

Beyond criticism: Learning to read the Bible again

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A cartoon in the *New Yorker* shows a man making inquiry at the information counter of a large bookstore. The clerk, tapping on his keyboard and peering intently into the computer screen, replies, “The Bible? . . . That would be under self-help.”

As the cartoon suggests, in postmodern culture the Bible has no definite place, and citizens in a pluralistic, secular culture have trouble knowing what to make of it. If they pay any attention to it at all, they treat it as a consumer product, one more therapeutic option for rootless selves engaged in an endless quest of self-invention and self-improvement. Not surprisingly, this approach does not yield a very satisfactory reading of the Bible, for the Bible is not, in fact, about “self-help”; it is about God’s action to rescue a lost and broken world.

If we discount the story of God’s gracious action, what remains of the Bible is decidedly nontherapeutic. We are left with a curious pastiche of ancient cultural constructions that might or might not be edifying for us, in the same way that the religious myths of any other ancient culture might or might not prove interesting or useful. Indeed, some postmodern readers have come to perceive the cultural alienness of the Bible and find it dangerous and oppressive.

The difficulty of interpreting the Bible is felt not only in secular culture but also in the church at the beginning of the 21st century. Is the Bible authoritative for the faith and practice of the church? If so, in what way? What practices of reading offer the most appropriate approach to understanding the Bible? How does historical criticism illumine or obscure scripture’s message? How are premodern Christian readings to be brought into engagement with historical methodologies, as well as feminist, liberationist and postmodernist readings? The church’s lack of clarity about these issues has hindered its witness and mission, so that it fails to speak with wisdom, imagination and courage to the challenges of our time. Even where the Bible’s

authority is acknowledged in principle, many churches seem to have lost the art of reading it attentively and imaginatively.

In order to address these problems, the Center of Theological Inquiry in Princeton, New Jersey, convened a group of 15 scholars and pastors who met periodically over a period of four years (1998-2002) under the collective name “The Scripture Project.” The group’s individual members contributed expertise in the fields of Old Testament, New Testament, systematic and historical theology and parish ministry.

Our aim was to overcome the fragmentation of the theological disciplines by reading scripture together. As one member of the group remarked, at one time the church’s great interpreters of scripture (such as Origen, Augustine, Aquinas, Calvin and Luther) did not think of themselves narrowly as specialists in Old or New Testament or in theology or church history; for them, interpretation of the Bible was a seamlessly integrated theological activity that spoke directly to the needs of the church. Thus what we were doing, he joked, was assembling 15 specialists to function corporately as a “complete theologian.”

The joke captured something of the truth, and it became for us a working description of the ideal we were pursuing. In seeking to explore, exemplify and nurture habits of reading scripture theologically, we hoped to recover and extend the church’s rich heritage of biblical interpretation in a dramatically changed cultural environment.

In the course of our consultation, the conviction grew among us that reading scripture is an *art*—a creative discipline that requires engagement and imagination, in contrast to the Enlightenment’s ideal of detached objectivity. In our practices of reading the Bible, we are (or should be) something like artists. This conviction entails some bad news and some good news.

The bad news is that, like every other true art, reading scripture is a difficult thing to do well. Strangely, we do not often mention this difficulty in church, in sermons or in teaching. Our attitude seems to be that interpreting scripture is a cut-and-dried kind of thing. In most liberal churches, the issue hardly seems worth discussing. Even in more Bible-oriented churches, there is little acknowledgment of the fact that making good sense of the Bible and applying that sense wisely to our lives is hard to do. The disciplines of attentiveness to the word do not come easily to us, accustomed as we are to user-friendly interfaces and instant gratification. (It is worth noting that recognition of the difficulty of interpretation is one of the huge differences between

Jews and modern Christians; Jews have always revered the reading of scripture as the greatest and most difficult of all art forms.)

