

AN INTERPRETIVE GRID FOR STUDYING SCRIPTURE AND SHAPING THEOLOGY

OVERVIEW

According to Our Shared Story, which is DCC's Statement of Belief,

We believe that God, through His Spirit, inspired the authors of the Scripture to speak to all generations of men and women. As people of the Bible, it is our perfect and authoritative source for understanding God, one another, ourselves, and our world. As such, we are called to intently study Scripture communally and individually so that, with the leading of the Holy Spirit, we may be faithful to understand and live out its teachings in our lives as a community.

This statement reflects our belief that the study of the Bible, the formation of theology, must have influence on the way that we live and function in our world today. Paraphrasing the words of Stanley Grenz and John Franke from their book *Beyond Foundationalism*,

*Theology is a second-order ongoing contextual discipline that engages in critical reflection on the faith, life, and practices of the Christian community. Its job is to articulate biblical normed, historically informed, and culturally relevant models of Christian belief for the purpose of assisting the Christian community to live as the people of God in a particular social-historical context in which they are situated.*¹

This statement recognizes the following:

- Theology will always recognize Scripture as its primary source, that being the Bible as first-order. Theology is therefore, second-order. Theology is the human interpretation, human reflection, and human understanding of the stories contained within biblical text, making it a second-order, an interpretive effort.
- Theology is on-going, in that it is constantly being understood and reformed according to the reader's context. We recognize that the God revealed in the Bible does not change, the context in which we seek to live this out does change. As such, we believe, that Christian Theology is a Pilgrim Theology² – a discipline that is best represented by the metaphor of a journey rather than a destination.
- Theology is not simply statements about the meaning of the biblical narrative; rather it is engagement with the narrative, articulation of the content *and* implications of the Scriptures, and, most importantly, it assists the Body of Christ to live out its calling in a particular culture and setting.

It is within this framework that the Elders of DCC have set out an Interpretive Grid, attempting to provide a framework for shaping theology. This grid is meant to cultivate the relevance of theology as a discipline that enables the community of God to understand and live out the story of the Bible in various social and cultural contexts.

¹ Stanley Grenz and John Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Post-Modern Context* (Louisville, KY, Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 16.

² Michael Bauman, *Pilgrim Theology: Taking the Path of Theological Discovery* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1992).

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE DCC INTERPRETIVE GRID

SCRIPTURE

We believe the Bible is authoritative, because it is the instrument through which God speaks to his people. The Bible simply points people to the authority of the Triune God. We affirm, “The supreme judge by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture.”³

Therefore, Scripture must be the primary voice in the shaping of theology as it is perfectly suited “so that all God's people may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”⁴ As we interact with all matters of life, faith, and doctrine, we must allow for the Scripture to be the standard that informs our understanding and our norms. We do this with a great amount of humility, recognizing that we must allow the Spirit to speak to us.

A question that often arises regarding this is, “Can’t anyone have an interpretation and claim that the Spirit spoke to them?” To answer this, we seek understanding of the second, third and fourth pieces of our grid: tradition, community, and context. These pieces will guide us in all of our interpretations of the Bible.

TRADITION

The Tradition of the Church is our story. It tells us from where we have come and points toward where we are going. It gives us an identity and a purpose. We cannot confuse our “traditions” with “Tradition”. Traditions are little things particular to a local church that make them unique.⁵ By “Tradition,” we mean the Tradition of the Church of Jesus Christ. This 2,000 year-old Tradition is both ancient and future. Tradition, simply put, is the attempt of the Christian community to be faithful to the core of the Christian faith in light of the faith community, Scripture, and culture.⁶

Tradition serves to guide us as we continue to build, grow, discover, and live as the embodiment of Christ in our world. Tradition gives us an understanding of how to apply, interpret, and live out the narrative found in the Bible.⁷ While Scripture is our authority, Tradition is one of the lenses through which we understand the Scripture in our world.

COMMUNITY

The people of God are called to be a people who live together in community, in reflection of our God who exists in community.⁸ This reflection of God must happen in all parts of our life, including the study of Scripture and the formation of theology.

