



Kindling (and Sustaining) Biblical Imagination

STEPHEN FOWL

In his memoir *The Year of Living Biblically*, the journalist A. J. Jacobs chronicled his year of trying to embody all of the Bible's commandments as literally as possible.¹ The results are not altogether surprising. He finds that some commandments are predictably relevant though hard to embody (for example, do not covet, lie, or gossip). Others seem easy to do, but odd and irrelevant (for example, prohibitions around mixing fibers in one's clothing and regulations around shaving). One of the primary things Jacobs learns in his year of living biblically is that it is impossible to take the entire Bible literally.

This should not really be news to Christians (and observant Jews) who seek to live their entire lives biblically. Both the Old and New Testaments seem to recognize that the moment a commandment is uttered by God, believers who seek to embody it in specific temporal, cultural, and geographical contexts have had to struggle with how to do so. Sometimes changing circumstances present believers with challenges the Bible could never have directly anticipated. For example, can Christians work on the development of first-strike nuclear weapons? Does the fact that the Bible nowhere speaks of nuclear weapons mean that the Bible is irrelevant for Christian thinking about this issue? Other times, changing circumstances make

¹A. J. Jacobs, *The Year of Living Biblically* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2007).

Cultivating and sustaining the imagination and wisdom needed to embody scripture faithfully will require us to develop facility with scripture and how to interpret it, to read scripture with charity, and to seek and tell the truth. Such cultivation will be a lifelong task.

certain issues much less significant. For example, the issue of eating meat sacrificed to idols—so vexing for the Corinthians—does not arise directly for American Christians. Nevertheless, Paul's observations about how the Corinthians' concerns about meat and idol worship have led them to forget the larger project of believers building each other up in love seem immediately relevant to Christians in the United States.

BEYOND LITERALISM

My point here is that, although it may be news to Jacobs, believers have always recognized that in order to embody scripture in the specific circumstances in which they find themselves, a simple commitment to take the Bible literally has never been sufficient. Christians must engage with each other in interpretation, discussion, and debate. The really pressing questions are not concerned with how to be more or less literal in one's observance. Rather, they concern how to engage in these interpretive activities well. Although it would help matters, there is simply no method or procedure that Christians can follow in order to guarantee success in this endeavor. Instead, by cultivating their imaginations and developing their capacities for practical wisdom, Christians can enhance their prospects for interpreting and embodying scripture faithfully. Thus, for Christians, cultivating their imaginations and developing their capacities for practical wisdom are primary elements of living biblically. In this essay, I will begin by describing some of those things most necessary for the cultivation of believers' imaginations and practical reasoning. Then, by looking at Philippians, I will offer a brief glimpse into how things might work when our imaginations and practical reason have been well formed. Finally, I will say a few words about how to recognize and address those occasions when we fail to exercise faithfully our imagination and practical wisdom.

Anytime one moves to discussions of imagination, and often when one discusses wisdom, there is a tendency to treat these as largely intuitive matters that are not really open to sustained reflection and analysis. One either has imagination and wisdom or one doesn't. One can see that this is not the case by looking at imaginative performers in almost any realm of human activity from music to art to drama or sports. The most imaginative and innovative performers certainly can give the impression of being instinctual and intuitive. Indeed, this is what makes their work or performances stand out. Those who have ever achieved some measure of creativity in any of these activities will be the first to affirm that one can only do this after one has mastered the basics of one's craft. There is no jazz improvisation that does not first arise from diligent practicing of scales. There is no masterpiece apart from first mastering technique and manipulation of color. There is no wizardry on the basketball court apart from putting in hours of practice in the gym.

The same is true for Christians. We cannot hope to cultivate and sustain the imagination and wisdom needed to live faithfully and biblically in the present

apart from putting in the time and attention needed to master the foundational elements needed to embody scripture faithfully. In the following paragraphs I will address some—but by no means all—of these foundational elements.

