

Re-engaging with the Bible in a postmodern world

I am honoured to have been invited to deliver what, I understand, may be the final Clyde Vautier Memorial lecture.¹ This annual public lecture has been a regular feature in the calendar of the Wellington Centre of the Bible College of New Zealand for many years, and with that Centre now closing, the lecture series will also end (or perhaps mutate into something else). My personal contact with Dr Vautier was not extensive. But as a virtually brand new theological student, he did invite me to teach one or two courses at the Wellington Bible College, which he had newly established at Elizabeth Street Chapel in 1980. I well remember Dr Vautier's passionate enthusiasm for expositing the biblical text, energised as it was by his deep commitment to the so-called the "Old Princeton" theory of the "full verbal and plenary inspiration of Scripture". This is the belief that every single word of the entire scriptural text has been consciously selected by the Spirit of God for the purpose of imparting infallible, propositional truth.² While such a conception of biblical origins raises, at least for me, more problems than it solves, there is no denying that, as in Dr Vautier's case, it does serve to engender an appropriate reverence for, and delight in, the text of Holy Scripture.

If Clyde were alive today, he might well join those who complain that such reverence for and delight in the Bible is an increasingly rare commodity in the modern church. Indeed what has prompted the

subject of tonight's lecture is the concern voiced recently by Mark Brown (former National Director of Scripture Union, now of the Bible Society) that some parts of the contemporary church are virtually operating in a post-biblical environment. Looking around the Christian scene, Mark discerns an alarming lack of sustained biblical engagement in our congregations, and he raises the question of what can be done to encourage Christians

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to re-commit themselves to serious encounter with Scripture.

Mark is not alone in this concern. It is not uncommon for commentators today to speak of the "crisis of biblical authority" that confronts the church and of the need to "reclaim" the Bible for the church.³ Whether the word "crisis" is helpful in this connection, I am not sure. It has a panicky ring to it, and implies that unless we take remedial action urgently, disaster will follow. But the phenomenon these commentators discern has not come suddenly upon us. It is a result of a progressive ebbing away of biblical consciousness over several generations, even over several centuries, and there is no quick-fix solution. So if there is a crisis, it is a very gradual and quiet kind of crisis. On the other hand, we should not

minimise the problem. The word crisis does capture the importance of the issues at stake, and it is worth remembering that the biblical prophets often announced crises that nobody else saw coming. So perhaps the term is worth retaining simply for its prophetic punch.

What then is this "crisis" of biblical proportions (!) to which people refer? Put simply, it is the way in which the Christian community is becoming increasingly estranged from its sacred text, the Bible, increasingly deaf to its witness, bewildered by its contents, unsure of how best to read it or apply it responsibly to life, and unable to explain just why it is the Bible ought to be esteemed so highly. This is true even of the most

conservative evangelical and Pentecostal churches, who make the loudest claims about the divine dignity, authority, even inerrancy, of the Bible, yet who, in some respects, are the most adept at distorting the text. They describe the Bible in grandiose terms, but the depth and breadth of their engagement with Scripture remains superficial at best, and downright manipulative at worst. There may even be a direct correlation between how emphatically people insist on the inspiration and infallibility of the Bible, and how little they wrestle with its meaning and its complexity.

Yet it is not enough to make big claims about the Bible's uniqueness and authority. The authority that any text possesses is not measured by what we say about the text, but by what we *do* with the text, by the way

we permit the text to function in our life and thought. If it is true (as I believe it is) that Scripture possesses supreme authority in faith and life, then what ought to be evident in our congregations is serious, sustained and intelligent attention to the actual meaning of Scripture. After all, the church universal has always confessed that when the faithful listen attentively and humbly to Scripture, they can hear the very voice of God addressing them,

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instructing them, comforting them, and transforming them – which, when you stop to think about it, is an awesome thing to contemplate!

So what further can be said about the problem of biblical disengagement that afflicts us today, and what can be done about it? For the sake of analysis, I want to tease out four distinct, but interrelated, dimensions of the problem, and sketch out some possible remedies. My intention is to offer an initial response to Mark Brown’s challenge, not to give any definitive answers. I am as much affected by the predicament as anyone else, and claim no special insight into the way ahead. My goal is simply to open up the conversation.

1. A crisis of acquaintance:

Perhaps the most obvious symptom of biblical disengagement is the diminishing level of biblical knowledge which the average Christian possesses today. Despite the fact that we have more Bibles available to us, in more translations, versions, languages and dialects, than ever before, the current crop of churchgoers simply knows less of the actual content of Scripture than

was true of previous generations, while for outside the church, the Bible is now an almost wholly unknown book. In my 21 years as a theological educator, I have found that each generation of students comes to study with less and less prior knowledge of biblical material, and with only the slimmest awareness of the single large story the canonical text narrates. They may be familiar with a smattering of biblical facts or know a few favourite

verses. But what is lacking is any extensive acquaintance with the stories, teachings, genres, themes, actors, and key narrative moments of the biblical record.

As already indicated, this is not due to some

sudden memory lapse; it is the result rather of a gradual deterioration that has taken place over generations. I have often pondered how my own father knew much, much more of the content of Scripture than I do (notwithstanding my professional training), while I know a great deal more than my own children do.

Gregory Jones, a prominent American ethicist, tells of how he once asked a class of 60 Christian undergraduates where the words, “Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream”,

which Martin Luther King uttered in his famous *I Have a Dream* speech, came from. Some students thought that King had composed them himself; others nominated Shakespeare or “somewhere in the Bible” as possible sources. Not a single student was able to identify the allusion to the OT prophet Amos, although in his day Martin Luther King could simply assume his hearers would pick up this powerful

intertextual echo.⁴

Why has the average level of biblical knowledge declined in this way? No doubt there are many contributing factors. One is the increasing secularisation of society, so that folk today hear little of the Bible quoted in public settings, such as in school assemblies, at weddings or funerals or civic ceremonies, or in the mass media. Another reason is that we live in an increasingly visual or multi-media environment, so that people read less in general than they used to and are less patient with memorisation. But a substantial part of the blame must be laid at the door of the church. The level of biblical enquiry in most Sunday sermons is lamentable, while Sunday schools and youth groups often struggle to attract members, never mind train them in the Scriptures.

