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Teaching the Bible along the Devotional/Academic Faultline: An Incarnational Approach to the Quarrel between Love and Knowledge

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Abstract. *There seem to be two irreconcilable approaches to reading the Bible, and these often collide in an undergraduate's first college class in religion. Students from a devotional background find the scholarly approach a disappointment compared with their preferred way of reading. Yet upon closer examination the limits of an exclusively devotional way or an exclusively academic way soon become apparent. A way beyond this impasse is described as an incarnational approach, which seeks to honor the integrity of the literary, cultural, and historical features of the Bible while also taking seriously the personal faith of both student and instructor. This strategy is not original of course, but is a case study of a way in which the Christian tradition may address the quarrel between two competing ways of reading and turn it into a conversation.*

A Student's Disillusionment

While serving on the spiritual life committee of our college, we were forwarded a letter that a young, devout Christian had written to the college chaplain. The letter sprang from the student's frustration with his very first college class in religion entitled "Literature of the Old Testament." Among other things the student wrote:

Expectations were high that this Bible study would by far, in every way, surpass all of those I had experienced previously. . . . Imagine my surprise when I learned that the inspiration, the revelation of Truth, the excitement of our history, turned out to be what the name of the course implies, a study simply of the literary characteristics of the Bible . . . "How can this be?" I asked myself. "Our university has only a few short months worth of lessons on this Word, this gift from God, and we've chosen this? The class was nothing more than a lesson in looking at God's work in worldly terms."

The student went on to lament that instead of helping students grow (spiritually), the class's purpose was "simply to educate us." Following such a disappointment, he could only hope that the college might consider changing its priorities from "picking apart the Word" to "renewing the fire. The way it is now, we all finish off the semester with little new revelation [sic] or excitement for the Gospel, and with unnoticeable improvement in our Christian walk." As I read through the letter, I was naturally concerned about the student's disappointment. For all the rhetoric about the centrality of the Bible in Protestant churches, reading the Bible has probably never been a more perplexing exercise. Just when his young adult faith, like a freshly blooming flower, needed special nurture, something in the classroom atmosphere had blocked sunlight for its fragile growth. Perhaps the instructor/gardener had committed some egregious horticultural miscue? Were other students similarly shriveling on the vine? My concern took on a more personal edge when I read the name at the bottom of the page and discovered that the letter had been penned by one of my students. *Mea culpa!* I was the very one whose instruction had been disillusioning.

Not to be Confused: Beyond Devotionalism

The student described as purely literary the way the class read the Bible. Had I, for the sake of some scholarly chimera of detached, impersonal objectivity, artificially suspended my belief that God could or would encounter the student through the text of Scripture? Certainly not! As my starting point, I have no shyness in saying, "Here I stand. I believe this book contains a living connection to the living God." I wondered, did our method of study amount to "picking apart the text in a worldly way"? Was it worldly to take a sideways glance at creation accounts from other ancient religions and compare and contrast these with Genesis? Did it

seem a “purely literary” view of divine revelation to consider that wisdom literature is not exclusive to Israel, but reflects a form of writing widely valued elsewhere in the ancient world, so much so, that the canonical book of Proverbs offers quotations of advice from a pagan King Lemuel and his royal Mother (Prov. 31)? Was it “only to educate,” not to help one grow in faith, that I spent precious class time describing and distinguishing between psalms of lament, praise, thanksgiving, trust, and salvation history? Was it irrelevant to one’s own personal journey of faith to inquire together why psalms of lament, so numerically dominant in the Old Testament, are nearly invisible in contemporary Christian worship? I could give a semester’s worth of other examples, but these are sufficient to illustrate various ways we looked at literary forms and historical context as basic ingredients in studying the Biblical text.

Clearly something about the way we interacted with historical, linguistic, and literary material interfered with this student’s preferred way of reading the Bible. Apparently for this young adult, a way of reading which paid as much attention to the human or literary nature of the Bible as to its divine status as revelation undercut its spiritual authority. Examining the cultural and literary nature of the Bible seemed to interfere with its signal as an inspiring and inspired document. Given the importance of the student’s faith commitment, coupled with a strong attachment to his previous way of reading the Bible, in retrospect it is not surprising that this new approach evoked serious resistance.

