

Interpretative Anarchy, Ecclesial Fragmentation, and Doctrinal Chaos: IBS in the Present Pluralist Age

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Abstract

The method of Inductive Bible Study (IBS) and hermeneutical principles associated with it may help to mitigate against excessive interpretative anarchy and doctrinal chaos in the present pluralist age. These also challenge the practice of foisting a philosophical system or theological grid upon the biblical text. These contributions from IBS can help bridge the gap between Biblical Studies and the study of theology.

Key Terms: pluralism, hermeneutics, post-modernism, theology

The Present Pluralist Age

Despite Jesus's high priestly prayer for those who will believe in the Apostle's message "that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you" (John 17:21), there are more than 30,000 Protestant denominations today (including non-denominations!). If we include the Eastern Orthodox Church as well as the Roman Catholic tradition, the varieties of Christianity are bewildering. Alongside so many denominational varieties are a great assortment of doctrinal beliefs. While there is common theological agreement among most Christian churches embodied in the Apostle's Creed, many dispute scores of doctrinal beliefs. For example, there are disagreements about:

- the inspiration of Scripture
- the creation accounts in Genesis
- how to understand the Trinity
- the nature and attributes of God
- how God acts in the world
- the nature of humanity
- the person and work of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit
- what salvation, justification, and sanctification mean
- the nature, mission, and marks of the Church
- women in ministry
- the number and significance of the sacraments
- the destiny of those who never heard the Gospel
- and endless positions related to eschatology¹

Most all churches would say that they base their beliefs upon the Bible. Some churches even stress that they “teach the Bible and nothing but the Bible!” Recently, I heard a pastor say that all he needs is the Holy Spirit and the Bible and he and his congregation will figure it all out themselves. How did Christianity get so fragmented? If everyone claims to derive their beliefs from the Bible and nothing but the Bible, why so many interpretations, churches, and disputed doctrines? In the present pluralist climate, who has the authority to say which interpretations and doctrines are correct and/or authoritative?

Fragmentation is not only a characteristic of contemporary churches and their beliefs, one also finds it in the academy. Sharply defined divisions of academic disciplines in post-Enlightenment Christianity have separated the Christian curriculum into ever more specialized arenas of biblical, theological, and practical studies. The typical college or seminary curriculum typically includes courses in each of these areas. Yet, the further one climbs the academic ladder, the more

¹ For example, see Gregory A. Boyd and Paul R. Eddy, *Across the Spectrum: Understanding Issues in Evangelical Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009).

one becomes a specialist in a narrower sub-discipline within that field of study. At the level of doctoral degree, a biblical studies person must choose not only between the OT and NT, but also among the various subcategories that exist within the Hebrew Bible and the NT. The same is true for those pursuing a doctoral degree in theology. One must decide upon specific subcategories within historical, systematic, philosophical, spiritual, or practical theology. Moreover, if you look at the various groups, units, meetings, and events at annual scholarly theological conferences, you find a wall of separation between biblical and theological disciplines (not just at the AAR/SBL!). While there is much benefit to ever specialized arenas of research, one of the unfortunate consequences is that many people in theology do not tread very deeply into biblical studies nor do many biblical scholars read theological studies very extensively. There is presently a gulf between biblical and theological studies to the detriment of both disciplines. This can degenerate to the level of disdain between biblical scholars and theologians with each group claiming to have the upper hand.

Kevin J. Vanhoozer points out that in the past it was fitting for theologians to exegete the meaning and truth of Scripture and for biblical scholars to make significant contributions to theology. Vanhoozer claims, however, that this

has not generally been the case in the modern academy, where biblical studies is seen to be an enterprise of neutral and objective historical description. In contrast, theology is thought to be a confession-based prescriptive activity that reads Scripture through the conceptual grid of doctrinal frameworks. The exegete says what people in the past—the biblical authors—thought about God; the theologian says what the church should believe about God today.²

² Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “Systematic Theology,” in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 773–74.

On the one hand, biblical scholars have a legitimate concern that confessional theologians have and continue to impose their denominational distinctives or theological trends upon the biblical text or they selectively rummage through Scripture to find proof texts to support their doctrinal positions. In addition, biblical scholars, at least since the time of Rudolf Bultmann, now acknowledge that they too are not immune from importing their own assumptions, presuppositions, and theological biases upon their reading of Scripture. Bultmann claimed that: “no exegesis is without presuppositions, inasmuch as the exegete is not a *tabula rasa*, but on the contrary, approaches the text with specific questions or with a specific way of raising questions and thus has a certain idea of the subject matter with which the text is concerned.”³ On the other hand, theologians note that Christianity passed from the first-century Jewish cultural context and worldview, when Judaism had already been Hellenized in the 3rd century BCE, to the later Hellenistic, Medieval, Reformation, Modern, and Contemporary cultural contexts and worldviews. Theologians argue that just repeating what the Bible said in the first-century AD is inadequate for people to understand the message of the gospel and its significance for their own language, time, and culture. Applying the Bible to contemporary questions and issues is an important task of the Church.

Moreover, within the field of modern biblical studies itself, biblical scholars approach the critical study of Scripture from a wide variety of angles, e.g., textual, source, form, redaction, historical, rhetorical, social, literary, etc. A large group of biblical scholars employing the variety of methods of biblical criticism have come to emphasize the diversity of sources, editors, and competing communities with quite different theological interests. Whereas the sixteenth-century Reformers maintained that there was overall unity and continuity in the biblical witness on major themes and that Scripture helps interpret Scripture,

³ Rudolf Bultmann, “Is Exegesis Without Presuppositions Possible?” in *Existence and Faith: Shorter Writings of Rudolf Bultmann* (New York: Living Age Books, 1960), 289.

