities here with Simeon Zahl, *The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience* (Oxford, OUP, 2020).

<sup>25</sup>Sarah Coakley, 'Sarah Coakley: Fresh Paths in Systematic Theology', in Rupert Shortt (ed.), *God's Advocates: Christian Thinkers in Conversation* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2005), p. 70.

<sup>26</sup>Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality and the Self: An Essay 'On the Trinity'* (Cambridge: CUP, 2013), pp. 48–9.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 59.

Central to Coakley's approach is a retrieval of a patristic reading (specifically, that of Origen) of Romans 8,<sup>28</sup> which provides a pneumatological supplement to a Johannine 'binitarian' revelatory model that emphasises the Father-Son relationship at the expense of the Spirit.<sup>29</sup> For Coakley, the Spirit 'actually catch[es] up the created realm into the life of God', thus conforming creation (and, thus, the pray-er) to the image of the Son (συμμόρφους τῆς εικόνας τοῦ υιοῦ in Rom 8:29). This conformation involves (at least in part) believers having received a spirit of divine adoption as sons (ἐλάβετε πνεῦμα υιοθεσίας), which is none other than the Spirit by which (ἐν ᾧ) the believer prays (8:15). Such prayer is a fully trinitarian act: 'activated from within' by the Spirit,<sup>30</sup> conforming the pray-er to the Son's image, directed to the Father.<sup>31</sup>

This is fundamentally an act of inaugurated eschatology. Whilst only made possible by our having already received the Spirit of divine adoption (ἐλάβετε πνεῦμα υιοθεσίας, 8:15), it clearly constitutes a co-groaning with creation (κτίσις συστενάζει ... στενάζομεν, 8:22-23) whilst awaiting this very same adoption (υιοθεσίαν ἀπεκδεχόμενοι, 8:23). In other words, this conformation is only made possible by proleptic anticipation of and participation in our deified, eschatological selves. Accordingly, only a robust metaphysics of participation can underpin such an account of prayer – although, in this context, Andrew Davison rightly draws a distinction between the participation of creaturely existence in God now and the participation of deification in glory,<sup>32</sup> thereby allowing one to affirm participatory prolepsis of deification through prayer without simultaneously collapsing present and future notions of creaturely participation in divine being.

In contrast to Coakley's work, in Sonderegger's systematics one finds no methodology of prayer.<sup>33</sup> Rather, 'Sonderegger simply begins.'<sup>34</sup> She writes:

<sup>28</sup>Coakley notes: 'what is striking ... is the relative *lack* of extended reference to Romans 8' in ante-Nicene patristic literature outside of Origen's 'On Prayer'. Sarah Coakley, 'Prayer, Politics and the Trinity: Vying Models of Authority in Third-Fourth-Century Debates on Prayer and "Orthodoxy"', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 66/4 (2013), pp. 382-3. Maurice Wiles describes her reading of Romans 8 as 'somewhat idiosyncratic': 'Review Article: Marching in Step?' *Theology* 90 (1987), p. 462, a point Coakley concedes in 'Why Three? Some Further Reflections on the Origins of the Doctrine of the Trinity', in Sarah Coakley and David Palin (eds), *The Making and Remaking of Christian Doctrine: Essays in Honour of Maurice Wiles* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p. 49. I am grateful to Dr Ashley Cocksworth for highlighting this to me.

<sup>29</sup>My use of the term 'binitarian' is taken from Hurtado's work on early Christian worship describing early Christologies incorporating Jesus into the life of YHWH. See Larry W. Hurtado, *One God, One Lord: Early Christian Devotion and Ancient Jewish Monotheism* (London: SCM, 1988); and *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2003). Coakley calls this the 'linear' revelatory model in *God, Sexuality and the Self*, p. 111.

<sup>30</sup>Coakley's terminology (see *God, Sexuality and the Self*, p. 112).

<sup>31</sup>On the experiential foundation on Romans 8, see Mark Wreford, 'Diagnosing Religious Experience in Romans 8', *Tyndale Bulletin* 68/2 (2017), pp. 203-22. Cf. Coakley, 'Why Three?', pp. 37-8.

