

# **Models for a Theology of Biblical Application**

*THEO 500: Theological Overview*

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## APOLOGY

I understand that this overly long essay on the theology of biblical interpretation is of an unusual character for a class such as *Theological Overview*. Seeing many shelves full of books on Biblical Hermeneutics, the Theology of the Bible, Biblical Exposition, and Homiletics made me sure that there is much there that I should have considered before writing. After briefly discussing the topic with Prof. Packer and learning that there is little written on this issue, I did a moderate survey of the literature and found it interesting but ultimately disappointing. As a result, this essay is largely my own work. I was sorely tempted at several points to give up and do something more straightforward, such as a comparison of paedo- and credo-baptism. But in the end, I appreciate the opportunity to think about these issues, and I hope this exercise bears some useful fruit, whether my analysis has intrinsic value or not. I wish to thank Prof. David Naugle of Dallas Baptist University (Dallas, Texas) for a stimulating e-mail exchange on the topic of worldview that contributed to this work.

To adapt a quotation from Prof. Packer:

**“Don’t shoot the theology student, he is doing his best!”**

## Introduction

Twenty years ago Walter Kaiser wrote an alarming book introduction that said he was unable to find a single European language book describing a theology for navigating the space between the text of Scripture and the contemporary relevance of the text.<sup>1</sup> He proceeds to produce a candidate method for doing so. In another book introduction, Anthony Thiselton acknowledges the great problem of distance between the text and the interpreter, asserting that it is not insoluble.<sup>2</sup> He proceeds to engage the problem philosophically. I write this essay in sympathy with the same issue, but choose an approach somewhere between them (and with considerably less expertise and detail than either). I consider the problem of developing contemporary applications from the biblical text from a theological point of view, downplaying the considerable philosophical and practical issues. My approach is to consider the nature of Scripture in two ways: (1) its method of production, and (2) its central concerns. I then present a framework for applying Scripture that is in harmony with both the concerns and method of Scripture itself. The organizing principle for my description is the well-recognized threefold thrust of Scripture: historical, theological and aesthetic.<sup>3</sup>

## The Problem

The problem of biblical application<sup>4</sup> is easily described in three steps. First, for evangelicals the Bible is the primary source and authority for understanding all matters of faith and life.<sup>5</sup> Second, every

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<sup>1</sup> Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward an Exegetical Theology: Biblical Exegesis for Preaching and Teaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 18.

<sup>2</sup> Anthony C. Thiselton. *The Two Horizons* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), xix.

<sup>3</sup> V. Philips Long, *The Art of Biblical History* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 13; and Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University P, 1987), 41. Note that the precise terms vary ('theological' vs. 'ideological'; 'aesthetic' vs. 'literary').

<sup>4</sup> I use the term "biblical application" to mean the act of bringing the truth, meaning and power of Scripture to bear on the present (including individuals, corporate entities, decisions, etc.). This activity goes by a variety of terms, such as contemporizing or 'actualizing,' which Childs defines as "render[ing] the tradition accessible to the future generation": Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985), 79.

<sup>5</sup> "Holy Scripture...[is] given by inspiration of God to be the rule of faith and life": *Westminster Confession of Faith*, I.ii. "God purposes to direct the belief and behavior of his people through the revealed truth set forth in Holy Scripture": J. I. Packer, *Concise Theology* (Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale, 1993), 16.

aspect of a Christian's life is meant to be affected by the power of the gospel.<sup>6</sup> Third, the Bible does not directly address every aspect of contemporary Christian life. This last point can be expanded in two directions. First, quite obviously, the Bible is not a document of directions, an 'answer book.' Therefore it is not an authority in the same sense that traffic laws are an authority – precise descriptions of acceptable and unacceptable thought and behavior. Second, the Bible writers had no access to a vision of 21<sup>st</sup> century life with its Internet-based relationships, hyper-capitalistic economies, and the worldwide plague of AIDS. As a result, the Bible that we have appears to fail at being a sufficient guide and authority. One possible solution would be to conclude that the Bible (and therefore, God) is only concerned with particular, narrow areas of life and thought – leaving the others without guidance. Such thinking would necessarily result in the possibility of a Christian and an atheist having identical belief and practice in large domains of their lives.<sup>7</sup>