it seems that many biblical scholars today view Scripture as radically diverse and emphasize its discontinuity. An example of this is Walter Brueggemann's *Theology of the Old Testament*.⁴ Brueggemann structures that work around Israel's core testimony, counter-testimony, unsolicited testimony, and embodied testimony. Brueggemann offers this assessment of twentieth-century models of exegesis and theology: "It is fair to say that much of the old critical consensus from which theological exposition confidently moved at mid-century is now unsettled, if not in disarray."⁵ He is resigned to the fact that there is "a multilayered pluralism" within OT studies which includes a "pluralism of faith" and views of Yahweh, a "pluralism of methods" beyond the historical critical, and a "pluralism of interpretative communities" with specific epistemological, socioeconomic, and political interests. Brueggemann cannot accept a simplistic view of the unity of Scripture but he also seeks to avoid a reductionist approach by finding a "consensus" among the various and often conflicting testimonies within the OT. This consensus does not negate the "plurality of testimonies in the text," but rather, the exegete is to work with "the pluralistic interpretive context (reflected in the texts themselves, in biblical interpreters, and in the culture at large)."⁶ The acceptance of a pluralism of interpretations is not new but the view that the biblical witness itself is radically diverse and plural in its sources, history, and theological concerns has caused some concern. There is fear that multilayer pluralism within Scripture itself not only attacks the idea of the unity of Scripture but also threatens the principle that Scripture helps to interpret Scripture. If we add the current discussions on biblical hermeneutics to the diversity of methods of biblical criticism—particularly more postmodern approaches that question the authoritative role of the author in interpretation, affirm the indeterminacy of texts, and prioritize the context or horizon

⁴ Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997).

⁵ Brueggemann, *Theology*, xv.

⁶ Brueggemann, *Theology*, 710.

of the reader—we have a perfect storm for interpretative anarchy and doctrinal chaos.

The aim of this essay is to explore how the Inductive Bible Study (IBS) method and hermeneutical principles associated with it help to mitigate against excessive interpretative anarchy and doctrinal chaos in the present pluralist age. Although the IBS method and hermeneutical principles are not without assumptions, they do challenge the blatant practice of foisting a philosophical system or theological grid upon the biblical text. These contributions from IBS can help bridge the gap between biblical studies and the study of theology. But first, it is important to see how we got into this messy situation in the first place.

The Roots of Interpretative Anarchy, Ecclesial Fragmentation, and Doctrinal Chaos

How did we get into the present situation of interpretative anarchy, ecclesial fragmentation, and doctrinal chaos? Biblical interpretation has a long history. This history reveals not only that there are differing interpretations of biblical passages but also that there is a great deal of disagreement among those interpretations. We find evidence for this not only in the Jewish tradition where hundreds of rabbis debated a myriad of biblical passages and topics in the more than 6,000 pages of the Talmud, but also in the vast history of interpretation within the Christian tradition.

There are at least four reasons why biblical interpreters come to diverse and conflicting interpretations. First, the many and diverse interpretations of Scripture are due to the nature of Scripture itself. Scripture has been likened to a well where one can draw infinitely without ever reaching the bottom. Scripture has an infinite depth dimension. Therefore, new interpretative discoveries are the natural result. Second, we are finite beings with a limited perspective; we read, see, and understand partially and in diverse ways. No one has a God's-eye view of reality, except God of course! Third, we use different methods

of interpreting Scripture. As mentioned above, there are many ways to critically read and approach the text of Scripture. These diverse ways of critically reading Scripture yield different insights and emphases. Fourth, interpretative differences also result from the fact that we recognize different interpretive authorities to decide what a text means. For example, if we recognize the magisterium of the Roman Catholic Church as authoritative, then we will interpret texts in ways congruent with that authority.

During the medieval period of the Church, the standard method of biblical interpretation was the “fourfold sense of Scripture.” This method of interpreting Scripture extends back into the patristic age and the approach developed by Origen of Alexandria. The first sense is the literal sense, wherein interpreters take Scripture at the surface level (at face value). The second sense is the allegorical sense, wherein interpreters located certain obscure or hidden doctrines of the faith. The third sense is the tropological or moral sense, which gave direction for Christian behavior. The fourth sense is the anagogical, wherein interpreters thought Scripture held divine promises of future events. The fourfold method of interpreting Scripture led to wide-ranging and highly imaginative interpretations and doctrinal beliefs. The Roman Catholic Church, however, managed to keep interpretative anarchy and doctrinal chaos at bay by employing the rule of faith, church councils, creeds, authoritative doctors of theology, the concept of the magisterium, and the exercise of papal authority even if some Roman Catholic theologians and lay folks veered away from these norms. Today, if anyone wants to know what the RCC believes, all one has to do is read the official *Catechism of the Catholic Church*⁷ or Denzinger’s *Sources of Catholic Dogma*.⁸ The main doctrines of the Christian faith and what good Roman Catholics are to believe have already been determined through a long process of biblical interpretation and theological evaluation by

⁷ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1994).

⁸ Henry Denzinger, *The Sources of Catholic Dogma*, trans. Roy J. Deferrari, 13th ed. (Fitzwilliam, NH: Loreto, 2007).

church councils, teachers, and official papal announcements. These discouraged innovative interpretations and novel doctrinal speculation, which are not authoritative in matters of faith and practice.

One of the unintended consequences of the Protestant Reformation, however, was what Christian Smith calls the problem of “pervasive interpretative pluralism.”⁹ In addition, Alister McGrath contends that Protestantism impacted the world with a “dangerous idea,” namely,

that all Christians have the right to interpret the Bible for themselves.... It was a radical, dangerous idea that bypassed the idea that a centralized authority had the right to interpret the Bible. There was no centralized authority, no clerical monopoly on biblical interpretation. A radical reshaping of Christianity was inevitable, precisely because the restraints on change had suddenly—seemingly irreversibly—been removed.¹⁰

Martin Luther was intent on translating the Bible into German. He wanted every Christian to have a Bible and to read it for themselves. However, Luther naïvely thought that everyone who employed a historical grammatical surface reading of Scripture would interpret Scripture just as he did. He soon learned that the German Peasants and other Reformers were interpreting the Bible in ways that Luther disapproved.

The classic example is Luther’s dispute with Zwingli over the interpretation of Christ’s phrase “this is my body” at the institution of the Lord’s Supper. The point of contention was how to understand the presence of Christ in the bread and wine. Although Luther interpreted “this is my body” literally, he disagreed with the Roman Catholic concept of transubstantiation and instead affirmed a real physical presence of Christ in, above, under, and around the bread and wine. Luther’s contemporary, the Swiss reformer Huldrych Zwingli, contended that

⁹ Christian Smith, *The Bible Made Impossible: Why Biblicalism Is Not a Truly Evangelical Reading of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 3.