<sup>32</sup>Andrew Davison, *Participation in God: A Study in Christian Doctrine and Metaphysics* (Cambridge: CUP, 2019), p. 297.

<sup>33</sup>In marketing material for vol. 2, she writes: 'as I worked at the first volume, I came to see that my time at prayer, especially with Holy Scripture, was as important – as formative and instructive – to a systematics as is historical and conceptual analysis of texts. I came to trust that insight more and more as I worked on volume 2'. Fortress Press Fall 2020 Academic Catalogue, [https://www.fortresspress.com/catalogs/downloads/2020\\_Fall\\_Academic.pdf](https://www.fortresspress.com/catalogs/downloads/2020_Fall_Academic.pdf), p. 3; accessed 6 July 2021. However, whilst prayer remains central *methodologically*, it is mentioned even less in vol. 2. As such, the present discussion focuses on vol. 1.

<sup>34</sup>Cocksworth, 'Prayer', p. 400.

In the end, we must say that a doctrine of God cannot but take the wings of prayer. There is no study, no examination nor understanding, without a heart seared by intercession, by repentance, by worship and prayer ... This is the proper dogmatic form of the doctrine of God: the intellect, bent down, glorified, in prayer.<sup>35</sup>

And yet, whilst the *content* of Sonderegger's prose is less concerned with prayer, its *form* is markedly more prayerful.<sup>36</sup> 'The principal subject matter of theology is God, and the mother tongue for God-talk is prayer. Yet academic theology rarely reads as prayer.'<sup>37</sup> This is certainly not a criticism one might level at Sonderegger herself! Worshipful in tenor, her work is unconventional in style even as she navigates traditional *loci* of systematic theology. In the few references to prayer in Sonderegger's work, one finds affinities with Coakley's more expanded contemplative methodology. For example, there is agreement that certain knowledge of God is only available to one steeped in prayer: 'Deity is Mystery: hidden, invisible, transcendent mystery. The Objectivity of God closes the intellect up in wonder. The richness of this Mystery is inexhaustible, and we study it only in prayer.'<sup>38</sup> This mystery is only apprehensible in prayer as the site of genuine communication – *mediation* – between God and creation: 'prayer is living exchange, encounter between Creator and creature'.<sup>39</sup>

Alongside the confessional register of her prose, Sonderegger is noteworthy for subverting traditional trajectories of systematics.<sup>40</sup> Her cry of 'not all is Christology!' leads her to discuss God *in se* apart from God's revelation in Christ.<sup>41</sup> Prayer allows Sonderegger to talk about the inner life of God precisely because prayer 'takes place *within* the molten Life of Divine Power'.<sup>42</sup> Here, in the inner life of God, Creator-creature communication occurs, so in 'the fiery Presence of the transcendent God', entered into prayer, theologians can speak of God *in se* without Christology and without negating divine transcendence. Here the circularity of the matter becomes clear: a participatory metaphysics grounds an account of prayer, and yet only prayer accounts for participation without reducing God to part of a metaphysical system: 'man can neither pray nor sacrifice ... before the *causa sui*, man can neither fall to his knees in awe nor can he play music and dance before this God'.<sup>43</sup> But it is *precisely* in prayer where God's transcendent otherness manifests as fiery intimacy, as we participate in the transcendent intimacy of the divine life.

This circular participation pivots around Christ: prayer remains inescapably christological since it is Christ who makes possible participation through prayer:

<sup>35</sup>Katherine Sonderegger, *The Doctrine of God*, vol. 1 of *Systematic Theology* [hereafter *ST*] (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2015), pp. xx–xxi.

<sup>36</sup>Her systematics is perhaps best understood as 'confession'. See Cocksworth, 'Prayer', p. 402. Cf. John Webster, *Confessing God: Essays in Christian Dogmatics II* (London: T&T Clark, 2005), p. 69.

<sup>37</sup>Brad East, *The Doctrine of Scripture* (Eugene: OR: Cascade, 2021), p. 7.

<sup>38</sup>Sonderegger, *ST*, vol. 1, p. xiii.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 291.

