

## CHAPTER 4

# *The Role of Authorial Intention in the Theological Interpretation of Scripture*

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Debates over the role, significance, and status of authors for interpretation have been hotly contested over the past fifty years.<sup>1</sup> Those who have attacked authors have focused on two main issues. The first concerns whether and how one might uncover the intentions of the author. The other revolves around whether and how authors might be thought of as having some claim or control over how their works are interpreted. Among these critics it is not uncommon to hear people speak of “the death of the author.” The French literary critic Roland Barthes has noted that “the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author.”<sup>2</sup>

1. The classic essay which began this was William K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley's 1946 essay, “The Intentional Fallacy.” An edition of this can be found in Wimsatt's *The Verbal Icon* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1954), pp. 3-18.

2. See Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” in *Image — Music — Text* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1977), p. 148. Two other names most often associated with this claim are the French philosophers Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida. While the views of these two are very different from each other in most respects, they do share an antipathy toward authors. Foucault does leave room for what he calls the “author function” (see “What Is an Author?” in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow [New York: Pantheon, 1984], pp. 191-20). On the other hand, the attack on “man” as subject, which concludes *The Order of Things* (New York: Vintage, 1975), makes one wonder whether Foucault did not have his sights set on a much bigger enemy than authors. For a good overview of Derrida on authors, which focuses on Derrida's engagements with John

Of course, authors have also had their defenders. The most vigorous of these has been E. D. Hirsch. In his widely read book *Validity in Interpretation*, Hirsch argued that the best way to make strong claims about the validity of differing interpretations is to make authorial intention the standard to which they must conform.<sup>3</sup> Most recently, Kevin Vanhoozer (following leads in the work of P. D. Juhl, Anthony C. Thiselton, and Nicholas Wolterstorff) has relied on speech-act theory to correct some of the problems in Hirsch's position in order to reemphasize the primacy of authorial intention for theological interpretation.<sup>4</sup>

Debates over authors have largely been carried on in departments of literature and philosophy. Adequate representation of the various strains of these debates goes well beyond the limits of this chapter.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the aims of this chapter are directed toward helping those interested in reading Scripture theologically to sort out how and why arguments about authors and authorial intentions fit into that larger interest of interpreting Scripture theologically. Hence, more recent work invoking speech-act theory in regard to authorial intention is more directly relevant to my own aims, and in due course I will try to address both what I take to be its strengths and its weaknesses.

What is clear to anyone who enters the debate about authors is that the issues at stake are actually several and diverse. There exists no single position with regard to authors and their role in interpretation with which one either agrees or disagrees. Rather, there are a variety of issues which

Scarle in *Limited Inc.* and Hans-Georg Gadamer in *Dialogue and Deconstruction: The Gadamer-Derrida Encounter*, see Reed Dasenbrock, "Taking It Personally: Reading Derrida's Responses," *College English* 56 (1994): 261-79.

3. E. D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967). For a concise yet philosophically acute criticism of Hirsch, see Richard Rorty, "Texts and Lumps," *New Literary History* 17 (1985): 1-16.

4. See Kevin Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998). See P. D. Juhl, *Interpretation: An Essay in the Philosophy of Literary Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980). The two primary works by Anthony C. Thiselton in this regard are *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) and *New Horizons in Hermeneutics: The Theory and Practice of Transforming Biblical Reading* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan; London: Collins, 1992). See also Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim That God Speaks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

5. Students are encouraged to engage the arguments and positions of the primary critics (and authors!) on the various sides of these debates. The notes of this chapter are primarily designed to direct students to some of this material.

should, as far as possible, be separated and distinguished from each other. Hence, in this chapter I will argue for several different points in relation to authors and the theological interpretation of Scripture. I begin by articulating a chastened notion of authorial intention, arguing that it is possible to speak in a coherent if constrained way about an author's intention. Moreover, I allow that critics might make serious claims to explicate an author's intention. Having done this, however, I also want to reject the claim that an author's intention is "the meaning" of a text, especially if this claim is made at the expense of other approaches to texts that do not accord privilege to authorial meaning. I want to conclude by arguing that the ends for which Christians are called to interpret, debate, and embody Scripture are to be found in such manifestations as faithful life and worship and ever deeper communion with the triune God and with others, and that these ends neither necessitate any specific critical practice nor accord privilege to the intentions of a scriptural text's human author. I will therefore begin by laying out some claims about authors and their intentions. My hope is that these claims will not be subject to the general criticisms that have led people to claim (prematurely) that the author is dead.

