

HOLY SPIRIT, HISTORY, HERMENEUTICS AND THEOLOGY: TOWARD AN EVANGELICAL/CATHOLIC CONSENSUS

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This essay seeks to explore what role the Holy Spirit plays in the work of hermeneutics and theology and how understanding the work of the Spirit may produce more fruitful results in the ongoing dialogue between evangelicals and Roman Catholics.¹ I shall begin by arguing that the Holy Spirit, while not providing a hot line to heaven that conveys additional data to the interpreter of Scripture, nevertheless has an indispensable role in the Church's endeavor to understand who God is and what he requires of us. I shall then briefly explore the relationship between exegesis, Biblical theology, historical theology and dogmatics and how I believe the Spirit relates to each area of inquiry. I shall conclude with two case studies, one dealing with doctrine and the other with ethics.

I. HOLY SPIRIT, MEANING, AND SIGNIFICANCE

In a recent article² Clark Pinnock defines the relationship between exegesis and the work of the Holy Spirit in a manner similar to that set forth in an earlier essay by Daniel P. Fuller.³ Both Fuller and Pinnock believe that the role of the Spirit in Biblical interpretation is not to impart new information to the reader beyond the grammatical-historical data but to change the heart of the reader so that he or she might become more willing to accept the gospel message revealed in Scripture.⁴

Standing behind Fuller's and Pinnock's rejection of the notion that the Holy Spirit imparts new information to the reader is the distinction between "meaning" and "significance" articulated by E. D. Hirsch⁵ and common within

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¹ The best-known (though not the only) document that exemplifies the present evangelical-Catholic debate is "Evangelicals and Catholics Together: A Declaration" (cf. *First Things* 43 [May 1994] 15–22).

² C. Pinnock, "The Role of the Spirit in Interpretation," *JETS* 36/4 (December 1993) 491–497.

³ D. P. Fuller, "The Holy Spirit's Role in Biblical Interpretation," *Scripture, Tradition and Interpretation* (ed. W. W. Gasque; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 189–198.

⁴ Fuller, "Role" 192; Pinnock, "Role" 493–494.

⁵ E. D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University, 1967) 121–122; *The Aims of Interpretation* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1976) 1–13.

the writings of evangelical Biblical scholars.⁶ This distinction defines meaning as the message the original author intended to convey and significance as how that meaning is relevant to other people and situations. Pinnock therefore states that “the significance of texts changes—but not their meaning.”⁷ Yet shortly after this remark he adds that “the meaning [of a text] can be enlarged upon reflection. . . . The text can come to be seen to allow a larger interpretation than was strictly intended.”

It would appear, then, that Pinnock’s distinction between meaning and significance is not a hard and fast one. Indeed this malleability of the word “meaning” manifests itself among a number of evangelicals as well as liberals, postmodernists and deconstructionists.⁸ It has to do with questions of the unity of the Bible⁹ and the relevance of the Bible to the reader’s life situation or “horizon.”¹⁰ And while one could argue that the question of relevance is principally concerned with significance, the problem of the unity of the Bible is by definition concerned with whether there exists one overall meaning that relates the diverse messages of the Biblical writers to one another.

Despite this lack of a clear line between meaning and significance it is useful and proper to distinguish the two concepts without positing an absolute dichotomy. For this reason the next two sections of our discussion will address the work of the Holy Spirit as it relates to meaning and significance respectively. In the first section we shall link meaning to hermeneutics, which pertains to the disciplines of exegesis and Biblical theology. In the following section we shall relate significance to the term “theological method,” which pertains to systematic theology and ethics.

II. HOLY SPIRIT, HERMENEUTICS, AND *HEILSGESCHICHTE*

As we address the subject of hermeneutics within the context of the recent dialogue between evangelical Protestants and Roman Catholics, a good place to begin is to examine insights set forth by Oscar Cullmann, who was already engaged in fruitful dialogue with Roman Catholics a generation before evangelicals considered this to be worthwhile. As I have noted else-

⁶ In addition to Fuller and Pinnock see e.g. W. Kaiser, “The Meaning of Meaning,” in W. Kaiser and M. Silva, *An Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994) 27–45; G. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1991) 6–9, 391–396. At the same time, however, it appears that the meaning-significance distinction is not as popular among evangelical Christians in the disciplines of English and literary criticism.

⁷ Pinnock, “Role” 495.