³ Westminster Confession of Faith, 1.10

⁴ 2 Timothy 3.16 (TNIV©)

⁵ For more on this idea see *The Church on the Other Side* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 53-63.

⁶ Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 118.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 120

⁸ From the DCC Statement of Belief, “God, the Creator of all things, has always existed and will always exist, as One God in communal relationship with himself. This relationship is expressed in three persons - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This One God created all men and women in His image. With this identity we are created to live in communal relationship with God, others, our self, and all creation. All humanity longs for this deep connectedness that can only be found within the community that exists perfectly in Him.”

As we listen to the Spirit of God speak through Scripture we must do so not only as individuals but also as a community.⁹ We articulate and form theology in light of how the community should live and function and how an individual should live within the community of God. The task of theology is to enable the community of God to understand and live out their calling, in response to the call placed on us to be the embodiment of Jesus in our world.

CONTEXT

Each biblical author was writing in a particular time and culture. They used idiomatic language from their day that was common speech among their people. They used personal experience to relate the truth of God that we find in Scripture.¹⁰ To remove the human context and content from the Bible can confuse the meaning of Scripture. “If Jesus were to blink into existence as a full-grown man, with no mother Mary, no belly button, no step-father Joseph, no cousin John, no Aunt Elizabeth, no second-temple Judaic culture, no context of the Roman Empire in the background with its thrones and swords and crosses,” He may make little sense to us today.¹¹

In engaging the meaning of the Scripture we must be historically informed. This involves understanding, as best we can, what the language meant in its original context, what the cultural norms were when the text was written, and understanding the political, social, and historical situation of the author and the original readers.

ESCHATOLOGY

Eschatology is simply the doctrine of “last things.” From the beginning to the end, Christianity is focused on Eschatology. It is always hopeful, rooted in looking forward, moving forward, and thereby revolutionizing our understanding of the present reality in which we live. Eschatology is not merely an element of Christian theology, but “it is the medium of Christian faith, as such, the key in which everything is set, the glow that suffuses everything here in the dawn of an expected day.”¹²

Eschatology is simply a theology with reference to “last things.” We live each day with the “hope that Jesus will return to us and restore all things to Himself to the glory of God the Father.”¹³ We understand that while Eschatology does refer to certain events in the future yet to happen, it is also a way of orienting our theology or our way of living. As such, we have given our lives to living out that future reality now.¹⁴ As we shape theology we must ask, “How does our understanding of last things, cause us to think about the way we should live as the people of God in our particular social-historical context in which we are situated?”

CULTURE

The community of God is called to live out the good news of Jesus Christ in all parts of our lives to the glory of God the Father. This is our goal in shaping theology. Theology must never stop at understanding rather *theology must always lead the people of God to live out the teaching of the*

⁹ The Rabbis point out that the greatest danger to the community is hypocrisy, not heresy. They say this because they study in community. Heresy begins when one person studies alone. Some believe that when Jesus said, “Where two or three are gathered ...” was an idiom that referred to study, not prayer.

¹⁰ For a humorous example of this, see when Paul thinks he is out of his mind for “writing like this” in 2 Corinthians 11.21-23

¹¹ Brian McLaren, *Generous Orthodoxy*, (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2004), 162.

¹² Jurgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, trans. James Leitch (New York, Harper & Row, 1967), 16.

¹³ DCC Statement of Belief

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

Scriptures. This is a constant discipline. Our job is to live out the orthodox truths of Scripture that do not change in the midst of a culture where norms and expectations are always fluctuating.

Our task then is then to understand our specific context and culture. We must do this through observing prevailing culture as participants in the community of God. Asking informed questions about what we observe to better understand assumptions, beliefs, and meaning implicit and explicit in culture. We do this so that we can gain understanding as to why our world lives and believes the way it does. Finally we must respond to culture, by living within it, engaging it with the good news in natural ways, so that we can live as the full, relevant, embodiment of Jesus in our world.¹⁵

¹⁵ Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 160