## 1. Reviving Authors

One of the major criticisms of an interest in uncovering an author's intentions is that it presumes an account of human subjectivity which, while characteristic of the Enlightenment, is difficult to maintain today. That is, some ways of talking about authors assume that authors (like other humans) are fully (or substantially) autonomous and aware of themselves and their intentions. Further, it assumes that the texts that authors write (or language more generally) are suitable vehicles for mediating those intentions from one autonomous self-aware mind to another. In the light of the critiques lodged by those masters of suspicion, Nietzsche, Freud, and Marx, this notion of selfhood has come under sustained, vigorous attack. Moreover, from a theological perspective, this account of human selfhood simply does not fit with a view that humans are created in the image of the triune God whose inner life is characterized by its relationships rather than autonomy, a God who creates us for lives of peaceable fellowship with God and each other. Moreover, our creaturely status needs to circumscribe all notions of autonomy and freedom. Further, Christian convictions about sin and sin's manifestations in human habits of self-deception in

thought, word, and deed should make Christians wary of any presumptions about humans being fully or substantially present to themselves. Short of the consummation of God's reign, we shall not know as fully as we are known by God. If, therefore, we are to reconstitute notions of authorial intention, we will have to do so in ways that do not presume that via an analysis of a text we can climb inside an author's head and share with the author an immediate and unfettered access to the author's intentions.

The best way to do this is to reshape a notion of intention so that it does not presume problematic notions of selfhood. One way to do this is to try to distinguish authorial motives from an author's communicative intentions.<sup>6</sup> That is to say, one ought to distinguish between *what* an author is trying to say (which might be called a 'communicative intention') and *why* it is being said (which might be called a 'motive').<sup>7</sup> An author might write from any number of motives. She might have a desire for fame and fortune, or failing that, tenure. She might have a deep psychological need to share her thoughts with a wider public. There might be (and probably are) motives at work of which an author is not fully conscious. Alternatively, in the case of lying, an author may be conscious of her motives but wish to conceal them from others. As Mark Brett notes, "any single motive can give rise to a vast range of quite different communicative intentions."<sup>8</sup> In order to get at an author's motives, semantic and historical analysis of her texts is never enough. A desire to discover an author's motives will be quite hard to fulfill in almost all cases. Moreover, in the case of ancient authors an interest in motives will tend to be frustrated by our comprehensive lack of knowledge about these characters.

Alternatively, to render an account of an author's communicative intention one need not attend to an author's motives. Rather, such an account requires attention to matters of semantics, linguistic conventions operative at the time, and matters of implication and inference, to name only three. In the case of dealing with the biblical writers, attention to these matters is inescapably historical. Indeed, in many respects the prac-

6. This distinction is initially made by Quentin Skinner in "Motives, Intentions and the Interpretation of Texts," *New Literary History* 3 (1971): 393-408. For biblical scholars this notion is expertly articulated by Mark Brett in his article, "Motives and Intentions in Genesis 1," *JTS* 42 (1991): 1-16. In what follows I am largely following Brett's work.

7. Brett, p. 5.

8. Brett, p. 5.

tices required to display an author's communicative intention will be familiar to biblical critics even if they do not characterize their work as offering an account of an author's communicative intention. Hence, to this degree, my argument is not so much with any particular current critical practice. Nevertheless, in the course of reviving authors we need to understand, on the one hand, that many of the commonplace practices of professional biblical critics do not deliver the results they have often been thought to deliver. Hence, we need to reformulate our ways of thinking and talking about authors and their intentions to match the sorts of results for which we can reasonably aim. On the other hand, I will ultimately argue that even reformed views about authors and their intentions will only be useful to theological interpretation of Scripture in ad hoc ways.