The more historically attested solution is to affirm that the Bible does not directly address all areas of contemporary life, but through proper interpretation, its message may be brought to bear on them all. The problem of interpretation is obviously not new; the Scriptures have always been interpreted. However, over the past century the field of biblical studies has seen rapid growth. It has shifted its center from the realm of theologians to the realm of secular academics. The biblical text has been read using many new approaches based on the studies of linguistics, literary theory (itself a rapidly changing field), and sociology. Furthermore, biblical studies as a field has become isolated from its former close associates: theology and homiletics. As a result, there has been a growing divide between what is known (or, at least, believed to be known) about the text and how the text has been brought to bear on life. Many of those in the field of biblical studies recognize the increasing severity of the problem and emphasize

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<sup>6</sup> Consider the breadth of Paul's 'turning point' statements when he moves from theology to application in his epistles: "I...entreat you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called" (Eph 4:1, *NASB*) and "I urge you therefore...to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, ... and do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind..." (Rom 12:1-2, *NASB*). Also, the necessity of 'thinking Christianly' about all of life helped motivate the founding of Regent College.

<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, the present condition of the evangelical church (*e.g.*, recent surveys indicating nearly identical divorce rates for evangelical Christians and the general population) indicates that this option may be pragmatically operative across much of the evangelical church.

that any legitimate exegesis must lead to current application and not be an isolated exercise in textual understanding.<sup>8</sup> Dennis Nineham's call still needs to be heard: "What I plead for is that we should have some biblical scholars...whose expertise is...in the modern end of the problem" of biblical application.<sup>9</sup>

## **A Model of Scripture**

### ***The Three Principal Thrusts of Scripture***

Both theistic and atheistic scholars agree that the Bible's principal concerns are historical, theological and aesthetic. These three are 'principal' in the sense that none of the three may be ignored without misrepresenting the Bible. To see the Bible as historical alone ignores its unique perspective, selectivity, and commentary on the history it tells. To see the Bible as theological alone ignores the fact that its theology is presented in historical settings and with aesthetic power. Finally, seeing the Bible as aesthetic alone ignores its claims to tell of real people and events, and its claim for a particular metaphysical reality beyond these things.<sup>10</sup>

The Bible is historical in two senses, which must both be taken into account. First, it is historical because it represents itself as recounting historical occurrences, deeds and words.<sup>11,12</sup> Second, it is historical because its words were written by historical authors for historical audiences in particular historical situations. If long, complex redactional processes produced the final documents, this complicates the historical nature of Scripture but in no way nullifies it. This historical particularity of the Bible is fundamental to understanding its nature. I argue for a more radical sense of particularity than many. For example, Fee and Stuart differentiate between Paul's statements to Timothy to "bring the cloak" (2 Tim 4:13) and to "suffer hardship...as a good soldier" (2 Tim 2:3). They see the former as more

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<sup>8</sup> D. Patte, *What is Structural Exegesis?* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), 6.

<sup>9</sup> Thiselton, xx.

<sup>10</sup> see Long, 120-168 for an extended discussion of the different scholarly imbalances between these three biblical thrusts and the resulting interpretational problems.

<sup>11</sup> Of course, evangelicals would go further and say that it actually *does* recount history. As I describe these three thrusts, I attempt to do so in a manner acceptable to those of different belief systems.

<sup>12</sup> The Bible is a "vast deposit of precious memories of decisive interactions": Walter Brueggemann, *The Bible Makes Sense* (Atlanta: John Knox P, 1977), 10.

localized to its historical setting and the latter as more universally applicable.<sup>13</sup> I believe it is more helpful to place both in the same category (at least as a starting point): they are statements from one particular person to another particular person at a particular moment in time. I return to this example below when considering biblical application. Nonetheless, it is true that parts of the Bible are less historically particular than other parts. For example, many of the psalms are de-historicized in their composition, intentionally obscuring their historical settings to make them more general and widely applicable.<sup>14</sup> Likewise, the authors and situations for many of the OT narratives seem to be intentionally obscured and unrecoverable.<sup>15</sup> The degree of historical specificity in the text varies, and the corresponding method of interpretation and application must likewise vary. Regardless, the Bible is a historical book.

