

Scripture

Christian Reflection

A SERIES IN FAITH AND ETHICS



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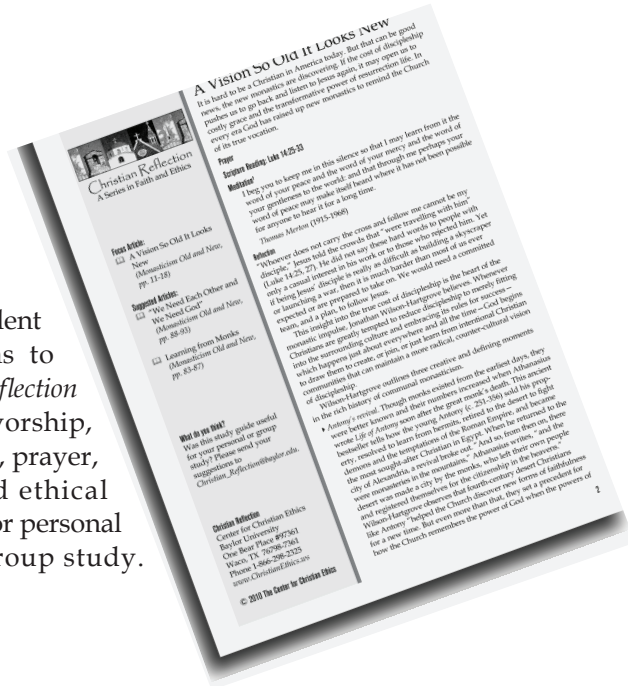
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The goal of any Christian engagement with Scripture is a deep and profound acquaintance with the Triune God. If this notion is lost to some degree in modernity, when the Bible is often taken to be a conduit of information about God (or the history of religions, or the moral life), its recovery is now in full swing.

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Introduction

BY ROBERT B. KRUSCHWITZ

The deep wellspring of Christian moral reflection is Scripture, but how do we read the Bible in a way that allows it to question our presuppositions and transform our discipleship? Our contributors explore Christian practices that will shape us as faithful and theologically informed interpreters.

The deep wellspring of Christian moral reflection is Scripture with its “morally stupendous claim that all reality is created and remade by God’s overflowing goodness,” Brian Brock has noted. “To take this claim seriously is to give up the attempt to fit the Bible into a preconceived moral universe and to begin, instead, to wrestle with the methodological questions raised by the moral strangeness of this basic claim.” How do we read Scripture in a way that allows it to question our presuppositions and transform our discipleship? Which Christian practices will form us as faithful and theologically informed readers? What resources in the tradition can guide our interpretation of Scripture? Our contributors explore answers to these questions.

Daniel J. Treier and Stephen T. Pardue suggest in *A Trinitarian Way of Reading Scripture* (p. 11) that the recent renaissance in Trinitarian theology is pointing us toward a better understanding of how to read Scripture. Because the Bible’s “mysterious climax in the Father’s sending of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit places us in a coherent drama,” they explain, “we read for neither information nor inspiration alone, but fellowship” with the Triune God. Furthermore, “faithful understanding is not an impossible task we are left to achieve on our own, but is participation in the Spirit’s work of helping the Church to hear the divine Word.”

In *The Journey of Reading Scripture* (p. 20), Todd Billings surveys the developing school of theological interpretation of Scripture that “encourages

us to read the Bible as God's instrument of self-revelation and saving fellowship." He contrasts this with two popular ways of reading the Bible: either with a theological blueprint in hand and gathering support for our preconceived ideas, or with our felt needs in view and searching for answers to our problems. In either case, he warns, "we use Scripture for our own purposes. We are in control." Stephen Chapman's *Studying the Word of God* (p. 29) extends this line of thinking in a very practical way. He notes that "When we think of 'studying' Scripture, we often envision a process of gathering information" that reduces the Bible to a commodity. However, "the classical Christian approach to Scripture starts from an altogether different perspective: that in the Bible God still speaks to humans." He concludes with some concrete guidance for Bible study groups.

The idea that the Bible is just "like any other book" in that we should dissect it as we desire in our curiosity, is a peculiarly modern notion. Thus, in *Reading the Beatitudes like a Christian* (p. 37), Andrew Selby suggests adding some pre-modern scripture commentaries to our reading list. "Patristic and medieval biblical interpreters can help us relearn reading Scripture within the story of salvation," he explains. "They do not disdain historical inquiry, but integrate those details within a larger picture of reality. Their reading of the Bible flows first and foremost from their faith."

There are passages of the Bible that are hard to understand, and some will assault our sensibilities as they challenge our perspectives. Christine McSpadden gives wise advice for preaching and hearing such difficult passages in *Preaching Scripture Faithfully* (p. 47). Among other things, she commends studying them in a community with a "hermeneutic of trust" that "involves an attitude of prayer and worship, and a humble willingness to hear the otherness of the text while suspending one's own inner critic."

A long tradition in Christian art elevates Scripture by depicting its inspiration by the Triune God. In Caravaggio's powerful image *Inspiration of Saint Matthew* (on the cover), the evangelist receives his divine inspiration through an angel, which happens to be Matthew's emblem. "Caravaggio conveys urgency in Matthew, who is not seated as a scribe deep in thought, but is rushing back to the table to write down the inspiration from God," Heidi Hornik observes in *Urgency of Inspiration* (p. 64). "The guidance of the Holy Spirit in the formation of Scripture is found not only in the work of the Bible's authors, but also in its translators, such as Jerome," she explains in *Inspired Translator* (p. 66). She explores this motif in two Renaissance depictions of the fifth-century scholar – Antonello da Messina's *Saint Jerome in His Study* and Andrea del Castagno's *Saint Jerome's Vision of the Trinity with Saints Paula and Eustochium*.

In her worship service (p. 58), Amber Inscore Essick leads us to adore the Triune God who draws us to himself through Scripture, praying "Just as you have spoken to your people of old, speak to us in this hour. Write yourself into our hearts, that we may be written into the story of your

love." The liturgy incorporates new service music and Ann Bell Worley's discerning hymn, "Many Books, One Holy Canon" (p. 55).

In *Why Bother with the Bible?* (p. 78), Bill Ireland bemoans the decline in biblical literacy as a moral problem, because it leaves us vulnerable to unreliable cultural scripts for our lives. "By its very nature, Scripture is subversive," he writes. "Scripture gives us an alternative script and says, 'This is the best way to live.'" Kathy Maxwell shares the biblical stories through memorization and performance, because this "gives Scripture freedom to work in the lives of the hearers in refreshing and unexpected ways." In *Embodying Scripture through Performative Interpretation* (p. 74), she shares her experience of giving "a voice and body to God's Word, which was (most likely) originally spoken and heard."

Don Collett says the theological interpretation of Scripture movement, to which several of our writers have contributed, "is arguably one of the more exciting and promising developments in the past two-hundred years of biblical exegesis." In *Overcoming Historicism's Dividing Wall of Hostility* (p. 81), he evaluates the movement's promising attempts to heal the rift between biblical studies and theology within both the academy and the Church. Collett recommends four books—J. Todd Billings's *The Word of God for the People of God: An Entryway to the Theological Interpretation of Scripture*, Stephen E. Fowl's *Theological Interpretation of Scripture*, Christian Smith's *The Bible Made Impossible: Why Biblicism Is Not a Truly Evangelical Reading of Scripture*, and N. T. Wright's *Scripture and the Authority of God: How to Read the Bible Today*—as "readable introductions to the major facets of the theological interpretation of Scripture."

"Many of us have experienced the awkward silence that falls at the end of a Bible study when the question of application arises," Rachel Billings admits. "Not only do we find ourselves flummoxed if we expect every word of Scripture to apply to us personally, but we make the platform for God's speech much too small." In *Reading with the Great Cloud of Witnesses* (p. 88), she enlarges our vision of the meaning of Scripture through newly translated commentary resources from the patristic and medieval Church. John L. Thompson's *Reading the Bible with the Dead: What You Can Learn from the History of Exegesis That You Can't Learn from Exegesis Alone* is a good place to begin, and Jason Byassee's *Praise Seeking Understanding: Reading the Psalms with Augustine* offers a very accessible, more extended example of interpreting Scripture with a patristic guide. Then Billings compares the *Genesis* volumes in InterVarsity Press's *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* series and The Brazos *Theological Commentary on the Bible* series; the first offers lengthier examples of early Christian commentary, while the latter invites theologians to draw on such sources in offering a Christian theological reading of Scripture. "Given these impressive and accessible resources," Billings concludes, "readers have no reason to delay their acquaintance with earlier Christian interpreters of Scripture." ☞

A Trinitarian Way of Reading Scripture

BY DANIEL J. TREIER
AND STEPHEN T. PARDUE

The goal of any Christian engagement with Scripture is a deep and profound acquaintance with the Triune God. If this notion is lost to some degree in modernity, when the Bible is often taken to be a conduit of information about God (or the history of religions, or the moral life), its recovery is now in full swing.

It was a rainy Sunday in late May. In Toronto to visit a close friend, I (Daniel) walked with him and his wife to St. Paul's on Bloor Street. I was caught short by the bulletin headline: Trinity Sunday. "Hmmm," I thought: "I never realized there was such a day." I was even more surprised by the preacher: she centered her sermon on the doctrine of the Trinity! That was courage I definitely had never encountered before. But soon the sermon had me awestruck at the beauty of our God: a God who is love, inviting us into fellowship in Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit.

This experience did not belong to an inexperienced youth group attender or beginning collegian. No, a Ph.D. student in theology, holding two seminary master's degrees, encountered the Triune God of the Bible—in a sense, for the first time. Had I already learned, enough to regurgitate adequately in writing, Trinitarian theology? Yes. Had I learned to appreciate its beauty and love its Subject? Not really. Instead, sadly, I had learned

to avoid the doctrine, secretly suspecting it could not be defended with sound biblical exegesis or philosophical reasoning, and that for ministry-keeping purposes it would best be affirmed without receiving much (risky) attention.

How uncommon is my experience? Perhaps less common now than it was more than a decade ago, but I suspect that many continue to find the Trinitarian mystery not just alien but alienating due to churchly fear and neglect. I do not intend this as a criticism of my seminary, which gave me a life-changing education I continue to treasure. My background set me up for a fall, as it were, when seminary presented the classic Trinitarian tradition. By God's grace, though, Trinity Sunday in Toronto did not just return me to academic theological study with renewed vigor; it changed my life, furthering a spiritual turn toward divine love, nourishment in liturgical practice, and life and healing in fellowship.

Before that Sunday, it seemed impossible to conceive of biblical interpretation in robustly Trinitarian terms. For it seemed difficult to be confident of Trinitarian theology as really biblical. In this introductory article, we try to remedy such difficulties. To begin with, we show the doctrine of the Triune God emerging from Scripture's mysterious story. Hence biblical interpretation is the drama of Word and Spirit establishing fellowship. We then suggest how Trinitarian theology might be "practiced" as the Church understands Scripture: to be "people of the book" means participating in the Triune God's self-communication.

DOCTRINE: THE TRIUNE GOD OF SCRIPTURE'S STORY

Does the Bible's story head in a Trinitarian direction? Its starting point is the identity of the one Creator as the God of Israel: "Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might" (Deuteronomy 6:4-5). Biblical faith never allows for worshiping any other:

There is no other god besides me,
a righteous God and a Savior;
there is no one besides me.
Turn to me and be saved,
all the ends of the earth!
For I am God, and there is no other.
By myself I have sworn,
from my mouth has gone forth in righteousness
a word that shall not return:
"To me every knee shall bow,
every tongue shall swear."

Isaiah 45:21b-23

Philippians 2 alludes to this Isaiah text yet applies it to Jesus: who, in the form of God, did not insist on retaining divine privilege and glory but took on the form of a servant, even sacrificially dying on a cross (2:6–8). Now,

Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

Philippians 2:9–11

We only join in this confession that Jesus is Lord by the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:3). So Christians are baptized on the authority of Jesus into the Triune God, whose name now is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:18–20).

No Old Testament passage directly addresses God as Triune, nor should we expect that. The expectation of Isaiah’s prophecy is that fuller, final revelation of YHWH will accompany Israel’s renewal, Gentiles’ redemption, and accordingly God’s restored rule over creation: repeatedly we read, “Then they will know....” These anticipations fill out mysterious hints of divine relationality, even as early as the “Let us...” of Genesis 1.

No New Testament passage fully provides a doctrine of the Trinity, nor should we expect that either. By divine design the Holy Spirit takes time to help the Church develop the mind of Christ regarding the full implications of his work. Yet we can already see numerous passages associating Jesus with the works for which God alone should be worshiped, or associating Father, Son, and Spirit with a threefold economy of salvation. 1 Peter 1:2 provides an example: we “have been chosen and destined by God the Father and sanctified by the Spirit to be obedient to Jesus Christ and to be sprinkled with his blood.” An increasing number of scholars trace “early high Christology” (and a related pneumatology) across a range of texts, to which John’s Gospel adds fuller Trinitarian hints. Texts like Philippians 2, then, link Israel’s God with the Triune God of the ecumenically orthodox creeds despite the variety of New Testament concepts for Jesus. Without simply counting scholarly heads – never a good idea – this indicates the intellectual plausibility of reading Scripture in line with Trinitarian teaching.¹

The next step is to place the character of Scripture itself, and thus its reading, within the Trinitarian story of salvation. Telford Work, among others, unfolds the Church’s classic commitment to a Trinitarian economy

of Scripture. Indeed, Augustine could envision no longer needing Scripture, ultimately: upon receiving the fullness of union with Christ, verbal revelation extending across space and time would give way to greater relational immediacy.² With the Protestant Reformers, drawing upon modern thinkers from Karl Barth to Nicholas Wolterstorff, Kevin Vanhoozer emphasizes that communion with God, of whatever kind, responds to divine communicative action.³ God's action is communicative, and divine communication is an integral form of action: God's Word is God's covenant bond. God's indirect yet real and ongoing personal identification with God's words by the Spirit is what makes Scripture trustworthy as God's Word.

Accordingly, as Timothy Ward, Scott Swain, and others highlight in compact guides to the nature of Scripture, the Bible is an instrument of God's self-communication to foster communion.⁴ By looking at the Trinitarian relations, we encounter a dynamic of Word and Spirit, with God's definitive self-communication in Jesus Christ creating freedom for response by the Holy Spirit. Hence the meaning of biblical texts unfolds in a history of covenant fellowship.

DIVINE DISCOURSE: THE FELLOWSHIP OF WORD AND SPIRIT

Because understanding Christian Scripture in a Trinitarian fashion means unlocking a kind of acquaintance with God that is deep and profound, the spiritual benefits of such an approach are worth elucidating. But before we discuss those advantages – which come to us not only in personal reading of Scripture, but also in corporate worship, prayer, and even public life – a more basic theological task deserves our attention. We must understand the nature of the fellowship between humans and the Triune God that Scripture is designed to establish.

What can we say about this fellowship? Perhaps the relevant image that has most captured the imagination of Christian artists and theologians is that of Adam and Eve in pre-lapsarian Eden. In that flourishing environment, fellowship with the Triune God was apparently unhindered, except by natural human limitations. Only a brief authoritative "word" from God was issued – a warning that, ostensibly, required little interpretation – since God himself dwelt with humanity in remarkable intimacy. As Athanasius noted in the fourth century, the Word, the very Image of the Father, dwelt in human hearts, and the Spirit conferred upon them fellowship unique among the creatures.⁵

After humanity's migration east of Eden, fellowship continues to follow the same Triune pattern, but with a different form. Athanasius notes that the Law and the Prophets (evoking all of Scripture by synecdoche) serve precisely this purpose: they are the means by which the Spirit speaks the Word, who is the self-same image of the Father. Scripture is "a sacred school of the knowledge of God and the conduct of the spiritual life for the whole world,"⁶ so that by its tutelage we humans can once again fulfill our

capacity for acquaintance with God. Ultimately, of course, the Law and the Prophets only succeed partially in clarifying the occluded image of God, so that the very Image—Jesus of Nazareth, the Word of God inhabiting humanity in the full power of the Spirit—must finally accomplish the renewal of the Father’s likeness in human hearts. In his birth, life, death, and resurrection, a communion even deeper than Eden’s becomes available, so that with appropriate attention to the examples of saints gone before, we can find in interaction with Scripture a reward beyond what has previously been available: a fellowship with God so deep that no eye, heart, and mind has yet grasped its fullness.⁷

Such profound acquaintance with God is the *telos* of any Christian engagement with Scripture and, if nothing else, a Trinitarian hermeneutic is simply an approach to the Bible designed to make this goal explicit. If this notion is lost to some degree in modernity, when the Bible is often taken to be a conduit of information *about* God (or the history of religions, or the moral life), its recovery is now in full swing. Karl Barth, grandfather to this recovery, reminds us that “God reveals himself through himself”:⁸ The Father speaks in the Son, and the Spirit completes this communicative act as Lord of our hearing.

We have spoken already of Eden as a guiding image for divine-human fellowship, but Christian theologians have recognized other resources for depicting our communion with the Triune God. For centuries, the Song of Songs was read mostly in these terms, and was likely the most commented-upon book of the Bible. Generations of saints saw in the Song an image of the remarkable intimacy with God made available through the Son and Spirit’s work. Gregory of Nyssa comments on Song of Songs 5:2, which references water dripping from the groom’s hair, as an analogy for the way that we, as Scripture’s recipients, receive partial acquaintance with God—drops of water, as it were, from the gushing stream that springs from the Triune God.⁹

A profound acquaintance with God is the *telos* of any Christian engagement with Scripture and a Trinitarian hermeneutic is simply an approach to the Bible designed to make this goal explicit. If this notion is lost in modernity, its recovery is now in full swing.

A properly Trinitarian hermeneutic does not require consent to the creative allegorical methods of early Christian thinkers; depending on their traditions and dispositions, readers may feel horror, adoration, or something in between for such expansive allegorical treatment of the Song. But what

has universal import in Gregory's approach is the resolve to approach Scripture primarily as a means of fellowship with the Father through the Son in the power of the Spirit. In other words, participation in the divine life (2 Peter 1:4) is both the hoped-for result of reading Scripture and the presumed context without which Scripture is meaningless.

DRAMA: THE PRACTICE OF TRINITARIAN HERMENEUTICS

Both Gregory and Athanasius are quick to note that meeting the Triune God in Scripture is not a solo enterprise: it happens in community with contemporaries and saints gone before. In these relationships, we learn practices that build interpretive virtues and block bad interpretive habits. Such practices are not the "application" of "theory"; they are essential means of grace through which fellowship with God is realized. Forming us as God's people, these practices form in us virtues to discern and display the reality of God's Triune fellowship.¹⁰ Three practices in particular merit attention.

First, engagement with Scripture is most constructively Trinitarian in light of the rule of faith (*analogia fidei*). When keeping the rule in mind, the potentially fragmentary elements of Scripture speak in a unified (though not uniform) fashion. They proclaim, celebrate, hope for, and promise the redeeming work of the Father, Son, and Spirit. While restraint is sometimes a virtue—such "ruled" reading does not require finding vestiges of the Trinity in every proverb, prophecy, and pericope—courage to read the parts in light of the whole is an important (and increasingly rare) habit. Especially in the modern academy, where specialization reigns, breadth of vision is often in short supply, even if it is a bare-minimum mark of Christian handling of Scripture, as Irenaeus and Tertullian argued in the second century.

Second, then, suitable attention to early Christian witness aids a Trinitarian approach. For habits of mind and heart prevailing in pulpits and professorates today are shaped by methodological naturalism that is poisonous to Trinitarian engagement with Scripture. David Yeago poignantly highlights this tyranny: "It is assumed that a truly scholarly interpretation of the scriptural texts methodologically excludes any reference to Christian doctrine as a hermeneutical touchstone."¹¹ In contrast, early Christian writers usually considered the Triune God to be primary in our engagement with Scripture: the main character in the story of redemption, and the divine author in whose friendship lies infinite wisdom and grace. Thus, as Douglas Burton-Christie observed of the desert fathers, "the aim of interpretation [is] moral purity and integrity and through this, the experience of God."¹² This is not to say that patristic interpretation is a pure realm, free of mistaken approaches. The doctrine of the Trinity could easily work as a kind of exegetical hammer, bending texts to its shape regardless of grammar or semantic range. But even the mistaken approaches differ from those that usually prevail today, and can at least work as a counterweight to naturalistic modern habits.

