

Review

New Testament Theology and the Production of Theological Commentaries: Trends and Trajectories

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Abstract: The past two decades have witnessed an explosion of new theological commentary series and theological commentaries. As we near the end of the second decade of theological commentary production, it is beneficial to take a step back to evaluate the contributions of each theological commentary series and how the commentary genre continues to be a helpful form for the development of NT theology. This paper reviews and evaluates four commentaries from each of the Belief, Brazos Theological, and Two Horizons New Testament commentary series according to (1) the aims and goals of the series, and (2) how each commentary attempts to actualize the stated ends of the series.

Keywords: theological commentary; theological hermeneutics; belief; Brazos Theological Commentary; Two Horizons New Testament Commentary

1. Introduction

The past two decades have witnessed an explosion of new theological commentary series and theological commentaries. Although the aims and goals of each theological commentary series are distinct, they all purportedly participate in the common project of (re)learning how to interpret Scripture theologically. Moreover, the editors and contributors to these series view the commentary genre as well-suited to accomplish the goals of both the broader and more specific projects related to theological interpretation and hermeneutics. As we near the end of the second decade of theological commentary production, it is beneficial to take a step back to evaluate the unique contributions of each theological commentary series. As some of the early commentary series end and new ones emerge, we should take stock of what we have learned from the production of these kinds of commentaries and, more specifically, how the commentary form can continue to contribute to the larger project of NT theology.

I will review and evaluate four commentaries from each of the Belief, Brazos Theological, and Two Horizons New Testament commentary series. I will begin with a brief definition of NT theology and the unique contributions that the commentary genre offers this project. I will then analyze each commentary series in turn. For each series, I will (1) articulate the aims and goals of the series, (2) provide summaries for how each commentary attempts to actualize the stated ends of the series, and (3) evaluate both the aims of the commentary series and the individual commentaries.

2. NT Theology and the Production of Theological Commentaries

It would seem pertinent to begin with a clear definition of the aims and purposes of NT theology. Like much of the biblical and theological disciplines, however, there is no shared consensus regarding such matters (e.g., [Blomberg 2018](#); [Hatina 2013](#); [Rogan 2015](#)). Even so, I offer a broad framework for NT theology that elucidates how the production of theological commentaries is a fruitful partner in charting a path forward. Though this claim might border on tautology, a NT theology is thoroughly a theological endeavor precisely because positing a collection of early Christian writings as “the NT” is itself a theological claim—an enactment of the church’s faith in God’s providential ordering of these texts to reveal and enfold God’s people in God’s economy of salvation. Moreover, the



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New Testament assumes an *Old Testament* and, therefore, posits a second theological claim regarding the unity of the Christian two-testament canon. Theological reflection on these texts “works within the frame of the triune identity of the one God of the two Testaments alongside a commitment to the verbal character of the text in relation to its triune subject matter” (Gignilliat and Pennington 2016, p. 255). Central to doing NT theology is a focus on Scriptures’ triune subject matter and a concern to situate the NT properly in relation to the OT. Theological reflection on these texts is theological reflection on the church’s language about God derived from its disciplined reading and hearing of Scripture, and the performance of its mission in the works of piety and charity. Despite the contested nature of NT theology, for our purposes the perspective on NT theology that will follow in this essay will be “the science in which the Church, according to its knowledge at different times, takes account of the content of the NT critically under the guidance of its proclamation and confessions”.¹

While this critical account of the content of Scripture can take many forms, commentary seems well suited for the aims of a NT theology for at least four reasons. The first is the integral relationship between canon and interpretation. The theological claim that these texts and not others represent the NT canon necessarily calls forth the subsequent work of commenting on and interpreting these texts. As Marina Stojanović notes, “The authority of the canonical text bears itself the obligation of its interpretation, therefore a commentary is a natural and required interpretation” (Stojanović 2015, p. 72). Scripture is not self-interpreting and, therefore, requires the community of faith to discipline itself to hear God’s Word through the verbal character of its literal sense across time. One of the forms such discipline has taken is the scriptural commentary.

Second is the form of commentary itself. The history of Jewish-Christian commentary witnesses to a wide array of possibilities for how scriptural texts are interpreted with different methods in various social contexts (Green 2005, p. 124). As a genre, commentary “can also function as a critical judgment on exegetical theories when the tension becomes unbearable between a new reading and the very integrity of the commentary form itself” (Childs 1997, p. 189). Commentary provides a particularly beneficial form for engaging in this critical and theological endeavor both in its ability to allow for a wide variety of methods and yet constrain or judge those methods that work against its foundational aim to elucidate the text under consideration.

Third, the production of theological commentaries provides a circumscribed area for scholars to explore and be further formed in the habits of thought necessary to produce a larger, more comprehensive NT theology. The problems facing theological hermeneutics of any kind have been rehearsed often: Johann Phillip Gabler’s separation of biblical studies from dogmatics (Sandys-Wunsch and Eldredge 1980), Troeltsch’s all-consuming historical-critical method that brackets *a priori* Scripture’s ability to witness to its divine subject matter (Troeltsch 1991), and Krister Stendahl’s linear hermeneutical process of description—what a text meant—to theology—what a text means (Stendahl 1976). Such problems have only been compounded by the professionalization of the biblical and theological guilds that continues to subdivide their respective subject matter into smaller and more isolated components. Both NT theology and theological commentary, as species of theological interpretation, must simultaneously address these problems while offering theological readings of the NT texts. Among the numerous problems caused by such issues, the production of theological interpretations of Scripture must aim to unite biblical studies and theology, cultivate interdisciplinary habits that allow sharing between discrete disciplines, and reorient history toward its proper beginning and end in God’s own eternal life. Such a task is monumental and can lead toward constant hermeneutical reflection on how to do theological interpretation without its actualization in theological readings. The commentary genre holds together such hermeneutical reflection and the interpretation of texts with a focus on one or a small selection of biblical books, and in this way, affords the exegete an opportunity to comprehensively explore theological readings of particular

passages in light of a book's larger message, while also offering preliminary considerations on the relationship between the NT books themselves.

