

On the Present Possibility of *Sola Scriptura*

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Abstract: The historic Protestant wager that Christian theology is funded and governed *sola scriptura sui ipsius interpres* commits Protestant exegesis and theology to a particular hermeneutical programme. But is this programme viable? I argue that it is, and that it should be undertaken today by practising the theological interpretation of Scripture as a particular kind of *Sachkritik*: one that seeks the evangelical *scopus scripturae* in and across the variegated contours of the whole of the canon of Scripture, acknowledging both that it is all ‘letter’ and that precisely as ‘letter’ it is also the elected site of the adventitious self-disclosure of Word and Spirit.

Introduction

In its sixteenth-century polemical aspect, the Protestant assertion that Christian faith, life and doctrine ought to be governed *sola scriptura* insisted upon a proper (re-)ordering of the sources of authority within the Christian church. In the contest of the times, this claim inevitably acquired a defensive, apologetic quality as an authorizing appeal to the ultimate grounds for reforms in doctrine, worship and discipline. Perhaps of more lasting theological interest, however, is the positive unfolding of its implicates and entailments. Confession of Scripture’s status as *norma normas non normata* brings with it the assertion of both its

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self-authenticating (*autopistis*) and so also self-interpreting character.¹ In Martin Luther's famous formulation: 'The meaning of Scripture is, in and of itself, so certain, accessible, and clear that Scripture interprets itself and tests, judges, and illuminates everything else'.² *Sacra scriptura sui ipsius interpres* ('Holy Scripture interprets itself') – the axiom that gives distilled expression to these analytic judgements – thus commits Protestant exegesis and theology to a quite particular and dynamic hermeneutical programme.³ As Oda Wischmeyer has recently observed, 'under the rubric of *sacra scriptura sui ipsius interpres* we [must] think as hermeneuts' for the axiom 'frees non-authoritative interpretation to follow a path that is not marked out for it in advance' by historic teaching or religious authorities.⁴

The precise direction and shape – let alone viability and validity – of this hermeneutical programme are scarcely self-evident some fifty years after Pannenberg decisively diagnosed the 'crisis of the Scripture principle'.⁵ Three distinct lines of criticism advanced by contemporary scholars can serve to represent recurrent concerns.⁶ First, Stanley Hauerwas has famously suggested that this programme is at once ecclesiological anaemic and deeply corrosive. As he put it in one memorable formulation:

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- 1 Henk van den Belt, *The Authority of Scripture in Reformed Theology: Truth and Trust* (Leiden: Brill, 2008) offers an instructive historical account of the career of the concept of Scripture as *autopistis* in Reformed doctrine and its theological significance.
 - 2 Martin Luther, *D. Martin Luthers Werke: kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Weimar: Hermann Böhlaus Nachfolger, 1883–2009), vol. 7, p. 97, col. 23–4: 'hoc est, ut sit ipsa per sese certissima, facillima, apertissima, sui ipsius interpres, omnium omnia probans, iudicans et illuminans' [*Assertion against the Bull*, 1520]; cited by Martin Lohse, *Martin Luther: An Introduction to His Life and Work*, trans. R.C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), p. 157. Luther ends the statement by citing Ps. 119:130: 'The unfolding of thy words gives light; it imparts understanding to the simple'.
 - 3 That this nest of claims advances 'a quite different hermeneutical model' than those which preceded it is argued briefly but with typical vigour by Gerhard Forde, 'Scriptura sacra sui ipsius interpres', in M.C. Mattes and S.D. Paulson, eds., *A More Radical Gospel: Essays on Eschatology, Authority, Atonement, and Ecumenism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), p. 70.
 - 4 Oda Wischmeyer, 'Sola scriptura, claritas scripturae und sacra scriptura sui ipsius interpres: Kritische Überlegungen aus exegetischer und hermeneutischer Sicht', *Zeitschrift für Neues Testament*, Heft 39/40 (2017), p. 241 (translation mine).
 - 5 Wolfhart Pannenberg, 'The Crisis of the Scripture Principle', in *Basic Questions in Theology*, vol. 1, trans. G.H. Kehm (London: SCM Press, 1970), pp. 1–14.
 - 6 Criticism of *sola scriptura* and its entailments can, of course, be advanced from various directions, see, for example, Henk van den Belt, 'Sola Scriptura: An Inadequate Slogan for the Authority of Scripture', *Calvin Theological Journal* 51 (2016), pp. 204–26, for a vigorous articulation of a number of more specifically 'in-house' Reformed worries.

When *sola scriptura* is used to underwrite the distinction between text and interpretation, then it seems clear to me that *sola scriptura* is a heresy rather than a help in the Church. When this distinction persists, *sola scriptura* becomes the seedbed of fundamentalism, as well as biblical criticism. It assumes that the text of the Scripture makes sense separate from a Church that gives it sense.⁷

To insist that the Bible is ‘the church’s book’ and that its quality, function and interpretation cannot be rightly understood outwith an ecclesiological framework has become a hallmark of much contemporary theological interpretation of Scripture. The most vigorous Protestant efforts to embed the Bible firmly within ‘a “sociology” and “politiology” of church practices’ run close to affirming traditional Catholic judgements of the formal insufficiency of Scripture.⁸

A second line of criticism is forcefully represented in historian Brad Gregory’s widely read work, *The Unintended Reformation*. Gregory argues that Protestant insistence on the principle of *sola scriptura* when ‘combined with the vast range of countervailing ways in which the Bible was interpreted and applied’ produced a ‘pattern of fissiparous disagreement’ that constitutes ‘the most important, distant historical source of Western hyper-pluralism’ concerning

7 Stanley Hauerwas, ‘Stanley Fish, the Pope, and the Bible’, in *Unleashing the Scripture: Freeing the Bible from Captivity to America* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993), p. 27. Cf. Robert P. Carroll, *Wolf in the Sheepfold: The Bible as Problematic for Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1997), p. 70: ‘It seems to me to be the outstanding Protestant heresy of the Reformation that it elevated the Bible to a position of authority that it had never had before the sixteenth century’.