But the good news in recognizing scriptural interpretation as an art is that reading scripture, like other forms of art, has the potential for creating something beautiful. Interpretations of scripture are not just right or wrong, although at times such categories are useful and necessary. A more adequate way of judging our readings might be the way we judge works of art—according to the standards of beauty. To what extent do our readings reveal the intricacy, the wondrous quality of what the biblical writers call *ma'asei Adonai*, “the works of the LORD”? To what extent do they draw us toward something, a way of being that is—to use Paul’s language—more “lovely,” more “gracious,” more “excellent,” “noble,” “worthy of praise” (Phil. 4:8)?

Our readings will produce such beauty precisely to the extent that they respond faithfully to the antecedent imaginative power of God, to which the Bible bears witness. We normally say that God relates to us through God’s power of love, of compassion and so on—and of course that is true. But if imagination is the capacity to envision the existence of something that does not yet exist—the clearest instance of this being the artistic imagination—then it makes sense to speak also of the divine imagination.

The creation of the world, the covenant between the Creator of heaven and earth and an old man named Abraham, the formation of a nation of priests out of a band of runaway slaves, the incarnation of the Godhead in human flesh, the destruction of death’s finality, the inclusion of the gentiles in God’s covenant with Israel—all these and more are remarkably imaginative acts on God’s part, acts through which God envisions and effects something totally new, totally unimaginable before it was brought into being. If we are faithful readers of the stories of these imaginative acts, we will find our own imaginations expanded and transformed. Thus scripture claims us and gradually forms us into a new people.

If reading scripture is an art, there follows one more conclusion: we learn the practice of an art through apprenticeship to those who have become masters. We come to read scripture imaginatively and well only by learning from those who have gone before us and performed, in their lives of embodied faithfulness, beautiful interpretations of scripture. For that reason, we in the Scripture Project immersed ourselves in the history of biblical interpretation, paying special attention to the

patterns and practices of reading that have characterized the lives of the saints—those whom the church has recognized as the most astute and faithful exemplars of scripture’s meaning.

As our consultation progressed, the members of the project found growing agreement on a set of core affirmations about the interpretation of scripture. The group as a whole formulated these affirmations in the form of Nine Theses. These theses do not represent a novel hermeneutical proposal; rather, they articulate a way of approaching the Bible that has historically characterized catholic Christianity. Nonetheless, we believe that the theses serve as an urgently needed reminder in our time, and that they can help the church to read scripture deeply and as a source of guidance for Christian life.

Yet the careful reading of scripture always generates new questions and often yields a range of understandings rather than a single clear “answer.” Therefore, each affirmation is conjoined with some of the questions that accompanied it in the Scripture Project’s discussions. The questions are as important as the theses; it is our conviction that both together may encourage the emergence of fresh and faithful insights when we read scripture as a church. In the spirit of seeking to hear the word of God together, we offer these theses and questions to the wider community of faith as a basis for further conversation, debate and reflection about the art of interpreting scripture:

Nine theses on interpreting scripture

1. Scripture truthfully tells the story of God’s action of creating, judging and saving the world.

God is the primary agent revealed in the biblical narrative. The triune God whom Christians worship is the God of Israel who called a people out of bondage, gave them the Torah, and raised Jesus of Nazareth from the dead. This same God is still at work in the world today. God is not a projection or construct of human religious aspiration. Readers who interpret the biblical story reductively as a symbolic figuration of the human psyche, or merely as a vehicle for codifying social and political power, miss its central message. Scripture discloses the word of God, a word that calls into existence things that do not exist, judges our

presuppositions and projects, and pours out grace beyond our imagining.

For ongoing discussion: How is the biblical story of God's action related to God's continuing work in the contemporary world? How is the affirmation that God is at work in the world to be related to widespread evil and human suffering?

2. Scripture is rightly understood in light of the church's rule of faith as a coherent dramatic narrative.

Though the Bible contains the voices of many different witnesses, the canon of scripture finds its unity in the overarching story of the work of the triune God. While the Bible contains many tensions, digressions and subplots, the biblical texts cohere because the one God acts in them and speaks through them: God is the author of scripture's unity for the sake of the church's faithful proclamation and action.

