

Hans Frei, George Lindbeck, and the Objectivity of Scripture¹

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In *The Drama of Doctrine*, Kevin Vanhoozer writes – wrongly – of Hans Frei and George Lindbeck that ‘There is a palpable tension between their professed intertextuality, on the one hand, and their focus on the church’s use of Scripture, on the other. The urgent question for cultural-linguistic theology is whether genuine Christian identity is received through the apostolic witness – mediated by the biblical text – or whether it is produced in and by the community’s performance, a social construction.’²

This is one version of a criticism of Frei and Lindbeck that has become widespread, and it is my aim in this chapter to explain why it misses its mark.³ Both Frei and Lindbeck, I will argue, insist upon the objectivity of scripture, by which I mean scripture’s capacity to yield a sense not given to it by its readers, and so a sense that can stand over against its readers’ practice and be a means by which they are interrupted by the voice of God and called to repentance. Both Frei and Lindbeck believe that such an insistence is not only entirely compatible with, but is in fact supported by a certain kind of focus on the church’s use of scripture. To miss this double emphasis (or to construe it as a ‘palpable tension’) is to misunderstand the relationship between Frei and Lindbeck, the nature of their postliberalism, and the contribution that their work might make to current debates.

¹ I developed some elements of the presentation of Lindbeck in this chapter in ‘Reconstructing *The Nature of Doctrine*’, *Modern Theology* 30.1 (2014), pp. 1–31, and in ‘George Lindbeck and the Christological Nature of Doctrine’, *Criswell Theological Review* 13.1 (2015), pp. 47–62. I also presented a version of it at a seminar at St Andrew’s, chaired by Steve Holmes; I am grateful for all the feedback I received there.

² Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Doctrine* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2005), p. 170; italics removed.

³ I will be providing a very different account (at least of Lindbeck) from the one I gave in ‘Frei’s Christology and Lindbeck’s Cultural-Linguistic Theory’, *Scottish Journal of Theology* 50.1 (1997), pp. 83–95 – an article I now regard as seriously mistaken.

The criticism

Vanhoozer's presentation of his 'canonical-linguistic' approach to the theological interpretation of scripture includes a sustained conversation with Lindbeck, accompanied by asides about Frei. He acknowledges that Lindbeck's work appears to insist upon the authority of the biblical text, but argues that 'a closer inspection shows that he relocates authority in the church'⁴ because instead of 'Scripture as used by God, even, or perhaps especially, when such use is *over against* the church', Lindbeck gives authority to 'Scripture as used by the church'⁵ and insists 'that only church practice gives the text its sense.'⁶ 'Theologians', says Vanhoozer, 'should pay less attention to how this or that Christian community uses the Bible (the *sensus fidelium*) and greater attention to the Bible as itself a communicative act of the triune God.'⁷

He draws attention to Lindbeck's claim that 'the meaning ascribed to texts is underdetermined to the extent that their use in shaping life and thought is unspecified.'⁸ This means, according to Vanhoozer, that 'there there is no such thing as "the" sense of the text'⁹ for Lindbeck – and he thinks he sees the same idea in Frei: 'Because a text can have a multiplicity of senses, Frei felt obliged to turn to the tradition of Scripture use in the church in order to secure stable meaning. Frei's argument amounts to the claim that *for Christians*, the biblical narratives render the identity of Jesus Christ.'¹⁰ This means, Vanhoozer argues, that for both Frei and Lindbeck 'the biblical text ultimately cannot make sense on its own terms', and so it lacks the independent objectivity it would need to stand over against the life of the church.¹¹

The late John Webster offered a similar argument. He acknowledged that, for Lindbeck, scripture does indeed shape the church: it is 'a durable linguistic artefact which organises the Christian religious and cultural system, and so

⁴ Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, p. 10.

⁵ Ibid., pp. 16–17, emphasis original.

⁶ Ibid., p. 97.

⁷ Ibid., p. 63, emphasis removed; cf. pp. 149–50.

⁸ George A. Lindbeck, 'Postcritical Canonical Interpretation: Three Modes of Retrieval' in *Theological Exegesis: Essays in Honor of Brevard S. Childs*, ed. Christopher R. Seitz and Kathryn Greene-McCreight (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1999), pp. 26–51: p. 36.

⁹ Vanhoozer, *Drama*, p. 172.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 173.

¹¹ Ibid.

shapes Christian thought, speech, and action'.¹² But this is a norm possessed by the church, a norm with which the church has settled and made its peace, and Lindbeck therefore has (Webster thinks) no serious account of how the text of scripture can serve 'the *viva vox Dei*' as it breaks out *against* the life of the church.¹³ For Webster, by contrast, 'Attending to Scripture ... is not a matter of being socialised, but of being caught up in the dissolution of all society – including and especially church culture – through the word of the one who smites the earth with the rod of his mouth.'¹⁴ 'Scripture is not', he says, 'the domestic talk of the Christian faith, or simply its familiar semiotic system. It is the sword of God, issuing from the mouth of the risen one. And that is why there can be no "coinherence of Bible and Church", no "mutually constitutive reciprocity" between the scriptural witness and the community of the Word, but only of their asymmetry.'¹⁵

George Lindbeck

Lindbeck is, of course, best known for *The Nature of Doctrine*¹⁶ – though he has since said that the book 'was, and still is, peripheral to my main concerns' and that it is 'misinterpreted when its purpose of supplying theoretical warrants for ecumenical practice is disregarded, as has often been done.'¹⁷ Lindbeck was seeking to do justice to practices of theological reasoning that he had encountered in formal ecumenical dialogues in the 60s and 70s. His book was an attempt, by means of a new account of the nature of doctrine, to describe, steady, and direct this ecumenical reasoning, in service of the basic ecumenical goal of reading the various Christian denominations as diverse forms of faithfulness to the God who had revealed Godself in Jesus Christ.

