



Interpretation for Christian Ministry¹

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As the title of this essay suggests, interpretation is always for something; it serves some end. The particular “end” in view here is “Christian ministry.” That end presumes certain commitments and prejudgments. We read the Scriptures because they are to serve as “the norm in matters of faith and practice.” The rather straightforward statement invites Bible readers into a conversation that begins with a prejudgment: the Scriptures are to be accorded a privileged status in our reflection about God and what it means to be children of God. The prejudgment likewise suggests that the Scriptures are for us; they have to do with our faith and our practice. This is not to deny that biblical works were written at another time and place, for other audiences as well; it does not specify precisely in what sense they will serve as “normative”; and the particular bias does not deny that the Bible may be good for other things, like writing histories of antiquity or providing data for Greek and Hebrew grammarians. Christians read the Bible, however, because we are convinced that in our engagement with it we encounter the living God.

Such convictions help to define what will count as “critical” scholarship and

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adequate readings. Those who choose to define “critical” as “reading from an alien perspective” begin with different prejudgments. Their vantagepoint is not necessarily more sophisticated or “critical.” It is by no means apparent, further, that those who limit the work of biblical scholarship to historical descriptions of ancient faith communities produce more convincing commentaries than those interested in how God works through gospel narratives in the present to awaken and sustain faith or to shape a Christian imagination. An important aspect of our work as interpreters should be to find ways of discussing those prejudgments and to determine what will count as reasons for or against such commitments.² That such conversations rarely occur in public settings, like professional society meetings, only reflects a cultural bias that religious beliefs are essentially private in character.

We suggest that in our present setting, what is required of us is a reconceiving of the vocation of exegete. The questions are not new, and there are many who have found a personal way through the hermeneutical labyrinth, but theological educators have not succeeded in identifying a strategy for shaping interpreters who will in turn engage the Christian community in a reading and hearing of the Scriptures that will renew and sustain the church. It is to the

possibility of such a strategy that we devote our attention.

I. BIBLICAL AUTHORITY

When discussions of scriptural authority can still elicit strong emotions, even dividing churches, it is clear that a crisis exists. That such discussions are needed is itself a mark of the problem. The Bible does not exercise much influence in the church. People do not read it. Even students who have been raised within the bosom of the church and who enter theological seminaries to become pastors are largely unfamiliar with biblical stories. That is all the more problematic given the enormous burgeoning of biblical scholarship in the last century. There are thousands of Bible courses offered at colleges and universities around the country taught by people who have devoted their lives to study of the Scriptures. Pastors educated in the last decades, whose education has included study of the biblical languages as well as current methods of interpretation, have not succeeded in bringing the Bible to life in their congregations.

There are reasons why biblical scholarship has not produced more fruit within churches. For much of this century—and particularly in North America—the exegetes of the church have settled for adapting to one degree or another a methodology generated and shaped by the interests of the secular academy. Objective, value-free, institutionally independent scholarship was the ideal. Much was achieved during this era; we know vastly more about the world in which the Bible emerged. In recent decades, however, many who have no ostensible religious interests have questioned whether secular scholarship has been or could ever be objective, value-free, and institutionally independent. In an effort to avoid being

²This is the topic of a thoughtful essay by Patrick Keifert, “An Ecumenical Horizon for ‘Canon within a Canon,’” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 14 (1987) 185-193.

parochial or even sectarian, historical critical methodologies have contributed, wittingly or not, to a distancing of the Bible from many of its readers.

Such criticism, however, necessitates neither a return to some golden pre-critical age nor a repudiation of the knowledge accrued through the application of the historical critical methods in which we have been trained. We must rather reimagine the interpretative task: What do we think we are doing when we interpret Scripture, and what is interpretation good for, particularly in the practice of Christian ministry?

The reimagination of interpretation for Christian ministry requires a return to basic questions, some of which will seem mundane. For example, what do we think the Bible is? As Christians, we accord the Scriptures a privileged status. But how shall that status be conceived? Claims about the Bible ought to respect “the facts.” We are obliged to pay attention to the particularities of the Scriptures and to insure that the claims we make are for the writings actually before us and not for Scriptures or classics in general.