The second principal concern of the Bible is theological. Though historically set, its message is not a ‘objective’ history.<sup>16</sup> Instead it recounts history with a keen interest in theology. Using historical raw materials, it conveys a message about God, God’s nature, God’s people, God’s words, God’s covenants, God’s requirements, God’s judgments, God’s affirmations, people interacting with God, a man claiming to be God, people presenting thoughts about God, and so on. For evangelicals, the theological thrust of the Bible goes beyond this: it is God’s word for humanity. In the mysterious interaction between human authors and the divine author, the theological thrust of the Bible is not simply that it talks about *some* God, but that it communicates what God actually wants humanity to know about him. Note that this doctrine of revelation does not explain how it does so, but simply that it does. In both senses then, as literature about God and as God’s word, the Bible has a theological thrust.

The third and final principal concern of the Bible is aesthetic.<sup>17</sup> This literary thrust means that the Bible’s theological message is not presented in a cold, detached, dispassionate, rationalistic form.

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<sup>13</sup> Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 62.

<sup>14</sup> Raymond B. Dillard and Tremper Longman III, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 213.

<sup>15</sup> Sternberg, 64.

<sup>16</sup> The very idea of ‘objective’ history has come under convincing criticism in recent decades: Iain W. Provan, *Ideologies, Literary & Critical: Reflections on Recent Writings on the History of Israel* (Vancouver, British Columbia: Regent, 1998).

Although this artistic quality is multifaceted, the most important one for the present study is its rhetorical quality: the Bible is persuasive literature. Its theological point-of-view is not presented as one equally valid choice among many, but as the only viable choice. It asserts its worldview<sup>18</sup> as the one to be embraced by all humanity. Like a rhetorician, the aesthetic quality of the Bible seeks to establish consensus in the face of opposition, “bringing the audience’s viewpoint into alignment with his own,” by vindicating and inculcating its worldview.<sup>19</sup> Sternberg points out that persuading people to the biblical worldview is not a simple task. It requires great artistry because the goal is to convince the reader of truths that “both transcends and threatens man.”<sup>20</sup>

The biblical aesthetic encompasses many different genres. Each one invites readers to explore the biblical position. In narratives, a reader ‘tries on’ new roles and compares them with one’s own experiences, while observing God’s activity and the outcomes of the choices the characters make. The law codes present God’s authoritative voice and concern for every aspect of life in a holistic manner. The prayers and psalms show people in vital relationship with the God who is known and unknowable. The gospels bring the reader into the crowd and then allow one to eavesdrop on Jesus and the disciples, and even hear Jesus’ own thoughts. The epistles reveal the difficulties and glories that result from embracing the Bible’s worldview. The apocalypse challenges the defiant with predictions of doom and blessing depending on one’s choices. The literary artistry of the biblical presentation speaks to both heart and mind as it persuasively communicates its theological point-of-view.

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<sup>17</sup> The artistic nature of the Bible is the most recent to be acknowledged and studied. The church owes a great debt to many Jewish and secular scholars who have discovered the literary genius embodied in the biblical literature.

<sup>18</sup> The term ‘worldview’ must be used with care. I do not refer to a philosophical thought-system, as if the biblical worldview could be embraced apart from a relationship with the triune God. I likewise do not refer to such changeable elements as scientific and cosmological understandings. By the biblical worldview, I mean an understanding of reality that has God as its ultimate concern, from which all other understandings are derived. It includes such things as trusted propositions, values and priorities, narratives, methods and interconnections between these diverse elements. Within modernity, the concept of worldview might have been considered reducible to propositional beliefs. However, in the postmodern view, logical consistency is not assumed, nor are logical constructions necessarily believed to be sufficient (or even appropriate) representations of a person’s understanding of reality. It is in this difficult definition of worldview that I ‘hide’ the problem of separating the ‘eternal truths’ from the ‘cultural elements’ in the Bible.

<sup>19</sup> Sternberg, 482.

<sup>20</sup> Sternberg, 483.

