SCRIPTURE, COMMUNITY AND SPIRIT: BIBLICAL THEOLOGY'S CONTRIBUTION TO A CONTEXTUALIZED CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

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1. The Problem

On the one side we have Scripture, a diverse collection of writings arising from complicated social and historical settings of a distant past. On the other side we have contemporary Christian communities, living in correspondingly complex circumstances and looking back to Scripture for guidance. How can the twain meet?

The words found in the title of this article offer an opening hint. The meeting does not occur as the result of a unidirectional move, in which case the title would have been 'The Bible Answers the Contemporary Christian Community’s Questions'. Rather preparation and initiative must occur on both sides of the meeting. The preparation and initiative on one side is called biblical theology, on the other side Christian theology.

The activity in each case involves theology, that is, a human effort to understand truths about God. On the one side, scholars seek to understand how individuals and communities in biblical times perceived

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God's presence and activity in the affairs of humans and the phenomena of nature. On the other side, scholars seek to understand the meaning of God's presence and activity for contemporary life. Such human efforts imply assumptions and methods. The ability of biblical theology to contribute to Christian theology, and of Christian theology to contribute to biblical theology, is enhanced where the assumptions and methods used on each side are compatible with one another. I am going to describe accordingly the assumptions and methods that I apply to biblical theology for purposes of clarification and in anticipation of two ensuing forms of dialogue, one leading to significant points of disagreement but nevertheless holding open the opportunity for mutual edification, the other characterized by considerable convergence in understanding and inviting exploration of ways in which the dialogue can be enriched further to the benefit of church, other religious communities, and world.

2. The Spiritual Understanding of Reality in the Bible

The Bible presents a spiritual understanding of reality. Events in nature and history do not happen arbitrarily, but according to divine purpose. The Purposer, moreover, is not regarded as a distant Prime Mover, but as a loving, righteous divine Presence. Creator and creation are related through a series of covenants that set forth the terms of a relationship initiated and sustained by God's steadfast love (hesed) and calling for human response.

What is the basis of this spiritual understanding of reality? Obviously it arises from a specific perspective rather than a general principle. The providential significance of the exodus was not discerned by the Egyptian Pharaoh. Though it was God who stirred Tiglath-pileser of Assyria to action (1 Chron. 5.26), he was not mindful of the Spirit of God in his military campaigns. To Cyrus the Mede the divine oracle in Isaiah 45 refers with the words, 'I call you by your name, I surname you, though you do not know me' (v. 4), though admittedly the Chronicler, perhaps moved by the uncommon humaneness of this conqueror, claims him for Yahwism much as the church fathers claimed Socrates for Christianity (2 Chron. 36.22-23).

The ability to discern God's presence was thus regarded in the Bible not as a natural human propensity but as a divine gift. In the tent of meeting, God did not speak randomly to anyone who dropped in, but specifically to Moses 'face to face, as one speaks to a friend' (Exod.