¹⁰ Alister McGrath, *Christianity’s Dangerous Idea: The Protestant Revolution—A History from the Sixteenth Century to the Twenty-First* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2007), 2–3.

we should understand the phrase “this is my body” as an *alloeosis* or a figure of speech. Zwingli thought that Christ had literally and physically ascended to the right hand of God the Father and, therefore, could not be physically present at the Lord’s Table.

After much back-and-forth in writing to one another, things came to a head at the Marburg Colloquy in 1529 with fifteen points of disputed doctrine on the agenda. The Lutherans and the Reformed churches could agree on fourteen of the fifteen disputed points. The last point concerned “On the Sacrament of Christ’s Body and Blood.” They all could agree against transubstantiation and that people should partake of both the bread and the wine, that the mass was not a “good work,” and that the Lord’s Supper was ordained by God. However, they could not agree among themselves on the presence of Christ in the bread and the wine and thus the Lutheran and Reformed traditions separated and remain so until this day.¹¹

Overlapping with the issue of the presence of Christ in the Lord’s Supper was the Anabaptist reading of the New Testament on Christian baptism. The Anabaptists took the premise of Luther and Zwingli regarding *sola scriptura* literally and rejected the practice of infant baptism because the Bible does not explicitly mention it. Roman Catholic, Lutheran, and Reformed Christians all viewed Anabaptists as heretics and persecuted them to the point of death. Here we have the beginnings of Protestant interpretative anarchy, ecclesial fragmentation, and doctrinal chaos that proliferated as time went on. The aftermath of the Protestant Reformation was a series of religious wars that bred intolerance, pluralism, and national patriotism (the Schmalkaldic Wars, the Thirty Years War, the French Wars, the Dutch Revolt, and the British Civil Wars). Following the Reformation period, the Enlightenment period with its emphasis on individual autonomy and thinking for oneself only exacerbated the profusion of interpretations, churches, and doctrines.

¹¹ “The Marburg Articles (1529),” in *Martin Luther’s Basic Theological Writings*, 3rd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012), 280–82.

This situation raised a new issue for Protestant churches: How should we adjudicate the differing interpretations of Scripture and whose interpretation is authoritative? Luther answered the question by affirming that the laity were capable of understanding and interpreting Scripture rightly because of the clarity of Scripture itself, the illumination of the Holy Spirit, and the employment of the historical and grammatical interpretation of the text. However, it is clear from his writings that Luther thought his interpretations of Scripture were not only superior to that of lay folks but also to the interpretations of other Reformers.¹² In Zurich, Zwingli settled matters of biblical interpretation through debate before the city council. They took a vote! Anabaptists held that the individual Bible reader guided by the Holy Spirit could come to authoritative interpretations, while some Radical Reformers bypassed Scripture altogether and claimed that they had authoritative direct revelations from the Holy Spirit. John Calvin proposed that his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* could serve as an interpretative lens by which to read Scripture properly. Lutherans and Reformed Christians went on to make catechisms to help guide the reading and interpretation of Scripture along denominational lines.

Roman Catholics feared the interpretative anarchy and doctrinal chaos generated by the Protestant Reformers and responded at the Council of Trent (1546) by defending the church's magisterium as the authoritative body to interpret the Scriptures. This decree was issued on interpreting Sacred Scripture at the Fourth Session of the Council in 1546:

Furthermore, to check unbridled spirits, it decrees that no one relying on his own judgment shall, in matters of faith and morals pertaining to the edification of Christian doctrine, distorting the Holy Scriptures in accordance with his own conceptions, presume

¹² Martin Luther, "Confession concerning Christ's Supper" (1528), in *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, ed. Timothy F. Lull and William R. Russell, 3rd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012), 262–79.

to interpret them contrary to that sense which holy mother Church, to whom it belongs to judge of their true sense and interpretation, had held and holds, or even contrary to the unanimous teaching of the Fathers, even though such interpretations should never at any time be published. Those who act contrary to this shall be made known by the ordinaries and punished in accordance with the penalties prescribed by the law.¹³

The more than 30,000 Protestant denominations make it difficult to say that these fears were unfounded.

Critical Assessment and Recent Proposals

How should we assess this aspect of the Protestant Reformation? Is the Bible the sole or the primary source for theology? Was it wise to want every Christian to have and read the Bible? Did this open the door to “unbridled spirits” to interpret the Scripture any way they wanted? There are many critics of the Protestant Reformation on this point. As mentioned above, Alister McGrath thought that it was a radically dangerous idea to let individuals interpret the Bible for themselves. He assesses that

this powerful affirmation of spiritual democracy ended up unleashing forces that threatened to destabilize the church, eventually leading to fissure and the formation of breakaway groups.... By its very nature, Protestantism had created space for entrepreneurial individuals to redirect and redefine Christianity.¹⁴

¹³ *The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, trans. H. J. Schroeder (Rockford, IL: Tan Books and Publishers, 1978), 18–19.

¹⁴ McGrath, *Christianity's Dangerous Idea*, 2, 4.

Christian Smith, focusing more on American Evangelicalism, challenges some of the central assumptions that derive from the Reformation about the Bible and biblical interpretation. Smith labels these assumptions as “Biblicism,” by which he means “a theory about the Bible that emphasizes together its exclusive authority, infallibility, perspicuity, self-sufficiency, internal consistency, self-evident meaning, and universal applicability.”¹⁵ Reflecting on the manifold disputed doctrinal issues within American Evangelicalism, among which each group claims that their theology is based upon the authority of Scripture, Smith comes to this assessment:

that on important matters the Bible apparently is not clear, consistent, and univocal enough to enable the best-intentioned, most highly skilled, believing readers to come to agreement as to what it teaches. That is an empirical, historical, undeniable, and ever-present reality. It is, in fact, the single reality that has most shaped the organizational and cultural life of the Christian church, which now, particularly in the United States, exists in a state of massive fragmentation.¹⁶

Brad Gregory offers the most devastating critique of the Protestant Reformation charging that it led to the secularization of society, the relativizing of doctrine, church fragmentation, the subjectivization of morality, the rise of capitalism and consumerism, and the secularization of knowledge. The root of these negative consequences, Gregory assesses, lies with

the Reformation’s failure derived directly from the patent infeasibility of successfully applying the reformer’s own foundational principle. For even when highly educated, well-intentioned Christians interpreted the Bible, beginning in the early 1520s they did

¹⁵ Smith, *Bible*, viii.