DEVELOPING FACILITY WITH SCRIPTURE

All of the skills I will mention here are interrelated. Success in one leads to and depends upon success in the others. Moreover, it is difficult to pull them apart for the sake of analyzing them individually. Nevertheless, it is fair to say that the first skill Christians must develop if they are to cultivate their imaginations and practical wisdom is a facility with scripture. It is common to lament the low level of biblical literacy in most churches, but that is only part of the issue. Although a facility with scripture requires a high level of biblical literacy, of knowing the texts of scripture well, a facility with scripture requires more than that. Facility with scripture requires not only knowing the text of scripture, but also the ability to make connections between and among scriptural texts. This requires a capacity both to recognize and respect generic differences between scriptural texts and to construct and perceive links that span those differences. A facility with scripture enables one both to attend to various levels of textual detail and to draw together texts into larger wholes. Someone who has cultivated a facility with scripture has both the skills and insights needed to construct coherent conversations between texts in order to address specific situations and the patience to resist imposing coherence when it may not be warranted, thus allowing scripture to be appropriately silent.

All of these ways of displaying a facility with scripture depend on having a way or ways of organizing diverse biblical texts. The problem is not that there are no ways of organizing scripture's diversity. Rather, there may seem to be too many such ways, and they are often incompatible. For example, those readers familiar with the work of modern biblical scholars will recognize that there are a variety of historical, literary, philosophical, and sociological schemes that scholars rely on to organize parts of scripture. There is much to be learned from studying these works. They can help one develop a facility with handling scripture, but ultimately, for Christians, such works must be subordinate to theological ways of organizing scripture.

The reasons for this lie in the fact that Christians understand that scripture is intimately tied to God's overriding desire to bring us into ever-deeper communion with God and each other. Scripture and its interpretation is not an end in itself. Rather it is instrumental to God's desire to be reconciled to us.² As Augustine noted, scripture is one of the vehicles God has provided to bring us to our true home along a road laid down by Christ.³ Thus, because scripture plays a central and instrumental role in God's drama of salvation, the ways in which Christians organize its various pieces must ultimately be in the service of the larger aims of

²John Webster makes a strong case for making all doctrines of scripture subsidiary to doctrines about God in *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 5–41.

³Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. D. W. Robertson (New York: Macmillan, 1958) 1.4.4.

that drama. It is important to recognize, however, that the importance of keeping theological concerns primary in organizing the various parts of scripture is not a modern phenomenon necessitated by the rise of biblical criticism.

As early as the second century, or as soon as it makes sense to speak of a stable body of scriptural texts, Christians and their opponents recognized the great diversity of perspectives within scripture. Indeed, in Irenaeus's *Against Heresies* it would appear that a common recognition of the extraordinary diversity of scripture is the point from which Irenaeus and his foes both begin, even if they move in different directions.

Irenaeus develops an account of God's economy of salvation that has its definitive and climactic moment in the incarnation, death, and resurrection of the Word

I think the situation of Irenaeus can be instructive for addressing our situation. Both Irenaeus and his foes began from the diversity of scripture. Their strategies for managing the diversity, however, are quite different. As Irenaeus sees it, the Valentinians, for example, order scripture's diversity by imposing on it a philosophical cosmology. While this provides a sort of order, it does so at some cost. First, it commits one to adopting a set of views that require so much revision of essential Christian claims about God and the world that the result is not recognizably Christian.

Second, Irenaeus argues that such an account is scriptural only to the extent that it is stocked with biblical verses. The result of ordering these verses within a framework provided by a Valentinian cosmology is a twisted version of the biblical story. Irenaeus likens this procedure to someone who constructed a story from Homeric verse. It would be possible to take some texts from the *Odyssey*—in no particular order—and intersperse them with texts from the *Iliad*—again, in no particular order—and thus create a story. This story would contain only Homeric language; it would contain only Homeric characters. Moreover, it could easily convince the uneducated that it was a true Homeric story. Nevertheless, its connections to Homer would be only superficial and its assertions and narrative would not be Homeric at all.⁴