A fourth and perhaps overlooked reason is how the commentary in its material reality is already situated between the church and the academy, and between biblical studies and theology. The commentary form has been and continues to be a staple literary production of the biblical studies guild, and although there is a persistent complaint that commentaries do not aid pastors in their homiletical reflection or ministries, commentaries continue to line the bookshelves of those who hold teaching offices in the church. Moreover, while the biblical studies guild has coopted the commentary form for the past two centuries, scriptural commentaries have traditionally been written by church doctors and theologians. With the new influx of theological commentaries that explicitly invite theologians to engage in this work, the production of commentaries already transgresses some of the boundaries that theological hermeneutics must overcome and begins to create a shared culture of material production and consumption between biblical scholars, theologians, and church leaders.

As I turn to the three commentary series under review, a brief word should be said about how I will evaluate them. I first assess the commentaries according to the standards set by the series themselves in order to determine how and the degree to which a particular commentary fulfilled the stated aims. I will then move to evaluate both the aims of the series and the individual commentaries as they relate to the production of a NT theology. A primary consideration must be the degree to which a given commentary helpfully elucidates the theological aim(s) of the text(s) under consideration. My broad framework and definition of NT theology above presupposes that theological commentators will read across and with all of Christian Scripture, doctrinal development, and ecclesial practice. We must evaluate whether such readings clarify or obscure a reader's ability to make sense of the given text's literal sense. A second and related consideration will be the extent to which a given commentary (re)orients the methods employed to the theological claims of Scripture. This reorientation of methods will involve a critical appropriation of both modern and premodern approaches to Scripture. Finally, I will evaluate how particular commentaries move the needle toward theological interpretations of Scripture. The theological culture that gave birth to the church's canons and ecumenical confessions developed across numerous generations; likewise, the malformation of this culture in the modern period was an intergenerational effort. It will take the effort of numerous generations to produce a requisite theological culture in which theological interpretation can flourish and will require a critical appropriation of the whole interpretive tradition. It is only fair to evaluate the present theological commentaries on their ability to move the needle toward such a theological culture and not on their ability to actualize every aspect of theological interpretation.

3. Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible

The aims of this commentary series are twofold. First, it aims to produce commentaries that are useful for the church and its pastors, particularly in their ability to "convey the powerful sense of God's merciful presence that calls Christians to repentance and praise" and to "bring the church fully forward in the life of discipleship" (González 2010, p. ix). The second aim is to "encourage all theologians to pay more attention to Scripture and the life of the church in their writings" (x). These aims are meant to address the twofold problem that (1) many of the existing commentary series stop short of theological reflection and, for this reason, do not offer a full commentary on the biblical material, and (2) the increase in specializations across biblical and theological disciplines has resulted in a lack of scriptural engagement by theologians, especially in the traditional form of commentary. For these reasons, theologians are the preferred commentators in this this series. The commentaries should "seek to explain the theological importance of the texts for the church today" and dialogue primarily "with the church's creeds, practices, and hymns; with the history of faithful interpretation and use of the Scriptures; with the categories and

concepts of theology; and with contemporary culture" (x). How commentators engage these objects and what methods best elucidate the theological importance of a text is left to each commentator's discretion. The only prescribed structure is to introduce each biblical book in relation to its contemporary significance.

Catherine Gunslaus González's commentary *1 & 2 Peter and Jude* offers a concise reading of 1 Peter that, although exploring many topics, is relevant to contemporary Christians as it challenges assumptions regarding the necessity of the Hebrew Scriptures, the essential character of the church, the role of the congregation in Christian life, and the possibility of persecution. In regard to 1 Peter, Gunslaus González reflects on these challenges through a paragraph-by-paragraph interpretation with special attention to traditional Christian practices of typology, baptism, and the catechumenate. She argues that 1 Peter does not read the OT within a prophecy-fulfilment model that dispenses with the OT once its message has been fulfilled, but rather through typology where the OT "remains the absolutely necessary source for our interpretation of God's action in Christ as well as in our own times and in our own lives" (18). A prime example of a typological reading comes in 1 Pet 3:20–21 where baptism is the antitype (ἀντίτυπος) to the salvation of Noah and eight others through water in the ark. Just as God judged the violence of a fallen creation through the flood, so too does God drown our old life of sin and violence in the waters of baptism in order to raise us to live in the peace of God's new creation in the church (i.e., the ark). Within this typological reading and throughout the letter, the church is the indispensable community that births and socializes its babes and children (cf. 1:3, 14) in order to cultivate God's people toward holy living distinct from "being a good citizen." It is here that Gunslaus González reflects on the ancient practice of a catechumenate to aid the contemporary church in actualizing 1 Peter's exhortation toward a holiness that is distinct from western citizenship.

Thomas G. Long's commentary *1 & 2 Timothy and Titus* argues that the continued decline and instability faced by most North American churches makes these letters urgently important today. For Long, the aim of these letters is on "establishing—or reestablishing—order, discipline, and theological soundness in congregations that have gone—or are threatening to go—off the rails" (Long 2016, p. 1). He employs three reading strategies in his approach to these letters: reading the letters (1) within their historical context, (2) as Scripture that is enacted primarily through a posture of charity, and (3) as pseudonymous both in their authorship and in their addressees. The "Pastor" (Long's name for the author of these letters) is writing to the leaders at Ephesus (i.e., Timothy) and any newly formed church (i.e., Titus) in order to give pastoral guidance during the crisis of false teaching that has broken out among their congregations. These interpretive decisions lead Long to engage in constant historical typology, both between the literal sense of the text and the history behind the text, as well as between the historical situation and the contemporary church. In an example drawn from 2 Timothy, Long notes the "overarching theme of 2 Timothy" is Timothy's being entrusted with "faith in the gospel and the call to serve the church with strength and love" (185). Long is quick to remind the reader, however, that Paul is really the Pastor who is writing to a symbolic Timothy in order to encourage the elders at Ephesus whose leadership has been challenged. Throughout the commentary, Long draws comparisons to a contemporary ministry context from his behind the text reconstructions with comments such as this: "[Good ministry] looks like loving God's people so much that one stands with them in all of the broken places of life . . . standing there not in our own power but in the power of the Spirit, a gift given over and again. . . . It is a ministry that counts, really counts, because it is a ministry that is finally gathered up into the eternal mercy and reign of God" (207).