⁸ This malleability has also found expression in Hirsch’s modification of his earlier meaning-significance distinction; cf. “Meaning and Significance Reinterpreted,” *Critical Inquiry* 11 (December 1984) 202–225. For a survey that includes Hirsch’s new position, as well as a summary of prominent evangelical perspectives, see W. E. Glenny, “The Divine Meaning of Scripture: Explanations and Limitations,” *JETS* 38/4 (December 1995) 481–500.

⁹ This problem of the unity of the OT and NT is a central concern to J. DeYoung and S. Hurty in *Beyond the Obvious: Discover the Deeper Meaning of Scripture* (Gresham: Vision House, 1995) esp. chaps. 1–3.

¹⁰ Pinnock, “Role” 491–492, 495–496.

where,¹¹ Cullmann insists that the Holy Spirit is active in our ongoing interpretation of Scripture as the Church seeks “to translate the biblical message into the language of today.”¹² That is to say, the Spirit is active both in restating the Biblical message in contemporary terminology (meaning) and applying it to contemporary situations (significance).¹³ This is basically the same position taken by Pinnock when he speaks of the Spirit’s work of “illumination.”¹⁴ It also closely resembles what some Roman Catholics call the Spirit’s “activity of actualization”—that is, interpretation of Scripture that seeks to keep the Bible relevant for each generation.¹⁵

In addition to illumination or actualization, Cullmann sees a second work of the Spirit as crucial for Biblical interpretation: The exegete must pray that the Spirit engender within him an attitude that seeks first of all to affirm what is good about another’s interpretation of Scripture. This ethical attitude is communicated by the Greek verb *dokimazein*, which Cullmann contrasts with *krinein*, “to criticize.” An attitude characterized by *dokimazein* makes it more likely that the exegete will in turn test his own interpretation in light of Scripture rather than using his own conclusion as a standard by which to judge (*krinein*) others.¹⁶ This Spirit-inspired attitude of openness to the results of another’s exegesis of Scripture, while not overcoming all differences of opinion, will make consensus on the meaning of the text much more likely.

Cullmann goes on to say, however, that while the Spirit continues to be active within God’s history of salvation (*Heilsgeschichte*), God’s history of revelation (*Offenbarungsgeschichte*) has expressed itself definitively for all time within the historical period of Christ’s incarnation and the apostolic eyewitnesses. This history of revelation gives meaning to the entire span of salvation history.¹⁷ For this reason “it would be rash to place [any present-day preaching or teaching] on the same level as the canon.”¹⁸

With this statement Cullmann takes issue with the Roman Catholic dogma that the Holy Spirit’s work in the magisterium, or teaching office of the Church, provides a source of revelation that is parallel to Scripture and that in the end is the finally authoritative source for Christian faith.¹⁹ To the

¹¹ T. M. Dorman, *The Hermeneutics of Oscar Cullmann* (San Francisco: Mellen Research University, 1991) chap. 6.

¹² O. Cullmann, “The Tradition: The Exegetical, Historical and Theological Problem,” *The Early Church* (ed. A. J. B. Higgins; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1953) 87.

¹³ The activity of translating the Bible is one in which the line between meaning (hermeneutics) and significance (theological method) may be blurred, particularly if one is dealing with a translation whose goal is dynamic equivalence (e.g. TEV) as opposed to a more literal translation (e.g. KJV or RSV). The NIV is a sort of halfway house between these two approaches. On dynamic equivalence see C. Kraft, *Christianity and Culture* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1979) 261–312.

¹⁴ Pinnock, “Role” 491.

¹⁵ Y. Congar, *Tradition and Traditions* (New York: Macmillan, 1967) 22; cf. also pp. 39–40, 42 ff., 64.

¹⁶ O. Cullmann, “Andacht zur Eröffnung der S.N.T.S. am 30 August 1965 in Heidelberg,” *NTS* 12 (1965–1966) 142–143.

¹⁷ O. Cullmann, *Salvation in History* (New York: Harper, 1967) 295.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 302.