8 So, Reinhard Hütter, *Suffering Divine Things: Theology as Church Practice* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), p. 66. Hütter himself was subsequently led along such lines to embrace the ‘divine and catholic faith’ comprehending, as the First Vatican Council teaches in chapter 3 of *Dei Filius*, ‘all those things . . . contained in the word of God as found in scripture and tradition, and which are proposed by the church as matters to be believed as divinely revealed, whether by her solemn judgment or in her ordinary and universal magisterium’. See Reinhard Hütter, ‘Relinquishing the Principle of Private Judgment in Matters of Divine Truth: A Protestant Theologian’s Journey into the Catholic Church’, *Nova et Vetera* 9 (2011), p. 866. For representative discussion see Angus Paddison, *Scripture: A Very Theological Proposal* (London: T&T Clark, 2009). It is interesting to note that critical concerns about the possible hypertrophy of the church in such hermeneutical proposals were already a subject of comment in key texts from the early years of the current movement, for example: Francis Watson, *Text, Church, and World: Biblical Interpretation in Theological Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994).

fundamental ‘life questions’ and so also of the secularization of modern public life and discourse.⁹ The forfeiture of traditioned and institutionally embodied religious authority and the manifest inability of the actual practice of Protestant hermeneutics to generate widely agreed readings set in train centrifugal forces which, it is suggested, dissolved the religious coherence of Christendom and much else besides.

Third, Dutch theologian Maarten Wisse has recently argued that the axiom *sacra scriptura sui ipsius interpres* obscures the role played by the selectivity and subjectivity of the interpreter in theological work: its invocation allows exegetes and theologians effectively to dodge responsibility to account for the reasoning involved in the doctrinal and interpretative decisions that shape their self-styled ‘biblical’ positions; in this way, as he says, it ‘makes theologians lazy’ and ‘provides ready cover for ‘religious power games’.¹⁰ We might understand this claim as a specific – and suspicious – application of David Kelsey’s insight that all appeals to the ‘authority of Scripture’ trade on a prior and generally inexplicit construals of ‘Scripture’ as such, and so always involve tacit theological judgements and decisions.¹¹ Wisse’s worries

9 Brad Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), pp. 91–2. His discussion of this theme concludes, pp. 109–10:

Protestants disagreed among themselves on multiple fronts. They disagreed about the meaning and prioritization of biblical texts, and the relationship of those texts to doctrines regarding the sacraments, worship, grace, the church, and so forth. They disagreed about the broad interpretative principles that ought to guide the understanding of scripture, such as the relationship between the Old and New Testaments or the permissibility of religious practices not explicitly prohibited or enjoined in the Bible. They disagreed about the relationship among the interpretation of scripture, the exercise of reason, and God’s influence in the hearts of individual Christians. And they disagreed about whether (and if so, to what extent) explicit, substantive truth claims were even important to being a Christian, with some spiritualists and alleged prophets radically relativizing the place of doctrines in Christian life. The net result was an unintended Protestant doctrinal and social pluralism, as the number, range, and character of the truth claims asserted and lived by protagonists within communities of belief remained indefinitely open-ended.

10 Maarten Wisse, ‘Contra et Pro Sola Scriptura’, in H. Burger, A. Huijgen and E. Peels, eds., *Sola Scriptura: Biblical and Theological Perspectives on Scripture, Authority, and Hermeneutics* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), pp. 19–37.

11 David Kelsey, *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1975), esp. pp. 89–91, 167–70. Cf. the idea of a ‘canonical construal’ of Scripture in Charles Wood, *The Formation of Christian Understanding: An Essay in Theological Hermeneutics* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981), p. 82.

could and should also be augmented with specific ideological critiques of the socially and politically pernicious uses to which a supposedly ‘self-interpreting Scripture’ has been put.¹²

In the face of such charges – incoherence, ideological obfuscation, fissiparousness and corrosive plurality, intellectual dishonesty and even heresy – the odds might seem very long indeed for the wager that Christian faith and theology can and must be undertaken on the basis of Scripture alone. Nevertheless, in what follows I want to propose that one might yet be able to inhabit this hermeneutical programme to good effect. By the very nature of the case, as we shall see, we cannot secure the necessity but only the *possibility* of doing so. The proposal is that the historic Protestant wager that Christian faith and theology are established and governed *sola scriptura sui ipsius interpres* – by ‘Scripture alone as it interprets itself’ – authorizes and requires the practice of a kind of theological *Sachkritik*. In this, it commits to a way of living and thinking from, with, and before Scripture which is sufficient for faith. If what Paul called ‘the gospel of God’ (1 Thes. 2:2; Rom. 1:1) is the material centre [*Sache*] of the New Testament witness, then it must serve as the discrimen of a Christian construal and reading of the Scriptures as a whole. The creaturely service and disservice of the biblical records *qua* Scripture will be appreciated and discerned with primary reference to their vital relation to this material centre. As we shall see, the *Sache* itself sets up a dynamic, even dialectical, relationship with the biblical records which proves decisive. This view, I suggest, makes sustained argument concerning the *Sache* of the biblical witness and its interpretation the proper and primary business of Protestant dogmatics, its ‘first theology’ as it were.¹³ As a particular performance of the Protestant hermeneutical programme, it may also afford some traction upon the criticisms just surveyed by clarifying the relation of Scripture and church, underwriting the properly provisional hearing of the gospel, and enjoining critical scrutiny – and self-scrutiny – of all our hermeneutical judgements and achievements.

Scopus, Sache and Scripture

In Protestant approaches to the question of the self-authentication and self-interpretation of Holy Scripture, the substantive message of the biblical

12 See, concisely, for example, Lisa Isherwood, ‘Gathering Gifts Under Gunfire: A Feminist Use of Scripture’, in Angus Paddison, ed., *Theologians on Scripture* (London: T&T Clark, 2016), pp. 119–32. James Cone, ‘Biblical Revelation and Social Existence’, *Interpretation* 28 (1974), pp. 438–40, programmatically states the critical hermeneutical principles of the Black Theology to which he made such formative contributions.