In his commentary on *Philippians and Philemon*, Daniel L. Migliore views Paul's letter to the Philippians as significant for four reasons: (1) this letter uniquely encapsulates Paul's joyful witness of knowing and following Jesus Christ, (2) the struggle to remain faithful amidst community disagreements is shared between the Philippians and contemporary readers, (3) the significance and implications of Christ's lordship within a diverse and

complex social environment must be urgently probed, and (4) the letter's integration of belief and practice challenges the ease with which contemporary Christians separate these realities (Migliore 2014, p. 2). His theological reading involves commitments to the literary integrity of the letter, a coherent Pauline theology that cannot be reduced to a single doctrine and is expressed in various ways across his letters, the use of narrative in ethical instruction, and attending explicitly to the theological content in such a way as to hear God's Word to contemporary readers (cf. 15–18). A recurring theme where the significance of Philippians and Migliore's theological sensibilities converge is in his repeated reflection on the practice of prayer. Through reflection on Paul's own prayers in the letter and the church's own life of prayer, Migliore probes theological issues like Paul's proto-Trinitarian language (43; cf. Phil 1:9–11) and the relationship between divine and human agency (104; cf. 2:12–13), as well as how prayer is a mode of fellowship in the gospel that produces rejoicing (31, 162; cf. 1:19) and a participation in and response to God's own life of self-giving love (180; cf. 4:15). Migliore's attention to prayer in its theological and practical registers helpfully ties his commentary to the Scriptures and the worshipping life of the church in mission.

Justo González locates the significance of his commentary on Luke within contemporary issues facing the church and Luke's own theological agenda. In addition to its concerns with the role of women, Christian responses to poverty, and eating practices that encode forms of exclusion and inclusion, Luke's theological-historical narrative presents an ongoing history of God's activity in the world and an unfinished church that invites contemporary readers to join in the "grand narrative" of "the fulfillment of the eternal plans and work of God" (González 2010, pp. 4, 278). In order to offer a theological commentary on this narrative, González rejects the temptation to reduce Luke to a set of abstract principles; rather, he aims to "relate it to the life and proclamation of the church and its members," especially as it pertains to issues of exclusion and inclusion (13). Throughout the commentary, González moves seamlessly between exposition of Luke's narrative and its connection with present-day Christian life through the characters Luke develops and employs. For example, in reflecting on the sign of Jonah and the queen of the South (Luke 11:29–32), he comments that Christians today look toward church growth and tithe income for a sign of God's presence. However, González exclaims, "It may be well that the sign of a church in which the Spirit of God is at work is precisely that the most unlikely folk are brought in, like the Ninevites at the time of Jonah" (149–50). A church that fails to discern this radical form of inclusion as a sign of God's presence and to conform its practices accordingly runs the risk of being thrown into the sea by the society at large.

Overall, these four commentaries provide concise, theological readings of the books under their purview with an eye toward their significance to contemporary Christian life and issues. Given the aims of the series, most commentaries focus on the literary and theological emphases in a given text and downplay or ignore historical-critical issues. These commentaries readily read the biblical books within the trinitarian and Christological developments of Nicaea and Chalcedon. While some commentators briefly justify this decision (cf. Migliore 2014, pp. 54–56), most simply assume its appropriateness. These theological and literary readings are also attentive to the formation of Christian discipleship both past and present. Perhaps the strongest contribution of these commentaries is their utilization of Christian practice as a way both to reflect on the text and to actualize its message within the life of contemporary Christians. Gunslaus González uses the practice of the catechumenate to bridge the theological claims of 1 Peter that require the socialization of new converts into an exilic Christian identity to the contemporary western church that has a difficult time distinguishing between faithful disciples and good citizens. For his part, Migliore's commentary provides an exposition of Philippians through the lens of the church's maxim *lex credendi est lex orandi* (my words, not his). Migliore and González explicitly, and Long and Gunslaus González implicitly, operate from the ecclesiological claim of the continuity of God's people and God's address that allows them to hear in these texts a word for the present. How these commentators discern a word for the present

fluctuates between drawing historical analogues between ancient and modern situations and allowing the theological thrust of a text shed to light on contemporary church practice.

The biggest areas of weakness in these commentaries stem from their lack of explicit reflection on the relationship between history and theology, coupled with the aim of the commentary series toward contemporary significance. Since no commentary in this series offers reflection on the relationship between history and theology, especially as it pertains to historical and theological interpretive methods, these commentaries end up either ignoring historical issues (e.g., Migliore) or accepting historical-critical judgments that distort and shortcircuit a commentator's ability to engage in theological reflection (e.g., Gunslaus González, Long). Long provides the worst example of accepting the historical-critical judgment that the Pastoral Epistles are pseudonymous in its authorship and addressees. These judgments relocate the primary meaning behind the text, and subsequently, situate its theological significance in the correlation of these behind-the-text reconstructions and contemporary analogues. Gunslaus González's acceptance of differing authorship for 1 and 2 Peter presents a less stark example of the same phenomenon. While she does not engage in historical reconstruction like Long, the historical-critical judgment regarding authorship leads her to focus on how the letters differ and forecloses her ability to reflect on the relationship between these two letters that the final canonical form invites (cf. 2 Pet 3:1!). González alone reflects on the relationship between history and theology in an excursus on issues of continuity and discontinuity in Luke's narrative, which discuss Luke's negotiation of *Weltgeschichte* and *Heilsgeschichte*; however, his decision to locate Luke as presenting a highly continuous synthesis of *Weltgeschichte* and *Heilsgeschichte* confuses more than it clarifies (cf. González 2010, pp. 29–32).