¹⁹ See e.g. *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: America Press, 1966) 120–121.

contrary, says Cullmann, "The Holy Spirit interprets Scripture, but is at the same time controlled by it."²⁰ Specifically the results of grammatical-historical exegesis, as opposed to the teaching office of the Church, constitute the check that controls our interpretation of Scripture.²¹

The dialectical relationship Cullmann sees between God's *Heilsgeschichte* and his *Offenbarungsgeschichte* reflects the already/not-yet tension he finds in the NT: The kingdom has already come but has not yet arrived in fullness. Biblical scholars therefore already have a normative *Offenbarungsgeschichte* in the canonical Scriptures, even while the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit is not yet fully or infallibly revealed to us. Such a stance both affirms the ongoing work of the Spirit in Biblical interpretation (e.g. the ethical *dokimazein*) and advocates caution in our attempts to discern what the Spirit would teach us in specific situations, since the progress of God's history of salvation during the present interval between Christ's two advents is hidden from us. Thus "we must make a clear separation between the *continuation* of salvation history as such and our *knowledge* of it."²²

Cullmann's contribution to elucidating the role of the Spirit in the hermeneutical enterprise, while valuable, is largely confined to the tasks of exegesis and what may be termed descriptive Biblical theology. In the next section I shall set forth a proposal as to how the work of the Spirit relates exegesis and Biblical theology to the broader disciplines of systematic theology and ethics via the insights of historical theology. This will take us from the realm of hermeneutics to that of theological method.

III. HOLY SPIRIT, *HEILSGESCHICHTE*, AND THEOLOGICAL METHOD

The concept of *Heilsgeschichte*, which affirms the ongoing work of the Spirit in the theological enterprise while recognizing that only the apostolic *Offenbarungsgeschichte* is normative, implies that the Spirit has given the postapostolic Church insights into both the meaning and significance of the Scriptures. Such insights are not infallible, but that does not preclude them from being potentially valuable. The universal Church's commitment to Trinitarian dogma and the doctrine of the hypostatic union is proof that Chris-

²⁰ Cullmann, "Tradition" 87.

²¹ Cullmann, "Andacht" 143. Cullmann's allegiance to the priority of exegesis to dogmatics, combined with his massive learning and irenic disposition toward his Roman Catholic counterparts, was a positive influence at the Second Vatican Council, which invited Cullmann as an official Protestant observer. *Documents of Vatican II* 118–121 and the Pontifical Biblical Commission's recent publication on "The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church," *Origens: CNS Documentary News Service* 23/29 (January 6, 1994), demonstrate an understanding of modern Biblical exegesis that also finds expression in a number of recent Biblical studies and commentaries published by Roman Catholic scholars.

²² Cullmann, *Salvation* 299. But see also Cullmann, "The Necessity and Function of Higher Criticism," *The Early Church* (ed. A. J. B. Higgins; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1953) 14–15, where he notes that while the Holy Spirit may interpret Scripture for the simple reader apart from historical-critical investigation the resulting interpretations are still subject to the control of the historical-critical method.

tians regard certain postapostolic formulas not merely as human endeavors but as insights given to the Church by the Spirit of God.

But how shall we determine just which insights are of value? While no rigid criterion of verification exists, I submit that historical theology can provide a valuable check alongside grammatical-historical exegesis (though the latter must have the last word). Specifically those matters of Christian faith and conduct that have been affirmed, in the words of Vincent of Lérins, “everywhere, at all times, by all people” (*quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus creditum est*)²³ ought to exercise significant control over our theological and even exegetical labors. Where there has been universal or nearly universal consent to a matter of Christian doctrine throughout the history of the Church, the burden of proof must rest upon those who arrive at conclusions contrary to that consensus.

What I am proposing, then, is that historical theology should perform a mediating function between exegesis and Biblical theology on the one hand and dogmatics on the other hand. Such an approach could be termed a consensual theological methodology. The consensual approach takes seriously the Biblical witness that the Holy Spirit will guide his people into all truth (e.g. John 16:13) even as it gives priority to the apostolic eyewitness testimony set forth in the NT.

My theological rationale for this consensual methodology is based upon the aforementioned concept of *Heilsgeschichte*, which affirms both the ongoing guidance of the Spirit throughout the history of the Church and the hiddenness of such guidance at the present time. It also affirms the community of Christ’s people, the Church, as the primary locus of such guidance, thus leaving open the possibility for fresh insights that may spring forth from time to time as the people of God reflect upon the Scriptures and their experience. If therefore it be true that the Holy Spirit continues to work in the Church universal between the first and second advents of Christ, then should we not seek both insight and guidance from the theological traditions that have come down to us, even if we do not deem them infallible?