The shift of preference in some congregations towards cell groups or home groups, or the informal gatherings characteristic of the so-called “emerging church,” is probably not helping things either. In 1994, sociologist Robert Wuthnow estimated that as many as two-thirds of all small group meetings in America gathered specifically as Bible study groups. But what Wuthnow found was that, in

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practice, these groups focused more on providing pastoral support for participants than on learning from the Bible. When they did consult the text, they often produced wooden interpretations, and achieved little actual increase in knowledge of biblical teaching.⁵

Lutheran theologian, Robert Jenson, blames American clergy for the growing level of biblical illiteracy in their congregations. He notes that,

in contrast to what prevailed in earlier generations, clergy today give much less attention to catechising young believers, teaching them how to access the Scriptures and stocking their minds with biblical stories, language and themes.⁶ If this is true of more liturgical traditions, such as Lutheranism, how much more true must it be of evangelical, pentecostal and other free church traditions which usually lack any formal apparatus for the catechesis or instruction of young believers? Indeed, I sometimes wonder whether, ironically, it is the relative strength of so-called “Bible believing” churches compared to the declining mainstream congregations that partially accounts for falling

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levels of biblical knowledge. At least in liturgical worship, the congregation every week hears the public reading of Scripture on the basis of the lectionary, a time-honoured practice stemming back to the earliest days of the church. In most looser evangelical church services, by contrast, the only time Scripture is publicly read is to furnish the launching pad for some sermonic excursion that focuses more on the experiential or therapeutic needs of the listeners than on the meaning of the text itself.

The same is true of the worship repertoire found in our most popular churches. Although the old “Scripture in Song” genre had distinct limitations, at least it served as a vehicle for inculcating our minds with biblical imagery and language. By comparison, it is striking how lacking in biblical allusions many of the most popular worship songs are today, such as those emanating from Hillsong. Many say little more than “Jesus is my girlfriend”, and a very cool

girlfriend too, countless times over! When it is reckoned that what people sing in church is today arguably their primary source of theological instruction, this is rather troubling.

But why should it be troubling? Why should diminishing familiarity with Scripture be a cause of concern? Does it really matter? Yes it does! It matters because what is being lost is an awareness of the Bible’s central role in shaping Christian identity and forming Christian character. The church is, to use Richard Hay’s phrase, a “Scripture-shaped community”.⁷ The leading function of the Bible is to tell us who we are as a people, where we fit in the history of God’s redemptive activity,

and how we should think and act in ways that will enable us to continue living God’s story faithfully. Only by attending carefully to Scripture can our imaginations be

converted so that we can envision the kind of world God wants to bring about, both in us and through us. Without having our worldview consistently shaped and reshaped by the message of Scripture, without being continually renewed in our minds and hearts as we listen for the word of God, we will, as Paul warns, be irresistibly squeezed into the world’s mould, so that we think and act and live according to the seductive wisdom of *this* age rather than the paradoxical wisdom of the *new* age (Rom 12:1-12; 1 Cor 1:18-25). The less we listen to Scripture, the more we will accept the world as we know it as our default setting, and the less we will have to offer the world that is fresh and powerful and redemptive.

So then, one major cause for biblical disengagement in the contemporary church is the diminishing level of acquaintance with the actual content of the Bible, and this is partly because the traditional media for instruction – preaching, Sunday school classes,

Bible study groups, catechetical lessons, the regular public reading of Scripture, and worship songs – no longer serve this purpose very well. But there is a *second*, and even more *serious*, reason for biblical disengagement – a general loss of confidence by many in the church in the credibility and relevance of the Bible.

2. A crisis of confidence

Over the 200 years since the Enlightenment, the Bible has been subjected to more critical scrutiny, and generated more secondary literature, than any other document in the world. Whereas the essential truthfulness of the Bible was once taken for granted by almost everyone in Western society, virtually the opposite prevails today. Many people outside the church consider the Bible to be little more than religious propaganda, and the very fact that it is authorised by the institutional church – which is now profoundly disliked and distrusted – simply compounds their cynicism. It is this atmosphere of hostility to religious authority that has allowed the *Da Vinci Code* and similar fantasies to enjoy such phenomenal success.

Even within the church, there are many who harbour profound doubts as to whether the Bible has somehow now been shown to be false or flawed or fictitious, whether by modern scientific research or by historical analysis. Some voice this fear openly and embark on new journeys across the choppy Sea of Faith. Others refuse to face their doubts and simply shout louder about biblical inerrancy. Many remain in a state of flux, painfully aware that the world probably wasn’t created in six literal days, or that homosexuality can’t simply be wished away by biblical fiat, or that the great bulk of humanity probably isn’t going to fry forever in hell, but not quite sure where this leaves the Bible, which they *do* still want to believe in, but don’t feel quite as certain about as they once did.

One of the most regrettable features of this crisis of confidence is that the task of interpreting the Bible

has largely been captured by a professional, and often sceptical, scholarly elite. A shift of context has occurred in which the Bible is normatively interpreted from the church to the academy. British theologian Alister McGrath even speaks of the “Babylonian captivity of Scripture”, to make the point that the Bible has been exiled from its true homeland in the community of faith and banished to an alien academic society, with its own definite, though often unacknowledged, agenda. Scripture has been made subservient to the interests of a fragmented scholarly community in which originality and innovation are valued above all else, and faithfulness to

tradition is denigrated. What Luther called “the papacy of the professors” prevails, wherein the ability of ordinary believers to read the Bible aright is treated with contempt by scholars who insist that the only acceptable way to study the Bible is by means of a sophisticated battery of historical-critical techniques and in a spirit of critical detachment from, if not overt suspicion towards, the theological truth-claims of the text.⁸

This is not to decry the enormous advances in understanding that have accrued from the employment of critical methods over the past two centuries. Nor is it to deny the importance of scholarly enquiry unfettered by the controls of ecclesiastical dogma and politics. But what is easily lost sight of in the academy is that the Bible exists both on account of, and for the sake of, the community of faith, not for the prestige or professional advancement or intellectual stimulation of scholars.⁹ Like the church itself, the Bible owes its very existence to what Paul calls “the truth of the gospel” (Gal 2:5, 14), viz., the revelation of God’s saving initiative in Jesus Christ, which is to

be received with humility and accepted in faith. The primary purpose of the Bible, and of theological reflection on the Bible,¹⁰ is to bring believers into greater knowledge of this God, not to answer the welter of technical questions that modern critics might dream up.

