

Reformed Theological Seminary: Charlotte

“Not Manifold, But One”

The Westminster Standards and the Single Sense of Scripture

Submitted to Dr. Chad Van Dixhoorn

In Partial Fulfillment of

ST6370: Theology of the Westminster Standards

By

Kirby Key

November 8, 2025

“We are not to depart from the litterall sence of the scripture but upon great inconveniences,” declared William Bridge amidst a debate at the Westminster Assembly.<sup>1</sup> Bridge understood that the authority of the Bible is embedded in its literal meaning, which Samuel Rutherford explained as “the Holy Spirit’s true intent and aim as far as he makes the things signified clear.”<sup>2</sup> The Westminster Divines were convinced of “the authority of the Holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed, and obeyed,” and thus were devoted to interpreting the Holy Spirit’s intended communication in its contents.<sup>3</sup> Since the correct understanding of God’s Word is essential for Christian belief and behavior, the Westminster Assembly instructed Christians on how to correctly interpret the Bible. According to Westminster Confession of Faith I.9, “The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself: and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture... it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly.”<sup>4</sup> This “infallible rule of interpretation”—Scripture must interpret Scripture—was not a post-Reformation innovation. Over a millennium prior to the Westminster Assembly, Augustine suggested “using the evidence of indisputable passages to remove the uncertainty of ambiguous ones.”<sup>5</sup>

However, the Confession’s parenthetical qualification, “the true and full sense of any Scripture (which is not manifold, but one),” signaled a departure from the Catholic tradition. Before the Reformation, many Christians believed that there was “a field of possible meanings that allowed for considerable exegetical creativity” in biblical interpretation.<sup>6</sup> Patristic

---

<sup>1</sup> Chad Van Dixhoorn, ed., *The Minutes and Papers of the Westminster Assembly, 1643–1652*, vol. 2: Minutes, Sessions 45–119, 155–198 (Oxford University Press, 2012), 528 (23 February 1644, Session 161).

<sup>2</sup> Samuel Rutherford, *Lectures on Holy Scripture*, ed. Chad Van Dixhoorn, trans. Joseph A. Tipton, vol. 2, *The Complete Works of Samuel Rutherford* (Reformation Heritage Books, Forthcoming), 38.

<sup>3</sup> *Westminster Confession of Faith* I.4 in Chad Van Dixhoorn, *Creeds, Confessions, and Catechisms: A Reader’s Edition* (Crossway, 2022), 185.

<sup>4</sup> WCF I.9 in Van Dixhoorn, *Creeds, Confessions, and Catechisms*, 187.

<sup>5</sup> Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, trans. R. P. H. Green, Oxford World’s Classics (Oxford Univ. Press, 2008), 37.

<sup>6</sup> Timothy George, *Reading Scripture with the Reformers* (InterVarsity Press, 2011), 28.

theologians and medieval biblical scholars believed that there were multiple levels of meaning in every biblical text. The *sensus literalis* of any passage is only one of its meanings;<sup>7</sup> an interpreter must adventure beyond the textual surface in order to uncover the *sensus mysticus*.<sup>8</sup> Over the course of the centuries, Christian exegetes developed interpretive grids through which readers could uncover these mystical meanings. The fourfold hermeneutical pattern known as the quadriga, embraced by Augustine and Aquinas, emerged as the standard method for discovering the multiple senses of God’s Word. But in “the confession’s passing comment,” the Westminster Divines dismissed the enduring assumption that Scripture has manifold meanings, thereby also discarding the methods for deriving (or inventing) them.<sup>9</sup>

The Westminster Divines rejected the Catholic tradition’s prevalent hermeneutical approach, which assigned multiple meanings to each passage of Scripture according to the four senses of the quadriga. Instead, they asserted that each passage possesses a single meaning according to the authorially-intended, literal-grammatical sense. The Westminster Confession offers a hermeneutical improvement that avoids convoluted readings and enhances interpretive certainty for those seeking to understand Holy Scripture.

## **I. The Quadriga and Manifold Meanings in the Catholic Tradition**

Manifold theologians in the history of the church believed Holy Scripture contains manifold meanings. From the early centuries of the church through the era of the Reformation, biblical interpreters assumed that the Holy Spirit inspired more meanings than the plain sense of each text. Capturing the mindset of many interpreters of the Catholic tradition, Pelikan writes,

---

<sup>7</sup> The literal sense. Muller defines the *sensus literalis* as “the fundamental literal or grammatical sense of the text of Scripture.” Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms: Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology*, 2nd ed. (Baker Academic, 2017), 331.

<sup>8</sup> The mystical sense, defined as “as distinct from the literal reading of a text, the reading or interpretation that in the words of the text finds types, signs, figures, tropes, or symbols of meaning not literally stated in the text.” Muller, *Dictionary*, 332.

<sup>9</sup> Chad Van Dixhoorn, *Confessing the Faith: A Reader’s Guide to the Westminster Confession of Faith* (The Banner of Truth Trust, 2014), 26.

“To discern the deeper and truer meaning of such passages, it was necessary to understand that biblical words and biblical narratives meant more than they said.”<sup>10</sup> Many theologians assumed two categories of meaning in the Bible: literal and spiritual (or mystical). De Lubac asserts that the Christian tradition has understood Scripture to contain both literal and spiritual meanings. He explains that the spiritual meaning “is not separated from the letter. At first, it is contained and hidden in the letter. The letter is good and necessary, because it leads to the spirit. The letter is its instrument and servant.”<sup>11</sup> While the literal meaning is important, it is inferior to the spiritual; the mystical meaning is the treasure buried within the field of the literal. This duality of biblical meaning was upheld by Roman Catholic theologians in the early modern period.<sup>12</sup>

### **A. Manifold Meanings in the Early Church**

The hermeneutical approach of excavating multiple layers of meaning in Scripture emerged in the early church period. Plenty of patristic theologians assumed there were manifold meanings in each biblical passage.<sup>13</sup> Christopher Hall boldly claims, “All the fathers expected to

---

<sup>10</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, vol. 3, *The Growth of Medieval Theology (600–1300)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 39.

<sup>11</sup> Henri de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis: The Four Senses of Scripture*, trans. Mark Sebanc, vol. 1 in *Ressourcement: Retrieval and Renewal in Catholic Thought* (RRRCT) (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1998), 226.

<sup>12</sup> Samuel Rutherford disputes the interpretive principles of early-modern Roman Catholic theologians in his *Lectures on Holy Scripture*. He cites Alonso Tostado (ca. 1400–1455, bishop of Avila and Roman Catholic exegete), Gabriel Vásquez (1549–1604, Spanish Jesuit theologian), and Robert Bellarmine (1542–1621, Archbishop of Capua, Jesuit theologian and controversialist) in the 3rd Question of his 2nd Disputation: “Whether Scripture is Capable of Multiple Meanings.” “Tostado says that beneath the letter lurks a mystical meaning which the pious preacher can tease out at his discretion for the sake of edification. Differing with Tostado, Vásquez says, ‘We maintain that in addition to the literal there can also be a mystical meaning beneath the letter according to the design of the Holy Spirit, the principal author of Scripture, so that it can be said this was fulfilled or prophesied.’ Bellarmine says, ‘Scripture often has two meanings, one literal (or historical), the other spiritual (or mystical). The literal is that directly denoted by the words, while the spiritual is that which refers to something other than what the words directly signify.’” Rutherford, *Lectures*, 34.