13 See Kevin Vanhoozer, *First Theology: God, Scripture & Hermeneutics* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2002).

record ‘play[s] a decisive role from the beginning’.¹⁴ As Brevard Childs explains,

the priority of scripture over church tradition arose from the conviction that the object of the witness, namely God’s revelation in Jesus Christ, provided the critical norm by which to test the truth of its reception. God himself testified to its truth by inspiring both the authors and readers of the sacred writings.¹⁵

In other words, questions concerning the nature, meaning and authority of Scripture are first and always *material* questions about the determinative object to which it gives witness; formal questions like those concerning the canonical list, that is, the institutionally recognized bounds of the authoritative textual record, are properly derivative. Asking and answering these material questions has meant searching for the substantive *scopus scripturae*, that is, the orienting centre, focus, fundamental thrust and direction of – and so heuristic key, to – the scriptural record.¹⁶ But, as Child’s remarks also suggest, the *scopus* must not only be specified and substantiated, but also, crucially, it must be *activated*, that is, be put into motion as the living principle of the hearing and understanding of Scripture by a testifying and inspiring work of the living God. For this reason, the axiom, *sacra scriptura sui ipsius interpres*, is fundamentally misunderstood if taken as ‘an argument for internal interpretation in the sense of a concordance-method’ or for formalistic approaches to the biblical text as a self-contained and self-referential aesthetic

14 G.C. Berkouwer, *Holy Scripture*, trans. J.B. Rogers (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), p. 80. As David Demson, ‘“Justification by Faith”: The Canonical Principle’, *Toronto Journal of Theology* 2 (1986), p. 68, explains:

There is not only the Gospel, namely the living Jesus Christ, but there is also the canon. The canon is the human proclamation of Jesus by those persons who listened to him and confessed him as he came to them in his ministry and resurrection appearances. The point is, the reformers tell us, that there is a canon, a common pattern of confession. It is precisely this common pattern of confession which the church in faith discerns in a book when she declares it canonical . . . one single confession at the base of the many confessions of Christ we find in Scripture; that is, there is the canon at the base of the historically received canonical collection.

15 And he continues, with the critical observation that ‘Yet, the history of the post-Reformation church also illustrates the weakness of the Reformers’ use of a critical norm and of its insufficiency in practice’. Brevard Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), p. 66.

16 For valuable discussion of this theme and related motifs across the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries see Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2, *Holy Scripture: The Cognitive Foundation of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), pp. 211–21.

object.¹⁷ The dynamics of theological *Sachkritik*, as I hope to suggest, variously involve efforts to honour both the specification and divine activation of the *scopus scripturae*.¹⁸

Modern *Sachkritik* simply designates an approach to the understanding, interpretation and criticism of biblical texts in light of their intended subject matter.¹⁹ Ingredient in all forms of *Sachkritik* is acknowledgement of what Hans Weder calls the ‘externality’ of the subject and defining centre of the scriptural texts.²⁰ It is the interval opened up by this difference – that is, by the *non-identity* of text and subject matter – that animates any and all such approaches. Of course, the nature of the ‘subject matter’ and of the interval between it and the textual record can be and is variously conceived; so too, is the nature of the relation across the interval. Everything of interest turns on these conceptions.

So, for example, modern historical-critical studies espy an interval between the texts and the historical events which lie behind them and require responsible readers to understand and interpret the biblical record accordingly. Similarly, modern knowledge of geography, biology, astronomy, as well as the working of social ideologies, discern differences between texts and the actual world to which they relate; good interpretations understand and criticize the texts in light of their distance from and relation to that actual world. Such ‘cold *Sachkritik*’ (as Weder styles it), takes the intended subject matter of the texts to be the world of time and space that we ourselves know and in which, like us, the biblical authors also lived and wrote.²¹ This construal of the *Sache*

17 Oswald Bayer, ‘Hermeneutical Theology’, in P. Pokorny and J. Roskovec, eds. *Philosophical Hermeneutics and Biblical Exegesis* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002), p. 119. Francis Watson contends at length against the latter throughout *Text, Church, and World: Biblical Interpretation in Theological Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), see p. 60 for example.

18 Here I echo the central concern of John Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) that the question of Scripture and its reading be asked and answered with decisive reference to the economy of divine grace, that is, ‘divine activation’ as I have styled it here.

19 For detailed discussion of the term and its history see Robert Morgan, ‘*Sachkritik* in Reception History’, *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 32 (2010), pp. 175–90, and also Robert Morgan, ‘Thiselton on Bultmann’s *Sachkritik*’, in S.C. Porter and M. Malcolm, eds., *Horizons in Hermeneutics: A Festschrift in Honour of Anthony C. Thiselton* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), pp. 32–50.

20 Hans Weder, ‘Die Externität der Mitte: Überlegungen zum hermeneutischen Problem des Kriteriums der Sachkritik am Neuen Testament’, in C. Landmesser, H.-J. Eckstein and H. Lichtenberger, eds., *Jesus Christ als der Mitte der Schrift: Studien zur Hermeneutik des Evangeliums* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1997), pp. 291–320.

21 Weder, ‘Die Externität der Mitte’, p. 299, speaks of these as forms of *kalten Sachkritik*. Ernst Troeltsch articulates the kinds of intellectual operations such ‘coldly critical’ approaches admit and require in his classic essay, ‘On the Historical and Dogmatic Methods in Theology’ in D. Sarisky, ed., *Theology, History, and Biblical Interpretation: Modern Readings* (London: T&T Clark, 2015), pp. 89–108.

of the texts and our independent access to it are crucial to opening up the interval between text and historical (or other) truth, to adjudicating how it ought to figure in our interpretations, and to ‘cooling’ our relationship to it as readers.

Yet, when we think of *Sachkritik* we generally have in mind not historical-critical approaches but other explicitly *theological* interpretations of scripture, that is, ‘a quite different kind of *Sachkritik* to which the interpreter is forced not by modernity but by the New Testament texts themselves’, in an effort to negotiate tensions arising from the diversity – even ‘fundamental contradictions’ – of the textual record.²² We might style such approaches ‘hot *Sachkritik*’, because they variously identify and expose themselves to the theological subject matter and religious truth claims of the texts in ways that implicate interpreters and put them ‘at issue’ in some sense.²³ There are no doubt, as Robert Morgan has argued, more ‘conservative’ approaches of this kind that restrict themselves to interrogating specific texts ‘in the light of a sense of Scripture as a whole’, as well as other more radical approaches that press to challenge the textual record ‘in light of the interpreter’s understanding of the gospel’ itself.²⁴ Yet common to all variations is acknowledgment that there is no access to the *Sache* other than that afforded by the textual record and its mediation of it. Bultmann paradigmatically explains that ‘the objective criterion called for in objective exegesis [*Sachexegese*] can establish its standard only through the object opened up by the text, over which it has no prior control’ and so it stands ‘in a particularly ambiguous and even contradictory situation since it comes to what is meant only through what is said, and yet measures what is said by what is meant’.²⁵

We might think – somewhat over-schematically – of three basic forms in which the business of *Sachkritik* is conceived and undertaken.