There is nothing wrong, of course, with posing critical questions to the biblical text, and answering many of them is essential to a responsible appropriation of

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biblical teaching in this age of historical consciousness. But insofar as critical methodology serves to deny rights of access to the text to ordinary believers, or to undermine their confidence in consulting the text, or to discredit the church’s historic practice of reading the Bible under the conscious guidance of the Holy Spirit and in light of its existing faith-confession, it functions to disengage Scripture from its primary constituency of committed disciples.¹¹

Again, let me be clear that the problem is not primarily with the critical methods themselves; it is with the spirit and manner in which they are deployed. Academic study of Scripture in the post-Enlightenment period has been characterised by two things in particular: a pretence to scientific neutrality and a decidedly anti-theological bias. Scholars have asserted that their own use of critical reason is free of confessional assumptions and theological motivations, so that their approach has the status of an objective science, quite unlike the “fundamentalist” approaches they so despise. To prove their objectivity, they have

insisted that the only proper subject matter of biblical scholarship is the historical or sociological world *behind* the text, or the literary or narrative world *of* the text itself, or, more recently, the readers’ world *in front* of the text – but never the world *above* or *beyond* the text, the world from which God speaks, never the theological claims which the text exerts on its recipients, and never the knowledge of God disclosed by the text. Critical scholarship has been content to concentrate all its

attention on what the text meant historically, back then, and to defer endlessly the question of the validity of the theological truths which the text declares.

Fortunately, this modernist claim to neutrality has now

be exposed for what it is, a fallacy, and a fallacy of the most pernicious kind. To quote Kevin Vanhoozer:

A host of post-modern thinkers has slain the giant assumption behind much modern biblical scholarship that there can be objective, neutral, and value-free reading of biblical texts. Post-modern thinkers have charged modernity’s vaunted historical-critical method with being just one more example of an ideologically motivated approach. The critical approach only pretends to be objective, neutral and value-free. Modern biblical critics are as rooted in the contingencies of history and tradition as everyone else. Indeed, biblical criticism is itself a confessional tradition that begins with a faith in reason’s unprejudiced ability to discover truth. The question post-moderns raise for historical critics is whether, in exorcising the spirit of faith from biblical studies, they have not inadvertently admitted even more ideological demons into the academic house.¹²

By exploding the myth of neutral scientific interpretation, what is sometimes called “the postmodern turn” in human thought has given

new legitimacy to an explicitly faith-based or theologically-attuned reading of Scripture, an approach that historically has always characterised the church's reception of the text.¹³ The hegemony of objectivist historical criticism is now over, and with it the theological liberalism that so heavily dominated the academy over the 19th-20th centuries.¹⁴

But this demise, as welcome as it may be to some, has brought with it a new, and even more unsettling,

assault on the confidence Christians may have in the truth-value of the Bible. In the current intellectual context, the confidence-question no longer centres on whether biblical teaching agrees with scientific reason; it

centres on whether the biblical text (or any text for that matter) contains any objective meaning at all, any meaning that is independent of the interpreter. In postmodernity, the playful reader is all supreme. Meaning is no longer something which readers *discover* in a text, a meaning intended by the author and reliably conveyed by the text; rather meaning is something readers themselves *create* from the text, in pursuit their own private interpretive interests.¹⁵ To quote Vanhoozer again:

Post-moderns typically deny that we can escape our location in history, culture, class, and gender. Our readings of the biblical text will be shaped, perhaps decisively so, by our particular location and identity. The goal of interpretation is therefore to discover "what it means to my community, to those with my interpretive interest". Post-modern readers come to Scripture with a plurality of interpretive interests... though no one interest may claim more authority than another. The post-modern situation of biblical interpretation gives rise to a pluralism of interpretive approaches and hence to a

*legitimation crisis: Whose interpretation of the Bible counts, and why? Biblical interpretation in postmodernity means that there are no independent standards or universal criteria for determining which of many rival interpretations is the "right" or "true" one.*¹⁶

Anyone who has undertaken formal theological training will be familiar with this dilemma. Once scholars spoke of "exegesis", assuming that there was a single fixed meaning in the text to be ferreted out by sound

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exegetical method. Then they began speaking of "interpretations", in recognition of the richness or polyvalence of textual meaning, and the extent to which readers are involved in unfolding aspects of meaning. Now it is common to speak of "readings", by which is meant the conscious attempt by specific communities to read the biblical text in light of explicit ideological commitments, such as radical feminism or post-colonialism or queer theory or whatever. So-called "advocacy readings" – where the text is interpreted to promote overt political agendas – have proliferated over the past generation, and they are usually legitimated by the assertion that, since there is no fixed meaning in the text, we ought to read it in a way that will advance our own community's quest for justice and equality. A common feature of such approaches is use of the co-called "hermeneutics of suspicion and retrieval" – where the biblical text is subjected to radical critique to determine which parts fail to conform to the ideological values of the interpreter, and must therefore be rejected, and which parts can be retrieved to reinforce the

interpreter's cause.

Now, in a real sense, it could be said that advocacy interpreters are simply being honest about the pre-understandings and political biases that inevitably guide any appropriation of Scripture. Far better to own these biases than to pretend they do not exist, which is infinitely more dangerous. It also should be conceded that advocacy readings are usually motivated by a genuine commitment to greater justice, which is consistent with the spirit of the

gospel. The interpreter's larger political programme, in other words, often has moral legitimacy.¹⁷ Advocacy readings also often cast new light on the text, and expose the power dynamics hidden behind

"received" interpretations. All this is good. But the net result of sustained ideological criticism is often a substantial erosion of confidence in the reliability of biblical meaning. Assuming the indeterminacy and relativity of textual truth, some interpreters feel free to massage textual meaning to their own advantage. Yet, to surrender all belief in authorial intention and the relative stability of textual meaning in favour of some version of radical deconstructionism serves, finally, to subordinate the word of Scripture to the manipulative proclivities of human beings. It is perhaps significant that the first biblical character to subject the word of God to a hermeneutics of radical suspicion was the crafty serpent in the Garden of Eden: "Surely God has not said..?"¹⁸

So then, postmodern sensitivities – that is, our profound awareness of the contextual nature of all human knowledge, of the role of human subjectivity in apprehending knowledge, and of the power of privileged elites in defining reality for the rest of us – bequeath to the current Christian community a fresh reason for faltering confidence in the

Bible. What then is to be done about it? How can Christian readers today engage responsibly with the Bible in light of our new consciousness of the seemingly endless capacity of readers to generate diverse readings of the same texts?

I am not sure how to answer this question! Postmodernism is a work in progress, and where it will take us is not entirely clear. It is an intellectual and cultural shift that confronts not just the church but western thought in general with an epistemological quandary. But let me mention just three things that I think contemporary Christians ought to cultivate in this new context. The first is a *self-critical humility* on the part of every reader

about the extent to which our understandings of Scripture are always going to be partial, provisional, and invariably tainted with self-interest¹⁹ – and how much, therefore, we need to listen respectfully to all other interpreters of the text if we are to discern the word of God. Determining the meaning of Scripture is often much more tricky than we realise, and we must listen with charity to those who see things differently to ourselves.