One of the distinctive moves that Lindbeck makes in the book is to emphasise the *descriptive* task of theology. He points his readers to the ethnographic work

¹² John Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* (Cambridge: CUP, 2003), pp. 48–9.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 52, quoting Lindbeck, 'Scripture, Consensus and Community', in *Biblical Interpretation in Crisis: The Ratzinger Conference on Bible and Church*, ed. Richard John Neuhaus (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), pp. 74–101, reprinted in Lindbeck, *The Church in a Postliberal Age*, ed. James J. Buckley (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2002), pp. 201–22: p. 205.

¹⁶ Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1984).

¹⁷ Lindbeck, 'Ecumenisms in Conflict: Where does Hauerwas Stand?' in *God, Truth and Witness: Engaging Stanley Hauerwas*, ed. L. Gregory Jones, Reinhard Hütter and C. Rosalee Velloso Ewell (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2005), pp. 212–28: pp. 212, 214 n. 4.

of Clifford Geertz, and to Geertz's practice of 'thick description', suggesting that theology will be take a similar form: it will describe Christian practice, and identify the grammar embodied in it. Doctrines – statements of normative Christian teaching – can be thought of as expressions of such grammar. They are, in other words, rules for Christian practice, and it sounds like they must be rules designed to keep Christian practice in a shape that it already possesses. It is not hard to see how he can be read as (in Vanhoozer's words) 'reloca[ting] authority in the church': specifically, in the already-achieved shape of the church's practice. Furthermore, when Lindbeck adds to this account the claims that the church's practice is its way of inhabiting scripture, and that the grammar that is embodied in that practice includes the church's rules for reading scripture, it is not hard to see how he can be read as domesticating scripture within the life of the church, treating it as a possession of the church which (in Webster's words) 'organises the Christian religious and cultural system' – that is, which supports the settled shape of the church's life, and is captive to it.

The Nature of Doctrine is, however, a misleading anchor for making sense of Lindbeck's thought.¹⁸ As I have argued at some length elsewhere, his account in that book is got up in clothes borrowed for the occasion, including in ones borrowed from Geertz. The analogy between postliberal theology and Geertzian ethnography is a lot less close than Lindbeck's text initially suggests – and that is especially true if we ask in more detail what *kind* of description of the church's life Lindbeck's theology involves.¹⁹

In the first place, if we look at works that Lindbeck wrote before *The Nature of Doctrine*, it becomes clear that Lindbeck's turn to description is theologically driven. The shape of the life of the church, held in place by its doctrinal rules, is the church's response to God. The church is supposed, by the grace of God, to correspond to God's being and will – with as realist a sense of correspondence as one could wish.²⁰ That is, the church's response to God is

¹⁸ Both Vanhoozer and Webster primarily focus on texts written by Lindbeck after *The Nature of Doctrine*. My claim is not at all that they have ignored Lindbeck's wider corpus, but that they are examples of a way of interpreting his theology which makes most sense if *The Nature of Doctrine* has taken root as the central statement of Lindbeck's project.

¹⁹ See my 'Reconstructing *The Nature of Doctrine*', for a much more detailed justification of this claim.

²⁰ See Lindbeck, 'Discovering Thomas (1): The Classical Statement of Christian Theism', *Una Sancta* 24.1 (1967), pp. 45–52; p. 51; 'The Infallibility Debate', in *The Infallibility Debate*, ed. John J. Kirvan (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1971), pp. 107–52; p. 126; and *The Nature of Doctrine*, p. 51.

true if and only if it is aligned to the being and will of a God whose existence and nature are in no way dependent upon the church.²¹

This is not in itself, of course, enough to undermine the criticism offered by Vanhoozer and Webster. It leaves open the possibility that, even if truth does not *consist* in performance (such that to say that some Christian form of life is ‘true’ means no more than that it conforms to the shape of life embodied by the church), performance might nevertheless be held to *guarantee* truth. That is, it leaves open the possibility that conformity to the form of life embodied by the Christian community makes one’s practice correspond to God, presumably because that form of life is a God-given means for creating such correspondence. Obedience to God and obedience to the church would then be functionally equivalent, and the criticism would stand.

If we look at Lindbeck’s work after *The Nature of Doctrine*, however, we find him deepening and extending an emphasis that had certainly been present in his earlier work but which now became one of his dominant concerns: an emphasis upon the *sinfulness* of the church, and its need for ongoing reformation. In his later thinking, this theme becomes associated with his insistence that Israel and the church are not related as type and antitype (with sinful Israel now superseded by the holy Church) but that ‘the kingdom already present in Christ alone is the antitype, and both Israel and the church are types.’²² In this pattern, the Jews are acknowledged to be (as they are portrayed in scripture) a sinful people – but so is the church. The church’s story is, we must both acknowledge and expect, a story of fallings away, of disastrous choices, of faithlessness and of necessary repentance – no less than (and perhaps more than) the story of the people of Israel in the pages of the Hebrew Bible.

As well as providing a vocabulary in which Lindbeck can talk in general about the sinfulness of the church, this attention to the relationship between the church and Israel provides him with a central example of the church’s sinfulness. The ‘Israel and the church as type; Christ as antitype’ pattern was

²¹ All of this is very confusingly expressed in *The Nature of Doctrine* itself (in the ‘Excursus on Religion and Truth’, pp. 63–9), but clarified by Lindbeck in several subsequent comments. See Lindbeck, ‘Response to Bruce Marshall’, *The Thomist* 53.3 (1989) pp. 403–6 (which needs to be read in tandem with the Marshall paper to which it is a response: ‘Aquinas as Postliberal Theologian’, pp. 353–403); and Lindbeck, ‘Reply to Avery Cardinal Dulles’, *First Things* 139 (2004) pp. 13–15.