In the first form, individual texts are read in relation to the totality of Scripture whose complete message is properly identified with the *Sache*. Here

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- 22 Hans Weder, ‘*Sachkritik* as a Fundamental Device for Theological Interpretation’ in W.M. Alston, Jr and M. Welker, eds., *Reformed Theology. Identity and Ecumenicity II: Biblical Interpretation in the Reformed Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), pp. 436–7. He takes the conflicting understanding of God in 1 Jn 4:8 and Rev. 19:11–15 as a worked example of this tension. Cf. Weder, ‘Die Externität der Mitte’, pp. 300–301.
- 23 Bayer, ‘Hermeneutical Theology’, p. 118, writes of how under the rubric of *sacra scriptura sui ipsius interpres* the biblical text is ‘not interpreted by me. Rather it is capable of interpreting itself, in that it interprets me, inscribes and judges my life history so that the God who is identical with the author of the Holy Scriptures is the author of my life-history’.
- 24 Robert Morgan, ‘New Testament Theology as Implicit Theological Interpretation of Christian Scripture’, *Interpretation* 70 (2016), p. 386.
- 25 Rudolf Bultmann, ‘Theological Exegesis of the New Testament’, in J.M. Robison, ed., *The Beginnings of Dialectic Theology*, Vol. 1 (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1968), p. 241, where *Sache* / *sachliche* are rendered as ‘object’ / ‘objective’.

the interval between part and whole animates an interpretation that traces the circulation between the two since the whole is only ever mediated by the parts.²⁶ In this line, the concept of the biblical *canon* and its implicates – including important ecclesiological considerations in relation to its formation and the church as primary reading community – becomes uniquely important.²⁷ The hermeneutical concern is well-expressed in Gadamer's observation that

the movement of understanding is constantly from the whole to the part and back to the whole. Our task is to expand the unity of the understood meaning centrifugally. The harmony of all the details with the whole is the criterion of correct understanding. The failure to achieve this harmony means that understanding has failed.²⁸

In the second form, both individual texts and the textual record as a whole are read in relation to a material textual 'core' which is properly identified as the *Sache*. As Hendrikus Berkhof says, 'we do well to distinguish in the canon between center and periphery, and between peaks and plains, without prematurely rejecting the second for the sake of the first'.²⁹ Here it is the interval between the textual record (whole or parts) and the determinative central texts that drives interpretation. In this line, specification of a 'canon within the canon' – texts which are most transparent to the *Sache* or its clearest, most radical exponents – becomes a matter of central hermeneutical importance. Paradigmatic for proposals of this kind is Luther's recommendation of a central subset of New Testament books which 'it is

26 Kornelis H. Miskotte, *Zur biblischen Hermeneutik* (Zollikon: Evangelischer Verlag, 1959), p. 11.

27 For recent discussion, see Peter-Ben Smit, *From Canonical Criticism to Ecumenical Exegesis: A Study in Biblical Hermeneutics* (Leiden: Brill, 2015).

28 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. G. Barden and J. Cumming (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), p. 302. Emphasizing the text as an organic and internally coherent literary whole draws the meaning of the axiom 'Scripture interprets itself' into proximity with the ancient view that 'Homerum ex Homero interpretari': Aristarchus cited in Estathii, *Commentarii ad Homeri Iliadem Pertinentes* (Leiden: Brill, 1987), p. 105, n. 31.

29 Hendrikus Berkhof, *Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Study of the Faith*, trans. S. Woudstra (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), p. 85. He continues: 'No one can inwardly appropriate the whole. But in that awareness, every believer should remain open for new discoveries in passages and lines of thought which thus far had remained strange to him'.

necessary and good for you to know, even though you were never to see or hear any other book or doctrine', books in terms of which all else can we well read.³⁰

In the third form, texts are read in light of an animating distinction drawn between the textual record itself and its intended meaning identified as the *Sache*. Here we run close to the notion of the *scopus* of Scripture, but with a particular strain interjected by associating it with the spirit in Paul's disjunction between 'letter and spirit' (2 Cor. 3:6); so, Bultmann's proposal to prosecute 'criticism of the text *qua* myth in light of the text *qua* kerygma'³¹; so also Käsemann who takes the Protestant commitment to *sola scriptura sui ipsius interpres* to arise precisely from the 'dialectical relationship of Scripture and Gospel' and the 'disturbing tension' set up when the biblical record is 'understood primarily in light of its central content and of the message of which it is the deposit – that is, in the light of the Gospel'.³² In this line, the material determination of 'the kerygma' or 'the gospel' is plainly decisive, as these provide the authority and the measure of authentic understanding of the Scriptures.³³ An emphasis falls upon the *non-identity* of text

30 See Martin Luther, 'Preface to the German Translation of the New Testament' (1522), in J. Dillenberger ed., *Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1961), pp. 18–19:

In a word, St. John's Gospel and his first Epistle, St. Paul's Epistles, especially Romans, Galatians and Ephesians, and St. Peter's first Epistle are the books that show you Christ and teach you all that it is necessary and good for you to know, even though you were never to see or hear any other book or doctrine.

The case of Luther is exhaustively discussed in Walter Mostert, '*Scriptura sacra sui ipsius interpres*: Bermerkungen zum Verständnis der Heiligen Schrift durch Luther', *Lutherjahrbuch* 46 (1979), pp. 60–96 and in connection with contemporary debates in Paul E. Capetz, 'Reformation Heritage and the Question of *Sachkritik*: Theological Criticism of the Bible', *Currents in Theology and Mission* 45 (2018), pp. 41–62.

31 David Congdon, *The Mission of Demythologizing: Rudolf Bultmann's Dialectical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), p. 723.

