

You Asked for It: Biblical Authority and Interpretation

A Sermon by Louise Westfall
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
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Text: Acts 11:1-18

Occasionally, a newly-minted church member will promise eagerly, with eyes afire, "I'm going to read the Bible all the way through." And though part of me applauds the effort (especially after seeing research that suggests only about one-third of U.S. adult Protestants study the Bible at all!), I always encourage a different path. "Try a gospel" I suggest. "Join a Bible study." "Check out the wonderful commentaries we have in our church library, and read one alongside the Bible." Why? Because – and you know this if you've ever tried it—you can sustain that effort pretty well through Genesis with its soap-opera narrative and fascinating family histories. Exodus starts out promisingly too, with the call of Moses, the miraculous liberation of the people from slavery, and the giving of the Ten Commandments. But all too quickly, the story gives way to detailed descriptions of various religious articles and rituals, recitation of arcane rules and regulations, and who can put down the riveting statistics from the book of Numbers with the census results of the twelve tribes of Israel (*...the descendants of Issachar, their lineage, by their ancestral houses, from twenty years old and upward, everyone able to go to war: were fifty-four thousand four hundred...*)? The dilemma is obvious: on the one hand Presbyterians regard the Bible as our infallible guide to faith and practice; within its pages are found everything we need to know of God and God's saving purposes for humanity. On the other hand, it is not the most accessible book. Its own rich history includes generations of oral tradition; different parts being compiled and organized at different historical periods in Israel's life and so reflect perspectives from those different eras; how ancient manuscripts have been lost and recovered only piecemeal; how language shifts over centuries.

Unfortunately, this dilemma is too often resolved by one of two troubling paths. One path begins with an acknowledgement that the Bible is old; that it really doesn't offer particular guidance for our complex contemporary lives; it functions mainly as a symbol within our tradition. Like an ancient, beloved, but largely irrelevant great-uncle, the Bible is regarded primarily as a repository for our family history.

The starting point for another way to resolve the dilemma is the acknowledgement that the Bible is mysterious; that it really can't be understood by ordinary people. What you need to know about God's

Word will given you through faithful preaching, Bible study classes led by trained professionals, and books written by experts.

Both these paths promote biblical illiteracy; the one because it renders the Bible useless, and the other because it renders human intellect useless, unless it happens to have been ordained, or otherwise sanctified. The Church today is vulnerable to traveling both these paths; for example when we pick and choose texts that simply shore up our social, political, economic perspectives, and equally when we skip the difficult interpretive task and demand of the so-called experts, "Just tell me what it means; tell me what to believe and how to behave."

There is another path, another way, which is more challenging, but infinitely more satisfying. That is the way of the biblical interpreter. Think artist, detective, gold miner. The interpreter puts onto the canvas not simply what she sees, but what she believes is "there." The interpreter lets the clues lead him to the truth, not the other way around. The interpreter uses knowledge *and* faith to find a treasure.

Maybe so few Christians actually read the Bible because they feel ill-equipped to do so. And perhaps that reveals why today's "you asked for it" topic was the single most-requested one this summer. Following my sermon on gay marriage earlier this spring, some of you commented that while you appreciated the perspective, you felt uncertain about getting there from a faithful reading of Scripture. *How do we know which texts are no longer applicable, and which ones are still valid?* --was typical of the comments. In addition, more of you wondered about the implications of the interpretive task; as one member wrote, *"If all the Bible is open to interpretation, then how can anyone presume to understand God's authority?"*

What I propose to do in this sermon is to lay out several principles which guide biblical interpretation in the Presbyterian and Reformed tradition, and to affirm from these the true foundation of biblical authority. I hope you'll join me for sermon talk-back at 11:30 at the Manse; printed copies of the sermon will also include several helpful resources that support and extend the ideas presented in the sermon.

A word of warning (that I also believe yields a critical clue to interpretation): all biblical reading is interpretive. The text we have to read is itself an interpretation. We hear it through the lens of our culture and experience. Even the selection we read is subject to the inferences of choice; why are we reading this passage, and not some other? And because all reading is interpretive, to some extent it is also contingent; that is, its meaning is not a matter that is entirely settled. We cannot

claim that our understanding of it today is the final word. So let us come to the reading of Scripture with faith and with humility, with a prayer that our partial human effort will be made whole by divine Spirit.