The lack of explicit attention to matters of history and theology are then compounded by the aim for contemporary significance. A search for contemporary relevance is vulnerable to circumscribing the interpretive task within categories of contemporary need or issues (Fletcher 2009). The result is an interpretation that must identify relevant, historical analogues that allow the message of Scripture to bridge a historical gap. The task for the commentator to elucidate the text theologically is subverted in a quest for a transhistorical significance. This is seen clearly in both Long and Gunslaus González's commentaries, which consistently search for analogous situations in order to work out the text's theological significance. To clarify, interpreting a text with an eye toward contemporary significance is not wholly bad, as it assumes the identity of one people of God across time and God's continued speaking through this text to God's people. However, in order for these theological claims to do their appropriate interpretive work, the categories for contemporary relevance must be determined by the theological aims of the scriptural texts themselves and not the other way around. We see the beginnings of such a move in Migliore and González's reflections on contemporary significance, which identify the theological motifs drawn from these texts—Paul's joyful witness or Luke's unfinished church—as of primary significance. In this way, the vulnerability of translating God's word into contemporary medium is subordinated to the more primary task of determining how the theological claims of these texts envision our personal and communal transformations.

4. Brazos Theological Commentary

R. R. Reno, the general editor for the Brazos Theological Commentary (BTC) series, frames the series not from a contemporary challenge like the state of critical commentaries, but rather with the nature of Scripture itself as described by Irenaeus and Origen. Irenaeus likens Scripture to a mosaic of a king whose tiles—that is, the individual books and passages of Scripture—must be put in their proper order to construct their intended result. Origen likens Scripture to a house with many locked doors and many keys, each representing the various books and passages of Scripture; it is the job of interpretation to learn which key goes with which door in order to properly unlock Scripture's true interpretive aims. Scripture is vast, heterogeneous, and obscure and, therefore, argues Reno, requires a traditioned reading that can order and clarify Scripture's many puzzles. In other words,

scriptural interpretation requires doctrine that is “the schematic drawing that will allow readers to organize . . . the Bible into a coherent whole” and “guides us toward the proper matching of keys to doors” (Harink 2009, p. 10). The foundational claim of the series is that “dogma clarifies rather than obscures” (11). For this reason, the commentators for the series are primarily theologians, chosen “by virtue of the doctrinal formation of their mental habits” since “theological training in the Nicene tradition prepares one for biblical interpretation” (12). Moreover, the series does not proscribe how dogma and the Nicene tradition should inform one’s interpretation or relate to modern methods of interpretation but leaves such judgments to the individual commentators.

In lieu of standard introductory issues like authorship, date, or contemporary significance, Douglas Harink introduces his commentary *1 & 2 Peter* by identifying who his primary interlocutors are and with what framework he will bring to these texts. In relation to 1 Peter, Harink reads through the lens of the messianic/apocalyptic as developed by John Howard Yoder, Karl Barth, and Walter Benjamin, while also utilizing linguistic and socio-historical insights from Paul Achtemeier and John Elliott (Harink 2009, pp. 20–21). The commentary offers a sustained practice of utilizing the words of Peter as a launchpad for reading across the scriptural witness and into the quiet revolution that Jesus the Messiah has enacted. Harink locates the center of Peter’s message and the revolutionary power of the Gospel in the repeated call to “be subordinate” (1 Pet 2:13–3:8). This call and the concrete forms of life it engenders within the institutions of slavery, marriage, and the church enacts the word of Christ that “comes as disruptive grace and plenitude in the midst of what exists, breaking into it and breaking it open for the sake of its own healing” (86). This revolution of breaking into and breaking open is quiet, hidden from those who have not been healed of their ignorance and are still trapped by their desires. Those who imitate Jesus Messiah by being subordinate to every human creature do not pit what exists against what exists so as to identically repeat the forms of violent control that undergirds worldly power, but rather, being filled with the divine plenitude of God’s own life, reappropriate their lives within the world’s social structures by enacting a cruciform life of self-giving for the good of what exists. While the immediacy of Harink’s language and use of political philosophical readings of Pauline texts do provide fresh and expansive readings of 1 Peter, I wonder if perhaps Harink uses too many keys to unlock the door of 1 Peter and sometimes ignores the key that Peter has left behind. For example, Harink unpacks Peter’s command to holiness (1:15–16) through an extensive reading of Romans and not Leviticus (19:2), which Peter cites.

Risto Saarinen’s commentary *The Pastoral Epistles with Philemon and Jude* develops a hermeneutical paradigm from post-exegetical reflection on his section-by-section commentary on the Pastoral Epistles and Philemon that he then explicitly applies pre-exegetically to his commentary on Jude. His hermeneutical paradigm involves analysis of the subject–predicate relationship of theological propositions derived from the explicit statements in the biblical text or the obvious summary of the text. The interpretive task involves “realiz[ing] that the meaning of theological key subjects is elucidated by their intracanonical predicates” and that “the predicative terms . . . resonate with ordinary language as well as with other language types and the phenomenal world of human beings” (Saarinen 2008, p. 228). Thus, the meaning of theological subjects is not directly connected to the phenomenal world but must be mediated by “handshakes” with their intracanonical usage that take up and reconfigure the phenomenal signification. We can analyze Saarinen’s theological hermeneutic by focusing on one of his theological propositions taken from the Pastoral Epistles: “Sound doctrine brings forth a sound mind, virtuous character, and good works” (227). Sound doctrine (ὑγιαίνουσα διδασκαλία; 1 Tim 1:10; 2 Tim 4:3; Titus 2:1) as the theological subject is elucidated by its predicates. The primary way it “brings forth” these predicates is through the entrusting of “tradition” (παράθηκη; 1 Tim 6:20; 2 Tim 1:12, 14). Tradition, argues Saarinen, should be read within the historical context of Seneca’s articulation of gift-giving and gift-receiving, as well as a contemporary anthropological framework of “inalienable possession” that emphasizes how this form of giving and receiving is integral

to the identity formation of a community (251–56). These historical or phenomenological articulations of giving-and-receiving are taken up and reconfigured according to the intracanonical predicates of the Christian faith in which God's activity in Christ and the Holy Spirit makes faith possible and is also the object of faith, with the aim of producing a community of saints. Furthermore, while the predicates "a sound mind, virtuous character, and good works" draw heavily from the Greco-Roman medical tradition, the predicates are again reconfigured toward the intracanonical witness such that meekness becomes a central virtue and enactment of a sound mind (1 Tim 6:11; 2 Tim 2:25; Titus 3:2).