32 Ernst Käsemann, 'Is the Gospel Objective?', in *Essays on New Testament Themes*, trans. W.J. Montague (London: SCM Press, 1964), p. 55. Käsemann identifies 'canon' and 'gospel' in a sense here, as Demson, "'Justification by Faith": The Canonical Principle', p. 74, observes: 'Käsemann means that those texts are canonical through which the Spirit grants to us life from the dead, victory over demons, and the peace of obedience to Christ'. On Käsemann and *Sachkritik* see Bernard Ehler, *Die Herrschaft des Gekreuzigten. Ernst Käsemanns Frage nach der Mitte der Schrift* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1986), esp. pp. 127–55.

33 Käsemann, 'Is the Gospel Objective?', p. 57. Käsemann goes on to observe that the Protestant doctrine of Scripture recognizes a 'dialectical determination of the relationship of Scripture and Gospel' because while the authority of the Scripture is derived from that of the gospel, the gospel is only encountered in and through the Scriptures and its 'binding relation' to them.

and message despite their inseparability, on the basis that the ‘primitive community is already in part an apprehending, in part a misapprehending, community’, or, as Bultmann says, that ‘there are other spirits speaking besides the *pneuma Christou*’ such that ‘criticism can never be radical enough’.³⁴

These three forms are of course types. Any particular vision of the enterprise of *Sachkritik* and its *discrimen* may involve elements from any of the three (or perhaps a nesting of all three), depending upon how one conceives of the gospel, its relation to particular biblical texts, and the relation of those texts and the gospel to the canonical collection as a whole. We can see something of this complexity and perhaps fill out the picture of the *sachkritische* task further by briefly considering the contribution of Karl Barth. The lively disagreements between Bultmann and Barth concerning *Sachkritik* in the 1920s arise against the backdrop of substantive agreement concerning both the limits of historical interpretation and the necessity of *Sachexegese* as the specific direction in which historical-critical work ought to become ‘even more critical’: both agreed on the central place of *Sachkritik* in theological interpretation, even as they disagreed about the *Sache* itself.³⁵ So, in the preface to the second edition of Barth’s Romans commentary we read that ‘the conversation between the original record and the reader moves around the subject-matter [*Sache*] in the hope that by a ‘relentless elastic application of the “dialectical” method’ it is possible to press through the ‘riddle of the text’ to the ‘enigma of the matter’.³⁶ Indeed, requisite for

34 Ernst Käsemann, ‘The New Testament Canon and the Unity of the Church’, in *Essays on New Testament Themes*, p. 102; Rudolf Bultmann, ‘Karl Barth’s *Epistle to the Romans* in its Second Edition’, in Robinson, *The Beginnings of Dialectical Theology*, vol. 1, p. 120. For an account of this sensibility and its further trajectory, see Willem Maarten Dekker, ‘Hermeneutical Theology as Contemporary Rendition of the *Sola Scriptura*’, in Burger, Huijgen and Peels, *Sola Scriptura*, pp. 105–20, with direct comment on *Sachkritik* on pp. 108–9.

35 See Morgan, ‘*Sachkritik* in Reception History’, pp. 178, 182. In addition to the extensive discussion in Congdon, *The Mission of Demythologizing*, esp. pp. 714–37, see also Christophe Chalamet, *Dialectical Theologians: Wilhelm Herrmann, Karl Barth, and Rudolph Bultmann* (Zürich: TVZ, 2005), esp. pp. 138–45, 200–206, as well as Von Hartwig Thyen, ‘Rudolf Bultmann, Karl Barth, und das Problem der “Sachkritik”’, in B. Jaspert, ed., *Rudolf Bultmanns Werk und Wirkung* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1984), pp. 44–52. For comment on the limits of historical interpretation see Bultmann, ‘The Problem of a Theological Exegesis of the New Testament’, p. 239 and Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. E.C. Hoskyns from the 6th edn (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), p. 8: ‘The critical historian needs to be more critical’. On the meaning of this latter claim, see recent discussion in Martin Westerholm, ‘Barth’s Theology of Scripture in Developmental Perspective’, in B. Rhodes and M. Westerholm, eds., *Freedom Under the Word: Karl Barth’s Theological Exegesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019), pp. 15–19.

36 Barth, *Romans*, pp. 7, 8.

understanding of the biblical text is precisely a perception of the ‘inner dialectic of the matter’ *in* the actual words of the text.³⁷

Barth gives us a particularly suggestive statement of what is involved when he writes that the task of theological interpretation is to see that ‘as far as possible the relation of the words to the Word in the words must be revealed’.³⁸ There are two aspects here: first, the relation of the words of the record to the ‘Word in the words’ of the record; and second, the fact that this relation between words and Word itself occurs and is encountered ‘in the words’, i.e., that it is itself a feature of the record. Both the *Sache* and the relation of the *Sache* to the textual record is mediated by the textual record. No clean triangulation of text and subject matter is thus possible, only patience before the text and a wager on the self-specification and self-activation of the *Sache* upon, in and through the text.

This last point signals a distinct way in which the ‘externality’ of the *Sache* features in Barth’s account. Though the strong emphasis on textual mediation suggests a purely imminent criterion of interpretation, this is only one moment in the dialectic. In the other moment, the young Barth admits a most radical interval between *Sache* and text: taking as his watchword Psalm 115:16 (‘God is in heaven; you, mortal, are on earth’), Barth identifies this interval with the interval between Creator and creature, that ‘infinite qualitative difference’ between God and not-God.³⁹ Responding to criticism from Bultmann, in the preface to the third edition of the commentary Barth clarifies that the infinite interval is opened up not by abstract eternity or deity as such – not just sheer abstract *activation* – but rather by the annihilating concreteness and uniqueness of the ‘Spirit of Christ’, that is, also *specification*: it is the ‘relation between *this* God and *this* human being the relation of *this* human being and *this* God’, he says, that is ‘the theme of the Bible . . .’.⁴⁰

Now this not only threatens to evacuate the words of any capacity for the Word, it actually does so, Barth avers, as ‘the whole is placed under the *KRISIS* of the Spirit of Christ. The whole is *litera*, that is, voices of those other spirits’ such that ‘the question in terms of which the *litera* must be studied is whether the

37 Barth, *Romans*, p.10.

38 My translation of ‘tunlichst weitgehend muß die Beziehung der Wörter auf das Wort in den Wörtern aufgedeckt werden’ in Karl Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922* (Zürich: TVZ, 2015), p. xix. I worry that Hoskyn’s original English rendering, ‘the Word ought to be exposed in the words’ (Barth, *Romans*, p. 8), collapses precisely what is crucially important here.