To use contemporary vernacular, I would speak of a tradition-friendly approach to theological method that gives careful consideration to ecclesiastical traditions passed down throughout the postapostolic history of redemption, without recourse either to an infallible magisterium (Roman Catholicism) or to a narrowly defined postapostolic era of orthodoxy such as the first seven ecumenical councils (Eastern Orthodoxy). Such an approach would affirm *sola Scriptura* with respect to Biblical authority but would reject what I would label a narrow, Bible-only mentality that is so suspicious of insights from ecclesiastical tradition that it ends up reinventing the wheel again and again. A consensual approach, by way of contrast, would examine such traditional insights in light of Paul’s admonition that we “test (*dokimazete*) everything, and hold fast to what is good” (1 Thess 5:21).

²³ Vincent of Lérins *Commonitorium* 2.3; cf. *The Christian Theology Reader* (ed. A. E. McGrath; Cambridge: Blackwell, 1995) 51.

To be sure, on some matters of doctrine and ethics Church tradition will exhibit less than the unanimity desired by Vincent of Lérins. On other matters, however, the historic consensus is so overwhelming that, as noted above, the burden of proof must rest upon those who seek to justify their departures from the tradition. That is, they must not merely demonstrate that their position is a possible or even plausible interpretation of the Bible. They must prove beyond a reasonable doubt that the historic Christian consensus is wrong.²⁴

To illustrate how this plays out in the arena of theological method we shall examine two subjects that have occasioned considerable controversy in recent years. The first of these is a theological issue that lacks a clearly-defined historical consensus: the doctrine of justification. The second is an ethical issue that, though extremely controversial within the contemporary Church, finds an overwhelming historical consensus in ecclesiastical tradition: abortion.

IV. JUSTIFICATION: IN SEARCH OF A CONSENSUS

The appearance in 1994 of the declaration “Evangelicals and Catholics Together: The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium”²⁵ brought to light an emerging coalition of evangelical Protestants and Roman Catholics who seek to cooperate in confronting the challenges facing the Church at the end of the twentieth century. It also sparked controversy over the way the document had finessed the subject of justification by faith.²⁶ What follows is a brief attempt to define a central issue in this debate and to offer a possible avenue toward at least partial consensus on the basis of two seldom-recognized sources (at least among evangelicals) in the history of the Protestant Reformation.

At issue is how to define the term “justification.” Does Scripture bear witness to a rather specific concept that refers to God’s declaration that sinners are not guilty in his sight by virtue of the imputed righteousness of Christ (Reformed Protestantism)?²⁷ Or does justification in the Bible include not merely the forensic element of imputed righteousness but also the ethical element of infused righteousness (Roman Catholicism)?²⁸

Alister McGrath notes that the Reformers’ definition of justifying righteousness as the alien righteousness of Christ imputed to sinners “marks a

²⁴ A recent article that takes this approach is D. Basinger, “Can an Evangelical Christian Justifiably Deny God’s Exhaustive Knowledge of the Future?”, *Christian Scholar’s Review* 25/2 (December 1995) 133–145. Basinger’s own question never receives a meaningful answer because he fails to define the canons of what is or is not justifiable.

²⁵ See *First Things* 43 (May 1994) 15 ff.

²⁶ A good summary of the issues separating Protestants and Catholics regarding the doctrine of justification is found in N. L. Geisler and R. E. MacKenzie, *Roman Catholics and Evangelicals: Agreements and Differences* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995) 221–248.

²⁷ See e.g. J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 3.11.2–4.

²⁸ Council of Trent (1547) DS 1528, cited in *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Mahwah: Paulist, 1994) 482. See also J. Leith, *Creeds of the Churches* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982) 408–424.

complete break with the [Western Church] tradition up to this point.²⁹ The Reformed definition saw justifying righteousness as passive or external to the person who receives it, as opposed to an active internal ethical quality. Justifying righteousness is imputed, not infused. The reality of infused righteousness is not denied but is placed under the rubric of sanctification. And while the Reformers insisted that justifying righteousness never exists apart from sanctifying righteousness, they nonetheless introduced a “notional distinction” where one had previously not existed.³⁰

In 1547 the Council of Trent rejected this notional distinction and defined justification as a process that includes the infusion of proper (ethical) righteousness.³¹ In so doing the Church of Rome rejected the Lutheran and Reformed view that justification is an instantaneous event bestowed upon sinners by God at the outset of the Christian life.³² In this way Trent sought to link Christ’s righteousness (the “merits of Christ”) received by faith with the Christian’s active righteousness in its definition of justification, thus establishing a positive link between faith and works.