²² Lindbeck, ‘The Church’, in *Keeping the Faith: Essays to Mark the Centenary of Lux Mundi*, ed. Geoffrey Wainwright (London: SPCK, 1989), pp. 179–208; reprinted in Lindbeck, *The Church in a Postliberal Age*, pp. 145–65; p. 166.

not the pattern of thinking that came to dominate the church's imagination or to shape its practice, giving it its current grammar. Rather, it was the 'Israel as type, church as antitype' pattern, by which Israel is deemed faithless, the church faithful; Israel rejects grace, the church basks in it; Israel lacks the Spirit, but the church is the Spirit's community. This pattern made possible 'the ecclesiological triumphalism of a *theologiae gloriae*',²³ and was a mistake with 'monstrous offspring'.²⁴ This is not simply a matter of a holy church with its life shaped in conformity to the being and will of God nevertheless suffering a moment of aberration, a stain upon its purity, which a turn back to the well-embodied grammar of its own existence can correct. Lindbeck is clear that supersessionism is a deep-seated, pervasive, and persistent disordering of the grammar of the Christian faith – one that will require a thoroughgoing reformation before it is undone.²⁵ And he is equally clear about the implications of all this for the church's relation to scripture: it means that the church's ways of inhabiting scripture, of exploring and performing the strange new world within the bible, can (and do) take the form of distortions of that biblical world – and some of those distortions are egregious.²⁶ '[I]t is no exaggeration', he insists, 'to say that the great majority of Christians, not excepting the theologians whom we most honor as our ancestors in the faith, have at this point heard the voice of the devil quoting Scripture when they thought they were listening to God.'²⁷

Yet if the church's practice, including its reading of scripture, can be distorted, Lindbeck also insists that scripture can be the means by which the church is called by God to repentance. He expresses this most clearly when discussing (as he does throughout his work) the Reformation *solus* – especially

²³ Lindbeck, 'Ecumenical Directions and Confessional Construals', *Dialog* 30.2 (1991), pp. 118–23; p. 120. I have discussed all this in more detail in 'George Lindbeck and the Christological Nature of Doctrine'.

²⁴ Lindbeck, 'The Story-shaped Church: Critical Exegesis and Theological Interpretation', in *Scriptural Authority and Narrative Interpretation*, ed. Garrett Green (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1987), pp. 161–78; p. 171; see also 'The Church as Israel: Ecclesiology and Ecumenism', in *Jews and Christians: People of God*, ed. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2003), pp. 78–94.

²⁵ Lindbeck speaking to Peter Ochs, quoted in Ochs' *Another Reformation: Postliberal Christianity and the Jews* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), p. 48.

²⁶ Lindbeck, 'Atonement and the Hermeneutics of Social Embodiment', *Pro Ecclesia* 5.2 (Spring 1996), pp. 144–60; p. 151. (The essay was later published in a revised form as 'Atonement and the Hermeneutics of Intertextual Social Embodiment', in *The Nature of Confession: Evangelicals and Postliberals in Conversation*, ed. Timothy Phillips and Dennis Okholm (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1996), pp. 221–40.)

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 148.

the *sola scriptura* and the *solus Christus*.²⁸ The central point of these solas, for Lindbeck, is precisely to hold the church – including the deep doctrinal grammar of its present practice – open to question.²⁹ ‘The *sola scriptura*’, he says, ‘and the eschatological Lordship of the coming Christ to which it bears witness, forbids the formal attribution of irreversibility to even the most necessary dogmatic developments.’³⁰ Taking the *solas* seriously (in a sense to which we will return shortly) teaches the church an orientation to scripture that acknowledges its authority, and accepts that it can and must act as ‘judge of the Church’.³¹ Acknowledging that we inhabit a sinful church, and that there is no telling in advance how deep are the distortions that mar the church’s life and witness, Lindbeck calls the church to turn to scripture as the means by which God will judge and renew its life.

That brings us, finally, to Lindbeck’s scriptural hermeneutics. In *The Nature of Doctrine* itself, Lindbeck’s hermeneutical comments are very brief, but they are

²⁸ These are a central focus in Lindbeck’s ecumenical work on Catholic accounts of infallibility or irreformability. See, alongside the works cited below, Lindbeck, ‘Reform and Infallibility’, *Cross Currents* 11.4 (1961), pp. 345–56; ‘Ecclesiology and Roman Catholic Renewal’, *Religion in Life* 33 (1963), pp. 383–94, reprinted in *New Theology* 2, ed. Martin Marty and Dean Peerman (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1965), pp. 183–97; ‘The Infallibility Debate’ (see n.20 above); *Infallibility*, the 1972 Pere Marquette Lecture (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1972), reprinted in *The Church in a Postliberal Age*, pp. 120–42; ‘Papacy and *Ius Divinum*: A Lutheran View’, in *Papal Primacy and the Universal Church: Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue V*, ed. Paul C. Empie and T. Austin Murphy (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1974), pp. 193–208; ‘The Reformation and the Infallibility Debate’, in *Teaching Authority and Infallibility in the Church: Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue VI*, ed. Paul C. Empie, T. Austin Murphy, Joseph A. Burgess (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1980), pp. 101–19; ‘Problems on the Road to Unity: Infallibility’, in *Unitatis Redintegratio 1964–74: The Impact of the Decree on Ecumenism*, ed. Gerard Békés and Vilmos Vajta = *Studia Anselmiana* 71 (1977), pp. 98–109.

²⁹ This is obscured in *The Nature of Doctrine* by Lindbeck’s desire that the book offer an ecumenically neutral framework. He therefore (see pp. 84–8, 98–104) seeks to show that it is compatible with the claim that some doctrinal decisions are irreformable, and with claims about infallibility: he wants the theory of doctrine he sets forth to provide him with a shared ecumenical language within which his arguments about *sola scriptura* can be substantively worked out without having been decided in advance by a biased technical conceptuality.

³⁰ Lindbeck, ‘The Problem of Doctrinal Development and Contemporary Protestant Theology’, *Concilium* 3.1 (1967), pp. 64–72: p. 69.