<sup>13</sup> Craig Carter credits this hermeneutical assumption to the influence of Platonic thought on early Christianity. He argues that patristic theologians co-opted Platonic allegory and applied it in a manner “appropriate to Holy Scripture.” Carter writes, “This Christianization of allegory necessarily involves drawing the spiritual or allegorical sense back into close proximity to the literal sense, precisely because the Christian faith is about God’s mighty acts in history and the inspired interpretation of those acts by his appointed and inspired prophets and apostles.” Craig A. Carter, *Interpreting Scripture with the Great Tradition: Recovering the Genius of Premodern Exegesis* (Baker Academic, 2018), 167.

find layers of meaning within a biblical text.”<sup>14</sup> As early as the 2nd century, Irenaeus and Justin Martyr exhibited allegorical exegesis in their writings.<sup>15</sup> Clement of Alexandria was an interpretive pioneer who had a significant impact on the Alexandrian exegetical tradition. He developed a system for discovering the deeper meaning of a biblical text: one must first understand the literal sense before he can discover the allegorical.<sup>16</sup> Clement was concerned with Gnostic allegories of the Bible that disregarded the plain sense of the passage. He recognized that allegories untethered from the biblical text spiraled into heresies, so he established guardrails to prevent nonsensical interpretations. Clement “insisted that the literal meaning of the biblical text had to be preserved, and that any figurative meaning had to conform to what was fitting for God and consonant with other passages of Scripture.”<sup>17</sup> While Clement’s concerns reveal that it was

---

<sup>14</sup> Christopher A. Hall, *Reading Scripture with the Church Fathers* (InterVarsity Press, 2009), 133.

<sup>15</sup> Hall, *Reading Scripture with the Church Fathers*, 138. Irenaeus understood the rod of Moses as a type of Christ that foreshadowed his virgin birth: “Wherefore also Moses giving a type, cast his rod upon the earth, in order that it, by becoming flesh, might expose and swallow up all the opposition of the Egyptians, which was lifting itself up against the pre-arranged plan of God; that the Egyptians themselves might testify that it is the finger of God which works salvation for the people, and not the son of Joseph” (Exodus 7:8–13). Irenaeus, *Against Heresies in The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, edited by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, vol. 1 of *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, (Christian Literature Company, 1885), 453.

Justin Martyr interpreted Jacob’s two marriages to Leah and Rachel as two dispensations of Christ’s ministry to the Jews and Gentiles: “Attend therefore to what I say. The marriages of Jacob were types of that which Christ was about to accomplish. For it was not lawful for Jacob to marry two sisters at once. And he serves Laban for [one of] the daughters; and being deceived in [the obtaining of] the younger, he again served seven years. Now Leah is your people and synagogue; but Rachel is our Church. And for these, and for the servants in both, Christ even now serves.” Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho, a Jew in The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, edited by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, vol. 1 of *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, (Christian Literature Company, 1885), 267. Both Irenaeus and Justin exhibit deriving a separate, mystical (in both instances, Christotelic) meaning from the plain sense of an Old Testament text.

<sup>16</sup> David S. Dockery, *Biblical Interpretation Then and Now: Contemporary Hermeneutics in the Light of the Early Church* (Baker Book House, 1992), 83.

<sup>17</sup> Gerald Bray, *How the Church Fathers Read the Bible: A Short Introduction*, 1st ed. (Faithlife Corporation, 2022), 91. Clement critiques Gnostic misinterpretations in his *Miscellanies*: “And if those also who follow heresies venture to avail themselves of the prophetic Scriptures; in the first place they will not make use of all the Scriptures, and then they will not quote them entire, nor as the body and texture of prophecy prescribe. But, selecting ambiguous expressions, they wrest them to their own opinions, gathering a few expressions here and there; not looking to the sense, but making use of the mere words. For in almost all the quotations they make, you will find that they attend to the names alone, while they alter the meanings; neither knowing, as they affirm, nor using the quotations they adduce, according to their true nature.” Clement of Alexandria, *Miscellanies in Fathers of the Second Century: Hermas, Tatian, Athenagoras, Theophilus, and Clement of Alexandria*, edited by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, vol. 2 of *Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Christian Literature Company, 1885), 551.

objectionable to indiscriminately plunder Scripture for mystical meanings, the hermeneutical assumption of dual senses to Scripture was already in the water during the patristic period.

Clement's catechumen, Origen of Alexandria, advanced the issue by "develop(ing) an interpretive scheme that would become foundational for all subsequent patristic exegesis."<sup>18</sup> Origen shared the assumption of his teacher that the Bible contains both literal and mystical meanings. Origen wrote that the Scriptures "have not only a meaning that is manifest but also another that is hidden."<sup>19</sup> Origen believed that exclusively literal readings were impoverished interpretations of God's Word, pinpointing the literalistic approach of the Jews as the reason they failed to find Christ in the Scriptures.<sup>20</sup> In order to avoid Jewish errors and uncover these hidden meanings, Origen invented a threefold interpretive scheme. He proposed three levels of meaning in Scripture that "correspond to a basic anthropological model whereby each human being is composed of flesh, soul, and spirit in ascending order."<sup>21</sup> The rudimentary sense of Scripture was "the flesh" while the mystical meanings were understood as either related to the human soul or spirit, the spiritual as the highest level of meaning.<sup>22</sup> Origen applied his interpretive grid across the canon of Scripture, his adventurous exegesis uncovering exciting meanings in passages such as "The Parable of the Good Samaritan" in Luke 10.<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> Bray, *How the Church Fathers Read the Bible*, 92.

<sup>19</sup> Origen, *On First Principles*, cited from Hall, *Reading Scripture with the Church Fathers*, 138. Origen likened the words of Scripture to "vulgar and unpolished vessels" that hide the "treasure of divine wisdom." However, we are hindered by "the weakness of our understanding" from "trac(ing) out the hidden and secret meaning in each individual word." Origen, *On First Principles in Fathers of the Third Century: Tertullian, Part Fourth; Minucius Felix; Commodian; Origen, Parts First and Second*, edited by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, vol. 4 of *Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Christian Literature Company, 1885), 355.

<sup>20</sup> Ian Christopher Levy, *Introducing Medieval Biblical Interpretation: The Senses of Scripture in Premodern Exegesis* (Baker Academic, 2018), 12.

<sup>21</sup> Levy, *Introducing Medieval Biblical Interpretation*, 13.

<sup>22</sup> Hall, *Reading Scripture with the Church Fathers*, 144–145.

<sup>23</sup> Origen postulates that the wounds inflicted by robbers on the Samaritan are "vices and sins." The priest who passed him represented the law, while the Levite represented the "prophetic word." The Samaritan, of course, is Jesus, who brings the man to the inn, which represents the church. Origen urges Christians to imitate the Samaritan by helping other sinners since he is an image of Christ: "We can go to them, bind their wounds, pour in oil and wine, put them on our own beasts, and bear their burdens. Origen, *Homilies on Luke and Fragments on Luke*, ed. Thomas P. Halton, trans. Joseph T. Lienhard, vol. 94 of *The Fathers of the Church*, (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2009), 141.