This notion of an author's communicative intention does not depend on having a textually mediated access to an autonomous, fully aware, authorial self. Rather, it depends on, in the case of Paul, for example, a knowledge of Greek and the linguistic conventions operative in the first century; an ability to detect and explicate allusions, indirect references, implications, and inferences; and a measure of familiarity with the general set of social conventions of which letter writing is a part. No doubt other elements might come into play as well. Further, the exact ways in which to mix and match all of these considerations will always be open to argument and debate. For example, there is no set formula or method that will tell one when to rely more heavily on semantics rather than social conventions, or possible OT allusions. In fact, the great majority of interpretive arguments among professional biblical scholars could be cast as arguments about whether or not these considerations should even count as relevant pieces of evidence and what sort of weight to give each piece of evidence. In adjudicating these arguments a whole range of factors might be considered, but one element that is not relevant is a concern with what was going on in Paul's consciousness at the particular moment he wrote something — assuming we could even know this. It is clearly much easier to talk about an author's communicative intention in regard to epistolary discourse as opposed to narratives such as the Gospels. I think, however, one can argue from analogy that while different factors may need to be brought into play, and while the mix of considerations will be different, one can make provisional claims about the communicative intention of a Gospel or a Gospel passage. Moreover, as with Paul, knowledge of the internal mental states of Matthew, for example, is simply not relevant here.

Needless to say, these are always probability judgments, open to revision in the light of further information and scholarly debate. Given this measure of provisionality, which is the measure within which we generally have to operate, we can expect to make fairly confident claims about an author's communicative intention that will largely be immune to the sorts of criticisms of authors mentioned above.

It is here in regard to establishing an author's communicative intention that my arguments overlap most closely with those who rely on speech-act theory.<sup>9</sup> Like them, I recognize that all utterances are intelligible because they are contextually embedded and that successful communication relies on the knowledge and operation of linguistic and social conventions. To the extent that those who rely on speech-act theory recognize that one needs to make ad hoc arguments about the relative importance of specific conventional and contextual concerns in order to account for specific utterances, I would say that we both recognize the priority of practical reasoning in interpretation.<sup>10</sup> In subsequent sections

9. In this respect, Vanhoover's constructive arguments in *Is There a Meaning in This Text?* (chap. 5) overlap with my own.

10. This characterization is offered by Merold Westphal in his review of Wolterstorff's *Divine Discourse in Modern Theology* 13 (1997): 527. I make this point in the rather circumscribed way that I have because I would argue that there are really two streams of speech-act theory, or rather, two ways of carrying on the views laid out by J. L. Austin in *How to Do Things with Words* (originally the Henry James Lectures for 1955, the volume was posthumously published in 1962 [Oxford: Clarendon]). Philosophers such as Richard Rorty and Jeffrey Stout treat Austin as a therapeutic philosopher, a philosopher who helps us eliminate problems and confusions. This way of reading Austin treats him as one of several philosophers who eliminate confusions about language by showing that words and utterances become intelligible because of the way they are used in context and in the light of various conventions, not because words have meanings as inherent properties. This way of treating Austin places emphasis on the priority of practical reasoning in interpretation. The other way of carrying forward Austin is characterized by John R. Searle's attempt to use Austin's work to develop a philosophy of language and, at least implicitly, a metaphysics or ontology (see *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969]). (Vanhoover [p. 209] casts Searle as Melanchthon — speech-act theory's systematic theologian — to Austin's Luther.) Given this (overly simplified) account, I would argue that Rorty, Stout, and I stand with Austin, and Thiselton and Vanhoover stand more with Searle. Both Thiselton (*New Horizons in Hermeneutics*) and Vanhoover offer criticisms of Rorty and Stout. I am not persuaded by these arguments. In particular, I think Vanhoover argues primarily against Derrida and assumes too easily that the same arguments work on Rorty and Stout. To read the major criticisms of Searle's approach, see Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Oxford: Blackwell,

of this essay, however, it will become clear that I do not think that speech-act theory can provide either a theory of meaning or the basis for arguing for the interpretive priority of the communicative intention of authors.

## 2. Only Authors?

In the previous section I argued that, in the light of sustained criticisms of the Enlightenment's presumptions and assumptions about human subjectivity, it is possible to preserve a chastened notion of authorial intention. The next set of issues concerns the interpretive status to be given to an author's communicative intention.

