

# **Toward Doxology and Discipleship: Presuppositions and Principles for a Trinitarian Reading of Scripture**

## **Underlying Presupposition**

*The goal of biblical interpretation is to know and love the triune God, such that we reflect the glory of his Son in whose image we were made and are being reformed.*

## **The God of the Word: Three Horizons in Communication**

1. Author – The God Who Speaks
2. Text – The Word God Writes
3. Audience – The Spirit Who Empowers Understanding

## **Interlude**

1. Observation, Interpretation, Application
2. **The Case for Three Horizons**

## **The Word of God: Three Horizons in Scripture**

1. Textual – Literal, Grammatical, Historical Interpretation
2. Covenantal – Biblical-Theological Interpretation
3. Canonical – Christotelic (Christ-at-the-end of every) Interpretation

## **Hearing God's Voice in God's Word**

1. Old Testament Test Cases
2. New Testament Test Cases

## **Appendices**

- A. Terms
- B. Covenantal Topography Charts
- C. Law-Gospel GPS System

## A Case for Reading at Three Horizons

When it comes to interpretation, “context is king” (*textus rex*). But context engages various scopes of meaning, just like our physical address. When writing a letter, we put down a [1] street address, then a [2] city, then a [3] state with a [4] zip code, all the while assuming the country. For instance, here’s our church address,

[1] 3700 Old Bridge Road, [2] Woodbridge, [3] VA [4] 22193

If any of part of the address goes missing, it will be difficult to send the letter. So too, if we go looking for a street address in the wrong the state or wrong country, our directions will be off.

So too, in biblical interpretation we must consider three horizons of biblical context. We call these three horizons the textual, epochal, and canonical horizons.<sup>1</sup> Or to put it differently, we must see the literary context, the historical context, and the theological context.

- **Literary Context.** Because Scripture is written with words, grammar, etc., we must begin with the chapter and verse of are text—the street address, if you will.<sup>2</sup>
- **Historical Context.** Next, we must rightly discern the historical address of the text, what we call the epochal horizon, or better, the covenantal horizon, because the Bible’s history unfolds over multiple covenants.
- **Theological Context.** Finally, because Scripture is one progressively unfolding message leading us to know the triune God through Jesus Christ, we must understand how any text, in its covenantal context, relates to the whole message of the Bible. This is called the canonical horizon, or the Christological horizon. This horizon is necessary because we believe that Scripture is one unified revelation about Jesus Christ.

Only as we consider these three horizons, using the tools of grammatical-historical exegesis (outlined in the next lesson) will we come to a full understanding of any biblical passage.

We read with a grammatical-historical approach because God has used grammar rooted in history to speak to us. At the same time, must make our way from the original text to ourselves in the way Scripture gives to us, which I will argue requires covenantal awareness. So, to give a few examples.

- **Old Testament.** We cannot make direct application from Deuteronomy or Isaiah to ourselves without considering how redemptive-history has changed since the coming of Christ, and how Christ serves as the mediator between God’s Word and us.
- **The Gospels.** When we read the Gospels, we must realize some of Jesus’ teachings (i.e., bringing a gift to the altar) must be translated into the new covenant era.
- **The Epistles.** Even after Christ is exalted and the Spirit is poured out, we must not forget how the apostolic message depends upon and relates to the Old Testament and the person and work of Christ. We read the New Testament in the light of the Old, because Jesus *the Christ* fulfills the types, concepts, language, and events of the OT.

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<sup>1</sup> Edmund Clowney, *Preaching and Biblical Theology*, 87–121; Richard Lints, *The Fabric of Theology: A Prolegomenon to Evangelical Theology*, 259–311; Peter Gentry and Stephen Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical Theological Understanding of the Covenants*, 92–108.

<sup>2</sup> Importantly, our system of versification was invented by English Cardinal Stephen Langton in 1205.