My initial response was to describe this “before college” way of reading the text as *ahistorical* (timeless) and *acritical* (context free). To add a bit of polemical punch to this analysis, I will describe it as a gnostic reading of the text, as if history and context are fundamentally irrelevant to meaning. It is to read Scripture as though divine guidance requires only the barest acquaintance with history, comparative cultural studies, and theology, or even with none of the above. Simply provide the proper attitude of interior devotion and *voilà!* God bestows immediate access to the redemptive meaning of the Bible. From a historical perspective, one can detect here the strains of a post-Reformation pietism that has misconstrued Luther’s and Calvin’s perspicuity of Scripture. Here it would seem to mean we do not need to engage in any strenuous thinking in order to interpret the Bible since genuine believers will always find Scripture’s meaning to be clear enough (Thiselton 1992, 179).

Shortly before his death, Lesslie Newbigin reflected on devotional or religious ways of reading the Bible that do not pay serious attention to its unique message and context.

Most of us treat the Bible as an anthology of helpful thoughts to which we may occasionally turn, and from

which we can obtain comfort, guidance, direction. And even in our reading of the Bible in church, we tend to look at only very short passages which reinforces the impression that the Bible is a collection of nuggets of wisdom from which we can choose what we find helpful. But in that case, of course, it is not the Bible itself that decides what is worth reading; we decide in advance. The Bible is not our authority. . . . Most households today have a Bible. But do people read it in the way they read other books? Do they read it as a whole, as a story from beginning to end? I think not. (Newbigin 1999, 4)

Newbigin further describes how Christians can inadvertently misrepresent the Bible even when presenting it as the true “religion.”

Many years ago a Hindu friend of mine, a very learned man, said to me something I have never forgotten: I can’t understand why missionaries present the Bible to us in India as a book of religion. It is not a book of religion – and anyway we have plenty of books of religion in India. We don’t need any more! I find in your Bible a unique interpretation of universal history, the history of the whole of creation and the history of the human race. And therefore a unique interpretation of the human person as a responsible actor in history. That is unique. There is nothing else in the whole religious literature of the world to put alongside it. (Newbigin 1999, 4)

Of course one may choose to read the Bible exclusively as a book about religion. One may believe that God reveals himself to each and all people everywhere and in all times in what can be described as a mystical, vertical, and immediate way, quite apart from any specific journey with any particular people with a unique history. Israel’s story can be viewed as simply illustrative of everyone’s story and experiences with God. One learns quickly to look beyond the details and particularities and ask almost immediately “How does this story apply to me and my experience of God?” The real question I am interested in becomes, “How do I apply these spiritual principles about experiencing God and principles about human nature to my life today?”

Following Newbigin, I am convinced that a unique interpretation of the human story calls for a unique way of reading. I wish to describe what I would like to call an incarnational way, which fully respects the creaturely and human elements contained therein as the way of the divine in the world. This way of reading springs from a belief that God takes seriously space, time, culture, history – the entire project of creation. The Bible is profoundly referential in making truth claims about the world. It affirms that the creator of the universe is also the Lord of history, who, in the words of N. T. Wright, “has acted climactically, *and not merely paradigmatically* in Jesus of Nazareth” (Wright 1992, 136). In con-

crete terms, it affirms that God chose a distinct historical community from whom came One whose life, death, and resurrection would form a new community that would enfold all ethnicities and cultures. Instead of converting all cultures into the likeness of one particular ethnic/social group, the church can humbly acknowledge that the fullness of the kingdom will not be complete until the astonishing variety of the manifold tribes and tongues have been baptized into the reign of God. Cornelius becomes the prototype of the Gentile who makes Peter and the church repentantly revision its understanding of God's reign. Hence, reading the Bible has an implicit missionary goal: to take the good news about God's coming and God's kingdom to every nation and culture. But whenever this is faithfully undertaken, the church will always be a learner as well as a teacher. The question before us is: can I understand let alone translate Jesus' message to my own culture if I rush past its unique creaturely, historical, and literary context?