¹⁶ Smith, *Bible*, 25.

not and manifestly could not agree about its meaning or implications. Nor would anti-Roman Christians change or compromise their exegetical claims about the meaning of God's word on points they regarded as essential.... 'Scripture alone' was not a solution to this new problem, but its cause.... This was the case throughout the Reformation era and has remained so ever since.¹⁷

Stanley Hauerwas's solution to this problem is this:

No task is more important than for the Church to take the Bible out of the hands of individual Christians in North America.... Let us rather tell them [little children] and their parents that they are possessed by habits far too corrupt for them to be encouraged to read the Bible on their own.¹⁸

This solution might be too radical for many. Is there another way forward?

In a recent monograph, *Biblical Authority After Babel*, Vanhoozer challenges the idea that the Reformers and their principle of *sola scriptura* are to blame for interpretative anarchy and calls for a retrieval of the distinctly Reformation insights of grace alone, faith alone, Scripture alone, Christ alone, and the Glory of God alone as hermeneutical guides and interpretative authorities for a "Mere Protestant Christianity."¹⁹ Vanhoozer admits that "the proliferation of opinions and disagreements over just about every single passage in the Bible is staggering."²⁰ He asserts that the multiplicity of interpretations from Scripture is due to the fact that that there is no "viable shared criterion or central

¹⁷ Brad S. Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 368–69.

¹⁸ Stanley Hauerwas, *Unleashing the Scripture: Freeing the Bible from Captivity to America* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993), 15.

¹⁹ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Biblical Authority After Babel: Retrieving the Solas in the Spirit of Mere Protestant Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2016).

²⁰ Vanhoozer, *Biblical Authority*, 16.

authority” to sort out the various interpretations. Moreover, this leads to “communal interpretative egoism” whereby individual churches ignore all interpretations except those found in their own interpretative communities. Vanhoozer’s proposal is not simply to repeat and reassert the Reformers’ views but to “retrieve” and “translate” creatively what the Reformers said to move forward faithfully as the Church. His aim is twofold:

Mere Protestant Christianity is an attempt to stop the bleeding: first, by retrieving the *solas* as guidelines and guardrails of biblical interpretation; and second, by retrieving the royal priesthood of all believers, which is to say, the place of the church in the pattern of theological authority—the place where *sola scriptura* gets lived out in embodied interpretative practices.²¹

With this goal in mind, Vanhoozer analyzes what Luther and Calvin meant by each of the *solas*, evaluates other views, and then offers creative retrievals of each *sola* in view of the Bible, Church, and Interpretative Authority. Throughout the book, Vanhoozer offers twenty theses that frame the contours of his vision of a Mere Protestant Christianity. The final authority of Mere Protestant Christianity is the Triune God who speaks and acts in the diverse testimonies in Scripture. Vanhoozer maintains that for interpreters to have a better understanding of what God is saying in the Scripture biblical interpreters must attend to the work of other interpreters, including those outside one’s own tradition. He desires to steer a middle course between absolutely certain interpretations and relativist skepticism. Mere Protestant Christianity affirms the canonical principle that Scripture interprets Scripture and also the catholic principle that acknowledges the role of church tradition. Vanhoozer insists that *sola scriptura* is not to blame for sectarianism, fragmentation, and schism in the Church. Rather, *sola scriptura* is a “call to listen for the Holy Spirit speaking in the history of

²¹ Vanhoozer, *Biblical Authority*, 32.

Scripture's interpretation in the church."²² He calls this a "catholic biblicalism." Moreover, Mere Protestant Christianity asserts that local churches have the authority to say what is binding in matters of faith and practice. However, they have an obligation to do so in dialogue with other local churches. Vanhoozer believes that dialogue and conferencing trans-denominationally will limit the amount of individual autonomy and interpretative anarchy and bring glory to God.

A more critical recent proposal to retrieve the past in order to move forward from the pluralist age into the twenty-first century is the group of scholars who gather under the banner "Canonical Theism" and are led by William J. Abraham. Like Vanhoozer, Abraham and others are dissatisfied with the theological and ecclesial situation in the contemporary North American context. However, Abraham and his crew propose a grander retrieval than that of Vanhoozer's retrieval of reading Scripture through the lens of the Reformation's five *solas*. Canonical Theists reject the concept of *sola scriptura* and believe that the Holy Spirit not only gave the Church a canon of Scripture, but also "an abundant canonical heritage of materials, persons, and practices" found in canonical creeds and statements of faith, canons of liturgy, canons of bishops, canons of saints, canons of authoritative theologians, canons of Church councils, and canons of iconography and architecture.²³ Canonical Theism views the canon of Scripture as just one canon among many others that the Holy Spirit has given as a gift to the historic Church.

Douglas Koskela focuses upon the authority of Scripture in the context of the Church. Speaking on behalf of Canonical Theists, he asserts:

[A]t a very basic level, the biblical texts are considered authoritative because they are thought to yield special revelation to the

²² Vanhoozer, *Biblical Authority*, 145.

²³ William J. Abraham, Jason E. Vickers, and Natalie B. Van Kirk, eds., *Canonical Theism: A Proposal for Theology and the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 27–28.

community of faith. But the process of interpreting the scriptures such that revelation is faithfully received is a very complex matter indeed. To compound the problem, one significant consequence of the Protestant Reformation was the detachment of the Bible from the ecclesiastical practices that were intended to facilitate healthy interpretations. Embracing mottos such as *sola scriptura*, heirs of the Reformation espoused a notion of an authoritative Bible that stood alone, free from the entanglements and distortions of church tradition. The problem, of course, was that their Bible proved to be anything but self-interpreting, and competing interpretations of scripture abounded.²⁴

Canonical Theists do not deny the authority of Scripture. Rather, they claim that the canon of Scripture requires “the Rule of Faith” as a key to interpretation. As noted above, the Rule of Faith includes creeds, liturgies, bishops, saints, theologians, Church councils, icons, and architecture. Abraham, seeking to calm the fear of Evangelicals, says: “On this analysis scripture has its own magnificent way of depicting the beauty and of the full expression of that grace in Jesus Christ... scripture is not pitted against, say, the trinitarian faith of, say, the Nicene Creed but as complementary to it.”²⁵ Canonical Theists, then, understand the canon of Scripture as one of many canons that function as a source for Christian theology. Scripture does not compete with tradition as a theological resource; it is part of the heritage of canons given by God to guide the Church’s faith and practice.