II. WHAT THE BIBLE IS

What is the Bible? If we understand this question to be a question of genre, obviously Scripture exhibits a wide variety: letters, narratives, songs, proverbs, visions, etc. Interpretation must pay attention to the particular forms in which biblical works are cast. Categories like “story” or “preaching” may be appropriate for some biblical material but certainly not for all.

Taken more broadly, we could answer that Scripture is the testimony of and witness to the faith of ancient Israel and the early Christian community. The category is useful for several reasons. It serves notice that the Bible is “interested” literature. It was produced by people with a case to make and particular views about God and the world—real people who spoke languages different from our own, who wrote out of their own experience in situations where testimony was required. The literature was written for people who were expected to share that vision. But here is where the problem begins. For whom is the testimony? We read the Scriptures because we believe they can speak to us—but they cannot do so at the expense of their particularity. It is clear that already by the second century the particularity of Paul’s letters were a problem for those who wanted to read them as Scripture. Are we not simply reading someone else’s mail?

It is not difficult to become preoccupied with the historical particularities. Who actually wrote this material and under what circumstances? When and where were these works produced and how were they used by the first recipients? The questions are fascinating enough to sustain a whole industry. But if interpretation must await answers to such questions, we may never get beyond historical study (in many cases, historical speculation). And if the primary mode of reading the Scriptures is to determine what they meant for another audience at another time and place, it is not difficult to understand why there are problems retrieving the biblical message. We are left with “the spent voice of the text,” with the leftovers.

Viewing the Scriptures as “testimony” likewise raises truth questions. In

what sense is the witness true and reliable? One approach has been to understand the importance of the testimony as the realities to which it points—the “facts.” Did the exodus really take place? Which of Jesus’ sayings can we regard as “authentic”? Others have chosen to focus on the character of the biblical writers—demonstrating that if we cannot prove they were “apostolic,” we may at least acknowledge their courage and their religious genius, which makes their testimony reliable. It is perhaps worth noting how seldom truth questions are posed within biblical scholarship and how uneasy they make us.

There are still many within Christian churches who are convinced that the only way to protect the authority of the Bible is to hold to a theory of inspiration that sidesteps or minimizes the role of humans in the production of Scripture. Few interpreters will speak of direct dictation by God, but there is no lack of formulations about the divine qualities of Scripture, formulations that leave little room for any meaningful human involvement in its production. Scripture is seen as unique, without parallel in one characteristic or another. Divine production is seen as the guarantor of veracity. Scripture is seen not as Israel’s testimony, but as God’s.³

However tempting such theories may be, they will not solve the problem of the Bible’s lack of authority in the culture. The Bible spoken about does not in fact exist; every copy in use reflects textual and/or translational decisions that are under dispute or are even in error. Even the production of the Bible is embodied in human processes. Unless our notion of inspiration includes the work of text-critics and translators, it is a theory that has nothing to do with the Bible we read. Greater clarity and truthfulness on the part of biblical scholars and pastors about the realities of textual criticism and translation would be salutary. Many people simply do not know the facts.

III. WHAT THE BIBLE DOES

Beginning with a focus on what the Bible is does not automatically lead to greater appreciation of its authority. More promising, we would suggest, is to begin with a focus on what the Bible does—or ought to do. While not ignoring the particularity of the biblical writings, we propose taking more seriously their linguistic character. Language is important not first of all for what it points to but for what it does.⁴ The current fascination with narrative takes its cue from the observation that stories change people. They enliven and inspire; they also frighten. A pastor once observed that he had read the Bible from beginning to end when he was 15. “I was terrified,” he confessed. “What if God is really like that?” The rest of his education served to domesticate God—to show there is nothing to be frightened of—and to demonstrate, in fact, that the Bible can be read without ever

³There exists a secular version of this doctrine that has the same effect. Treating the Bible as a classic of western culture, a kind of icon, can also lead to a reading that does not take the particularity of the Bible seriously, including the role of culturally particular human beings in its production.

⁴The “rhetorical” character of language and of literature in antiquity is nicely described in an article by Jane Tompkins, “The Reader in History: The Changing Shape of Literary Response,” in *Reader Response Criticism—From Formalism to Post-Structuralism*, ed. Jane Tompkins (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1980) 201-232.