<sup>40</sup>In the second volume, 'not persons but rather *Processions* are the foundation of the dogma of the Trinity' marks another subversion. Katherine Sonderegger, *The Doctrine of the Holy Trinity: Processions and Persons*, vol. 2 of *ST* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2020), p. xx.

<sup>41</sup>Sonderegger, *ST*, vol. 1, p. xvii.

<sup>42</sup>Sonderegger, *ST*, vol. 1, p. 289 (emphasis added).

<sup>43</sup>Martin Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), p. 72.



Prayer ... brings us within the veil, to the holy mercy seat, to Christ's own Person. He just is the Living Exchange between creature and creator; He just is the Subjectivity in Objectivity; He just is the Communion of God with and for all flesh. He, Jesus Christ, is Holy Humility. Prayer is the participation in the Incarnate Word, under the conditions of sin and grace.<sup>44</sup>

And so, prayer is christological after all, as must be the theological discourse ground from prayer! Whilst Coakley and Sonderegger both speak of prayer as a participation in the inner life of God, for Sonderegger christological participation allows the pray-er to hear and speak the divine Word. This makes possible a biblical hermeneutics wherein, as we are conformed along to our eschatological selves along with the church throughout time, the difference between ourselves is overcome. If the persons of the Trinity are individuated according to their subsistent relations (following Aquinas),<sup>45</sup> conformation to the Son's image comprises a momentary tasting of relation to the Father and Spirit the believer enjoys in eternity.<sup>46</sup> This consists of nothing less than deification, proleptically participated in now through prayer.<sup>47</sup> Thus, as 'the giving and receiving of the Spirit ... constitutes the "deifying" content of the atoning exchange',<sup>48</sup> so the church's prayer, 'Come Holy Spirit', is 'a prayer for participation in the divine nature'.<sup>49</sup> In prayer, then, 'the appropriate function of the Spirit is the anticipation in the present of that which belongs to the end of time, eschatological in the full meaning of the word'.<sup>50</sup>

Concurrently, 'Scripture, as a textual witness to the revelation of God in Christ, is an agency within this eschatological dynamic',<sup>51</sup> and, in the eschatological moment of deification, captured proleptically in prayer, the scriptures are truly 'opened' as on the Emmaus road. Therefore, 'just as our understanding now is not down to our ingenuity, so full understanding will never come in the church's ever-growing amplification, but at the *eschaton*, which is proleptically at work in the church already'.<sup>52</sup> In this way, 'everything depends upon how we see the tenses [past, present, and future] to be open to one

<sup>44</sup>Sonderegger, *ST*, vol. 1, p. 294.

<sup>45</sup>There must be real distinction in God, not, indeed, according to that which is absolute – namely, essence [*quae est essentia*], wherein there is supreme unity and simplicity – but according to that which is relative [*sed secundum rem relativam*]. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* [hereafter *ST*] 1.28.3, Blackfriars edn, 61 vols (London: Eyre & Spottiswood, 1964–81).

<sup>46</sup>Even if one rejects a Thomistic metaphysics of subsistence *per se*, one may still distinguish the divine persons according to their relations. See John Lamont, 'Aquinas on Subsistent Relation', *Recherches de Théologie et Philosophie Médiévales* 71/2 (2004), pp. 260–79.

<sup>47</sup>On the renewed interest in deification in the West, see Paul L. Gavrilyuk, 'The Retrieval of Deification: How a Once-Despised Archaism Became an Ecumenical Desideratum', *Modern Theology* 25/4 (2009), pp. 647–59.

<sup>48</sup>Thomas F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith: The Evangelical Theology of the Ancient Catholic Church* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988), p. 190.

<sup>49</sup>Thomas F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction* (London: SCM, 1965), p. 242.

<sup>50</sup>Colin E. Gunton, *Becoming and Being: The Doctrine of God in Charles Hartshorne and Karl Barth* (London: SCM, 2001), p. 165. In many ways, this is highly congruent with Levering's notion of 'theological wisdom', central to his conception of theological pedagogy, wherein he notes: 'by practicing theological wisdom, the believer is enabled to anticipate, and to live in accord with, the ultimate end of *deification* that marks the transition from grace to glory'. See Levering, *Scripture and Metaphysics*, pp. 37–8.