The Reformed tradition, on the other hand, generally sought to make a strong distinction between faith and works, assigning the former to instantaneous justification and the latter to progressive sanctification.³³ Yet within the early Lutheran-Reformed tradition there exist two outstanding examples of efforts to make a positive connection between the imputed righteousness of justification and the actual righteousness that follows the free divine gift of forgiveness.

²⁹ A. McGrath, *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1986) 2.3.

³⁰ *Ibid.* 2.2.

³¹ See n. 28 *supra*.

³² Ironically, Trent’s emphasis on justification as God’s ongoing supply of actual righteousness also rejected the teaching of both Anselm and Thomas Aquinas that God justifies sinners instantaneously. Anselm’s views on justification, which emphasized the sole sufficiency of faith in the merits of Christ’s death for sinners, are reflected in a tract he wrote to console the dying (*Opera Omnia* [ed. J. P. Migne; Paris, 1853] 1.686–687; cf. A. H. Strong, *Systematic Theology* [Old Tappan: Revell, 1907] 849). For Aquinas’ affirmation of the instantaneous nature of the *iusificatio impii* cf. *de Veritate* 012 QDV qu. 28 ar. 9 of *Quaestiones disputates et opuscula*. Neither Anselm nor Aquinas entertained the Reformers’ strict distinction between justification and sanctification, and both tended to speak of infused righteousness. But they nevertheless viewed justification as given instantaneously to sinners solely through faith.

³³ See e.g. the 1535 edition of Luther’s commentary on Galatians as well as Calvin, *Institutes* 3.11.3. But see also Luther’s 1519 commentary on Galatians, which sets forth a more positive relationship between faith and works (e.g. Gal 5:6) as well as the following statements from his 1520 essay “The Freedom of the Christian”: “Faith . . . regards [God] as truthful and righteous. Nothing more excellent than this can be ascribed to God. . . . Is not such a soul most obedient to God in all things by this faith? What commandment is there that such obedience [of faith] has not completely fulfilled?” (*Luther’s Works* [Philadelphia: Muhlenberg] 31.350). And even in 1535 Luther, despite his increasingly strong distinction between gospel and law, could write concerning Gal 5:19 that a true Christian “will also abstain from the desires of the flesh [sanctification] by means of the faith through which he is justified” (*Luther’s Works* [St. Louis: Concordia] 27.86). In the Reformed camp, even Calvin could speak of “The Beginning of Justification and Its Continual Progress” (*Institutes* 3.14).

The first of these efforts can be found in none other than Luther himself. Karl Holl, analyzing Luther's *Vorlesung über den Römerbrief*, saw a proleptic element whereby God justifies sinners not only on the basis of what Christ has done for them but also on the basis of what Christ will do in them. God, in other words, sees the Christian not only *in re* (in fact—as a sinner as he now stands before God) but also *in spe* (in hope—as he one day shall stand as healed of his sin and entirely sanctified). This proleptic perspective counters Rome's argument that Protestants view justification merely as a legal fiction. Indeed Holl went so far as to say that when Luther spoke of God's declaration of sinners as righteous *in spe* "his declaration of righteousness is analytical [as opposed to synthetic; i.e. it is based upon actual righteousness as well as upon imputed righteousness]."³⁴ The contemporary Lutheran theologian Paul Althaus likewise sees Luther making a positive connection between imputed and actual righteousness.³⁵

The notion that justification is an ongoing process finds a slightly different expression in the work of Martin Bucer, a contemporary of both Luther and Calvin. Bucer's doctrine of "double justification" speaks of both "justification of the ungodly" (*iustificatio impii*) and "justification of the godly" (*iustificatio pii*).³⁶ Specifically Bucer seeks to make a more positive connection between imputed and actual righteousness than either Luther or Calvin, linking the word "justification" to both imputed and imparted righteousness.

Bucer argues on the basis of Paul's use of the verb "to justify" (*dikaioō*) in Romans. He cites several examples to prove that Paul "never uses the word 'justify' . . . without appearing to speak no less of this imparting of true righteousness than of the fount and head of our entire salvation, the forgiveness of sins."³⁷ That is, Paul uses the word "justify" in a way that includes not only imputed righteousness but also imparted or infused righteousness.