Some defenders of authors see the chief end of criticism to be the display of an author's intention. Such critics argue that a text's meaning is coextensive with, or primarily determined by, the author's intentions. The only valid form of interpretation is one which ultimately is determined by judgments about an author's intentions. Many of these critics may also adopt the problematic notions of authorial subjectivity noted above. They could, however, in the face of mounting arguments against that type of authorial subjectivity, adopt the distinction between motives and intentions while still arguing that a text's meaning is coextensive with an author's communicative intention.<sup>11</sup> The results of any and all other critical practices are always subsidiary to the text's meaning as determined by an author's (communicative) intention.

One of the chief concerns that fosters this particular interest in authors is that without a theory of textual meaning tied to something relatively stable and determinable, interpretation will lapse into either vicious or silly relativism. This concern is particularly common among biblical scholars and theologians who worry about deconstructive accounts of interpretation.<sup>12</sup> These deconstructive accounts are primarily concerned to

1980), chap. 6; Jacques Derrida, "Signature, Event, Context," in *Limited Inc.* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1988); Stanley Fish, "How to Do Things with Austin and Searle," in *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), pp. 197-245.

11. Although he does not use quite this language, I take this to be Vanhoover's position.

12. To learn more about deconstruction and biblical studies, see the works of Stephen Moore — such as *Literary Criticism and the Gospels: The Theoretical Challenge*

stop a premature shutting down of interpretation. In response to claims that texts have one meaning, deconstruction celebrates the playful and ongoing interactions between texts. Seen against this background, arguments about the primacy of authorial intention are both a way of putting constraints on what can count as textual meaning and of providing some stability for discussion, argument, and debate about the interpretation of any particular text. One might even claim that such stability is crucial for the stability and coherence of Christian doctrine.

Without entering into a more sustained engagement with deconstruction than I have space for here, I do want to note that there are both theoretical and theological reasons against limiting a text's meaning to an account of authorial intention (reconstructed or not).<sup>13</sup>

First the theoretical. Limiting a text's meaning to the author's intention presupposes a definitive account of what the meaning of a text is (or ought to be). Of course, a quick survey of the critical landscape makes it pretty clear that our situation is marked by interminable debate and disagreement about just what the meaning of a text is.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, we should not be confused by the fact that at some times and places there may well be a large degree of interpretive agreement — agreement in terms of what we are talking about when we talk about the meaning of a text, in terms of methods for attaining meaning, and in terms of interpretive results. The fragility and contingency of these agreements become clear as soon as someone asks, "Why should something like the author's intention count as the meaning of the text?"

At such points several things may happen. On the one hand, there will probably be an outpouring of lengthy but ultimately question-begging philosophical polemic designed to show that the author's intention really

(New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989) and *Poststructuralism and the New Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994) — and Gary Phillips's "The Ethics of Reading Deconstructively, of Speaking Face to Face: The Samaritan Woman Meets Derrida at the Well," in *The New Literary Criticism and the New Testament*, ed. Edgar V. McKnight and Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, JSNT Sup 109 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), pp. 283-325; Phillips, "You Are Either Here, Here, Here, or Here: Deconstruction's Troubling Interplay," *Seneca* 71 (1995): 193-213.

13. Much of what follows here is directly dependent upon my book *Engaging Scripture: A Model for Theological Interpretation* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998). There I engage more directly the claims of deconstructive critics.

14. This argument is neatly laid out in Jeffrey Stout, "What Is the Meaning of a Text?" *New Literary History* 14 (1982): 1-12. I give a fuller account of Stout's views in *Engaging Scripture*, pp. 56-61.

is the meaning of a text. These responses will all be question-begging because they will presuppose some notion of textual meaning which is the very point at issue. Let me state categorically that I am not opposed to people using the word "meaning" in either general conversation or scholarly debate as long as they use it in its everyday, undetermined sense. What this sense of "meaning" cannot do, however, is resolve an interpretive dispute where the parties involved disagree about the nature of their interpretive tasks.