²⁴ Douglas M. Koskela, “The Authority of Scripture in Its Ecclesial Context,” in *Canonical Theism: A Proposal for Theology and the Church*, ed. William J. Abraham, Jason E. Vickers, and Natalie B. Van Kirk (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 210–11.

²⁵ William J. Abraham, “Canonical Theism and Evangelicalism,” in *Canonical Theism: A Proposal for Theology and the Church*, ed. William J. Abraham, Jason E. Vickers, and Natalie B. Van Kirk (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 260.

Should Athens Impose Itself upon Jerusalem?

In addition to excessive interpretative anarchy and theological chaos created by a lack of a central interpretative authority, the history of Christian theology reveals that theologians and biblical interpreters tend to impose philosophical and theological systems or doctrinal grids upon their reading of Scripture. The Patristic period of the Greco-Roman world was permeated with Plato's philosophy with its subsequent developments in Middle and Neo-Platonism. Although many early Church Fathers were careful in employing Platonism in its many forms in their theology and biblical interpretation regarding the soul and other matters, there were many who were not. This tendency to integrate Christian faith with Hellenistic philosophy triggered Tertullian to ask, "what indeed does Athens have to do with Jerusalem?"²⁶ Tertullian was concerned that non-biblical and non-Christian categories of thought were distorting the Christian faith.

After the rediscovery of Aristotle in the Middle Ages, Aristotle's philosophy and metaphysics were employed within scholastic theology. Scholastic theology emphasized the rational justification of religious beliefs and the systematic presentation of those beliefs. Scholasticism was not a specific system of beliefs, but a way of organizing theology. It was a highly developed method of presenting material that made fine distinctions and attempted to achieve a comprehensive view of theology. The goal of scholastic theology was to demonstrate the inherent rationality and harmony of Christian theology by an appeal to philosophy.

Scholastic writings tended to be long and argumentative, relying on closely argued distinctions. Each scholastic system tried to embrace reality in its totality, dealing with matters of logic, metaphysics, and theology. Scholastic proponents showed that everything had its logical place in a comprehensive intellectual system. The systems of Thomas

²⁶ Tertullian, *On Prescription Against Heretics* (ANF 3:246).

Aquinas and Duns Scotus are prime examples of the scholastic method. Luther, Calvin, and other Protestant Reformers rejected the scholastic method and, as mentioned above, proclaimed *ad fontes* (back to the sources) of Scripture and the writings of some early church fathers, especially St. Augustine. However, the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries saw the rise of Protestant scholasticism with two clear camps, Lutheran and Reformed. The same type of impulse that characterized Medieval scholasticism, namely, carefully reasoned comprehensive systems of thought with long arguments and fine-tuned distinctions, characterized Protestant scholastic theologies.

The scientific revolution and the Enlightenment significantly impacted biblical studies and theology as rationalism and empiricism became the chief methods of discovering truth and reality. The philosophy of Kant put limits on knowledge and tried to make room for faith in the realm of the ethical. However, the philosophy of Hegel and the birth of German Idealism restored an optimistic view of reason that some interpreters then applied to the Bible and theology in the form of pantheism.

When we come to the twentieth- and twenty-first centuries, the imposing of philosophical systems upon theology continued with the rise of existentialism, phenomenology, analytic philosophy, and post-modern hermeneutics. Diogenes Allen, Emeritus Professor of Philosophy of Religion at Princeton Theological Seminary, provides a comprehensive analysis of the historic interrelationship of philosophy and theology in his work, *Philosophy for Understanding Theology*. Allen impressively demonstrates that no matter what period, philosophical ideas have influenced the way we read the Bible and think theologically. His central thesis is that: “Everyone needs to know some philosophy in order to understand the major doctrines of Christianity or to read a great theologian intelligently.”²⁷

²⁷ Diogenes Allen, *Philosophy for Understanding Theology* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1985), iii.

In a recent book, *The Essentials of Christian Thought*, Roger E. Olson contends that the Bible itself has an implicit philosophy and metaphysics of reality, the world, God, and humanity. He argues that our pluralistic culture promotes “eclecticism” but that “Biblically committed Christians, however, *should* want to purify their worldview of beliefs radically alien to and in conflict with the worldview implied in the biblical story.”²⁸ Olson claims that one does not have to accept the de-Hellenizing project of Adolf von Harnack in the early twentieth-century to criticize the influence of Greek thought upon the Bible and Christian theology.

Throughout the book, Olson makes clear how Hellenistic thought, metaphysical dualism, pantheism, emanationism, absolute idealism, panentheism, naturalism, and humanism are radically different systems of thought with remarkably different ideas about reality, the world, God, and humanity. Moreover, Olson contends that the narrative of Scripture assumes and implies a duality without dualism, a God who is a being rather than being itself. This God is personal, supernatural, vulnerable, and exists in time while being eternal and invisible. Whereas Hellenistic and rational-speculative philosophy and metaphysics view God as “absolute,” “impersonal,” “unconditioned,” “immutable,” “impassible,” “immovable,” and “self-sufficient,” Olson highlights that the biblical and Christian view of God is demonstrably dynamic, personal, open, changeable, and relational.

There is also a contrast with the metaphysical vision of the world. Olson points out that Scripture is not world denigrating or dualistic like in Platonism. Nor is the world viewed in a monistic, pantheistic, Hegelian panentheistic, deistic, idealistic, or naturalistic manner. Rather, the biblical Christian view of the world is both positive and realistic. Scripture affirms that God created the material realm “good,” but sin resulted in its corruption. Moreover, the God of the Bible has a dialectical relationship with the world, sustaining, guiding, and caring for it. In addition, there is a continuity and discontinuity of God and

²⁸ Roger E. Olson, *The Essentials of Christian Thought: Seeing Reality Through the Biblical Story* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017), 13.

the world. God is both independent of the world and highly relational within it. Olson further contends that there is a distinctly biblical and Christian view of humanity found within Scripture that differs from all the other philosophical and metaphysical systems. The biblical view of humanity is the “original humanism” where God created humans good, in the image and likeness of God, and with freedom and responsibility (Gen 1:27). Moreover, God crowned humanity with glory, honor, and the dignity of caring for God’s good creation (Ps 8:4–9).