John Calvin and the Reformed tradition would later refer to the impartation of infused righteousness as sanctification. Bucer, on the other hand, refers to the Holy Spirit's impartation of active righteousness as *iustificatio pii* while using the phrase *iustificatio impii* to refer to Christ's imputed passive righteousness. In this way he sides with Rome in placing both the for-

³⁴ K. Holl, *Gesammelte Aufsätze* 1.124. Holl cites as evidence Luther's analogy of Jesus as the good Samaritan who heals the dying man on the road to Jericho; the original source is Luther's lectures on Romans (1515–16), found in *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe* 56 (Weimar: Böhlau, 1938) 272.3–21.

³⁵ Althaus also insists, however, that the actual righteousness that belongs to the Christian *in spe* is not a sufficient basis for justification since it cannot make up for past sins. Thus justification always finds its basis in the imputed passive righteousness of Christ: Not only those outside of Christ but also those who are already in Christ must avail themselves of the imputed passive righteousness of Christ; see P. Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966) 232–241. See also McGrath, *Iustitia Dei* 2.10–14, for an analysis of what he calls Luther's proleptic and sanative view of justification.

³⁶ Bucer sets forth his doctrine of double justification in section 8 of the preface to his commentary on Romans; cf. M. Bucer, *Common Places* (ed. D. F. Wright; Sutton Courtney, 1972) 159–169; see also McGrath, *Iustitia Dei* 2.34–35, which attributes Bucer's approach to the influence of Erasmian moralism.

³⁷ Bucer, *Common Places* 162.

giveness of sins and the ongoing obedience of actual righteousness within the category of *iustificatio*.

At the same time Bucer makes it clear that the Christian is justified in the sight of God (*coram Deo*) as a sinner (*iustificatio impii*) and thus solely by means of Christ's imputed righteousness, since our actual righteousness is never complete enough to earn forgiveness from God.³⁸ On the other hand, *iustificatio pii* refers to the fact that the Christian's actual righteousness declares in the sight of other people (*coram hominibus*) that the Christian's sins have been forgiven in God's sight on the basis of Christ's imputed righteousness (*iustificatio impii*).

One of Bucer's goals in placing both imputed and actual righteousness under the rubric of justification was to rebut Roman Catholic "unjust allegations" that the Reformers' doctrine of justification left no room for good works.³⁹ In addition Bucer was well aware that the historic Christian tradition prior to the Reformation usually defined justification in terms of actual righteousness⁴⁰ and that Luther's emphasis on Christ's imputed passive righteousness was a theological *novum* in the history of the Church. Bucer's exegesis of Romans convinced him that the Augustinian notion of justification as actual righteousness was founded upon Biblical revelation, even if it was incomplete in its failure to recognize what Luther later discovered in Paul regarding the imputed righteousness of Christ.

On the basis of his exegesis of Romans, as well as his awareness of the historical Christian tradition, Bucer and other Reformers sought to reach a mediating position with Rome wherein "the love and good works that for Luther remain the fruits of justifying faith tend to be embraced within the very concept of justifying faith."⁴¹ In so doing they gave tacit recognition to the proposition that the Holy Spirit had not been silent between the first and sixteenth centuries. The fact that they failed to attain consensus with Rome and that the Council of Trent and Reformed orthodoxy hardened the divisions between Protestants and Catholics does not mean that we should not

³⁸ Ibid. 164: "It goes without saying that however great a degree of righteousness the Spirit of Christ might effect in us when we believe, it will none the less never be sufficient to merit our being regarded as righteous in God's sight, for we remain unprofitable servants even when we have fulfilled all his bidding." This view finds a contemporary echo in Althaus (see n. 35 *supra*).

³⁹ Bucer, *Common Places* 166.

⁴⁰ Ibid. 163–164. Bucer notes that Paul's twofold use of "justification" helps explain why "the majority of the holy Fathers, bearing in mind no doubt the more visible aspect of justification, have taken *dikaiousthai*, 'to be justified,' in the sense of 'to be made righteous.' So Augustine: 'What does "to be justified" mean but "to be made righteous"?' On the other hand Bucer finds a few in the patristic tradition, such as Ambrose, who define "to be justified by faith" as "to be reckoned righteous."