George Hunsinger's commentary *Philippians* is an exercise in "ecclesial hermeneutics" (Hunsinger 2020, p. 15), which he describes as "reading backwards . . . not only from the New Testament to the Old but also from the ecumenical councils to the canonical texts" (16). Hunsinger employs such backward reading primarily through disciplining his exegesis according to the patterns of thought developed in Nicaea and Chalcedon, patterns of thought that explicate the scriptural text within an ordered correlation of "asymmetry, unity, and distinction" (54). Hunsinger deploys this pattern of thought explicitly in his discussion of Christ Jesus's incarnational movement (Phil 2:6–11), free will and grace (2:12–13), righteousness through faith (3:9), and being in Christ while Christ also is in us (4:19). I will briefly look at his discussion of righteousness through faith as it is an extension of this pattern of thinking from Christ's two-natures and the relationship of the Trinity to Christ's salvific work. The key terms that Hunsinger correlates in his exegesis of Phil 3:9 are God's mercy, judgment, and righteousness, which he unpacks through a reading of Romans and the Corinthian correspondence. Christ, who is righteousness, becomes sin so that those who believe might become the righteousness of God through faith (2 Cor 5:21). Paul describes this double substitution through forensic, economic, priestly/cultic, and personal/communal metaphors (Rom 3:24–25). What is decisive for Hunsinger is the proper order of these metaphors so that the cultic/priestly metaphors are primary and lead to the others, especially the forensic ones. Hunsinger concludes: "Mercy and judgment in God are related without separation or division, without confusion or change, and with the priority and precedence belonging to divine mercy" (102). Again: "Mercy and righteousness are distinct but not separate on the cross, with priority and precedence belonging to mercy" (166). To speak adequately about God's right-making work in Christ as presented in *Philippians* requires a nuanced grammar that properly orders and relates a multitude of metaphors and ontological claims. It is precisely in the church's ecumenical creeds that one learns such a grammar.

David Jeffrey's commentary *Luke* draws heavily from the catena and *scholia* literary forms where comments from church tradition are gathered together to surround the biblical text (Jeffrey 2012). While offering a chapter-by-chapter commentary of the Gospel, Jeffrey draws deeply from the church's commentaries, homilies, hymns, liturgical formula, and art to illuminate the manifold interpretive possibilities inherent with this text. Such an approach impresses on the reader the deeply significant ways Luke's Gospel has informed the church's liturgical and aesthetic life. Jeffrey's work provides a good reminder that the habits of mind needed to faithfully unlock the doors of Scripture are not always formed within biblical commentaries, homilies, or theological treatises; equally, if not more significant, are the artistic representations of paintings and hymns. This work also serves as a good reminder of the consistent plurality of premodern interpretation that operate from shared presuppositions regarding the role of Scripture within the economy of salvation but offer distinct decisions for how best to read the individual parts within such an economy. Perhaps the most interesting parts of this commentary are where premodern exegesis subverts or pushes against the taken-for-granted consensus in modern scholarship. These insights aside, Jeffrey's commentary does not necessarily offer a clear reading of the text. Numerous interpretive options are consulted but rarely does Jeffrey enter the conversation with his own voice in order to evaluate and arrange the various interpretive possibilities into a larger narrative framework. A poignant example comes in Mary's Song where Jeffrey focuses on her representation as a great poet in paintings and patristic

commentary but does not unpack the actual words of Mary's Song or their relevance as foundational themes in the rest of Luke's narrative (cf. 32–33).

Perhaps due to the wide latitude given to the commentators, the commentaries in the BTC series vary widely. The primary claims of the series are that “dogma clarifies rather than obscures” and a commentator's formation in the Nicene tradition is simultaneously the criterion by which commentators are chosen and the interpretive key to a proper ordering of Scripture. As such, one would assume the need for significant reflection on the relationship between doctrine and interpretation, or how the Nicene tradition will be used in one's interpretive judgments. While some commentators offer explicit hermeneutical reflections on their method (Saarinen and Hunsinger), others leave all such decisions implicit (Harink and Jeffrey). Jeffrey's work, which can only be considered a commentary in the broadest sense,² simply recapitulates premodern exegetical insights and does not attend to the manifold difficulties in appropriating these insights into a radically different theological culture. Saarinen does provide extensive hermeneutical reflection on his proposition-based theology, but strangely the method he produces seems to cut off his interpretive horizons from engagement with doctrinal development. Since theological subjects require the mediation of intracanonical handshakes to connect to the phenomenal world, all such connections are confined to the biblical text and the historical period of its production. At most, then, Saarinen's method allows him to point out various trajectories of doctrinal development on certain passages, but he cannot utilize these developments in his interpretive judgments (cf. Saarinen 2008, pp. 133–34; 2 Tim 1:15–18). For Jeffrey and Saarinen, it is unclear how dogma is used to clarify the Scriptures in any significant way or how their own formation in the Nicene tradition properly orders the heterogeneity of Scripture.