<sup>51</sup>Angus Paddison, *Theological Hermeneutics and 1 Thessalonians* (Cambridge: CUP, 2005), p. 23.

<sup>52</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 24.

another – interwoven, so to speak – through the Spirit’s action’.<sup>53</sup> Indeed, because it is in prayer where the church is caught up into the inner life of God proleptically to inhabit its eschatological self, Gunton rightly describes the Spirit as ‘the eschatological person of the Trinity’.<sup>54</sup>

I am not claiming that in prayer God reveals to us ‘what the biblical texts really mean’ or anything of this sort. Rather, in prayer we are proleptically conformed to our deified eschatological selves, such that we ourselves become the *kind* of people who can ‘open’ the scriptures in the sense of Luke 24:32. But, as Cocksworth reminds us, there is a ‘shadow-side’ to prayer that must be attended to in any theology incorporating contemplation.<sup>55</sup> Sonderegger’s caveat, that ‘prayer is the participation in the Incarnate Word, *under the conditions of sin and grace*’, must be remembered.<sup>56</sup> That prayer is always done by theologians and biblical interpreters living under these ‘conditions of sin and grace’ warns us of the dangers of unqualified confidence in prayer as source of theological knowledge.

As such, prayer is not an epistemological ‘trump-card’ to unearth ‘divine revelation from above’.<sup>57</sup> Thus, Webster writes that ‘prayer is not to be thought of functionally or instrumentally. It is not a means to an end.’<sup>58</sup> Appeals to contemplation should not obfuscate or override critical judgement and methodology. Coakley herself acknowledges the potential power-play here.<sup>59</sup> Rather, prayerful *formation* is key. Given that hermeneutics is always enacted by ‘historically effected consciousnesses’, the role of prayer in forming these persons becomes part of the hermeneutical process itself. Coakley writes: ‘theology involves not merely the *metaphysical* task of adumbrating a vision of God, the world, and humanity, but simultaneously the *epistemological* task of cleansing, reordering, and redirecting the apparatuses of one’s own thinking, desiring, and seeing’.<sup>60</sup> But this second task of ‘cleansing, reordering, and redirecting’ is properly *formational*, not epistemological, in that it is not about knowledge but *being a certain kind of person*.<sup>61</sup> Granted, formation leads to epistemology (we are formed that we might know God better), but the epistemological outworking of prayer is secondary to its primary formative function. Coakley and Sonderegger rightly highlight prayer as a precondition for certain knowledges of God, not because prayer is an epistemological tool *per se*, but because this knowledge is available only to certain *kinds of people* – people formed in prayer. The formational dimension of prayer unfolds

<sup>53</sup>Colin E. Gunton, *The Christian Faith: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), p. 157.

<sup>54</sup>Colin E. Gunton, *Father, Son and Holy Spirit: Essays toward a Fully Trinitarian Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2003), p. 81.

<sup>55</sup>See Cocksworth, ‘Prayer’, pp. 406–11, building upon Karl Barth as well as Lauren F. Winner, *The Dangers of Christian Practice: On Wayward Gifts, Characteristic Damage, and Sin* (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 2018).

<sup>56</sup>Sonderegger, *ST*, vol. 1, p. 294.

<sup>57</sup>Here Nicolas Berdyaev’s infamous footnote – ‘this was once revealed to me in a dream’ – springs to mind as an example of precisely the kind of uncritical appeal to the contemplative that ought to be avoided; see his *The Divine and the Human* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1949), p. 6, n. 1.

<sup>58</sup>John Webster, *The Culture of Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2019), p. 143.

<sup>59</sup>She writes, ‘[the orthodoxy of spiritual transformation] comes with cost; its orthodoxy therefore, paradoxically, sits at the edge of what is more generally regarded as “orthodoxy”’. Coakley, ‘Prayer, Politics’, p. 399.

<sup>60</sup>Coakley, *God, Sexuality and the Self*, p. 20.

<sup>61</sup>Webster, *Culture of Theology*, pp. 145–7, lists three characteristics of a prayerful theologian: fear of God; patient teachability or deference; and freedom from self-preoccupation.

epistemological possibilities before scriptural readers; it does not reveal scriptural truths, but conforms us more closely to our eschatological selves, so that we ourselves become better readers of scripture.

