

Response to Clair Davis

I have been invited to respond to the observations of D. Clair Davis on the retirement of Professor Douglas J. Green, recently announced by the Board of Trustees of WTS. These observations could be responded to at several points. Here I limit myself to addressing just one, clearly central for him.

As Dr. Davis sees things, there is a line initiated by the biblical theological work of Geerhardus Vos that, insofar as far as Westminster's institutional history is concerned, runs through Edmund Clowney to more recent faculty members who espouse a so-called Christotelic hermeneutical method. This biblical-theological line he apparently thinks has been brought to an end by the recent announcement. He laments this outcome deeply, for he perceives it as a great loss for Westminster in what he fears will now be its greatly diminished capacity to serve the church and so a loss for the church itself as it seeks better understanding of the gospel and greater effectiveness in its ministry to the world (his next to last paragraph).

Clair Davis and I have a long and largely overlapping history with Westminster. Both of us, former WTS students, were privileged to serve together on its faculty for an extended period from the mid-1960s until early in the past decade when he retired in 2004 (my own retirement was several years later in 2010—an interval not insignificant for matters occasioning this response). So, I share with Clair the vantage point provided by our lengthy common history from which he assesses the recent events. But I have a decidedly different assessment.

My former colleague believes the decision of the Board of Trustees signals an abandonment of interest in biblical theology and the tradition of redemptive-historical, Christ-centered interpretation, with its fructifying potential for systematic theology and preaching, matters that have been an important and distinctive part of the training provided by WTS over the years.

Nothing could be further from the truth. The right and continuing commitment to the role of biblical theology at WTS is not in jeopardy. Rather, precisely at issue is whether biblical theology, properly conceived and implemented, will continue at WTS. What the Board's action reflects is the growing recognition, stemming from the controversy that began to engulf the Seminary around 2006, that at stake are two contending understandings of biblical theology, the one for whom Vos can be said to be the father, the other a more recent and diverging conception, associated with a "Christotelic" interpretation, which, as far as Vos is concerned, understands itself as needing to go "beyond Vos," particularly in his reading of the Old Testament perceived as (too) "flat." The Board through its recent action clearly affirmed the first understanding of biblical theology as taught by Vos and dismissed the second Christotelic version.

At the height of his career, in 1916, Vos wrote ("Hebrews, the Epistle of the Diatheke" in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation*, pp. 232-33):

... Reformed theology has with greater earnestness than any other type of Christian doctrine upheld the principles of the absoluteness and unchanging identity of truth. It is the most anti-pragmatic of all forms of Christian teaching. And this is all the more remarkable since it has from the beginning shown itself possessed of a true historic sense in the apprehension of the progressive character of the deliverance of truth. Its doctrine of the covenants on its historical side represents the first attempt at constructing a history of revelation and may justly be considered the precursor of what is at present called biblical theology. But the Reformed have always insisted upon it that at no point shall a recognition of the historical delivery and apprehension of truth be permitted to degenerate into a relativity of truth. The history remains a history of revelation. Its total product agrees absolutely in every respect with the sum of truth as it lies in the eternal mind and purpose of God. If already the religion of the Old

and New Testament church was identical, while the process of supernatural revelation was still going on, how much more must the church, since God has spoken for the last time in His Son, uphold the ideal absoluteness of her faith as guaranteed by its agreement with the Word of God that abideth forever. It is an unchristian and an unbiblical procedure to make development superior to revelation instead of revelation superior to development, to accept belief and tendencies as true because they represent the spirit of the time and in a superficial optimism may be regarded as making for progress. Christian cognition is not an evolution of truth, but a fallible apprehension of truth which must at each point be tested by an accessible absolute norm of truth. To take one's stand upon the infallibility of the Scriptures is an eminently religious act; it honors the supremacy of God in the sphere of truth in the same way as the author of Hebrews does by insisting upon it, notwithstanding all progress, that the Old and the New Testament are the same authoritative speech of God.

Earlier in his 1894 inaugural address at Princeton Seminary, he wrote in a similar vein ("The Idea of Biblical Theology," *Redemptive History*, p. 19):

The second point to be emphasized in our treatment of Biblical Theology is that the historical character of the truth is not in any way antithetical to, but throughout subordinated to, its revealed character. Scriptural truth is not absolute, notwithstanding its historic setting; but the historic setting has been employed by God for the very purpose of revealing the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. It is not the duty of Biblical Theology to seek first the historic features of the Scriptural ideas, and to think that the absolute character of the truth as revealed of God is something secondary to be added thereunto. The reality of revelation should be the supreme factor by which the historic factor is kept under

control. With the greatest variety of historical aspects, there can, nevertheless, be no inconsistencies or contradictions in the Word of God.

I certainly do not mean to suggest an exact correspondence between the interpretive approach Vos was opposing in his day and the Christotelic approach approved by Dr. Davis as belonging in the line of Vos. Still, it is difficult to miss an unmistakable affinity between the two approaches. Several observations on the above quotes serve to bring out that similarity.

First, in these passages Vos is concerned with the fundamental and ever-crucial issue of the relationship between *revelation and history*, between historical development and revealed truth, and specifically how that relationship is to be understood with an eye toward a sound conception of biblical theology. Noteworthy in that regard is the continuity he sees between his own understanding of biblical theology and “the true historic sense” that has marked Reformed theology from its inception, specifically covenant theology’s awareness of and attention to the historically progressive character of revelation. The epoch-making stature of Vos is not in drawing attention for the first time to the significance of the fundamentally historical nature of revelation, though his work certainly highlights that—especially important where it is missed or underappreciated. Rather, his singular importance is in opening the way, in a post-Enlightenment setting, to biblically sound alternatives in the face of the destructive biblical theologies spawned by the historical-critical method in the late 18th and throughout the 19th centuries down to his own time. The continuity that Vos sees between his biblical theological work and earlier Reformed theology, then, suggests the need for reconsidering the high grade Dr. Davis assigns to a Christotelic approach at the expense of the Puritans (third paragraph from the end), at least when we consider the best and most able among them (e.g., Owen, Goodwin).