Origen established the precedent to divide the Bible's spiritual sense into subcategories. Theologians of the patristic period continued to develop their understanding of the different aspects of the mystical meaning. Notably, monastic theologian John Cassian distinguishes three sorts of spiritual meaning in his *Conference* "On Spiritual Knowledge." Cassian writes that for Christian readers, "Scripture also will begin to put on a new face, and the beauty of the holier meanings will somehow grow with our growth."<sup>24</sup> These "holier meanings" are one of "three kinds: tropological, allegorical, anagogical."<sup>25</sup> The tropological meaning entailed "the moral explanation which has to do with improvement of life and practical teaching;" the allegorical "prefigure(s) the form of some mystery;" and the anagogical "rises from spiritual mysteries even to still more sublime and sacred secrets of heaven."<sup>26</sup> So Cassian is one of the earliest theologians who interpreted Scripture along the four senses of the quadriga and perhaps should be credited as very first.<sup>27</sup> Other theologians would assume and apply these same four senses in their biblical interpretation.

But no other patristic theologian surpassed Augustine's hermeneutical influence on subsequent generations. Augustine's *On Christian Teaching* was "the basic hermeneutical manual of the Middle Ages."<sup>28</sup> Augustine taught readers to discern the difference between signs

---

Calvin had a particular disdain for Origenistic exegesis. He viewed Origen as the consummate example of reckless allegorical interpretation. He lamented that, "Origen, and many others along with him, have seized the occasion of torturing Scripture, in every possible manner, away from the true sense." Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistles of Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians*, cited from Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725*, vol. 2, *Holy Scripture: The Cognitive Foundation of Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 471.

<sup>24</sup> John Cassian, *Conferences in Sulpitius Severus, Vincent of Lérins, John Cassian*, edited by Philip Schaff, vol. 11 of *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1894), 440.

<sup>25</sup> Cassian, *Conferences*, 437. Cassian justifies this threefold division from Proverbs 22:20, which in the LXX reads "And you also should copy them (the words of wisdom) for yourself three times (τρισσῶς) for counsel and knowledge upon the surface of your soul." *The Lexham English Septuagint*, 1st ed. (Lexham Press, 2013).

<sup>26</sup> Cassian, *Conferences*, 438. Cassian offers the holy city Jerusalem as an example of a word with four meanings in Scripture: "Jerusalem can be taken in four senses: historically, as the city of the Jews; allegorically as Church of Christ, anagogically as the heavenly city of God... tropologically, as the soul of man."

<sup>27</sup> Mitchell L. Chase, *40 Questions about Typology and Allegory*, 1st ed, 40 Questions Series (Kregel Publications, 2020), 212.

<sup>28</sup> Muller, *Dictionary*, 301.

and things, “For a sign is a thing which of itself makes other things come to mind.”<sup>29</sup> Written words are signs, and so it is the responsibility of the reader to recognize the things indicated by an author’s words. For readers of Holy Scripture in particular, their responsibility “is simply to find out the thoughts and wishes of those by whom it was written down and, through them, the will of God, which we believe these men followed as they spoke.”<sup>30</sup> However, sometimes readers are meant to understand the thing signified by the words as literal, other times as figurative, and sometimes both at once. Readers must recognize that the meaning of a statement is figurative “when the things themselves which we indicate by the proper names are used to signify something else,” such as when Paul refers to ministers of the gospel as oxen (1 Cor. 9:9).<sup>31</sup> Augustine is concerned that readers prioritize understanding the proper literal meaning of every passage, urging them not to dismiss a literal meaning as figurative.<sup>32</sup> However, he suggests that there are “hidden meaning(s)” that must be uncovered from biblical texts, such as the significance of the 153 fish caught by Peter in John 21.<sup>33</sup> Augustine understands that the primary purpose of a biblical passage is sometimes to convey an allegorical meaning, such as in Song of Songs 4:2, “where the church is addressed and praised like a beautiful woman.”<sup>34</sup> However, in such instances when a spiritual meaning is intended beyond the literal, the thing signified should correspond intelligibly to the sign itself.<sup>35</sup>

While Augustine’s *On Christian Teaching* establishes the foundation for identifying meanings beyond the literal sense of the sign, he elsewhere advocates for a fourfold understanding of biblical meaning. In his treatise *On the Profit of Believing*, Augustine

---

<sup>29</sup> Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, 30.

<sup>30</sup> Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, 32.

<sup>31</sup> Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, 37.

<sup>32</sup> Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, 75.

<sup>33</sup> Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, 46. The answer is, of course, the fifty days of Pentecost, multiplied by the three salvific-historical eras (pre-law, under law, and under grace), plus another three for the Trinity. *Tolle lege!*

<sup>34</sup> Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, 33.

<sup>35</sup> Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, 55.

articulates four senses of Scripture, writing that it “is handed down fourfold to them who desire to know it, according to history, according to *ætiology*, according to analogy, according to allegory.”<sup>36</sup> While Augustine’s four senses do not perfectly align with Cassian’s, his endorsement of a fourfold reading of Scripture validated the quest for discovering manifold meanings beyond the patristic era.<sup>37</sup> Medieval theologians referred back to Augustine as their authoritative recommendation for fourfold exegesis.<sup>38</sup>

## B. Manifold Meanings in the Medieval Church

Although there was “no single exegetical tradition in the medieval period,” the doctors of the medieval church inherited the assumption that there are manifold meanings in each biblical text, and they interpreted Scripture in search of these manifold meanings.<sup>39</sup> While there was disparity in the exegetical traditions of the Middle Ages regarding the priority of the literal sense and whether or not the mystical meanings are subordinate to it, the majority of interpreters did not think the Scriptures were limited to one meaning. They believed the Bible’s meanings are abundant because God is its author. Chase asserts, “The medieval interpreters believed that the divine inspiration of Scripture justified deeper senses in the text, for divine intent transcends and

---

<sup>36</sup> Augustine, *On the Profit of Believing*, in *St. Augustine: On the Holy Trinity, Doctrinal Treatises, Moral Treatises*. translated by C. L. Cornish, vol. 3 of *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, edited by Philip Schaff. (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1887), 349.

<sup>37</sup> “Thus (for example) it is handed down according to history, when there is taught what hath been written, or what hath been done; what not done, but only written as though it had been done. According to *ætiology*, when it is shown for what cause any thing hath been done or said. According to analogy, when it is shown that the two Testaments, the Old and the New, are not contrary the one to the other. According to allegory, when it is taught that certain things which have been written are not to be taken in the letter, but are to be understood in a figure.” Augustine’s “history” and “*ætiology*” correspond roughly with Cassian’s “literal” and “tropological.” Augustine’s “analogy” is essentially the same as Cassian’s “allegorical,” but Cassian’s “anagogical” is specifically about heaven whereas Augustine’s “allegorical” is about figurative meanings in general. Augustine, *On the Profit of Believing*, 349.

<sup>38</sup> Dockery, *Biblical Interpretation Then and Now*, 145.