As gift given by grace through the Spirit, this formation is most properly our own. Speaking about nature and grace (and nature's innate orientation to the supernatural), Aquinas cites the Augustinian maxim: 'what we do by means of our friends, is done in a sense, by ourselves'.<sup>62</sup> That grace through its superabundance perfects nature, such that nature is most truly itself when suffused with grace,<sup>63</sup> formed a crucial *locus* for the *nouvelle théologie*, as exemplified by Henri de Lubac, who writes: 'how can a conscious spirit be anything other than an absolute desire for God?'<sup>64</sup> This desire is to be drawn up into communication instigated and fulfilled by the Divine, a communication in which the pray-er participates and is formed. As such, 'prayer is waking up to the already effective communication of the divine in passage: not just our communication with the divine, but our being already in that divine communication, within which we participate, now in sleep, now more mindfully awake'.<sup>65</sup>

Here, in this moment of eschatological 'awakeness' scripture is 'opened'. Again, this is not because prayer leads to epistemological mastery, but because prayer is accompanied by christological conformation, and the eschatological shape of this conformation enables us better to read scripture. And so 'a theological reading of Scripture is parallel, strictly parallel, with prayer ... the Christian encounter with Scripture, the prayer raised up in reading Holy Writ, takes place in [God's] Presence, under His watchful care, within the fiery ark of His Holiness'.<sup>66</sup>

Whilst knowledge of God is properly *grounded* in God, the *mode* of theological knowledge arising from a genuine opening of scripture is properly located within the readers of scripture.<sup>67</sup> As Sonderegger writes, 'our knowledge of God is reliable, trustworthy, genuine, because the One God gives Himself to be known; He creates us the creatures fit for His self-offering'.<sup>68</sup> It is precisely *as* creatures, sanctified in grace, that we know God and can thus truly *open* scripture. Again, it is not that prayer itself imparts knowledge of God or reveals truths with scripture, but that it forms the pray-er into the kind of creature who reads scripture more fruitfully. And as we are formed in such a manner, we begin to open scripture as and with Christ on the Emmaus road.

<sup>62</sup>Aquinas, *ST* 1/2.5.4.1.

<sup>63</sup>Aquinas, *ST* 1.1.8.2.

<sup>64</sup>Cited in Lawrence Feinberg, *The Natural Desire to See God According to St. Thomas and His Interpreters* (Rome: Apollinare Studi, 2001), p. 628. Milbank describes 'Henri de Lubac's core theological belief ... namely that there is no spiritual, intelligent being (angelic or human) that is nor ordered by grace to the beatific vision: that is, to deification.' See John Milbank, *The Suspended Middle: Henri de Lubac and the Debate Concerning the Supernatural* (London: SCM, 2005), pp. ix–x. Milbank's theology of gift draws from the *nouvelle théologie* and Marcel Mauss. See John Milbank, 'Can a Gift be Given? Prolegomena to a Future Trinitarian Metaphysic', *Modern Theology* 11/1 (1995), pp. 119–61; and *Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon* (London: Routledge, 2003). Milbank remains influential on this topic, prefiguring much of John M. G. Barclay, *Paul and the Gift* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2015), which has itself proved hugely influential within mainstream biblical scholarship.

<sup>65</sup>William Desmond, *Is There a Sabbath for Thought? Between Religion and Philosophy* (New York: Fordham University, 2005), p. 130.

<sup>66</sup>Sonderegger, *ST*, vol. 1, p. 510.

<sup>67</sup>On the 'reader' of scripture qua reader see Sarisky, *Reading the Bible Theologically*.

<sup>68</sup>Sonderegger, *ST*, vol. 1, p. 528.

Only readers of scripture formed eschatologically through a lifetime in the furnace of prayer, can ‘open’ scripture thus.