Thus, third, precisely because there is no hermeneutical panacea, a sufficiently Trinitarian approach attends to the fullness of the Spirit's work "in front of" the text. At least in the last two centuries, the Spirit's work has primarily been relegated to cognitive illumination—connecting dots in readers' minds, facilitating understanding and application—but this limitation is unwise. Since reading Scripture faithfully is a whole-person affair, the Spirit's renovation of affections, habits, and dispositions is essential. While this means in practice attending to "mystical" habits—confession and openness to God paired with meditation on Scripture, for example—it is equally important to recognize the Spirit's freedom to minister through cultural and social forms. Just as the Spirit gives life to linguistic symbols (jots and tittles) as modes of God's self-revelation, so the Spirit sanctifies cultural resources to reveal new depths of meaning in the written Word.

Recognizing this is particularly apt as Christianity undergoes radical geographic and demographic shifts, and globalization makes us more aware of those shifts than ever before. With increasing frequency, Christians have the privilege of grasping with new depth the nature of the Triune God revealed in Scripture because of cross-cultural exchanges. In these situations, we hear the Word anew when we see the Spirit's life-giving work take cultural shape, helping us to know the love of the Triune God more fully.

CONCLUSION: MEETING THE TRIUNE GOD AS "PEOPLE OF THE BOOK"

That Trinity Sunday experience of surprise at the wonder of divine love may be less common today. In the intervening years, attraction to "community," whether "postmodern" or not, has galvanized fresh interest in Trinitarian theology. Risks accompany this renaissance: chiefly, we might project a god formed in our own image, or in the image of communal forms we particularly desire. Such a god is unlikely to demand too much; correspondingly, idolatrous fellowship is unlikely to be very embracing across space or enduring over time.

Yet the rewards of paying attention to God's Triune identity outweigh the risks. The love that characterizes God's life is beautiful, worthy of praise. This beauty can evoke not just wonder but also love. As we turn to

Meeting the Triune God in Scripture is not a solo enterprise: it happens in community with contemporaries and saints gone before. In these relationships, we learn practices that build interpretive virtues and block bad interpretive habits.

Scripture, its mysterious climax in the Father's sending of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit places us in a coherent drama. We read not just for cognitive content but communion – the fullness of personal communication. We see truth and love not as opposites that have difficulty attracting, but instead as two dimensions of the one new humanity created in Jesus Christ. So we read for neither information nor inspiration alone, but fellowship; faithful understanding is not an impossible task we are left to achieve on our own, but is participation in the Spirit's work of helping the Church to hear the divine Word. Thus learning the mind of Christ, our very being in communion bears witness to the love of the Triune God.

NOTES

1 See, for example, Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel: God Crucified and Other Studies on the New Testament's Christology of Divine Identity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2008); Larry W. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2005); Gordon D. Fee, *God's Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009 [1994]), and *Pauline Christology: An Exegetical-Theological Study* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013 [2007]); Simon J. Gathercole, *The Preexistent Son: Recovering the Christologies of Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2006); Marianne Meye Thompson, *The God of the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2001); Andreas J. Köstenberger and Scott R. Swain, *Father, Son and Spirit: The Trinity in John's Gospel*, *New Studies in Biblical Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008); and David S. Yeago, "The New Testament and the Nicene Dogma: A Contribution to the Recovery of Theological Exegesis," in *The Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, *Wiley Blackwell Readings in Modern Theology*, edited by Stephen E. Fowl (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1997), 87–100.

2 Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, I.39.

3 See especially Telford Work, *Living and Active: Scripture in the Economy of Salvation*, *Sacra Doctrina* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2002); and Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Triune Discourse: Theological Reflections on the Claim That God Speaks" (2 parts), in *Trinitarian Theology for the Church: Scripture, Community, Worship*, edited by Daniel J. Treier and David Lauber (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 25–78.

4 Timothy Ward, *Words of Life: Scripture as the Living and Active Word of God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009); Scott R. Swain, *Trinity, Revelation, and Reading: A Theological Introduction to the Bible and Its Interpretation* (New York: T&T Clark, 2011).

5 Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, I.3.

6 Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, III.12 (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1996), 40.

7 Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, IX.57. Athanasius refers here to 1 Corinthians 2:9.

8 See, notably, Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, volume I.1, *The Word of God*, translated by Thomas F. Torrance, second edition (Edinburgh, Scotland: T&T Clark, 1975), 296.

9 Gregory of Nyssa, *Homilies on the Song of Songs*, 11.

10 In this regard, see Daniel J. Treier, *Virtue and the Voice of God: Toward Theology as Wisdom* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2006), for interaction with Alasdair MacIntyre's philosophical definition of "practices" and Ellen Charry's theological

treatment of doctrine as virtue-forming – both in substantial conversation with classic Christian teaching. For such an account of a crucial virtue in particular, see Stephen T. Pardue, *The Mind of Christ: Humility and the Intellect in Early Christian Theology*, *Studies in Systematic Theology* (New York: T&T Clark, 2013).

11 Yeago, “The New Testament and the Nicene Dogma,” 87.

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The Journey of Reading Scripture

BY J. TODD BILLINGS

The developing school of theological interpretation of Scripture encourages us to read the Bible as God's instrument of self-revelation and saving fellowship. This school of interpretation approaches Scripture as part of a transformative journey of coming to know the Triune God in Christ.

A wide range of voices claims that a crisis of biblical interpretation is taking place. But contrary to many pundits, the crisis does not simply involve a decline in the Bible's authority. For even when the Bible is interpreted authoritatively, it is not necessarily interpreted as *Christian Scripture*.

Consider, for example, a recent Christian bestseller that offers a "Bible diet." The book claims to enable better concentration, improve appearance, increase energy, and reverse the process of "accelerated aging." To want to improve your appearance and energy level, do you have to be interested in knowing God or Jesus? Of course not. There is nothing intrinsically Christian about the advice.

Similar trends appear in the numerous Christian books that promise biblical solutions for success in finances, relationships, and family. These books can help Christians see implications of their faith for various aspects of life, but they often communicate that the Bible is the authoritative answer book to felt needs and problems. This message centers on the individual and his or her preferences, and does not interpret the Bible in a way that calls felt needs into question or looks beyond them.

It is not just well-meaning writers but also many biblical scholars who fail to approach the Bible as Christian Scripture. Some approach it only as ancient history, using it as a piece of evidence in answering archeological or sociological questions about the ancient world. Other scholars try to reconstruct the thought of a book or author. A scholar can write an in-depth essay about Paul's theology without ever considering that God could be addressing the scholar's own time through Paul's ancient texts.

Partly due to the inadequacies of many popular and scholarly approaches to the Bible, an increasing number of scholars have advocated an approach toward Scripture called the "theological interpretation of Scripture." They encourage us to read the Bible as God's instrument of self-revelation and saving fellowship. This school of interpretation includes a wide range of practices, but all of them move us toward approaching Scripture as part of a transformative journey of coming to know the Triune God in Christ.

THE SPACIOUS RULE OF FAITH

When examining how we interpret Scripture, we should pay attention to our functional theology of Scripture: how our use of Scripture reflects particular beliefs about what the Bible is. Two common approaches to using Scripture today are particularly problematic.

Some start with a detailed blueprint of what the Bible says, then read individual passages of Scripture as if they were the concrete building blocks to fit into the blueprint. They translate each passage into a set of propositions or "biblical principles" that fit the established details of the blueprint. With this approach, the task of interpreting Scripture becomes a matter of discovering where in our theological system a particular Scripture passage fits.

Others prefer a smorgasbord approach. Imagine a huge cafeteria loaded with food of many kinds for many tastes; you are at the cafeteria with the members of a small-group Bible study. Can you imagine what some of the other members of the group would choose to eat? I suspect that there might even be patterns based on age, gender, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status, but each person chooses which foods to feast on based on his or her appetite. In the smorgasbord approach to Scripture, the Bible becomes the answer book for our felt needs and personal perspectives.

With both the blueprint and smorgasbord approaches, we are in control. We end up using Scripture for our own purposes. The Bible may be viewed as authoritative, but it either provides confirmation of our preconceived ideas or divine advice for felt needs.

Blueprint readers rightly sense that one cannot read the Bible without bringing some theological presuppositions to the table; we each come with assumptions when we open its pages. Smorgasbord readers rightly believe that the Bible is a book through which God addresses us; it is not just a book of ancient history, doctrine, or worldview. A theological reading of Scripture makes use of both of these assumptions, yet in a deeper and fuller way.

Instead of providing a detailed blueprint, a theological reading brings a map for a journey of faith seeking understanding. The map does not give all the answers; in particular moments of the journey, we can be confused and puzzled by what we find in a particular Scripture passages. But we trust that in this journey, the God of Scripture encounters us again and again, both with comforting signs of his presence and surprises that confound us, yet may open new vistas. Reading Scripture is not about solving puzzles, but discerning a mystery. Through Scripture, we encounter no less than the mysterious Triune God himself.

Early Christians taught that Christians should—indeed, must—approach Scripture with a basic theological map in hand. By the second century, Irenaeus spoke of the “rule of faith” as a way to understand the basic Christian story with which orthodox Christians (versus Gnostics) should approach the Bible. This “rule of faith” was not the invention of detached scholars, but an account of the gospel and Christian identity rooted in baptism: one reads Scripture as a follower of Jesus, baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Thus, early baptismal creeds—statements of faith—had a Trinitarian character (e.g., the Apostles’ Creed) that provided the basic content of the “rule of faith.”

Why was and is this necessary? The Bible is a large book, and even careful readers can interpret it in a variety of ways. But not all of these ways are *Christian* ways of reading Scripture. For example, one can read the Bible in a way that sees the God of Israel as a severe, judging God, as the antithesis of the God of Jesus, who is supposedly only a merciful God without judgment. But this is not a Christian reading of the Old and New Testaments. In the early centuries of Christianity, the rule of faith helped make sure that Christians held the Old Testament with the New—that the God of creation and covenant is also the God revealed to us in Jesus Christ.

The Trinitarian rule of faith has been a critical element of Bible reading from the early church through the Middle Ages and the Protestant Reformation. The Reformers emphasized that Scripture (not church tradition) was the only final “rule of faith.” Yet, Luther, Calvin, and others made it clear that they heartily affirmed a basic, Trinitarian theological approach to Scripture. In interpreting the Old Testament as well as the New, Reformers sought to read Scripture in light of Jesus Christ as the fulfillment of God’s promises in creation and covenant, applying it to the Church as disciples of Christ.

Many contemporary scholars have sought to revive this basic Trinitarian rule of faith. For example, as R. R. Reno says in the preface to the *Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible*, the multivolume series “advances upon the assumption that the Nicene [Trinitarian] tradition, in all its diversity and controversy, provides the proper basis for the interpretation of the Bible as Christian Scripture.”¹

The term *rule* in “rule of faith” is best thought of in terms of “measure.” The rule gives a sense of the center as well as the periphery in biblical interpretation. It does not decide the meaning of specific Scripture passages in advance. Instead, it gives a sense of scope in the journey of reading Scripture, forging a path to deeper fellowship with the Triune God. It gives us a map for our journey into a new country. The new world into which God brings us via Scripture is wide and spacious, but it also has a specified character. It is a journey on the path of Jesus Christ by the power of the Spirit in anticipation of the final, culminating communion with the Triune God.

THE BIBLE IS FOR DISCIPLES

Does the theological interpretation of Scripture require specialized training? While the movement’s adherents (Kevin Vanhoozer, Joel Green, and Stephen Fowl, among others) encourage engagement with pre-modern commentators and modern biblical criticism, they have great confidence in the ability of ordinary congregations to approach the Bible as God’s Word.

Two dynamics are often overlooked in contemporary approaches to biblical interpretation, especially those grounded in historical-critical assumptions. The first is the work of the Spirit in illuminating Scripture, and the second is interpreting the Scripture “in Christ.” Congregations around the world, though, cultivate a sense of these two realities as they pray for the Spirit’s illumination, worship the Triune God, and apply Scripture to their community of discipleship and witness. Of course, these practices are no guarantee of faithful biblical interpretation, but they are indispensable dynamics for interpreting the Bible *as Scripture*. The indwelling of the Spirit in the Christian community, as one located “in Christ,” uniquely equips the Christian community to interpret the Bible as God’s Word.

Approaching the Bible with such theological assumptions is anathema to many biblical scholars today. Theological convictions, many assume, are an adversary rather than a potential ally of faithful biblical interpretation. There is a genuine concern behind this objection: aren’t we supposed to get our theology from the Bible rather than impose it on the Bible? Those who object in this way usually grant that we cannot be unbiased

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in our interpretation, but add that we should “bracket” our theological presuppositions as we approach the Bible.

While it is right to seek our theology from the Bible, others note that theological convictions and practices like worship make Bible reading more fruitful and faithful rather than less. As Reno claims in the preface to the Brazos series, theological doctrine “is a crucial aspect of the divine pedagogy, a clarifying agent for our minds fogged by self-deceptions.”²

Consider the following scenario: as a congregation gathers, they give thanks for the love and majesty of God the Father, worship Jesus Christ as their saving Lord, and confess the communal working of the Holy Spirit. These are basic features of healthy Christian worship. Worship both expresses and shapes the loves and theological convictions of the worshippers. Now, after the opening of worship, we hear a text from the Gospel of Luke—containing a narrative and the words of this same Jesus. Do we really want to ask the congregation to “bracket” their love and conviction that Jesus is Lord at that moment? The congregation is approaching Luke’s text with a certain disposition, but that disposition can actually make the hearing of Luke’s text *more* fruitful rather than less for the sake of Christian discipleship—particularly if it displays an openness to hear through the text from Jesus Christ as Lord of the Church.

Of course, a theological reading of Scripture can have pitfalls as well. But the solution is not to surrender the Bible to scholarly experts. Rather, it is to regain a sense of the place of Scripture in God’s drama of redemption, and to enter into the task of reading Scripture with openness to being reformed and reshaped on our path of dying to the old self and living into our identity in Christ.

THE PLACE OF COMMENTARIES

Still, we should also avoid another extreme: interpreting the Bible alone, without others. In our day, some assume that the individual is an omni-competent biblical interpreter. No need for commentators, no need for a community of faith; just me, the Bible, and the Holy Spirit.

While sometimes the slogan “*sola scriptura*” is used to justify such an approach, it is a serious distortion of that Protestant principle. During the Reformation, the Bible was not read alone. Instead, communities of worship and discipleship were the setting of biblical interpretation. Moreover, Reformation exegetes consulted exegetes through the ages, and refined their knowledge of biblical languages and other critical skills of biblical interpretation.

The theological interpretation of Scripture movement seeks to reunite what modernity has divided: discipleship and critical study of the Bible. For example, in *On Christian Teaching*, Augustine said that Jesus Christ, as the incarnate God-human, is the “road” to our heavenly homeland.³ Thus, all Scripture is interpreted in light of Jesus Christ. All scriptural interpretation must lead to our growth in love of God and neighbor.

Along with this, however, Augustine claimed that knowing Greek and Hebrew is very valuable for interpreting Scripture. He said that reading Scripture engages the disciplines of history, rhetoric, logic, and what we would call cultural anthropology. Like Augustine, the theological interpretation movement has sought to bring together discipleship with the academic study of Scripture.

While historical-critical study of the Bible is both necessary and helpful, on its own it is not sufficient for interpreting the Bible as Christian Scripture. Building upon Augustine, we can say that a Christian interpretation of Scripture necessarily leads to love of God and neighbor; if it fails to edify in this way, then it does not matter how much linguistic and historical study was done. It is not interpreting the Bible as Christian Scripture.

For example, how should one interpret as Christian Scripture the Psalms which curse the Psalmist's enemies? Is a historical-critical inquiry on its own adequate, forcing one to set aside consideration of Christ and his command to love our enemies? No. Instead, with the bulk of pre-modern commentators, we need to interpret the Psalms in a way that leads us deeper into Christ and his way of discipleship. Using these Psalms to hate our personal enemies rather than love them is not an exegetical option. There is not just one way to do this—and pre-modern commentators can engage our imagination about the possibilities. Indeed, the clarity with which pre-modern commentators face the question of how to interpret the Bible as God's Word—even difficult parts of the Bible—is one of the reasons for renewed interest in pre-modern interpretation today. As Thomas Oden notes in his *General Introduction to the Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, "a profound yearning broods within the heart of evangelicals for the recovery of the history of exegesis."⁴

Thus, it is fruitful not only to interpret Scripture with a functional Trinitarian rule in a community of faith, but—particularly for those designated to teach or preach the Bible—to read it with pre-modern as well as modern commentators. Yet, regarding methods of reading the Bible, Fuller Seminary New Testament scholar Joel Green reminds us that "any and all methods must be tamed in relation to the theological aims of scripture and the ecclesial context within which the Bible is read

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as scripture.”⁵ As suggested by Augustine, a wide variety of interpretive methods can be used, but they are used toward the end of reading Scripture as God’s powerful word to the Church, a community of disciples growing in the image of Christ.

CHRIST IN FOCUS

A key feature of much work in theological interpretation has been the revival of some form of “spiritual” interpretation, such that the Old Testament not only has a historical sense, but also a spiritual sense – in the form of allegory or typology – that extends to Christ and his Church.

But doesn’t such reading violate a historical reading of the text itself?

It depends on what one means by “historical.” For the majority of Christian history, the historical or literal sense of the Old Testament did not mean that exegetes tried to “unthink” Jesus when they read the Old Testament. Rather, it generally referred to the narrative flow of the Old Testament itself. Thus, in its best instances, the Old Testament’s narrative continued to have integrity even as “spiritual” senses referring to Christ were layered on top of it. The Reformers rightly protested against aberrant forms of allegory that lost sight of the historical sense, but they continued to give spiritual readings of the Old Testament in various forms.

This approach to the Old Testament is rooted in the New Testament itself. For New Testament writers, it is not just the occasional messianic psalm or prophecy that applies to Christ. They read all of Israel’s Scriptures in light of Christ. For example, Hebrews begins with seven citations of Old Testament texts from diverse contexts and genres (the Psalms, Deuteronomy, and 2 Samuel), yet all of them are applied to Christ. How could this be? It is not because of quirky hermeneutics but because of who Jesus Christ *is* in God’s economy of salvation:

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being....

Hebrews 1:1-3a

The Son is the fulfillment of such divergent Old Testament passages because even though “our ancestors” did not recognize it in their day, the Son is the Creator who is also the “heir of all things” and has been made known in history in Jesus Christ.

This means that spiritual readings of the Old Testament should not annihilate the Old Testament narrative. When the risen Jesus opened the minds of his companions on the Emmaus road “to understand the scriptures,” he did not suggest that the “law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms”

had been displaced; rather, they had been “fulfilled” in himself (Luke 24:44–45). In the words of Daniel Treier, reading Scripture in a “Christ-centered” way “makes possible spiritual participation in the realities of which Scripture speaks.”⁶

READING WITH CONFIDENCE AND HUMILITY

As John Webster notes, “reading Scripture is an episode in the history of sin and its overcoming; and overcoming sin is the sole work of Christ and the Spirit.” Thus, “reading Scripture is inescapably bound to regeneration.”⁷ As such, we read Scripture expecting to receive a divine word — one of comfort but also of confrontation. God’s Word renews us as it confronts our cultural and personal idols, provides light for our path, and equips us for service in the world.