An incarnational way of reading reflects the ancient Chalcedonian pattern. Recall that the creed of Chalcedon (451 C.E.) acknowledges Jesus as "fully human, fully divine" and these are "not to be confused, not to be separated." As a result, the humanity of Christ is not to be leaped over or minimized (as in docetism) but deeply respected and honored. We have no divine Jesus to worship apart from the real human person who lived, worked, and "was crucified under Pontius Pilate." By analogy, the Bible's humanity, which surely includes its linguistic, literary, and cultural context, is essential to encountering it as Word of God. I would argue that its divine reality cannot be understood apart from its truly human and creaturely qualities. If we see the Bible solely as a human document, this would be akin to an Ebionite reading, in which Jesus is merely human and in no way the divine Son of God.

It is unlikely my student was aware of these distinctions. He did not deliberately choose to read the Bible in a docetic manner, as simply a divine book, so that duly armed with a devotional attitude, he could extract sufficient spiritual nutrients for the day. But it is my sense that he lacked an incarnational hermeneutic which would have opened him to the inseparable value of the literary, cultural, and historical flesh and blood of the divine Word. Instead he was bored by what seemed a surfeit of historical/cultural information.

Having embraced Newbigin's contrast between a Hindu holy book and the uniqueness of the Bible, I now seek to differentiate clearly and carefully an incarnational way of reading the Bible from a generic devotional approach. In other words, I want my students to read the historical contexts and literary features as more than husks to be discarded as quickly as possible for the religious kernel within. I want them to savor the humanity of the text, including its literary qualities, for the following reason: if God has communicated and partnered

with humankind in a unique way within the history of Israel and the coming of Jesus, then the contingent reality of creation and creaturely processes therein are real and relevant even for God. To paraphrase the traditional wedding service, when God has joined together history, culture, and divine self-disclosure, let us not put them asunder.

Not to be Separated: The Personal as Essential to the Radical

Let me be clear: I am advocating something more than converting students from an uncritical to a critical, or from a devotional to an academic/scholarly approach. Yes, pre-critical reading of the text can be shockingly immature and self-centered. It can be a form of comfort reading, quickly glossing over the new, strange, or different in favor of the reassuringly familiar. I read to fix my present distressing mood, not to encounter the kingdom of God, let alone the God who is a consuming fire (Hebrews 12:29)! Yet let us admit that academic and critical study in the Christian tradition has many dangers and dead-ends as well. Thomas Merton reminds us that the very religious who read the Bible as a matter of professional or pious duty, too often read without a radical dialogue and questioning of one's own self.

A high proportion of the last hundred years of scholarship we must admit, and anyone well read in the field must agree . . . is an arid, exhausting desert of futile detail which wearies the mind by distracting it from the meaning of the Bible and goes wandering aimlessly through a wilderness of technicalities where all interest withers and expires. (Merton 1970, 35)

Merton calls this a reading of the Bible in a non-radical way. Had my student seen vestigial (or virulent) remnants of the pedant in me? We offer students no solution when we substitute a glib critical reading of the Bible for a glib non-critical approach. What I wish to do instead is to find lenses that, as Merton admonishes, help scholars and students read the Bible more radically. One cannot simply abandon whatever smacks of the devotional. The goal is to develop skills to refine the radical gold hidden in the devotional dross as the reader genuinely responds to God's genuine disclosure. I do not want to promote an arid sort of objectivism that sees the reader merely as a passive observer. I am seeking an active way of reading in which one learns to engage the text in a radically personal way. Such a way of encountering the text is both self-critical and transformative. To read the Bible in a radical way involves us in an encounter that may sharply challenge our prior expectations and wishes.