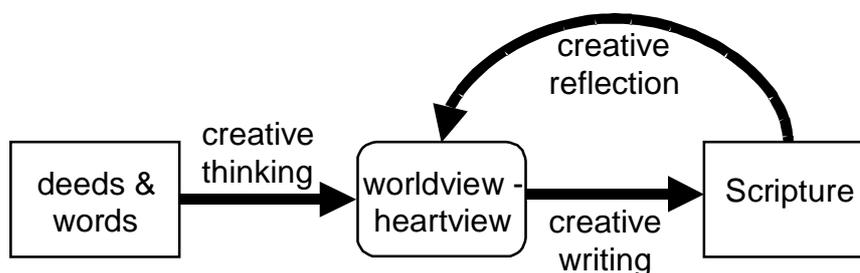


Figure 1. A model for the process of writing Scripture that emphasizes the historical, theological, and aesthetic aspects. Square boxes are historical artifacts. The rounded box is a theological construction. The arrows are aesthetic activities.

In summary, the Bible has three principal concerns: historical, theological and aesthetic. These three attributes are an important component of the nature of Scripture and all three must be respected when seeking to understand Scripture and how to apply it to contemporary life.

### ***The Process of Writing Scripture***

I now consider the process of writing Scripture, emphasizing the place of these three principal concerns.<sup>21</sup> The process is illustrated in Figure 1. Note that the process begins and ends with historical artifacts, which are represented by square boxes. First, there are historical deeds and words (along with other historical occurrences), which involve both God and people. These historical artifacts are the starting points of Scripture. The human author of Scripture then considers the activities of God and humanity (possibly including himself or herself) and develops a worldview. In the case of an author of Scripture, this worldview would be centered on the triune God. In the figure, I also use the word ‘heartview’<sup>22</sup> to emphasize that a person’s worldview is intimately connected with the heart and cannot be held as a separate intellectual entity. The thought that derives a worldview from historical deeds and words is labeled *creative* thinking because it represents the first aesthetic thrust of this process. Deeds and words by themselves are simply chronicle.<sup>23</sup> People transform unstructured chronicles of objects and

<sup>21</sup> It must be stressed that this presentation represents the process from the human point-of-view. Clearly for the resulting Scripture to be the inspired word of God, each step involves a mysterious intersection of God’s activity and human activity. Consideration of the interplay between these is beyond the scope of this paper.

<sup>22</sup> I am indebted to Prof. David Naugle (Dallas Baptist University, Dallas, Texas) for pointing out the connection between worldview and heartview.

<sup>23</sup> The concepts of chronicle and meaning, and the human role in transforming one into the other is discussed in Robert Farrar Capon, *The Romance of the Word: One Man’s Love Affair with Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 51-53.

events into meaningful arrangements. This transformation is a creative (and therefore aesthetic) activity.<sup>24</sup> At the completion of this first step, a theological understanding, in the form of a worldview/heartview has been produced from historical deeds and words. As described in footnote 21, each step of this process fundamentally depends upon God's inspiring involvement in order for the result to be the word of God as well as a human-authored document. God's involvement is no less necessary in the original historical deeds than in the author's creative thinking and formulation of a worldview.

The rest of the steps are more easily explained. The author now produces actual literature, words on a page, that represent his own worldview. This creative writing process is again aesthetic since the writing process is not simply a catalog of the worldview (as if such a thing were even possible). Instead, it is a literary presentation of the worldview that has persuasive power. The result of this process is another historical artifact: a literary document.<sup>25</sup>

One more level of complexity needs to be added to this model to complete it, represented by the arc-arrow. This arrow represents Scripture-to-Scripture redaction<sup>26</sup> and also canonical development. As an example of redaction, the author of Chronicles reflected on Kings as part of the development of his worldview before creatively writing Chronicles. In the case of canonical development, the earlier parts of the canon contributed to later authors' worldviews, even if these earlier documents do not become literal sources for their writing. In either case, earlier Scripture influences later Scripture, particularly in the case of the OT forming the basis of the NT.

Although requiring some detailed explanation, this model for the process of developing Scripture is quite simple and a reasonable description (from the human point-of-view) of the mechanics of writing of the Bible. It makes clear that the historical, theological, aesthetic Bible does not accidentally involve

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<sup>24</sup> Describing this activity as an *aesthetic* one does not put it in tension with being an intellectual one. A deeply intellectual activity, such as the cataloging of species or the construction of a systematic theology, is also fundamentally aesthetic because a good organization, set of emphases, hierarchy, etc. is recognized by when it takes shape and becomes *beautiful*, as most scientists will confirm.