⁴¹ D. F. Wright, introduction to Bucer, *Common Places* 21. A modern scholar whose approach appears very similar to Bucer's (though he retains the traditional Reformed terminology of justification and sanctification) is Fuller, who uses Paul's term "the obedience of faith" (Rom 1:5) to make an inseparable link between faith and works; see e.g. D. P. Fuller, *Gospel and Law* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) chap. 4; *Unity of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991) chap. 19. Fuller defines saving faith as persevering faith that "works itself out in love" (Gal 5:6). The Augustinian overtones of Fuller's language cannot be missed, even though Fuller's work is largely exegetical and does not interact with the pre-Reformation tradition.

attempt to revive their effort.⁴² For where consensus does not exist in the Church universal, the Spirit almost certainly has more light to be revealed from God's Word, as was the case during the Reformation. With regard to the doctrine of justification, the present-day encounter between evangelicals and Catholics may contain a message from the risen Jesus: "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches" (Rev 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22).

V. ABORTION: AFFIRMING THE CONSENSUS

One area in which evangelicals and Catholics do find themselves in substantial agreement is that of abortion. Indeed, abortion is the paramount social issue that gave impetus to the document "Evangelicals and Catholics Together."⁴³ So if there is general agreement between evangelicals and Catholics on this point, why do we need to discuss it here?

The answer to that question lies not in the Catholic tradition but in the evangelical ethos. Specifically I have observed that evangelicals are all too often loath to draw insights from the historical Christian tradition in order to oppose abortion. Rather, due to their allegiance to a truncated *sola Scriptura* they want to find explicit guidance in the Bible.

The problem with this approach, however, is that the Bible does not mention abortion. For evangelical pastors, particularly those in mainline denominations, this is no small obstacle. I experienced such obstacles some years ago as a Presbyterian pastor in San Diego. Members of my church were studying the issue of abortion and were divided in their opinions. One church member in particular comes to mind. He believed in Biblical inerrancy and was personally opposed to abortion on demand. But since he could not find abortion mentioned in the Bible, he was unwilling to say that our church should take a stand on the issue.

Here was a sincere, devout evangelical who interpreted *sola Scriptura* to mean that only those issues specifically mentioned in the Bible can be addressed definitively by Christians. The Reformers, of course, did no such thing. A cursory reading of Calvin's *Institutes*, for example, reveals that time and again he availed himself of insights from the classical Christian tradition.

That tradition, which antedates the Roman Catholic Church as well as Protestantism, has universally opposed abortion since the first century.

⁴² See Wright's discussion of Bucer's efforts at a Protestant-Catholic consensus concerning the doctrine of justification (*Common Places* 42 ff.). Protestants and Catholics made significant strides between 1539 and 1541 in finding common ground with regard to justification, but in the end theological and political pressures wiped out all progress. The Council of Trent was the death knell for further dialogue, issuing in a Protestant-Catholic standoff for over four hundred years (not to mention the Thirty Years' War in the following century). For a survey of developments in the doctrine of justification within Catholicism between 1490 and 1545 see McGrath, *Iustitia Dei* 2.55-62. The work of the Spanish Catholic Juan de Valdés is especially worthy of note.

⁴³ Cf. e.g. *Evangelicals and Catholics Together: Towards a Common Mission* (ed. C. Colson and R. J. Neuhaus; Dallas: Word, 1995) xxv: "Abortion is the leading edge of an encroaching culture of death."

Michael Gorman has documented how this unanimous consensus, which existed until the second half of the twentieth century, actually began in Judaism.⁴⁴ Given that the Jews of Jesus' day unanimously opposed abortion on demand, Gorman notes that the Bible's silence on the subject of abortion, far from being a silence that permitted abortion, was actually a silence in support of the status quo—that is, the Jewish tradition's historic opposition to abortion.⁴⁵ Furthermore a grammatical-historical examination of the Greek term *pharmakeia*, which is sometimes translated “sorcery” and which deals with the use of drugs for magical purposes, indicates that first-century Christians probably included abortion under the heading of *pharmakeia*.⁴⁶

Thus both the NT grammatical-historical data and the overwhelming historical consensus of the Christian tradition place the burden of proof on those who would say that in our day the Holy Spirit is saying a new thing regarding abortion. The same would be true of other ethical issues (such as homosexuality) as well as certain theological issues where an overwhelming historical consensus exists (such as classical definitions of the omniscience of God). In such matters, to repeat what I said earlier, the modern-day theologian must do more than demonstrate that his or her position is possible or even plausible. He or she must present overwhelming evidence that the historical consensus is not the result of the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit.⁴⁷

VI. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The Holy Spirit does not give Christian scholars a hot line to heaven whereby they can infallibly read the mind of God. We hold the treasure of the gospel in cracked pots (2 Cor 4:7). But if we nonetheless affirm that the Spirit did not stop speaking to the Church after the death of the last apostle, we must recognize the implications of his ongoing work in God's *Heilsgeschichte* for our hermeneutical and theological labors.