One especially useful critical tool for sifting the personal gold from the devotional dross is an aesthetic

insight from C. S. Lewis. In his autobiography, Lewis describes a painful loss of joy that came over him while pursuing his great love of “Northern” or German Romantic literature and music. Though initially each story of the old sagas thrilled him, including even the increasing minutia of detail about authors, language, and context, gradually the boredom crept in. In retrospect, he concludes that his reading had become focused on experiencing a certain thrill while reading. Ironically, the more he read in order to sense a feeling of exaltation, the less it occurred. What had gone wrong? Inadvertently his mental focus had zoomed in on reproducing the good feeling. He had taken his focus off the story and its characters and had put his real attention on recovering a certain inner emotional palpitation. The beautiful byproduct aroused by the story had been so delightful, it had become his purpose for reading. The Northern sagas became valued as the functional means to a ravishing end. Sadly, all too soon this pragmatic use of the narrative produced diminishing returns. “Only when your whole attention and desire are fixed on something else – whether a distant mountain, or the past, or the gods of Asgard – does the ‘thrill’ arise. It is a byproduct. Its very existence presupposes that you desire not it but something other and outer” (Lewis 1955, 159).

The lesson seems immediately relevant for young adult believers reading the Bible at a college level class. It is quite possible that the more one encounters the artifacts, genres and comparative religious contexts of the Bible, the more the highly desirable awareness of God *through the text*, recedes. Gradually or suddenly, that familiar sense of the beloved Presence, which elsewhere Lewis describes as “knowledge by personal acquaintance,” *connaitre* (French), *kennen* (German), dissolves into the more banal “knowledge about,” *savior* (French), *wissen* (German) (Lewis 1972, 213). From the heights of a sense of God’s felt presence, one descends to the valley of the shadow of cultural, linguistic, and sociological analysis – a painful death indeed. Indeed, why not blame the historical or literary details as usurpers of the divine awareness, now vanished?

Now consider Martin Buber’s well-known distinction between “I-thou” and “I-it” encounters. Part of the student’s felt loss may be that he has replaced a growing I-thou relationship with God through the text, with an I-it critical study of ancient culture and religious ideas about God. Again, why deepen our acquaintance with history, theology, and culture if the cost is emptying the text of personal meaning? Suppose, in a prevailing secular culture of unbelief, which includes a chaotic variety of pluralisms and relativisms, one has struggled to find a childlike faith in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob? Why turn into linguistic and sociological cul-de-sacs, when one has so recently discovered the

highway of God’s mercy and love? Is this not the psychological origin of (some) conservative teachers and pastors who have become the sworn enemies of all critical methodologies?

Robert Mulholland helpfully analyzes these very different reading experiences through a series of contrasts between what he calls informational versus formational reading (Mulholland 1985, 30):

- Informational – cover as much material as possible, as quickly as possible
- Formational – focus on small portions, leisurely
- Informational – linear, moving from the first element on to the next
- Formational – depth; open to multiple layers of meaning
- Informational – master the text; gain control of interpretation
- Formational – text masters me; I am open to hear, receive, respond
- Informational – text is an object; maintain our distance
- Formational – text is a subject; come close to the text, in relationship with it
- Informational – analytical, critical, judgmental
- Formational – open, indwelling, loving
- Informational – problem solving
- Formational – openness to mystery

What Mulholland designates as “informational” reading has much in common with Lewis’s “knowledge about” and Buber’s “I-it,” whereas the “formational” is akin to “knowledge by personal acquaintance” and “I-thou.” When the Bible is read in academic contexts, the tendency has commonly been to take on one-sidedly the qualities of informational reading, whereas in the formational (or we could call it transformational) realm, students are left virtually uninstructed. Colleges and seminaries can nearly guarantee their students will develop their critical thinking skills, but meanwhile one hears the frequent complaint of growing dull and cold in their spiritual lives. During the turbulent years between World War I and II in Germany, Bonhoeffer wrote to Barth, “The kind of questions serious young theologians put to us are: How can I learn to pray? How can I learn to read the Bible? Either we help them do this, or we can’t help them at all. Nothing of all this can be taken for granted” (Bonhoeffer 1986, 30).

In wishing to honor both the reader’s personal response and the text’s cultural and human integrity, I wish to avoid the following mis-readings in seeking to find an incarnational strategy:

- From Lewis: An improper intrusion of the self which dominates the text and silences its agenda – a reading for comfort.