³¹ Lindbeck, ‘The Reformation Heritage and Christian Unity’, *Lutheran Quarterly* 2.4 (1988), pp. 477–502; reprinted in *The Church in a Postliberal Age*, pp. 53–76: p. 60.

filled out and developed considerably in several later essays.³² What emerges is a consistent claim that if scripture is approached by Christians in the right manner – a manner that they are taught primarily by the faithful practice of earlier generations of Christians, but which can be articulated theologically – then it can provide the means by which God both forms them for holiness, and speaks out against their continued unholiness. It will be both with *and* over against them. And the ‘right manner’ is to approach scripture ‘as a Christ-centered and typologically unified whole with figural applications to all reality’,³³ or, more fully, as ‘a canonically and narrationally unified and internally glossed (that is, self-referential and self-interpreting) whole centred on Jesus Christ, and telling the story of the dealings of the Triune God with his people and his world in ways which are typologically ... applicable to the present.’³⁴

This way of reading that Lindbeck describes is not an invention of the church, nor is it an imposition of a sense on scripture by the church. It does not involve the church deciding what scripture will mean for them. After all, a focus on the church’s practice of scriptural reading need not be in any tension with a focus on the ability of scripture to stand over against the practice of the church. Consider, as an analogy, the activity of counting the pages in this book. The book is the length that it is, and that length is in no way subject to my whims. I can nevertheless talk about this activity of page-counting as a practice that has a particular, contingent shape to it. I can talk about the forms of attention and the skills that I need to pursue it. I can talk about the history of the activity (the shift from counting sheets with recto and verso sides to counting pages; the rise of double numbering systems with roman numerals for prolegomena and Arabic for the body, and so on). I can talk about the way in which, at different points in that history, I would actually be asking slightly different questions about the book, and so would come up with different answers – not because the length of the book depended upon my practice, but because my changing questions would be getting at slightly different facts about the book. And I can also talk about the process by which

³² See Lindbeck, ‘Barth and Textuality’, *Theology Today* 43.3 (October 1986), pp. 361–76, ‘The Story-shaped Church: Critical Exegesis and Theological Interpretation’ (see n. 24 above); ‘The Church’ (see n. 22); ‘The Church’s Mission to a Postmodern Culture’, in *Postmodern Theology: Christian Faith in a Pluralist World*, ed. Frederic B. Burnham (San Francisco, CA: Harper and Row, 1989), pp. 37–55; ‘Scripture, Consensus and Community’ (see n. 15); and ‘Atonement and the Hermeneutics of Social Embodiment’ (see n. 26).

³³ Lindbeck, ‘Ecumenical Theology’ in *The Modern Theologians*, vol. 2, ed. David F. Ford (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), pp. 255–73: p. 266.

³⁴ Lindbeck, ‘Scripture, Consensus, Community’ p. 203.

I have ended up thinking that this is an important thing for me to be doing with this object. Yet none of this need be in any competition with a recognition of the objectivity of the answers that this practice yields. Similarly, the bare fact that Lindbeck focuses on the church's practice of reading, speaking of it as a practice that has a particular contingent shape to it, and a history, does not by itself imply that he denies the objectivity of scripture.

The pattern of reading that Lindbeck identifies is one that he believes emerged as the Spirit led the church into the truth revealed in scripture. It was as much learnt *from* scripture as it was brought *to* scripture.³⁵ Humanly speaking, that history could, of course, have gone differently: the church could have adopted some other approach to scripture (a wholesale allegorisation, for instance), and by that very fact have cut itself off from the main source that could have called that approach into question. Since it is, therefore, not inevitable that Christians will read in the way Lindbeck describes, and because it is all too possible for people to approach the text as if it were some other kind of reality (rather than being God's faithful witness to Godself), Christians need to learn – to be guided into – this way of reading.³⁶ Without such guidance, they might read in all sorts of ways that would allow them to miss the Triune God's self-testimony.

It is true that to accept that the faithful practice of earlier generations of Christians guidance can lead one into the true way of reading does involve some kind of reliance upon that practice – a 'confidence that the Holy Spirit guides the church into the truth.'³⁷ Yet the truth into which the Holy Spirit has guided the church is precisely the truth that the church is not the source, standard, or guarantee of truth, but looks outside itself to a standard that it does not control for its guidance and correction. And this truth entails that even the guidance that has led us into this form of reading must itself be subjected to testing by further practice of this form of reading.

Lindbeck fills out what it means for the church to provide this guidance by attending to the *regula fidei*, which he sees as comprising a set of 'low-level generalizations' about the nature and purpose of scripture, and the approach proper to its interpretation, produced by the early church. The emergence of the *regula fidei* was not, however, a matter of, say, Irenaeus describing the way his community happened to read various passages, and treating those readings as authoritative because they came from his church. Rather, the

³⁵ Ibid., 204–5.

³⁶ That, after all, is why some Christians need to write books like Vanhoozer's *Drama of Doctrine*, or Webster's *Holy Scripture*.

³⁷ Lindbeck, 'Atonement and the Hermeneutics of Social Embodiment', p. 146.

regula is (as Lindbeck reads it) a summary of what Irenaeus believed the church had been shown, by the Spirit, through the medium of the text, to be scripture's overarching message, and what the church had been taught by the Spirit of the disciplines appropriate to reading this text, given its nature and its place in the purposes of God.