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thinking about God. “My education has succeeded in quieting my fears,” he observed, “but now I have to work hard just to find the Bible interesting.”

We propose that the discipline of biblical studies focus on the experience of reading. Such a view is not anti-historical. It takes seriously, however, the function of psalms and narratives and letters as linguistic events. They were written to be performed; their goal was to move people to praise or to action, to shape the way they understood their place in the world so as to give confidence or offer judgment. Form critics have been interested in such matters for decades. Practitioners of literary approaches, particularly those dealing with narratives, have enriched the experience of reading, narrowing the gulf between biblical stories and contemporary audiences.

We would add that our focus should be explicitly theological: we read the Bible because it has to do with God. Such a statement must be made in the face of scholarly traditions in which God is neither object nor subject. We study Scripture because we are convinced that God was at work in ancient settings, creating and sustaining communities of faith. Scripture witnesses to this generative work of God and is itself a product of that generative work of God. God has continued to create, renew, and sustain communities of faith. These communities have consistently testified that the study of Scripture has been a means for the Spirit of God to generate their own existence, renewal, and sustenance. Their own writings were understood to be commentary on Scripture, not a replacement; for, in their experience, Scripture had an effect on them which could only be described as the work of the living God. The reformation is only one of the more self-conscious moments in that history of interpretation. Locating ourselves within those faith traditions, we ourselves undertake our interpretive work with the confidence that God continues to create, renew, and sustain communities of faith. And we are convinced that Scripture is a fundamental means employed by the Spirit of God to accomplish this work.

Historical circumstance and the history of interpretation will have a decisive shaping

effect on the present hearing, but the focus of scholarship that serves the mission of the church ought to be on the experience of reading the Bible in the present—and on shaping a community of competent readers who are open to working of God.

Our conviction that in the engagement with the Scriptures we encounter God is a prejudice that ought to shape our own reading. It will have to be tested in practice. Is it the case that we hear anything but our own voices or experience anything but what is already inside us? We cannot answer such questions in advance; the proof will come in the interpretive conversation. We must recognize, however, how easily we can guarantee that such questions will never be posed. The experience of scholarship suggests that we can define as “critical” and responsible only those studies that insure the God-question will never be posed or that we can so distance readers as to insure they will hear the message of the Bible as intended only for other people at another time and place. We are suggesting that there are likewise ways to set up the interpretive conversation in such a way as to

maximize the possibility that readers will be caught up in the biblical story. Beginning with and returning to the actual experience of reading and hearing the Bible is one aspect of that strategy. And insisting upon asking questions about God is a crucial aspect of that strategy.

IV. WHAT THE BIBLE IS GOOD FOR

If we focus on the actual experience of reading and hearing the Bible, we will soon recognize that there are numerous possibilities for what people see and hear. When turned loose on the Bible, “unenlightened” readers come up with amazing suggestions. Those suggestions are not always wrong or wrongheaded. Some of the most liberating and promising interpretive comments have been made by readers whose horizon has not been totally determined by scholarly traditions. Yet there are good reasons to attend critically to the kinds of discussions the Bible engenders; they reveal how expectations have been shaped, what people think of the Bible and what questions they bring. Preparing an audience of competent hearers means engaging those expectations and reshaping them.

In observing students and the sorts of discussions that occur in congregations, we would suggest the following categories as a way of organizing expectations.

1. *Moral Authority*. In many Christian congregations today, the Bible is viewed as a source of moral authority. That people even outside the church community should have such a view is hardly surprising. Sunday school materials have for decades taught young children that the Bible is full of stories that tell us what we ought to do, from the very first tales of Adam and Eve to stories about Samson’s haircut and Jacob’s cheating and King David’s adultery. Children learn the ten commandments and the golden rule.

Little wonder, then, that at a time of great social upheaval people should turn to the Bible in hopes of finding some stability in a moral order. In many congregations these days, talk about biblical authority is directly related to concerns about homosexuality and abortion.