- From Buber: The warning that reading the Bible for something beyond a relationship and journey with God turns the event of reading into an act of idolatry – a reading for control.
- From Newbigin and Wright: A devotional way of reading which ignores the Bible's unashamed involvement in the contingencies of history, language, and culture – a docetic reading. An academic way of reading which ignores the divine within history, language and culture – an Ebionite reading.

The Experiment: Mutual Self-Criticism, Shared Openness

I wondered how students would respond to such an analysis. I decided to present them with this frame for reading the Bible. My starting point would be that a unique message requires a unique way of reading, fully respecting the humanity of the text, fully valuing the divine reality witnessed therein. More clearly than before, I would describe a way of reading which challenges the personal/devotional apart from a full commitment to the historical and literary. And by the same logic, I would warn against an immersion in linguistic and historical contingencies that dismiss the divine treasure within the earthen vessels.

At our next class, I laid out the two ways of reading the Bible from Mulholland, Lewis, and Buber and the incarnational way adapted from Wright and Newbigin. It was time to see if this analysis of possible ways of reading might foster a more radical way of “opening the Bible.” I asked, “With which way of reading are you most familiar and comfortable?” Not surprisingly the large majority replied, the devotional/formatational. Next I asked them to reflect on the limitations of informational/critical reading. As we discussed this in small groups and then as an entire class, the limits seemed obvious to all. A focus on *information about* (events, culture, history) could easily become impersonal facts only, uninspiring, and lacking in spiritual relevance for their lives today.

So far so good. Now it was time to process the limits of an exclusively formational or devotional way of reading. Remember: by their own admission, this was how their pastors, youth pastors, and Sunday school teachers had largely instructed them these past eighteen-plus years. Would they rally to its defense? Straight away one response seemed to encapsulate the corporate mood. “Didn’t the Canaanite devotee [undergraduate] who read their equivalent holy text or listened to their Priest [Professor] in a formational/devotional way believe that sexual participation at the temple of Baal would help the crops grow in the field and increase fertility at home?” The import was evident to all: an exclusively formational way of reading may invite one to

behave ethically or believe intellectually that which is decadent or false.

They were not finished. Another student queried, “Didn’t the Pharisees and Sadducees, Jesus’ great rivals in the Gospels, read their sacred texts with the conscientious zeal characteristic of formational reading?” This provoked me to reply that when Jesus came with new parables or new insights into old stories (“you have heard it said of old, but I say unto you”), he invited them into a radically new encounter with the One they fervently worshipped (the phrase “born-again” comes to mind), and hence a re-experience of the One they worshipped. Many of his contemporaries were so anxiously attached to the familiar ways of reading about the meaning of the temple, the Sabbath, and racial/cultural purity, they fiercely resisted this new way.

Needless to say, I was encouraged by responses that were clarifying and penetrating beyond ways I would have derived on my own. There seemed to be a consensus that both ways of reading, not one without the other, help us read the Bible in a way worthy of its truth and appropriate to its creaturely and divine reality.

It would be worth further exploration whether reflecting on the ways we read has relevance for our conversations with other religions. Muslims and Hindus read their sacred texts devotionally too. Is there a correspondingly informational way? If so, would new information alter interpretations and hence experiences of the divine? Are there insights into how faith matures in other religions by asking questions about the humanity and divinity of sacred texts? These questions are raised in a very preliminary way, but having raised the issue, it is interesting to ponder these words from Gandhi, both for their meaning for Hindu faith as well as for the conversation between Hinduism and Christianity:

To refuse to struggle against the evil of the world is to surrender your humanity; to struggle against the evil of the world with the weapons of the evil-doer is to enter into your humanity; to struggle against the evil of the world with the weapons of God is to enter into your divinity. (El-Assal 1999, 133)

It is sadly the case that within each faith, internal debates on interpretation can and do arouse serious differences, even violence. Gandhi was shot and killed on his way to a Hindu prayer meeting by a fellow Hindu furious over Gandhi’s reforming interpretations of the Gita, including his abolition of caste and his inclusion of prayers from the Koran (Fischer 1983, 504). Malcolm X was assassinated by fellow Black Muslims incensed that he laid aside his racist interpretations and unquestioning obedience to Elijah Mohammed following his visit to the larger Islamic world (Haley 1999, 368). Exploratory questions regarding meaning and

interpretation offer a fundamental service in other religions as well, though it would be as wrong to predetermine their outcome as it is to silence those who raise the questions.