In their useful book *Reading in Communion*, Stephen Fowl and Gregory Jones propose that a key feature of healthy Christian communities is the extent to which they are open to the perspective of outsiders, both to the perspective of marginal figures within the community, such as homosexuals, and of those beyond the community.²⁰ Listening to strangers is not always comfortable of course. But if we are to hear what the Spirit is saying to the church, we must read the Bible “in a wide company of interpreters, who both nurture us and challenge us”.²¹

The second thing needed is a *courage to resist the interpretive nihilism* commended as a virtue by some postmodern interpreters. The

critical role of readers in actualizing textual meaning cannot be denied; it must be factored in to our understanding of biblical truth. But it can also be exaggerated out of all proportion. Meaning is not merely generated by readers at a whim. It is the product of a three-way conversation between author, text and recipients, with each party exercising an irreducible role.²² Texts are not infinitely malleable. They exert constraints on readers, and are capable of resisting alien or

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misguided interpretations (try using a cake recipe to fix your computer problems, and you’ll see what I mean!) If this is true of any text, how much more so is it true of the biblical text, which, Christians confess, is given by God to speak constraining words of grace and judgment to the believing community.

Accessing the meaning of Scripture is certainly not a simple process, and absolute certainty will ever elude us. But neither is it a wholly impossible enterprise, in which the text inevitably becomes an echo-chamber of the reader’s own prejudices and priorities. There is no point in reading Scripture at all if we doubt its power to speak a true or discomfiting word to us. So a second crucial requirement for engaging meaningfully with the Bible today is retention of confidence in Scripture’s potential autonomy from human control, as long as this “hermeneutics of trust” is always matched by a sober recognition of our own human propensity to try to exert such control over Scripture.

The third thing needed for reading the Bible in the postmodern era is much a *fuller and richer understanding of the nature of truth*. In his book *The Ethics of Biblical Interpretation*, Daniel Patte highlights

the way in which both evangelical fundamentalism and critical biblical scholarship have shared a similar understanding of truth. Both have assumed that texts have a single meaning, and that the truthfulness or otherwise of this meaning resides in its correspondence to external factual reality. The fundamentalist insists that, for the Bible to be true, it must be absolutely correct in every chronological and historical detail, such as in six days of creation or two separate cleansings of the Temple.

The biblical critic shares this conception of truth, but concludes that the Bible cannot be wholly true because it obviously errs in scientific and historical detail. Both camps assume a realist conception

of truth, but disagree on the extent to which the biblical text measures up to reality. Over against such modernist realism, Patte proffers a non-realist or constructivist conception of truth, where textual meaning is indeterminate, and where the truth of the text resides in the ethical uses to which it is put.²³

But neither of these alternatives is satisfactory. Perhaps instead of either we ought to be guided more by the Bible’s own *relational or personalist* view of truth. Jesus said “I am the truth” (John 14:6), and Jesus is a person, not a proposition. Scripture speaks of “truth” most often, not as some abstract property that a propositional statement possesses, but as an enduring quality of faithfulness and constancy in relationships. Biblical truth implies fidelity and dependability, in the same sense that we speak of a “true friend” or a “true brother” or a “true commitment”. Truth in the Bible, in other words, is more than factual accuracy; it is something that inheres in steadfast relationships.²⁴ Viewed from this perspective, the truth of the Bible resides primarily in the trustworthiness of its witness to the activity and purposes of God, not in its historical or chronological detail,

nor in its utility for constructing endless castles in the sky for postmodernists to inhabit. Scripture is true because it can be counted on to faithfully represent who God is, what God is doing in the world, and what God wants from us.²⁵

And what, precisely, does God want from us? Nothing less than our ongoing transformation into the image of his Son, in our hearts, minds, and souls, in our thinking, feeling and doing (2 Cor 3:18; Col 3:5-17). And it is here that Scripture has unrivalled power. It is now widely recognised in moral anthropology that the formation of moral character requires the engagement of a person's emotions and imagination, not just their reason and intellect.²⁶ People are formed morally as much by the stories they hear, and the examples they observe, and the groups they belong to, as they are by the moral rules or precepts they are taught (something particularly worrying in our celebrity-saturated age). The Bible's stories and examples, as well as its moral commandments and injunctions, have a unique capacity to engage the full panoply of our moral capacities, to transform us at the deep level of our affections, motivations, volitions and values, so that we measure up more to the stature of Christ. In this respect, the truth of the Bible lies in the way it can be counted on to achieve this purpose, if we submit to it. Which brings us to the third dimension of our topic.

3. A crisis of authority:

It is with some trepidation that I turn to the matter of authority, since the phrase "biblical authority" has become one of the "stuck" terms in Christian discourse. The term most often crops up today in discussions over controversial moral matters, such as homosexuality, with conservatives accusing liberals of spurning the authority of Scripture, and liberals retorting that

conservatives misconstrue the Bible. Appeals to biblical authority in such settings usually do more to deepen the antagonism than to resolve the disagreement. Moreover what is frequently touted as an issue of authority is, more often, an issue of hermeneutics. Even those who offer fresh or revisionist readings of biblical texts do so precisely because they implicitly recognise the authority of the text and want its teachings to justify their stance.

I want to suggest that the issue the church faces today is not so much to do with the *fact* of biblical authority, as it is to do with the *theory and practice* of biblical authority. It is not that believers are increasingly rejecting the authority of Scripture, but rather that they don't know *why* Scripture ought to be authoritative, nor how the Bible should function *in practice* with respect to other sources of Christian guidance, such as reason, tradition and experience.²⁷

The reason why the *fact* of biblical authority is not really the issue is because, since its very inception, Christianity has always been a religion of the book. There has never been a single moment in Christian history, going back to the time of Jesus himself, where there

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did not exist a scriptural text to make recourse to. Initially, it was the text of the Jewish Bible, later supplemented with the 27 documents of the New Testament canon. Christianity, in other words, has *always* acknowledged the authority of Scripture, though how this authority has functioned in practice has varied considerably.