Of course, on the other hand, when people start arguing about what counts as textual meaning, some authoritative interpreters may exercise their institutional power and decree arbitrarily that meaning equals authorial intention. Those coming under the institutional control of such interpreters must either assent, leave, or be driven out. This phenomenon is as well known in modern academic settings as it is in churches. Displacing one's interpretive opponents may provide a limited amount of institutional stability, but it does not make arguments about textual meaning any more coherent. The problem is that we lack a general, comprehensive theory of textual meaning that is neither arbitrary nor question-begging which would justify privileging authorial intention in this way. This would not be so frustrating if there were evidence that we were moving forward, coming ever closer to our goal by the articulation and reduction of error. In the case of developing a theory of textual meaning without a clear conception of what meaning is, we do not even know what "success" in this venture would look like.

The problem here is that our concerns with textual meaning are confused. The source of this confusion is the term "meaning" itself. Obviously, most of us can use the term "meaning" in informal conversations with relative ease and clarity. This is because the contexts in which the term is used in these informal conversations are so clearly circumscribed (or open to circumscription) that the term poses no impediment to discussion. The problems arise when we move to formal discussions of meaning as such. Take, for example, discussions about a theory of meaning. "What is a theory of meaning a theory of? Evidently, it may be a theory of any number of things. A question of the form, 'What is the meaning of x?' retains all of the ambiguity of its central term but none of the grammatical features that . . . would diminish its tendency to confuse."<sup>15</sup> A notion of authorial intention, no matter how coherent in and of itself, cannot provide us with the

15. Stout, p. 3.

"meaning" of a text without begging the question of what textual meaning might be.<sup>16</sup> In the absence of a clear answer to that question, we cannot expect any account of authorial intention to provide the theoretical basis for limiting or authorizing any particular set of interpretive interests at the expense of other interests.

In the light of this situation, we should eliminate talk of "meaning" in favor of other terms that will suit our interpretive interests and put a stop to futile discussions. Hence, we should be satisfied with being able to articulate an author's communicative intentions, or a text's contextual connections to the material or gender-based means of its production, or any other type of clearly laid-out interpretive aim. There is no need to cloud the issue further by calling this or that interpretive activity "the meaning of a text" at the expense of other interpretive activities in which one might engage.

Moreover, Christians have theological reasons for arguing against using notions of authorial intention to limit the various ways they are called to engage Scripture. These reasons are largely but not exclusively tied to Christian convictions about the OT. Any attempt to tie a single stable account of meaning to authorial intention will put Christians in an awkward relationship to the OT.

The church has always regarded itself in relationship to Israel. While not continuous in every respect, the church has claimed to be in continuity with Israel. This claim is crucial for Christian affirmations regarding the integrity or righteousness of God. As Paul understood so well, a God who abandons promises to Israel may not be able or willing to keep promises made to Christians. Christians have always maintained the importance of interpreting the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings as their Scripture. If those texts have a single meaning that is determined by the author's communicative intention, a variety of problems arise. Some of these problems are nicely displayed by the following example:

16. When someone asserts that meaning simply is authorial intention, no matter how loudly and repeatedly the person says this, it is nothing more than an arbitrary assertion that begs the very questions at hand (see, e.g., Vanhoozer, pp. 74-79, in which he discusses Hirsch; or Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels, "Against Theory," in *Against Theory: Literary Studies and the New Pragmatism*, ed. W. J. T. Mitchell [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985], pp. 11-30; Knapp and Michaels, "Against Theory 2: Hermeneutics and Deconstruction," *Critical Inquiry* 14 [1987-88]: 49-68). Vanhoozer seems to be aware that this argument might be used against him, but his very brief excursus on this matter (pp. 253-54) does not suffice. It simply shifts all of the problems with "meaning" onto "interpretation."

How was a French parish priest in 1150 to understand Psalm 137, which bemoans captivity in Babylon, makes rude remarks about Edomites, expresses an ineradicable longing for a glimpse of Jerusalem, and pronounces a blessing on anyone who avenges the destruction of the Temple by dashing Babylonian children against a rock? The priest lives in Concale, not Babylon, has no personal quarrel with Edomites, cherishes no ambitions to visit Jerusalem (though he might fancy a holiday in Paris), and is expressly forbidden by Jesus to avenge himself on his enemies. Unless Psalm 137 has more than one possible meaning, it cannot be used as a prayer of the Church and must be rejected as a lament belonging exclusively to the piety of ancient Israel.<sup>17</sup>