<sup>39</sup> Mark D. Thompson, “*Sola Scriptura*” in Matthew Barrett, ed, *Reformation Theology: A Systematic Summary* (Crossway, 2017), 152.

envelops and clarifies the intent of the human author.”<sup>40</sup> Dockery adds that they were obliged to identify fuller meanings in the text that were not “possibly intended or known by the author.”<sup>41</sup>

The key to unlocking the treasury of hidden meanings in Scripture was the quadriga: “the fourfold pattern of medieval exegesis.”<sup>42</sup> The quadriga served as a hermeneutical lens through which one could identify the four senses of a Scripture passage. These four senses corresponded with Cassian’s: the literal, tropological, allegorical, and anagogical. Theological students of the Middle Ages “frequently rehearsed” a “mnemonic refrain” that inculcated the quadriga into their hermeneutical approach: “The letter teaches of deeds, allegory of what is believed; morality of what is done, anagoge of things to come.”<sup>43</sup> The latter three senses—the allegorical, anagogical, and tropological—were associated with the three theological virtues of faith, hope, and love, inspired by the influence of Augustine and Gregory the Great.<sup>44</sup> Medieval interpreters believed that these three virtues were pervasive throughout Christian Scripture. And yet, when they appeared to be absent from a text, it was still safe to impose a faith, hope, or love-related sense.<sup>45</sup> By interpreting the Bible according to these four senses, the doctors of the Middle Ages were honoring their hermeneutical heritage. Barrett writes, “The fourfold meaning was not original to medievals; they were simply retrieving, though at times adapting, a hermeneutic considered a staple of the church catholic.”<sup>46</sup>

Although the medieval church has been caricatured as untethered allegorists and playing fast and loose with the literal meaning of the biblical text, there were several influential medieval

---

<sup>40</sup> Chase, *40 Questions*, 216.

<sup>41</sup> Dockery, *Biblical Interpretation Then and Now*, 177.

<sup>42</sup> Muller, *Dictionary*, 301.

<sup>43</sup> Littera gesta docet, quid credas allegoria, moralis quid agas, quo tendas anagogia. Levy, *Introducing Medieval Biblical Interpretation*, 34.

<sup>44</sup> Muller, *Dictionary*, 301.

<sup>45</sup> Dockery, *Biblical Interpretation Then and Now*, 158.

<sup>46</sup> Matthew Barrett, *The Reformation as Renewal: Retrieving the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church* (Zondervan Academic, 2023), 140.

exegetes who underscored the importance of the human author's plain intent. Early in the Middle Ages, Isidore of Seville and the Venerable Bede emphasized the necessity of rightly interpreting the literal. Isidore contested that the Bible must be interpreted historically. However, the failure of both Jews and other heretics was that they interpreted Scripture exclusively historically. He wrote that the language of Scripture "is to be understood not only historically, but also according to its mystical sense, that is, spiritually."<sup>47</sup> Bede insisted that interpreters diligently seek to grasp the literal sense before they jump to allegorical conclusions, lest "by his allegorizing he desert the explicit faith based on history."<sup>48</sup> Muller references Albert the Great, Hugh of St. Victor, and Nicholas of Lyra as theologians who appropriately balanced the literal and mystical senses in the later Middle Ages. He highlights Hugh of St. Victor as a champion of the Scripture's literal meaning who "disputed those who moved away from the literal sense."<sup>49</sup> He was concerned by those who disregarded the literal sense as if it were not also inspired by the Holy Spirit. He recognized that if the thing "literally signified by any given word is not understood, the spiritual meanings of the text—which arise not from the words of the text but from the things that they signify—cannot be grasped."<sup>50</sup>

The medieval theologian chiefly responsible for advancing the quadriga in Catholic interpretation is Thomas Aquinas. Standing on the shoulders of Augustine, Aquinas aimed to standardize the quadriga for the sake of responsible exegesis.<sup>51</sup> Barrett comments, "Thomas considered the fourfold meaning essential to preserving the spiritual truths the divine author intended to communicate."<sup>52</sup> While Aquinas certainly recognized value in each of the four

---

<sup>47</sup> Isidore of Seville, *Sententiae*, 3.12.3, cited from Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition*, 39.

<sup>48</sup> The Venerable Bede, *Commentary on Genesis*, I, cited from Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition*, 39.

<sup>49</sup> Muller, *PRRD: Holy Scripture*, 35.

<sup>50</sup> Muller, *PRRD: Holy Scripture*, 35, paraphrasing Hugh of St. Victor, *De Scripturis et Scriptoribus*, cap. 5.

<sup>51</sup> Aquinas cites Augustine four times in his short article answering "Whether in Holy Scripture a Word May Have Several Senses?"

<sup>52</sup> Barrett, *The Reformation as Renewal*, 140.

senses, he emphasizes the primacy of the literal sense in Christian hermeneutics. Muller argues, “Aquinas commented with some frequency that the *primus sensus* and *prima expositio* of Scripture was *magis litteralis*, and that the purpose of exegesis was to identify the ‘intention’ of the words, of the book, or of the writer.”<sup>53</sup> Muller’s claim is validated by Aquinas’s assertion in the *Summa* that, “all the senses are founded on …the literal.”<sup>54</sup> Therefore, there is no such thing as a legitimate mystical sense that is divorced from the literal. If the allegorical, anagogical, or tropological meaning is untethered from the literal meaning, then the former is not a true meaning of the passage. Aquinas adds that even legitimate mystical senses cannot be the grounds for a theological claim: it is only the literal sense “from which… can any argument be drawn.”<sup>55</sup> Even so, Aquinas argues that since God is the author of Scripture, who “comprehends all things by His intellect,” then it must be the case that “even according to the literal sense, one word in Holy Writ should have several senses.”<sup>56</sup> For Aquinas, “with God all (meanings) are possible,” so long as they are embedded in the text’s literal sense. Therefore Muller insists that Aquinas and advocates of the quadriga “did not ignore the literal meaning of the text, as sometimes alleged, but used it as the basis for each of the other meanings.”<sup>57</sup> Aquinas’s qualifications on the literal sense and its relationship to the others “set the terms of debate thereafter.”<sup>58</sup>

## II. The Single Sense of Scripture in the Westminster Standards

The rise of the Reformation afforded the opportunity to subject Aquinas’s quadriga to scrutiny. The European Renaissance and concurrent reformations shared skepticism towards

---

<sup>53</sup> Muller, *PRRD: Holy Scripture*, 36.

<sup>54</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Burns Oates & Washbourne, 1912), Part I Q. 1 Art. 10 Ad. 1.

<sup>55</sup> Aquinas, *Summa*, Part I Q. 1 Art. 10 Ad. 1. It seems that Aquinas would agree with Rutherford that, “The church cannot cause Psalm 91:[13] (“You shall tread upon the lion and the dragon”) to mean ‘You, O Pope, shall trample the necks of emperors underfoot.’” Rutherford, *Lectures on Holy Scripture*, 48.

<sup>56</sup> Aquinas, *Summa*, Part I Q. 1 A. 10 Resp.

<sup>57</sup> Muller, *Dictionary*, 302.