As is well known, the 16th C Protestant Reformers made the authority of Scripture their *cause celebre*, calling on the church to

subject its sometimes corrupt practices to biblical scrutiny. The three great watchwords of the Protestant Reformation were *sola fide* (faith alone), *sola gratia* (grace alone) and *sola scriptura* (Scripture alone). For all their differences, Lutheran, Calvinist and Anabaptist Reformers all agreed on four basic truths: i) the Bible possesses supreme authority in the life of the church; ii) the Bible is meant to be understandable, even if some parts are difficult to grasp and require special techniques; iii) the Bible's interpretation should not be restricted to the ecclesiastical authorities; and iv) the Bible's teaching must be heeded.²⁸ These four principles remain foundational to any adequate theology of Scripture, and virtually all Christian traditions still subscribe to them

But *why* does the Bible possess supreme authority? Is this just an arbitrary claim made about one book among many? Or is there good reason to accord supremacy to *this* book rather than any other? One of the assumptions behind the *Da Vinci Code*, and similar books such as *The Jesus Papers*, as well as behind some of the scholarship emanating from the Jesus Seminar in America, is that the New Testament canon is a somewhat random collection of

documents, assembled for largely political purposes, and accorded authority primarily as a means of suppressing dissident (and allegedly more interesting)

theological voices in the early church. This increasingly common assertion presses home the question of why we should accord authority to the Gospel of Mark or the Gospel of John, but not the Gospel of Thomas, or the Gospel of Peter, or the Gospel of Judas, or the Gospel of Mary (which, after all, allegedly speaks of the woman in Jesus' life)?

To answer this question adequately would require a long detour into the history of the canonical process, the criteria of

canonicity, and the merits of the New Testament documents vis-à-vis other early Christian writings. For our purposes, it is enough to note that the reason why the church accords authority to its canonical documents is because it believes that God has chosen these documents to be the primary medium for exercising *his* authority in the community of faith. As N.T. Wright points out, the phrase “authority of Scripture” is really a shorthand way of saying “the authority of *God* exercised *through* Scripture”.²⁹ This is important, for according to biblical teaching itself supreme authority is possessed by God alone (e.g., Rom 13:1) – which means, incidentally, that when the New Testament writers ascribe “all authority in heaven and earth” to the risen Jesus (Matthew 28:18; John 19:11; Philippians 2:9-11), they are necessarily allocating to him a divine status. That being so, the only legitimate reason the church could possibly have for attributing supreme authority to some human book is because it believes that this book bears a unique relationship to God. Put simply, the *authority* of Scripture depends, ultimately, on the *authorship* of God (“authority” and “authorship” belong to the same semantic field). This is not to say that God personally wrote the Bible in some direct sense; or that he dictated its contents, word for word, to human scribes (which is more a Qu’ranic than a biblical conception of inspiration). Rather, it is to say, as Nicholas Wolterstorff spells out in his exacting philosophical analysis *Divine Discourse*, that God has *appropriated* human speech as a vehicle of divine speech, so that in attending to the human speech of the biblical authors, we can hear the voice of God.³⁰

So one reason why the church grants authority to Scripture is because it believes in the Bible’s

divine origins (or its divine-human origins, to be more accurate) – viz., that God has, in some unfathomable way, been involved in the writing, preserving and canonising of these documents. The other main reason why the Bible is accorded authority is because it bears *unique witness to Jesus Christ*. The central truth-claim of the Christian religion is that the only true God is made most fully known in the person and work of Jesus Christ, who is the Word of God made flesh (John 1:14). Christians believe that Jesus is the human face of God, which means, in turn, that God’s own identity must be fundamentally Jesus-like in character.³¹ Without this foundational conviction, the Christian movement would never have got started in the first place. Yet this claim would have no material content whatsoever were it not for Scripture, for without the canonical gospels we would know virtually nothing of the life, teaching, death

“... the Bible has been commandeered by an academic community which insists on an allegedly disinterested employment of critical methodology as the only legitimate method for understanding the text.”

and resurrection of Jesus or of his larger significance for the story of Israel. Extra-canonical sources do exist, but they are of questionable authenticity or add nothing substantial to the historical information afforded by the New Testament writings.

So, then, if the person of Jesus Christ is indispensable to the Christian religion,³² so too must Scripture be indispensable. And if Scripture is indispensable because it bears unique witness to Jesus Christ, then it must be Jesus Christ himself who furnishes the indispensable key for making sense of Scripture. Which brings us to the fourth dimension of our theme.

4. A crisis of interpretation:

Earlier I commented on the “Babylonian captivity” of Scripture – the fact that interpretation of the Bible has been commandeered by an academic community which insists on an allegedly disinterested employment of critical methodology as the only legitimate method for understanding the text. This metaphor implies that what is needed is for the Bible to be returned from exile to find its true homeland once again in the confessing Christian community. This is not, I have emphasised, to repudiate the value of critical methodology itself, only the pre-understandings and sceptical spirit with which it is often employed in many parts of the academy.

Lest this point be missed, I want now to stress that *any serious engagement with Scripture, even within the worshipping congregation, must be critical in nature* – critical in the sense that it is guided by sound

interpretive procedures and informed by self-conscious hermeneutical reflection. For arguably what is the *most* concerning feature of the contemporary church’s disengagement from Scripture is

not the declining level of biblical acquaintance, nor mounting qualms about biblical truthfulness and authority, but the sheer lack of hermeneutical competence shown by our preachers and teachers, as well as by ordinary readers.

Some will bridle at this charge, resisting any inference that it is only those with theology degrees who can properly interpret the Bible. And, in the spirit of the Reformation, and the spirit of the New Testament itself, it is absolutely right to resist any suggestion of clerical control over biblical exposition. But the alternative to clerical monopoly cannot be the hermeneutical free-for-all that prevails in some church settings, where every reader is

deemed equally skilled in judging the meaning and implications of the text. After all, Jesus himself highlighted the importance of correct interpretive procedure for apprehending Scripture's true import: "You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf. Yet you refuse to come to me to have life" (John 5:39-40). On the road to Emmaus, Jesus

needed to "open the Scriptures" for his companions so they could rightly understand them, as "beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the Scriptures" (Luke 24:27). In similar vein, the apostle Paul accuses his Jewish compatriots of misunderstanding Moses because they read him with hardened hearts and through a veil of ignorance. "Indeed, to this very day, when they hear the reading of the old covenant, that same veil is still there, since only in Christ is it set aside" (2 Cor 3:14).

In each of these instances, the problem is not a failure to *read* the Scriptures, or *trust* the Scriptures, or even to *learn* the Scriptures in detail; it is a failure to *understand* them. Why such a failure? Because the message of Scripture can only be understood properly when viewed through the correct hermeneutical lens, the lens which is Jesus Christ himself.