Although humanity is dependent upon the Creator, humans are the Creator’s co-creators. Nonetheless, Scripture is also realistic about the human condition—it is broken due to sin and in need of redemption. Olson contrasts the biblical Christian view of humanity with anthropologies in Gnosticism, Eastern thought, naturalism, and secular humanism. If we grant that Christianity has a distinct and explicit worldview and metaphysics of reality, God, the world, and humanity that is implicit within Scripture, the question arises as to how one discovers the implicit worldview and metaphysics found within Scripture and how do we avoid imposing our philosophical assumptions, theological systems, and conceptual grids upon Scripture?

Can the Inductive Bible Study Method Help in the Present Pluralist Context?

The challenges of excessive interpretative anarchy, church fragmentation, doctrinal chaos, and the imposition of alien systems of thought upon Scripture in the present pluralist age are enormous. It would be naïve to think that there is some silver-bullet remedy or quick fix to this situation. In addition, there are some, such as Merold Westphal, who celebrate interpretative, ecclesial, and theological pluralism.²⁹ In fact, Westphal urges readers to embrace different readings of the biblical text.

²⁹ Merold Westphal, *Whose Community? Which Interpretation? Philosophical Hermeneutics for the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009).

Acknowledging that we live in an interpretative and theologically pluralistic age and will continue to do so in the future, we at once confront the question as to whether there are ways to restrict, limit, or mitigate against excessive interpretative and theological pluralism. We may not be able to stop the interpretative and theological bleeding, but could we identify shared interpretative and theological procedures, methods, tasks, sources, and rules to at least slow or reduce the bleeding? In addition, are there not some criteria that are useful in adjudicating between contested and conflicting biblical interpretations and theological doctrines?

For the remainder of this essay, I argue that the IBS method and its hermeneutical principles are a vitally important, albeit limited approach to counteract excessive interpretative and theological pluralism. Its principles of observing, interpreting, and applying the biblical text, while modern, prohibit reading the Bible in just any way the reader wants and as a result provide theological guidelines. Although there are different methods, tasks, sources, and purposes between IBS and theology, there is a mutually beneficial relationship between the two. This section will highlight five contributions that the IBS method and hermeneutical principles make in response to the many issues in our pluralist age named above.

First: The Principle of Canonical Study

Karl Barth was perhaps the greatest theologian of the twentieth-century. One of Barth's legacies is that he returned Christian theology to "the strange new world within the Bible."³⁰ Theology had become estranged from the Bible due to deistic Enlightenment rationalism, which denied miracles. Also, the historical critical method came to dominate the academy and universities. Hans Frei contends that: "the realistic narrative reading of biblical stories, the gospels in particular,

³⁰ Karl Barth, "The Strange New World Within the Bible," in *The Word of God and the Word of Man* (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1978), 28–50.

went into eclipse throughout the period” of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-centuries.³¹

In addition, the German liberal tradition beginning with Schleiermacher sought to situate the Christian faith upon the human experience of God rather than upon Scripture or tradition. By the beginning of the twentieth century, many academic circles questioned the Canon of Scripture or sidelined it as a credible source of Christian theology. During WWI Barth became disillusioned with his liberal teachers. He saw the flaws in building theology upon human experience or upon liberal ethical ideals. Barth, therefore, reconstituted divine revelation in the Word of God as the criterion of Christian theology. Barth’s influence extends today among many groups, particularly those associated with Narrative Theology, Post-Liberal Theology, and the Theological Interpretation of Scripture movements. However, the theological landscape has shifted dramatically since the mid-twentieth-century when Neo-Orthodoxy and Biblical Theology were in their heyday. Theologies of Liberation have reemphasized the priority of human experience as a starting point for theology and various postmodern theologies have come of age. Postmodern theology, in general, does not prioritize the Canon of Scripture, but rather, privileges the horizon or context of the reader. Considering all the various interpretations and theological movements that exist today, there is once again a need to reassert the priority of the Canon of Scripture as the primary source and norm as well as the starting point for Christian theology.

The IBS method contributes to the study of theology in our pluralistic age by affirming the Canon of Scripture, it is the starting point for observation, interpretation, and application. In the words of David R. Bauer and Robert A. Traina,

³¹ Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study of Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 324.

[T]he notion of *canon* involves a rule or norm. The canon of Scripture, then, points to the reality that the community of the Christian church has claimed that these books, read as a canonical collection, have normative authority within the Christian community. More specifically, the canonizing process involved the judgment of the church that God somehow reveals God's self and God's will through these writings in unique ways, with the result that taken together as a canonical whole, they function as a theological norm and as the means of Christian formation.³²

Bauer and Traina affirm that there is both unity and diversity among the many books in the Canon of Scripture. The fact that there is diversity within the texts of Scripture points to the fact that the Bible is a dialectical interplay between the human authors and divine inspiration. Bauer and Traina emphasize that recognizing the Canon of Scripture is important in seeing how the relationship of the individual books of the Bible relate to one another and point to the authority and inspiration of Scripture. Giving priority to the Canon of Scripture as the rule and norm of Christian theology helps restrict excessive interpretative anarchy and doctrinal chaos. Making the Canon of Scripture the primary source, norm, and authority does not exclude church tradition, other sources of knowing, or human experience. Giving priority to the Canon of Scripture also does not preclude one from using such methods of study as source, form, or redaction criticism. Bauer and Traina acknowledge that these methods can make valuable contributions but are limited because they move “behind the final form of the text” and create “certain tensions” because, “For its part, *historical criticism* presents alternative narratives that necessarily differ from those the biblical writers presented to the implied readers in the biblical text.”³³ While prioritizing the Canon of Scripture as the primary

³² David R. Bauer and Robert A. Traina, *Inductive Bible Study: A Comprehensive Guide to the Practice of Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 66.

³³ Bauer and Traina, *Inductive Bible Study*, 396.

source, norm, and authority of Christian theology will not halt excessive interpretative anarchy and doctrinal chaos within our pluralistic age, it provides a rule and measure by which to assess and evaluate the plethora of interpretive and theological proposals on offer today.