Whether or not this situation leads one to adopt the medieval fourfold sense of Scripture, it clearly points out a key theological limitation for those who hold that biblical interpretation is determined by a single meaning that is tied to the human author's intention. Another place where this issue would arise concerns christological readings of various OT texts. A single meaning determined by authorial intention will either force Christians into rather implausible arguments about the communicative intention of Isaiah, for example, or lead them to reduce the christological aspect of these passages into a subsidiary or parasitic role. The first of these options has little to commend it. The second option would put Christians in the odd position of arguing that the "meaning" of these texts is one of their less important aspects.<sup>18</sup>

In addition, these concerns are not limited to the OT. For example, if one is committed to the interpretive primacy of John's communicative intention, it becomes very difficult to locate resources from which to offer a trinitarian account of the Johannine prologue (John 1:1-18) in the face of Arian challenges. To oppose Arian readings of John's prologue, one needs to invoke such things as the *skopos* of Scripture, the Rule of Faith, and theological doctrines about Christology and about how humans might be

17. David Steinmetz, "The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis," in *The Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, ed. Stephen E. Fowl (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), p. 28.

18. Vanhoozer, pp. 259-65, addresses this problem by means of a revision of Hirsch's meaning/significance distinction. In particular he makes use of Raymond Brown's thoroughly discredited notion of the *sestus plenior*. The most thorough undermining of this view can be found in Robert Robinson, *Romani Catholic Exegesis since Divino Afflante Spiritu* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1988).

saved.<sup>19</sup> While speech-act theory can helpfully remind us that the intelligibility of language is conventional and contextual, it cannot give any guidance about why, in the face of an Arian Christology, Christians need to employ conventions gleaned from the later theological formulations rather than those that would have been operative at the time of the writing of the Fourth Gospel.

### 3. Authors and the Literal Sense

Someone still wishing to hold on to authorial intention as the meaning of Scripture might respond by noting that even within the medieval fourfold sense of Scripture, the literal sense (*sensus literalis*) of Scripture served as the determinate meaning of the biblical text, a meaning that disciplined and limited all other types of interpretation. Further, the literal sense was often equated with the intention of the author. This would indicate that our discussion of authors and Scripture needs to expand some to discuss notions of the "literal sense" of Scripture.

If an interpretive commitment to authorial intention (communicative or otherwise) is to be supported by arguments about the literal sense of Scripture, it will be important to clarify both what the literal sense of Scripture is or might be, and who the true author of Scripture is.

The first of these tasks is less easy than it might appear. There is no single determinate account of the literal sense of Scripture. Nicholas of Lyra (ca. 1270-1349), for example, seems to hold to a double literal sense which does not really limit interpretation or work to buttress a modern interpretive interest in authors.<sup>20</sup> More contemporary advocates of the literal sense of Scripture such as George Lindbeck, Hans Frei, and Kathryn Tanner treat the literal sense as that meaning established within the community of those who take the Bible to be their Scripture.<sup>21</sup>

19. All of these concerns might be part of an account of God's communicative intention as the author of Scripture, but as I will soon show, such a move fits much better with my position than with alternatives.

20. See, for example, the Second Prologue to Lyra's *Postilla litteralis super totam Bibliam*, §14 (translated and introduced by Denys Turner in *Eros and Allegory* [Kalamazoo: Cistercian, 1995], p. 385).

21. George Lindbeck, "The Story-Shaped Church: Critical Exegesis and Theological Interpretation," in *The Theological Interpretation of Scripture*, pp. 39-52. Frei's most concise presentation of his views can be found in "The Literal Reading" of Bibli

Clearly this view is not going to be helpful if one wants to use notions of the literal sense to support an interest in the primacy of authorial intention.