Importantly, this process remains incomplete in this life, since ‘Christ’s presence in all its manifold forms is realised only through anticipation, and that means through the mediation of the eschatological spirit, as anticipated eschatology.’<sup>69</sup> The church is not currently identical with its eschatological fulfilment; but it is nevertheless the case that as the church throughout history joins with itself in prayer, it participates in its eschatological reality, becoming in this way *more* identical to itself. It is because prayer forms the church in this way that the proper place of theology (and scriptural interpretation) is ‘within the sphere of the church ... [where] the “place” of the church is eschatological, constituted by the terrifying aliveness of the risen one’.<sup>70</sup> With prayer conceived of in the formational terms outlined here, we can agree with Alfred Yuen’s claim that ‘the church can therefore expect no unity outside of Christ, nor can it know the “true Bible” apart from God’s redemptive help which and through which it is summoned to seek and obey – in prayer’.<sup>71</sup>

Some of the outworkings and implications of this emphasis on prayer within Christian hermeneutics are worth briefly mentioning here. The first is that such an approach retains a measure of ‘objectivity’ within scriptural interpretation without negating the insights of philosophical hermeneutics concerning the inherent ‘subjectivity’ of reading. Scripture retains an ‘objective’ meaning, which is the meaning the risen Christ opens in scripture, in which we seek to participate in our own prayerful reading. However, such objectivity cannot be appealed to without due caution: since (again) the act of prayer does not provide any guarantee of correct results, appeals to the objectivity of the ‘final’ or ‘ultimate’ meaning of scripture as determined by Christ’s opening of it should not lead to a homogeneity of readings within the church. This is because a properly christological conformation instils in the one so conformed a Christlike desire to seek and attend to the voices at the margins, and a corresponding appreciation for the need for a breadth and diversity of scripture readings.

The second implication to note is that historical criticism remains a vital dimension of scriptural interpretation. One can only discuss what Paul meant by justification (for example) if one has some inkling as to what Paul might have meant in his original historical situation.<sup>72</sup> Gadamer is clear that one can ‘see the past in its own terms ... [by] acquiring an appropriate historical horizon’.<sup>73</sup> Angus Paddison rightly says that ‘insofar as Scripture’s profundity is amplified from within the community of the church, the proper constraints and limits will always be there for members (or hierarchies) to declare what is and is not faithful to the wider faith of the church’.<sup>74</sup> Historical-critical considerations of the text remain one such constraint, for, as Nicholas Lash notes, ‘the range of appropriate interpretations of a dramatic or literary text is constrained by what the text ‘originally meant’. This is what keeps historians and

<sup>69</sup>Colin E. Gunton, ‘“Until He Comes”: Towards an Eschatology of Church Membership’, *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 3/2 (2001), p. 200.

<sup>70</sup>Webster, *Holy Scripture*, p. 123–4.

<sup>71</sup>Alfred H. Yuen, *Barth’s Theological Ontology of Holy Scripture* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2014), p. 45.

<sup>72</sup>Thus, Eco rightly points out that responsible readers consider linguistic nuances at the time of composition. See Umberto Eco, *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, ed. Stefan Collini (Cambridge: CUP, 1992), p. 68.

<sup>73</sup>Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald Marshall, 2nd rev. edn (London: Continuum, 2004), p. 302.

<sup>74</sup>Paddison, *Theological Hermeneutics*, p. 32.

textual critics in business.<sup>75</sup> Biblical scholars outside the Christian tradition can and have contributed meaningfully to our understanding of scripture in this regard. To suggest otherwise is foolhardy and dishonest.

Indeed, prayer – as described here – should foster a humility that leads to *greater* engagement with the other. As Rowan Williams writes, prayer ‘is precisely what *resists* the urge of religious language to claim a total perspective ... by “conversing” with God, it preserves conversation between human speakers’.<sup>76</sup> Prayerful reading of scripture within the church therefore should not lead to the dismissal of other approaches, but should result in a posture to those outside the Christian tradition that allows and encourages them to inform the interpretive process. Thus, historical-critical readings of scripture are not to be ignored or dismissed, but relativised. Brad East is therefore right to say that ‘interpretation of the Bible produced by historical-critical methods can be good, but will always be so relative to other more primary and determinative theological and hermeneutical goods’.<sup>77</sup>