Whatever he might have said about ethnographic approaches, this is the only kind of description of the church's use of scripture that Lindbeck actually pursues. He provides a summary of the theological ways of talking about the nature of scripture that emerged in the early church as scripture was read, and a summary of the most general features of the practice of reading that yielded that description and that was justified by it. And this account of scripture's nature, and the practice from which it emerged and which it supported, emerged (as Lindbeck understands it) as the church was taught by the Spirit to read, in such a way as to brought up against the action of God working through scripture.³⁸ 'The *regula fidei* which developed into the trinitarian and christological affirmations of the early church,' he says, 'was needed to make sure that the Bible is not read any old way (as the ancient gnostics and contemporary deconstructionists do), but as testimony to and from the creator God whose Word enfleshed is Jesus Christ.'³⁹

It is important to stress that these 'low-level generalizations' contained in the *regula* do not dictate what the interpretation of the text will yield. Rather, they help hold in place a way of approaching the text (as testimony to and from the creator God whose Word enfleshed is Jesus Christ), and the actual interpretation of the text is done by faithful Christians in the contexts in which they find themselves, as, so guided, they discern prayerfully and diligently what the text as a whole demands of them in those situations.

Such interpretation is, for Lindbeck, made determinate in practice. That does not mean that the church is free to decide what the text means, making a choice between a range of equally plausible possible senses left open by the indeterminateness of the text. Lindbeck is not saying that the church's practice determines what the text means. Rather, it is in practice that the church declares (and can't help but declare) in its most determinate form

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Lindbeck and Gerhard O. Forde, 'Confessional Subscription: What Does it Mean for Lutherans Today?', *Word and World* 11.3 (1991), pp. 316–20: p. 319. Lindbeck's wider position on doctrinal rules suggests that even these 'low-level generalizations' can't be seen as irreformable; they too must be considered to be open to testing by means of the very reading that they support. I am, however, not aware that he ever explicitly pursues this point.

what it takes the text to mean. The church may well, in the process, *mistake* the text – and, as we have seen Lindbeck insist, it has often done so, sometimes very deeply. And so these determinate lived interpretations are properly subject to correction by ongoing reading, and the *regula* helps the church to practice this ongoing reading in such a way as to hold itself open to such correction – to the possibility of finding its conscience ‘compelled by Scripture itself’ toward repentance.⁴⁰ The church’s continued reading of scripture as witness to Christ is, in other words, not about preserving some already achieved identity, but about holding open the possibility of ‘communal self-criticism’.⁴¹ Diligent attention to the text – to meaning as ‘constituted by the text, not by something outside of it’, emerging from the whole canonical metanarrative centred upon the gospel narration of Jesus Christ, discerned in ways that involve a struggle to avoid our ‘reflex tendency’ to ‘project our ideas into the Bible – does, by the grace of God, have the capacity to call the church away from its mistakes (even if it might sometimes take centuries, and the Spirit working upon the church through all kinds of external stimuli, to drive the church back to scripture with re-opened eyes, and for this capacity to be realised).⁴² It is as the church goes on reading the text in all the situations in which it finds itself, as it goes on staking itself in practice on determinate readings, goes on testing its readings, and goes on being corrected, that it is led by the Spirit deeper into the true meaning of the text.⁴³

The question that Lindbeck’s account (if taken on its own) leaves open, however, is just *how* it is that the text, read in the way that he describes, genuinely stands over against the church. It is clear that he takes his focus on the use made of scripture by the church to be, precisely, a focus on the kind of use in which readers yield the priority to scripture, acknowledging that it is God’s witness to God’s self, and looking for God to use it to guide and correct them. Yet he does not himself provide (at least, not in any detail) an account of *how* the objectivity of scripture appears within this use. Indeed, because he focuses a good deal of his attention on the way in which the church reads scripture as a narrationally unified whole, it is not hard to retain the suspicion that this form of reading *does* involve the church, having grasped the plot, now

⁴⁰ Lindbeck, ‘Atonement and the Hermeneutics of Social Embodiment’, p. 148.

⁴¹ Lindbeck, ‘Confessional Subscription’, p. 320; cf. ‘Scripture, Consensus, Community’, p. 206.

⁴² Lindbeck, ‘Atonement and the Hermeneutics of Social Embodiment’, pp. 152–3.

⁴³ For more on this, see my discussion of Lindbeck’s ‘decision’-focused ‘historical situationalism’ in ‘Reconstructing *The Nature of Doctrine*’, p. 19; cf. Lindbeck, ‘The Problem of Doctrinal Development and Contemporary Protestant Theology’, pp. 66–8.

knowing in advance what all of scripture will mean. That plot, however, centres upon scripture's portrayal of Jesus of Nazareth – and, when it comes to explaining how that portrayal *can* stand over against the church, Lindbeck points us to the work of his friend and colleague, Hans Frei.⁴⁴

Frei's 'greatest contribution', Lindbeck says, 'has been to make possible the restoration of the christologically centred narrative sense of scripture to its traditional primacy' – precisely by articulating the 'primacy of the narrative meaning of the stories about Jesus for scripture as a whole'. And it was Frei who had taught him that 'The [Gospel] stories in their narrative function unsubstitutably identify and characterize a particular person as the summation of Israel's history and as the unsurpassable and irreplaceable clue to who and what the God of Israel and the universe is' – and that, for Lindbeck, is where the heart of the objectivity of scripture resides.⁴⁵

Hans Frei

Frei's work as a whole – and especially the work that he did on the literal sense, the *sensus literalis*, in the 1980s – provides the account that Lindbeck's work needs, going to a level of depth and detail (if not always of clarity) that Lindbeck's own forays in hermeneutics lacked. And Frei himself indicates that he and Lindbeck should be read together at this point: he refers to Lindbeck's 'cultural linguistic' and 'intratextual' approach when indicating the kind of theology will be congruent with his own account.⁴⁶

Frei's work on the *sensus literalis* has, however, often been read (as by Vanhoozer) as a turn away from a focus on the text of scripture itself, and on what that text demands, and towards a focus on the Christian community's use of the text instead. In other words, it has often been read as a symptom of the very problem that I am claiming it will help us solve. As with Lindbeck, it is not hard to see how that reading has arisen.

