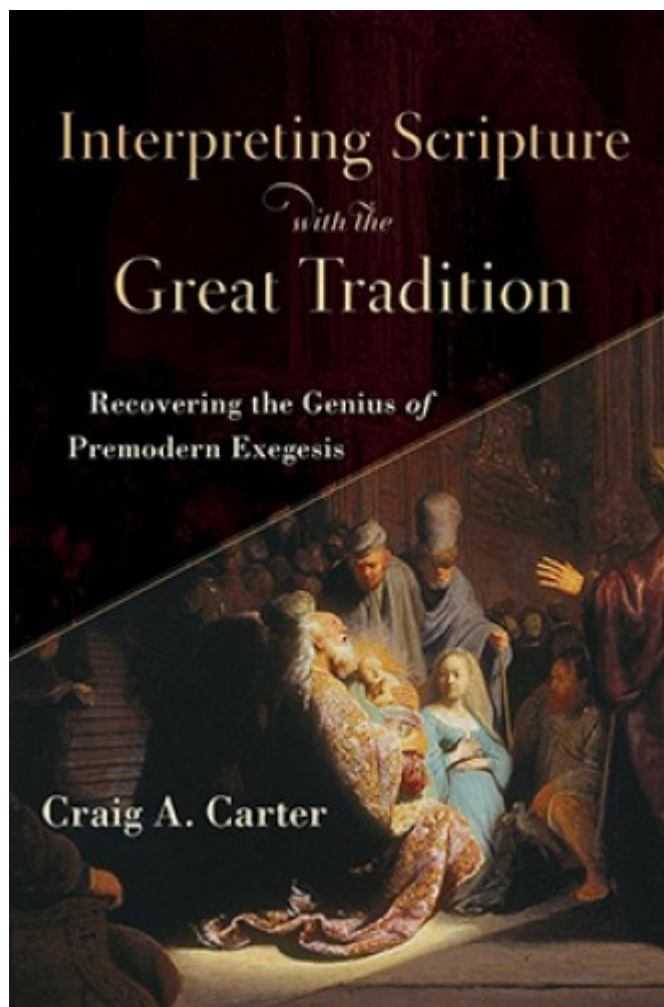


An anti-Enlightenment ax to grind

Craig Carter's book makes good points—and undermines them with his use of polemic.

by [Brad East](#) in the [February 13, 2019](#) issue

In Review



Interpreting Scripture with the Great Tradition

Recovering the Genius of Premodern Exegesis

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Christian polemic is a worthy endeavor. Done well, it imitates the fighting words of the prophets, saints, and Jesus himself through confident, courageous exposure of wickedness and error, whether moral, political, or intellectual. Done poorly, it uses the excuse of imminent danger (real or imagined) to justify point scoring, name calling, and scapegoating, all of which are vices and shortcuts in the life of the mind, and nowhere more damaging than in theological argument.

Craig Carter's book is an exercise in Christian polemic. Many of the objects of his critique or praise are deserving of it. But the book's alarmist framing and scorched-earth prose undercut its nobler goals and arguments. For the sake of orientation into Carter's world, consider two sets of claims.

The first: the Bible of Old and New Testaments is the sacred book of the Christian church. As holy scripture, it is the inspired word of God for the people of God. Christians go to it for divine instruction; they expect to hear from it the speech of the living Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. It judges, rules, and guides believers as they seek to follow Jesus, and it is the material norm for all sound doctrine. To approach this book as if it were merely, or primarily, of historical interest makes no sense for Christians, whether laypersons, clergy, or scholars. Christian engagement with the Bible, rather, ought to be characterized by a combination of theological convictions and spiritual dispositions, not least regarding scripture's divine authorship and unity in Christ and the accompanying posture of believers' humble trust in the Spirit's illuminating aid in reading it.

Such claims are a mainstay in the Christian tradition. In recent decades they have returned to the fore, in the form of a loose constellation of academic writings on the Bible broadly categorized as "theological interpretation of scripture." Despite its diversity, this semi-movement has proven enormously productive and influential, most of all in questioning the validity of historical criticism's 200-year hegemony in academic biblical interpretation in the West.