<sup>58</sup> Robert Letham, *The Westminster Assembly: Reading Its Theology In Historical Context* (P&R Pub, 2009), 148.

tradition and an emphasis on the proper interpretation of written texts, particularly regarding authorial intent. Muller writes, “The Reformation and its sometime ally, Renaissance humanism, brought new tools and new attitudes to the study of the text of Scripture.”<sup>59</sup> The Reformers reevaluated the claims of the Catholic tradition and rejected the interpretations that appeared forced onto Scripture rather than derived from it. Many of the doctrines critiqued by the Reformed were those that resulted from “the allegorical, tropological, and anagogical meanings of the text.”<sup>60</sup> Since the three mystical senses quadriga was responsible for heterodox conclusions, the Reformed suspected that the fourfold interpretation was therefore a heterodox system—papist hermeneutics results in papist readings. Luther was concerned “that allegorizing could easily become a Trojan horse with which one could smuggle all sorts of mischief into the Scriptures.”<sup>61</sup> Over a century after the Reformation, À Brakel accused the Roman Catholics of insisting on a fourfold meaning “in order to facilitate the pope’s placement upon the seat of judgment.”<sup>62</sup> The Reformation included a reform of biblical hermeneutics, and it eventually came about that, “both Calvinists and Lutherans insist wholly upon the literal sense of Scripture.”<sup>63</sup>

#### **A. The Single Sense is the Literal Intent**

The Westminster Divines embraced the Reformers’ emphasis on the literal sense of the Bible and their concern about the Catholic claim of manifold meanings. Van Dixhoorn writes, “With the Reformation there came a stress on the literal meaning of the text and the unity of that meaning... For the assembly’s members, every interpretation started here.”<sup>64</sup> Muller argues that

---

<sup>59</sup> Muller, *PRRD: Holy Scripture*, 469.

<sup>60</sup> Muller, *PRRD: Holy Scripture*, 469.

<sup>61</sup> Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Biblical Authority after Babel: Retrieving the Solas in the Spirit of Mere Protestant Christianity*, (Brazos Press, 2018), 79.

<sup>62</sup> Wilhelmus à Brakel, *The Christian’s Reasonable Service: God, Man, and Christ*, ed. Joel R. Beeke, trans. Bartel Elshout, vol. 1 (Reformation Heritage Book, 2012), 43.

<sup>63</sup> William Twisse, *The Scriptures Sufficiency to Determine All Matters of Faith, Made Good Against the Papist* (London, 1656), 47.

<sup>64</sup> Van Dixhoorn, *Confessing the Faith*, 26–27.

the Reformed shift away from mystical meanings to a single literal sense “deprived the Protestant orthodox of the quadriga” as an ally in studying sacred doctrine.<sup>65</sup> However, the Westminster Divines and other post-Reformation theologians did not believe they had voluntarily filed for hermeneutical bankruptcy. Their focus on the literal intent of the author did not downgrade their access to spiritually edifying interpretation. Rather, their improved approach to the single sense of Scripture enabled them to identify the true mystical meanings intended by Scripture’s inspired authors. They did not reject the quadriga principally because they disagreed with the interpretive results it facilitated, although they were often problematic. They objected to it primarily because the division between the literal and spiritual meanings confused the unified nature of the literal sense. The Westminster Divines, along with other Reformed theologians, believed that the literal intent of the author was often to convey a spiritual meaning—allegorical, anagogical, or tropological—as the single sense of the passage.

Contrary to the quadriga, the Westminster Divines affirmed that all of Holy Scripture has one meaning. John Ball acknowledged their departure from the Catholic tradition: “There are (those who) make many senses of Scripture, but upon no sufficient ground, whereas it is apparent, there can be but one true and right sense.”<sup>66</sup> Parliamentarian and friend of the assembly Edward Leigh wrote, “We hold that there is one true, proper, and genuine sense of Scripture.”<sup>67</sup> The Westminster Assemblymen understood this single meaning as the one which God intended when it was written, not one that interpreters impose after the fact. Samuel Rutherford asserts, “The meaning of Scripture is the Word of God explained according to the Holy Spirit’s true

---

<sup>65</sup> Muller, *PRRD: Holy Scripture*, 443.

<sup>66</sup> John Ball, *A Way to the Tree of Life Discovered in Sundry Directions for the Profitable Reading of the Scriptures* (London, 1647), 167.

<sup>67</sup> Edward Leigh, *A Systeme or Body of Divinity Consisting of Ten Books* (London, 1662), 128. John Bower describes Leigh as “a noted lay Bible scholar and historian who served as a member of Parliament from 1645 to 1648. He was well acquainted with the members of the assembly and at one time chaired the Committee for Plundered Ministers.” John Bower, ed., *The Confession of Faith: A Critical Text and Introduction* (Reformation Heritage Books, 2020), 56.

intent and aim.”<sup>68</sup> Leigh agrees: “The sense of the Scriptures is that which God, the Author of Scripture, in and by the Scriptures, gives men to know and understand.”<sup>69</sup> This divinely-derived meaning is delivered in the written words of Scripture. The Holy Spirit inspired the words of Scripture to plainly convey His meaning. Therefore, God chose and ordered each word in the Bible in a way conducive for readers to understand the substance of God’s communication with them.<sup>70</sup> Since God communicates in written discourse, the proper method for discerning His communication is literal-grammatical exegesis. And so Rutherford defines the one meaning of Scripture as “the literal and grammatical.”<sup>71</sup>

The definition of Scripture’s meaning at Westminster aligned with the understanding of their English Reformed predecessors. In his magisterial *Disputation on Holy Scripture*, William Whitaker declares, “There is but one true, proper and genuine sense of scripture, arising from the words rightly understood, which we call the literal.”<sup>72</sup> Whitaker elaborates: “There is but one true and genuine sense of scripture, namely, the literal or grammatical, whether it arise from the words taken strictly, or from the words figuratively understood, or from both together.”<sup>73</sup> William Perkins concurs: “Scripture has only one sense, the literal one.”<sup>74</sup> But why should the infinitely wise God limit Himself to only one meaning in each text of Scripture? Augustine and Aquinas considered God’s omniscience a validation of manifold meanings. Certainly God is capable of communicating as many meanings as He wishes, but that does not necessitate He did so in Scripture. Dutch Reformed theologian Wilhelmus À Brakel writes, “Even though God is infinite

---

<sup>68</sup> Rutherford, *Lectures on Holy Scripture*, 38.

<sup>69</sup> Leigh, *Body of Divinity*, 125.

<sup>70</sup> Whitaker explains, “For the Scripture consists not in the bare words, but in the sense, interpretation, and meaning of the words.” William Whitaker, *A Disputation on Holy Scripture: Against the Papists, Especially Bellarmine and Stapleton*, ed. William Fitzgerald (Soli Deo Gloria Publ, 2000), 402.

<sup>71</sup> Rutherford, *Lectures on Holy Scripture*, 39.

<sup>72</sup> Whitaker, *Disputation on Holy Scripture*, 404.

<sup>73</sup> Whitaker, *Disputation on Holy Scripture*, 406.

<sup>74</sup> William Perkins, *The Arte of Prophecyng* (London, 1607), 31.

and therefore capable of comprehending many matters of infinite dimension simultaneously, He nevertheless is not addressing Himself, but rather men who have but a puny and finite intellect.”<sup>75</sup> In other words, God knew to whom He spoke. He intended for His message to be understood, so He communicated a single meaning according to the literal sense of His words.