39 Barth, *Romans*, p. 10.

40 Barth, *Romans*, pp. 17, 10, translation altered.

whole can be understood in relation to the subject matter, which is the voice of the *spiritus (Christi)*.⁴¹

To follow Barth here is, in particular, to call into question our second mode of *Sachkritik*, because it refuses any stability to the contrast between the Spirit of Christ and other spirits as an imminent structural feature of the text, a self-evidently ‘pure canon’ within the otherwise ‘admixed canon’, true letters amidst false letters. As he says, memorably, ‘The Spirit of Christ is not a vantage-point from which constant criticism of Paul – or of anyone else – may be exercised schoolmaster-wise’. And yet, in good dialectical form, we are not thereby led away from or beyond the text as such, but rather forced back to it as the gracious and eventful locus of the living advent of Word and Spirit. The interpreter must admit the deep ambiguity and uncertainty of the situation he or she shares with the biblical writers, and only so proceed with ‘desperate earnestness’ and ‘utter loyalty’ to them, to hear and bring to expression ‘the relation of the words to the Word in the words’.⁴²

This chastened, entirely human positioning and disposition of the interpreter – this mode or manner of thought – before what the elder Barth calls ‘the uniqueness of the prophecy of Jesus Christ’ is more fundamental to the practice of *Sachkritik* than any particular hermeneutical technique.⁴³ Indeed, in Barth’s hands, the radicality of the ‘inner dialectic of the matter’ ultimately renders *Sachkritik* itself an eschatological concept: for the Spirit of Christ is finally the one and only *Sachkritiker*, the only possibility and promise that Scripture might interpret itself, that the words might become the Word, that the Spirit be rightly traced amidst all the spirits’ traces across the textual record. Like the parables of Jesus, the letter of Scripture is everywhere ordinary, everywhere all-too-human, unless and until it is ‘told’ by Word, ministerially commandeered

41 Barth, *Romans*, p. 17, translation altered. Cf. Barth’s later claim that ‘the Word of God can only confront and illuminate man as truth and reality if it is seen to run counter to his whole natural capacity to understand; yet it enables him for this very reason to make it his own’. Karl Barth, ‘Rudolf Bultmann: An Attempt to Understand Him’, in H-W. Bartsch ed., *Kerygma and Myth: A Theological Debate*, vol. 2, trans. R.H. Fuller (London: SPCK, 1962), p. 123. Thinking of the same matter from the other side, J.K.S. Reid, *The Authority of Scripture: A Study of the Reformation and Post-Reformation Understanding of the Bible* (London: Methuen, 1957), p. 278, contended that ‘God marches up and down through the Bible magisterially’, as it were, ‘making His Word come to life at any point throughout its length and breadth’.

42 Barth, *Romans*, p. 19. For Bultmann, because of its dialectical character, *Sachkritik* ‘never establishes universally valid statements as “results”, but always remains in motion’. Hermeneutical recognition of the permanent volatility of the relationship with text and intended meaning serves ‘to guarantee that the concept of revelation does not become a presupposition at the exegete’s disposal’ in any way that would bypass the ‘demand for existential encounter with the reality of which the text speaks’ which is, for Bultmann, the genuine presupposition of interpretation. Bultmann, ‘Theological Exegesis of the New Testament’, p. 255.

43 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 4 vols. in 13 pts., ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956–75) (hereafter *CD*), IV/3.1, p. 95.

and activated by the Spirit. Indeed, Barth himself suggests that the parables are in this sense prototypical of Scripture as such. For they signal the fact that the creaturely can be taken up and transformed by the Creator into true witnesses to the gospel of God, that there can be words in which the Word makes it way.⁴⁴

Some Observations and Upshots

Under the rubric of *sacra scriptura sui ipsius interpres*, Protestant dogmatics conceives of a programme of theological hermeneutics that, when faced with the internal diversity of the New Testament witness and the meaningful interval between its texts and their subject matter, seeks interpretations that are, as Peter Stuhlmacher says, ‘ordered to and by the central sense [*Sinnmitte*] of the Scriptures’, in a practice that demands ‘constantly new rehearsal of the stations of the biblical recognition of the truth and of the debate in which already the first witnesses – above all Peter, Paul and James – engaged concerning the *aletheia* (without breaking with one another!)’.⁴⁵ The precise nature of this ‘rehearsal’ will depend, I have suggested, upon the construal of Scripture in relation to its essential subject matter, indeed, finally upon the construal of the nature of that subject matter itself. That these construals are themselves upshots of scriptural interpretation, is an inescapable source of ambiguity and embarrassment for Protestant dogmatics, ingredient in its proper *vulnerability* to Scripture, we might say. No construal is systematically able to ensure or deliver the ‘divinity’ of the witness or to ‘retrospectively remove’ or otherwise compensate for the all-too human quality of the texts and their witness.⁴⁶

44 See Barth, *CD IV/3.1*, p. 114: ‘To the biblical witnesses, and to all the witnesses of the Christian community, it is promised and given to be parables of the kingdom of heaven’; cf. Barth’s wider discussion of this theme across pp. 110–14, all of which stand under the claim, p. 111, that ‘even as true words of God, they must still distinguish themselves from this one Word, keeping their distance and conceding and accepting the fact that it alone is truth’.

45 Peter Stuhlmacher, ‘Der Kanon und seine Auslegung’, in C. Landmesser, H-J. Eckstein and H. Lichtenberger eds., *Jesus Christ als der Mitte der Schrift: Studien zur Hermeneutik des Evangeliums* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1997), p. 289 (my translation).

46 Ernst Käsemann, ‘Thoughts on the Present Controversy about Scriptural Interpretation’, in *New Testament Questions of Today*, p. 277:

On no account are the lowliness and hiddenness of Jesus on his way to the Cross to be retrospectively removed by a fundamentalist understanding of the canon, nor faith to be transformed (at this one point at least) into freedom from temptation. The Bible, too, preserves after its own fashion the lowliness and the hiddenness of the crucified Jesus.