Thus, to read the Bible as Scripture involves delighting in, memorizing, and dwelling on it. When tempted by Satan, Jesus responds with Scripture he has memorized (Matthew 4:1–11). Colossians 3:16 admonishes believers to “let the word of Christ dwell in you richly.” The Gospel of John shows a Trinitarian dynamic of dwelling in Christ’s word, for the Spirit sent to believers will “glorify” Christ, and “will take what is mine and declare it to you” (16:14). Delighting and dwelling in God’s Word is supremely practical, relating to our finances, family, and bodies. However, we should not enter into it for worldly “success,” but rather as part of our dying to the old self and participating in the Spirit’s new creation in Christ.

In this way, we can read the Bible with confidence, knowing that God acts powerfully through Scripture — in corporate worship, through prayer and memorization, through teaching and witness. We do not have to master Scripture and then make it relevant to our lives; through Scripture, God opens up a new place for us to dwell, a place of fellowship with Christ on a path leading to love of God and neighbor.

We never finish the journey of sanctification in this life. Likewise, we never finish our journey of meditating on Scripture, experiencing it anew in word and sacrament. We wrestle with it even as it sometimes tells us what we do not want to hear, as well as confirming and building up our new identity in Christ. In all of this, Scripture’s value to us is inexhaustible because the Spirit uses Scripture to testify to Christ, the Word of the Father. In reading the Bible as Scripture, we are not the masters. We are being mastered and enlivened by the Triune God.⁸

NOTES

1 R. R. Reno, series preface in Jaroslav Pelikan, *Acts*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2005), 13–14.

2 *Ibid.*, 14.

3 Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, I.17.

4 Thomas C. Oden, general introduction in Andrew Louth, ed., *Genesis 1–11*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, Old Testament, volume I (Downers Grove, IL:

InterVarsity Press, 2001), xxi.

5 Joel B. Green, *Seized by Truth: Reading the Bible as Scripture* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2007), 125.

6 Daniel J. Treier, *Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Recovering a Christian Practice* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 54.

7 John Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch*, *Current Issues in Theology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 88-89.

8 This article is adapted from my essay "How to Read the Bible: New strategies for interpreting Scripture turn out to be not so new – and help deepen our life in Christ," *Christianity Today*, 55:10 (October 2011), 24-30; available online at www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2011/october/how-to-read-bible.html.



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Studying the Word of God

BY STEPHEN B. CHAPMAN

When we think of “studying” Scripture, we often envision a process of gathering information. Scripture, like everything else in modern life, becomes a commodity. The classical Christian approach to Scripture starts from an altogether different perspective: that in the Bible God still speaks to humans.

When people think of “studying” Scripture today, they often envision a process of gathering information. After all, the twenty-first century is the age of Google and Wikipedia; information is produced and gathered constantly. Internet search engines are so much a part of daily life that families access them at the dinner table. Cell phones are magic-like portals to universal knowledge. News reports rocket around the globe, minute by minute, 24/7. Even though communication technologies are a great gift, attempting to monitor the overwhelming flow of information is like trying to take a drink of water from a fire hydrant.

In this environment, the act of reading focuses more and more on expediency and becomes fundamentally opportunistic. “What can I get out of this text?” is the driving question. “How can I find the information I need as quickly and efficiently as possible?” “How can I zero in on what is important for me and use it to my best advantage?” Reading takes place so that information can be consumed, and “studying” is just one more way for consumers to locate the right product. Scripture, like everything else in modern life, has become a commodity.

The phenomenon of “Study Bibles” illustrates this contemporary situation. There is an Apologetics Study Bible and an Archaeology Study

Bible, a Catholic Study Bible and an Orthodox Study Bible, a Humanist Study Bible and a Women of Faith Study Bible, a Life Application Study Bible and a Teen Study Bible, and so on. What all of these Bibles offer is heightened attention to the user, assistance in separating the scriptural wheat from the biblical chaff, and the addition of interpretive notes to direct readers more efficiently to the particular kind of information specially geared for them—in short, streamlined delivery with reduced investment of time and effort.

None of this is wholly bad, and in fact such publications will often do some good. Christians want and need to understand Scripture, and Scripture is not always easy to understand. If merchandising the Bible in this fashion helps Christians to achieve that end, fine. But the relentless repackaging of the Bible for niche markets also communicates the idea that there will be a particular Bible “for me,” that the Bible does not do its work as well as it might just on its own, and that a more appealing form can be developed for the purpose of highlighting and enlivening its content. In this way Christians are trained to be consumers of the Bible and skeptical reviewers of its message. “If this part of the Bible is not speaking to me,” they learn to say, “then it is simply not the part to which I need to pay attention.”

Of course, some Christians do not want to read the Bible only for what they can immediately get out of it or what seems best suited for them at first glance. They want to dig deeper and learn about everything in the Bible out of genuine historical interest. So much about the Bible seems exotic and ancient, full of excitement and adventure. These Christians have a sense that the Bible beckons them to a world beyond the horizon of their hum-drum daily lives, a world of long ago in which God spoke plainly and acted directly in human affairs. Accordingly, the point of studying the Bible for them is to reconstruct this lost world. Scripture is an artifact, a transcript that relates history: what God once did and how our forebears in the faith responded.

By recovering an appreciation for what God did in the past, these contemporary Christians think to gain a fresh angle of vision on our current situation. By drawing analogies between the past and present, they attempt to re-narrate their identity and face today’s challenges imaginatively. Much of this historically oriented study is well-intentioned and faithful. The Bible is in fact rooted in history, and it does tell a story. In the end, however, this more serious mode of Bible study also fails to avoid refashioning Scripture according to contemporary expectations, norms, and presuppositions. Historical study of the Bible tends to substitute a reconstructed story behind the biblical text for the biblical text itself. The meaning of a biblical story then lies in what “really” happened. God remains quarantined in the past. Scripture is granted a role to play in revisiting God’s once-mighty acts, but Scripture itself is only a means to that end—evidence, testimony, a witness to Truth that resides somewhere else. The biblical interpreter becomes a religious tourist.

The classical Christian approach to Scripture starts from an altogether different perspective. Praying and studying Scripture were once considered two complementary modes of communication with God: in prayer humans speak to God; in Scripture God speaks to humans.¹ It is this sense of being *addressed* that characterizes the reality of Scripture within Christian tradition. Scripture requires study not in order to discover interesting information about the past, but to discern what God is saying for today. Discernment is still necessary precisely because God has chosen to speak in an ongoing way through words recorded long ago. That is what terms like “scripture” and “canon” indicate: that God continues to speak in these particular writings, that they *are*, and not only *were*, God’s Word.

Such discernment will be “critical” because it will involve detailed knowledge of the whole Bible and profound intellectual wrestling with the substance of faith. At the same time it will be deeply personal, since discernment always relies in part on an interpreter’s dispositions and affections. Early church theologians knew all too well that good biblical exegesis was just as much about an interpreter’s character as an interpreter’s knowledge or method. As Gregory the Great once put it: “Scripture is like a river...in which a lamb may wade and an elephant swim.”² Lamb-like readers can comfortably stay in the shallows, but there are riparian depths in Scripture for elephantine interpreters to explore.

This traditional emphasis on character or virtue undercuts modern efforts to shield knowledge from personal commitment.

Modernity’s claim to “objective” knowledge is less about fairness and dialogue, and more about a denial of any consequential relationship between knowledge and ethics. Yet some ideas, once they are accepted, in fact require us to live differently; sometimes we have to live differently even in order to understand certain ideas.

After God’s gift of the law at Sinai, the Israelites curiously respond: “we will do, and we will be obedient” (Exodus 24:7). They have realized that doing comes first; obedient knowledge is consequence of committed action rather than its precondition.

True enough, throughout history non-Christians and heterodox Christians have made significant contributions to a theological understanding of Scripture, and orthodox Christians have frequently betrayed the Bible’s

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fundamental message of love. But these cases do not negate the early church's basic insight: to study the Bible well means to stake one's entire life on it, to be a disciple as well as a reader. God's Word for today will always be heard more clearly within the context of a life exhibiting humility, purity, and chastity. Because of individual human limitations and personal frailty, this insight means in turn that biblical interpretation will be most reliable and robust in authentic Christian community, where scriptural interpreters can complement each other's strengths and weaknesses, and where all are committed to the path of communal discipleship.

From this perspective many well-intentioned church Bible studies are falling desperately short of what is needed. The central question for such groups to discuss should not be "What did this Bible passage mean originally?" or "What does this text tell us about the past?" or even "What does it tell us about what God once did?" Instead, Bible study groups should be asking "What is God saying to us today through this text?" and "If our church took this scriptural word with utmost seriousness, what would we do differently this week in our local community?" and "How is God using this part of the Bible to show us what it means to be disciples of Jesus right now, right here?"

It might be that the whole idea of Bible "study" has become tainted and misdirected within the Church: too distanced, too cerebral, too individualistic. Perhaps churches should start calling their Bible studies by another name: "Bible action groups" or "Bible implementation squads." The new name would help make the point that what is at stake in consulting the Bible is not only what Christians are to know but how they are to live. The endless modern debates about the Bible's relation to history and science, not to mention the critical debates in academic scholarship over the history of the Bible's literary formation, have all too conveniently served to deflect attention away from the gospel's call for transformed lives. In this regard it is difficult to improve on the comment attributed to Mark Twain: "It ain't those parts of the Bible that I can't understand that bother me, it is the parts that I do understand." So much of what passes for Bible study these days, in the Church as well as the academy, is finally a straining after gnats (Matthew 23:24).

The best way to prevent getting off track comes from the biblical text itself. Discussion leaders need above all to keep on asking "But what does it *say*?" While there is much to be gained from more creative approaches to the Bible, speculating about the psychology of biblical characters invariably leads away from serious reflection on the ways of God. Speculating about history ("maybe back then...") not only leaves the text behind but winds up in a cul-de-sac of undecidability ("maybe...I just don't know"). By contrast it is crucial to be alert to the Bible's own distinctive interests and also to its silences. To paraphrase the Reformer Ulrich Zwingli, good biblical interpretation involves not only speaking when the Bible speaks but keeping silent when the Bible is silent.³

When reading the story of Abraham and Isaac in Genesis 22, everyone always notices how three days pass by without a word of dialogue being mentioned (vv. 3-4). Things are tense; God has commanded Abraham to sacrifice his only son. But to respond to this information gap by observing “Well now, they must have talked about *something* in the course of those three days, so I wonder what they said” is again to substitute a “real” story, somewhere behind the biblical story, for the biblical story itself. The biblical story *is* the real story. If no dialogue is provided, it means that for the purpose of this story no dialogue exists, that Abraham and Isaac are silent as they trudge along toward Moriah. Their silence heightens the tension literarily, even as it reminds readers that the heart of the story is not about Abraham’s internal struggle but God’s uncompromising call. This is a story about external actions rather than inner emotions. God has no intention of killing Isaac; we are told right at the beginning of the story that the divine command is a test (22:1). God does not want a dead Isaac but a faithful Abraham. Through Abraham’s example we learn that faith is not only about what we say or feel but what we are prepared to do.

Becoming a sensitive and alert reader is therefore of paramount significance. Young people preparing for the ministry should be English majors. The theologian Nicholas Lash has said that the Church should be “an academy of word-care.”⁴ Linguistic and literary skills are crucial not only because the careful use of words is one

of the primary ways that the Church maintains and deepens Christian identity (in worship, prayer, preaching, and so on), but also because being imprecise or sloppy with words is sure to provide sin with an entry-point into Christian community. Yet literary sensitivity is not exclusively theological; it can be learned and used in secular contexts just as effectively. At their best, literary tools illustrate how reading

the Bible well sometimes means reading it “like any other book.”⁵ Rather than approaching the Bible as if it is a pious tract, literarily informed readers look for the same rhetorical strategies and effects that they might find in novels and sonnets.

Another way to think about the importance of the Bible’s literary dimension is to invoke the modern distinction between “story” and “discourse.”⁶ If we

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take “story” to mean something like “plot,” then “discourse” can stand for the way in which that story gets told. So, for example, the basic story of *The Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens is well-known. Many people are familiar with Scrooge and the three ghosts who visit him by night. But this story has in fact been told in many different versions, in film as well as in literature. The Victorian setting of Dickens’s original tale is far removed from the television-studio retelling featuring Bill Murray.⁷ In theory the same “story” could even be re-narrated from the perspective of Bob Cratchit or Tiny Tim. In *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, Tom Stoppard retells the story of Hamlet from the perspective of two minor characters in Shakespeare’s play.⁸ In these examples the “story” may ultimately be the same, but the “discourse” is quite different. The point is that “discourse” is the *how* of the story rather than the *what*, and yet this *how* contributes substantially to the story’s meaning.

The Bible is discourse as well as story. Perceptive readers pay loving attention to how the biblical story is told because they understand that the Bible’s meaning also lies in that *how*, that the Bible does not only wish to report things that happened but also convey a point of view about them. This point of view can be recognized most readily in the way in which the events of the plot are shaped and unfolded. The narrator of Genesis 22 does not have to begin that story by observing how what follows is a test, but he does—and it completely changes the way the story works. In fact, sometimes when people talk about Genesis 22 they seem to think that Abraham did kill Isaac or that God actually wanted Abraham to do so! But at the *discourse* level of Genesis 22, both of these judgments are actually ruled out. What God tells Abraham to do is a horrifying test, and we should still squirm and marvel at how God seemingly believes that what will be gained from this test is worth Abraham’s agony. But Genesis 22 is not only a plot sequence that can be told and re-told, it is a particular literary presentation of that plot, told in a certain way for a theological purpose.

We could extend this idea to the format of the Christian Bible as a whole. Basic to Christian tradition is the idea of a single Bible containing two testaments.⁹ Early on, of course, the only Bible known to Christians (all of whom at first were Jews) was what is now called the “Old Testament.” Only gradually were other Christian writings produced and assembled, and added to the Old Testament as a new literary collection with its own integrity and focus. On the one hand, early Christians apparently came to feel that the Old Testament was no longer enough for them. On the other hand, they retained it as it was and did not seek to “Christianize” it or harmonize it with Christian realities through editorial revision. For this reason each testament has its own character and deserves its own careful investigation. It remains important that Jesus is not named in the Old Testament, nor does he explicitly appear. The Old Testament is a pre-Christian witness to God.

Yet the gospel message is not only that God gave Jesus to the world but that God sent him in the form of the long-promised Jewish messiah, within the context of Israel's divinely appointed vocation to the world. In interpreting the Old Testament, Christian realities can only be "bracketed" to a point. Reading the story forward without inserting Christian teachings can be a helpful way to read Israel's story more carefully — but only so long as the story is still read as culminating in Christ. Jewish interpreters and secular scholars may not wish to read the two testaments together at all. But for Christians, the two-testament format of the Christian Bible is basic because the gospel proclaims Jesus as the messiah of the Jews, and not only the redeemer of the Gentiles. It is hard to do justice to both of these truths at once. One way may be to engage in both "prospective" and "retrospective" reading. Reading "prospectively" or "forward," one can trace the story of Israel from creation, through Exodus, Exile, and Return, peering ahead to a coming divine act that will finally exceed the temporal boundaries of the Old Testament. At the same time, reading "retrospectively" or "backward," one can re-read the various events and figures of the Old Testament as foreshadowing and gesturing toward Christ.

David Steinmetz has described this traditional manner of reading as something like what happens in a good detective story, in which a concluding drawing-room revelation customarily causes the reader to re-read the whole story with new understanding.¹⁰ In this re-reading, certain seemingly trivial details take on new importance and many things that once appeared as if they might be highly significant ("red herrings") are no longer of interest. Having all the information from the outset would spoil the story; not thinking back through the story from the perspective of its conclusion would exhibit a lack of regard for the truth. Karl Barth thus described the Old Testament as a witness of "anticipation" and the New Testament as a witness of "recollection."¹¹ In the center is Christ, and both testaments point to him — each in its distinctive way.

Accordingly, Christian study of the Bible has always concentrated on comparing both testaments with each other. To return to the example of Genesis 22, many modern commentators have objected to its portrayal of a God who would demand that a parent sacrifice a child — even as a test. This deficient deity, they say, is that wrathful "Old Testament God" who was later replaced by the "New Testament God" of love. Yet Jesus also says that "whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me" (Matthew 10:37) and Paul teaches how God "did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us" (Romans 8:32). Reading the two testaments together in fact reveals that their "Gods" are the same God, and that Genesis 22 not only depicts God's call for radical obedience but discloses the possibility of God's self-sacrifice.

We do and do not study the Bible "like any other book."

NOTES

1 For example, see Jerome, *Letters* 3.4. Cf. his *Letters* 22.25, "If you pray, you are speaking to your Spouse; if you read, he is speaking to you," as cited in Mariano Magrassi, *Praying the Bible: An Introduction to Lectio Divina* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1998), 16.

2 Gregory the Great, *Epistle to the Most Reverend and Holy Leander*, 4, prefixed to his *Morals on Job*.

3 See Timothy George, *The Theology of the Reformers* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2013), 135-136.

4 Nicholas Lash, "Ministry of the Word or Comedy and Philology," *New Blackfriars* 68 (November 1987), 472-483, here citing 477.

5 This phrase has an important history in modern biblical studies; see R. W. L. Moberly, "'Interpret the Bible Like Any Other Book?' Requiem for an Axiom," *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 4:1 (Spring 2010), 91-110.

6 Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1978).

7 *Scrooged*, directed by Richard Donner (Mirage Productions, 1988).

8 Tom Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* (New York: Grove Press, 1968). The play was also released as a film with the same title, directed by Stoppard (Brandenburg/WNET Channel 13 New York, 1990).

9 Christopher R. Seitz, *The Character of Christian Scripture: The Significance of a Two-Testament Bible*, Studies in Theological Interpretation (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011).

10 David C. Steinmetz, "Uncovering a Second Narrative: Detective Fiction and the Construction of Historical Method," in Ellen F. Davis and Richard B. Hays, eds., *The Art of Reading Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2003), 54-65.

11 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/2, edited by G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh, UK: T&T Clark, 1956), 45-121.



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Reading the Beatitudes like a Christian

BY ANDREW SELBY

**Patristic and medieval biblical interpreters can help us
relearn reading Scripture within the story of salvation.**

**They do not disdain historical inquiry, but integrate those
details within a larger picture of reality. Their reading of
the Bible flows first and foremost from their faith.**

Imagine that a friend has asked you to lead a Bible study group that is working through the Gospel of Matthew, and your job is to explain the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount: the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:1-12). You know that teaching this difficult passage will require more than just a cursory explanation. Recognizing that the Sermon on the Mount is probably the most important of Jesus's discourses in the Gospels, and is often called the charter for Christian discipleship, the stakes are accordingly high. If you succeed, you could inspire your brothers and sisters in Christ to fuller love of God and neighbor. On the other hand, if you bungle Jesus' teaching, you may accidentally persuade the group that the Christian life is either impossible or dull. Will they find Christ's sketch of the "blessed" life compelling or just plain naïve?

You know that you need more than personal anecdotes to unpack the passage. After all, we are all on the way, not having attained to the vision of life cast in the Beatitudes. Humbly recognizing your individual limitations, you decide to consult some Bible study resources. But which ones?

If you have some training in biblical exegesis from a Christian college or seminary, you will probably reach for some standard modern commentaries published in the last few decades. But as you search them for insight into

the Beatitudes, you begin to suspect that their being “up-to-date” is not a virtue, but a liability. Surely these contemporary commentaries have some “blind spots” through no fault in their author’s scholarship or faithlessness in their devotion. Since human beings are limited in the scope of their understanding and hindered by the effects of sin, every exegete in every age necessarily has blind spots; but the particular scope of the restrictions is conditioned by the exegete’s time and culture. So here’s the rub: when we read commentaries from our own era, we may find them easy to understand, but the very aspects of the biblical text we miss, their authors may miss as well – and for the same reasons.

Indeed, there is good reason to suspect that contemporary commentators have more than their fair share of blind spots. In the last few centuries biblical scholarship has been located almost exclusively in the university, and in the same period the university has largely rejected the authority of faith over reason. Abandoned is the basic approach of *fides quaerens intellectum*, or faith seeking understanding. One consequence has been the divorce of theology from biblical commentary. In other words, modern exegetes often adopt a method of interpreting Scripture that separates the narrative of faith from the “real” meaning of the text. The relation of a passage to the overarching story of creation, Israel, Christ, Church, and consummation is ignored because the grand Christian narrative is no longer assumed to be true. The findings of supposedly “objective” historical research then eclipse theology as the truth about the biblical texts.