Furthermore, the integrity of God’s communication would be compromised if the biblical texts were composed of multiple meanings. À Brakel scoffs at the notion that every Scripture contains four meanings, since it would “make the Holy Scripture ludicrous.”<sup>76</sup> Rutherford argues that there is no difference “between equivocal speech and speech that admits of multiple meanings.”<sup>77</sup> Communication that might be understood in multiple different senses is unavoidably ambiguous. If a statement has a range of exclusive meanings, none of them can be understood with any degree of certainty. Van Dixhoorn summarizes, “If there are multiple meanings to the Word, the Word equivocates.”<sup>78</sup> And if God’s Word is equivocal, how could it be profitable? Rutherford declares, “For if Scripture is equivocal and ambiguous, it is completely useless for instruction. Equivocal explanations teach us nothing.”<sup>79</sup> While not every portion of Scripture is equally clear, God does not communicate unclearly. His speech concerning the essential elements of the faith can be understood by the “due use of the ordinary means.”<sup>80</sup> The Reformed recognized that the single meaning of God’s Word is downstream from the doctrine of Scripture’s perspicuity. Shaw comments that Scripture cannot have different meanings “because of the unity of truth, and because of the perspicuity of Scripture.”<sup>81</sup> Similarly, Turretin explains

---

<sup>75</sup> À Brakel, *The Christian’s Reasonable Service*, 43.

<sup>76</sup> À Brakel, *The Christian’s Reasonable Service*, 43.

<sup>77</sup> Rutherford, *Lectures on Holy Scripture*, 38.

<sup>78</sup> Chad Van Dixhoorn, “Introduction” to Rutherford, *Lectures on Holy Scripture*, 40.

<sup>79</sup> Rutherford, *Lectures on Holy Scripture*, 40.

<sup>80</sup> WCF I.7 in Van Dixhoorn, *Creeds, Confessions, and Catechisms*, 186.

<sup>81</sup> Robert Shaw, *The Reformed Faith: An Exposition of the Westminster Confession of Faith* (Monergism Books, 2008), 57.

that the perspicuity of Scripture and the unity of God's truth, "makes it impossible for there to be several contradictory and diverse meanings."<sup>82</sup>

While the Westminster Divines asserted that the single sense of Scripture was the literal meaning, they did not limit the author's intention to the bare sense of the words written. In Augustinian terms, they did not constrain every statement to a strict sign-to-thing relationship. The author did not always restrict himself to conveying the immediate image associated with the word (the first thing that strikes the mind when the sign is perceived). Often, the author intended the thing communicated by the sign as itself a sign which signifies the intended meaning. It is often the case that the literal intent of the text is to communicate symbolically. The Reformed understood the literal meaning of the text as the author's singularly intended communication, which could have been either plain or figurative, simple or symbolic. Whitaker confronted the Jesuits for misunderstanding the literal meaning as the mere letter of the text, "the sense of the words as they are immediately presented." They failed to understand that the Holy Spirit might literally communicate symbolically, such as in Psalm 91:13, where the Psalmist writes, "You will tread on the lion and the adder." Christ never stomped on a literal lion or snake. Either the literal meaning of this verse is symbolic, or it was a false prophecy. Whitaker explains, "Either, therefore, the literal sense of these words is not that which the words immediately present, as the Jesuit maintains; or these words have no literal sense, which he dares not affirm."<sup>83</sup>

The Reformed recognized the necessity of understanding the comprehensive nature of the literal meaning. The literal intention of the author might have been strict or figurative; either one could be the single sense of the passage. Whitaker summarizes, "The literal sense, then, is not that which the words immediately suggests, as the Jesuit defines it; but rather that which arises

---

<sup>82</sup> Francis Turretin, *The Doctrine of Scripture: Locus 2 of Institutio Theologiae Elencticae*, ed. John W. Beardslee (Baker Book House, 1981), 201.

<sup>83</sup> Whitaker, *Disputation on Holy Scripture*, 404.

from the words themselves, whether they be taken strictly or figuratively.”<sup>84</sup> Rutherford is comfortable stating that, “the literal meaning is twofold: the straightforwardly literal, which consists in the basic meaning of the words, and the figurative, which occurs when the words refer to something other than their basic meaning.”<sup>85</sup> Thus, it was essential to understand in which way the words of each biblical passage were employed: the exegete must understand whether God intended to convey a straightforward or metaphorical meaning as the single sense. Leigh instructs readers to discern “the genuine signification of the words... in which the Author useth them, whether speaking properly or figuratively.”<sup>86</sup> Through a grammatical and contextual study of a biblical text, the interpreter can determine whether the words as signs convey “their native and proper signification” or if they function “figuratively.”<sup>87</sup> When the inspired author wrote that David “chose five smooth stones” (1 Sam. 17:40), the intended literal meaning was properly, plainly signified. When the inspired author calls Christ a “living stone” and Christians a “spiritual house” (1 Pet. 2:4–5), the intended literal meaning was figuratively signified.

The Westminster Divines and their Reformed brethren articulated a comprehensive literal sense that could account for either strict or figurative significance. Twisse writes, “We acknowledge sense literall to comprehend sense Metaphoricall as well as proper.”<sup>88</sup> Figurative language in the Bible does not suggest a second, non-literal meaning. Determining the symbolic meaning of a figurative statement is the determination of the singular meaning in its entirety. Whitaker explains, “When the sign (refers) to the thing signified, that which was hidden in the

---

<sup>84</sup> Whitaker, *Disputation on Holy Scripture*, 405.

<sup>85</sup> Rutherford, *Lectures on Holy Scripture*, 35.

<sup>86</sup> Leigh, *Body of Divinity*, 125. Leigh enlists John 10:16 as a case study: what did the Holy Spirit intend in Christ’s words “I have other sheep”? If one interprets Christ’s words “properly” (meaning plainly or non-figuratively), then he must draw the conclusion that Jesus referred to the fluffy animals. But if Christ’s statement is understood figuratively, then the interpreter understands that Jesus metaphorically spoke of human beings as his sheep, and therefore the Holy Spirit’s literal intent was to convey this point in a symbolic manner.

<sup>87</sup> Ball, *A Way to the Tree of Life*, 164.

<sup>88</sup> Twisse, *The Scriptures Sufficiency*, 48.

sign is more openly expressed. When we proceed from the sign to the thing signified, we bring no new sense, but only bring out into light what was before concealed in the sign.”<sup>89</sup> Whether plain or metaphorical meaning, the Holy Spirit’s inspired intent is the passage’s single sense.<sup>90</sup>

It is even the case that the literal sense might entail a mystical meaning, such as an allegory or prophecy. The quadriga relegated allegorical and typological meanings as distinct from the literal sense, but the Reformed upheld that they could be one and the same. Paul’s Hagar and Sarah allegory in Galatians 4 is an example of an allegory as the author’s clear literal intent—it would be hermeneutically absurd to divorce his allegorical meaning from his literal meaning. It would also be inappropriate to reinterpret Genesis 16 as if the inspired author communicated an allegory in recording their story; Ishmael and Isaac had no allegorical import in the literal sense of their narrative. In Genesis, they were Abraham’s sons, not yet Paul’s allegory. And yet it was often the case that the initial, literal meaning of a prophetic pronouncement was its eventual, mystical fulfillment. Whitaker interpreted the literal meaning of

---

<sup>89</sup> Whitaker, *Disputation on Holy Scripture*, 407.

