

The Book That Breathes New Life

Scriptural Authority and Biblical Theology

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Biblical Authority

A Personal Reflection

The issue of the authority of the Bible is a perennial and urgent one for those of us who claim and intend to stake our lives on its attestation. But for all of the perennial and urgent qualities of the question, the issue of biblical authority is bound, in any case, to remain endlessly unsettled and therefore, I believe, perpetually disputatious. It cannot be otherwise, and so we need not hope for a “settlement” of the issue. The unsettling and disputatious quality of the question is, I believe, given in the text itself, because the Bible is ever so endlessly “strange and new.”¹ It always, inescapably, outdistances our categories of understanding and explanation, of interpretation and control. Because the Bible is, as we confess, “the live word of the living God,” it will not submit in any compliant way to the accounts we prefer to give of it. There is something intrinsically unfamiliar about the book, and when we seek to override that unfamiliarity we are on the hazardous ground of idolatry.

Because I am not well schooled in the long, formal discussions and considerations concerning “the authority of scripture” (perhaps better left to theologians), I offer here a quite personal reflection on the authority of scripture, to consider how it is that I work with, relate to, and submit to the Bible. I do not suggest that my way is in any sense commendable or normative. Nor do I know if my ruminations will particularly serve the current crisis in the church, and I do not intend my statement to be particularly attentive to the “culture wars” in which we are engaged.

Thus, I offer a more or less innocent personal account, though of course none of our personal accounts is very innocent. Your invitation has provided an opportunity for me to think clearly about my own practice. In the process, moreover, I have become convinced that we will be well served if we can be in some way honest about the intimate foundations of our

personal stance on these questions. Indeed, rather than loud, settled slogans about the Bible, we might do better to consider the odd and intimate ways in which we have each, alike and differently, been led to where we are about the Bible. In setting out such a statement, I say at the outset that you do me a great privilege by inviting me here, a non-Presbyterian, though I hope when I have finished you will judge me to be reliably, if not with excessive intensity, Reformed.



I begin by telling you about what I take to be the defining moment in my attachment to the Bible. In my German Evangelical upbringing, confirmation was a very big deal. In that act of confirmation, the pastor (in my case, my father) selected a “confirmation verse” for each confirmand, a verse to mark one’s life—read while hands were laid on in confirmation, read at one’s funeral, and read many times in between. My father, on that occasion of confirmation, read over me Psalm 119:105:

Your word is a lamp to my feet
and a light to my path.

He did, in that act, more than he knew. Providentially, I have no doubt, he marked my life by this book that would be lamp and light, to illumine a way to obedience, to mark a way to fullness, joy, and well-being. The more I reflect on that moment, the more I am sure that I have been bound more than I knew to this book.

Before that moment of confirmation in baptismal vows, in my nurture in the church, my church prepared me to attend to the Bible in a certain way. I am a child of the Prussian Union, a church body created in 1817, on the 300th anniversary of Luther’s theses. The Prussian king was weary of Calvinists and Lutherans arguing about the Eucharist and so decreed an ecumenical church that was in its very founding to be ecumenical and not confessional, open to diversity, and aimed not at any agreement beyond a broad consensus of evangelical faith that intended to protect liberty of conscience. This is the church body that brought to the United States a deep German church slogan now taken over and claimed by many others:

In essentials unity;
in nonessentials liberty;
in all things charity.²

In actuality, moreover, the last line, “in all things charity,” became the working interpretive principle that produced a fundamentally irenic church.

The pastoral ambiance of that climate for Bible reading may be indicated by two examples. First, the quarrels over historical-critical reading of the Bible, faced by every church soon or late, were firmly settled as long ago as 1870, when one seminary teacher was forced out of teaching but quickly restored to a pastoral position of esteem, so the issue did not again cause trouble. Second, in its only seminary, Eden Seminary, there was no systematic theologian on the faculty until 1946, and things were managed well enough in a mood of trustful piety that produced not hard-nosed certitude, but rather an irenic charity of liberated generosity. All of that was before my moment of confirmation, in which I became an heir to that tradition, with its trustful engagement with the book as “lamp” and “light.”

After my confirmation came a series of teachers who shaped me in faith, after my father, my first and best teacher, who taught me the artistry as well as the authority of scripture. In college my first Bible teacher was a beloved man still at work in the church, still my friend. He mostly confused me about JEDP, perhaps because he did not understand very well himself, being a theologian and not an exegete.

In seminary I had an astonishing gift of Bible teachers, none of whom published, as perhaps the best teachers do not. Allen Wehrli had studied under Hermann Gunkel in Halle and taught us the vast density of artistry of the Bible, with attention to the form of the text. His pedagogy, for which he was renowned in our circle, was imaginative storytelling; he understood that the Bible is narrative, long before G. Ernest Wright or Fred Craddock. Lionel Whiston introduced us in 1959 to the first traces of Gerhard von Rad that reached English readers. Von Rad showed that the practice of biblical faith is first of all recital, and I have devoured his work ever since.³ I learned from Wehrli and Whiston that the Bible is essentially an open, artistic, imaginative narrative of God’s staggering care for the world, a narrative that will feed and nurture into obedience, that builds community precisely by respect for the liberty of the Christian man or woman.⁴

After seminary, purely by accident, at Union Seminary in New York, I stumbled on to James Muilenburg (arguably the most compelling Old Testament teacher of his generation), who taught us that the Bible will have its authoritative, noncoercive way if we but attend with educated alertness to the cadences and sounds of the text as given in all its detail.