Of course, because the spell of the Enlightenment is lifting, many scholars within the guild of biblical studies recognize this problem. They understand that their work, generally favoring the historical-critical method of interpretation, has become disconnected from the life of the Church, which is founded on the overarching Christian narrative.

But while modern scholars wrestle with this problem and debate proposed solutions, you have a Bible study to lead! In conditions such as these, we need teachers to teach us how to teach. We need a model right now to show us a way forward in interpreting texts in light of God’s story of salvation.

Fortunately, the divorce of faith and scholarship has not always afflicted the Church. The Church of premodern times bears witness to a more integrated way of understanding the Bible. If patristic¹ and medieval² authors have a defining characteristic, it is that they emphasize the big picture over the details. They have eyes intent on the narrative of Scripture, especially on its climax in Jesus’s incarnation, death, and resurrection – what they often called the “scope” or “mind” of Scripture. Because of this awareness of the cosmic story of the whole, they exemplify how to read particular passages of the Bible from the standpoint of faith. Furthermore, their blind spots will often appear glaringly obvious to us because of the perspective that the passing of time affords. So, they are less likely to lead us astray.

What difference, then, would a premodern approach make for our understanding of the Beatitudes? How can studying interpreters from an earlier time benefit us as we lead small groups or preach sermons or teach classes on the Bible? To answer these questions practically, let's consider the work of Christian of Stavelot, a ninth-century commentator on the Gospel of Matthew who can serve for us both as expositor of the Beatitudes and model for putting the tradition to good use.³

CHRISTIAN OF STAVELOT AS EXPOSITOR OF THE BEATITUDES

All that is known of Christian of Stavelot derives from the commentary he wrote on the Gospel of Matthew. Indeed it is not even certain that his name was "Christian."⁴ We do know that he composed his exposition for the benefit of young monks studying in the Abbey of Stavelot, located in modern Belgium.

Not unlike a contemporary Bible study leader, it fell to him to explain the Gospels to his young charges, as we discover from the introductory letter Christian attached. Initially, he tried using Jerome's *Commentary on Matthew*, written in 398, as his classroom text.⁵ But Christian's young pupils found Jerome too difficult to comprehend. Christian also reports to the monastery's elders with chagrin that his lectures were going in students' one ear and out the other. Christian's commentary would allow them to study and review what he had said—or so he hoped.

His commentary was also the product of a larger movement of reform in the ninth-century Frankish

Empire: the "Carolingian Renaissance." John J. Contreni explains the purpose of this renewal movement: "What the leaders of Carolingian society wanted to do was to prepare the clergy, 'the soldiers of the Church,' to lead 'the people of God to the pasture of eternal life.'"⁶

Charlemagne, the great ruler of the empire, and his advisor, Alcuin, were eager to raise the level of education among pastors and monks to attain this goal of improved

leading, preaching, and evangelizing. They proceeded by emphasizing study of the liberal arts (especially the *Trivium*: grammar, logic, and rhetoric) and the Bible. Indeed, scrutinizing the Scriptures was one of the primary means to learning the liberal arts in the time period, which in turn fostered a deeper reading of Scripture.

Every exegete has blind spots conditioned by the time and culture. So here's the rub: commentaries from our era may be easy to understand, but the very aspects of the biblical text we miss, their authors may miss as well—and for the same reasons.

An agent of this renaissance, Christian wished to impart such knowledge to his students. Some of the commentary is therefore rather pedantic, making notes of spelling and defining words. But this was part of Christian's task in educating young monks, who would grow up to exposit the Bible to their flocks and fill crucial leadership roles in their communities. Christian was not just teaching the text of Matthew: he was teaching his students to read well. In our contemporary situation, in which educational standards in the United States have been consistently slipping, pastors and lay leaders cannot assume their congregants know all the vocabulary in a biblical passage, much less the logical flow of the argument or narrative. Thus, we would do well, like Christian, not to neglect basic explication of the texts we teach.

As for the Beatitudes in particular, Christian's interpretation maintains a singular focus on Jesus. Never for a moment does he forget from whose mouth the Beatitudes flow. If every speech has three aspects – argument (*logos*), appeal to the listener (*pathos*), and the character of the speaker (*ethos*) – Christian attends to all three, especially emphasizing *ethos*.

For example, when the text mentions the detail that the Lord “sat down” on the mountain before the sermon commences (Matthew 5:1), Christian comments:

This means he was set apart from the crowds [as a teacher from pupils]. God's *sitting down* has the spiritual meaning that Jesus was made incarnate, because when he became incarnate it was as if he shrank: that is to say, he was not such as he is in his divinity.⁷

The first bit of this remark is a basic historical point: Jesus assumes an attitude of authority when he sits like a rabbi, with his audience gathered around him – a point frequently made in modern commentaries. But then Christian moves to a deeper level, invoking the theology of the Incarnation. Christian probably has in mind Psalm 110:1, “The LORD says to my Lord, ‘Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool’” [emphasis mine]. New Testament writers frequently used this verse to identify Jesus, significantly in Matthew 22:41–46. Christian observes that when someone sits he seems to get smaller. Spiritually, this refers to Jesus becoming incarnate, taking on human flesh, in his humility. The Incarnation is the greatest possible act of humility, since Jesus always has reigned and always will reign with the Father and Holy Spirit in divine majesty.

But why highlight the doctrine of Jesus' divine and human natures here? Christian wants his students to know that the Lord of the universe, who inspired the prophets, has delivered the Sermon – not just a really nice man. This tallies with the closing of the Sermon, which tells of the crowd's astonished reaction to Jesus' teaching: “For he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes” (Matthew 7:29), about which Christian comments:

For the Pharisees were teaching as those who had learned from mortal men, and from the things they read in the law and the prophets, which they were not understanding thoroughly. But the Lord taught as the One who had given the law and had spoken through the prophets.⁸

This understanding of Jesus' divine and human natures reflects the great tradition of Christian interpretation through the ages. Sadly, the doctrine of the Incarnation is less emphasized in contemporary Bible teaching. It is even more difficult to find modern commentators that connect Jesus' identity as the Son of God, sharing the same substance as the Father, with the ethics of the Beatitudes.

But when we fail to consider the identity of the one uttering the Beatitudes, it becomes all too tempting to reduce them to abstract principles. Abstract principles are susceptible to manipulation for our self-justification. To illustrate, the declaration, "Doing fifty pushups would be a good idea," considered without reference to the speaker is one thing; indeed, it is a notion many of us would easily find excuses to ignore! However, if a drill sergeant bellowed the same sentence at a new recruit in the military, it takes on a whole new meaning. When we think of the Beatitudes as the fulfillment of the Law in and through God's Son himself (cf. Matthew 5:17), we are less likely to write them off as unattainable or too culturally different to be relevant. Accordingly, Christian highlights this doctrine at both the beginning and end of his treatment of the Sermon.

Christian's exposition of each Beatitude focuses first on the grammar of the text and theological definition of terms to ensure that his young audience understands the "plain sense" of the text. On 5:4, the "meek (*mites*)" are glossed as "humble ones (*mansueti*), i.e., the kind of person who does not despise

others but rather receives everyone, thereby loving their neighbors without pride or disdain."⁹ A little later, Christian explains that those who mourn are not blessed because they are grieved about the loss of their worldly possessions (a pertinent message for a group on the verge of taking vows of poverty!) but because they lament over their own sins, the sins of their neighbors, and the tarrying of the kingdom of God.¹⁰

As Christian of Stavelot interprets the Beatitudes, he maintains a singular focus on Jesus. Christian wants his students to know that the Lord of the universe, who inspired the prophets, has delivered the Sermon on the Mount—not just a really nice man.

Christian saves his climactic comment on the Beatitudes for the end. It is not only that Jesus possesses divinity equal to God the Father, but also that he himself obeys and exemplifies every instruction he gives:

Christ fulfilled all of the beatitudes, because he taught nothing except what he had fulfilled himself beforehand. He was poor both in possessions and in spirit, saying, *The Son of Man has nowhere to lay down his head* (Matthew 8:20). He was meek, saying, *Learn from me, for I am meek and humble in heart* (Matthew 11:29). He grieved over others' sins when he saw the city of Jerusalem and wept over it (Luke 19:41). He hungered and thirsted for righteousness, saying, *My food is to do the will of my Father* (John 4:34). He was merciful, saying, *I desire mercy and not sacrifice* (Matthew 9:13 and 12:7). He was pure in heart, saying, *Be holy because I am holy* (1 Peter 1:16; Leviticus 11:44). He was a peacemaker, saying, *I grant my peace to you* (John 14:27). He suffered persecution, saying, *If they persecuted me, they also will persecute you* (John 15:20).¹¹

It is widely agreed that the Sermon in general and the Beatitudes in particular encapsulate Jesus' program for discipleship. A great deal of modern scholarly discussion about the Sermon on the Mount has concentrated on whether or not it is practical to live it out. This question is not often found in the patristic or medieval tradition. While it is widely recognized that Jesus' program in the Sermon will be difficult, it does not seem to occur to earlier writers that it would be impossible to conform to it. This is due to their singular focus on Jesus himself, as Christian demonstrates here. Whatever faults writers in the early Christian tradition may exhibit, they do not abstract the Beatitudes away from Jesus and, therefore, they do not reason as if Jesus himself were irrelevant or extrinsic to carrying out the life of discipleship chartered in the Sermon. It is easy for us to forget that the blessed, flourishing life depicted in the Beatitudes only comes about *in* Christ. He himself lived it out. It is only a possibility for us to the extent that we are united to him by the work of the Holy Spirit in us as the Church. The greatest virtue of this lovely passage from Christian of Stavelot is to refocus us on Jesus himself even as we begin to embark on the kind of life Jesus' Beatitudes map out.

CHRISTIAN AS A MODEL OF LEARNING FROM THE TRADITION

It is not as if Christian discovered this wonderful insight through unique personal inspiration. No. He diligently listened to the great cloud of witnesses surrounding him, provided for him by God's providence in the tradition of the Church. The voice ringing most clearly for Christian is Augustine of Hippo (354–430). He wrote a discourse on the Sermon on the Mount early in his pastoral career, and referred to the Sermon, especially the Beatitudes, over and over again in his preaching and teaching.¹²

Augustine titles his treatise “The *Lord’s* Sermon on the Mount” to underscore the Preacher’s importance. Naturally, it is crucial to him that Jesus exists as fully God and fully man: only the Son of God himself could impart such lofty moral teaching because he had already set his people free by his love.¹³ The Beatitudes come from Christ and are about Christ who dwells *in* the Father. So Augustine reads the Beatitudes together with a verse that comes a little later, “Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matthew 5:48). This can only work, for Augustine, if we are sons of God by adoption and by participation in Christ who is the Son of God by nature.¹⁴

As Christian read Augustine and handed on the tradition of this teaching in a new way to his students at the monastery in Stavelot, so it would be of great benefit for us to once again attend the school of the church fathers. I have underscored one important way the medieval and early Christian tradition corrects our exegesis, showing us that a more theological reading of Christ’s teaching in the Beatitudes prevents us from making them abstract statements unconnected with Jesus’ person, but assists us to live in light of the grace available to us through his Incarnation.

It is not that we should ignore modern commentators on this passage or on others. They often provide biblical background that the church fathers would have loved to consult had it been available. Christian referred to Jerome’s detail-oriented *Commentary on Matthew* much the same way as we might utilize Craig Keener’s excellent New Testament background commentary.¹⁵ Additionally, modern

scholarship often opens a window on the significance of the Old Testament foundations for the New Testament. N.T. Wright’s work exemplifies this, especially on the Beatitudes.¹⁶ Wright is among the few commentators who simultaneously views Jesus’ teachings from the past looking forward (the Old Testament background) and from the future looking back (in light of Jesus’ death and resurrection and later understanding of these events recorded in the creeds).

The world of early Christian commentary may feel foreign and forbidding at first. Fortunately, plenty of assistance is available. Two series – the Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture¹⁷ and The Church’s Bible¹⁸ – provide excerpted comments on scriptural passages from a variety of church fathers. The Fathers of the Church series by Catholic University of

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America Press has translated many commentaries and theological works. The old Ante-Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers translations are easily accessible for free online and still serviceable despite their nineteenth-century English.¹⁹ Additionally, two books by D. H. Williams argue that Protestants should (re-)engage with the church fathers and point to further resources.²⁰

It is worth noting that Christian of Stavelot did not mention his knowledge

Christian did not mention his knowledge of Augustine and Jerome to his students. Instead, he made their insights his own while introducing students to the riches of the mysteries of faith. Bible studies should be about Scripture, not about sources.

of Augustine and Jerome to his students. Instead, he made the church fathers' insights his own as he introduced his students to the riches of the mysteries of faith. The point for Christian, as it is for those of us who teach the Bible, is to foster our students' ability to read Scripture well. Unless one's audience consists of folks with the inclination and time to actually read patristic and

medieval texts, we should not present premodern interpretation as a necessary gateway to true understanding. That is to say, Bible studies and sermons should be about Scripture, not about Augustine or Jerome. Christian again is an example for us as he deftly presents Augustine's acumen to his audience without referring to it explicitly. There will always be opportunities to direct interested students toward the sources.

The tradition of biblical interpretation from patristic and medieval Christian teachers can help us relearn reading Scripture within the story of salvation—the grand narrative of creation, fall, Israel, Christ, Church, and consummation. They can teach us to keep sight of the big picture. They instruct us not so much in good morality as obedience to the Lord Jesus Christ, who is one with the Father and the Holy Spirit as Trinity. They do not disdain historical inquiry, but integrate those details within a larger picture of reality. Their reading of the Bible flows first and foremost from their faith.

From them, let us learn to read like a Christian.

NOTES

1 "Patristic" refers to the church fathers, Christian writers living (roughly) before the sixth century.

2 The Reformers should also be understood as "medieval" since they retained the principle of *fides quaerens intellectum* in their exegesis. See, for example, Richard A. Muller, "Biblical Interpretation in the Era of the Reformation: A View from the Middle Ages," in Richard A. Muller and John L. Thompson, eds., *Biblical Interpretation in the Era of the Reformation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1996), 3–17.

3 Christian's commentary came to my attention thanks to the generous patronage of the

Green Scholars' Initiative (GSI) that provided a team from Baylor, under the leadership of Daniel H. Williams, the opportunity to study a beautiful eleventh-century manuscript of Christian's ninth-century commentary. David L. Jeffrey encouraged my further study. I thank Drs. Williams and Jeffrey, as well as my colleague, Jesse Hoover, who helped puzzle out the text of the manuscript.

4 The editor of his Gospel commentary thinks the name accidentally ended up in the titles of manuscripts and eventually became associated with our author. See R. B. C. Huygens, "À propos de Christian dit de Stavelot et son explication de l'évangile selon Matthieu," *Sacris erudiri* 44 (2005), 247-273, at 248-250. The critical Latin edition that Huygens edited is Christianus dictus Stabulensis, *Expositio super librum generationis*, Corpus Christianorum, Continuatio Mediaevalis 224 (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2008). The GSI manuscript was not considered by Huygens, but does not differ significantly from the final text he edited. For further study of Christian, see M. L. W. Laistner, "A Ninth-Century Commentator on the Gospel According to Matthew," *Harvard Theological Review* 20.2 (1927), 129-149, and M. Ponesse, "The Instruction of Monks in Christian of Stavelot's Commentary on Matthew," *Journal of Medieval Latin* 18 (2008), 24-35.

5 A good English translation with introduction is Jerome, *Commentary on Matthew*, Fathers of the Church 117, translated by Thomas P. Scheck (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2008).

6 John J. Contreni, "The Carolingian Renaissance: Education and Literary Culture," in Rosamond McKitterick, ed., *The New Cambridge Medieval History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 709-757, here citing 709, quoting Alcuin's *Admonitio generalis* of 789. I follow Contreni's understanding of the Carolingian Renaissance closely in this paragraph.

7 R. B. C. Huygens, ed., *Expositio super librum generationis*, 5.1 (p. 136, lines 16-19). Since this work has yet to be translated into a modern language, all translations here are my own.

8 *Ibid.*, 7.29 (pp. 177-178, lines 298-303).

9 *Ibid.*, 5.4 (p. 137, lines 33-37).

10 *Ibid.*, 5.5 (pp. 137-138, lines 45-58).

11 *Ibid.*, 5.12 (pp. 140-141, lines 119-129). Notice too that the principle of "Scripture interpreting Scripture" (*scriptura scripturam interpretans*) existed long before the Reformation!

12 For an excellent summary of Augustine's interpretations of the Sermon on the Mount throughout his life, followed closely here, see Robert Louis Wilken, "Augustine," in Jeffrey P. Greenman, et al., eds., *The Sermon on the Mount through the Centuries* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2007), 43-58.

13 Augustine, *Commentary on the Lord's Sermon on the Mount*, 1.1.2, Fathers of the Church 11, translated by Denis J. Kavanagh (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1951), 20-21.

14 *Ibid.*, 1.21.69 (pp. 95-96) and 1.23.78-80 (pp. 105-8). Cf. Wilken, "Augustine," 50-51.

15 Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 55-57.

16 Tom Wright, *Matthew for Everyone, Part 1: Chapters 1-15*, New Testament for Everyone, second edition (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 34-38. But an even more theologically rich interpretation of the Beatitudes can be found in the twentieth-century classic, *The Cost of Discipleship*, by the theologian and martyr, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. See *Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works 4 (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003), 100-110.

17 Thomas C. Oden, series editor, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press). Volumes in this series cover every book of the Bible.

18 Robert Louis Wilken, series editor, *The Church's Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans). Volumes on The Song of Songs, Isaiah, 1 Corinthians, and Romans are available, and a volume on Matthew is forthcoming.

19 The *Christian Classics Ethereal Library* project (www.ccel.org) provides free electronic versions of the Early Church Fathers series in many formats.

20 D. H. Williams, *Retrieving the Tradition and Renewing Evangelicalism: A Primer for Suspicious Protestants* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1999) and *Evangelicals and Tradition: The Formative Influence of the Early Church*, *Evangelical Ressourcement: Ancient Sources for the Church's Future* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005). In the latter series see his anthology of excerpts from early Christian sources: *Tradition, Scripture, and Interpretation: A Sourcebook of the Ancient Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006).



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Preaching Scripture Faithfully

BY CHRISTINE T. McSPADDEN

How can we preach and hear Scripture faithfully in today's post-imperial-Christian, relativistic, poly-vocal milieu? Despite the challenges, we can appropriate the sacred texts in a refreshed way that allows the power of God's Word to transfigure, convert, and create.

As an art director on Madison Avenue, my job involved presenting to clients and selling them on products, concepts, and ideas. Much like Don Draper of *Mad Men* fame, I was charged with crafting a cohesive message and then communicating that message in a creative and compelling way that could be heard in the vernacular of my audience, in order to convert perspectives and ignite desires.

Hundreds of pitches honed my skills. Hours of public speaking steeled my nerves. But the first time I climbed the stairs of a pulpit to preach a sermon, my knees buckled, my heart raced, my hands perspired, and my confidence flagged. Up to this point, my presentations espoused the advantages of whitening agents and moisturizing compounds, credit card acceptance and softness assurance. Never had the stakes been so high as when I mounted those steps to proclaim Christ crucified and risen, who was, and is, and will be forever. More absorbent diapers or age-defying micro beads had nothing on the power of the living God to heal, reconcile, enliven, and transform. Given the privilege to preach, entrusted to proclaim the Word of God, I found myself awestruck by the task.

Twenty years later, I find myself no less daunted by this vocational prerogative. But now having preached hundreds of sermons, in a variety of settings, I trust that God's Word will work in and through me to deliver good news to those hungry to hear it.