<sup>25</sup> The writing process also obviously draws on the historical deeds and words, but my 'full-orbed' description of worldview incorporates these historical artifacts into it as memories, which become stories as they are refined.

<sup>26</sup> The redaction of non-Scriptural sources is already present in the model because these sources are historical artifacts like any other words that contribute to the raw material at the left of the diagram.

these three elements, but that all three are deeply rooted in the very process of its production.<sup>27</sup>

### A Model of Biblical Application

With this groundwork, I now move to a discussion of biblical application. Figure 2 shows a model of the process with strong similarities to the model for the production of Scripture. This time, it begins with Scripture and produces contemporary ‘history,’ *i.e.* thoughts, deeds and words in the real world that become historical artifacts in their own right.

The first step is labeled ‘creative reading’ and is the link between Scripture and the reader’s worldview. Again, ‘worldview’ here is in a similar category to ‘theology’ but is meant in a broader sense. As before, it represents the reader’s understanding of reality, including such things as trusted propositions, values and priorities, narratives, methods and interconnections between these diverse elements. It is necessarily different than a traditional systematic theology<sup>28</sup> (though it certainly contains aspects of a systematic theology within it) for several reasons. First, many saints cannot articulate anything like a systematic theology, yet they have a thoroughly Christ-centric worldview. When one considers the dynamics of David as an OT saint, it is difficult to imagine that he could reduce his artful dance of faith to a systematic form. Second, the fact that the Bible is God’s word and that it is not

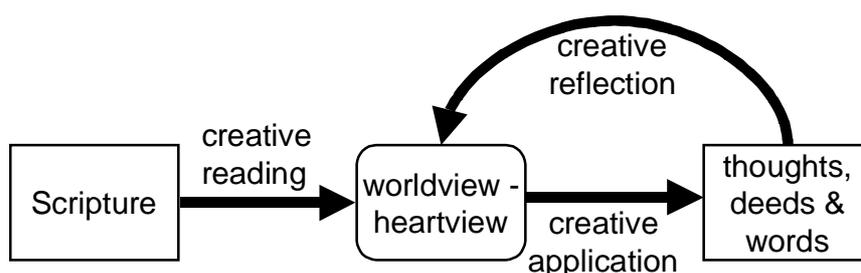


Figure 2. A model for the process of applying Scripture to contemporary situations.

<sup>27</sup> This model of writing Scripture bears some resemblance to Dorothy Sayers’ concepts of idea, energy and power. The correspondence I draw is that the idea is the worldview, the deep idea that the author is expressing; the historical foundation forms the energy; and the aesthetic and persuasive elements correspond to the power: Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Mind of the Maker* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1987), 35-45.

<sup>28</sup> Packer’s model for biblical application is similar, but he labels his midpoint as “systematic theology.” Fundamentally I agree with his approach, though I question whether “systematic theology” is a strong enough term to encapsulate the necessary elements. For the reasons given in the text, I believe ‘worldview’ is more appropriate. See J. I. Packer, “Theology and Bible Reading,” in *The Act of Bible Reading*, ed. Elmer Dyck (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity P, 1996), 69-70.

presented in systematic form makes it highly questionable whether forming a systematic theology is a necessary step in applying the Bible.<sup>29</sup> Third, many parts of the Bible resist systemization. Consider the Rahab narrative of Joshua 2 that leaves so many interpreters with contradictory conclusions about the ethics of Rahab's lying, the spies making a covenant with her, and even Joshua's decision to send spies to Jericho at all. Narratives such as this one appear to primarily communicate something that is difficult to represent in systematic form.

The single arrow 'creative reading' is deceptive because of the number of elements concealed behind it and their complexity. The first is exegesis. Beyond the normal difficulties of literary exegesis,<sup>30</sup> the Bible adds millennia of historical distance, the problem of understanding ancient languages and culture, and the highly symbolic and figurative language used to represent transcendent reality. However, there is reason for hope in that Jesus clearly expected his contemporaries to bridge the significant historical distance to the Hebrew Scriptures. Furthermore, generations of biblical interpreters testify that the difficulties can be surmounted with more ease than theoretical considerations may lead one to believe.<sup>31</sup> Although exegesis can be a highly technical activity, I describe it as creative reading because it requires aesthetic finesse in the end. Brueggemann describes the necessity of rigorous historical study in order to become an 'insider' to the biblical text, but then goes on to say, "The key to becoming an insider...and therefore a participant in this covenantal/historical understanding of reality is the nurturing of an historical imagination."<sup>32</sup> This historical imagination is the aesthetic activity to which I refer – the creative entering of a reader into a foreign world. It must be rooted in historical study to avoid becoming fantasy, but it cannot be accomplished without imagination.