Yet what often prevails in fundamentalist, evangelical and Pentecostal churches, as well as in mainline congregations, is a "flat text" approach, where verses are taken at random from this or that part of the Bible to support some theological or moral view point. In such settings, the oft-heard assertion that a particular position is "biblical" simply means that some verses can be found somewhere in the Bible that seem to say what one already believes. This is what I

meant earlier when I said that so-called "Bible-believing" churches are often guilty of trivial and manipulative mishandling of the text. The Bible is treated in a quasi-magical fashion, where each isolated component is imbued with some

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mysterious potency quite independent of its larger literary, historical, canonical or theological context. What Richard Hays calls "bumper sticker hermeneutics" is practiced – "the Bible says it, I believe it, that settles it".³³

But such naïve biblicism is not to honour Scripture as the written Word of God; it is, in fact, to manipulate Scripture to suit our own preconceptions – every bit as much as postmodern ideologues do, but without the self-critical awareness of doing so. If evangelical preachers and teachers really did believe in the uniqueness, authority and inspiration of Scripture as much as they say they do, then the least they would do is learn how to "rightly divide the word of truth" (2 Tim 2:15). This does not necessarily require a full theological training, but it does require some minimal degree of hermeneutical awareness and wisdom.³⁴ There is no time here to spell out what this hermeneutical awareness should consist of.³⁵ But let me flag just four essential prerequisites for becoming a competent or wise reader of the Bible.

(i) The first is an appreciation for the *narrative quality of Scripture*. Often in our churches the Bible is treated as a devotional manual, or as a doctrinal or moral handbook. But that is to misconstrue the kind of book the Bible is. The Bible is not a collection of timeless truths dropped from heaven; rather it is, fundamentally, a

story book. Not only is narrative the dominant genre in the Bible, but the biblical canon itself tells a single, overarching story, beginning in the Garden of Eden and ending in the New Jerusalem. It is a progressively unfolding drama made up of several

distinct scenes or narrative moments: creation, fall, Israel, Christ, the church, new creation.

The importance of this narrative progress cannot be over-estimated, for the

meaning of individual texts must always be assessed, in the first instance, in terms of that part of the story to which they relate. In several cases, realities that pertain in earlier scenes of the story are superseded by later developments, so that Moses does not have the same relevance for Christian practice as does Christ (or for that matter Paul) who follow him in the drama of salvation. "The law indeed was given through Moses", John writes, "grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (John 1:17).

The narrative quality of the Bible is also crucial to appreciating how *biblical authority* ought to function. If the Bible is meant to exercise normative authority in the church, and if the Bible is first and foremost a narrative, then the kind of authority the Bible possesses must be a *narrative-kind* of authority, a story authority more than a legislative or prescriptive type of authority.³⁶ How then do narratives exercise authority? They do so by providing us with a compelling way of looking at the world, with a way of making sense of experience, of understanding our lives and the purpose of our existence, a way of challenging our priorities and scrutinising our values. Stories have unique power to crack open our existing frame of reference and afford us fresh ways of conceiving reality – which is precisely why Jesus made such heavy use of parables in his ministry. As a single large story, the Bible exercises its

authority, not by dictating in detail how we should behave, thus robbing us of all freedom or creativity, but by teaching us how we should understand the world, and where it is going, and by inviting us to shape our lives in ways that are consistent with how reality *really* is, from God's point of view.³⁷

(ii) A second prerequisite for the wise reading of Scripture is recognition of the *centrality of Jesus to the meaning of the biblical drama*. Each and every part of Scripture must, finally, be assessed in relation to him. This means the Old Testament must be read in light of the New, and the New must be understood against the backdrop of the Old (or, as someone else has put it, the Bible must be read back-to-front, as well as front-to-back).³⁸ The two Testaments should neither be fused nor separated but read together, for, as Brevard Childs explains, "the goal of the interpretation of Christian Scriptures is to understand both Testaments as witness to the self-same divine reality, who is the God and Father of Jesus Christ".³⁹

The Protestant Reformers all agreed on this principle of christocentric interpretation. For the magisterial Reformers however, it tended to assume a markedly doctrinal character. For Luther it meant the centrality of justification by faith in Christ; for Calvin it meant the centrality of God's elective purposes culminating in the threefold office of Christ.⁴⁰ For the radical Reformers, however, such as the Anabaptists, christocentric interpretation took on a more ethical form. For them, it was the *entire gospel story* of Jesus' words and deed, not just his atoning death, that is the key to unlocking Scripture. For Christ is not simply the agent of eternal salvation; he is also the normative ethical paradigm for Christian existence. Which means that no interpretation or appropriation of Scripture that fundamentally contradicts the teaching and spirit and example of Jesus can be accepted as a valid interpretation for today. It was on this basis that the Anabaptists rejected, not just sacrifice and

circumcision, but also the swearing of oaths and the bearing of the sword.⁴¹ I personally remain convinced that recovery of such ethical christocentrism, both as a hermeneutical principle and as a form of Christian presence in the world, is an urgent priority for the church in the postmodern and post-Constantinian world we now live in. (iii) This brings me to a third prerequisite for being a wise interpreter: *a life of discipleship as the sine qua non for understanding Scripture*. The radical Reformers insisted that in order to understand what is written *about* Christ in the gospels, and what is consistent with his teaching and spirit elsewhere in Scripture, one must first walk *with* Christ on the path of obedience. The 16th century Anabaptist leader Hans Denk put this point memorably: "No one can claim truly to know Christ unless one follows him in life". Modern theologian Jürgen Moltmann glosses this saying in more theological categories: "There is no christology without christopraxis, no knowledge of Christ without the practice of Christ. We cannot grasp Christ merely with our heads or our hearts. We come to understand him through a total, all-embracing practice of living; and that means discipleship".⁴²

This basic Anabaptist axiom – that we can only *know* the truth of Scripture insofar we *live* the truth – has come to the fore in much recent theological scholarship.⁴³ It is one of the most positive insights of postmodern epistemology – namely, that knowledge is acquired, not through the exercise of disembodied reason, but through the embodied practices of life, which knowers acquire from their historical contexts. Postmodernist thinkers recognise that people actually "talk their walk"; they conceptualise and verbalise reality in light of their political practice. This is why Jesus called on his hearers to *change* how they walked – by following him – in order to understand his message (e.g., Matt 7:24-27; 11:29; John 7:17), and only to talk *of* him in light of their walk *with* him.