Why do I believe this? What tenets, doctrines, and theology inform my resolve? How do I face this audacious homiletic task without crumbling under its magnitude? This article probes these questions.

Aimed at the preacher and the active listener, I hope to deepen a sense of participation in the project of preaching. Drawing a distinction between the art of marketing and the power of proclaiming the gospel, I open a conversation about what it means to preach and hear Scripture faithfully in today's post-imperial-Christian, relativistic, poly-vocal milieu. Acknowledging that there are barriers and challenges to preaching Scripture faithfully in this contemporary milieu, I present strategies for the preacher and oratory audience to guide interpretation and reception of Scripture in worship. Finally, in proposing an ethos of preaching and the role of the sermon, I hope to embolden the reader to appropriate the sacred texts of the Old and New Testaments in a refreshed way with greater expectation in the power of God's Word to transfigure, convert, and create.

PARTICIPATING IN THE PROJECT OF PREACHING

Even though advertising tells a story to convert—a shared goal with sermons—the project of preaching possesses marked differences. Where the marketing pitch lulls consumers by selling an attractive reality, preaching equips disciples, awakening in them skills of discernment. It activates sensibilities to new realities—some of those realities initially *unattractive*.

At its heart, preaching is a conversation. While in most cases one person may be doing the talking, those receiving the talking engage in the varied responses of acceptance, refusal, interpretation, and integration. Preaching acts as a conversation because it anticipates, it expects response. The homiletic conversation operates on several levels: preacher with scriptural text, preacher with congregation, congregation with preacher, and, in the case of what I would call a “good” sermon, congregation with scriptural text.

I define the so-called good sermon as one that sends the hearer back to the text—the revelation of the Word. With a steady diet of good preaching, hearers should want to read the Bible, dig in, looking for more. In the Christian community, the scriptural texts of the Old and New Testaments provide the only sustained and mutually accepted account of God. The two testaments act, and have acted throughout the history of the worshiping community, as the *sine qua non* Source. Good preaching, then, encourages its hearers to return to that source, to look *at* it and *in* it anew with curiosity and expectation. Good preaching points not to itself, or its orator, but to the Holy One revealed in Scripture—in the gospel or “good news.”

In my use of the terms gospel and good news I draw on Martin Luther's understanding of the entire canon encompassing Old and New Testaments. More specifically, I look to the first verse of the Gospel of Mark to elucidate the term good news (*euangelion*): “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”¹

In the very first verse of the Gospel of Mark, the evangelist lays out his project. He reveals the provenance of his faith claims by connecting the good news to the beginning, Genesis 1:1-2, when God created out of the chaos, the *tohu va bohu*. He grounds the authority of the good news in the authority of Hebrew prophecy and Torah, identifying Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah, the awaited anointed one, and as the Son of God, the beloved, the only one.

Additionally, in a deft move of grammatical tense and layered meaning, the evangelist accretes double meaning to the term good news with both the characteristics of a noun and a verb. As a noun, the good news represents the transforming, salvific gospel Jesus proclaims through word and deed. Likewise, God's righteous purposes for Israel, reach both climax and consummation in and through the active ministry and en-fleshed person of Jesus; Jesus is the good news incarnate. Animated as a verb, the good news happens in the proclamation of Jesus and, by extension, his followers. In this sense, Jesus does not merely proclaim the dawning of the reign of God but extends the invitation for fidelity to himself as the instrument ordained to inaugurate the reign of God. Intrinsically in the text, Mark enlivens this claim about the dynamic nature of the good news.

In this two-fold way, the proclamation speaks down through the ages by virtue of sharing the living text. The Evangelist draws parallels between the first disciples' experience and the dynamics one might face today in choosing to follow Jesus, thereby inviting the reader into the story with a sense of agency and urgency. Mark's narrative connects the contemporary reader to the long-awaited proclamation and eschatological choice for, and hope in, the living Christ.

WORKING WITH DIFFICULT TEXTS

But what does one do when that scriptural revelation of the Holy One looks less than attractive? How does one deal with those so-called "difficult" texts encountered during lectionary-based worship—texts all too lacking in marketable appeal? How does the preacher put the alluring lipstick on the pig of a prickly passage from the pulpit?

Without question there are barriers to preaching Scripture faithfully and robustly in our contemporary culture. It is tempting to neglect or domesticate passages that challenge the status quo. Yet because that is exactly what those texts should do, preachers must resist the temptation. Typically, the

Preaching is a conversation that operates on several levels: preacher with scriptural text, preacher with congregation, congregation with preacher, and, in the case of a "good" sermon, congregation with scriptural text.

sermon reaches the largest audience in a congregation, providing the most efficient venue for exposition, pastoral care, and connection to sacred Scripture. In my experience, congregations want their preachers to take on these difficult texts, to wrestle with them, to explicate them on their own terms, and to connect them to real life lived now. Precisely because of their strangeness, unexpectedness, and even offensiveness, they possess the power to challenge, surprise, confront, and transfigure those primed to hear them.

So to help the good news be heard, I present four moves the preacher can make with the text to allow it to speak on its own terms with a challenging and relevant word. These “hermeneutics,” or methods of interpretation, provide lenses through which texts might be read, interpreted, and mined for refreshed perspectives.

EMPLOYING THE FOUR-FOLD SENSE OF SCRIPTURE

The rise of Fundamentalism in all three Abrahamic faiths has misled some to believe that there is one, literal way to read Scripture—a singular way that has been there, fundamentally, since the beginning. But the rise of Fundamentalism is a new phenomenon. Burgeoning in the latter half of the nineteenth century in a post-industrial milieu of anxiety and coming to full fruition after the emotional and institutional upheaval following World War II, Fundamentalism—with its strict adherence to univocal scriptural reading—completely defies the long tradition of scriptural study in the Church and the very nature of the biblical text to criticize, revise, and comment upon itself.

From its inception, the Church has boasted a rich tradition of interpreting sacred Scripture; persistently, the biblical texts have been read, marked, and inwardly digested with an intellectual curiosity and scrutiny. The Gospels constantly recast Old Testament witness in light of the Resurrection; Paul consistently draws analogies between texts. Jesus himself illumines the holy writ in new ways.

The tradition of interpretation developed further during the Patristic period. The church doctor Augustine, taking cues from his mentor Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, outlined an ethical stance to reading Scripture, affirming that all texts bear the good news and it is the reader’s vocation to keep at prayer and study until that goodness of the news reveals itself. He starts from the conviction that if one has not apprehended the good news, they need to go back into Scripture again, for it is not the text that is wanting.²

Methods of interpretation flourished in the Middle Ages, in particular with the *Quadrigo* or the four-fold sense of Scripture. With this discipline, each text is mined for four levels of varied meaning: the literal sense (*sensus historicus*), the allegorical sense (*sensus allegoricus*), the moral or tropological sense (*sensus tropologicus* or *sensus moralis*), and the anagogical or future sense (*sensus anagogicus*).³

First, the literal sense denotes what the passage says at face value, what it reports or states directly given its grammatical, etymological, historical constitution. To parse the literal sense, one might employ a wealth of study tools such as grammatical aids, archaeological evidence, historical and literary analyses, and sociological and anthropological studies. With a host of commentaries available in print and online, it is easier than ever to call up articles of rigorous, in-depth scholarship to help locate the text within an historical-critical framework, to trace the meanings and usage of words and phrases through the centuries, to mine grammatical constructions. Reading more than one commentary broadens the conversation with the text. Finding opposing views, bringing them into the conversation, and noting what is at stake in the differing opinions takes study one step better. Why do their differences matter and why might those differences matter to your congregation?

Second, the allegorical sense indicates what the passage means in light of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, church doctrine, and the rule of faith. The rule of faith is the constellation of faith claims made by early followers of the new Way engendered by Jesus of Nazareth. Over time, the discipleship community distilled and shaped these faith claims into credal formulas (in particular the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Athanasian Creed). Often the allegorical sense renders a Christocentric, symbolic reading layered upon pre- or non-Christian texts.

Third, the moral sense suggests what the passage can teach one about how to live. It challenges one's worldview, gives guidance, and models ethical response. Fourth, the analogical sense teases out an eschatological, metaphysical meaning concerned with last things, consummation, and ultimacy.⁴

CONSIDERING THE TEXT WITHIN ITS CANONICAL CONTEXT

Canonical criticism represents a post-critical hermeneutic that looks at the

meaning the final form of a text has for the community that uses it. As a student of Brevard Childs (even though he has rejected the term "canonical criticism"), I remain swayed by his argument for the importance of considering any particular text within the wider context of the entire canon—the outer boundaries of authoritative Scripture. As such, the canon "forms a prism through which light from the different aspects of the Christian life is refracted."⁵

The Church boasts a rich tradition of interpreting Scripture. In the Middle Ages, each text was mined for four levels of meaning: the literal sense, the allegorical sense, the moral or tropological sense, and the analogical or future sense.

Maintaining the contours of the canon, each excerpted text stands not in isolation but in relationship to the weighted witness of the corpus of sacred Scripture. By weighted witness, I imply that each excerpt must also be considered in comparison with its place and significance within the overall proportion and weighted emphases of the canon.

PROBLEMATIZING THE HERMENEUTIC OF SUSPICION

Contemporary readings of Scripture often approach biblical texts with a hermeneutic of suspicion. Appropriating meaning from this stance often involves starting with one's self-defined experience as, for example, feminist, womanist, queer, non-Western, or in some significant way, marginalized. Sacred Scripture is then scrutinized with an eye toward recasting or even removing passages that veer from ideological critique. These particular readings prove invaluable in expanding the conversation to include new and heretofore unheard voices. Yet, while I believe forcefully that the text should never stand beyond suspicion or critique, that it indeed should be able to withstand the most rigorous of scrutiny, discounting the authority of troubling texts robs them of their ability to challenge, surprise, and freshen dearly-held perspectives.

Instead of defaulting to a hermeneutic of suspicion, we should approach difficult texts with a "hermeneutic of trust"⁶ or a "hermeneutic of consent."⁷ A hermeneutic of trust or consent involves approaching the biblical witness with an attitude of prayer and worship, and a humble willingness to hear the otherness of the text while suspending one's own inner critic. Such an interpretive framework accords sacred writing the benefit of the doubt: it acknowledges that the text has had something to say to followers for millennia and might have something authentic to say now. It invokes the doctrine of divine inspiration that encourages an attitude of openness and vulnerability to transformation by the Word and the work of the Holy Spirit.

Often, just as valuable as listening to what a text is saying on its own terms, is the practice of listening to what it is not saying. For example, in the story of Jephthah's daughter (Judges 11) a first reading might cast the passage as one that condones violence against women. Yet upon closer reading, it acts as a damning commentary on the arrogance and apostasy of its male protagonist Jephthah. Jephthah makes his pact with God to offer a sacrifice if he is victorious in battle against the Ammonites. Tragically, he ends up sacrificing his beloved and only daughter. Missing from the story is God's acknowledgement or acceptance of Jephthah's terms. Yes, Jephthah prevails, but it could be argued that he negotiated the bargain with himself, without God's blessing. Read this way, an ancient "blood" text that prefigures the sacrifice of Jesus, comes to the same condemning conclusion: people get swept up in their own machinations and act abominably, knowing not what they are doing.

APPROACHING THE BIBLE AS A LIVING TEXT

While the content of the Bible is fixed – the canon as it currently stands is closed⁸ – what might be gleaned from that unchanging document is infinitely rich, abundantly varied, and utterly inexhaustible. We attend not only to what the text meant in a past community, but also to what the text has to say for the present believing community. Dialectically, we shuttle between the literal and spiritual senses of the text in the effort to appropriate what God’s Word has to say today. The doctrine of divine inspiration holds that sacred Scripture not only was composed and edited under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, but also continues to be interpreted and appropriated under that same divine guidance. With the Bible, we deal with a living text that continues to have meaning for the faith communities that hold it sacred.

RELAXING INTO THE MYSTERY OF GOD

I asked a group of people in the congregation I currently serve what they find most helpful in approaching hard texts and what they want from their preachers. In teasing out their answers, they outlined the strategies above. They appreciate when the preacher goes into these texts, wrestles with them, and does not avoid them. They noted that when the preacher exercises this tenacity and brings it to the pulpit, they participate with the preacher in interpretation.

When preachers open themselves to transformation by the biblical witness, undoubtedly they will deliver sermons that invite hearers to do the same. An authentic conversation through preaching builds tolerance for mystery and for the unresolved. Building this tolerance encourages the same in relationships, so that members deepen the ability and courage to meet and apprehend the wholeness of each other, however different or foreign that might be. In essence, the four relationships identified earlier – preacher to scriptural

text, preacher to congregation, congregation to preacher, and congregation to scriptural text – become more hospitable. A hermeneutic of welcome operates alongside a hermeneutics of trust and consent.

Dealing with hard texts with a congregation extends the invitation to take on a new ethic, one marked by the kingdom of God. Preaching that

We should approach difficult texts with a “hermeneutic of trust” or “hermeneutic of consent.” This involves an attitude of prayer and worship, and a humble willingness to hear the otherness of the text while suspending one’s own inner critic.

aims to illumine the breadth of the canon of Scripture connects to the power to transform the receiver's perspective, so that one wishes to transform self, relationships, and the world in ways that more closely align with the expectations, ethos, hope, and glorious vision of the kingdom of God. Preaching, then, forms the hearer, improving their interpretive skills. And finally, preaching persuades the listener that the Bible manifests resources for our daily lives that far surpass any worldly or material good.

NOTES

1 The text reads "αρχη του ευαγγελιου ιησου χριστου υιου του θεου" in Stephens 1550 Textus Receptus, Scrivener 1894 Textus Receptus, and Byzantine Majority.

2 In this discussion I am referring to Augustine's discourse in *On Christian Teaching* where he encourages a figurative reading when bumping into morally troubling portions of the Old Testament—for example, his statement that "anything in the divine discourse that cannot be related either to good morals or to the true faith should be taken as figurative" (*On Christian Teaching*, 3.10.14). This hermeneutic is shaped by his longer view that ethics involves the pursuit of the supreme good by loving the right objects—those that are worthy of our love—in the right way, leading to the true happiness that all humans seek.

3 The fourfold sense of Scripture was first proposed by John Cassian (ca. 360-435).

4 A cursory example of using the fourfold sense to parse the Israelites crossing of the Red Sea might go something like this: A literal reading would deal with the importance of the story for Israel's deliverance. It might ask logistical questions like "Was the Red Sea really a 'reed' sea, shallow and marshy?" or "Historically, what transpired when Moses and Israel crossed the sea?" Allegorically, one might wonder how the crossing represents baptism and new life, repentance and being washed clean. Morally, one might reflect on what it says about deliverance from oppressive forces, how one crosses over hardship in search of a promised land. Eschatologically, one might ask what the story anticipates about the passage from death into eternal life.

5 Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1993), 672.

6 Richard B. Hays introduces the idea of a "hermeneutic of trust" in "Salvation by Trust? Reading the Bible Faithfully," *The Christian Century* (February 26, 1997), 218-223.

7 Peter Stuhlmacher, *Historical Criticism and Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Toward a Hermeneutic of Consent*, translated by Roy A. Harrisville (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1977).

8 While an argument could be made that the canon, theoretically, remains open, in practice the Church regards the canon as closed—books cannot be added or removed—reflecting the doctrine that public revelation has ended. For an explication of the term canon, see Bruce M. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).



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Many Books, One Holy Canon

A N N B E L L W O R L E Y

Many books, one holy canon, many authors, voice divine,
forging saints through faithful teaching, Scripture speaks to every time.
Law and prophecy and wisdom, prose and poetry and song,
gospel stories and epistles – Living Word inspired by God.

As we hear the sacred readings and respond “Thanks be to God,”
may the living words transform us, fill our temples with Christ’s love.
May we listen and interpret with divinely opened minds
in our worship and our study, as we take the bread and wine.

Breathe your Word into our hearts, Lord; may it guide us on the way.
May the spirit, not the letter, be the law that we obey.
Give us insight and discernment; let your Scripture read us, too.
May it mold us as your people; may our lives proclaim good news.

Many Books, One Holy Canon

ANN BELL WORLEY

JOHN WYETH'S REPOSITORY
OF SACRED MUSIC (1831)

Ma - ny books, one ho - ly can - on, ma - ny au - thors, voice di - vine,
As we hear the sac - red read - ings and re - spond "Thanks be to God,"
Breathe your Word in - to our hearts, Lord; may it guide us on the way.

forg - ing saints through faith - ful teach - ing, Scrip - ture speaks to ev - ery time.
may the liv - ing words trans - form us, fill our temp - les with Christ's love.
May the spir - it, not the let - ter, be the law that we o - bey.

Law and proph - e - cy and wis - dom, prose and po - e - try and song,
May we lis - ten and in - ter - pret with di - vine - ly op - ened minds
Give us in - sight and dis - cern - ment; let your Scrip - ture read us too.

The image shows a musical score for a hymn. It consists of two staves: a treble clef staff on top and a bass clef staff on the bottom. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 8/7. The melody is written in the treble staff, and the bass line is written in the bass staff. The lyrics are placed between the two staves.

gos - pel stor - ies and e - pis - tles, Liv - ing Word in - spired by God.
in our wor - ship and our stu - dy, as we take the bread and wine.
May it mold us as your peo - ple; may our lives pro - claim good news.

*Text © 2014 The Institute for Faith and Learning
Baylor University, Waco, TX*

*Tune: NETTLETON
8.7.8.7.D*

Worship Service

BY AMBER INSCORE ESSICK

Call to Worship

Come now to praise and sing;
come, bow before the Lord, our maker.

**He is the Lord, revealed in all his mighty works;
he is the Lord, revealed in the stories of old.**

We have come to praise God, the author of life,
the Lord, who writes us into his story.

Lift up your hearts to God, the source of our being.
He is the Lord, we lift our hearts to him.

Invocation

God of love, we come to you.

You, O Lord, are the God of story and song, of wisdom and law. You have spoken to us through the ages, binding us together in one common narrative. You have given us the Scripture, a treasure we can hold in our hands.

Draw near to us now, breathing life into our hearts. Just as you have spoken to your people of old, speak to us in this hour. Write yourself into our hearts, that we may be written into the story of your love.

Amen.

Chiming the Hour

Silent Meditation

In your mind's eye, try to recall the first Bible ever given to you. Picture the giver, who represents the countless people through the centuries who have handled the texts you received. Give thanks for the people who introduced you to Scripture and nurtured your love for the sacred texts of our faith.

Hymn of Praise

"From All that Dwell below the Skies"

From all that dwell below the skies,
let the Creator's praise arise;
let the Redeemer's name be sung
through every land by every tongue.

Eternal are your mercies, Lord;
eternal truth attends your Word;
your praise shall sound from shore to shore,
till suns shall rise and set no more.

Isaac Watts (1719), alt.

Tune: DUKE STREET

Witness of the Old Testament: Ezekiel 3:1-3

(This reading calls for two readers, one for Ezekiel in the light print and another for the LORD in the bold print.)

He said to me,
O mortal, eat what is offered to you;
eat this scroll, and go, speak to the house of Israel.
So I opened my mouth,
and he gave me the scroll to eat.

He said to me,
Mortal, eat this scroll that I give you
and fill your stomach with it.
Then I ate it;
and in my mouth it was as sweet as honey.

Prayers of Confession

Lord, your word is both a wound for us and a balm.
With it you pierce our pride and our illusions of self-sufficiency.
You reprove our selfishness and arrogance,
you strip away our condescension,
and we know that not one of us has yet arrived.
Forgive us our sins, and heal us with a word from you.

We confess that we have sinned against you and against one another.
At times we have thought that we alone hold the key to interpreting Scripture.
We have disregarded the voices of others –

though without them we cannot hope to hear your Word in its fullness.

Forgive us our sins, and heal us with a word from you.

We have read your Word selfishly in order to justify our own thoughts.
We have failed to read it prayerfully, seeking guidance and wisdom
from above.

We have used your words to serve our own ends,
lording ourselves over others and rebelling against your teachings.