Is the Bible good for moral conversation? Judging from current practice, it does not build a community of moral conversation. Some people use historical arguments to disqualify potential moral examples, while others attack such historical approaches as marks of faithless reading. If the Bible is good for shaping a community of discourse, we will have to learn how that is to

occur. A major agenda item for theological educators must be helping pastors learn how to make use of the Scriptures in moral deliberation—which presumes that the learned community is able to come to some agreements about practices that edify.

It is appropriate to ask in what sense God has a place in this process. How is God at work in the building of a community of moral discourse?

2. *Pieties or Spirituality*. While related to a moral reading of Scriptures, the interest here is not in precise directives as much as in lifestyle. “Lifestyle” might include a rather fully delineated piety or a less clearly defined “spirituality,” by which people often mean living with a clearer sense of God’s presence.

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3. *Sound Doctrine*. There are still many for whom the Bible is important as a source of doctrine. This is true for academics as well, who still find such categories as “christology” and “soteriology” useful as a way of organizing biblical teaching. For some believers, doctrine can provide a kind of systematic stability. Some of the great debates within Christian communities have to do with the kinds of doctrinal statements that Scripture authorizes.

4. *Ulterior Motives*. Bible readers, particularly the educated, have been convinced by particular ideologies of reading that stories are about more than they claim. One might suggest, for example, that biblical works are actually windows into the unconscious. The popularity of *The Last Temptation of Christ* indicates how convincing psychological reductionism still is in our culture. Life has to do largely with the interior, so the argument goes. What is important is that we understand our feelings and those of others. Jesus, in particular, still fascinates those whose interests are psychological. Whole programs of Bible study have been developed with an explicitly therapeutic, psychological agenda.

The Bible is about other things as well. It is enlisted (as well as criticized) by those who insist that the most significant realities in our society are political. The Bible is read to shed light on class struggles, and it is studied as the product of such struggles. Liberation theologians are among those who read the Bible with such interests and expectations. Phrases like “God’s preferential option for the poor” serve as thematic summaries for readings of the gospels.

Feminists insist rightly that the Bible is about gender matters. Their questions have opened a whole horizon of study within which interpreters are invited to ask not only what the Bible explicitly teaches about male and female relations but what the various narratives and letters imply about writers, audiences, and their symbolic universes.

5. *Encounter with the Living God*. Far less common is the experience of reading the Bible and finding oneself confronted by the reality of God. There are reasons why this experience is uncommon. Perhaps the most obvious is the insulation provided by traditions of interpretation, particularly in academic settings. The “God-question” is seldom posed even in the sense of asking what texts reveal about the God-concept of ancient peoples. Distancing methodologies succeed in protecting interpreters and their audiences from experiences that earlier generations of believers found common.

There are the exceptional cases. The hard words in Mark 4:10-12 about Jesus’ reasons for telling parables (“in order that they may not see”) strike most readers as scandalous. There is hardly a commentator whose anxiety about the words is not apparent in the attempt to dismiss the verses as “Mark’s parable theory” or to insist that they represent a mistranslation of something

more palatable. In a class, a student reacted differently. She wrote, through clenched teeth, “I will not believe in a God who conceals reality from some.” While not a naive Bible reader, her knowledge could not insulate her from the theological offense that has led to some of the most profound reflection within the history of the Christian community, from Augustine to Luther to Calvin. Where could she be directed for some assis-

tance in her wrestling that was surely a struggle with God? There is hardly a commentator who is any help. Commentaries are to help understand the words by providing a context. The student’s problem was that she understood the words perfectly—and could not abide them.

This was a precious moment in class and an important test for professor and students. The question raised the ante in the interpretive game, suggesting that what is at stake is nothing less than life and death. How does one deal with a God who claims the right to conceal—and to reveal? By denying the right? By formulating a more palatable concept of God? By dismissing the verse as a mistake, due to unthinking redaction? At the very least, the question demanded an accounting from the evangelist. Does the story offer any possibility that such a message can be heard as good news? That the words come from Isaiah offers further possibility for discovery. Perhaps this notion of a God who conceals and reveals is more than a Markan aberration; perhaps it is in fact “biblical.” If so, the question provides an occasion for doing biblical theology—and perhaps even for speaking a promising word to a very specific someone who is in the present moment wrestling with God.