Irenaeus's brilliant alternative is the so-called Rule of Faith.⁵ Irenaeus devel-

⁴Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.9.4. In *Against Heresies* 1.8.1, Irenaeus uses the image of mixing up the stones in a mosaic to come up with an alternative picture. Further, as Paul Blowers notes, "Herein the struggle with the Gnostics is not just a battle of straightforward or atomized doctrinal propositions, which presumably Irenaeus could have tendered in the debate. It is more fundamentally a contention of 'our story versus theirs,' a collision of metanarratives, one Christian and one (or more) not," in "The *Regula Fidei* and the Narrative Character of Early Christian Faith," *Pro Ecclesia* 6/2 (1996) 211.

⁵For a good contemporary reflection on the Rule of Faith, see R. Wall, "Reading the Bible from within Our Traditions: The 'Rule of Faith' in Theological Hermeneutics," in *Between Two Horizons*, eds. Joel Green and Max Turner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000) 88–107.

ops an account of God's economy of salvation that has its definitive and climactic moment in the incarnation, death, and resurrection of the Word. By clarifying the economy of salvation in the light of the crucified and risen Lord, Irenaeus can give a coherent account of the various movements of God's economy. This summary account of the whole of God's economy is what he calls the apostolic faith, a faith that is formally represented in the creed. This then provides the framework within which the diversity of scripture can be rightly ordered so that it can be directed towards advancing the apostolic faith in the life, teaching, and worship of the church—a life, teaching, and worship that is acknowledged throughout the world.⁶ Of course, what is so striking about Irenaeus's account of the divine economy and the Rule of Faith is that it is so clearly derived from scripture.

Without question, there is a circular movement here. The diversity of the New Testament poses a problem that is solved by ordering that diversity in the light of the apostolic faith. Only in the light of the New Testament, however, does that apostolic faith receive its definitive formulations. As Rowan Greer puts it:

We could say that the quest which Irenaeus accomplishes is basically the discovery of a principle of interpretation in the apostolic Rule of Faith. At the same time...it is in another sense Scripture itself that supplies the categories in which the principle is expressed. Text and interpretation are like twin brothers; one can scarcely tell the one from the other.⁷

Of course, this circularity is not vicious as long as one recognizes that theological considerations are intimately and complexly connected to the development of a facility with scripture that is an essential element of the formation of the imagination and wisdom Christians need to live biblically throughout their lives.

READING WITH CHARITY

The second foundational element in the cultivation of biblical imagination and practical wisdom is charity. Recall that as they seek to embody scripture with imagination and wisdom in order to live faithfully in the world, Christians will inevitably be called on to engage in the discussion and debate central to all interpretive work. Disagreements are not first and foremost an indication of failure, though they may be. Instead they are simply a part of having scripture in the first place.⁸ Think, for example, of the dispute narrated in Acts 10–15 about how to include Gentiles into the almost exclusively Jewish group of Jesus' followers. Did they need to become Jews in addition to faith in Christ?

Almost two millennia of exclusively Gentile Christianity can lead us to forget

⁶Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.10.1–3.

⁷James L. Kugel and Rowan A. Greer, *Early Biblical Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986) 157.

⁸One of the central themes of my book *Engaging Scripture* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1998) is the emphasis on the necessity of discussion, debate, and argument within Christian communities regarding the interpretation and embodiment of scripture. Given that, the pressing questions concern the ecclesial practices that need to be in good working order to ensure that such debate and discussion enhances the common life of such communities rather than tearing it apart.

that those who were arguing that Gentiles who became followers of Jesus should also become Jews as well had several strong points in favor of their view. First, Jesus was a Jew and his followers thought him to be the Messiah of Israel. He limited his earthly ministry to the “lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matt 10:6). His followers understood themselves as initial participants in God’s redemption of Israel. The Bible frequently makes the point that all those who join themselves to Abraham and his people should be circumcised (Gen 17:14, Exod 12:44, and elsewhere).