Second, Vos is concerned to stress that within Scripture and the history of revelation (of which the origin of Scripture is a part) the historical character of its truth, while integral, is subordinate to its revealed character. While historical development is essential, revelation, as he says, is “supreme.” And that is always so throughout, for “its total product”; “at no point” is that not the case.

It is this point of the entire truthfulness of the history of revelation and Scripture--involving “the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth,” as Vos says, and critically essential for any doctrine of Scripture, like that set out in chapter 1 of the WCF, intent on doing justice to the unity and coherent harmony of the Bible as God’s own written word--it is just this crucially important point that is compromised or at best obscured by the Christotelic approach to Scripture. This happens through its “first read-second read” treatment of the Old Testament that it adopts. The first read seeks to establish the original historical meaning or original human author meaning of an Old Testament passage on its own terms without any reference to the New Testament. The second read of the passage then seeks to show how in the light of the New Testament it is about Christ, to disclose its Christotelic content.

This approach as a whole is ill-conceived and seriously flawed. Though it is motivated in part by the legitimate concern to avoid reading New Testament meanings back into Old Testament texts--no doubt a danger--there is a difference between reading the New Testament back *into* the Old and reading the Old Testament *in light of* the New. The former is wrong; the latter is not only legitimate but also requisite. As it is carried out, the first read tends towards highlighting the “messiness” of the Old Testament, as its proponents put it, towards finding unrelated or discordant trajectories of meaning in the Old Testament. It obscures both the organic connection between the meaning of the divine author and what the human authors wrote as well as the organic connection and unity between the Old Testament and New Testament. Multivalent, even contradictory trajectories will appear to be the case when the

Old Testament documents are read “on their own terms” in the sense of bracketing out their fulfillment in Christ and the interpretive bearing of the New Testament.

For new covenant readers submissive to both the Old and New Testaments as the word of God, such a disjunctive reading of the Old Testament is illegitimate, as well as redemptive-historically (and canonically) anachronistic. To seek to interpret the various Old Testament documents for themselves and apart from the vantage point of the New exposes one ultimately to misinterpreting them. The Old Testament is to be read in the light of the New not only because Jesus and the New Testament writers read it this way, but also because Jesus and the New Testament writers are clear about the continuity in intention and meaning that exists between themselves and the various Old Testament authors and what those authors wrote in their own time and place. Passages like Luke 24:44-45, John 5:39-47 and 1 Peter 1:10-12, not to mention numerous others, put this beyond question—unless we are to dismiss such passage, as advocates of Christotelic interpretation characteristically do, as reflecting a Second Temple Jewish hermeneutic that attributes meaning to Old Testament passages that is not their original human author meaning.

The Old Testament reveals a unidirectional path or a set of multiple paths that leads to Christ. Certainly at points that way is obscure and difficult to follow; that remains and will always be a challenge to sound interpretation of the Old Testament. Nor did the Old Testament authors grasp with any fullness the meaning of what *they wrote*. But, as Vos says elsewhere, that they “did not understand all this in detail is not relevant” (*Reformed Dogmatics*, volume 2, forthcoming, on the unity of the covenant of grace). At the same time, their understanding of what they wrote does not disclose discordant and inorganic discontinuity. As Vos immediately adds, “But without doubt, they would have grasped the heart of the matter.” To cite a few examples among many more: “Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was

glad” (John 8:56). “Isaiah said this because he saw Jesus’ glory and spoke about him” (John 12:41). Not only did Isaiah speak (or write) but also, in speaking, he himself saw or understood. In fact, with an eye to the syntax of verse 41, he spoke “because he saw”; he said it because he saw it. Again, the intense interest of the Old Testament prophets as a whole was in what “the Spirit of Christ” at work in them was disclosing about his own eventual coming, his sufferings and consequent glory (1 Peter 1:10-11).

As Vos indicates in the first quote above, at stake here is what is essential for the Reformed faith (e.g., WCF, 7:5-6; 8:6; 11:6; WLC, 33-35), for true, Biblical religion since the fall: the unity of the religion of the Old and New Testaments focused on Christ. Central for the faith of the former is the future fulfillment of the promise of the Messiah to come, for the faith of the latter, the realized fulfillment of that promise.

Finally, it seems fair to observe that the term “Christotelic” has been coined in part to replace “Christocentric.” Advocates of Christotelic interpretation will speak of the Old Testament being “Christological” in a general sense, in view of the pervasive reference to Christ that the New Testament finds in the Old Testament in all its parts. But they avoid applying “Christocentric” to the Old Testament because in their view, their “first read” approach shows that its original historical, human author meaning is, all told, not Christ-centered.

There can be no objection to “Christotelic” in itself. But Scripture is Christotelic just because it is Christocentric. It is Christotelic only as it is Christocentric, and as it is that in every part, the Old Testament included. Or, as we may, in fact must put the issue here in its most ultimate consideration, Christ is the mediatorial Lord and Savior of redemptive history not only at its end but also from beginning to end. He is not only its omega but also its alpha, and he is and can be its omega only as he is its alpha.

Biblical theology in the tradition of Vos, as it will continue at WTS, Lord willing, seeks to affirm this glorious truth in all its fullness. Biblical theology undertaken as Christotelic interpretation, no doubt despite the best intentions of many of its practitioners, intentions which I commend and honor, nonetheless regrettably obscures and compromises that truth.

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