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<sup>29</sup> I hasten to point out that I am not attempting to detract from the importance of systematic theology, because it performs a vital function in biblical understanding and application. My point here is that the conceptualization of biblical revelation is richer than a conventional systematic theology can sustain.

<sup>30</sup> The theoretical difficulties of literary interpretation are significant enough to lead radical deconstructionists to believe that any language interpretation is fundamentally uncertain. Even those with more moderate views must acknowledge that the difficulties are real.

<sup>31</sup> "Those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation, are so clearly propounded, and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them." (*Westminster Confession of Faith*, I.vii)

<sup>32</sup> Brueggemann, 32.

The second major activity behind this one arrow is what Packer calls ‘synthesis.’<sup>33</sup> It is the joining together of the results of exegeting texts from throughout the Bible. It is also the creative work of synthesizing those results with the reader’s own experiences, language, and culture. The assumption behind synthesis is that the biblical message is consistent, that one part casts light on others rather than contradicting one another. Likewise, it is assumed that personal experiences in the real world correlate with the understanding of reality that comes from the biblical witness.<sup>34</sup> For an evangelical, it also assumes that the biblical message is authoritative.

An additional complication obscured by this diagram is the fact that the reader’s worldview affects his reading of Scripture. Internal presuppositions are inevitable when approaching a text. It is the reader’s own horizon that engages with the text’s horizon.<sup>35</sup> The reader must be humble and transparent about this, but it cannot be avoided. More importantly, however, is the fact that Scripture challenges the reader’s worldview.<sup>36</sup> Because the reader’s worldview is interwoven with his heart (thus, ‘heartview’), the Bible exposes where the reader’s heart is in tension with God’s design.<sup>37</sup> In the end, this complex process of exegesis, synthesis and challenge results in a worldview that is progressively molded into one that matches the biblical worldview.<sup>38</sup>

At this point, the authentic reader is prepared to “walk in a manner worthy of the calling” (Eph 4:1, *NASB*). This requires the creative application of the resulting worldview to the contemporary world. Notice at this point that the three thrusts of the Bible meet together again. The theological thrust is

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<sup>33</sup> J. I. Packer, *God Has Spoken* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1979), 105-8.

<sup>34</sup> Of course, personal experiences must also be interpreted in this process, which is a creative (and fallible!) exercise like biblical interpretation.

<sup>35</sup> Thiselton, 10-17.

<sup>36</sup> As described above, the persuasive aesthetic of Scripture is central to its being.

<sup>37</sup> Again, I emphasize that this description is from a human point-of-view. From God’s perspective, the illuminating and convicting work of the Holy Spirit is a better description of the Bible’s persuasion of a reader to adopt a sanctified worldview. From God’s perspective, this is better described as a change in heart rather than a change in ‘worldview.’

<sup>38</sup> This is why a student of the Bible must have a faith commitment to the triune God and to biblical authority before authentic reading can occur. If the very nature of Scripture is its persuasive character, then it is misuse of it to rule out conversion to its worldview *a priori*. Thus it is not surprising that secular approaches to exegesis and biblical studies do not result in ‘meaning’ from the text because the pre-requisite circumstances for meaning to emerge are nullified before reading has begun.

embodied in the reader's worldview. The aesthetic thrust is urging a creative movement from the worldview into the real world. The historical thrust is honored because the result is new history: thoughts, deeds and words that become new historical artifacts. The activity of God that led to Scripture being written now becomes activity in the world again through application of that same Scripture. Once again, I have emphasized the human element of this activity, but the divine element is clearly present in providence and spiritual gifting. Finally, the arc arrow in the model allows these historical results to be synthesized back into the reader's worldview as part of his overall experience. The cycle of creative reading, creative application and creative reflection continues through all of life.