Conclusion: Love Without Knowledge is Lame, Knowledge Without Love is Empty

I conclude that formational/devotional reading in isolation substitutes nostalgia for knowledge. Reading in order to re-experience a particular sense of God's presence ends up manufacturing a new golden calf, syncretistically cobbled together by bits of ancient culture, linguistics, and history, molded by a style of reading conditioned by a hunger for comfort or control. Believers devoted to sacred texts (or sacred rituals) are naturally enthusiastic. But zeal without knowledge becomes not only lame, but destructive. Gods of temple prostitution, slavery, and holy war, however discredited by today's theological consensus, all have a devotional origin. They are the social constructions not of cynics and skeptics but of passionate believers. Unfortunately, if recent events are not misleading, variations on holy war seem to have retained their appeal in more than one religious tradition.

So it was that Saul of Tarsus read his Bible with such devotion that he sought to kill those who challenged the standard interpretations of his community. One day something interrupted the old devotional routine. After his participation in the stoning of Stephen and the ensuing Damascus experience of the risen Christ, he could no longer use violence to spread/control information, true or false. His knowledge had been enlarged to include a new interpretation and a new experience of Jesus the Messiah. A transforming experience led to a new interpretation of text and life. The two enriched and deepened one another.

There is a scene in Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia* where one of the children, Lucy, at long last sees the Lion, Aslan, after a considerable time of growing up in England. It follows a particularly trying adventure upon returning to Narnia. When they finally meet after this lengthy prelude, the following conversation occurs.

"Aslan, you're bigger."

"That is because you are older, little one," answered he.

"Not because you are?"

"I am not. But every year you grow, you will find me bigger." (Lewis 1977, 124)

Apart from openness to fresh informational reading, we are stuck worshipping an increasingly diminutive idol of our previous experience. Though we try to disguise it with holy names, this amounts to a breach of the second commandment, the taking of God's name in vain. Faith, though passionately held, may be attached to "lies, even

though lies breathed through silver," as the pre-Christian Lewis worriedly remarked to Tolkien (Carpenter 1977, 147). By the same token, to turn Coleridge somewhat upside down, without a willing suspension of belief, one can never be open to new critical insights. One is forever devoted, with increasing insecurity, to expressions and formulations of the truth more than the Reality to which by grace they bear witness. Our propensity to idolatry unveils our tendency to forget that God is always greater than both our conceptual apprehensions and affectional realizations. "God is the great iconoclast. Every image of him we form, he must in mercy shatter" (Lewis 1964, 82). Without knowledge that deepens, even the most passionate love is lame. "Little children, keep yourselves from idols" (I John 5:21).

On the other hand, without love, knowledge is empty. Those who read only for information and knowledge about the Bible reduce the personalizing God who wishes to encounter us face to face, into a series of interesting religious concepts over which they are masters. This absorbs religious reality into a psychological power drive. Since this is self-evidently bogus, I assume this sort of idolatry veils itself by hiding within a virtue. The academy and the sciences have often championed new ideas, new discoveries, new reformations, but have just as often been places of pecking orders and doctrinal disputes between competing schools of orthodoxy, complete with the judging and banishing of heretics from today's intellectual plausibility structures. It is important for church and academy, preachers and professors, to recover a mutual commitment to the real purpose of information and analysis, which is to read the text of the Bible radically (Merton 1970).

The longer I have observed (and participated in) this conflict over ways of reading the Bible, the more it strikes me as a family quarrel, albeit sometimes a scene from a divorce court. Let me suggest instead that the text intends an intimate coming together of two worlds, the sacred and the profane, the divine and the human. To read the Bible in a manner in which the academic and the devotional are characterized as rivals, whose methods are in sheer conflict, misunderstands the purpose of both methods as well as the text. The alternative argues that the Bible itself has a bias, which turns the feud into a dialogue. The believer who reads the Bible through docetic lenses and the academic who reads it solely as an Ebionite (human) document can choose instead, if you will pardon the extended metaphor, to grind out a bifocal approach, more congruent with the incarnational reality present in the text.