Barth, *CD I/2*, p. 537, admits that David Friedrich Strauß was entirely right to speak of this as the ‘Achilles heel of the Protestant system’ but goes on to suggest with paradoxical bravado that ‘Protestant doctrine has necessarily and gladly to leave this question [of the divinity of the witness] unanswered, because there at its weakest point, where it can only acknowledge and confess, it has all its indestructible strength’.

This vulnerability is rightly admitted and suffered by a commitment to *Sachkritik* as the way in which the axiom ‘Scripture interprets itself’ is honoured in practice. Negatively, acknowledging intervals between the textual record and its ‘external’ subject matter – and the hermeneutical dynamics and disciplines it enjoins – helps theology avoid valorizing the ‘text as an aesthetic object, an enclosed and self-contained world’.⁴⁷ The dialectic between Scripture and gospel sets Protestant theology the standing task of urgent and searching criticism of received interpretations, and of resisting both the collapse of gospel into Scripture (that is, ‘orthodoxy’) or their complete dissolution (that is, ‘enthusiasm’).⁴⁸ As Käsemann observes,

the tension between Spirit and Scripture is constitutive because, the Spirit does not contradict the ‘it is written . . .’ but manifests himself in the Scripture. But Scripture itself can at any moment become ‘the letter’ and indeed does so as soon as it ceases to submit to the authorization of the Spirit and sets itself up as immediate authority, seeking to replace the Spirit.⁴⁹

Positively, the practice of *Sachkritik* necessarily enjoins upon us the permanent task of exegesis of the biblical record with a view to exposing its essential content. As Barth insists, ‘exegesis of the Bible should . . . be left open on all sides’.⁵⁰ This is secured by the fact that doing justice to the *Sache* of Scripture is the absolute telos of the work of interpretation, the comprehensive realisation of which is and can only be an *eschatological* possibility, that is, that event in which our interpretation is coextensive without remainder with Scripture’s self-interpretation by the Spirit of Christ, that time when parables cease to be parables and *just are* the Kingdom. We do not have such reading behind us, or in hand, but only ever before us. If this is so, then alongside honouring the vulnerability of Scripture (and of dogmatics tethered to it) our practice will also need to admit and to own the *sufficiency* of Scripture. It does so because it is willing to deliver to the congregation readings which, however provisional and contestable, are also enough for a faith that wagers upon the continued eloquence of the God into whose service the unruly library of scriptural texts has been conscripted. Theological exegesis need not castigate itself for failing to be able to secure more than this by its efforts.

It is striking, I think, that Barth’s theologically supercharged account of *Sachkritik* – in which the ultimate interval between *Sache* and textual record is

47 Watson, *Text, Church, and World*, p. 60.

48 Käsemann, ‘Is the Gospel Objective?’, p. 55.

49 Ernst Käsemann, ‘The New Testament Canon and the Unity of the Church’, in *Essays on New Testament Themes*, trans. W.J. Montague (London: SCM Press, 1964), p. 107. Declan Kelly kindly reminded me that David Bentley Hart, *The New Testament: A Translation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), translates 2 Cor. 3:6 as ‘scripture slays but spirit makes alive’.

50 Barth, *CD I/1*, p. 106.

finally nothing less than the interval between Creator and creature, God and humanity, the Spirit of Christ and all other spirits – should issue in an hermeneutical posture which, as regards the interpreter, is finally so utterly deflationary: presenting us with a human reader before the *litera* reading in uncertainty and in earnest – but also in hope – to encounter the Word of God of in the words of the all-too human record with a discrimen ‘*recollected and expected though not at our disposal*’.⁵¹

Dogmatically, the decisive interval at issue in scriptural hermeneutics is the interval simultaneously opened and overreached by the transcendence and revelation of God. It is the interval that, paradoxically, recognizes the uniqueness of Scripture owing to its all-too-human service to the God of the gospel, and precisely thereby renders the labour of theological exegesis itself all-too-human and very much like any other effort at responsible interpretation of the ‘letter’ of a text.⁵² If I were to add my own rationale for why this practice of Protestant *Sachkritik* should be so utterly human, it would be because its practice is suspended between the first commandment and the cross, that is, between the transcendent uniqueness of God and the terrible particularity of God’s loving condescension.⁵³ Suspended like this, *Sachexegese* serves and corresponds in a creaturely way to God’s own salutary repudiation of idolatry. It does this by seeking ever anew to trace and to echo in its hermeneutical labours the divine refusal to be other than *this* God for us. Nothing about a Protestant commitment to the venture of *sola scriptura sui ipsius interpres* prohibits the elaboration of thick and detailed programmes of theological exegesis, to be sure.⁵⁴ But the position advanced here might also invite a certain dogmatic restraint. Such restraint would be born not of hermeneutical anxiety, but of a sober and happy

51 Barth, *CD I/1*, p. 92.

52 On this as an upshot of Barth’s early hermeneutical theology, see Eberhard Jüngel, *Karl Barth: A Theological Legacy*, trans. G.E. Paul (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986), p. 74. While motivated on very different grounds, in practice this comports with what Francis Watson has very recently argued should be our view of ‘theological interpretation’: namely, that it involves ‘no more and no less than an insightful interpretation of a text with significant theological content’ approached with ‘imaginative sympathy’ toward ‘the truth claim it implies and the form of life it mandates’. See Francis Watson, ‘Putting “Theological Interpretation of Scripture” in its Place: Three Models and Their Limits’, *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 14 (2020), pp. 72–3, summarizing the proposal of his *The Fourfold Gospel: A Theological Reading of the New Testament Portraits of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016).

53 Ernst Käsemann, ‘The Faith of Abraham in Romans 4’, in *Perspectives on Paul*, trans. M. Kohl (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), p. 91, speaks suggestively of ‘a radicalised doctrine of God and creation acquired in the light of the cross of Christ’.

54 For representative examples of what might be trialled, see in short compass, see Arnold Huijgen, ‘Alone Together: *Sola Scriptura* and the Other Solas of the Reformation’, in Burger, Huijgen and Peels, *Sola Scriptura*, pp. 79–104, and at greater length, Ingolf U. Dalferth, *Wirkendes Wort: Bibel, Schrift, und Evangelium in Leben der Kirche und im Denken der Theologie* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2018).

loyalty to the sufficiency of the ministry of the biblical texts in all their vulnerability by virtue of the eloquent mercy of the God of the gospel.