How are nonnarrative portions of scripture to be understood in light of the claim that scripture is a coherent dramatic narrative? How do we understand the character of the Bible's unity in and through its polyphony? The character of God's speech through scripture? Of God's authorship? How do we understand particular texts that seem theologically or morally problematic—does God speak through all the texts of scripture?

3. Faithful interpretation of scripture requires an engagement with the entire narrative: the New Testament cannot be rightly understood apart from the Old, nor can the Old be rightly understood apart from the New.

The Bible must be read “back to front”—that is, understanding the plot of the whole drama in light of its climax in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This suggests that figural reading is to be preferred over messianic proof-texting as a way of showing how the Old Testament opens toward the New. Yet the Bible must also be read “front to back”—that is, understanding the climax of the drama, God's revelation in Christ, in light of the long history of God's self-revelation to Israel. Against the increasingly common contention that Christians should interpret “the Hebrew Bible” only in categories that were historically available to Israel at

the time of the composition of the biblical writings, we affirm that a respectful rereading of the Old Testament in light of the New discloses figurations of the truth about the one God who acts and speaks in both, figurations whose full dimensions can be grasped only in light of the cross and resurrection. At the same time, against the assumption that Jesus can be understood exclusively in light of Christian theology's later confessional traditions, we affirm that our interpretation of Jesus must return repeatedly to the Old Testament to situate him in direct continuity with Israel's hopes and Israel's understanding of God.

How is "figuration" related to traditional understandings of allegory and typology? How do we honor claims about the centrality of Christ while honoring the abiding significance of Israel? How do we deal with New Testament texts that appear to say that Israel has been rejected by God and superseded by the church?

4. Texts of scripture do not have a single meaning limited to the intent of the original author. In accord with Jewish and Christian traditions, we affirm that scripture has multiple complex senses given by God, the author of the whole drama.

The authors and editors of the canonical texts repeatedly gave new contexts and senses to earlier traditions, thereby initiating the process of discerning multiple senses within the text. The medieval "fourfold sense" is a helpful reminder of scripture's multivalence. The church's traditions of biblical interpretation offer models and guidance about how the fuller sense of scripture should be understood. This does not entail a rejection of historical investigation of biblical texts. Indeed, historical investigations have ongoing importance in helping us to understand scripture's literal sense and in stimulating the church to undertake new imaginative readings of the texts.

How, then, do we learn from modern historical interpretations of scripture while also drawing on the church's premodern traditions of biblical interpretation? Should either modern or premodern traditions be privileged in the church's reading of biblical texts? What criteria ought to be employed to provide some determinacy to the interpretation of particular

texts?

5. The four canonical Gospels narrate the truth about Jesus.

The Gospels, read within the matrix of scripture from Genesis to Revelation, convey the truth about the identity of Jesus more faithfully than speculative reconstructions produced by modernist historical methods. The canonical narratives are normative for the church's proclamation and practice.

How are the four portraits of Jesus related to one another? To what extent are historical investigations necessary or helpful in understanding Jesus? How is the entirety of scripture necessary to an accurate portrayal of Jesus? To what extent is a right understanding of the whole of scripture necessary to an appropriate understanding of the identity of Jesus?

6. Faithful interpretation of scripture invites and presupposes participation in the community brought into being by God's redemptive action—the church.

Scriptural interpretation is properly an ecclesial activity whose goal is to participate in the reality of which the text speaks by bending the knee to worship the God revealed in Jesus Christ. Through scripture the church receives the good news of the inbreaking kingdom of God and, in turn, proclaims the message of reconciliation. Scripture is like a musical score that must be played or sung in order to be understood; therefore, the church interprets scripture by forming communities of prayer, service and faithful witness. The Psalms, for example, are "scores" awaiting performance by the community of faith. They school us in prayer and form in us the capacities for praise, penitence, reflection, patient endurance and resistance to evil.