A *heilsgeschichtliche Hermeneutik* recognizes that the Holy Spirit was uniquely present in the person of Jesus Christ and that the Spirit-inspired apostolic eyewitness belongs with Christ at the center of redemptive history,

⁴⁴ M. Gorman, *Abortion and the Early Church: Christian, Jewish and Pagan Attitudes in the Greco-Roman World* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1982) chaps. 1–3.

⁴⁵ M. Gorman, “Why is the New Testament Silent about Abortion?”, *Christianity Today* (January 11, 1993) 27–29. Gorman further notes that passages from first-century Christian writings such as the *Didache*, *Apocalypse of Peter* and *Barnabas*—all books considered by some early Christians to have the rank of sacred Scripture—explicitly condemned abortion. So the “Bible” of many first-century Christians did mention abortion and always equated it with homicide.

⁴⁶ Gorman, *Abortion* 48.

⁴⁷ At this point the question may well be asked whether the prochoice position on abortion held by some Protestants is a theological *novum* comparable to Luther's doctrine of the imputed righteousness of Christ and therefore ought not to be dismissed out of hand. My reply is that Luther's doctrine of forensic justification did not pose a necessary contradiction to the Augustinian doctrine of justification. Rather, it could be seen as complementary to it. The same cannot be said for the prochoice stance regarding abortion, which explicitly contradicts the historical Christian consensus and is less the product of novel theological reflection than of cultural accommodation.

the *Offenbarungsgeschichte*.⁴⁸ The apostolic eyewitness found in the NT thus becomes an objective, normative revelation accessible to us via grammatical-historical exegesis. At the same time, such a hermeneutic recognizes the ongoing hidden work of the Spirit in redemptive history, manifesting itself in various ways through the historical Christian tradition. Such a hermeneutic will therefore not limit itself to examining the Biblical documents in their own historical context but will also attempt to discern to what extent a diachronic survey of historical theology offers us insights into Scripture from the Spirit, who has been at work throughout the history of the postapostolic Church.⁴⁹

A *heilsgeschichtliche theologische Methode*, while building its foundation squarely upon Scripture, will also recognize that God's Spirit has been at work throughout the history of the Church, giving illumination and guidance to God's people. Given the definitive importance of the apostolic eyewitness in redemptive history, the theological enterprise must give due weight to the all-too-human phenomenon of fading memories and thus pay special attention to theological consensus reached within the first several centuries of Church history. At the same time, theologians who believe that the Spirit works throughout redemptive history will be open to new insights such as Luther's discovery of the central place of Christ's imputed righteousness in the doctrine of justification. And where overwhelming consensus exists throughout Church history on a given issue, such as abortion, we may be reasonably certain that God has not changed his mind in the last fifty years.

With regard to both hermeneutics and theological method, we as contemporary Christian scholars will do well to recognize the provisional nature of our work even as we recognize that Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever (Heb 13:8). We will also do well to recognize that even though all wisdom is not contained within the insights of great theological minds of the past, neither does all wisdom end with us. In short, we must (in the words of a contemporary chorus) "humble ourselves in the sight of the Lord."

To this end we must pray that God will grace us with the Spirit's gift of discernment, the ethical *dokimazein*, so that we might set aside our inevitable biases and learn to appreciate, and not merely criticize (*krinein*), one another's insights when we gather as a community of scholars. In short, the Spirit calls us to listen to one another whether we be evangelical, Catholic, or of any other tradition. Such humble listening to one another will in turn enable us better to listen to the Spirit's voice in Scripture and to listen for the Spirit's voice in the historical Christian tradition, a tradition that by God's grace includes us but did not begin with us and will not end with us. The Spirit of God will have the last word.

⁴⁸ In addition to references earlier in this article see O. Cullmann, *Christ and Time* (3d ed.; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964) 171–172.

⁴⁹ For further discussion of a diachronic use of the Christian tradition in the hermeneutical enterprise see T. M. Dorman, "The Case Against Calvinistic Hermeneutics," *Philosophia Christi* 19/1 (Spring 1996) 39–55.