Charity probably thrives in an atmosphere of civility, but civility is not the same as or a substitute for charity. Charity does not require anyone to treat a weak argument as a good one; it does not require one to overlook flaws in reasoning.

My point is not to claim that the decisions narrated in Acts 15 were wrong. Rather, I simply want to note that the answers to these concerns were not self-evident. Thus, debate, discussion, and “no small dissension” (Acts 15:2) are not signs of failure. Such debate and discussion are built into the very structure of Christianity. Since this is the case, if such debates and discussions are to build up rather than tear apart the body of Christ, then charity has to be the foundation on which those debates and discussions take place. To be clear, charity probably thrives in an atmosphere of civility, but civility is not the same as or a substitute for charity. Charity, in this sense, does not require anyone to treat a weak argument as a good one; it does not require one to overlook flaws in reasoning. Rather, charity will seek to understand an opposing position in its strongest possible form. In staking out a position, it will acknowledge the strong points of an opposing argument and advance them without replicating its problems and weaknesses.

At the same time, the charity that will help believers cultivate their imaginations and their wisdom is always focused on the goal of building up the love of God and the love of neighbor. This recognition lies behind Paul’s recognition that knowledge “puffs up” while love “builds up” (1 Cor 8:1).

SEEKING TRUTH

Following from this, truth seeking and truth telling in Christ must be towards the top of any list of elements crucial to the cultivation of a biblical imagination and practical wisdom. Although we often contrast the real and truthful with the imaginary, our imaginations are always nourished on truthfulness rather than falsehood. On the one hand, this seems obvious. Debates, discussions, and arguments about scripture or anything else cannot be life-giving apart from issues of truthfulness. On the other hand, those of us who still bear the lacerations or scars from having had brothers or sisters “speak the truth to us in love” (Eph 4:15) will recognize how awful and divisive such “truth telling” can be. This sort of truth tell-

ing is often a thin disguise for personal hostility. If truthfulness is essential to the cultivation of the imagination and wisdom needed to live faithfully, then believers will need to think of truth telling in christological terms.

Here is a brief account of what that might mean. In a passage filled with military images, the apostle Paul commands us to bring every thought captive in obedience to Christ (2 Cor 10:5). It is not that Christ aims to obliterate all thoughts. Rather, the point of bringing every thought captive to Christ is so that our thoughts (as well as our feelings, dispositions, and emotions) will be subjected to Christ's penetrating, healing gaze. Bringing all thoughts captive to Christ is a way of establishing or restoring their right relationship to the one who is the truth (John 14:6).⁹ In fact, one can see this process narrated in the risen Christ's engagement with Peter around a charcoal fire in Galilee (John 21:1–19). Peter's deceit and betrayal is purged; he is restored in the course of being questioned by the resurrected one who is feeding him at the same time he interrogates him.¹⁰ The truth about Peter is never glossed. Nevertheless, the resurrected Christ uses this truth to transform Peter.¹¹

AN EXAMPLE FROM PHILIPPIANS

Thus far, I have spoken about a facility with scripture, charity, and truthfulness as elements or practices that are necessary if believers are to cultivate their imaginations and their practical wisdom in ways that will lead to faithful living. There are, no doubt, other practices as well that will help believers develop their imaginative capacities, but these three seem to me to be some of the most significant. At this point, I would like to turn to an example of the type of imaginative practical wisdom I have been speaking about. Philippians 2:5–11 must count as one of the most significant passages of the New Testament. The bulk of this passage is devoted to a poetic narration of the Christ's person and work: the story begins by noting Christ's disposition to not use his divine status for his own advantage. Instead, he empties himself, taking on human flesh, and becoming obedient to God and the mission God has given him even though it will cost his life. God transforms the obedience unto death through the resurrection, exalting Christ and bestowing on him that name above all names.

Although the Christian tradition has found this text to be extremely rich in terms of its Christology, the striking thing is how Paul engages this story of Christ with the aim of letting it guide the patterns of thinking and acting that he wants the Philippians to embody. One of Paul's primary aims in writing to the Philippians is

⁹In *Trinity and Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), Bruce D. Marshall unpacks this Johannine notion in conversation with a wide range of contemporary philosophical discussions.

