



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 The Journey of Reading Scripture
(*Scripture*, pp. 20-28)

Suggested Article:

📖 Overcoming Historicism's Dividing Wall of Hostility
(*Scripture*, pp. 81-87)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

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The Journey of Reading Scripture

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

Scripture Reading: Psalm 119:103-105

Responsive Prayer

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 who is 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 who is 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.

Reflection

Have you noticed how even well-meaning believers are tempted to misuse the Bible in one of two ways? First is what Todd Billings calls "the blueprint approach." Starting with a detailed theological blueprint of what the Bible says, they "translate each passage into a set of propositions or 'biblical principles' that fit the established details of the blueprint." The other way is "the smorgasbord approach." Just as one might choose favorite foods from a huge cafeteria line based on appetite and taste, they select Bible passages to sooth their felt needs or perspectives. (Of course, their "personal" needs and perspectives often follow patterns based on age, gender, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status.)

Both approaches make the mistake of limiting Scripture to our purposes. Billings explains, "We are in control. The Bible may be viewed as authoritative, but it either provides confirmation of our preconceived ideas or divine advice for felt needs."

Yes, the 'blueprint followers' realize everyone brings assumptions to their reading of Scripture, and the 'smorgasbord eaters' appreciate that God addresses us through the Bible. But we can do much better; we can let Scripture speak to us, surprise us, and guide us beyond our felt needs and preconceived theologies. That is what the theological interpretation of Scripture is about.

- ▶ *A spacious rule of faith, not a detailed blueprint, guides interpretation of Scripture. We read "as a follower of Jesus, baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." It's like having a good map rather than all the answers. Billings writes, "in particular moments of the journey, we can be confused and puzzled by what we find in a*



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particular passage in Scripture. 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." Like a map, the rule does not replace the journey. "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."

The rule may guide us to a careful "spiritual" reading of a text – in the form of allegory or typology – that finds import about Christ and his Church. "This...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."

- ▶ *Congregations around the world can prepare to interpret the Bible by allowing the Holy Spirit to illuminate Scripture and interpret it "in Christ." They do this "as they pray for the Spirit's illumination, worship the Triune God, and apply Scripture to their community of discipleship and witness," Billings notes. "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."*

Of course, the best intentioned theological interpreters can make mistakes. They would do well to rely on prayerful study of commentaries (from other cultures and eras, as well as their own) and the biblical languages. But the solution to interpretive mistakes, Billings suggests, "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 by God on our path of dying to the old self and living into our identity in Christ."

Study Questions

1. Discuss your experiences with people using the blueprint and the smorgasbord approaches to interpreting Scripture. Why do you think these approaches are so popular today?
2. How does the rule of faith counter the blueprint and smorgasbord approaches to interpreting the Bible?
3. Why does Todd Billings commend congregational over individual interpretation of Scripture? What makes congregations capable of doing it well? Why aren't they foolproof?

Departing Hymn: "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

The Journey of Reading Scripture

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 2 and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To identify and critique two popular ways of reading the Bible: the blueprint approach and the smorgasbord approach.
2. To understand the nature of the rule of faith and why it is needed to guide interpretation of Scripture.
3. To consider the role of the congregation of believers in interpreting Scripture.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 4-5 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Scripture (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn "From All That Dwell below the Skies" locate the familiar tune DUKE STREET in your church's hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/).

Begin with an Observation

In the United States, the decline in the Bible's authority has a generational dimension. A poll by the Barna Group for the American Bible Society notes, "Boomers (ages 49 to 67) and Elders (ages 68 plus) are more likely to regard the Bible as sacred [85% and 89% respectively]. Millennials (18 to 29) are the least likely generational segment to regard the Bible as sacred literature [64%]" (State of the Bible 2014, 6, online at www.americanbible.org/features/state-of-the-bible-research-2014).

But the problem involves not only a decline in the Bible's authority, Todd Billings warns, because "even when the Bible is interpreted authoritatively, it is not necessarily interpreted as *Christian Scripture*." On the one hand, there are many specialty Bibles of dubious worth. "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." Such products encourage us to read the Bible according to our preferences; they do not allow it to call our felt needs into question or cause us to look beyond them.

On the other hand, Billings continues, "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." (*Scripture*, 20-21)

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Psalm 119:103-105 from a modern translation.

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by inviting members to read responsively the prayer in the study guide. The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Reflection

The Trinitarian rule of faith plays an essential role in forming congregations that can interpret Scripture well for their particular time and place. The practice of using the rule of faith to guide interpretation of the Bible was introduced in the previous study, “A Trinitarian Way of Reading Scripture.” This study follows Todd Billings in presenting the “spacious” rule of faith as a corrective to the narrow theological straitjackets (“the blueprint approach”) and personal or group agendas (“the smorgasbord approach”) that often guide popular biblical interpretation today.

The renewed interest in the rule of faith is a central feature of the emerging movement among scholars for the theological interpretation of Scripture. Don Collett describes this movement as “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*, he recommends accessible resources from the movement and evaluates its attempts to heal the rift between biblical studies and theology within both the academy and the Church.

Study Questions

1. Members may share their or others’ attempts to interpret the Bible in the “blueprint” or “smorgasbord” way in the context of a small group study. To avoid excessive finger pointing, encourage members to focus on their own struggle with these tempting approaches. Ask them to evaluate Christian books and study Bibles, televised sermons and lessons, and church presentations that veer into one of the approaches. Both approaches emphasize our mastery over Scripture in bending it to our purposes, and privilege the individual interpreter’s perspective and choice. Perhaps they are tempting to even well-meaning believers because they cater to modern consumerist and individualist tendencies.
2. Todd Billings describes the Trinitarian rule of faith as “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.”

As we read Scripture with this rule of faith as our guide, it is *similar* to the blueprint approach (in acknowledging that we read with certain assumptions about God’s nature and purpose in mind) and the smorgasbord approach (in expecting Scripture to provide insight and guidance for our lives). But the rule of faith is an important corrective to these popular approaches. On the one hand, the rule is “spacious,” like a “map” or “measure,” rather than a detailed like a blueprint; as the rule guides us, it provides plenty of latitude for exploring the text’s meaning for our discipleship of Christ and for his Church. Against the smorgasbord approach, the rule reorients our reading away from our sometimes errant preferences and felt needs. It reminds us that Scripture is not about what we happen to want or think we need, but about the Triune God’s purposes for all creation, including our growing fellowship with the Father through the work of Christ and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

3. In an individualist, consumerist culture, we are tempted to interpret the Bible alone, without others. Billings writes, “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.” Billings urges us to return to these Reformation practices.

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.