In summary, this model of biblical application describes a process by which the historical artifact of the Bible becomes the basis for contemporary action. The middle element, a biblical worldview, is both the result of exegesis and synthesis, and is the "deposit of truth" from which real world activity is born.<sup>39</sup> This model incorporates the historical, theological and aesthetic thrusts of Scripture. Furthermore, its analogous shape to the model for writing Scripture has an aesthetic quality of its own! The parallel is not too surprising, since writing Scripture is a theological/aesthetic act of transforming historical activity into written words, and applying Scripture is a theological/aesthetic act of transforming words into historical activity.

### **Implications**

In order to move from the theory of models to something closer to the real activity of biblical application, I conclude this essay with a series of observations on the implications of this analysis. These observations concern (1) the activity and person of the one doing biblical application (whom I refer to as the 'interpreter'), (2) applying the Bible by challenging worldviews, (3) the error of going directly from biblical exegesis to application, (4) a warning concerning the danger of interposing worldview between exegesis and application, and (5) the reality of applying the Bible to *all* of contemporary life.

First, this model makes clear that many demands are made of the interpreter. He must be an

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<sup>39</sup> Packer, "Theology and Bible Reading," 76-77.

exegete in order to be able to experience the biblical text in a meaningful way. Modern scholarship has increasingly established the foreign nature of the texts, and this reality cannot be ignored. Brueggemann's recommendation of historical knowledge and historical imagination are good starting points. The interpreter must be a theologian, because the theological message of the Bible is behind all of its particularities. Furthermore, the interpreter must learn from the exegesis and theology/worldview of others who are involved in the same exercise, both because of the enormity of the task of exegeting the Bible and the difficulty of fusing the two horizons. A peer who has already done some horizon-fusing is a valuable resource. The interpreter must also be a student of the contemporary world. Just as historical knowledge and imagination are necessary to become an insider to the biblical text, cultural knowledge and imagination are needed to apply the Bible to this present world. Living in a biblical ghetto will not produce true biblical application. On the other hand, it seems also likely that becoming a reflective 'outsider' to one's own world may provide some valuable perspective. Altogether, the one seeking to apply the Bible to everyday life is attempting a rich and demanding task. It is wholly dependent upon the grace of God at every step.

Second, one of the principal thrusts of the Bible was seen to be the persuasive task of challenging worldviews. The Bible asserts its own worldview without deference to others. Those seeking to faithfully apply the Bible will need to creatively discover ways to challenge prevailing worldviews with the biblical one. This is the heart of both evangelism and growth to Christian maturity. In evangelism, a person's worldview is centered on something or someone other than Christ. The Bible presents its Christ-centric worldview in poetry, narrative, wisdom, lament, praise, history, apocalypse, law code, and so on. It does so in genres and images that were appropriate for the historical situation in which it was written. Though its genres and images have considerable overlap with our own, authentic application of the Bible need not be constrained to using its original forms of language. A well-formed biblical worldview coupled with cultural imagination should produce new ways to encounter people evangelistically. The situation is similar in the case of Christian growth. Many church-goers are fully anaesthetized to the summons to

“praise God” and the form of the traditional three-point sermon. It is possible that there are more authentic songs than those that repeat biblical texts verbatim. Creativity is again necessitated. Both evangelism and Christian growth call for challenging worldviews where they differ from the biblical one, which demands both discernment and creativity.

Third, a popular approach to biblical application is (1) exegesis, (2) the separation of the eternal truths from the cultural aspects of the biblical message, and (3) the application of the eternal truths to the contemporary situation.<sup>40</sup> This approach bears some resemblance to the one shown here, but it has some important weaknesses. Most important, it hides the step of synthesizing a worldview (*i.e.*, developing a theology) somewhere in step #2. The difficult task of separating the eternal from the cultural *requires* a theological basis from which to work. Ignoring the complexity of this separation, and the fact that the result depends on the interpreter’s implicit worldview, is a dangerous oversight. Another problem with this approach is that it goes against the nature of the Bible as we have it. As noted, the Bible is historical by nature. The mining of ‘eternal truths’ as the starting point for application implies that a better Bible would be one without all of the cultural baggage obscuring these truths in the first place. In other words, exegesis and separation are presented as difficult tasks that are only necessary because the Bible is not as well written as it could have been. I argue that the historical particularity of the Bible is intrinsic to its message and interpretational methods should not depreciate this attribute. Finally, I return to the example of Paul’s two commands to Timothy (“bring the cloak” and “suffer hardship...as a good soldier”). The exegete/separate method, as Fee and Stuart argue, counts the former insignificant and the latter significant. However, a better way to look at the situation is that Paul’s worldview and situation necessitated communicating both messages to Timothy. Neither one is presented as an eternal truth in the biblical text. According to the model presented here, the appropriate use of this passage is to bring both commands in their context to bear on the reader’s worldview. “Bring the cloak” communicates Paul’s own suffering in a cold prison as a good soldier as an example of what faces many people of faith, as well