¹⁰See Rowan Williams, *Resurrection* (New York: Pilgrim, 1982) 33–38.

¹¹Some may seek to make something of the alternation between Jesus' use of ἀγάπη in his question, "Do you love me?" and Peter's response using φιλέω. John uses φιλέω in 5:20 speaking of the Father's love for the Son; in 11:3 speaking of Jesus' love for Lazarus; and in 16:27 speaking of God's love for the disciples. This should make one very hesitant to draw too sharp a distinction between these two Greek terms both in the context of John 21 and elsewhere.

to impress upon them the importance of manifesting a common life worthy of the gospel of Christ so that they will be able to stand as faithful witness to God's work in the world in the face of various types of opposition (1:27–29). As Paul sees it, the key practice in forming such a common life is for the Philippians to manifest that form of love that mutually seeks the benefit of one another. The story of Christ that Paul narrated in 2:6–11 shows Christ displaying that particular form of love; it also shows that when steadfast adherence to that form of love leads to death, God redeems that death.

In this passage, Paul demonstrates the imagination and practical wisdom that all Christians are called to cultivate. He demonstrates a facility with the story of Christ and its Old Testament antecedents in Isaiah; he incorporates a faithful account of God's work in Christ and boldly and truthfully connects it to the concrete situation in which the Philippians find themselves; finally, he patiently and charitably works out these connections for them over the course of the epistle, bringing in examples from his own practice and that of Timothy and Epaphroditus (cf. 2:19–30).

WHEN IMAGINATION FAILS

I am aware that this entire discussion has been too compressed. There is, however, at least one more significant issue to address, albeit briefly. Even when believers have a well-developed facility with scripture, an abundance of charity, and a commitment to truthfulness, their imaginations can fail and their attempts at practical wisdom can produce folly. Our own and our churches' complicity in sin make such failure both more likely and harder to recognize.

Scholarly expertise is not sufficient protection against failure. It would be wonderful if there was a method for guaranteeing that our imaginations and practical wisdom were protected from our complicity in sin, but there isn't.

Although there are numerous examples of such failure throughout church history, some notable recent examples were attempts by the German Christians to interpret scripture in ways that supported the anti-Semitism of the Nazis; the Dutch Reformed church's attempts to use the scripture to underwrite the practice of apartheid in South Africa; attempts by Christians in the United States to use scripture to support the kidnapping and enslavement of Africans.

These episodes represent comprehensive failure—not just failure of imagination and wisdom—and the results were devastating for the victims. They further show how difficult it can be for a Christian community to recognize their failures and repent of them. At the same time, each of these communities benefitted from scholarly expertise as they read the New Testament in ways that clearly generated moral failure. Hence, one must recognize that scholarly expertise is not sufficient

protection against failure. It would be wonderful if there was a method for guaranteeing that our imaginations and practical wisdom were protected from our complicity in sin, but there isn't. Instead, believers must be vigilant, self-reflective, and self-critical with each other. This communal vigilance can be one of the best ways in love to seek the benefit of one another, and one of the most difficult to accomplish. Further, when we are presented with our sin and failure, Christians should recall that God delights in forgiving our sin. Further, believers have a variety of resources for confessing our sin, seeking forgiveness, and engaging in reconciliation. Indeed, in the absence of such resources we may find that our imaginations end up being quite stunted and our practical reasoning short-circuited.

These are some, but by no means all, of the issues that go into cultivating and sustaining a scriptural imagination and practical wisdom. Such cultivation is a lifelong task for Christians as they seek to live biblically in the world. As the example of Jacobs indicates, however, there are not really other options for living biblically. ⊕

STEPHEN FOWL is professor of theology at Loyola University Maryland, Baltimore, Maryland. He has written widely on the relationships between biblical studies and theology. His most recent book is a commentary on Ephesians (Westminster John Knox, 2012).