

## **Covenantal, Christocentric and Christotelic Hermeneutics At Westminster Theological Seminary**

Following the historic lead of Westminster's founding father, Dr. J. Gresham Machen, Westminster has stood unswervingly for the truth of the Bible. Machen longed for Westminster to produce "specialists in the Bible". Thereafter, Westminster was blessed by our first President, Dr. Edmund C. Clowney, who taught his students to preach Christ from all the Bible, especially from the Old Testament.

Westminster Seminary's efforts have been consistent with the historical ministry of the people of God. Indeed, the interpretation of Holy Scripture has been the responsibility of the Church throughout the centuries. As the Reformed tradition emerged, it especially returned to biblical authority to reform the church. Christ was seen as the heart of the Bible, and the Apostolic word was nothing less than the Word of God:

John 5:46–47. For had ye believed Moses, ye would have believed me: for he wrote of me. But if ye believe not his writings, how shall ye believe my words?

1 Thess. 2:13. For this cause also thank we God without ceasing, because, when ye received the word of God which ye heard of us, ye received it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which effectually worketh also in you that believe.

The Westminster Confession I:4-5 explains it this way:

4. The authority of the Holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed, and obeyed, dependeth not upon the testimony of any man, or church; but wholly upon God (who is truth itself) the author thereof: and therefore it is to be received, because it is the Word of God.

5. We may be moved and induced by the testimony of the church to an high and reverent esteem of the Holy Scripture. And the heavenliness of the matter, the efficacy of the doctrine, the majesty of the style, the consent of all the parts, the scope of the whole (which is, to give all glory to God), the full discovery it makes of the only way of man's salvation, the many other incomparable excellencies, and the entire perfection thereof, are arguments whereby it doth abundantly ... our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth and divine authority thereof, is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts.

Reformed scholars have always emphasized the significance of the centrality of Christ for understanding the Bible's message. Many passages were interpreted by our Reformed and Presbyterian forefathers as portraying Christ as the heart and goal of biblical revelation (see, for example, Gen. 3:15; 15:6; Deut. 18:15; Ps. 22:30; 32:1–2, 5; Isa. 9:5–6; 42:1; 53:10; 55:4–5; 6; Jer. 31:33–34; Ezek. 36:26–27; Luke 2:32; John 6:37, 44–45; 8:56; Acts 2:29–36; 3:20, 22; Rom. 4:11, 16–24; 10:6–10; 1 Cor. 10:1–4; Col. 1:13; 2:11–12; Gal. 3:7–9, 1; 1 Pet. 1:19–20; Heb. 4:2; 8–10; 11:13).

The manner in which this developed early on focused on the unifying principle of the covenant. The essence of this “Christ centered” understanding of Scripture was well captured in the climax of the Reformation’s confessional compositions, namely, the Westminster Standards. Chapter Seven addresses the relevance of the covenant for Biblical interpretation:

3. Man, by his fall, having made himself incapable of life by that covenant, the Lord was pleased to make a second, commonly called the covenant of grace; wherein he freely offereth unto sinners life and salvation by Jesus Christ; requiring of them faith in him, that they may be saved, and promising to give unto all those that are ordained unto eternal life his Holy Spirit, to make them willing, and able to believe.

5. This covenant was differently administered in the time of the law, and in the time of the gospel: under the law, it was administered by promises, prophecies, sacrifices, circumcision, the paschal lamb, and other types and ordinances delivered to the people of the Jews, all foreshadowing Christ to come; which were, for that time, sufficient and efficacious, through the operation of the Spirit, to instruct and build up the elect in faith in the promised Messiah, by whom they had full remission of sins, and eternal salvation; and is called the old testament.

6. Under the gospel, when Christ, the substance, was exhibited, the ordinances in which this covenant is dispensed are the preaching of the Word, and the administration of the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper: which, though fewer in number, and administered with more simplicity, and less outward glory, yet, in them, it is held forth in more fullness, evidence, and spiritual efficacy, to all nations, both Jews and Gentiles; and is called the new testament. There are not therefore two covenants of grace, differing in substance, but one and the same, under various dispensations.

These classic Reformed emphases on the covenantal unity of the Bible highlight the organic Christ-centered interpretation of Scripture. This confessional view has been committed to by all Westminster Seminary faculty and board since the Seminary’s beginning. The Seminary today continues to believe that the hermeneutical method identified in the Reformational tradition of Westminster is biblically sound and in fact essential for a high view of Scripture in an age of doubt, controversy and compromise.

Thus in Westminster’s *Affirmations and Denials*, the Seminary reasserts these foundational commitments. In Part IV of that document, for example, Westminster addresses several key issues including:

- the Harmony of Scripture,
- the NT Use of the OT,
- Old Testament Teaching
- Old Testament History.

Some of the salient features of this section engage issues that are openly denied or contravened by those who do not adhere to or take overt and unexpressed exception to the Westminster Standards.