Now consider a second set of claims. Any interpretation of the Bible that is not theological interpretation is *eo ipso* not interpretation at all. The only theological interpretation worthy of the name, moreover, is underwritten by and committed to a metaphysics aptly termed Christian Platonism. Indeed, more or less every orthodox

Christian thinker until the 18th century was a Christian Platonist, including Luther, Calvin, and the movements bearing their names. Alas, Christian Platonism was undone by the Enlightenment—a singular, monolithically bad event for which the Protestant Reformation bears no guilt—all of whose heirs in the realm of biblical scholarship exchanged their birthright for pottage, principally in the form of accepting methodological naturalism as the frame for their work. Worst of all, some Christian critics of historical criticism's reign have found refuge in postmodern hermeneutics, a dead end that fails to secure a stable meaning in texts apart from and prior to communal practices of reading.

Such claims lie at the heart of Carter's book. He believes they are a necessary complement to the first set of claims; without them, the latter lack grounding and direction. The resulting polemic is full of harsh language and partisan battle lines. For example:

Secularists accuse Christians of not being able to put empirical history and God's action together, but it was the secularists who separated them in the first place. If a guest takes an expensive piece of china from your table and smashes it on the floor, it is irrational to blame the owner for not being able to reassemble it adequately. The fault lies with the one who did the smashing. The most the owner can do is to bar the guest from having access to the dining room in the future. It is time to expel the Enlightenment culture-wreckers from positions of cultural, or at least ecclesial, influence. Failing that, we should at least lock up the china.

Rhetoric like this permeates the book. Elsewhere Carter recommends that those "who have not been corrupted in their thinking by the bad philosophy of the Enlightenment" need not panic, for "we just need to wait for modernity to finish collapsing, and then carry on throughout the process of rebuilding culture on the ruins of Western modernity."

Carter is right about a good deal. He is right that the Enlightenment unleashed a host of negative consequences for Christian faith and theology. He is right that the historical-critical domination of the theological academy is to be lamented and resisted. He is right that premodern exegesis—above all the spiritual interpretation exemplified by the church fathers—is a treasure trove for Christian theological readers today. He is right that metaphysics is unavoidable in hermeneutics, biblical

or otherwise. He is right that reading the Bible is a fundamentally spiritual act, and that reading it in faith, far from impeding understanding, enables and assists it.

At every turn, however, the attempt to support these and other positions is undermined by an excessive and unnecessary rhetoric, which leads to both underdeveloped arguments and overreaching claims. To focus on a representative example: Carter holds up John Calvin as the church's faithful interpreter nonpareil, at once summarizing and consummating the Christian Platonist exegetical tradition. In doing so he wholly elides the irreducible disagreements separating Calvin from much of the preceding tradition—not only the more creative allegorizers, but Thomas Aquinas, Bernard of Clairvaux, and even Augustine.

The spiritual sense that these and other saints sought—which is to say, prayed for, delighted in, and contemplated—was not a “stable” “layer” of meaning “residing” in the text. It was the in principle infinite sacramental signification of human signs divinely authored and illumined. For the rest of scripture, as a whole and in each of its parts, is Christ. Just how any one particular text of scripture signifies Christ, not to mention just what Christ might use such a text to say to the believing reader under the Spirit's guidance, is limited neither by human authors' intentions nor by ordinary rules of grammar and syntax, nor by the capacities, desires, or convictions of readers, believing or pagan. It is determinate, but only insofar as Christ is determinate. And Christ makes himself present and known in endless ways on countless occasions: in the determinate elements of the Eucharist, in the determinate bodies of the faithful, in the determinate words of the sermon, in the determinate sufferings of the least of these. Just so, we should expect countless, indeed endless, manifestations of Christ on the sacred page.

Perhaps Carter would agree. If so, his ax-grinding obscures it. In any case, the form of his argument—culture war as trench warfare—subverts his goals with respect to the catholic tradition. Neither rapprochement nor *ressourcement* will be furthered as a result.