Our singular goal in interpreting the Bible is to hear the voice of our triune God. And to do that we must read Scripture “on its own terms.”<sup>3</sup> As we considered in the study of communicative horizons (author, text, audience), understanding God’s Word requires that

(1) **God** speak and reveal his truth to us, and

(2) **We**, by his grace, let his authoritative Word overturn our unbelieving biases.

What follows then is an approach to reading his Word that also has three horizons relating to the (1) biblical texts, (2) biblical covenants, and (3) the biblical subject—namely the Lord Jesus Christ revealed in the whole canon of Scripture.

### Three Horizons in Interpretation

In *Preaching and Biblical Theology*, Edmund Clowney identified three horizons that the faithful interpreter must engage three horizons to rightly understand biblical truth. These three horizons relate to the biblical text, the biblical covenants (or epochs), and the biblical Christ (i.e., the canonical testimony about God in Christ).

Expounding on these three horizons, Richard Lints has written,

The biblical text has three interpretive horizons: the immediate context of the book (or passage), the context of the period of revelation in which the book (or passage) falls, and the context of the entirety of revelation.

It is signally important that we take each horizon seriously if we want to understand the biblical material properly. While no horizon takes precedence over the others, each must nonetheless be regulated by the other two. The meaning of any given passage will depend to a great extent on its place in its own particular epoch and its place in the entirety of redemptive revelation. The theological interpreter of Scripture must allow the three horizons to dialogue with one another continually, helping to explain and clarify the meaning of the others.

It is when we keep all three horizons in dialogue that Scripture begins to inform us about what questions it considers important and the framework necessary to find answers to those questions.<sup>4</sup>

In other words, only by attending to the three horizons can we understand how to read Scripture on its own terms. Likewise, because our goal is to know God, not just Moses or Matthew, it is imperative we read theo-logically, i.e., seeking to know the word (*Logos*) of God (*Theos*).

Knowing God is our goal and it requires careful attention to grammar, history, and the covenantal canon. Only as we learn how to read these three horizons together will we be able see how the leaves and the trees (words and sentences) begin to form a well-ordered forest (the whole biblical canon), a forest that has come to us through many seasons of growth, decay, and rebirth (i.e., the progression of covenant that have led to Christ).

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<sup>3</sup> Graeme Goldsworthy

<sup>4</sup> *The Fabric of Theology: A Prolegomenon to Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 293.

In the next three sessions, we will spend time on each horizon. But let me give some biblical bases for each of them.

## Text

A key text for observing biblical interpretation in action is **Nehemiah 8**, Speaking of the priests, verse 8 reads, “They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.” When Israel returned to the land, the people needed a re-education in the ways of God. Even before the exile, attention to the Law had been lost (cf. 2 Chr 34:8–21). Now, delivered from captivity, the sons of Israel were not much better off. Hebrew had been lost in the exile; Aramaic was the new *lingua franca*, and so Nehemiah had the Law read and the priests “gave the sense” of its meaning.

Like Ezra himself (Ezra 7:10), these Levitical leaders helped the people understand and apply the Law of God. As the Law commanded (Lev 10:11), they were explaining what the Law meant. And thus we have a true example of biblical exposition. Such interpretation is found in other parts of the Bible too. The only two sermons in Scripture (Deuteronomy and Hebrews) both show evidences of biblical exposition—explaining the meaning of a biblical text. (E.g., Deut 12–25 expounds Exod 20; Heb 5–10 expounds Ps 110 and Jer 31).

The pattern continues today. Our goal is to put our finger on the text and explain what it says.

## Epoch / Covenant

Zooming out from the textual horizon we come to the epochal horizon. This horizon recognizes the Bible is not a catalogue of timeless truths. Rather, it is a progressively revealed testimony about God’s redemption in history. It is intentionally written with a promise-fulfillment, as **Acts 13:32–33** says, “And we bring you the good news that what God promised to the fathers, this he has fulfilled to us their children by raising Jesus.” Likewise, **Hebrews 1:1–2** intentionally reveals the superior revelation of Christ the Son to the prophets of previous generations. From the internal testimony of the Bible we learn that God revealed himself over time, and that the order of his redemption is important (see Paul’s argument in **Galatians 3**, where his argument depends on the Law coming 400 years after the Promise).