Examples of these debated points are illustrated by the following relevant statements:

- We deny that we must find explanations for each apparent discrepancy before accepting the divine authority of Scripture and submitting to its teaching.
- We affirm that each individual passage of Scripture is consistent in its affirmations with every other passage. (WCF 1.9.)
- We deny that passages may contradict one another.
- We affirm that when interpreting any passage, the true meaning must be found by comparing the one passage with the rest of Scripture (WCF 1.9.)
- We deny that it is legitimate to give an interpretation of a passage that is not in harmony with what is affirmed in another passage or passages.
- We affirm doctrinal unity and coherence in a given passage between the meaning of God, as its primary author, and the meaning of the human author, however limited may have been the understanding of the latter of what he wrote. (WCF 1.4, 5)
- We deny that in a given passage the intentions of God and the human writer are doctrinally divergent or discordant.
- We deny that the divine authority of Scripture belongs only to its main purpose or only to the main points of its various passages.
- We affirm that we must submit to the New Testament affirmations concerning the Old Testament, and not merely to the conclusions that the New Testament draws from them.
- We deny that it is ever allowable to submit to conclusions but not to other affirmations in the Scripture.
- We affirm that the methods and reasoning that Scripture uses in reaching its conclusions are valid.
- We deny that any Scripture uses invalid methods or reasoning to draw valid conclusions.
- We affirm that in the Old Testament God spoke to his people in a way that took into account their lack of detailed knowledge of the coming salvation to be revealed in the New Testament. (WCF 7.5.)
- We affirm that what God said in the Old Testament is always in harmony with later teaching in the New Testament, though it may not always be as full or explicit. (WCF 7.)
- We deny that the New Testament shows any contradiction to what is in the Old Testament.
- We affirm that we can sometimes understand passages in the Old Testament more deeply in the light of the later revelation that God has given us in Christ. (WCF 7.5.)
- We deny that we can never have more understanding of an Old Testament passage than what was available to people when it was first given.
- We affirm that God's intention with respect to an Old Testament passage is consistent with his later reference to or allusion to that passage in the New Testament. (WCF 1.9.)
- We deny that God's intentions at two different points in time, or in two different texts, are ever in disharmony.
- We affirm doctrinal continuity and harmony between the original historical and human meaning of an Old Testament text and the meaning a New Testament writer attributes to that text. (WCF 1.5; 1.9.)
- We deny that there is any doctrinal divergence or disparity between the original historical and human meaning of an Old Testament text and its use in the New Testament.

- We affirm that Adam and Eve were real flesh-and-blood individual human beings and that their fall into sin was subsequent to their creation as the first human beings. (WCF 6.1; 7.2; WLC 17.)
- We deny that the narrative in Genesis 3 is merely symbolic for what is true of mankind in general.
- We affirm that in the Scripture God does not endorse at any point a faulty worldview or cosmology or a faulty aspect thereof. (WCF 1.4; 2.1.)
- We affirm that Noah, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were real people who went through the experiences that Genesis describes them as going through. (WCF 1.4; 2.1; 14.2; WLC 160.)

What then does this have to do with the Christotelic hermeneutic? In one approach to Christotelic hermeneutics, there is no inconsistency at all. Christocentric and Christotelic may well be understood as mutually reinforcing. One way to say this would be to assert that Christ is the heart of the Bible's organic message (Christocentric) and that Christ is the goal of every stage of redemptive history (Christotelic).

The problem comes, however, when adherents of the Christotelic approach use it to diminish or deny that Christ is the heart of the Scriptures. In this approach to Christotelic hermeneutics, adherents may say that the OT and the NT contradict each other, but nevertheless, in spite of the contradictions, the OT is always moving toward Christ. Another example is to suggest that the OT was essentially ignorant or blind to the ultimate coming of Christ. Thus, the NT for all practical purposes reads Jesus back into the Old Testament. Then the OT unwittingly, yet nevertheless in spite of that disjunction and ignorance, was moving forward to Christ. Another example of this is the outright denial of the historic Adam, even though the New Testament makes the Adam and Christ parallel a foundational truth of the Gospel.

So it is when Christotelic hermeneutics breaks the union of the OT and NT's conscious message or organic union that it becomes different from Christocentric hermeneutics. It is then that Westminster believes it is inconsistent with the historic Reformed witness captured by the Westminster Confession of Faith and taught by Scripture itself.

It is Westminster's firm commitment to maintain simultaneously, the covenantal, Christocentric and Christotelic understanding of Scripture in the midst of the plethora of competing, contradicting and at times even higher critical interpretations of Scripture. In so doing, we have not changed or narrowed. Rather, we have remained true to our heritage, to our founders' commitments, to our *ex animo* vows to the Confession of Faith, and in particular to the wonderful legacy of Westminster's founder, Dr. Machen and Westminster's first President, Dr. Edmund Clowney, who taught us to preach Christ from all of Scripture, especially the Old Testament.

Peter A. Lillback