Forgive us our sins, and heal us with a word from you.

We need every word you will speak to us.

We need the words that come down through the ages to speak for us:
we need the voices in the Scripture who grieve to voice our own pain;
we need the stories of divine blessing to breathe purpose into our lives;
we need the songs of old to draw us into their joyful refrain.

We need your words, passed down through the ages,
to understand the mystery of our God, the holy three in one.

Heal us with a word from you, so that we may be whole.

Words of Assurance

Having confessed and turned from our sins, and believing in God, know now that by the power of the Holy Spirit, God forgives us in Christ. Be made whole. *Amen.*

Hymn of Petition

“Many Books, One Holy Canon”

Many books, one holy canon, many authors, voice divine,
forging saints through faithful teaching, Scripture speaks to every time.
Law and prophecy and wisdom, prose and poetry and song,
gospel stories and epistles – Living Word inspired by God.

As we hear the sacred readings and respond “Thanks be to God,”
may the living words transform us, fill our temples with Christ’s love.
May we listen and interpret with divinely opened minds
in our worship and our study, as we take the bread and wine.

Breathe your Word into our hearts, Lord; may it guide us on the way.
May the spirit, not the letter, be the law that we obey.
Give us insight and discernment; let your Scripture read us, too.
May it mold us as your people; may our lives proclaim good news.

Ann Bell Worley (2014)

Tune: NETTLETON (pp. 55-57 of this volume)

Witness of the Psalmist: Psalm 119:103-105

How sweet are your words to my taste,
sweeter than honey to my mouth!
Through your precepts I get understanding;
therefore I hate every false way.
Your word is a lamp to my feet
and a light to my path.

Litany of Dependence

For all those who seek to follow you,
**your word is a lamp to our feet
and a light to our path.**

For the stay-at-home mom at the end of her rope,
**your word is a lamp to our feet
and a light to our path.**

For the farmer who gets up before dawn to tend and to plant,
**your word is a lamp to our feet
and a light to our path.**

For the teacher seeking moments of openness in a student's life,
**your word is a lamp to our feet
and a light to our path.**

For the scholar who studies diligently and faithfully,
**your word is a lamp to our feet
and a light to our path.**

For the child whose budding faith needs nurture,
**your word is a lamp to our feet
and a light to our path.**

For the pastor and the truck driver, for the nurse and the janitor,
for everyone who seeks to follow you,
**your word is a lamp to our feet
and a light to our path.**

We do not wish to choose our own path,
but to walk the path you lay out for us,
the path that leads to you. **Amen.**

Witness of the Gospels: Matthew 4:1-4

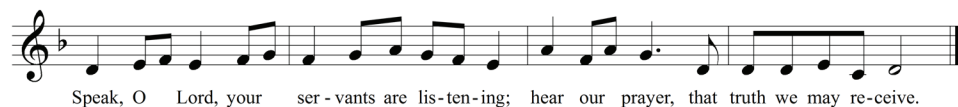
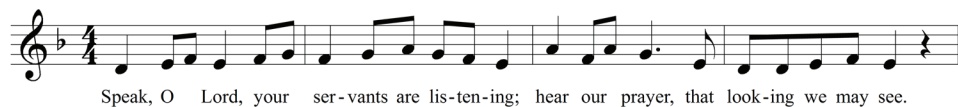
(Read the passage in the manner of *Lectio Divina*.¹)

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." But he answered, "It is written,

'One does not live by bread alone,
but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

Song of Preparation

“Speak, O Lord”²



Amber Inscore Essick (2014)

Tune: SPEAK, O LORD

Words and Music © 2014 Amber Inscore Essick

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Sermon

Silent Reflection

It happens that while listening to the Word the heart is touched by a particular saying and set on fire. Then one must stop and let the fire spread quietly.

Olivier Clément (1921-2009)³

Benediction

Hear now the words of the Apostle Paul to his friend and disciple Timothy:

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

2 Timothy 3:14-15

NOTES

¹ *Lectio Divina*, or “divine reading,” is an ancient way of reading Scripture. It has been long practiced in monastic settings and is now often followed by other circles within the Church. It entails hearing a scripture passage read aloud several times, with a period of prayerful silence following each reading. Rather than trying to interpret the meaning of the passage, the hearer attempts to enter into it. In other words, if the reading were the passage where Jesus says “my peace I leave with you,” the hearer would not try to figure out the meaning of his words so much to enter into the story and receive the peace Jesus gives.

Here is one way to practice *Lectio Divina* (though there are others). Read the passage three times, allowing a period of silence after each reading. During the first reading, try to

imagine the story as if you are there, hearing sounds, smelling scents, and so on. During the second reading, listen for a word or phrase that catches your attention. During the third reading, listen for what the Holy Spirit might be saying to you through the Scripture.

2 The composer grants permission for the reproduction of this chorus in conjunction with studying the *Scripture* issue of *Christian Reflection*. All other rights are reserved.

3 Olivier Clément, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism: Texts from the Patristic Era with Commentary*, translated by Theodore Berkeley, O.C.S.O., and Jeremy Hummerstone (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1995), 100.



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Caravaggio conveys urgency in Matthew, who is not seated as a scribe deep in thought, but is rushing back to the table to write down the inspiration from God.

Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (1573-1610), INSPIRATION OF ST. MATTHEW (1602). Oil on canvas, 9' 8 1/2" x 6' 2 1/2". Contarelli Chapel, S. Luigi dei Francesi, Rome, Italy. Photo: © Alinari / Art Resource, NY. Used by permission.

The Urgency of Inspiration

BY HEIDI J. HORNİK

The mature period of Caravaggio's religious painting begins with four images commissioned for the decoration of the Contarelli chapel.¹ The chapel had been purchased by Matthieu Cointrel in 1565 and completed before his death in 1585. The French cardinal, who Italianized his name to Contarelli, left instructions that the paintings should portray scenes from the life of Matthew, his patron saint. Caravaggio painted *Calling of Saint Matthew* and *Martyrdom of Saint Matthew* on the left and right sidewalls of the chapel, respectively.²

The altarpiece in the center depicts the *Inspiration of St. Matthew*. Caravaggio painted two versions in 1602, after the sidewalls were completed.³ Perhaps Caravaggio rejected the first and preferred the second version that we see here for several reasons. This figure of Matthew, being more similar to that depicted in the other paintings, makes a more consistent narrative. Caravaggio probably knew precedents for the visual theme of Matthew composing his Gospel: here he returns to medieval versions of an apparition emerging from heaven at a distance above and behind the evangelist.⁴ Matthew, like the other Evangelists, is represented in the visual tradition by one of the four living creatures of Revelation 4:7. Matthew's symbol is the winged man or angel.⁵

Caravaggio conveys urgency in Matthew, who is not seated as a scribe deep in thought, but is rushing back to the table to write down the inspiration sent from God via the angel. Matthew becomes an example of the faithful reader of Scripture: captured by the immediacy of the experience and intent on remembering that moment of inspiration.

NOTES

1 G. A. Dell'Aqua and M. Cinotti, *Il Caravaggio e le sue grandi opere da San Luigi dei Francesi* (Milan, 1971), 105ff.

2 For a discussion of Caravaggio's *Calling of St. Matthew*, see Heidi J. Hornik, "Not the Righteous, But Sinners," *Vocation, Christian Reflection: A Series in Faith and Ethics*, 10 (Waco, TX: Baylor University, 2004), 44-46, www.baylor.edu/ifl/christianreflection/Vocationart-Caravaggio.pdf (accessed June 16, 2014).

3 Irving Lavin, "Divine Inspiration in Caravaggio's Two St. Matthew's," *The Art Bulletin*, 56.1 (March 1974), 59-81, here citing 59.

4 *Ibid.*, 79. The first version portrayed the angel as a collaborator alongside Matthew. This was a fusion of the intellectual and supernatural "angel" popular in the Renaissance.

5 On the establishment on symbols for the Four Evangelists by St. Jerome, see Heidi J. Hornik, "Inspired Translator," *Scripture, Christian Reflection: A Series in Faith and Ethics* 52 (Waco, TX: Baylor University, 2014), 66-69.

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The guidance of the Holy Spirit in the formation of Scripture is found in its translators such as Jerome, who is depicted in these paintings in his study and before the Trinity.

Inspired Translator

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

The guidance of the Holy Spirit in the formation of Scripture is found not only in the work of the Bible's authors (see, for example, Caravaggio's *Inspiration of Saint Matthew*), but also in its translators, such as Jerome (c. 347-420). In the Latin West, the inspiration of Scripture was represented visually as a supernatural event by showing the attributes of the Four Evangelists—symbols assigned to them based on a vision of the prophet Ezekiel that is echoed in the prophet John's first vision of heavenly worship (Ezekiel 1:10; Revelation 4:7). In these visions the heavens opened to reveal four creatures with the aspects of a man, a lion, an ox, and an eagle. The distribution of the symbols among the Four Evangelists that became canonical in the West was established by Jerome in the preface to his commentary on Matthew.¹ In the Caravaggio painting, we see Matthew looking up toward his symbol, a miraculous messenger from heaven.

Jerome is usually represented as a theologian in his study translating the Bible into Latin, as in the Renaissance picture by Antonello da Messina illustrated here. Antonello was from the Sicilian town of Messina, but he is believed to have influenced Venetian painting by introducing the technique of oil painting when he lived there from 1475 to 1476. Antonello probably learned oil techniques from the Flemish-influenced painter Colantonio, whom he may have studied with in Naples. Antonello was employed in 1456 in the court of Galeazzo Maria Sforza in Milan at the same time as the Flemish artist Petrus Christus (a student of Jan van Eyck).² The abundance of Flemish characteristics in this painting—such as meticulous attention to every detail of each individual object, illusionistic arch, light effects, and oil glazes—caused a documented debate about its attribution to Hans Memling, Jan van Eyck, or Antonello.³

Penny Howell Jolly claims that the individual facial characteristics, however, defy the typical features of Jerome. The Italian view of the saint is an elderly figure with a full, white beard. The Northern tradition is a dark-haired man with a low brow and a long straight nose; his lips are full, his eyebrows strongly drawn, and his chin, cheek, and neck are smooth. Antonello's Jerome differs from both traditions: he is middle-aged, has deep-set eyes, slightly corpulent cheeks, and an aquiline nose; for these reasons, Holly suggests that it may be a disguised portrait.⁴

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Andrea del Castagno (1417/19-1457), SAINT JEROME'S VISION OF THE TRINITY WITH SAINTS PAULA AND EUSTOCHIUM (1454-1455). Fresco, 9'9" x 5'10". SS. Annunziata, Florence, Italy. Photo: Scala / Art Resource, NY. Used by permission.

The vision of the Trinity by Jerome is a much rarer subject than the saint writing in his study.⁵ Andrea del Castagno painted Jerome between two women whom art historian Millard Meiss identifies as Jerome's much loved disciple and associate, Paula, and her daughter Eustochium. Meiss also connects its iconography to the recently founded eremitical congregation dedicated to Saint Jerome in the nearby town of Fiesole.⁶ Jerome is depicted as a penitent based on the most quoted paragraph of Jerome's famous Epistle 22 to Eustochium, which describes his years of penitence in the Syrian desert. He wrote, "Whenever I found a deep valley or rough mountainside or rocky precipice, I made it my place of prayer and of torture for my unhappy flesh."⁷ There

is not, however, any reference in Jerome's letter to the vision of the Trinity. However, in the twenty-sixth chapter of another collection of Jerome's letters and treatises, but with modification inclining towards hyperbole, Pseudo-Jerome states, "I have seen with the sight of divine vision.... My witness is the Trinity itself, which I saw, I know not with what kind of sight."⁸

Castagno represents the Trinity as a throne of mercy/throne of grace before Jerome, or *Gnadenstuhl*. The image of a penitent mortification by Jerome was invented in Italy about 1400. "Per la memoria della passione di Cristo" ("For the memory of the passion of Christ") was a common phrase in every flagellant confraternity in Florence, of which there were many. By 1454 Jerome was pictured before a Trinitarian vision as his reward for those weeks of mortification and meditation on the Passion.

The Trinity is drastically foreshortened, and for this the clergy criticized Castagno and demanded a "correction." Jerome's red cardinal's hat is seen at his feet and his own animal symbol, the lion, is visible behind him. The flagellant's rope is present not only because of Jerome's practice of mortification but because the patron, Girolamo (Jerome) dei Corboli, belonged to a flagellant confraternity.⁹

Although self-mortification is no longer a common or even accepted Christian practice, meditation on the Scripture as practiced by Jerome remains. The contemplative Jerome in his study combined with the actively penitent Jerome who is rewarded with a vision inspired by the Holy Spirit, may still offer insight to the power of scriptural reflection.

NOTES

1 Irving Lavin, "Divine Inspiration in Caravaggio's Two St. Matthew's," *The Art Bulletin*, 56.1 (March 1974), 59-81, here citing 60. For a discussion of Caravaggio's *Inspiration of Saint Matthew*, see Heidi J. Hornik, "The Urgency of Inspiration," *Scripture, Christian Reflection: A Series in Faith and Ethics* 52 (Waco, TX: Baylor University, 2014), 64-65.

2 Frederick Hartt and David G. Wilkins, *History of Italian Renaissance Art*, seventh edition (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2011), 412.

3 Ibid.

4 Penny Howell Jolly, "Antonello da Messina's 'St. Jerome in His Study': A Disguised Portrait?" *The Burlington Magazine*, vol. 124, no. 946 (January, 1982), 26-29, here citing 28.

5 Eugene Rice, "St. Jerome's 'Vision of the Trinity': An Iconographical Note," *The Burlington Magazine*, Vol. 125, No. 960 (March, 1983), 151-153, 155.

6 Ibid., 151.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 Hartt and Wilkins, 178.



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❖ Other Voices ❖

Apply the whole of yourself to the text [of Scripture], and apply the whole of the text to yourself.

JOHANN ALBRECHT BENDEL (1687-1752)

Holy Scripture is not a single or simple entity. The term 'Holy Scripture' refers primarily to a set of texts, but importantly and secondarily to its divine origin and its use by the church. Thus the content of the term can only be thoroughly mapped by seeing this set of texts in connection with purposive divine action in its interaction with an assemblage of creaturely events, communities, agents, practices and attitudes. ... 'Holy Scripture' is a shorthand term for the nature and function of the biblical writings in a set of communicative acts which stretch from God's merciful self-manifestation to the obedient hearing of the community of faith.

JOHN WEBSTER , *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch (2003)*

[Scripture] texts must first be restored to their historical locus and interpreted in their historical context. But this must be followed by a second phase of interpretation, however, in which they must also be seen in light of the entire historical movement and in terms of the central event of Christ.

**CARDINAL JOSEPH RATZINGER (POPE BENEDICT XVI) ,
"Biblical Interpretation in Conflict: On the Foundations and the Itinerary of Exegesis Today"
(2008)**

I read the Bible as a sacred text and a witness to Jesus Christ; a site of God's self-revelation; a text from the past through which God addresses all humanity and each human being today; a text that has overarching unity yet is internally teeming with rich diversity; a text that encodes meanings and refracts them in multiple ways; a text we should approach with trust and critical judgment as well as engage with receptivity and imagination; a text that defines Christian identity yet speaks to people beyond the boundaries of Christian communities.

MIROSLAV VOLF , *Captive to the Word of God: Engaging the Scriptures for Contemporary Theological Reflection (2010)*

The early Church read the Old Testament as the Word of God, a book about the triune God...who "was and is and is to come." What the text of

the Bible meant when it was written, as far as that can be determined, is part of interpretation, but it can never be the last word, nor even the most important word. A historical interpretation can only be preparatory. A Christian understanding of the Scriptures is oriented toward the living Christ revealed through the words of the Bible, toward what the text means today in the lives of the faithful and what it promises for the future.

ROBERT LOUIS WILKEN, *“Introduction to the Christian Interpretation of Isaiah,” in Isaiah: Interpreted by Early Christian and Medieval Commentators, The Church’s Bible*

The *unease* one feels in reading patristic exegesis should not be mistaken for *disease*, though, on the part either of the contemporary reader or the ancient exegetes. It is precisely because patristic exegesis does not seem comfortably familiar that it promises to have something to offer us. This unease ought not to be a deterrent, a road sign warning “Turn back now; waste of time ahead.” Rather, I would suggest, the unease that reading patristic exegesis occasions...is what it feels like to put on someone else’s clothes – not those cut and measured to one’s own dimensions and liking but garments that have been handed down, and into which one must wear one’s own way. These are the garments of the Christian tradition.

CLAIRE MATHEWS MCGINNIS, *“Stumbling over the Testaments: On Reading Patristic Exegesis and the Old Testament in Light of the New,” Journal of Theological Interpretation 4:1 (2010)*

Like other spiritual practices, formative reading [of Scripture] is less a question of strict methods and more a matter of attitudinal dispositions. Turning to the text in the initial act of reading, we pray that the Holy Spirit will open our hearts and enlighten our minds so that we may imbibe, beyond information, the formative meanings disclosed in the text, reading, so to speak, “between the lines” and remaining receptive to the ways in which the Holy Spirit can use the power of the word to touch and transform our lives. We abandon the potentially arrogant position of being a textual expert and become a disciple who not only reads but also prays with these words, who hears them not only in an auditory manner but also with the ears of the heart. The fruits of this being-with-and-in-the-text flow forth in our actions; it becomes second nature to “consider our state of soul, and reflect in our own deeds the lives about which we read so often and so eagerly.”

... [W]e should not expect to receive direction every time we read. If it pleases the Spirit to test our faithfulness to reading in the midst of aridity, we should not give up. We should realize that the work of the Holy Spirit might go unnoticed for long stretches of time. It is not there at once, but it ripens in us like fruit on a tree. Just as its leafy branches need sufficient sunlight for the fruit to blossom, so do we need to remain faithful to the practice of spiritual reading until that day when the words we read light

up for us with formative-inspirational beauty. Scriptures that were perhaps lacking in meaning for many years may now strike us as immediately significant for our lives. The initiative for such encounters rests with God alone. We cannot force or compel them; we can only wait in loving attention.

SUSAN MUTO, *“The Art and Discipline of Formative Reading: Revisiting Holy Scripture with Humble Receptivity,”* *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care* (2012)

Phrases are powerful instruments of awakening and recollection for all of us. The wisdom of the ancient Benedictine practice of *lectio divina* or “holy reading” lies in focusing not on an idea or even a sentence, but on a “word or phrase” that summons us to attention. Learning to notice what we notice as we move slowly from words to meaning, pausing where we sense a slight beckoning, allowing associations to emerge around the phrase that stopped us is an act of faith that the Spirit will meet us there. There is, we may assume, a gift to be received wherever we are stopped and summoned. At one reading of the prologue to John’s Gospel, it may be that “In the beginning” allows us a moment to step outside time and revel in a cosmic awe that brings with it the comfort that we are not stuck in the morass of human history, but belong to a much bigger story. At another reading of the same passage, it may be the simple phrase “with God” that gives us occasion to consider the mystery of divine companionship that is an aspect of God’s very being.

MARILYN CHANDLER McENTYRE, *What’s in a Phrase? Pausing Where Scripture Gives You Pause* (2014)

It is not too much to say that the one thing other than belief in Jesus Christ that unites Christians more than any other is the Bible. It is also one of the greatest sources of division and controversy. Scripture unites Christians in that anyone who calls herself a Christian is not free simply to dismiss the Bible as irrelevant. She may quarrel with it, investigate it, and emphasize some parts over others, but she may never simply say, “I am going to do Christian ethics without the Bible.” To be a Christian is to be in conversation with the biblical text. The fact that Christians (as well as Jews and Muslims) are referred to as a “people of the book” reflects the fact that Scripture stands as the bedrock of the Christian life. The Bible can never be simply dismissed as irrelevant or peripheral.