That student’s struggle, which is surely not over, has suggested a strategy for interpreting Isaiah and Mark. Rather than using interpretive method as a way of distancing a group of hearers from an encounter with the text, a teacher may head off any such escape and gently allow for the possibility of an encounter with God. The Bible and the Christian tradition suggest that such an encounter will be life-giving. That is worth testing.

Those familiar with the history of hermeneutics, particularly with hermeneutical theories in the late middle ages, will detect many similarities between the sorts of expectations common among Bible readers today and the four-fold structure (literal, allegorical, anagogical, and tropological). Most of the categories we have suggested above would fall under the “tropological”; the Bible is important for what it has to say about how we are to live. The last category—reading the Bible to experience the presence of God—does not fit easily into the ancient categories. Pursuing this experience should lead to a distinctive notion of what the Bible is good for and may engender a distinctive sort of preaching.⁵ Such matters must be explored on another occasion, however. Here we want only to suggest that the whole matter of interpretation—understanding what expectations are appropriate and what the Bible is good for—deserves study by biblical scholars as well as systematic theologians. The conversations that occur in each of the areas indicate how much work needs to be done if we privilege the Scriptures, if we focus on the actual experience of reading, and if we insist that God and the work of God be explicit topics in all discussions.

V. INTERPRETATION FOR CHRISTIAN MINISTRY

What shall we say then? The literature in the biblical field is vast and growing. No one can read more than a portion of it. Reflection on interpretation—the

field of hermeneutics—is daunting itself, and much of the literature requires an initiation into another language. And if the actual experience of reading and hearing is to be the focus of scholarship, careful study of what actually occurs at the level of performance in congregations is warranted as well. One cannot do everything. Choices are necessary for seminaries and graduate schools.

There are graduate programs where the Bible will continue to be used to shape a community of interpreters interested in what it meant for someone else, at another time and place. Such study is not without merit. The Scriptures are written in another language; they were composed in particular settings. Jeremiah's oracles were delivered at crucial points in the history of Judah; they were collected by those who witnessed subsequent events and read his prophecies in light of what actually came about. Paul wrote letters to the church at Corinth on at least two occasions. Someone collected Paul's letters after his death and "published" them as a unit. Anyone interested in reading the Bible ought to be interested in all these settings, to the degree they are recoverable.

Yet the major issue still remains: Jews and Christians read the Scriptures because they believe God still speaks through them. The kinds of interpretive questions generated by such convictions will not arise in graduate programs that exclude explicitly theological questions and concentrate on historical work. The intellectual work required of those whose interpretation is in service to the ministry of the church is no less strenuous, but the agenda must be formulated differently. And one of the major tasks facing graduate programs at church institutions is to determine what ought to be on that agenda.

We wish to offer some modest suggestions, mostly by way of summary.

1. More attention must be paid to the actual experience of reading and interpreting the Scriptures as addressed to the present. This would suggest that no clear line ought to separate what occurs at the level of congregational involvement with the Bible and academic study. The task of church scholarship should be to determine what ways of study are most helpful in creating an audience for the Scriptures, with the goal of shaping actual practice at the level of congregations and small groups.

In this regard, we expect that literary approaches to the Bible will take precedence over the more historical—not because they provide a way of avoiding sensitive historical questions but because they facilitate engagement with the literature.

As a corollary, we would suggest that while many students have been convinced that sound method is a way of avoiding mistakes, in most cases the greatest danger is not wrong answers as much as lack of engagement. For fear of fundamentalists who may control the discussions, many pastors seek to determine in advance how studies of the Bible will come out. One cannot—and ought not—control the actual experience of engagement with the Bible. There is no sure way to predict or to control the movements of the Spirit; and where people are encouraged to try out their own ideas in a group, there will always be pleasant surprises. Expectations can be shaped and guidelines developed for what counts as a reason-

able interpretation; this is the proper sphere for consideration of method. Success in leading Bible studies will depend upon the ability to develop and free the imagination, which remains crucial for experiencing new ideas and realities beyond one's experience.

