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reviewed by Telford Work, Westmont College

This brief account of Scripture is a theological rulebook for how Christians are to understand and regard Scripture in terms of God, the economy of grace, the life of the Church, and theological education. It seeks clarity about Scripture by identifying the appropriate dogmatic categories for the various dimensions of the Bible’s character and use and letting doctrines do “the real work” (71). Likewise, it blames widespread academic confusion about Scripture on hesitation to apply these rules with the necessary boldness and discernment. Over against both cultural and religious phenomenologies of the Bible and accounts of Scripture that spring from other ideological or theological visions, Webster sketches a radically theological account that lives unapologetically in the Protestant, and specifically the Reformed and Barthian, tradition.

Chapter 1 casts Holy Scripture as God’s self-disclosing means of fellowship through texts that proceed from God and are pressed into holy service. Most contemporary accounts give the Bible’s human communities a basic, inflated, or even total role, or else rely on problematic theological claims. By contrast, healthy dogmatics respect the human processes by which the Bible arose and works, but frame these firmly within the divine purpose and acts by which God makes himself known as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Webster makes a noteworthy contribution to the Barthian tradition by appealing to *sanctification* as the providential “overall process of God’s ordering of creaturely realities as servants of his self-presentation” (10). Sanctification describes the whole phenomenon of Scripture from its cultural and historical background through its canonization to its present practice. *Inspiration* is the kind of sanctification that governs the specifics of biblical textuality. This approach helps rescue Barthian doctrines of Scripture from
dualisms between “the Word of God” and “the Word of Man.” However, it makes inspiration bear the full weight of the necessary distinctions between the Bible and other holy things, diverting it from other traditional functions (for instance, distinguishing in charismatic traditions between prophetic and ordinary speech).

Chapter 2 articulates the theological relationship between Scripture and the Church. Without denying that the Church is visible, historical, traditional, and practical, Webster stresses that all these qualities owe to its primary quality of being spiritual – of being the Spirit-enabled hearer of the Word of God’s saving self-revelation. Scripture is authoritative because it serves that reality. Scripture is canonical because Christ grants the Church the gift of recognizing and submitting to it. Webster responds to contemporary flights from authority and determinacy not with what he calls “the politics of invention” but by restricting the Church’s office to teaching and confessing that “Scripture’s authority flows from its given place in the economy of grace” (55). Some will protest that Rome or Moscow is already so disciplined; some will suspect that the Barthian camp indulges in invention now and then. Such objections still accept Webster’s general argument.

Chapter 3 describes the reading of Scripture as an episode in the history of sin and its overcoming (87). Webster pits Calvin and Bonhoeffer, who read Scripture in an attitude of receptivity to its grace, against Schopenhauer and his postmodern successors for whom interpretation is begun and centered in human enterprise. Hermeneutics that shift away from theology toward psychology, virtue, or linguistics cannot truly appreciate “Holy Scripture as the sanctified servant of God in which the gospel is set before the attentive church” with the goal of fellowship (70). Webster argues that the widespread problems in contemporary hermeneutical theory owe to its stubborn and ultimately sinful failure to affirm the communicative activity of
God (101, 106). Christian reading is as dominically and dogmatically charged as every other Christian practice. Despite its commonalities with other forms of reading, it is *sui generis* because it involves a soteriological conversion of the reader, a mortification-and-vivification, that only the Spirit gives (88-91).

The fourth chapter envisions Scripture and theology in theological education. Against the compartmentalization of theological specialties under modern academic pressures, Webster prefers the premodern Protestant curriculum in which Scripture was *central* as well as *integral* to all fields and theology was a form of *commentary*. Zacarias Ursinius’ sixteenth century paradigm began in catechesis, proceeded to deeper inquiry into theological *loci*, and turned with these tools to close biblical learning and preaching (121). An appropriate contemporary school of divinity will repent of its habits of cultural passivity, self-determination, and domineering and return to the modest role as critical servant of the Word in building up the church – even when this brings scorn from fellow scholars.

In an age where theology often operates at the margins even of traditionally theological subjects, Webster’s confidence in its centrality is prophetically, embarrassingly true. He really believes! Why don’t we all? Following Augustine, Calvin, Ursinus, Barth, and Bonhoeffer, he puts doctrine to work masterfully in order to respect the power of the Word. We should heed his call back to a tradition of biblical and theological studies that does this as a matter of course.

Yet his treatment is still strangely unsatisfying – too spare, too clean. It is not that Webster is running his theology roughshod over other disciplines; he wisely and carefully offers formal respect for human, physical, phenomenal perspectives on the Bible’s history and practices. The trouble is that a gap remains between the doctrinal perspective and these others that the appeals to systematic *loci* do not close by themselves. It is one thing to move, say,
sociology to the margin of bibliology and locate it schematically under the umbrella of sanctification, but another to show how it should work there. Webster’s formal respect needs at least to be matched with the material respect that only a fuller, grittier treatment could provide. That is beyond the scope of his sketch, but it cannot remain beyond the scope of a full doctrine of Scripture.

Another, more unsettling gap lies between the authority Webster’s Reformed tradition claims for the whole church and the authority that tradition may actually have. Loyalists will appreciate Webster’s guide for its clarity, its firmness, and its powerful appeals to fathers of the faith, while champions of other theological visions will be less satisfied at the short shrift their arguments receive. To choose four examples: the Lutheran tradition’s Cyrillian Christology underwrites an appreciation of God’s presence in the world that is not just ‘immanentism.’ Neither are the sacramental theologies of Eastern Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism so easily dismissed. Likewise, Wesleyans believe that their Arminian synergism is better equipped than Calvinist monergism for reconciling the theological and anthropological pictures of biblical textuality and reading. Believers’ Baptists treat the church as a Word-following rather than merely Word-hearing community. Webster is by no means a parochial theologian, but his argument draws almost exclusively on one or two schools of theological reflection on Scripture, and those of us who see power in others will see this as more of a reassertion than an advance in the debate.

Still, the reassertion is welcome. This is a powerful, elegant, and urgently needed refresher course for strengthening the Protestant will to engage secularism with the convictions proper to Christian faith. Protestants gradually shifted from the gospel itself to modernist convictions as our bulwark against overbearing claims of churchly authority. Now that
modernity is crumbling, we are often at a loss. All orthodox Christian thinkers should appreciate Webster’s commitment to the centrality of theology to understanding, hearing, and reading Holy Scripture, even if his encouragement might move some of us in other directions.