And, since graduate school, I have been blessed by a continuing host of insistent teachers—seminarians who would not settle easily, church people who asked new and probing questions—and I have even read other Bible teachers, to mixed advantage. But mostly my continuing education has been from the writing and witness of people whose faith is powered by the text to live lives of courage, suffering, and sacrifice. In noncoercive ways and seemingly without effort at forcing anyone else, they have found this book a wind and source and energy for the fullness of the true life lived unafraid.

When I think about that moment of confirmation in 1947, seeing it better now than I did then, I have come to see that gathered all that day was my church tradition of simple, irenic piety from the past, and gathered all that day was this succession of teachers still to come who would let me see how broad and deep and demanding and generous is this text, how utterly beyond me in its richness, and yet, held concretely in my hands, offering to me and to those around me unprecedented generativity. “A lamp to my feet and a light to my path.” How remarkable a gift that my father knew all that and willed all of that and gathered all of that for me on that incidental day in 1947 at St. Paul’s Church in Saline County.

I take so much time with my particular history not because you are concerned with it, or because the story has any great merit, but perhaps as nothing more than the pondering of an aging Bible man. I tell you in order to attest that how we read the Bible, each of us, is partly a plot of family, neighbors, and friends (a socialization process) and partly the God-given accident of long-term development in faith. From that come two lessons:

1. The real issues of biblical authority and interpretation are not likely to be settled by erudite cognitive formulation or by appeal to classic settlements, but live beneath such contention in often unrecognized and uncriticized ways that are deeply powerful, especially if rooted (as they may be for most of us) amid hurt, anger, or anxiety.
2. Real decisions about biblical meanings are mostly not decided on the spot but are long-term growths of habit and conviction that emerge, function, and shape, often long before they are recognized. And if that is so, then the disputes require not frontal arguments that are mostly exercises in self-entertainment but long-term pastoral attentiveness to each other in good faith.

If that is true, a church in dispute will require great self-knowing candor and a generous openness to allow the legitimacy of long-term nurture that

gifts others. Such attentiveness may be so generous as to entertain the thought that the story of someone else's long-term nurture could be a gift not only for that person but could be, once removed, a transformative gift to me when I read the text through their nurture that is marked, as are we all, by joy, doubt, fear, and hurt.

With this perhaps too long personal reflection, I will now identify six facets of biblical interpretation about which I know something that I believe are likely to be operative among us all.

Inherency

The Bible is inherently the live Word of God that addresses us concerning the character and will of the gospel-giving God, empowering us to an alternative life in the world. I say "inherently" because we can affirm that it is in itself intrinsically so. While I give great credence to "reader response" (how can one not?) and while I believe in the indeterminacy of the text to some large extent, finally the Bible is forceful and consistent in its main theological claim. That claim concerns the conviction that the God who creates the world in love redeems the world in suffering and will consummate the world in joyous well-being. That flow of conviction about the self-disclosure of God in the Bible is surely the main claim of apostolic faith upon which the church is fundamentally agreed. That fundamental agreement about main claims is, of course, the beginning of the conversation and not its conclusion, but it is a deep and important beginning point for which I use the term *inherent*.

From that four things follow:

1. Because this is the foundation of apostolic faith to which we all give attestation, it means that all of us in the church are bound together, as my tradition affirms, "in essentials unity." It also means, moreover, that in disputes about biblical authority nobody has high ground morally or hermeneutically. We share a common commitment about the truth of the book that makes us equal before the book as it does around the table.

2. The inherency of evangelical truth in the Bible is focused on its main claims. From that it follows that there is much in the text that is "lesser," not a main claim, but a lesser voice that probes and attempts, over the generations, to carry the main claims to specificity, characteristically informed by particular circumstance and characteristically in the text open to variation, nuance, and even contradiction. It is a primal Reformation principle,

given main claims and lesser voices in the text, that our faith is evangelical, linked to the news and not biblicism, thus recognizing the potential tension or distinction between good news and lesser claims. That particular tension and distinction is, of course, the arena of much dispute in the church just now, and it is important at the outset to make the distinction, so that we can see the true subject of the dispute.

3. The inherent Word of God in the biblical text is, of course, refracted through many authors who were not disembodied voices of revealed truth. They were, rather, circumstance-situated men and women of faith (as are we all) who said what their circumstance permitted and required them to speak, as they were able, of that which is truly inherent. It is this human refraction, of course, that makes inescapable the hard work of critical study, so that every text is invited to a suspicious scrutiny whereby we may consider the ways in which bodied humanness has succeeded or not succeeded in being truthful and faithful witness. Each of us, moreover, would concede that some bodied human witnesses in the text were more successful and effective than some others.

4. Given both inherency and circumstance-situated human refraction, the Bible is endlessly a surprise beyond us that Karl Barth famously and rightly termed “strange and new.” The Bible is not a fixed, frozen, readily exhausted read; it is rather a “script,” always reread, through which the Spirit makes new. When the church adjudicates the inherent and the circumstance-situated, the church of whatever ilk is sore tempted to settle, close, and idolize. And therefore inherency of an evangelical kind demands a constant resistance to familiarity. Nobody makes the final read; nobody’s read is final or inerrant, precisely because the Key Character in the book who creates, redeems, and consummates is always beyond us in holy hiddenness.⁵ When we push boldly through the hiddenness, wanting to know more clearly, what we thought was holy ground turns out to be a playground for idolatry. Our reading of inherency, then, is inescapably provisional reading. It is rightly done with the modesty that belongs to those who are yet to be surprised always again by what is “strange and new.”

Interpretation

The claim of biblical authority is not difficult as it pertains to the main affirmations of apostolic faith. But from that baseline, the hard, disputatious work is interpretation that needs to be recognized precisely for