In recent centuries this progressive revelation has been variously described as a series of dispensations (even WCF uses this biblical language) or covenants. While epochs is a nice, neutral term for the progress of redemption, it is not as biblical as “covenant.” As our previous study showed, the Bible is a covenant document, comprised of two testaments, and centered on the new covenant of Jesus Christ. Therefore, it fits the biblical storyline to understand it as a series of covenants—which is different from (two-covenant) Covenant Theology. In fact, from an overview of the Bible, we can lay out redemptive history along six covenants, all leading to eternal covenant of Christ.

1. Covenant with Creation (through Adam)
2. Covenant with Creation (reissued through Noah)
3. Covenant of Promise (mediated by Abraham)
4. Covenant of Law (legislated through Moses)
5. Covenant of Kingship (mediated through David)
6. Covenant of Peace (mediated through Jesus Christ)

These covenants are listed in chronological order and can be shown to possess organic unity and escalating development over time. (See Biblical Covenants Chart). For matters of interpretation, it is necessary to ask, "When is this text taking place?"

And thus it is necessarily to know the stipulations of each covenant, and how the passage in question relates to the various covenants. Moreover, in the dog days of Israel's kingdom, when the Davidic covenant is spiraling downward and the prophets are looking for a new David with a new covenant, it is important to see that such messianic hope will re-shape much of the promises to Israel and David.

In other words, through redemptive history the covenant function as Scripture's tectonic plates. But as they fall apart, they begin to shift and change shape. Ultimately, they are all shadows of the one lasting covenant, the new covenant mediated by Jesus Christ. The

## **Christ / Canon**

Finally, there is in Scripture an eschatological direction. From the beginning of Genesis (3:15), Scripture is written in italics: it slants forward towards the Son who is to come. As Jesus taught his disciples, all Scripture points to him (John 5:39), thus to rightly interpret any portion of the Bible we must see how it naturally relates to Christ.

This Christ-centered approach to interpretation is easily misapplied (and just as easily mischaracterized). But rightly understood, it shows how sixty-six different find unity in the gospel of Jesus Christ. (Notice Paul himself says the gospel was preached beforehand of Abraham, Gal. 3:8). The Bible is unified not only because it comes from the same God; it is unified because it all points to the same God-man, Jesus Christ. And because it is a human book with promises to all humanity, all Scripture points to the Messiah who is the mediator between God and man.

What we will consider is *how* every passage relates to Christ. But for now, consider: every text has a place in the covenantal framework of the Bible. Hence, every text is organically related to the covenantal backbone of Scripture, which leads to Christ. Therefore, every text finds its *telos* in Christ through the progress of biblical covenants. In this way, every text has Christ as its final goal and terminus. Christ is not (anachronistically) transported back in time to Israel. Rather, he is the *telos* to which all the Old Testament points.

This Christ-at-the-end (Christotelic) presupposition is based on the exegetical conviction that all Scripture, all covenants, all typology leads to Jesus. And, accordingly, it has massive interpretive implications. It says that no interpretation is complete until it comes to Christ.

Likewise, any application that comes to us from the Old Testament, which avoids Christ, is fundamentally unsound. Likewise, all New Testament applications find their source of strength in Christ, the covenant he mediates, and the Spirit he sends. Therefore, all interpretations must be unashamedly Christian, i.e., Christ-oriented.