Third, Christian theology and scriptural interpretation can only exist by being authentically itself, in contrast to John Milbank’s idea that theology should master other disciplines and reclaim its status as ‘Queen of the Sciences’. According to Milbank, the only way theology can avoid being mastered by other disciplines is to transform itself into a discourse of mastery, ordering all other disciplines to itself to demonstrate their relativity, since theology will only be ‘on secure ground if it adopts the most extreme mode of counter-attack’.<sup>78</sup> But by affirming and employing mastery as the preferred category for relating to other disciplines, theology secures its own demise, because the language of counter-attack attempts to vindicate theology using the very agonistic framework that has led to its marginalisation, and thereby only vindicates critiques made against it.<sup>79</sup> Only by ‘foolishly’ affirming Christian orthopraxis without regard to its status in the academy can truly Christian theology flourish, since, as Webster says, theology is ‘more a process of moral and spiritual training and an exercise in the promotion of common life than it is a scholarly discipline’.<sup>80</sup>

Fourth, there can be no confessional neutrality within hermeneutics. Throughout this article I have been reticent to speak of *theological* interpretation of scripture, preferring instead to speak of *Christian* interpretation of scripture. Whilst the former has acquired currency, the adjective ‘theological’ might be taken to imply that there exists a ‘non-theological’ (namely, confessionally neutral) form of scriptural interpretation, as reflected in ongoing calls to ‘de-theologise’ biblical scholarship in service of a ‘more objective’ reading of the biblical texts.<sup>81</sup> However, as has long been noted, such

<sup>75</sup>Lash, *Way to Emmaus*, p. 44.

<sup>76</sup>Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), p. 13.

<sup>77</sup>East, ‘Hermeneutics of Theological Interpretation’, p. 52.

<sup>78</sup>John Milbank, ‘Theology and the Economy of the Sciences’, in Mark Nation and Samuel Wells (eds), *Faithfulness and Fortitude: Conversations with the Theological Ethics of Stanley Hauerwas* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), p. 45.

<sup>79</sup>So Linn Marie Tonstad, ‘(Un)Wise Theologians: Systematic Theology in the University’, *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 22/4 (2020), pp. 494–511 (esp. pp. 501–2). See also the similar argument made in Jonathan Rowlands, ‘Reception History, Theological Interpretation, and the Future of New Testament Studies’, *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 13/2 (2019), pp. 147–67.

<sup>80</sup>Webster, *Holy Scripture*, p. 116.

<sup>81</sup>For example, see Hector Avalos, *The End of Biblical Studies* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2007); and Herbert Berg and Sarah Rollens, ‘The Historical Muhammad and the Historical Jesus: A Comparison of Scholarly Reinventions and Reinterpretations’, *Studies in Religion*, 37/2 (2008), pp. 271–92. Despite their

post-Enlightenment concerns for neutrality and objectivity are themselves born out of theological developments within the Christian tradition and therefore might themselves justifiably be termed ‘theological concerns’.<sup>82</sup> From this perspective, the nomenclature of ‘theological interpretation of scripture’ stands in danger of empowering historical-critical methodologies as though they were *less* theological rather than merely *differently* theological. As such, my preference for the nomenclature of ‘Christian interpretation of scripture’ over ‘theological interpretation of scripture’ is a small performative manoeuvre intended to resist this empowering.

## Conclusion

In this article I have made two claims. First, I have argued that Christ is presented on the road to Emmaus as the scriptural interpreter *par excellence*. This presentation of the risen Christ as biblical exegete suggests that reading as and with the risen Christ on the road to Emmaus is the aim of Christian interpretation of scripture. Second, I have argued that prayer must be central to any Christian hermeneutics, since it is in prayer that that pray-er is conformed ever more closely to likeness of the risen Christ in a way that makes such interpretation possible. A hermeneutics committed to prayerful formation might more fruitfully attend to the biblical texts, making possible the ‘opening’ of scripture Christ performed on the Emmaus road.<sup>83</sup>

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diverging approaches and focuses, both Avalos and Berg/Rollens call for the ‘de-theologising’ of biblical scholarship as an unquestionably desirable aim.

<sup>82</sup>One could reference an enormous amount of literature here, but the most influential texts arguably remain John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006); and Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2007).

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