Both Harink and Hunsinger offer more fruitful ways forward than either Jeffrey and Saarinen, with Hunsinger offering explicit hermeneutical reflection and Harink doing so implicitly. Both scholars locate themselves within a received scholarly tradition that represents their formation in the Nicene tradition. Although the approaches and received tradition between them are distinct—Harink appropriates the apocalyptic/messianic of Yoder and Benjamin, and Hunsinger the *sensus communialis* of Frei—the end result reveals a fundamental aspect of the role of doctrine in interpretation: the practice of analyzing and ordering the literal sense of Scripture under the various aspects encoded in doctrinal formulations. For example, Harink's ability to read the household codes of 1 Peter as God “breaking into and breaking open” what exists for its own healing presupposes asymmetrically related orders of transcendence and immanence that are encoded in the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. God's ability to create from nothing reveals that God acts from God's own plenitude and not from lack, and that the actions of God and humans do not operate on the same ontological planes and, thus, cannot be reduced to a zero-sum game. The theological reading of Harink is an analysis of the household codes under the aspect of this asymmetrical relationship between transcendent and immanent orders. Similarly, for Hunsinger, it is the logic of the incarnation as set forth in Chalcedon that patterns Christian language to speak of Christ's two-natures as united without distinction, and yet asymmetrically related as it is the eternal Son who assumes human nature. Hunsinger then reads the literal sense of Philippians, its claims regarding Christ's self-emptying obedience, the salvation won by this act of God, and the relationship between divine and human action, under the aspects of unity, distinction, and asymmetry.

The commentaries produced by Harink and Hunsinger reveal the “constraining and unleashing character” of doctrine to illuminate the literal sense of Scripture (Gignilliat and Pennington 2016, p. 255). Doctrine constrains as it pressures readings of Scripture under specific aspects that are asymmetrically related in specific ways and not others. Such constraint allows theological readings to unleash on the immanent horizon of our social institutions the transcendent reordering of God's plenitude; to probe the mysterious interconnection of God's mercy, righteousness, and judgment that is revealed in the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ Jesus; and to cleanse our minds of idolatrous

patterns of thinking about God and creation that ultimately lead toward violence and death. What these commentaries do not do, and what needs to be done in order for their insights to be adequately appropriated for NT theology, is to determine whether their inherited traditions are in fact faithful extensions of the Nicene tradition. It is assumed rather than argued that employing doctrine's grammar in accordance with Barth, Benjamin, and Frei necessarily produces theologically faithful readings. Lewis Ayres and Michael Hanby have persuasively shown, however, that the modern period has sufficiently malformed the theological culture and metaphysical foundations of the Christian tradition that the deployment of its traditional terms becomes subtly reinterpreted toward improper ends (Ayres 2004; Hanby 2021). NT theology must become conversant with these malformations so that it can rightfully appropriate doctrine's ability to clarify. Moreover, no commentary in this series offers significant engagement with critical biblical scholarship and the need to utilize and tame these insights toward the theological claims of Scripture. Therefore, while the works of Harink and Hunsinger, in particular, helpfully reveal how to analyze Scripture under various doctrinal aspects, these contributions to the series fail to take seriously the verbal character of Scripture as a historical product and integrate the historical aspect into their analysis.

5. Two Horizons New Testament Commentary

Joel Green and Max Turner, the editors for the Two Horizons New Testament Commentary (THNTC) series, say that the series "seeks to reintegrate biblical exegesis with contemporary theology in the service of the church" with a focus toward "the nature of a biblical hermeneutics appropriate to doing theology" (Green and Turner 2000, p. 2). They further clarify that the purpose of the series is "to help the reader (1) understand individual books theologically in their ancient context and (2) be able to interpret them competently into the theological contexts of the turn of the twenty-first century" (3). Theology and not history is the chasm that separates contemporary readers from Scripture's initial audience and the church's history of interpretation, even as the historical articulations of the faith and theology of God's people must be heard within their socio-historical contexts both past and present. It is possible to describe this series, then, as a practice in "intercultural discourse and theological formation within the community of God's people" across time (42). While the individual commentators are given freedom to determine how to achieve this aim and purpose in light of their own theological tradition and their own reflection on the nature of both biblical theology and theological hermeneutics, the series does require adherence to a tripartite structure: (1) an opening section that covers matters of introduction and theological exegesis, (2) an exegetical section that "elucidates the key theological themes of the book, their relationship to each other, and their contribution to and place in a broader biblical theology," and (3) a final section that "attempts to articulate the significance of the book and its themes for theology and praxis today, and to do this *in conscious dialogue with serious contributions to modern systematic, constructive, and practical theology*" (3, italics original).

Joel Green's commentary *1 Peter* operates with the guiding assumption that *1 Peter* does not contain the raw materials for theology, but rather is already theology's enactment "both in its critical task of reflection on the practices and affirmations of the people of God to determine their credibility and faithfulness, and in its constructive task of reiteration, restatement, and interpretation of the good news vis-a-vis its horizons and challenges" (Green 2007, p. 190). While Green traces the critical and constructive theology of Peter across a multitude of interrelated issues, I will look at his analysis of time as a prime example of his theological interpretation. Green utilizes narrative theology and contemporary insights in neurobiology to construct the following narrative employment of time from 1 Pet 1:13–21: (1) primordial time where the death of Jesus is inscribed into the timeless plan of God, (2) time of ignorance/emptiness shaped by the coercive powers of desire, (3) revelation of Jesus at the end of the age, (4) liberation through exodus imagery, (5) time of alien life characterized by holiness, (6) revelation of Jesus Christ that is oriented

toward divine vindication for those who imitate Jesus (cf. 36, 197–201). This temporal agenda, argues Green, serves to inscribe these Gentile churches into the history of Israel and cultivate “a strong sense of continuity with the past, a secure place within the arc of God’s gracious purpose, and a firm basis for projecting oneself into a future made certain in Jesus’ resurrection from the dead” (47). In this way, 1 Peter provides a narrative framework for solidifying communal identity amid social ostracism and discerning one’s past, present, and future life as determined by God’s actions in Jesus’s suffering and glory and not the standard canons of honor and shame in the Greco-Roman world.