<sup>90</sup> Turretin adds the qualification that there are instances where both proper (plain) and figurative meaning are intended. When it is one or the other, then the literal meaning is simple, but when both are intended, the literal meaning is composite. “We believe that Holy Scripture has one true and authentic meaning, but this meaning can be twofold, either simple or composite.” Turretin defines the simple meaning as a statement of fact without any further significance, which can be strict or figurative. He explains composite meaning as those “found in oracles containing typology... (which are) two parts of one and the same meaning intended by the Holy Spirit.” Turretin, *The Doctrine of Scripture*, 200. Turretin aims to preserve the sense in which the initial appearance of a type in Scripture had meaning both in itself and beyond itself. For example, when the tabernacle was first commissioned, its divinely inspired meaning always included its heavenly antitype. Therefore the meaning of the tabernacle was composite: it both meant the physical tent and the heavenly reality. This is true from the divine perspective.

However, this composite meaning was not present in the mind of the divinely-inspired human author. From the perspective of the human author, and therefore in the grammatical sense of the written text, the meaning is simple: the tabernacle is the entirety of the literal meaning. The composite sense is not what the Holy Spirit communicated in the inspired writing of the text, even though we can read a composite sense backward from the subsequent inspired revelation. The literal meaning communicated in the text is simple. Rutherford helpfully explains that Old Testament types had only the single, literal meaning. However, God later “superimposed” a mystical meaning through the revelation of the antitype. This superimposition does not change the literal meaning of the original statement, nor does it equivocate the original. The superimposition is not the meaning of the original statement; it is the meaning of the thing itself. Rutherford reiterates that only God is able to superimpose mystical meanings; such important revelatory work is above the pope’s paygrade. Rutherford, *Lectures on Holy Scripture*, 45.

Genesis 3:15 as “Christ shall beat down Satan.”<sup>91</sup> Rutherford remarks that Christ understood the literal sense of Isaiah 61 when he read the prophecy in the synagogue (Luke 4:16–21).<sup>92</sup> Daniel Featley interpreted the literal meaning of the Song of Songs as the “allegorical sense” since it was “principally intended.”<sup>93</sup> Therefore, according to Rutherford, we should “acknowledge that Scripture speaks allegorically, tropologically, and anagogically” but never “assign to Scripture an allegorical meaning distinct from the literal.”<sup>94</sup> When the Holy Spirit communicates a mystical meaning in Scripture, it is the literal meaning of the passage. The single sense of a portion of Scripture may be strict or figurative, plain or prophetic. Whichever the inspired author intended, such is the meaning (which is not manifold, but one).

### **B. The Single Sense has Sundry Consequences**

And yet some may be concerned that the Westminster emphasis on the single sense of Scripture restrains them from seizing interpretive opportunities. After all, the quadriga offers spiritual and practical meanings for every text. By rejecting the quadriga, do the Reformed miss out on significant canonical connections? Do they ignore opportunities to reflect on heaven? Are they allergic to application? Is the quibble about the nature of the literal sense worth missing out on the three other meanings?

The Reformed reject the premise; the quadriga’s three mystical meanings are not meanings at all. Rutherford writes, “The meanings which papists call mystical are either not meanings distinct from the literal or are only what our theologians call applications, accommodations, and inferences drawn from the real meaning.”<sup>95</sup> Whitaker concurs: “We

---

<sup>91</sup> Whitaker, *Disputation on Holy Scripture*, 405. God did not superimpose Christ as the meaning; one does not need to read backward in order to understand the literal sense of the protoevangelium (although reading backwards can certainly improve one’s understanding of the original meaning). It was always about Christ.

<sup>92</sup> Rutherford, *Lectures on Holy Scripture*, 39.

<sup>93</sup> Daniel Featley, *Clavis Mystica: A Key Opening Divers Difficult and Mysterious Texts of Holy Scripture* (London, 1636), 409.

<sup>94</sup> Rutherford, *Lectures on Holy Scripture*, 38.

<sup>95</sup> Rutherford, *Lectures on Holy Scripture*, 42.

contend that allegories, tropologies, and anagoges are not various senses, but various collections from one sense, or various applications and accommodations of that one meaning.”<sup>96</sup> From the perspective of the Westminster Divines and their Reformed brethren, those who employed the quadriga were not wrong to consider the potential applications or occasions for reflection prompted by a text; rather, they were wrong to identify them as meanings of the text. Rutherford writes, “Meaning is different from a lesson derived from meaning for the sake of shaping behavior.”<sup>97</sup> The meaning of a biblical text is limited to the literal intent of the inspired author, and so an application is only legitimately the meaning when the passage is written as an imperative. In other sorts of passages, applications may certainly be derived, although not as the single sense. Whitaker highlights the David and Goliath narrative as an example: the reader might be inspired by David’s courage and seek to follow his example, but the purpose of the passage is to tell the story, not teach a principle. In Whitaker’s words, “it would be absurd to say that” a lesson about courage “was the sense of this history.”<sup>98</sup>

Even though the literal sense is single, it is ripe with “sundry consequences.”<sup>99</sup> Rutherford calls them deductions and accommodations: “A deduction is a basic, logical drawing of a conclusion from premises; it is in no way the meaning.”<sup>100</sup> An application is a specific sort of deduction, wherein “the natural deduction or accommodation of a statement to pertinent people or things and *vice versa*.”<sup>101</sup> It is proper for interpreters to recognize the manifold

---

<sup>96</sup> Whitaker, *Disputation on Holy Scripture*, 404.

<sup>97</sup> Rutherford, *Lectures on Holy Scripture*, 38.

<sup>98</sup> Whitaker, *Disputation on Holy Scripture*, 406. Or as Matt Chandler once proclaimed to the folks at Elevation Church in the Queen City: “You’re not David!”

<sup>99</sup> Leigh, *Body of Divinity*, 128.

<sup>100</sup> Rutherford, *Lectures on Holy Scripture*, 38.

<sup>101</sup> Rutherford, *Lectures on Holy Scripture*, 38. Rutherford’s understanding of application as a consequence of meaning is exhibited in *Westminster Larger Catechism* Q&A. 100–148. The Westminster Divines deduce the manifold consequences of the Ten Commandment, specifying the duties required and sins forbidden in each. The abundant applications of the Decalogue are the result of the Divines understanding the literal meaning of each command and the good and necessary consequences downstream from the meaning.

consequences of the single meaning, but it is incorrect to confuse them with the meaning itself. When an interpreter conflates the sense with the consequence, he misunderstands the intent and emphasis of the author's communication. And if the literal sense is not properly identified and understood, the interpreter has no basis to determine whether he has recognized a "good and necessary consequence." The Westminster Divines understood that deducing Scripture's consequences is necessary for understanding "the whole counsel of God."<sup>102</sup> Faithful interpreters should seize these sundry consequences, but must not mistake them for meanings.

### **Conclusion**

The Westminster Divines deliberately departed from the Catholic tradition of discerning manifold meanings in each text of Scripture. They recognized the inconsistency of the quadriga's fourfold meanings with their conviction about the clear, single sense of Scripture. They retained the Reformation's recognition of the literal sense's priority for biblical interpretation. Fesko writes, "Central to the Reformed exposition of Scripture...is the principle that there is one sense to Scripture, not four."<sup>103</sup> The Divines understood that the hermeneutical assumption of manifold meanings is not only a gateway to problematic misinterpretations; it also confuses the nature of God's communication in Holy Scripture. And so by confessing that the meaning of Scripture is "not manifold," the Westminster Assemblymen listened to William Perkins' warning that the quadriga should be "exploded and rejected."<sup>104</sup> And by affirming that Scripture's meaning is one, the Divines anticipated another Reformed theologian who would define meaning as a circle; the author's intent as the dot in the center, and the good and necessary consequences extending to the circumference. There is only room for one meaning in the hermeneutical circle.<sup>105</sup>

---

<sup>102</sup> WCF I.6, in Van Dixhoorn, *Creeds, Confessions, and Catechisms*, 186.