The person most scholars turn to if they want to correlate a notion of the literal sense of Scripture with the author's intention is St. Thomas Aquinas. While Aquinas argued that the literal sense is that which the author intends,<sup>22</sup> "it turns out that Thomas' reflection on the literal sense leaves matters surprisingly undetermined and that the author's intention functions in his hands more to promote diversity than to contain it."<sup>23</sup> This is because Aquinas recognizes God as the author of Scripture. "Now because the literal sense is that which the author intends, and the author of Holy Scripture is God who comprehends everything all at once in God's understanding, it comes not amiss, as St. Augustine says in *Confessions* XII,

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cal Narrative in the Christian Tradition: Does It Stretch or Will It Break?" in *The Bible and the Narrative Tradition*, ed. Frank D. McConnell (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 36-77. See also Kathryn Tanner, "Theology and the Plain Sense," in *Scriptural Authority and Narrative Interpretation*, ed. Garrett Green (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), pp. 59-78. Brevard Childs seeks to distance himself from his erstwhile colleagues in "Toward Recovering Theological Exegesis," *Pro Ecclesia* 6 (1997): 20 n. 8. He claims that their position implicates them in a form of theological liberalism. He contrasts their views with his own position laid out in "The Sensus Literalis of Scripture: An Ancient and Modern Problem," in *Beiträge zur Alttestamentlichen Theologie: Festschrift für Walter Zimmerli*, ed. H. Donner et al. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1977), pp. 80-94. It is not clear from this essay why Childs should contrast his position so sharply with Frei's and Tanner's, except that their operates with a clearly Thomistic notion of the literal sense and Childs, while misstating Aquinas's views, shows a clear preference for what he takes to be the Reformers' views. In this regard I follow a variety of contemporary historians who treat the Reformation as a late medieval event. Both Luther and Calvin's interpretive habits are much more like those of medieval Catholic interpreters than opposed to them. One need only look at the way Calvin uses his notion of the literal sense of Scripture to refer to christological readings of Isaiah to see that, contra Vanhoozer (pp. 47-48), Calvin's views in this regard are much closer to mine than Vanhoozer's. In fact, one of the basic differences between Vanhoozer and me on the importance of authors is that he holds that there is basically a critical continuity between the interpretive interests of premodern and modern interpreters (see, e.g., p. 74). I argue in *Engaging Scripture* that there are significant ruptures between the premodern and the modern and that it is theologically essential for Christians to recover and revive premodern interests that have largely been eclipsed in modernity.

22. See *Summa theologiae* 1.1.10.

23. Eugene Rogers, "How the Virtues of the Interpreter Presuppose and Perfect Hermeneutics: The Case of Thomas Aquinas," *JR* 76 (1996): 65.

if many meanings [*plures sensus*] are present even in the literal sense of one passage of Scripture."<sup>24</sup>

As Eugene Rogers argues, rather than seeing the literal sense as a form of interpretation sharply limited by the author's intention, the literal sense becomes, for Thomas, a "whole category into which many readings may fall. . . . As a whole category the appeal to the author's intention promotes diversity rather than a restriction of readings, particularly since we can point so rarely to relatively independent indications of what it is."<sup>25</sup>

As Thomas argues in *De potentia*, there is further theological importance to maintaining a plurality of readings within the literal sense. Doing so will avoid such a situation,

[t]hat anyone confine Scripture so to one sense, that other senses be entirely excluded, that in themselves contain truth and are able to be adapted to Scripture, preserving the way the words run; for this pertains to the dignity of divine Scripture, that it contain many senses under one letter, in order that it may both in that way befit diverse intellects of human beings — that all may marvel that they are able to find in divine Scripture the truth that they conceived by their minds — and by this also defend more easily against the infidels, since if anything which someone wants to understand out of sacred Scripture appears to be false, recourse is possible to another of its [literal!] senses. . . . Whence all truth which, preserving the way the words run, can be adapted to divine Scripture, is its sense.<sup>26</sup>

For Thomas, limiting the literal sense to a single determinate meaning would limit edifying scriptural interpretation to the well trained, possibly leaving the untrained at the mercy of the "infidels." Moreover, it would inevitably bring Scripture into disrepute since the literal sense might be forced to teach something obviously false.

Rather than using authorial intention to limit interpretation, a Thomistic account of the literal sense fosters ongoing interpretation within the community of believers. Disputes about the literal sense can only be hashed out through ad hoc argumentation by interpreters guided by the virtue of prudence and by God's providence working through the Spirit.

24. *Summa theologiae* I.1.10.

25. Rogers, p. 72.

26. *De potentia* q.4, a.1, c. *post initia*; quoted in Rogers, p. 74.