(iv) The fourth requirement for

sound interpretation is *sensitivity to the leading of the Spirit in the interpretive community*. Both elements are essential – conscious openness to the Spirit and the collective discernment of the believing community. Again this fits well with postmodern instincts, for, as we have seen, postmodern thinkers highlight the interpretive privilege of specific communities which, they insist, *necessarily* read texts in the spirit of their own age and context. The New Testament writers similarly privilege the shared insights of the Spirit-filled community in the task of discerning God's word (e.g., Acts 15:1-35).⁴⁴ But the Spirit they speak of is not merely a projection of human ambitions or subjective intuitions. It is the Spirit of God, the giver of Scripture, who is also the Spirit of Truth, whose task it is to guide the community, albeit falteringly, into greater truth (John 16:13). Moreover the Spirit does this, not least, by bringing to the community's remembrance all that the earthly Jesus said and did (John 14:26). This means that a wise reading of Scripture is one that issues in a Christ-like way of life, a life that replicates the values and priorities and redemptive concerns we see evidenced in the gospel stories of Jesus, who is the one to whom the Scriptures bear ultimate witness

Conclusion

It is time to finish what has been a long and wide-ranging discussion. I have suggested that the phenomenon of biblical disengagement in the church, which Mark Brown and others have alerted us to, has four main dimensions. It is marked by falling levels of biblical literacy in our congregations; by nagging, though often repressed, doubts about the truthfulness and relevance of the biblical witness; by confusion around how and why the Bible is authoritative for Christian belief; and by low levels of hermeneutical competence in interpreting and applying the text as wise readers. "The Bible is to be the bloodstream of the church's worship", N.T. Wright observes, "but

at the moment the bloodstream is looking fairly watery".⁴⁵

The task before us, then, is one of trying to remedy these problems. And perhaps the place to start, or at least the place to give most emphasis to, is the task of wise interpretation. For there is no good encouraging people to read the Bible more, or to trust the Bible more, or to submit to the Bible more, unless they can make sense of the Bible, unless they learn to read the Bible as a coherent story of God's redemptive love at work in human history, and unless they can discern in the gospel story of Jesus Christ, not just Scripture's centre of gravity, but also the singular paradigm for Christian discipleship. In many respects the church today has, quite literally, lost the plot, and it is only by relearning, and reliving, the story of Jesus that the church has any hope of not simply surviving postmodernity, but even being a blessing to it.

Endnotes

1. This lecture was presented as the 2006 Clyde Vautier Memorial Lecture in Wellington on October 11, 2006.
2. For a useful summary of old Princeton scholasticism and its fundamentalist step-children, see Donald K. McKim, *The Bible in Theology and Preaching* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, Revised edition 1994), 52-75.
3. See, for example, the collection of essays edited by Robert W. Jenson & Carl E. Braaten, *Reclaiming the Bible for the Church* (Grand Rapids/Edinburgh: Eerdmans/T & T Clark, 1995).
4. L. Gregory Jones, "Formed and Transformed by Scripture: Character, Community, and Authority in Biblical Interpretation", in William P. Brown (ed.), *Character and Scripture: Moral Formation, Community and Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 18-33 (at 18-19).
5. Cited in Jones, "Formed and Transformed", 19. For a method of theological reflection in small groups that makes no mention of Scripture at all, see Abigail Johnson, "Theological Reflection in a Small Group", *Alban Weekly* (14 August 2006). Available online at http://www.alban.org/weekly/PF/2006/06_0814_SmallGroup.html [Accessed 10 January 2007].

6. Robert W. Jenson, "Hermeneutics and the Life of the Church", in Jones & Braaten, *Reclaiming the Bible*, 89-105 (at 91).
7. Richard B. Hays, "Scripture-Shaped Community; The Problem of Method in New Testament Ethics", *Interpretation* 54/1 (1990), 42-55.
8. Alister E. McGrath, "Reclaiming Our Roots and Vision: Scripture and the Stability of the Christian Church", in Jenson & Braaten, *Reclaiming the Bible*, 63-88 (esp. 69-78).
9. Of course, the church needs always to be open to new ways of understanding the Bible; these often emerge out of technical scholarship. But, as Wright insists, those who propose new interpretations ought never to thumb their noses at cherished points of view.
"When a biblical scholar, or any theologian, wishes to propose a new way of looking at a well-known topic, he or she ought to sense an obligation to explain to the wider community the ways in which the fresh insight builds up, rather than threatens, the mission and life of the church", *The Last Word; Beyond the Bible wars to a New Understanding of the Authority of Scripture* (San Francisco, CA: Harper San Francisco, 2005), 35.
10. For an insightful discussion of how what she calls early "sapiential theology", aimed at the knowledge of God, gave way to the scholastic or speculative theology in the Middle Ages, concerned with intellectual rigour, thence to the post-Enlightenment fragmentation of theology into disconnected disciplines, see Ellen T. Charry, "Walking in the Truth: On Knowing God", In Alan G. Padgett & Patrick R. Keifert (eds), *But Is It All True? The Bible and the Question of Truth* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2006), 144-69.
11. At least since the time of Irenaeus, and probably before, the church has explicitly affirmed the importance of reading Scripture in light of its antecedent "rule of faith", that is, its understanding of the gospel, as later crystallised in the creeds. This is not necessarily to champion tradition over Scripture; it is simply to recognise that one can only make sense of the Bible in light of some prior conception of its overall meaning and direction, as given in Christ. For a commendation of Irenaeus' interpretive rules, see Jenson, "Hermeneutics", 97-100. For a philosophical defence of bringing to the text prior interpretive convictions, see Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical*

Reflections on the Claim That God Speaks. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 206-23.
12. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Introduction", *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (Grand Rapids/ London: SPCK/Baker, 2005), 21.
13. Vanhoozer, "Introduction", joins those who call for a rehabilitation of theological exegesis. "Theological interpretation of the Bible...is biblical interpretation oriented to the knowledge of God...This is perhaps the ultimate aim of theological interpretation of the Bible: to know the triune God by participating in the triune life, in the triune mission to creation" (24). This includes a recognition that God is not merely the product of a certain community's interpretive interest. God precedes the community and the biblical texts themselves, and only a proper appreciation of God's priority can guard against idolatrous images generated by interpretive communities. Moreover knowledge of God is more than intellectual acknowledgement; to know God is to love God and to obey God, "for the knowledge of God is both restorative and transformative" (24). While employing scholarly tools and approaches, theological criticism is *confessional* in nature – it proceeds from faith. It is governed by the conviction that God speaks in and through the biblical texts.
14. "But the hegemony of liberalism is over. The embargo on being different has been lifted. Christianity is free to be itself once more, liberated from the stifling paternalism of a 'we're all saying the same thing, really' worldview – a worldview that, I may add, was found just as nauseating by non-Christians as it was by Christians. We are free to rediscover our distinctive identity as Christians in this world. And how are we to do that? By returning to our roots. By rediscovering that we are different. And reclaiming Scripture as the common heritage of all Christian believers is an integral element of this great process of coming to life once more, more that the homogenizing iron curtain has been lifted", McGrath, "Reclaiming our Roots", 81.
15. In the judgment of Karl P. Donfried, "Many in the professional guild of biblical scholarship are satisfied to offer private ideological speculations, yielding a myriad of conflicting options distant from the canonical witness and alien to its major theological testimonies", "Alien Hermeneutics and the Misappropriation of