<sup>103</sup> J. V. Fesko, *The Theology of the Westminster Standards: Historical Context and Theological Insights* (Crossway, 2014), 46.

<sup>104</sup> Perkins, *The Arte of Prophecyng*, 31.

<sup>105</sup> Give me a good Cara-ism over the quadriga any day!

## Bibliography

Aquinas, Thomas. *Summa Theologica*. Translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province. Burns Oates & Washbourne, 1912.

Augustine. *On Christian Teaching*. Translated by R. P. H. Green. Oxford World's Classics. Oxford Univ. Press, 2008.

Augustine. *On the Profit of Believing in St. Augustine: On the Holy Trinity, Doctrinal Treatises, Moral Treatises*. Translated by C. L. Cornish, vol. 3 of *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, edited by Philip Schaff. Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1887.

Ball, John. *A Way to the Tree of Life Discovered in Sundry Directions for the Profitable Reading of the Scriptures*. London, 1647.

Barrett, Matthew. *The Reformation as Renewal: Retrieving the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church*. Zondervan Academic, 2023.

Bower, John, ed. *The Confession of Faith: A Critical Text and Introduction*. Reformation Heritage Books, 2020.

Brakel, Wilhelmus à. *The Christian's Reasonable Service: God, Man, and Christ*. Edited by Joel R. Beeke. Translated by Bartel Elshout. Vol. 1. Reformation Heritage Book, 2012.

Bray, Gerald. *How the Church Fathers Read the Bible: A Short Introduction*. 1st ed. Faithlife Corporation, 2022.

Carter, Craig A. *Interpreting Scripture with the Great Tradition: Recovering the Genius of Premodern Exegesis*. Baker Academic, 2018.

Cassian, John. *Conferences*, in *Sulpitius Severus, Vincent of Lérins, John Cassian*, edited by Philip Schaff, vol. 11 of *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*. Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1885.

Chase, Mitchell L. *40 Questions about Typology and Allegory*. 1st ed. 40 Questions Series. Kregel Publications, 2020.

Clement of Alexandria, *Miscellanies in Fathers of the Second Century: Hermas, Tatian, Athenagoras, Theophilus, and Clement of Alexandria*, edited by Alexander Roberts and

James Donaldson, vol. 2 of *Ante-Nicene Fathers*. Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1885.

Dockery, David S. *Biblical Interpretation Then and Now: Contemporary Hermeneutics in the Light of the Early Church*. Baker Book House, 1992.

Featley, Daniel. *Clavis Mystica: A Key Opening Divers Difficult and Mysterious Texts of Holy Scripture*. London, 1636.

Fesko, J. V. *The Theology of the Westminster Standards: Historical Context and Theological Insights*. Crossway, 2014.

George, Timothy. *Reading Scripture with the Reformers*. InterVarsity Press, 2011.

Hall, Christopher A. *Reading Scripture with the Church Fathers*. InterVarsity Press, 2009.

Irenaeus. *Against Heresies in The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, edited by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, vol. 1 of *Ante-Nicene Fathers*. Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1885.

Justin Martyr. *Dialogue with Trypho, a Jew in The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, edited by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, vol. 1 of *Ante-Nicene Fathers*. Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1885.

Leigh, Edward. *A Systeme or Body of Divinity Consisting of Ten Books*. London, 1662.

Letham, Robert. *The Westminster Assembly: Reading Its Theology In Historical Context*. The Westminster Assembly and the Reformed Faith. P & R Pub, 2009.

Levy, Ian Christopher. *Introducing Medieval Biblical Interpretation: The Senses of Scripture in Premodern Exegesis*. Baker Academic, 2018.

Lubac, Henri de. *Medieval Exegesis: The Four Senses of Scripture*. Translated by Mark Sebanc. Vol. 1. Ressourcement: Retrieval and Renewal in Catholic Thought (RRRCT). Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1998.

Muller, Richard A. *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms: Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology*. 2nd ed. Baker Academic, 2017.

Muller, Richard A. *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725*. Vol. 2, Baker Academic, 2003.

Origen, *Homilies on Luke and Fragments on Luke*, edited by Thomas P. Halton, translated by Joseph T. Lienhard, vol. 94 of *The Fathers of the Church*. Washington D.C. The Catholic University of America Press, 2009.

Origen. *On First Principles in Fathers of the Third Century: Tertullian, Part Fourth; Minucius Felix; Commodian; Origen, Parts First and Second*, edited by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, vol. 4 of *Ante-Nicene Fathers*. Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1885.

Pelikan, Jaroslav. *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine - The Growth of Medieval Theology (600-1300)*. Vol. 3. University of Chicago Press, 1978.

Perkins, William. *The Arte of Prophecyng*. London, 1607.

Rutherford, Samuel. *Lectures on Holy Scripture*. Edited by Chad Van Dixhoorn. Translated by Joseph A. Tipton. Vol. 2. The Complete Works of Samuel Rutherford. Reformation Heritage Books, Forthcoming.

Shaw, Robert. *The Reformed Faith: An Exposition of the Westminster Confession of Faith*. Monergism Books, 2008.

Thompson, Mark. “Sola Scriptura” *Reformation Theology: A Systematic Summary*. Edited by Matthew Barrett. Crossway, 2017.

Turretin, François. *The Doctrine of Scripture: Locus 2 of Institutio Theologiae Elencticae*. Edited by John W. Beardslee. Baker Book House, 1981.

Twisse, William. *The Scriptures' Sufficiency to Determine All Matters of Faith, Made Good Against the Papist*. London, 1656.

Van Dixhoorn, Chad. *Confessing the Faith: A Reader's Guide to the Westminster Confession of Faith*. The Banner of Truth Trust, 2014.

Van Dixhoorn, Chad, “Introduction” to Rutherford, Samuel. *Lectures on Holy Scripture*. Edited by Chad Van Dixhoorn. Translated by Joseph A. Tipton. Vol. 2. The Complete Works of Samuel Rutherford. Reformation Heritage Books, Forthcoming.

Van Dixhoorn, Chad, ed. *The Minutes and Papers of the Westminster Assembly, 1643-1652*. 2: Minutes, Sessions 45-119, 155–198. Oxford University Press, 2012.

Vanhoozer, Kevin J. *Biblical Authority after Babel: Retrieving the Solas in the Spirit of Mere Protestant Christianity*. Brazos Press, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2018.

*Westminster Confession of Faith in Creeds, Confessions, and Catechisms: A Reader’s Edition*. Edited by Chad Van Dixhoorn. Crossway, 2022.

Whitaker, William. *A Disputation on Holy Scripture: Against the Papists, Especially Bellarmine and Stapleton*. Edited by William Fitzgerald. Soli Deo Gloria Publ., 2000.

——— *The Lexham English Septuagint*. 1st ed. Lexham Press, 2013.