Second: The Principle of Inductive Study

Bultmann was right to say that there is no exegesis without presuppositions. However, it is well known that Bultmann himself interpreted Scripture through the grid of Heidegger's existentialist philosophy. IBS forestalls imposing an alien philosophical worldview or a theological system/grid upon the text of Scripture because it is based on an *inductive* approach. Bauer and Traina clarify the importance of inductive study by contrasting it with a deductive approach as follows:

The present discussion employs the term *inductive* synonymously with *evidential*: that is, a commitment to the evidence in and around the text so as to allow the evidence to determine our understanding of the meaning of the text, wherever that evidence may lead. *Deduction* is used synonymously with *presuppositional*: that is, a commitment to certain assumptions (whether stated or implicit) that we allow to determine our understanding of the meaning of the text.³⁴

Bauer and Traina note that an inductive approach to interpreting Scripture has two important aspects.

First, the reader needs to possess an openness to accepting what the scriptural text is saying regardless of what are one's personal philosophical assumptions or theological commitments. It is true that no one comes to the biblical text without prior assumptions, commitments, values, experiences, and from some particular tradition that in-

³⁴ Bauer and Traina, *Inductive Bible Study*, 17.

fluences how we read texts. However, this only underscores the importance of the principle of inductive study if we genuinely want to let Scripture speak for itself.

Second, the principle of inductive study refers to a certain process or method of reasoning akin to what one finds in good scientific reasoning. The scientific method works on the principles of induction rather than deduction. A researcher makes observations and forms a preliminary hypothesis. Then, the researcher makes experiments to test if her hypothesis is verified or falsified. Whether a hypothesis is verified or falsified is based upon evidence, valid inferential reasoning, and the best explanation. All along the way, good scientific reasoning is open to more evidence and a commitment to revision if deemed necessary. It allows the evidence to dictate what is true and not the assumptions or presuppositions of the researcher. In the same way, inductive bible study allows the evidence from the text of Scripture to dictate the interpretative and theological conclusions one draws rather than what the reader assumes or presupposes the Scripture to be saying. Bauer and Traina point out that a danger in reading Scripture through our interpretative and theological grids is that we can miss challenging aspects of the biblical message: “the tendency on the part of those in the faith community to uncritically bring their theological assumptions to the reading of the text can dull the sharp and challenging message that biblical passages were originally intended to communicate to the faithful.”³⁵ In this way, the principle of inductive study mitigates against interpretative anarchy and doctrinal chaos. It also restricts from the start the impulse to impose a philosophical system or theological grid upon the text of Scripture. While we do not come to the text of Scripture as “blank slates,” the inductive approach urges interpreters to avoid foisting their systems and beliefs upon the text so that Scripture may speak for itself.

³⁵ Bauer and Traina, *Inductive Bible Study*, 382.

Third: The Principle of Literary Context

In addition to imposing a philosophical or theological system or grid upon the text of Scripture, there is also a tendency among theologians and biblical interpreters to read Scripture selectively to justify a doctrine or interpretation that one has already come to affirm. This is not only a problem with scholars. Having taught theology for 20 years or so, I have met many students who use the Bible selectively to back up what their ecclesial tradition, pastor, or family taught them to believe. When asked to justify why they interpret a passage of Scripture a certain way or believe a particular doctrine to be true, many students simply say, “That’s what I was taught to believe growing up.” In fact, many of them do not even know that there are interpretations or theological positions other than the ones they have learned. Scot McKnight relates a similar observation from his ministry experience:

What I learned was an uncomfortable but incredibly intriguing truth: Every one of us adopts the Bible and (at the same time) adapts the Bible to our culture. In less-appreciated terms, I’ll put it this way: Everyone picks and chooses.... We pick and choose. (It’s easier for us to hear ‘we adopt and adapt,’ but the two expressions amount to the same thing.)³⁶

To mitigate against reading the Bible any way we want and picking and choosing what we want to believe by selectively reading and citing Scriptures that support our cherished views, Bauer and Traina maintain the principle of literary context. This principle asserts that interpreters should study Scripture as books-as-wholes since the biblical writers constructed and planned them as such. An example of this would be determining the meaning of “faith” and “works” as used by Paul and the Book of James. Both cite Genesis 15:6 to talk about the relation of

³⁶ Scot McKnight, *The Blue Parakeet: Rethinking How You Read the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 13.

faith and works but the meaning of “faith” and “works” in Paul and the Book of James can only be determined by how each author uses these terms in their books as a whole. This is related to the principle of compositional study of Scripture:

The study of the Bible ought to be compositional study. This principle derives from the previous claim, namely, that the Bible is a collection of discrete books, and as such, individual passages must be interpreted in light of their literary context, which is to be understood finally as the context of the book-as-a-whole.³⁷

To quote one of my former teachers at Asbury Theological Seminary, Robert W. Lyon, “Context is Everything.” This dictum ought to guide and direct how we determine the meaning of words and concepts within Scripture. The meaning of a word, phrase, or sentence derives from the immediate context that precedes and follows that word, phrase, or sentence. Likewise, the meaning of sentences or verses derives from the paragraphs and larger units and sections of the book and extends to the context of the book-as-a-whole. This principle applies to reading the whole Canon of Scripture together so that Scripture can truly help interpret Scripture. The principle of observing and interpreting words, phrases, sentences, and paragraphs in the literary context of larger units, sections, and books-as-wholes correlated with all the other books-as-wholes within the Canon of Scripture allows the reader to follow the thought-flow of the biblical author and forces the interpreter to deal with the whole Bible and not just the parts that happen to support their particular theological interests or preferences.

Fourth: The Principle of Correlation

The principle of correlation also helps to mitigate against our tendency

³⁷ Bauer and Traina, *Inductive Bible Study*, 64.

to pick and choose verses or passages of Scripture that selectively support our theological systems or ecclesial traditions. Correlation comes after we have observed, interpreted, evaluated, and appropriated the text of Scripture. Bauer and Traina explain that: “Correlation is the process of bringing together, or synthesizing, the interpretation (and appropriation) of individual passages so as to arrive at the meaning of larger units of biblical material.”³⁸ Correlation happens at two levels, literary and canonical. Correlation at the literary level functions to formulate a biblical theology of an author’s writings, such as Paul or John, or to develop theological themes found within an author’s writings as a whole. Canonical correlation is looking at correlation of theological themes within individual books or the canon as a whole. Bauer and Traina point out that correlation involves recognizing both the unity and discontinuity of theological viewpoints within Scripture.