What, then, of the three criticisms with which we began? First, when conceived in this way, the hermeneutical programme ingredient in the affirmation of *sola scriptura* involves no isolation of Scripture from church, as Hauerwas worries, but it does specify their dynamic, ordered relation. The transcendence and identity of God conspire in the witness of Scripture to hold open an interval not only between textual witness and *Sache*, but also thereby between church and text. The church exists precisely in the midst of the Spirit's living contest with the spirits, and of the Word's vital judgement and justification of the words of the scriptural record. It is called to be a listening, reading and interpreting community *just there*. Whatever else we might go on to say about ecclesial life and authority, it must have the church's unsettled and unsettling relationship with the dynamic reality of Scripture as its indispensable premise. Only from here could a Protestant ecclesiology of the church as *creatura verbi* be rightly worked out.

Second, the provisionality and pluralism of the achievements of theological exegesis in this mode may not be as entirely pernicious or lamentable as Gregory and others have suggested. The disposition toward Scripture I am recommending is of a piece with recognition that for Protestant theology *dogma* is and can only ever be a properly eschatological concept.⁵⁵ The pursuit of dogmatics under the rubric of *sola scriptura* modestly seeks only adequate and reformable provisions for the travelling people of God. Childs once spoke of 'the church's ongoing *search* for the Christian Bible'; this seems to me an apt description of the situation.⁵⁶ Certainly theologians neither have delivered – nor could ever promise actually to deliver – greater religious uniformity and coherence than can be won by venturing first one and then another *sachkritische* reading of the tensive and plurivocal witness of the Scriptures. If acknowledging this disappoints those who yet dream of the putative univocity of Christendom, then that can only be to the good.

55 So, Barth, *CD I/1*, p. 269. Cf. Gerhard Sauter, *What Dare We Hope? Reconsidering Eschatology* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999), p. 77. David Bentley Hart firmly advances this same claim in his recent and extraordinary book *Tradition and Apocalypse: An Essay on the Future of Christian Belief* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2022).

56 Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments*, p. 67, continues, with an eye to his own programme:

The church struggles with the task of continually discerning the truth of God being revealed in scripture and at the same time she stands within a fully human, ecclesiastical tradition which remains the *tradent* of the Word. The hearing of God's Word is repeatedly confirmed by the Holy Spirit through its resonance with the church's christological rule-of-faith. At the same time the church confesses the inadequacy of its reception while rejoicing over the sheer wonder of the divine accommodation to limited human capacity.

Here the signal importance of acknowledgement of the *sufficiency* of Scripture ‘between the times’ becomes apparent.

Finally, the practice of *Sachkritik* as envisaged here involves precisely what Wisse’s criticisms desired, namely, that ‘it keeps the modern subject from hiding behind the consistent theses of the canon’ and ‘forces the subject to be itself responsible for its insights’.⁵⁷ Indeed, this account aggravates our awareness of the all-too-human quality of all our interpretative efforts and does so for explicitly theological reasons. Alongside study and direct exegetical endeavour, also prayer, confession, repentance, radical openness to instruction by others, searching self-criticism, yes, but even more fundamentally suffering the criticism of our readings by the text as heard by others in shared pursuit of the discernment of spirits – all of this will be constitutive of theological exegesis in this mode. Yet for all our hermeneutical self-awareness, the responsibility, integrity and authority of theological exegesis does not ultimately derive from our own success at rendering our interpretive pre-understandings and perspectives fully transparent.⁵⁸ Rather, the hermeneutical responsibility of the theologian is finally both joyful and terrible because, as John Webster remarks, ‘biblical commentary is to be one of the places in which the church’s theology registers the fact that its life is always open to devastation and renewal by the Word of God. From that devastation and renewal there can be no deliverance, not even a scriptural one’ – nor, we might add, a hermeneutical one.⁵⁹

This article has deliberated upon the disposition and approach toward biblical interpretation that might comport with acknowledgement of Scripture as *autopistis* and, as such, the determinate of the conditions of possibility for its own reception and interpretation. I have suggested that there may yet be a positive hermeneutical programme particular to Protestant theology, one which can be made intelligible as an outworking of the axiom *sacra scriptura sui ipsius interpres*. In particular, I have argued that pursuit of this programme should involve understanding and undertaking theological exegesis as a specific sort of *Sachkritik*: one that seeks the evangelical *scopus scripturae* in and across the variegated contours of the whole of the canon of Scripture, acknowledging that it is all *litera* and that precisely as *litera* it is also the

57 Weder, ‘*Sachkritik* as a Fundamental Device of Theological Interpretation’, p. 440.

58 Jeanette Kreijkes-van Esch, ‘*Sola Scriptura* and Calvin’s Appeal to Chrysostom’s Exegesis’, in Burger, Huijgen and Peels, *Sola Scriptura*, p. 272, reminds us that hypertrophied concern with achieving ‘transparency in hermeneutical considerations’ can actually distract from attending to the quality and agency of Word and Spirit at the root of all true hearing and interpretation of scriptural texts.

59 John Webster, ‘Karl Barth’, in Jeffrey P. Greenman and Timothy Larsen, eds., *Reading Romans Through the Centuries: From the Early Church to Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2005), p. 223. Cf. Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch*, pp. 46–7, where we are reminded that the church is a hearing community ‘constantly exposed to interruption’ by the Word.

elected site of the adventitious self-disclosure of Word and Spirit. In this I have entertained certain reformational intuitions about the quality and sufficiency of the Scriptures, as well as to suggest the possibility and plausibility of owning as axiomatic Luther's claim that 'Whoever does not understand the subject matter will be unable to elicit meaning from the words'.⁶⁰ But more important still has been the attempt to recommend a posture toward biblical interpretation which itself arises from – and is conformed to – a construal of Scripture as diverse human witness to the incomparable uniqueness and salutary concreteness of the living God. Of course, conformation of the propriety of this, as indeed of the viability and value of the proposal as a whole, must be sought and found in the labour of theological exegesis itself.

60 'Qui non intelligit res, non potest ex verbis sensum elicere'. Martin Luther, *Tischreden*. 5. Band. *D. Martin Luthers Werke* (Weimar: Hermann Böhlhaus Nachfolger, 1919), p. 26, #5246.