Robert Wall and Richard Steele’s commentary *1 and 2 Timothy and Titus* is an extended practice in a canonical approach to scriptural interpretation. The canonical approach assumes that the Scriptures are ambiguous, vulnerable to a variety of interpretations and uses, and, therefore, seeks to clarify its proper use and interpretation within the canonical process and final canonical form. In regard to matters of introduction, Wall argues that the Pastoral Epistles were canonized during the second-century debates with Marcion and Valentinus in order to solidify the correct reception and interpretation of the Pauline legacy as “the teacher of the nations” whose apostolic legacy, now codified in the thirteen-letter collection, is maximally effective for “making believers wise for salvation and bringing them to maturity to perform the good works of God” (Wall and Steele 2012, p. 25; cf. 2 Tim 3:15–17). Wall’s commentary section offers a fairly straightforward reading of the Pastoral Epistles with an eye toward its intracanonical resonances with the other Pauline letters and Paul’s characterization and speeches in the book of Acts. For example, Wall reads Paul’s exhortation for Timothy to rekindle the gift of God (1:6; χάρισμα τοῦ θεοῦ) in light of the Pauline discussions of χάρισμα in 1 Cor 12–14 and Rom 12:3, and the laying on of hands and receiving the Holy Spirit in Acts 8:17 and in various OT successions stories (cf. 221–25). In the final two sections of each book, Wall offers a “ruled reading” in which he rereads each book chapter-by-chapter in light of Tertullian’s Rule of Faith, and Steele offers a historical example from the ecclesial tradition that enacts the theology and aims of these letters. Although suggestive in theory, these concluding sections in actuality do not deliver on substantive theological engagement with the Pastoral Epistles.

Stephen Fowl’s commentary *Philippians* begins with explicit reflection on the nature of commentary and the distinction between historical and theological commentaries, offers a close reading of Philippians that keeps theological concerns central by allowing the text to address contemporary readers and utilizing historical inquiry only when it sheds light on the text’s theological aims, and closes with a synthetic account of friendship that moves beyond the book of Philippians as one who has internally digested its message. Fowl argues that the central aim of the letter is to form in the Philippians “a Christ-focused *phronēsis* or practical reasoning” (Fowl 2005, p. 123). The central practices that constitute this Christ-focused practical reasoning are the ability to narrate one’s life according to God’s economy as revealed in Christ, and to identify faithful, analogous performances of Christ’s self-emptying and obedience in the history of God’s people—this in order to discern how to non-identically repeat these performances with those whom God has gathered in Christ. In addition to describing how Paul cultivates practical reasoning in the Philippians, Fowl enacts such practical reasoning through reflection on ecclesial life in America. After interpreting Paul’s exhortation for the Philippians to stand firm in one Spirit and not be intimidated by their opponents (Phil 1:27–28), Fowl reflects on the unity of the church in America. Fowl does not draw a direct connection between the Philippian church and the American church, but rather between the divided kingdoms of Israel in its historical narratives as a figure of the contemporary church’s resistance to the Spirit, Paul’s reflections on the Jewish people in Rom 9–11 as an analogous way to live in a divided church, and Paul’s letter to the Ephesians that details how a divided church is unable to witness to the principalities and powers of our age (cf. 74–77).

F. Scott Spencer’s commentary *Luke* offers a narrative-theological reading of the Gospel that “remains staunchly *contextual* in arcing between ancient and contemporary literary and cultural ‘horizons’” (Spencer 2019, 16 italics original). His narrative-theological

interpretation is theologically centered, philosophically expanded, canonically connected, salvifically aimed, ecclesially located, and emotionally invested. Reading the text as the narrative unfolds, Spencer attends closely to the spiritual and emotional development of its characters. Spencer draws on premodern anthropology and modern psychological insights to utilize emotions as embodied expressions of the characters' core values and perceptual frameworks. This allows Spencer to track how the characters' core beliefs and perceptual frameworks progress throughout the narrative and move from a dominating knowledge to a participatory knowledge, and finally to a transforming knowledge (cf. 390–91). He pays special attention to Jesus's growing knowledge of God's redemptive purposes as he "steadily get[s] to know the full dimensions of divine-human fellowship" (63). Jesus learns how to be obedient to his earthly parents in preparation for his public ministry (57; Luke 2:51–52), learns about the power of faith from the bleeding woman who touches his garment (137; 8:43–48), questions the disciples about his messianic identity in order to "gauge and solidify his own identity as God's Son the Messiah" (140; 9:18), struggles to submit to the Father's will (340–41; 22:42) and to forgive his enemies (357; 23:34), and is ultimately transformed in the resurrection (391; ch. 24). In his final section, Spencer unpacks how Luke's Gospel, various contemporary theologians, and his Baptist tradition conceive of this transformative knowledge across the theological foci of trinitarian theology, spiritual theology, creational theology, social theology, and passionate theology.

In line with the aims of the series and in contrast to the commentaries in the previous two series, all of these commentaries offer explicit hermeneutical reflection on theological interpretation, especially in relation to historical-critical commentary writing and methods. Commentaries in the THNTC series do not reject historical inquiry wholesale but rather unilaterally reject those historical methods that seek to renarrate or rearrange the biblical texts in ways contrary to their canonical form and theological presuppositions. These commentaries, then, extensively use two forms of historical methods: (1) "[e]xcavation of traditional material in order to explain the process from historical events to their being textualized within the biblical materials," and (2) "[s]tudy of the historical situation within which the biblical materials were generated, including the sociocultural conventions they take for granted" (Green 2011, p. 161). Green, Fowl, and Spencer operate primarily in the second area and use this form to clarify how the taken-for-granted conventions of the Greco-Roman world are challenged and reconfigured in light of God's revealing work in Christ Jesus through the Spirit. Wall primarily operates in the first category, probing deeply the historical processes of event, textualization, and canonization in order to guide our theological judgments on the NT texts. One of the clearest strengths of this commentary series is its commitment to clarify which critical methods are able to be tamed by the theological aims of Scripture, and, in this way, reappropriate the gains of critical scholarship in their recovery of theological interpretation.