2. The agenda must be explicitly theological. A critical question is how we imagine God to be involved in the process of reading and interpreting the Scriptures. The practical atheism of the culture is very much in evidence. Scholars are only now discovering how little attention has been paid in New Testament studies to God as a character (or an implied character), and much of contemporary scholarship rules out consideration of the "living God" whom the Scriptures and the Christian tradition commend to present readers.⁶ Interpreting the Bible for Christian ministry cannot avoid an engagement with the theological tradition of the church. The task cries out for cooperation with colleagues in history, worship, and systematic theology as well as those who focus on pastoral practice at the congregational level.

3. A new assessment of the role of historical study is required. To put the question simply, we must ask what is history good for. Historical study has provided a means to expand the horizons of interpreters who are bound by their own experience. That was important when dogmatists threatened to dominate the reading of the Bible and to make of it a task for theologians only. Historical criticism provided a means of critiquing dogma and providing access to another world of meaning. It is still important for readers whose world is limited by their own culture and their own experience.

Yet historical approaches have come to dominate the scholarly imagination. One reason is perhaps that they have provided an effective means of keeping the Bible at a safe distance in sensitive discussions. This is perhaps most obvious in the various ecclesial studies of sexuality, in which the expected move is to locate statements about sexuality in a particular historical and cultural context in the past—only to dismiss them as pre-scientific or as focused on a specific problem unlike our own. Keeping the Bible out of the hands of the "crazies" is on the agenda of most who have had theological training. But such defensive reading has often succeeded in creating chasms between reader and text that cannot easily be bridged. It is for this reason that we grant literary and not historical approaches pride of place.

What, then, should be the role of traditional historical disciplines? They remain indispensable to those who study literature from another time and place. While the function of biblical language cannot be reduced to its referents, the Bible still speaks of particular people and times and places. The more we know of those people, times, and places, the richer will be our hearing of the biblical stories and letters. Our bondage to our own culture, race, and social class requires that our imaginations be expanded, and that will remain an important role for the histo-

⁶The point was made in a now-famous article by Nils Dahl, "The Neglected Factor in New Testament Theology," *Jesus the Christ* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991) 153-164.

rian. And not least, because the Bible makes very particular claims about people and times and places, it is appropriate to ask about the truthfulness of those claims. Such study is testimony to the particularity of the Scriptures. And while available evidence may not yield unambiguous answers, we are surely obliged to deal with questions believers will raise about Jesus and Pontius

Pilate, about whom the Bible makes very specific claims.

VI. “WHERE TWO OR THREE ARE GATHERED”

What we propose as a starting point and focus for interpretation that has its place within the life of the church is the actual experience of reading the Bible as intended for us. The shift in the discipline to literary and rhetorical methodologies should be welcomed. Literary studies will not necessarily yield theological fruit, of course. The setting in which the material is studied will have a crucial bearing on what questions are allowed, which will be followed up, and what will count as “critical” and “responsible” answers to questions. Teachers of literature are as capable as historians of blocking access to theological dimensions of the literature they study. And that is why we are obliged to press the question: What is the Bible good for? In what ways will literary, as well as historical, modes of study open Bible readers to the reality of God? Numerous questions remain. In response to a paper on Mark that suggested the experience of the Gospel’s ending was, in fact, an experience of the working of God, a colleague responded, “That was one of the best sermons I’ve heard in a while.” While perhaps sincere, the comment revealed the obvious discomfort of coming out from behind the protective rubrics of the academic setting.

We do not imagine things will change easily. There are some good reasons why biblical interpreters sought to free themselves from ecclesial restraints, and there are reasons to be uncomfortable when questions about God and truth are allowed to intrude into our public conversations. We nevertheless believe that the resulting modes of interpretation that have come to dominate biblical scholarship are at some points deeply flawed, at others genuinely hostile to the theological enterprise. What is required for Christian interpreters is a recasting of the imagination of the exegete—and considerable reflection on the part of seminary faculties about how best to go about reshaping a practice that will turn the Scriptures loose in the church.

What this will involve—and what we commend to colleagues—is not just a different methodology but trust in the promise that God still works in our midst.

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