⁴⁴ Lindbeck had drawn on Frei's work extensively while he was working on *The Nature of Doctrine*. See 'The Bible as Realistic Narrative' in *Consensus in Theology? A Dialogue with Hans Küng and Edward Schillebeeckx*, ed. Leonard Swidler (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1980), pp. 81–5.

⁴⁵ Lindbeck, 'The Story-shaped Church', pp. 161, 164.

⁴⁶ Hans W. Frei, 'The "Literal Reading" of Biblical Narrative in the Christian Tradition: Does it Stretch or Will it Break?', in *The Bible and the Narrative Tradition*, ed. Frank McConnell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 36–77; republished in *Theology and Narrative*, ed. George Hunsinger and William C. Placher (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 117–52; pp. 147–8.

Frei's early work – above all in *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* and *The Identity of Jesus Christ* – focused on the 'history-like' narratives of the Gospels (that is, above all, the passion and resurrection narratives, which are 'realistic' or 'history-like' in the sense that they depict the interactions of characters and circumstances in a public world). Frei sought to demonstrate that the meaning of those narratives is simply the story that they tell. More specifically, those narratives render their central character's identity to us in such a way that the depiction has a certain objectivity, a certain normativity, over against all the religious and other uses we might want to make of that depiction. We don't need to look 'behind' this depiction, to some more real identity of Jesus for which these texts can act as evidence; nor do we need to look 'in front' of them, perhaps to some ethic or form of religious consciousness detachable from the story which we can take to be the true subject matter, safe from the fires of historical criticism. Rather, just as, in a somewhat analogous way, *David Copperfield* gives us the identity of David Copperfield, the gospels give us, quite directly, the identity of Jesus Christ, and teach us to recognise him as one who was truly raised from the dead (not in some imaginative or ideal realm, but in this everyday world of ours, leaving his tomb quite straightforwardly empty). And the texts similarly teach us to recognise that this man's life, death, and resurrection are God's climactic action on behalf of the world, and so to recognise this Jesus as Lord.⁴⁷ In both *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (by describing their loss) and in *The Identity of Jesus Christ* (by proposing their retrieval), Frei's early work explores in great detail the ways in which the texts can be read for the sake of this realistic narrative sense.

In a letter written in July 1980, Frei looked back on this early work with the benefit of several years' hindsight, and noted that, at the time, he had been 'really naively persuaded that there was such a thing as a normative meaning to a narrative text, if not to others.' In the same letter, however, he noted that he had in the years since become 'a bit more jaded', though he insisted that he was still inclined to dig in his heels in the face of the rising popularity of deconstructionist readings.⁴⁸ By October 1981, he was declaring himself

⁴⁷ Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press); *The Identity of Jesus Christ: The Hermeneutical Bases of Dogmatic Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975). For a detailed discussion of Frei's core argument in his early work, see my *Christ, Providence and History: Hans W. Frei's Public Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2004), especially chh. 3–6.

⁴⁸ Frei, Letter to Bruce Piersault, July 8, 1980 (Hans Wilhelm Frei Papers, Manuscript Group no. 76, Special Collections, Yale Divinity School Library, box 4, folder 75).

‘personally doubtful about the persuasiveness of some of the moves I have made in the past’, saying that ‘at the very least they need large-scale qualification.’⁴⁹ And then, in 1982 and 1983, he gave a pair of lectures, one at Haverford College and one at the University of California, Santa Barbara, in which he made clear the nature of his doubts and the qualifications that they demanded – and in which he is understood by critics like Vanhoozer to have taken leave, if not of his senses, then at least of the sense of scripture.⁵⁰

Frei’s concerns did not, however, involve him abandoning the idea that there is a literal sense to scripture, capable of rendering the identity of Jesus Christ objectively to readers. His concerns focused, instead, on the answer that in his earlier work he had implicitly given to the question, ‘*Why* should one attend to that sense when reading scripture?’ Scripture has, after all, been read in all sorts of ways, and in some of those ways the literal sense is downplayed or ignored. What can one say to readers who adopt those other ways of reading, if one wishes to persuade them instead to attend to and learn from the literal sense? In his earlier work, Frei now acknowledged, the implicit answer given had simply been: ‘This text is a realistic narrative, and realistic narratives ought to be read in this way.’ In other words, his early work appeared to be underpinned by something like a general theory of realistic narrative: the erection of a ‘general category of which the synoptic Gospel narratives ... are a dependent instance.’⁵¹ Had Frei found himself faced, for instance, by a historical critic intent upon using the text as evidence for the reconstruction of a Jesus rather different from the one depicted, a critic for whom the narrative qualities of the text were simply one more form of evidence to be used in reconstructing the early church’s imagination of Jesus, the only response imagined in Frei’s early work is, ‘But it’s not the kind of text!’

Frei had now become convinced, however, that such a general and neutral justification of reading for the realistic narrative sense was implausible. It is, simply as a matter of fact, perfectly possible to do other things with such texts, and one is not necessarily committing a philosophical error – an error properly identifiable by means of generally available concepts – by so doing. In fact, Frei had become convinced that such a justification was not only

⁴⁹ Frei, Letter to Mark Ellingsen, October 20, 1981 (Frei Papers, box 1, folder 23). This is, interestingly, part of Frei’s response to the suggestion that he is part of a ‘Yale school’ – a suggestion made before the publication of *The Nature of Doctrine*, and before any obvious ‘turn to practice’ in Frei’s work.

⁵⁰ Frei, ‘Theology and the Interpretation of Narrative: Some Hermeneutical Considerations’, in *Theology and Narrative*, pp. 95–116, and ‘The “Literal Reading” of Biblical Narrative in the Christian Tradition.’

⁵¹ Frei, ‘The “Literal Reading” of Biblical Narrative’, p. 142.

implausible, but undesirable: it provided yet another way in which Christian reading ended up subordinated to a more general hermeneutical theory. It meant, in particular, that the claim that these texts give us the identity of Jesus Christ became an instance of a more general kind of claim, about what realistic narratives as such can do – and so it became subject to the limitations, and the changing fortunes, of the field of narrative theory, rather than being recognised as a *sui generis* claim about what the God of scripture does by means of scripture.