It appears, then, that appeals tying an account of authorial intention to a Thomistic account of the literal sense of Scripture will not help defenders of the primacy of authorial intention either to limit interpretation to a single meaning or to overcome the theological objections to such a practice. To argue that the intention of the human authors of Scripture should count as the literal sense of Scripture might secure a sort of determinacy for scriptural interpretation. It would do so, however, by shifting all of the problems associated with the term "meaning" onto the term "literal sense."

#### 4. Where Do We Go from Here?

Thus far I have tried to lay out some of the most significant objections to an interest in authorial intention. In the light of those objections, it seems plausible to reconstitute a notion of authorial intention, if by authorial intention one sharply distinguishes motives from communicative intentions and focuses on the latter rather than the former. Even doing this, however, cannot secure a critical primacy for an author's communicative intentions. No matter how one explicates the notion of authorial intention, it is not plausible to argue that an interest in authorial intentions should be the sole or primary interest of theological interpretation. There are two sorts of reasons for this. First, the typical way of doing this, by linking authorial intention to a text's meaning, fails. This is not because we cannot make the notion of authorial intention coherent. Rather, it is because we cannot make the notion of textual meaning strong enough to do the sort of work such a claim needs it to do. Moreover, for Christians, there are significant theological reasons against arguments for the critical supremacy or primacy of authorial intention.

Where does all of this leave interpretation more generally, and theological interpretation of Scripture in particular? In general, interpretation should be seen in terms of the practice of specific and diverse interpretive interests none of which can lay claim to delivering the single determinate meaning of a text at the expense of other interests. Some critics at certain times may want to pursue an interest in authors, but there is no necessity to this interest. Interpretation thus becomes more pragmatic and pluralist. The interesting questions in this regard are more political and moral than hermeneutical. They concern whether or not the institutional and professional bodies within which most schol-



arly interpretation takes place can provide a sort of order or discipline to the various interpretive practices and interests, thus maintaining institutional and professional coherence.

For theological interpretation of Scripture, the issues are similar yet more complex. This is in part because Christians are called to read, interpret, and embody Scripture in the light of the larger ends of the Christian life. That is, Christians are called to interpret and embody Scripture in the light of their call to live and worship faithfully, thus deepening their communion with the triune God and with others. Theological interpretation of Scripture therefore needs, ultimately, to advance these ends for which Christians are called to interpret Scripture. This will entail a complex and theoretically undetermined interaction between scriptural interpretation, Christian doctrine, and the practices of the Christian life. Judgments about the quality of any particular theological interpretation, then, have to be rendered in the light of these specific ends.

On the one hand, the clarity of the ends toward which theological interpretation of Scripture is directed provides a sort of order and discipline to the variety of interpretive interests Christians need to bring to scriptural interpretation. Within this order, an interest in the human authors' communicative intentions may well be relevant at specific points in time and for reasons that advance the ends of theological interpretation. Such an interest in authors, while possible and helpful, is not, however, necessary for theological interpretation. Further, as I have indicated above, in some cases a commitment to the interpretive primacy of authorial intention can actually work to frustrate theological interpretation.

While, on the other hand, the ends of Christian living provide an order and discipline for theological interpretation, the way any particular Christian community advances toward that end will always be a matter of ongoing discussion, argument, and debate. This is because neither the particular scriptural texts that Christians seek to interpret and embody nor the various contexts and constraints within which any particular community of Christians finds itself are self-interpreting.<sup>27</sup> Christians should expect that questions about how to interpret Scripture so as to live faithfully before God and to deepen communion with God and others in the specific

27. This claim is not meant to undermine the larger notion that Scripture is its own interpreter. Rather, it is a claim about specific texts. This claim opposes Vanhoozer's assertion, "Biblical texts and works of literature generally, I will say, are themselves 'institutions' with their own sets of constitutive rules" (p. 245).

contexts in which they find themselves will rarely (if ever) admit of easy, straightforward, self-evident answers.

Given this situation, the crucial tasks for Christians are concerned with fostering the sort of common life that will enhance rather than frustrate the prospects for such debates which will issue in their deeper communion with God and others. Within the scope of this larger endeavor, it will be important that some have the skills that will enable them to articulate and explicate an author's communicative intention. For the most part, however, Christians need to subject themselves to other formative processes and practices that will make them wise readers of Scripture if they are to pursue theological interpretation in ways suitable to the ends of Christian living.