KYLE D. FEDLER, *Exploring Christian Ethics: Biblical Foundations for Morality* (2006)

Throughout most of the Christian exegetical tradition, the Bible has been read as a document reiterating the morally stupendous claim that all reality is created and remade by God’s overflowing goodness. To take this claim seriously is to give up the attempt to fit the Bible into a preconceived moral

universe and to begin, instead, to wrestle with the methodological questions raised by the moral strangeness of this basic claim. It is an unfamiliar starting point, and it will yield unfamiliar methodological presuppositions. But if those who take the Bible's moral strangeness seriously look quixotic from the vantage point of modern readers, they in turn see modern readers as self-insulated travelers who, despite being physically present in foreign lands, are impoverished by reading everything through the categories and perceptions of their home culture.

BRIAN BROCK, *Singing the Ethos of God: On the Place of Christian Ethics in Scripture* (2007)

The Christian community has long asserted the unity of the Testaments and acknowledged multiple senses of Scripture, although the nature of that unity and of those senses has been a matter of debate. Particularly in the present postmodern, pluralist context in which contemporary biblical scholarship occurs, reading the Bible theologically means having to grapple anew with how we hear the OT's discrete witness, in light of what we know of God in Christ. Sensitive to the fact that the Hebrew Bible has an ongoing life and tradition of interpretation within Judaism, the challenge is how to avoid supercessionism in our ways of thinking and speaking of the OT without stripping Christianity of its claims to revelation of God in Christ.

CLAIRE MATHEWS MCGINNIS, *"Stumbling over the Testaments: On Reading Patristic Exegesis and the Old Testament in Light of the New," Journal of Theological Interpretation 4:1* (2010)

When asked to name the books that come to mind when they consider sacred literature or holy books, Americans overwhelmingly name the Bible (79%). ... Boomers (ages 49 to 67) and Elders (ages 68 plus) are more likely to regard the Bible as sacred. Millennials (18 to 29) are the least likely generational segment to regard the Bible as sacred literature. Additionally, Millennials (18-29) are more likely than average to say they do not consider any book sacred or holy (19%) or are unable to name a book that is sacred or holy (10%). ...

The total proportion of Bible readers – that is, those who read the Bible at least three to four times a year – is 53%. Fifteen percent of adults say they read the Bible daily. Another 13% spend time in Scripture several times per week; 9% read it once a week; 8% read the Bible once a month; and 8% read it three to four times a year. ...

Bible readers were presented with a list of possible reasons for reading the Bible. More than half (56%) say that reading it brings them closer to God. Far fewer spend time in Scripture because they have a problem they need to solve or need direction (17%) or need comfort (15%).

BARNA GROUP FOR THE AMERICAN BIBLE SOCIETY,
The State of the Bible 2014

Embodying Scripture through Performative Interpretation

BY KATHY MAXWELL

Internalizing and performing Scripture in the context of teaching and preaching gives Scripture freedom to work in the lives of the hearers in refreshing and unexpected ways. It gives a voice and body to God's Word, which was (most likely) originally spoken and heard.

Everybody enjoys a good story. Whether we are reading a dog-eared novel, watching a well-executed movie, or telling a whopper about the one that got away, stories are ingrained in how we come to know each other and the world around us.

When it comes to Scripture, however, we "love to tell the story" and then condense it to three points and a poem. As a preacher, teacher, and interpreter of God's word, it is a scary thing to leave the understanding of a story in the hands of our hearers. What if they do not reach the correct conclusion? What if they focus on this small detail and miss the main point? This concern, I believe, is real. But the benefit that outweighs the concern, in my experience, is discovering not what a *hearer* will do to or with the story, but what the *story* will do to the hearer. Internalizing and performing Scripture in the context of teaching and preaching gives Scripture freedom to work in the lives of the hearers in refreshing and unexpected ways.

Incorporating performance into the sharing of Scripture gives a voice and body to God's Word, which was (most likely) originally spoken and heard. However, most of us grew up in a text- or print-based culture. We are accustomed to encountering the Bible as something written and read. We assume that there is one authoritative copy of the ancient biblical text and that this copy is widely available and accessible. We assume that this text belongs to the author(s), in the same way that we think of modern

copyright and intellectual property. We tend to read this text silently, unless we are reading to someone else, in which case we often read without inflection or emotion, perhaps because we think this sounds more holy.

But if we are now, as Robert Fowler suggests, moving into a hypertext culture that assumes an active reader of a fluid, “multi-centered,” collaborative text, perhaps we can best communicate the gospel with a text that is read, heard, seen, felt, and even acted upon.[†]



When someone performs the text of Scripture, the stories become embodied before our eyes and we are invited to participate with the story teller. Even a simple gesture like eye contact by the performer does wonders for encouraging audience engagement. A small group of my students accepted the challenge of internalizing and performing excerpts from Paul’s letters. After the performances one student reported that when her classmate looked her in the eye and spoke Paul’s words, suddenly, the words were spoken *to her*. If she did not seriously consider these words, she was being as disrespectful as if she ignored sound advice from a friend or parent. This was no longer “just” the Word of the Lord for God’s people, but more specifically it was the Word of the Lord *for her*.

Performing Scripture is an effective way to communicate multiple layers of interpretation, including emotional interpretation. In one of my classes, students perform Mark’s passion narrative. Of course, they puzzle over the young man who is wearing nothing but his linen cloth, and loses it as he avoids capture by the unruly crowd. They have to figure out what tone of voice to give Jesus as he talks to the religious leaders and his disciples. When Jesus found his disciples sleeping in Gethsemane, was he irritated or resigned? Or (as in one of my favorite performative interpretations) was he hurt, feeling more deeply betrayed by their sleeping than by Judas’ kiss?

These students are quite familiar with the passion narrative and they have been exposed to visual images and medical explanations of the brutality of crucifixion. Yet each semester without fail, students say that from the performance of this story they experience the sorrow of these events in a new way. To see Jesus, portrayed not by a famous actor but by a friend and classmate, rejected and betrayed, somehow casts new light on the emotional pain of the passion. Hearing in a roommate’s voice the words of Peter’s denial or the crowd’s shout of “Crucify!” underscores our complicity in the death of Christ. Our hearts stop with the women when they look into the not-quite-empty tomb, and the words of the young man are spoken to us all: “Do not be alarmed.” After personally moving through these events, the words “He is risen!” stir a new hope, even in those of us who have always known the end of the story. But the ending of Mark has never stood in such stark contrast – and been so challenging – as when I watched a self-assured,

accomplished senior, who was gifted in ministry, perform the final verse by cowering behind a concrete wall, shoulders hunched, voice quavering and pitching higher, gasping out, "But they...they said nothing to anyone. Because they were afraid."



Last semester a group of colleagues and students at Palm Beach Atlantic University performed twenty-three stories we selected from Genesis's story arc from Abraham through Joseph. This was quite a challenge, even after summarizing some of the transition material. Each person memorized a story and we performed the entire story arc together, outside on a Tuesday evening. My story from Genesis 42, 44, 45, and 50 was the final piece: the story of Joseph's reunion and reconciliation with his brothers.

I find that preparing a story for performance shares many aspects of sermon preparation. One practice that takes center stage is putting myself into the sandals of the people I am embodying, guided and informed by the story's historical and literary context. In this case, family conflict and crisis are in full view. Jacob, to my ear, speaks bitterly and biting to his sons in the opening verses of Genesis 42, and I feel sorry for the ten brothers even though the earlier stories reveal that they have done terrible things to both Joseph and Jacob. Here are family relationships that have been corrupted for a long time, with parental disappointment and children (though grown) treated as the least favorite.

When I see Joseph for the first time in these chapters, he is the bratty brother who has 'done good' and is now waiting for his unsuspecting brothers at the end of their journey south. I experience the rest of the story from his perspective, primarily. He (along with the audience) sees his dreams in real life. When his brothers arrive, I wonder if Joseph thinks he is dreaming again. In any case, Joseph seems to act out of self-protection. Bowing before him are the brothers who literally sold him out. After a betrayal like that, how can I blame him for "treating them like strangers"? Joseph is facing not only his betrayers, but his abusers. Here are the strong, mixed emotions of confronting betrayers and abusers, and reacting non-violently in a way that protects oneself.

As the story continues, we see betrayers being betrayed, manipulators being manipulated, and slavers offering themselves as slaves. The motivations of Jacob, the ten brothers, and Joseph are not made clear in the story; and often such motivations are not clear in our stories either. At the end of the entire story arc, in Genesis 50, a final connection is drawn; it is different than those suggested above, but not mutually exclusive. Aside from dysfunctional families, confrontations, and role reversals, Joseph says that God has a plan for all this. (By the way, in my interpretation, this is quite different from saying "God *planned* all this.")

The first time I told the end of this story, having heard with our hearers the whole story arc, standing there looking them in the eyes, something unplanned happened. As I ended with Genesis 50:20, I slowed down for the “all this.” Joseph says, “Even though you intended harm to me, God intended this – all this – for good.” I swept my arm, catching the other storytellers who had told the journey from the Abrahamic covenant, to the binding of Isaac, to the heartbreak of Leah, to the selling of Joseph, to the shame of Judah and Tamar, to the recognition, reconciliation, and continuing fear of the brothers. *All this*. But the gesture also encompassed the people in our audience – their stories, too, including the betrayals and manipulations and disappointments.

If we are paying loving attention to the text, we see that this story from Genesis reflects and informs our own stories. If we live alongside this Story with our students, congregations, and friends, we find common ground on which to build and grow. As the Story unfolds, it connects us. It changes us. We find that God intends to use this – *all this* – for good.

NOTE

† Robert Fowler, “How the Secondary Orality of the Electronic Age Can Awaken Us to the Primary Orality of Antiquity or What Hypertext Can Teach Us About the Bible with Reflections on the Ethical and Political Issues of the Electronic Frontier,” *homepages.bw.edu/~rfowler/pubs/secondoral/* (accessed May 24, 2014). It is fascinating to see a “post-print” culture returning to many of the assumptions of the ancient rhetorical culture.



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Why Bother with the Bible?

BY BILL IRELAND

When we dwell in the pages of the Bible, we train ourselves to see that God is always at work. By its very nature, Scripture is subversive. It confronts us with an alternative script and says, “This is the best way to live.”

In a recent op-ed piece in *The New York Times*, columnist Nicholas Kristoff offered his readers a clever test. He presented a brief but error-filled narrative of events drawn from Scripture and church history, and asked them how many mistakes they could find in it. Here is a sample:

The Virgin Mary, a young Christian woman, conceives Jesus immaculately and gives birth to him in a Jerusalem manger. Jesus, backed by the Twelve Apostles and their wives, the Epistles, proclaims what we call the Golden Rule: “Do one to others before they do one to you.” The Romans repeatedly crucify Jesus – at Calvary, Golgotha, and other sites – but he resurrects himself each time.¹

Kristoff uses the test to illustrate what he calls the “great muddling of religious knowledge” in the United States.² Many people are making up faith as they go along, putting a lot of samples from the religious cafeteria on their tray and mashing them all together. Isolated bits of Scripture get thrown into the mix. As a result of this mash-up, knowledge of the Bible is declining precipitously. “Nearly two-thirds of Americans say they believe that the Bible holds the answers to all or most of life’s basic questions,” Kristoff explains. “Yet, only one-third know that Jesus delivered the Sermon on the Mount, and 10 percent think that Joan of Arc was Noah’s wife.”³

When it comes to the Bible, even the most religiously inclined seem to be saying, “Why bother?”

Let me be clear: Scripture *does* matter, and it is worth the bother! The writer of Hebrews was dead on when he declared that “the word of God is living and active” (4:12). I believe that. Let me offer you two reasons why Scripture matters.

SCRIPTURE TEACHES US TO LOOK BENEATH THE SURFACE

Bible stories invite us to acknowledge that there is always more going on than meets the eye: beneath the surface of our circumstances, the deep river of God's purpose flows.

Time and again, people discovered God working behind the scenes during difficult circumstances or revealing the hidden potential of ordinary things. Joseph, according to the stories in Genesis 37-50, had never met God as his forefathers had. Yet at every turn in his life and amidst all his ups and downs, God was at work behind the scenes to position Joseph strategically to save his people. The Apostle Paul could not understand why he was locked in a Roman jail when there were so many places he had yet to go and preach. Then he discovered that his imprisonment led to the gospel being proclaimed in ways and in places he had never imagined (Philippians 1:12-15). In his first sign in the Gospel of John, Jesus turned ordinary water into wine at a wedding. In doing this, Jesus communicated that the most ordinary things have all kinds of hidden potential. In his hands, something as common as water can become "the best of all" (John 2:1-11). In each of these examples, there is more going on at any one time than we can possibly fathom.

Has this sort of thing happened to you? Events that did not register at the time turned out to be pivotal events, real direction-changers! The passage of time gives us a vantage point from which to look back. When we do, we discover that God was up to something when we were absolutely convinced nothing important was going on.

Why bother with the Bible? When we dwell in its pages, we train ourselves to avoid taking life for granted and to recognize that God is always at work.

SCRIPTURE CHALLENGES THE SCRIPTS WE LIVE BY

The explosion in communications technology has given us immediate access to a wealth of story-tellers and the many ways of life that they commend. Five hundred channels on television, radio programs designed exclusively for our demographic, magazines in print and on-line that are devoted to exclusive interests and tastes—all of these are fountains of culture from which we may drink. These story-tellers shape how we understand ourselves and the world. They offer us scripts to follow, each promising to make our lives full and rich. Here is a sampling of some of the narratives embedded in our culture today:

Do whatever it takes to get ahead. It is a competitive world, and the only thing that matters is winning. Do whatever you have to do—lie, cheat, or throw somebody under the bus—in order to get an edge.

Buy stuff in order to be happy. The things we buy create our identity—who we are and who we want other people to think we are. Things craft our brand and image. Cramming our closets full and accumulating the latest things make a statement.

The most important thing in the world is me. I am the final arbiter in all things. What counts is how something affects me. The only thing that matters is me and mine.

Now give a listen to some of the most profound words in the Bible:

“But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.”⁴
“All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.”⁵

“Therefore, I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?”⁶

“Love your neighbor as yourself.”⁷

Do you hear the difference? Do you hear how much these statements go against the grain of convention? By its very nature, Scripture is subversive. Scripture confronts us with the truth about ourselves and the world we live in. Scripture gives us an alternative script and says, “This is the best way to live.”

NOTES

1 Nicholas Kristof, “Religion for \$1000, Alex,” *The New York Times* (April 26, 2014), www.nytimes.com/2014/04/27/opinion/sunday/kristof-religion-for-1000-alex.html?_r=0 (accessed June 8, 2014).

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 Matthew 19:30 // Mark 10:31; cf. Matthew 20:16 and Luke 13:30.

5 Matthew 23:12; cf. Luke 14:11 and 18:14.

6 Matthew 6:25; cf. Luke 12:22-23.

7 Leviticus 19:18; cf. Matthew 22:39, Mark 12:31, Romans 13:9, Galatians 5:14, and James 2:8.



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Overcoming Historicism's Dividing Wall of Hostility

BY DON COLLETT

In the wake of the breakdown of historical-critical modes of reading the Bible, a new movement—the theological interpretation of Scripture—seeks to heal the rift between biblical and theological studies, in both the academy and the Church. Four books reviewed here introduce major facets of the movement.

The second half of the twentieth century witnessed the beginnings of a rather tumultuous period of stocktaking and reevaluation in the field of biblical exegesis. In the wake of the breakdown of historical-critical modes of reading Scripture, a new movement arose that seeks to heal the rift between biblical and theological studies, in both the academy and the Church. Styling itself “the theological interpretation of Scripture,” the movement has many facets and is arguably one of the more exciting and promising developments in the past two-hundred years of biblical exegesis. Of course, whether one judges the latter assertion to be true or false largely depends upon one’s view of the nature and goals of biblical exegesis, as the following four books helpfully clarify in a number of different ways.

In *The Word of God for the People of God: An Entryway to the Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2010, 235 pp., \$18.00), J. Todd Billings offers an accessible introduction to a number of topics of special concern for those who are interested in the recovery of a robustly theological approach to the reading of Scripture. His discussion of the dynamic and functional character of the rule of faith is one of the more helpful introductory discussions of the topic available. Billings construes

the rule as a theological context that is authorized by Scripture (p. 22), and therefore may properly serve as a hermeneutical guideline for reading Scripture. While the rule's theological logic manifests itself in narrative, catechetical, and creedal forms, it is not to be identified with these forms, as though it were a fixed formula (p. 18, n. 14). Rather, the rule functions as a theological context delimiting the proper range of acceptable readings. While it may be stated in formal terms, the rule of faith is primarily functional rather than formal in character, owing to its dynamic and dialectical relation to the ongoing task of biblical exegesis.

Billings shares the concern of other writers canvassed in this review that revelation, inspiration, and canon have been dislocated from their Trinitarian context and given an independent integrity of their own in order to serve in the cause of foundationalist enterprises (i.e., projects that attempt to derive all beliefs from certain basic truths). Important also is his emphasis upon the Trinitarian and ontological framework authorized by the exegesis of Scripture and presupposed by the rule of faith (p. 74). By stressing the Trinitarian character of Scripture's frame of reference, Billings is able to avoid the sort of Christo-monism that ironically ignores the Trinitarian context that enables Christocentric accounts of Scripture to function in the first instance. In keeping with the stance of other books in this review (excepting Wright), he offers a largely positive analysis of the early and medieval church's use of allegory and the fourfold sense (e.g., the *Quadrigena*), rightly recognizing that the Reformers did not depart from its inherent theological logic, but rather sought to reformulate it in a way that "retained the content of the medieval fourfold account. ... In many ways, Calvin's approach is actually quite close to earlier authors" (p. 170; cf. pp. 178-179). Here Billings builds upon the insights of Richard Muller and other students of Calvin's exegesis.

Billings' last chapter offers sage advice on the spiritual and communal character of biblical interpretation. Especially helpful are his warnings about reducing theological interpretation to "method" (p. 195). While reading Scripture is a spiritual discipline that involves the use of what might be called scientific methods and tools (e.g., historical, lexical, and genre studies), it simply cannot be reduced to the use of such methods. The Spirit calls us as readers into deeper union with Christ through the biblical text, not by reducing that text to abstract information, as though honey is appreciated when we have understood the abstract dictionary definition of the word "honey," but by enabling us to taste its sweetness: "Reading Scripture," Billings argues, "is about discerning a mystery, the mystery of the triune God. It should not be reduced to conveying historical information from which we draw our own application" (pp. 212-213). Rather, it should always be borne in mind that Scripture is the instrument of the Triune God's communicative fellowship.



Turning now to Stephen E. Fowl's *Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2009, 108 pp., \$13.00), we find a continuation of a number of the essential themes and topics identified by Billings. This small primer, which is part of the Cascade Companions series, is intended to serve as an introductory guide and companion to the theological interpretation of Scripture. It is a model of lucidity and brevity. Experienced readers in the literature of "theological interpretation" will quickly realize, however, that Fowl's brevity is not to be confused with superficiality. Although brief, the book gives ample evidence of a deep familiarity and sophistication that can only come from years of navigating crucial topics of concern for theological interpretation. Given the confines of space, this review cannot hope to do justice to the many nuances at work in Fowl's book. Suffice it for present purposes to call attention to some of what I take to be the more interesting features of his study.

When it comes to navigating the nature and purpose of Scripture, theological interpreters often draw an analogy between the two natures of Christ and the character of Scripture as both a human and divine document. Invoking this Christological analogy is appropriate, Fowl argues, as long as it is not used to argue the necessity of a specific interpretive practice such as historical criticism (p. 3). The difficulty is that on the basis of this analogy, some have done just that. As a result, the Christological analogy between the two natures of Christ and Scripture's human and divine character has resulted in two claims: first, the

necessity of using historical criticism to avoid Docetism (the belief that Christ's human form was merely an illusion), and second, the claim that Scripture should be interpreted "like any other book" (pp. 4-5). However, once the Bible is interpreted "like any other book," the problem becomes how to move from there to the claim that, in view of its

divinely inspired character, the Bible is *not* just like any other book. The usual outcome of this procedure in the hands of historical critics was to situate the Bible in its ancient near Eastern world "without remainder."