Frei nevertheless remained convinced that the kind of realistic narrative reading championed in his early work *was* the appropriate way for Christians to read these portions of scripture – and that, so read, these texts do render for us objectively the identity of Jesus Christ, teaching us to recognise him as truly risen and to acknowledge him as Lord. He was equally convinced, however, that the proper justification for reading this way can only be given in theological terms – that is, in terms that cannot be converted without remainder into the terms of some more neutral, non-theological account. And there is therefore an unavoidable circularity involved in identifying and justifying the kind of reading to which Christians are called. It is as only as one participates in this practice of reading that one is put in a position to learn what is meant by the theological terms that are required for articulating its nature, and justifying its priority. One learns, for instance, to read the scriptures as God's witness to Godself, and as one does so one learns what is meant by 'God' and 'witness', and so learns to articulate and justify what one is doing, and to explain why this is the way that one *should* read. There is no way into this circle except by taking the plunge and entering it (or perhaps we should say: except by being drawn into it by the Spirit). No neutral account – that is, no account that can be framed in terms available to one who has *not* yet learnt to read scripture – can adequately indicate how it is that one should read, because they cannot indicate what scripture is, nor how it relates to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.⁵²

Frei therefore begins with a descriptive account of the *practice* of Christian reading – that is, of the life of reading into which one must plunge in order to learn how to read, and how to articulate the reasons for such reading.⁵³ Some

⁵² Of course, various neutral accounts might approximate to a proper theological account, in *ad hoc* ways, and so might provide stepping stones towards a Christian reading.

⁵³ Frei is much more cautious about the connection between the kind of description he wants to issue and ethnographic description. It will be 'closer to the social sciences than to philosophy' (though 'certainly not identical to them') because it will look at the meaning that the practice of reading has for Christians (the ways in which it is

confusion has been caused by the fact that Frei's account of the *sensus literalis* describes the church's practice of reading in two different ways. At some points, he focuses rather formally on the fact that what he is describing is the kind of reading that, as a matter of fact, Christians have learnt to pursue (and believed themselves called to pursue): the reading that has become for them the 'plain sense', the communal sense, the dominant use in Christianity of these texts. That does not yet tell you what kind of reading this is, nor what kind of authority it is taken to have, nor how the Christian community believes it to be grounded, nor what explanation and justification they can offer of it, nor in what ways this tradition of reading is open to criticism. And it certainly doesn't tell you that scripture is whatever the church makes of it. It simply tells you that Frei is speaking about the kind of reading that the church has, on the whole, and by the grace of God, learnt to regard as central.

Substantively, however, he focuses on the particular shape of the reading of the scriptures to which Christians are committed: a reading that attends to the gospels' rendering for us of the identity of Jesus Christ.⁵⁴ Christian reading, Frei argues, is gathered around 'a very simple consensus: that the story of Jesus is about him, not about somebody else or about nobody in particular or about all of us; that it is not two stories ... or no story and so on and on.'⁵⁵ And Christian reading acknowledges that telling us the story of Jesus in this way is the text's true purpose (rather than a misleading surface feature beneath which true reading will seek to penetrate) – or, to put it another way, that the text is a fit enactment of its author's intention, and that our interest as Christian readers is precisely in acknowledging and responding to that intention.

In other words, Frei offers as his substantive account of the *sensus literalis* a deliberately minimal description of a rough practical consensus that has been visible in Christian reading over the centuries. At least when it comes to the gospels, Christians have on the whole assumed that the texts tell the story of Jesus, and that they mean what they say. This is not an exceptionless norm; it is possible to identify all kinds of counter-examples, or contexts in which this practice has not been to the fore of Christian life. It is even easier to identify

described in their language, the sense it has within the wider scheme of their life) rather than relying on more general accounts – and there are some resemblances between such an approach and one, Weberian strand of social science ('Theology and the Interpretation of Narrative', pp. 96–8). More than that he will not say.

⁵⁴ See Frei, *Types of Christian Theology*, ed. George Hunsinger and William C. Placher (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), pp. 3, 16, 141–2, and 'The "Literal Reading" of Biblical Narrative', p. 122.

⁵⁵ Frei, *Types of Christian Theology*, p. 140.

(especially in the modern period) times when Christian theorists have articulated the nature of scripture and the forms of reading proper to it in ways that have made this practice of reading for the story of Jesus seem dubious or of secondary importance, or which have made it very difficult to recognise. Nevertheless, Frei claims, the consensus is recognisably there.

Frei then argues that if we do want to describe and justify this kind of Christian reading, we will do best to turn not to an independent hermeneutical theory, but to a theological account set out in terms that are themselves given their meaning by this practice of reading.⁵⁶ He argues, for instance, that to describe and justify such reading, we will need to turn to the doctrine of the incarnation (which is, precisely, a ‘partial second-order redescription’ of ‘the synoptic Gospel narratives’) as the basis of the idea that Jesus’ identity is given to us in textual form;⁵⁷ he argues that the doctrine of creation is the basis for insisting that ‘Language is not fallen, not absent from truth or meaning’, so that certain kinds of deconstruction are ruled out;⁵⁸ and he argues (more fully) that ‘Any notion of truth such that that concept disallows the condescension of truth to the depiction in the text – to its own self-identification with, let us say, the fourfold story of Jesus of Nazareth taken as an ordinary story – has itself to be viewed with profound scepticism by a Christian interpreter. The textual word as witness to the Word of God is not identical with the latter, and yet, by the Spirit’s grace, it is “sufficient” for the witnessing.’⁵⁹

From a human, historical point of view (i.e., leaving out anything we might want to say about the work of the Spirit, or the action of providence), other forms of reading could have come to be the norm for the church. In the contest between Irenaeus and the Valentinians, for instance, the Valentinians

⁵⁶ He also, I think, continued to regard the kinds of conceptual tools deployed in *The Identity of Jesus Christ* – tools for articulating how it is that a realistic narrative conveys identity, and for speaking about the shape of the identity so conveyed – as appropriate for use in exploring the yield of such Christian reading. He does not make this explicit, but one of his last writings provides a very similar account of the resurrection to the one offered in *Identity*, with no indication that the basics of Frei’s articulation of that account have changed. See “‘How It All Began’: On The Resurrection of Christ”, *Anglican and Episcopal History* 53.2 (1989), pp. 139–45, republished as ‘Of the Resurrection of Christ’ in *Theology and Narrative*, pp. 200–206, and again in *Reading Faithfully*, pp. 184–9.