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<sup>40</sup> Stuart and Fee. 61-77. Note that the necessity of developing a theology is mentioned briefly on page 76.

as the interdependence of the body of Christ and the need to serve one another. “Suffer hardship” prepares Timothy for challenges he would prefer not to face, which also reveals the nature of the obedient Christian life. Neither is more or less ‘eternal’ or ‘cultural’ than the other. They are both part of the historical, theological, aesthetic word of God.

Fourth, it is important to acknowledge a danger that comes from the model presented here. It is dangerous to interpose too ‘opaque’ a synthesized worldview between the biblical text and application. An opaque worldview is one that loses touch with the biblical text. History has demonstrated that such opacity can occur in the synthesis of systematic theology, where the resulting constructs become “speculative religious schemes, only loosely linked with the Bible.”<sup>41</sup> The same opportunity for trouble exists here. Therefore, prudence dictates that the interpreter should endeavor to keep the synthesized worldview and the creative applications rooted in the biblical text. This does not mean that every application has to have biblical precedent, but that the justifying reasons behind the application should not be far from biblical texts. This danger affirms the wisdom of rooting sermons in the exposition of biblical texts.

Finally, I return to the problem that was stated at the beginning of this essay: a valid theology of biblical application must make the Bible applicable to all aspects of contemporary life. The model presented here opens up that opportunity in a manner consistent with the nature of the Bible. By viewing the Bible as persuasive literature that aims to inculcate its worldview, the interpreter can seek to be “transformed by the renewing of [his] mind” (Rom 12:2, *NASB*).<sup>42</sup> From this transformed mind can come applications of the Bible that would be completely foreign to the original human authors of the texts. Yet these applications can be in complete agreement with the biblical authors’ (and the Bible’s) God-centered worldview.<sup>43</sup> If this approach were taken, it might mean the end of sermons that ‘challenge’ Christians to

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<sup>41</sup> Packer, “Theology and Bible Reading,” 70.

<sup>42</sup> Again, this and all other aspects of this model have their divine counterpart. In this case, the transformation of a mind depends on the gracious work of God regenerating and sanctifying an incapable sinner.

<sup>43</sup> *contra* Fee and Stuart’s two rules for hermeneutics (64-5), which effectively constrain the biblical message to the one envisioned by the biblical authors. This is true for exegesis, but for hermeneutics they constrain the applicability of the Bible too tightly. I support the authors’ apparent goal of avoiding overly wooden and broad applications.

have appropriately orderly communion meals (cf. 1 Cor 11:21) and to avoid taking other church members to court (cf. 1 Cor 6:1) when neither of these is actually an issue in the local church. It might also mean the increase of biblical Christian reflection on the problem of homosexuality and Christianity. It could lead to reforms that bring meaning back to depersonalized work within commodity labor markets. It could lead to theological study becoming once again vitally relevant to everyday life.

### **Conclusion**

In this essay I have presented theological models for the writing and application of Scripture that engage its historical, theological and aesthetic concerns. Humanly speaking, Scripture was written as a result of an author's creative engagement with history and a worldview centered on the triune God. The result of the writing, the Bible, becomes a new historical artifact that contains a theological position and a persuasive aesthetic presentation. The process of biblical application is similar. The interpreter creatively engages with the historical artifact of Scripture, which challenges the interpreter's personal worldview and urges it into increasing harmony with the biblical worldview. The interpreter's God-centered worldview can then be creatively engaged with the contemporary world in a manner that is in accord with the nature of Scripture. This model is only a framework for thinking about the theology of biblical interpretation and does not address the many significant questions of philosophy and practical method. However, the development of a proper model may aid the progress of such inquiries.

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