Following Alasdair MacIntyre, I would agree there is neither an academic nor a devotional way that has developed apart from a historical tradition. Our challenge is to recover a conversation between two members

of a family in which communication has broken down. Part of our students' anxieties reflects this breakdown in which one seeks to dominate or overwhelm the other. My hope is that the two can be respectful and equal partners in exploration and wonder, so that as Einstein suggested, science and religion may together reach maturity. Cutting off communication may arise from either a devotional or an academic starting point. It is, I believe, the peculiarly awkward challenge embedded within the Christian tradition to embrace both ways and yet be consumed by neither. Instead, one can live within both traditions and learn to be fluent enough in both the language of devotion and the language of the academy that within oneself there takes place a living conversation between the two (Newbigin 1989, 65). Granted, it will be tempting to turn the dialogue into a quarrel. Often the one does not listen well to the style or language of the other. But the promise of an incarnational approach is that it honors both and absolutizes neither.

In commending the wearing of bifocals, I realize that a visual metaphor of reading also limits as well as envisions how the text is at once human and divine. Other metaphors are possible and will lead to a further probing of what will always remain beyond our full comprehension. So let me suggest that reading the text can be deepened by hearing it. Jeremy Begbie reminds us that in the experience of listening to music we regularly hear two distinct notes sound together in such a way that neither cancels out the other, but both sound together in a greater harmony (Begbie 2000, 139). Hearing the text as God's word spoken through human words holds both together in a similarly relational way, like notes that interpenetrate and overlap one another, without the one absorbing or pushing out the other.

Eventually, the ways of academic and devotee, reading and listening, merge into the way of pilgrimage. To describe the reader as a pilgrim admits that the stakes in incarnational reading are never small. However, this only reflects the scandalous "good news" which the New Testament itself initiates by declaring that God has first come on pilgrimage toward us (John 1:14) and moreover has done so, not simply in theory or symbol, but in the stark history and culture of Roman-occupied Palestine. Merton reminds us that the New Testament itself proclaims the most controversial way of reading the Bible, which is at once the most radical, namely that the fullest manifestation of God is actually a self-emptying, where God became a man and submitted to death (Merton 1970, 79). To read the Bible in a correspondingly radical way involves the summons to take up one's own cross and follow.

But has the language of "taking up the cross" any relevance for teaching the Bible in an academic context? I think it does. At the least it suggests that teachers design a way of approaching the text which encourages

a mutual and not a one-sided openness and receptivity. This receptivity includes but is not limited to a repentant openness to re-examine matters of linguistics, history, and the like. Critical thinking continually demands a serious reading of the text. All the above mentioned areas may be pedantic avoidances or may cast fresh light on the meaning of the cross.

There is more of course. This past term I invited my students to consider what a reciprocally radical reading of the Bible might mean for them. Having posed the question, I waited in silence. After a pause, someone said it would mean revisiting the tendency to justify cheating. Silence. Another suggested it would dethrone reading for a good grade. More silence. "How are teachers tempted to read or teach less than radically?" I didn't wait long to answer that I am tempted to care more about impressing students with my preparation, or seeking to entertain them, than deepening their ability to read the Bible in a way that impacts the way they work and rest, the way they treat strangers and friends, the way they respond to God.

Do such questions and answers have any bearing on the issue of expected learning outcomes? I suspect I will continue to want students to understand the significance of the Maccabean revolt against Antiochus Epiphanes for understanding the Messianic longings of the first century. But I hope for formational outcomes as well, many of which have to do with how students relate to the text once the tests have all been taken and the G.P.A. computed. I want students to read and reread the text, but not as a repetitive devotional safety charm ("This is the temple of the Lord." "This is the temple of the Lord." "This is the temple of the Lord" [Jer. 7:4]). Like a musician facing the musical score of a classic, I will urge them to creatively and actively perform the reading role in such a way that personal and social life (theirs, ours, our neighbors, even our enemies) is informed and (by grace) transformed into an encounter with God mediated through this profoundly human text.

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