## What Happens When We Miss the Second and Third Horizons?

Edmund Clowney addresses the important but often missed epochal and canonical horizons. His words remind us why we must read the Bible at multiple levels. He writes,

In developing the biblical-theological interpretation of a text,<sup>5</sup> the aspects of epochal structure and continuity may be separately considered. The first step is to relate the text to its immediate theological horizon. This is to carry the principle of contextual interpretation to the total setting of the revelation of the period. It is a step which homiletical hermeneutics cannot afford to overlook. (88)

In other words, faithful interpreters must not only consider the literary context of passage. We must also consider when the passage is written, and how the period of time (e.g., before the Flood, after the Law, during the exile, etc.) informs the author. Most reliably the biblical covenants play a role in explicating the significance of any given period of redemptive history. What “genre” is to the literary context, “epoch” is to the historical context.

At the same time, we must consider more than the covenantal horizon. We must follow the epochal horizon, with consideration of the canonical horizon: how does this passage fit into the framework of the Bible? Clowney continues,

The second step is to relate the event of the text, by way of its proper interpretation in its own period, to the whole structure of redemptive history; and in that way to us upon whom the end of the ages have come. It must be stressed that this second step is valid and fruitful only when it does come second. All manner of arbitrariness and irresponsibility enter in when we seek to make a direct and practical reference to ourselves without considering the passage in its own biblical and theological settings. (88)

Rightly, Clowney stresses the order of operation here. The only way to make connections between the text and the reader is through the “covenantal highway” that moves from original author to the Spirit-filled reader. It is important to specify, however, that it is not simply a movement in time that makes the application. We must also see how the text relates to Jesus Christ before applying it to ourselves.

In other words, because all Scripture anticipates or explicitly testifies to Christ, we misstep if we make application to ourselves apart from him. Likewise, because our covenantal location is *in Christ*, we would not want to make any application to ourselves that truncates or side-steps our Lord. Scripture is powerless to us, without him. And thus, the canonical horizon should be explicitly Christo-telic, i.e., Christ is the goal and terminus to which all the Old Testament leads. And we must read Scripture in the light of this Christ-centered reality. And then with this conviction in place, we ask of all Scripture: What does this say of Christ? And how does it, in Christ, relate to the church (and to me)?

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<sup>5</sup> “Biblical-theological” is not a newfangled way of reading the Bible, one that overlooks the literary context of the text. It is simply a way of reading that insures that biblical passages are reading the context of the whole Bible and lead to biblical formulations of theology.

Failing to consider these three steps results in a handful of misinterpretations. Let's consider three.

**1. OT principles without explicit connection to Christ moves us toward moralism.**

a. Examples

i. Leviticus 26:1–13

ii. Psalm 1

iii. 2 Chronicles 7:14

b. Conclusion: Failure to remember the difference between OT and NT leads to a soft prosperity gospel – blessing based on my obedience, devoid of Christ, full of self.

From 9Marks article, [A Softer Prosperity Gospel: More Common Than You Think](#)

*Soft prosperity detaches verses from the redemptive framework of the Bible. When preachers present isolated verses as time-honored principles for claiming God's blessings, a counterfeit gospel results. Instead of relating all blessings to Christ, they directly apply individual verses to people today.*

*Such a promise motivates the strong and extinguishes the weak. Unless a passage is rightly related to redemptive framework of the Bible, verses like Psalm 1:3 become treadmills on which earnest Christians tire themselves out. Genuine Christ-centered expositional preaching prevents this sort of textual manipulation, and guards against the gospel of soft prosperity.*

*More specifically, soft prosperity delights in the tangible promises of the Old Testament. The error is often found in promising old covenant blessings to new covenant saints. Whenever we read the Old Testament, faithful interpreters must see how the promises first related to Israel in their historic and theocratic state; second, to Jesus who perfectly fulfilled the law (Matt. 5:17); and third, to us. Because we live under the new covenant, there will always be continuity and discontinuity between the Old Testament promise and its contemporary fulfillment. Preachers must learn how to interpret these ancient texts at the textual, epochal, and canonical levels. Likewise, healthy churches must learn to see how every blessing is found in relationship to Jesus Christ, the mediator of the new covenant.*