The text we're going to read records the first big crisis in the early church. As you know, Jesus was a Jew, and his first followers were also. As the apostles began to proclaim the gospel in ever-wider arenas, non-Jews came to believe as well, and for a time, the church required that they "become Jews" in practice and observance of the covenant law. But then Peter had an encounter that changed his mind, would come to change the church's understanding of itself, and which changed a particular interpretation of the Law itself. Listen for God's Word in the reading from the Acts of the Apostles, in the eleventh chapter at the first verse. [Acts 11:1-18]

A young man had just gotten his driving permit, and was eager to discuss his use of the family car. Equally eager to get the most bang for his buck, his dad said, "Look, I'll make a deal with you. You bring your grades up, study the Bible a little, get your hair cut, and then we'll talk about it. After about a month, the kid came back and wanted to use the car, and his dad said, "Son, I've been impressed with how much you've been reading the Bible, and doing well in school. But you still didn't get your hair cut." The son waited a moment and then replied, "Dad, Moses had long hair. Samson had long hair. Even Jesus had long hair." To which his father replied, "Yes, and everywhere they went, they walked."

Neither the father nor the son in this story are role models of effective biblical interpreters. The dad thought a little reading of it might act like one of those dog-training collars that would bring his son into compliance. The son cited a few random examples to try and prove the validity of his position. Fact is, the Bible is neither a training manual or a legal brief. It is the story of God's relationship with humanity, from its good creation, through infidelity and rejection, to the gift of grace in a Savior Jesus Christ, and beyond, to the establishment of the Realm of God "on earth as it is in heaven." The story was told generation to generation, around campfires, and in the worshiping community, for years before it was written down. The biblical writers employed drama, chronicles, legends, poems, hymns, letters, sermons, biographies, essays to tell the story. We dare to believe that the Spirit of God worked through these various writers from different eras that their human, time-bounded words might witness to the eternal Word of God.

First interpretive principle: Jesus Christ and not the Bible, is God's Word. God's redemptive work is the central theme of Scripture. The Hebrew Scriptures speak of covenant and messiah; the New Testament of Christ, the Word made flesh, alive today in the Spirit. The words of the text are

imbued with authority for Christian faith and practice insofar as they witness to God's saving grace and power. As Christians we believe this was made clearest in the life and teachings, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We sometimes forget that the words of scripture themselves are not quotations from God, but instead reflect God's Word in Jesus Christ. This Word—and not the words of the Bible—is the One we have to trust and obey.

Second interpretive principle: The Holy Spirit guides the Church in interpreting and applying God's message. The text from Acts provides an illustration of the sometimes- unexpected way the Holy Spirit illumines emergent situations, to allow more light shine there. All of the Bible was written in ancient times, within a middle-eastern context. We can't expect to read about the ethics of genetic engineering or nuclear weaponry or modern psychology and medicine. We CAN find insight and wisdom, however, that can help us deal with new realities from an understanding of how God has worked through human history and what God intends for the beloved creation. We have divine power beyond our own to guide us into the truth embedded in these words.

If you're starting (or continuing!) to wonder how these principles actually get applied when we read the Bible, good for you! Becoming an interpreter of Scripture is partly the task of the individual Christian. A central tenet of Reformed theology is that God alone is Lord of the conscience: no church council, Session, or preacher can finally dictate what you must believe. And yet, Scriptural interpretation is not just a personal matter. We read the Bible individually and seek God's Word for us; but we also weigh that insight against the testimony of the Christian community. We test our individual meanings alongside the tradition. We need each other! The faith community together in worship, prayer, study, conversation, action and reflection will come to understand God's Word far better than any of us will alone. Third principle: Explore how the faith community has interpreted particular passages. We are always in the process of being reformed and transformed, and together we hold each other accountable, we are strengthened by diverse people's insights, and are helped to remove blinders imposed by human conditions.

Finally, let all interpretation be in accord with the rule of love, the two-fold commandment to love God and to love our neighbor as ourselves. For God so loved the world is our gospel, and anything that contradicts that is subject to review and revision. I frankly believe much of the controversy around human sexuality in the Presbyterian Church, as well as many others, would benefit from a more generous helping of love dished out with the rhetoric.

Because, finally, sisters and brothers, we never graduate from the school of biblical interpretation. Memorizing and applying these principles will not make our interpretation either "right" or "complete." We will come to this task again and again. Let us continually seek to hear God's Word, to learn it by heart, to live it with courage, and to share it as bread in a hungry world.

TO THE GOD OF ALL GRACE WHO CALLS US TO SHARE GOD'S ETERNAL GLORY IN UNION WITH JESUS CHRIST, BE THE POWER FOREVER! AMEN.

For further reading:

The Layman's Bible Commentary, volume 1, *Introduction to the Bible*. See especially, "What Is the Bible" by Kenneth J. Foreman. Available in Ferris Library

Witness Without Parallel: Eight Biblical Texts that Make Us Presbyterian, by Earl S. Johnson, Jr. (Geneva Press, 2003).

What Unites Presbyterians: Common Ground for Troubled Times, by Clifton Kirkpatrick and William Hopper, Jr. (Geneva Press, 1997).

Presbyterian Understanding and Use of Holy Scripture, a position paper adopted by the General Assembly 1983. Available from the Office of the General Assembly, PDS, 100 Witherspoon St. Louisville, KY 40202.

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