- Scripture”, in Jenson & Braaten, *Reclaiming the Bible*, 19-45 (at 21-22).
16. Vanhoozer, “Introduction”, 20.
17. This need not be the case, however, such as in past readings that advocated slavery or apartheid or the subordination of women, or in present readings that endorse religious violence or American militarism. So the question arises, if advocacy readings are justified on the grounds that textual meaning is constructed more than given, then on what grounds does one repudiate readings that advocate racial segregation or patriarchal dominance? If this question can only be answered by an appeal to liberal democratic values external to the text, then biblical interpretation falls victim to some higher authority, and Christian faith loses its potential to criticise the world in the name of the divine will.
18. I owe this observation to Dennis T. Olson, “Truth and the Torah: Reflections on Rationality and the Pentateuch”, in Padgett & Keifert, *But Is It All True?*, 16-33 (at 18).
19. One of the first things that epistemological self-consciousness does is focus attention on the relativity of all interpretations. But, as Colin Gunton points out, relativity is not the same as absolute relativism. “To acknowledge that all treasure is contained in the earthen vessels of language is not at the same time to concede that no treasure is contained therein”, “Using and Being used: Scripture and Systematic Theology”, *Theology Today* 47 (1992), 248-59.
20. Stephen E. Fowl & L. Gregory Jones, *Reading in Communion. Scripture and Ethics in Christian Life* (London: SPCK, 1991; revised edition, 1997).
21. Jones, “Formed and Transformed by Scripture”, 28
22. For a full scale defence of this fact, see W. Randolph Tate, *Biblical Interpretation: An Integrated Approach* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1991).
23. Daniel Patte, *The Ethics of Biblical Interpretation: A Reevaluation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1995). For a stirring critique, see B.J. Malina, “The Bible: Witness or Warrant: Reflections on Daniel Patte’s *Ethics of Biblical Interpretation: A Review Essay*,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 26 (1996), 82-87.
24. It could be said that even in propositional statements, something is deemed true because it bears the requisite *relationship* to reality; it is a *faithful* account of what actually is.
25. For a helpful christological view of truth, see, Alan G. Padgett, “‘I Am the Truth’: An Understanding of Truth from Christology for Scripture”, in Padgett & Keifert, *But Is It All True?*, 104-14.
26. Lisa Sowle Cahill, “Christian Character, Biblical Community and Human Values”, in Brown, *Character and Scripture*, 3-17.
27. Richard Hays helpfully observes that whereas the fundamental question of the 16th century was the authority of Scripture with respect to *tradition*, and the fundamental challenge of the Enlightenment period was the authority of Scripture with respect to *reason*, in the postmodern period the issue is the authority of Scripture with respect to *experience*. See *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (Edinburgh, T & T Clark, 1996), 209-11.
28. See McKim, *Bible in Theology and Preaching*, 38-39.
29. See N.T Wright, “How Can the Bible be Authoritative?,” *Vox Evangelica* 21 (1991), 7-32; idem, *The Last Word*.
30. Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse*. More briefly, idem, “True Words”, in Padgett & Keifert, *But Is It All True?*, 34-43. Cf. Ben C. Ollenburger, “Pursuing the Truth of Scripture: Reflections on Wolterstorff’s *Divine Discourse*”, in Padgett & Keifert, *But Is It All True?*, 44-65.
31. McGrath cites former Archbishop of Canterbury Michael Ramsey as observing that “the importance of the confession ‘Jesus is Lord’ is not only that Jesus is divine but that God is Christ-like” (in A.M. Ramsey, *God, Christ and the World* [London: SCM, 1969], 98), in “Reclaiming Our Roots”, 67.
32. In liberal thought, Christianity is sometimes viewed as a self-sufficient set of ideas and values that may have been, at least partially, introduced by Jesus but which retain their validity independently of his person and work. But this is questionable on both empirical and theoretical grounds. There is much more to be said for the traditional view that Christianity is irreducibly grounded in, and focused upon, the person and work of Jesus Christ.
33. Hays, “Scripture-Shaped Community”, 43
34. Wright affirms the need for reading of Scripture that, as well as being thoroughly contextual, liturgically rounded and privately studied, is “refreshed by appropriate scholarship” and taught by “accredited leaders of the church”, *Last Word*, 127-42.
35. For a still very useful discussion of important hermeneutical principles, see Willard M. Swartley, *Slavery, Sabbath, War and Women: Case Issues in Biblical Interpretation* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1983), esp. 229-34.
36. For a more detailed discussion, see Christopher D. Marshall, “The Use of the Bible in Ethics: Scripture, Ethics and the Social Justice Statement”, in J. Boston & A. Cameron (eds), *Voices for Justice: Church, law and State in New Zealand* Palmerston North: Dunmore Press, 1994, 107-46.
37. I have always found to be enormously helpful in this respect Wright’s analogy of the Bible to a five act Shakespearean play, with the final act still to be completed. See “How Can the Bible be Authoritative?,” 18-20; idem, *Last Word*, 121-27.
38. Jones “Formed and Transformed”, 31. Cf. Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1989).
39. Brevard S. Childs, “On Reclaiming the Bible for Christian Theology”, in Jenson & Braaten, *Reclaiming the Bible*, 1-17 (at 15).
40. For a brief comparison of Luther and Calvin’s hermeneutical orientation, see David Stacey, *Interpreting the Bible* (New York: Seabury Press, 1977), 81-97.
41. See briefly Myron Augsburger, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation in Mennonite Theology* (Scottsdale, PA, Herald Press 1967); W.M. Swartley (ed.), *Essays on Biblical Interpretation* (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1984).
42. J. Moltmann, *Jesus Christ for Today’s World* (London: SCM, 1994), 47.
43. For just one example, see Wayne A. Meeks, “A Hermeneutics of Social Embodiment”, *Harvard Theological Review* 79/1-3 (1986), 176-86.
44. For a discussion of the importance of communal hermeneutics, see Warren Adler, “The Community of Interpreters: Why Christians Should Pursue Truth Communally in the Local church”, unpublished research paper, Bible College of New Zealand, 2000.
45. Wright, “How can the Bible be Authoritative?,” 29.



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