Like Billings, Fowl rejects the idea that Bible should be studied "like any other book," *if* by that one means that the Bible can be approached neutrally, apart from a theological and ontological frame of reference. Once one

The writers canvassed in this review share the concern that revelation, inspiration, and canon have been dislocated from their Trinitarian context and given an independent integrity of their own.

accepts the mistaken notion that Scripture can be interpreted neutrally, apart from a particular view about God's nature, moving from the task of exegesis to theological and practical concerns become second order affairs at best, rather than realities that are implicit in the act of interpretation from the outset. Fowl also warns against detaching Scriptural revelation from its context within the triune life and saving economy of God, the effect of which is to undercut its primary function and purpose as a Spirit-inspired instrument for bringing us into communion with God. Following the lead of Aquinas, he argues that the inspiration of Scripture must be rooted in God's providential ordering of things, and not in inspired human authorial intent *per se*, which is but one component in the larger economy by which God inspired Scripture. It is not that the concern with authorial intent is unimportant, Fowl suggests, so much as it is *insufficient*. It is simply too narrow a basis to build a culture of Bible reading upon, because it fails to do justice to the richness of sense-making at work in God's providential ordering of things, the meaning of which is rendered by the Spirit speaking in Scripture.

Fowl prioritizes a theological and ecclesial approach to the task of biblical interpretation. Like Billings, he recognizes that certain practices and habits often have far more impact upon our ability to experience Scripture's transforming power than the use of a proper 'scientific method' for accessing Scripture's meaning. Thus he argues that it was not differing biblical interpretations *per se* that caused church division during the Reformation, since such differences have always been present from the earliest days in the Church. Rather it is the fact that these differences took place in an interpretive context that was separated from other Christian practices, for example, the practices of repentance and humility, which caused the division. These practices are crucial, because they help inform how Christians should relate to one another in the midst of interpretive differences. Fowl rightly notes: "In the absence of these practices, Christians cannot expect that any hermeneutical theory will keep their scriptural interpretation from leading them into various sinful practices" (p. 68).



Christian Smith's *The Bible Made Impossible: Why Biblicism Is Not a Truly Evangelical Reading of Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2012, 240 pp., \$16.99) may be read as a sociological analysis of evangelical reading habits that also attempts to offer a constructive theological alternative to a set of problems raised for biblical interpretation in the modern era. Smith questions the fundamental assumptions undergirding evangelical versions of what he styles "biblicism," that is, a particular understanding of biblical authority rather than biblical authority *per se*. At the same time he calls for a more truly evangelical account of the Bible that will do a better job of honoring its authority.

He begins by marshaling empirical evidence to support his claim that in practice, multiple, diverse, and incompatible readings of Scripture are legion among evangelicals. For Smith, this "pervasive interpretive pluralism" (hereafter, PIP) is a problem for the particular view of biblical authority he calls "biblicism" because it renders a coherent account of biblical interpretation "impossible." Hence his title: *The Bible Made Impossible*. Smith recognizes that on strictly logical grounds, he cannot discredit biblicism's theory of biblical authority simply by pointing to empirical observations of its inconsistency in practice. For it could be, as Smith notes, "that biblicist theory is correct and that actual, empirical biblicist practices and experiences are often compromised. Life sometimes works this way" (p. 78). His argument seems to be that while one cannot make a logically compelling case against biblicism, there is simply too much inconsistency *in practice* for this qualification to save biblicism from being evacuated of any real content that goes beyond a purely theoretical, abstract, and therefore empty claim. Stated differently, biblicism is theoretically possible, but is it *really* possible? At the very least, Smith argues, the mountain of evidence sustaining the existence of PIP should cause biblicists to consider the possibility their theory is wrong. Yet they remain intransigent. Why is this?

Smith notes the influence of bad philosophies of language and science upon biblicists. On the one hand, paradigm-protecting approaches to organizing the diversity of Scripture generate canons within the canon. On the other, modernism's mathematical and scientific rationalism leads biblicists to effectively regard the Bible as a set of algebraic equations, thereby confusing mathematical and scientific ideas of precision with accuracy and truth. Sophisticated views of the philosophy of language and science are either unknown in popular forms of biblicism, or if known, exploited for purely negative and apologetic purposes, thereby precluding their constructive appropriation on any level.

The practices of repentance and humility are crucial as we interpret the Bible. Without them, Fowl notes, "Christians cannot expect that any hermeneutical theory will keep their scriptural interpretation from leading them into various sinful practices."

Among the more interesting answers that Smith gives to this question are found in his third chapter, which is largely rooted in sociological observations. As it turns out, biblicists do not get out much. They talk among themselves within socially and ecclesially constructed rooms of their own making, never bothering to open up windows to let in fresh air

from the outside. When one adds to this the sociological observation that the need to reinforce one's own identity is often tied to the need to differentiate oneself from others, this isolation is compounded even further (pp. 62-63). In short, because difference is essential to identity, biblicists may be subconsciously resisting "the idea of the biblical differences among them actually being settled" (p. 63). Smith's discussion of "homophily," which he defines as natural attraction to those who think in the same terms we do, also helps to explain, at least in part, why biblicism is so resistant to change. Evangelical biblicists regularly underestimate the influence of social networks and social location upon how people process Scripture (pp. 64-65; 195-196). Because of this, they fall into the trap of believing that if they can just get people all believing the right things, everything else would take care of itself. While one can go too far with this and foster a sort of social determinism that ignores the Bible's ability, through the Spirit, to overturn and counter the influence of what Smith (following Peter Berger) calls "plausibility structures," in my opinion Smith is right to point out that most biblicists regularly underestimate the impact their social context and location has upon how they hear Scripture. Many biblicists are Cartesians who view people as disembodied selves, or if you prefer, ideas with feet.

The second half of Smith's book offers a more Christocentric approach to understanding the nature and purpose of Scripture, an account that shares a number of features in common with the concerns of both Billings and Fowl. Here and there Smith's tone borders on stridency, especially in contexts where he is making rather totalizing claims about evangelicalism in general (pp. 37, 60). At times this makes it difficult to hear some of the more valid concerns of the book. In most cases, however, I found that reading the qualifications he makes in the book's endnotes were valuable for off-setting and clarifying possible misunderstandings arising from the tone of his prose.



In *Scripture and the Authority of God: How to Read the Bible Today* (New York: HarperCollins, 2011, 210 pp., \$14.99), N. T. Wright seeks to develop an account of biblical authority that is not rooted in Scripture *per se*, but in the exercise of God's authority in and through Scripture. This bears a family resemblance to the concerns of Billings, Fowl, and Smith, to avoid an account of biblical authority that detaches it from its theological subject matter (though this point is rather theologically underdeveloped in Wright's book). The book is written at a very popular level and offers a history of biblical interpretation from the early church through the eras of the medieval and Reformation church, as well as the Enlightenment and the beginnings of modernity.

Wright has a heavy investment in the hermeneutical categories of story and narrative, which in contemporary evangelical hermeneutics now seem to have eclipsed earlier categories such as salvation history. Unlike the treatments of Billings and Fowl, and to some extent even Smith, Wright takes a rather dim view of the Church's use of allegory and the medieval fourfold sense, arguing that it was essentially means for getting around the "less savory" passages of the Old Testament. On the other hand, Wright does do an admirable job of distinguishing the view of Anglican divine Richard Hooker (ca. 1554-1600) on the importance of "reason" in relation to Scripture and tradition from modern rationalism's notion of the same (p. 80). Moreover, he does not make the Enlightenment the source of all evil and reduce it to a vast black hole in the history of God's providential dealings with the Church (p. 83). The most stimulating aspects of Wright's book are his theological and exegetical treatments of the issues of Sabbath and monogamy. These illustrations of his approach to Scripture are well executed and based upon penetrating insights into the theological nature of the two issues.



All four of the books reviewed here are readable introductions to the major facets of the theological interpretation of Scripture and the resulting revisions to modern ways of making sense of the Bible. My recommendation is to purchase and read them, but to read them constructively as well as critically in order to benefit from their teaching.



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Reading with the Great Cloud of Witnesses

BY RACHEL M. BILLINGS

Given the impressive and accessible resources reviewed here, readers have no reason to delay their acquaintance with earlier Christian interpreters of Scripture. These books bring us alongside that “great cloud of witnesses” that has read the Bible before us, and allow us to benefit from their testimony.

For Christians, the Bible is an account and vehicle of the living God’s ongoing work around the world and across history in the community of his people, the Church—gathering, shaping, sorting, and redeeming. When we are reading our Bible alone at home, however, it can be hard to keep in mind the vast global and temporal scope of God’s activity. That loss of perspective can cost us dearly, especially when we try to “apply” the Bible to our lives. Many of us have experienced the awkward silence that falls at the end of a Bible study when the question of application arises. Not only do we find ourselves flummoxed if we expect every word of Scripture to apply to us personally, but we make the platform for God’s speech much too small. However, when we hear Scripture as members of the body of Christ, the universal Church, which spans all of time and space, this opens up countless pathways of interpretation!

In the last two decades, evangelical Protestants have begun to regain this sense of perspective, an awareness of the breadth and depth of the Christian tradition, and to bring this newfound awareness to their reading of Scripture. The books reviewed here set out to remind us that any Christian reading of the Bible takes place in the context of a long tradition of Christ-centered reading, and that our reading can flourish by its rootedness in such

a tradition. In *Praise Seeking Understanding: Reading the Psalms with Augustine*, Jason Byassee looks at how Augustine's *Enarrationes in Psalmos* (*Expositions on the Psalms*) can and should serve as a guide for Christian allegorical readings in today's church. John L. Thompson's *Reading the Bible with the Dead: What You Can Learn from the History of Exegesis That You Can't Learn from Exegesis Alone* has a title that explains itself. Thompson focuses on specific texts rather than a specific interpreter to provide models and companionship for Christian readings today. Finally, selections from two recent commentary series designed to help readers encounter the Bible within the long tradition of Christian interpretation will round out our selections. The *Genesis 12–50* volume of the Early Christian Commentary on Scripture Series and the *Genesis* volume of the Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible will provide further examples of how an awareness of Christian readings from the past can enrich our appreciation and understanding of Scripture in the present.



Jason Byassee's *Praise Seeking Understanding: Reading the Psalms with Augustine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2007, 290 pp., \$32.00) beckons the reader to reexamine and reclaim the ancient Christian practice of reading Scripture allegorically, with Augustine as its model. Modern seminary students and scholars have been so thoroughly steeped in the historical-critical method that they have grown wary of the Church's long tradition of allegorical readings: how can a method that "reads things into the text" possibly be appropriate for a historical work like the Bible? Through a guided tour of Augustine's homiletical exegesis of the Psalms, Byassee argues that allegory is, in fact, the most natural and theologically coherent way for *Christians* to read Scripture. To make clear why this is the case, he directs us to the proper *telos* or end of a Christian reading of the Bible—a theological goal, pursued in the context of the Church (p. 3). The Church most properly reads Scripture as God's own witness to himself, and as an agent of God's ongoing redemptive work in creation (pp. 48, 56–57). What does this mean, exactly? The most direct response comes in Byassee's quotation of Augustine: that "Christians are to treat the Bible as 'the face of God for now'" (p. 67). That is, a Christian reading of the Bible is much more about an encounter with the living God than it is about an encounter with a historical text. Although this does not change the historical nature of the Bible, it shifts our focus from antiquarianism to worship. Byassee frames this lofty goal with incredible succinctness: "Exegesis is intertwined with liturgy, which has as its end the beatific vision" (p. 241).

How does allegory come into the picture? Christians necessarily relate to the Old Testament indirectly and by extension, since Christians are not part of the ethnic people of Israel addressed by God in the Old Testament. As a result, Byassee asserts with regard to the Church, "Our very existence

is allegorical" (p. 50), and thus allegory is our only access to these divine words that did not originally address us. This distance between the text and its Christian readers who have been grafted in cannot be bridged by historical knowledge, but only by the work of Christ. A Christ-formed people warrant a hermeneutic that nourishes the body of Christ. Byassee most distinctively makes this point in his discussion of how Augustine reads the Psalms with an eye for the *totus Christus*, the whole person of Christ, such that our allegory finds not only Christ but also the Church present throughout the Bible (pp. 60, 84). In his concluding chapter, he draws Augustine's method out into the congregation, urging that practice and teaching are needed to form good allegorical readers (pp. 264–272). While some of his proposals for widespread education seem impractical, I would be eager to see Byassee edit a "reading with the Church Fathers" Bible study series to get things moving. For now, prospective readers should be aware that this book provides an in-depth study of Augustine's exegesis of the Psalms and will be most navigable by the theologically educated reader.



For a broader and more approachable introduction to the historic voices of the Church, John L. Thompson's *Reading the Bible with the Dead* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2007, 336 pp., \$24.00) does nicely. Thompson takes the reader on a conversational journey through some of the Bible's "difficult" texts with the guidance of various voices from church history. Confronted with modern, especially feminist, arguments that the Church has ignored or abused biblical texts dealing with the oppression and subjection of women (pp. 3–4), Thompson takes us back to the sources to give the history of Christian biblical interpretation a fair hearing. He shows that if the Church has failed on some points in its treatment of these texts, it has at least struggled with them extensively, refusing to ignore the hard questions they raise (pp. 45, 216). The chapters are conveniently divided by individual stories or types of texts, so that readers can easily locate exactly which discussion they need, whether that is the problem of Jephthah's daughter or the Psalms of cursing or the role of women in the Church. For those who might be suspicious of reading the Bible with the "Church Fathers" or even the Reformers, Thompson makes the case that Christians from the past deserve to be our partners in reading the Bible just as much as our contemporaries (pp. 226–227). And for those who are still skeptical that we should use other texts to help us read the Bible, the subtitle says it all: *What You Can Learn from the History of Exegesis that You Can't Learn from Exegesis Alone*. While some interpreters may celebrate the "freshness" that comes from an "independent" reading, Thompson rightly points out that novel readings can be ill-informed as often as "fresh" (pp. 6–7). In Thompson's view, it behooves us to familiarize ourselves with the past so

that we will not be doomed to ignore it, repeat it, or re-invent it. To aid us in this task, he offers a gracious and non-intimidating approach to our forebears.

For each topic, Thompson offers a range of opinions from church history, mostly summarizing his sources but providing brief quotes as well. When he surveys the interpretive options of the past, Thompson includes the ignominious as well as the insightful. For example, he does not hesitate to convey that he is appalled at Ambrose for blaming Jephthah's daughter for her untimely demise (pp. 37–38). Often, however, he can report with equal candor that such morally distasteful conclusions do not set the standard for earlier Christian exegesis (p. 38), as when he praises Luther's sympathy for Hagar (p. 25). From each chapter's examples, he draws out several concluding points for the reader to carry forward in interpreting the text in question. These generally focus on broad ways in which the Church has most fruitfully appropriated the text, roads best not taken, and important reminders that these difficult passages hold for the Christian reader. This book could serve as a handbook in the truest sense of the word—a book that pastors and other interpreters of the Bible will want to keep readily at hand for reference as those difficult questions arise.



For lengthier examples of early Christian exegesis, readers can turn to InterVarsity Press's Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture series. Launched in 2002 and arranged book-by-book like a typical biblical commentary, this series contains excerpts from early biblical exegetes that range from the first through the eighth centuries. Each selection ranges in length from a few sentences to a few paragraphs, and some are newly translated from original languages. Like Thompson's book, this series aims for an audience of pastors or educated lay readers who want to read the Bible in conversation with interlocutors from the early church. Instead of having to load their bookshelves with dozens of commentaries by different ancient authors, readers can pick up the appropriate ACC volume and find relevant selections from a variety of ancient authors grouped according to the order of the biblical text. This arrangement draws its inspiration from earlier Jewish and Christian commentaries that assembled commentators' words around portions of the biblical text for the reader's easy access—in a way, creating the prototype of the study Bible.

Readers will be pleased to find that the series covers the complete Bible as well as the Apocrypha, though the amount of material presented varies dramatically. Some books of the Bible have their own volume or even two, while others are grouped together with several neighbors within a single volume. For the purposes of this review, I consulted the volume covering the Patriarchal history: *Genesis 12–50*, edited by Mark Sheridan (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2002, 392 pp., \$50.00). In the series introduction

by Thomas C. Oden, the series editor, I found his inspiration by the format of the Talmud with its varied comments encouraging, hoping for the sort of survey of views found in Thompson's chapters. Oden, however, propounds a distinctive, quite intentional focus on the consensus of early interpreters, and I fear that this could lead to less variety in the selections than I had hoped for. Likewise, the word "wholesome" used twice on the flyleaf unfortunately evokes an indigestible bran cereal, while a truer description of the fathers would employ words like "provocative," "creative," and even sometimes "delightful."

Within the commentary, the biblical text is printed for the reader's convenience with a brief summary of the patristic comments that follow. Despite my concerns, the comments exhibit some diversity. The account of Abraham's lie about Sarah being his sister, for example, includes an on-the-ground justification of Abraham's action as prudence along with an all-out allegory in which Sarah represents virtue. Lest readers feel daunted by a minimally-mediated encounter with these unfamiliar sources, they will be glad to find an excellent set of biographical, temporal, geographical, and topical indices to help orient them. Overall, I highly recommend this series, but commend Thompson's more winsome introduction to the Patristic interpreters as a prologue.

For those who would like their earlier Christian sources somewhat more digested, the Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible series is a good choice. This series draws upon academic theologians to offer a consciously Christian theological reading of Scripture, defying the scholarly convention of leaving commentaries to biblical scholars. Quite a few volumes remain in production, so readers will only find commentaries for about half the books of Scripture at this point. R. R. Reno's volume on *Genesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2010, 304 pp., \$32.99) launched the series, which Reno also edits. He anchors the traditional verse-by-verse commentary format within five larger thematic categories mapping the forward thrust of salvation history: creation, fall, dead ends, the scandal of particularly, and the need for atonement. He frankly states in his introduction that "readers who wish for a self-contained commentary that approaches Genesis on its own terms will be disappointed" (p. 21). This volume, on the other hand, unapologetically aims to serve those who allow the Bible to evoke larger questions about life, the universe, and God, and who, with Reno, choose to read Genesis "as a promise-driven, future-oriented text" (p. 22). To illustrate this, we can turn to our previous example: Abraham's lie in Genesis 13. Reno acknowledges patristic concerns about the ethics of this lie about Sarah, and then moves beyond them to recognize the larger salvation-historical significance of the fall-redemption pattern this text depicts (pp. 147-148).

Reno does indeed, however, pay very close attention to the text itself, not merely in the limited modern sense that knows only an "original setting," but in the tradition of – and with the help of – the Church Fathers

and early Jewish interpreters. He practices the sort of close reading that brings theological awareness of the trajectory and fullness of Scripture to the meaning of a single verse, allowing it to resonate between the Old Testament and the New (pp. 287–291). Similarly, he brings the full range of extrabiblical commentary to bear on the question, for example, of not only *how* to translate Genesis 1:1 (“In the beginning, God created . . .” vs. “When God began to create”), but *why*. For this initial, crucial verse of Genesis, his references range from Augustine to the nineteenth-century Documentary Hypothesis. Reno’s adroit incorporation of diverse ways of reading not only draws upon ancient Christian commentary, but mirrors its methods. Just as Augustine could draw upon the lexical details of the Psalms to draw further theological meaning out of the text, Reno ably pulls in historical information where it can illuminate the theological shape of the text. With his literary flourishes of metaphor and turns of phrase, Reno provides an enjoyable commentary on Genesis as well as a well-Scriptured one.



Given these impressive and accessible resources, readers have no reason to delay their acquaintance with earlier Christian interpreters of Scripture. Even beginners will find it easy to navigate Thompson’s user-friendly book, and the Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture series provides a good follow-up for further reading. More ambitious readers can take on Byasee’s tour of Augustine’s exegesis or the Brazos Commentary series. Any of these books will help to bring readers alongside that “great cloud of witnesses” that has read the Bible before us, and allow us to benefit from their testimony.



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