Because there is unity and discontinuity of theology within Scripture itself, it is no wonder that biblical interpreters arrive at different theological conclusions. Some, like Brueggemann, despair of finding a unified biblical theology. By contrast, Bauer and Traina think that a correlation of biblical theology, while difficult, is an important task. It is difficult because it is complex due to the work it takes to pull together all the individual passages of Scripture and relate them into a coherent whole. Since there are no fixed rules on how to do this, the process is open to the subjective judgments of interpreters. Yet, despite the dangers, Bauer and Traina contend,

[C]orrelation is not finally a matter of subjective individual judgments because correlation focuses on the objective data of the text. Like all phases of induction, correlation is transjective: it includes both objective and subjective aspects working together. Thus, the process of correlation, which leads to biblical theology, is possible, but it may not be easy.³⁹

³⁸ Bauer and Traina, *Inductive Bible Study*, 337.

³⁹ Bauer and Traina, *Inductive Bible Study*, 341.

In addition, the principle of the Canon of Scripture assumes that interpreters do not read individual passages or books of the Bible in isolation from one another but rather as a whole. Those who emphasize the discontinuity of biblical theology exaggerate the situation. It is evident that Scripture is not univocal on such matters as the practice of sacrifice, or kingship in Israel, or the status of the Temple. There is also a tension between the violent acts of Yahweh in the OT and the enemy-loving, cheek-turning nonviolence revealed in Jesus's life and teaching. Furthermore, there is room for various interpretations of how God acts in the world, the nature of the atonement, the nature and extent of justification and sanctification, how to govern the Church, what happens to those who have never heard the gospel, the duration of hell, and a host of other disputed theological issues. However, there are theological themes at the metanarrative level of Scripture that are univocal, such as: God is the one sole creator, humanity was created glorious but is now fallen, God became incarnate to redeem the world, Jesus was in some way both divine and human, God is somehow both one nature and three persons, the cross of Jesus somehow reconciles us to God, Jesus was raised from the dead, the Holy Spirit awakens, regenerates, and sanctifies those who believe, Christ is coming again, and there will be a new heaven and a new earth at the consummation of human history. If we stay at the metanarrative level of Scripture, there is a more unified biblical theology. The more we get into the weeds of exegeting specific passages that have nothing to do with the metanarrative of Scriptural themes, the more likely we are to have interpretative anarchy and doctrinal chaos.

Fifth: The Principle of Communal Study

Vanhoozer contends that his vision of Mere Protestant Christianity is not a call to uniformity in interpretation, church, or theology. Rather, what he envisions is “a kind of Pentecostal plurality” likening it to the Spirit's outpouring on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2). Everyone was testifying about the “wonders of God” but they did so in their own

linguistic forms and languages. Vanhoozer affirms a unity of the gospel without a uniformity in interpretation or theology. He explains,

[T]he various Protestant streams testify to Jesus in their own vocabularies, and it takes many languages (i.e., interpretative traditions) to minister to the meaning of God’s Word and the fullness of Christ. As the body is made up of many members, so many interpretations may be needed to do justice to the body of the biblical text. Why else are there four Gospels, but that the one story of Jesus was too rich to be told from one perspective only? Could it be that various Protestant traditions function similarly as witnesses who testify to the same Jesus from different situations and perspectives? Perhaps we can put it like this: each Protestant church seeks to be faithful to the gospel, but no one form of Protestantism exhausts the gospels’ meaning.⁴⁰

I noted earlier that Vanhoozer proposes that the Reformation’s five *solas* should serve as interpretative guides while reading Scripture and that churches should engage in interdenominational conferencing as a check on “communal interpretative egoism” and interpretative anarchy.

Bauer and Traina also acknowledge that biblical passages can legitimately be interpreted in various ways since,

No passage, understood in its context, can mean just anything; a passage that means anything means nothing. The recognition of boundaries of plausible interpretations points to the fact that all passages are determinate: they have determinacy. But within those boundaries is always some range of more specific construals. The recognition of a range of plausible interpretations points to the fact that all passages are somewhat indeterminate or have some indeterminacy.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Vanhoozer, *Biblical Authority*, 223–24.

⁴¹ Bauer and Traina, *Inductive Bible Study*, 59.

So, not only do individuals interpret the Bible in several ways but the Bible itself invites a certain amount of diversity.

For this reason, Bauer and Traina think it is important not only to read the Bible individually but also in a community of interpreters. The community of interpreters have a vital role to play in assessing and evaluating both the process of biblical interpretation and the conclusions drawn from biblical study. Through dialogue with other interpreters, one can not only assess their observations, interpretations, and applications, but one can also self-evaluate one's own work in this same regard. This critical dialogue and assessment performed in community using the IBS method and hermeneutics discourages the unbridled reading the text and reveals ways that we might impose alien ideas or systems of thought upon our interpretation of Scripture. In addition, conferencing within a community of interpreters may shed new light on one's own observations, interpretations, and how we might apply the text today.

Bauer and Traina contend that we should not restrict the community of interpreters to scholars. Instead, they think that "we can learn a great deal about the meaning of biblical passages by examining how these passages have been used in a broad range of forms, for example, in poetry, hymnody, liturgy, paintings, or fiction."⁴² It should be added that the community of interpreters not only includes scholars living today, but also the vast number of biblical commentators throughout Church history. The community of interpreters might also include the canons of faith heralded by Canonical Theists, i.e., creeds, liturgies, bishops, saints, theologians, Church councils, icons, and architecture. In any case, the principle of communal study is essential to mitigating against excessive interpretative anarchy and doctrinal chaos. The IBS method and hermeneutical principles employed within the community of interpreters could function as part of a central legitimating authority that guides and assesses how we observe, interpret, and apply Scripture in the present pluralistic age.

⁴² Bauer and Traina, *Inductive Bible Study*, 61.

Conclusion

It is the central claim of this essay that the method of Inductive Bible Study (IBS) and hermeneutical principles associated with it may help to mitigate against excessive interpretative anarchy and doctrinal chaos in the present pluralist age. It also challenges the practice of foisting a foreign philosophical system or alien theological grid upon the biblical text. While the ISB method and principles do not settle specific doctrinal disputes and are limited in the task of reigning in doctrinal chaos, they do contribute to helping bridge the gap between Biblical Studies and the study of theology.