## **2. NT commands without gospel power makes us assume the gospel.**

### **a. Reading Application without Doctrinal Basis**

- i. Reading Romans 12–15 apart from Romans 1–11
- ii. Reading Ephesians 4–6 apart from Ephesians 1–3

### **b. Missing Indicative – Imperative Structure**

- i. The Concept – Romans 8:13; Philippians 2:12–13; Ephesians 4:1–3
- ii. Examples – Colossians 3:1–2; Ephesians 5:1–2; Galatians 5:24–26

## **3. Biblical categories divorced from the biblical plotline fail to reframe wrong views of Christ.**

### **a. Old Testament**

- i. Studying the Temple without relationship to Eden or Christ or Church
  - 1. 1 Kings 6:31–36
  - 2. John 1:14
  - 3. 2 Corinthians 6:16
- ii. Reading Psalm 110 without making application to New Testament
  - 1. Matthew 22:41–46
  - 2. Ephesians 1:22–23
  - 3. Hebrews 5–10
- iii. We can't read the Old Testament fully unless we read it like the NT does. When the NT doesn't speak directly to our particular passage, we might ask how does our passage relate to other biblical structures (i.e., person, event, institution), and how do they relate to the NT?

### **b. New Testament**

- i. Preaching about Forgiveness without New Covenant Background
  - 1. Matthew 26:28
  - 2. Ephesians 1:7
- ii. Speaking about the Law without awareness of New Covenant
  - 1. 1 Corinthians 9:21; cf. Romans 13:8ff.
  - 2. 1 John 5:3
- iii. We can't fully grasp the meaning of the NT authors unless we read their words in light of the whole canon. To be sure, the basic meaning is found in the grammar of their arguments, but their theological lexicon is found in the OT. It is not text vs. canon, it is text read in light of canon, and vice versa.



## The Biblical Covenants

God's Mediator	God's People	God's Place	God's (Covenant) Rule
<b>Adam</b>	Eve + Children  Shem vs. Cain	Eden	Covenant with Creation - YHWH; marriage - Gen 6:18 - Hos 6:7; Luke 3:38; Rom 5
<b>Noah</b>  <b>Gen 6 – 9</b>	Divided into three peoples (Gen 9)	<i>'Tents of Shem'</i>  (Gen 10)	Covenant with Creation (cont.) - points back to Adam - points fwd to Moses; Christ - covenant of common grace - promise of an elect people
<b>Abraham</b>  <b>Gen 12 – 22</b> <b>Galatians 3:8</b>	Israel (as Family)  <b><i>Circumcision in the Flesh</i></b>	(Theophanies)	Covenant with Abraham  - I will bless you – Gen 12 - Justification by faith – Gen 15 - Circumcision – Gen 17 - Priest/sacrifice/temple – Gen 22
<b>Moses</b>  <b>Exod 19–24</b>	Israel (as Priests)  <b><i>Circumcision in the Flesh</i></b>	Sinai	Covenant with Israel  - Royal Priesthood / Holy Nation - Decalogue
<b>Moses</b>  <b>Post-Exodus 32</b>	Israel (as a People)  <b><i>Circumcision in the Flesh</i></b>	Tabernacle	Covenant with Israel  - Represented by Levites - 613 Laws - Deut 30 – looks to a new covenant
<b>David</b>  <b>1 Sam 2:35</b> <b>2 Sam 7:9–14</b>	Israel (as a Kingdom)	Temple	Covenant with David  - Royal Sonship (7:14) - Charter for Humanity (7:19–20)
<b>Jesus</b>	Church = Jew + Gentile  <b><i>Circumcised heart with Spirit</i></b>	The Cosmos	New Covenant  (1) The Holy Spirit (2) New creation in Christ (3) Sonship (4) Law on the heart