While each commentator has his own particular view of how to do theology, these four commentaries see as integral to theological interpretation Scripture's aim to reorder completely the lives of God's people according to its theocentric and trinitarian vision. That theological claims necessarily make claims on our lives lead these commentators to consistently highlight the integral role that practices play in the ordering and reordering of our lives. This is similar to the Belief series, though the THNTC focuses on a much wider set of practices whereas Belief tends to focus on liturgical ones. Moreover, whereas Belief's focus on contemporary significance is vulnerable to reduce theological reflection to historical analogues, the THNTC reads the contemporary context in light of the theological claims of Scripture that enables more robust and theologically sophisticated reflection. Fowl offers a great example. In order to reflect on the theological claim that salvation and faithful witness presuppose a united church, he does not look for a division within the Philippian congregation that maps neatly onto contemporary church life in America. Instead, doing theology with Philippians, Fowl reads the contemporary context in light of Scripture's larger witness—Israel's divided kingdoms, Paul's reflections on the Jewish people (Rom 9–11), and how church unity should witness to the principalities and powers of a given

age (Eph 3:9–10; 6:12)—in order to expose contemporary disunity as resistance to God’s Spirit and offer tentative postures for faithfully living within such disunity. Such explicit reflection on the contemporary context is not consistently done. While Spencer does some analysis in his final section, Wall and Green keep their theological reflections attuned to the ancient context. In Green’s case, even though his final section offers extensive examples of “doing theology with” 1 Peter and makes normative statements regarding the text’s theological claims, he leaves it up to the reader to discern how such claims critique and refashion contemporary claims on the lives of God’s people—for example, contemporary canons of honor and shame or secular emplotments of time.

Another aspect shared across the four commentaries is their deliberate use of trinitarian categories to elucidate the texts. It is interesting to compare the use of trinitarian categories in the THNTC and the BTC series. Trinitarian language in the THNTC is used principally in its economic registers with only rare explorations into the imminent life of the Trinity. Fowl comes the closest in his discussion on what aspects of Christ’s kenotic self-emptying and God’s vindicating work humans can and cannot analogously imitate (Fowl 2005, pp. 106–7) and further reflections on friendship with God as participating in God’s own eternal life of perfect communion (212–13). Fowl’s reflections are still quite different than those of Harink and Hunsinger, which seamlessly move between the eternal relations of God’s inner life and their economic manifestations. This difference stems from the THNTC’s use of credal language as a prism through which one reads the text (cf. Green 2007, p. 258), and the BTC’s adoption of a credal grammar that takes as its point of reference the transcendent God’s united, discrete, and asymmetrical life within God’s self and with creation. I find both uses helpful yet inadequate on their own. The BTC’s linguistic grammatical approach is a formative experience for both the writer and reader, training each one in the habits of mind necessary to engage in this kind of scriptural interpretation. This approach, however, is vulnerable to overwhelm the scriptural text, potentially obscuring rather than clarifying the larger narrative and literary aims of a given text, and in this way pushes against the limits of the commentary genre. The THNTC’s more reserved approach, by contrast, maintains its ability to center the scriptural text even as its literal sense is interpreted according to trinitarian categories and claims. The downside is the seeming unwillingness for the commentators of this series to engage in metaphysical and ontological reflection both on the scriptural text and on the contemporary context.

6. Conclusions

The Belief, BTC, and THNTC series conceive of the theological task in distinct ways, even as each participates in the broader, shared work of recovering the practice of theological exegesis. Belief’s use of the liturgical practices of the church as a lens for reflecting on the biblical texts and as actualizations of the theological claims of Scripture provide fruitful avenues for continued theological engagement. Its elevation of contemporary significance as its hermeneutical focus, however, is vulnerable to subordinating Scripture’s theological claims to loosely drawn historical analogues between the ancient and contemporary contexts. The BTC’s guiding claim that “dogma clarifies rather than obscures” is a powerful clarion call against the worst assumptions of modern critical scholarship. The use of doctrine as a grammatical norm for exegesis has also produced theologically dense and rhetorically powerful commentaries that induct both writer and reader into a pedagogical formation of the proper ordering of all reality. The lack of any formal guidelines for the series, however, has created a context for commentaries that differ widely from one another, pushing the limits of the commentary form or even failing to meet them altogether. The THNTC, as the only series that uses biblical scholars as commentators, offers the most reflection on theological hermeneutics and how certain historical-critical methods can be tamed toward Scripture’s theological aims. Its consistent focus on elucidating how Scripture’s theological claims in turn make claims on the reordering of the church’s life grounds its theological reflection in the practices and thought patterns of the church, though there is

variety on how these claims are brought into a contemporary context. Furthermore, while there are benefits for its more reserved deployment of trinitarian language and exploration, commentators in this series might become more emboldened to probe the ontological and metaphysical commitments inherent to trinitarian language in order to expose and reformulate contemporary ontological and metaphysical claims that seek to distort the church's life and witness.

The road toward a robust theological culture that can sustain and produce faithful theological interpretation of Scripture for the church will be long and windy. I hope to have shown that the production of theological commentaries is a helpful avenue for charting and navigating such a road.

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Notes

- ¹ This definition is an adaption of Karl Barth's definition of dogmatics: "Dogmatics is the science in which the Church, according to the state of its knowledge at different times, takes account of the content of its proclamation critically, that is, by the standard of Holy Scripture and under the guidance of its Confessions" (Barth 1970, p. 9).
- ² Jeffrey's is not the only commentary in this series that struggles to produce a work that actualizes the commentary genre. Jaroslav Pelikan's decision to utilize the *loci communes* as an organizing principle for the commentary has the effect of relegating the text of Acts to a subordinate position, thus resisting the commentary genre (Pelikan 2005).

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