⁵⁷ Frei, *Types of Christian Theology*, pp. 141–2.

⁵⁸ Frei, ‘Theology and the Interpretation of Narrative’, p. 109.

⁵⁹ Frei, ‘Conflicts in Interpretation’ (the 1986 Alexander Thompson Memorial Lecture at Princeton Theological Seminary), in *Theology and Narrative*, pp. 153–66: p. 164.

could have prevailed, and their pattern of spiritual reading could have become the habitual (the ‘plain’) sense of the Christian community. ‘There is no a priori reason why the “plain” reading could not have been “spiritual” in contrast to “literal”, and certainly the temptation was strong.’⁶⁰ Had that happened, a lonely heir of Irenaeus in the present would certainly be able to say (on Frei’s account) that the text was now being misused, that the true meaning of the text had been missed, and that this meaning was waiting there ready to be rediscovered – but she would have no knock-down argument with which to convince her Valentinian friends of these claims, because the very coinage with which she could most fully fund the case would depend for its currency on the very kind of reading that the Valentinian church had rejected.⁶¹

Yet if we do ask, ‘Why is it that the church catholic should read in the way that, on the whole, it does?’ Frei will *not* say that it is simply a sociological fact, and that full membership of this community depends by definition upon compliance with the community’s rules. Rather, he will say that the church has learnt to read this way as the Spirit has guided them to attend to the scriptures, that they have learnt in that process that the text is God’s witness to God’s self, graciously assuming a textual form – and he will say that there is no more neutral way of specifying the kind of reading to which the church is called than by describing this knowledge into which the church has been drawn. Only the language learnt in the course of this reading is adequate to explain why Christians should read in this way, whatever analogies we might be able to find to other ways of reading.

⁶⁰ Frei, ‘Theology and the Interpretation of Narrative’, p. 122. This is what Frei meant when he said, in a 1984 letter to Gary Comstock, that ‘outside of that tradition there is no reason to think of *any* single interpretive move or scheme as *the* meaning of these stories’ (Frei, *Reading Faithfully: Writings from the Archives*, I: *Theology and Hermeneutics* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2015), pp. 35–40: p. 38).

⁶¹ Vanhoozer (as cited above) claims that ‘Frei’s argument amounts to the claim that *for Christians*, the biblical narratives render the identity of Jesus Christ.’ In one sense, this is quite right – but this claim is of the same logical type as the claim that ‘*For those who open the Bible and read it*, the biblical narratives render the identity of Jesus.’ The fact that those who don’t open the Bible and read it will not have the identity of Jesus rendered to them by the text doesn’t mean that authority in determining the sense of scripture has shifted from the text to the text-opening reader. Similarly, no interesting shift in authority is implied when we say that those who (for whatever reason) don’t read scripture for its identity-rendering sense won’t have the identity of Jesus rendered to them.

Conclusion

Lindbeck's work is wide-ranging and multi-faceted, though sometimes rather loosely argued and conceptually imprecise. Frei's work is more cautious and more focused, and he is far more hesitant about drawing out the wider connections and implications of his claims. For all their differences of approach and temper, however, they can be read together, such that each theologian's account supplements the other's.

There is much more that needs to be said (about other forms that the objectivity of scripture can take; about ways in which God's use of scripture to interrupt the church can take other forms; about the relationship between the gospels' depiction of Jesus and the rest of scripture; about the ways in which the church's life in the world animates and challenges its reading in unpredictable ways; about the more detailed history of the literal sense – and so on). What Lindbeck's work suggests, however, and Frei's work makes clear, is that there is a double logic in theological hermeneutics: on the one hand a circle, and on the other hand a line. The circular logic is the logic of learning to read; the linear logic is the logic of reading.

On the one hand, then, one learns to read with the help of the practice of the church and rule of faith (perhaps even by reading the books of such guides as Vanhoozer and Webster). Yet that practice and rule are themselves justified only by the results of the very form of reading that they help to inculcate. There is, in other words, a mutually supporting circularity uniting the text and its use.

On the other hand, the pattern of reading so sustained is precisely one in which there is a stark asymmetry, a line of authority running from text to reader. The pattern of reading in question is marked by a constant determination to bring all one's thought and practice, including one's hermeneutical thought and practice, to be tested by scripture, in recognition that it is God's instrument in both forming and correcting the church.

To turn from the line in order to focus on the circle would, as the critics suggest, be to neuter scripture, to turn it into the secure possession of a complacent church. My claim has been that, despite the critics' fears that they have fallen into precisely this trap, both Lindbeck and Frei can, when read together, help us to avoid it – perhaps more surely than those critics can themselves. That is because, as Frei suggests, downplaying the circle for the sake of the line will ultimately be self-defeating. It will mean that our accounts of the nature of scripture and of scriptural interpretation must rely upon

(possibly unstated) claims about the possibility, priority, and even necessity of certain kinds of reading, claims not themselves fully rooted in the results of such reading. It will, in other words, immunise our hermeneutics from scriptural critique. For a robust account of the objectivity of scripture, Frei and Lindbeck teach us, both the circle and the line are needed.