What does "participation in the community" entail? Does it require particular creedal or sacramental understanding? At what point does a community lose its status as an identifiably Christian community? How does the disunity of the church affect the interpretation of scripture?

7. The saints of the church provide guidance in how to interpret and perform scripture.

From the earliest communities of the church, through whose scriptural interpretation we received the Christian Bible, to the present communities of biblical interpreters, generations of Christians have received this book as a gift from God and sought to order their lives according to the witness of scripture. This chain of interpreters, the communion of the saints, includes not only those officially designated as saints by the churches but also the great cloud of witnesses acknowledged by believers in diverse times and places, including many of the church's loyal critics. This communion informs our reading of scripture. We learn from the saints the centrality of interpretive virtues for shaping wise readers. Prominent among these virtues are receptivity, humility, truthfulness, courage, charity, humor and imagination. Guidance in the interpretation of scripture may be found not only in the writings of the saints but also in the exemplary patterns of their lives. True authority is grounded in holiness; faithful interpretation of scripture requires its faithful performance.

How much of a gap can be endured between one's right interpretation of scripture and one's failure in performance (e.g., churches that practice racial exclusion or unjust divisions between rich and poor)? How do we understand what goes wrong when the Bible is used as an instrument of oppression and division?

8. Christians need to read the Bible in dialogue with diverse others outside the church.

There is a special need for Christians to read scripture in respectful conversation with Jews, who also serve the one God and read the same texts that we call the Old Testament within a different hermeneutical framework. There are also diverse others to whom we need to listen and from whom we need to learn. This includes critics who charge us with ideological captivity rather than fidelity to God.

How do we pursue the tasks of learning (again) to read scripture faithfully in the church while also being in dialogue with those outside? How should we understand and engage people who find themselves, in some sense,

simultaneously inside and outside a fragmented church?

9. We live in the tension between the "already" and the "not yet" of the kingdom of God; consequently, scripture calls the church to ongoing discernment, to continually fresh rereadings of the text in light of the Holy Spirit's ongoing work in the world.

Because the narrative of scripture is open to a future that God will give, and because our vision is limited by creaturely finitude and distorted by sinfulness, we lack the perspective of the finished drama as we seek to live faithfully in the present. Yet we trust that the story is moving to a final consummation in which God will overcome death and wipe away every tear from our eyes. Knowing that we do not see ourselves and our world from God's point of view, we are grateful for the gifts of scripture and community and for the possibilities of mutual correction in love that they offer. We are also grateful for scripture's promise that the Spirit of God will lead us into truth, which gives us hope that our speech and practice might yet be a faithful witness to the righteous and merciful God who is made known to us in Jesus Christ.

If the story has not yet reached its conclusion, does this have implications for understanding the relationship between scripture's identification of God and the claims made by other religious traditions? How are our fresh rereadings to be distinguished from interpretations of scripture that purport to separate the "kernel" of the gospel from the "husk" of cultural accretions? To what standards of accountability are we called in order to keep our rereadings faithful to the God of Jesus Christ?

The complex implications of these theses are more fully developed in the collection of essays that grew out of the Scripture Project: *The Art of Reading Scripture* (published last year by Eerdmans). This volume proposes a quiet revolution in the way the Bible is typically taught in theological seminaries. At the same time, it also calls pastors and teachers in the churches to rethink their practices of using the Bible.

Yet we do not understand the Scripture Project as a solitary voice in the wilderness; in recent years a number of other scholars and theologians have called for a recovery of an unapologetically theological approach to biblical interpretation.

It is our hope that the Nine Theses might stimulate and strengthen a gathering new consensus about the need for the church to reclaim its own heritage of biblical interpretation—and with that, its conviction that the Old and New Testaments of the Christian Bible tell the true story of God’s gracious action to redeem the world. Because that story is inexhaustible, each generation in the church is called anew to practice the demanding and yet delightful art of reading scripture.

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