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Between Breaths: the Dialogic Shape of Christian Authority

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ABSTRACT

Five hundred years ago, a group of Christians challenged the authority of church and tradition, provoking a Reformation that changed the face of the world. But the fractured history of Protestantism suggests the question of Christian authority is more complex than the potent rallying cry of "sola scriptura" might have first suggested. Scripture requires interpretation, and interpretation opens the door to substantial influence by church, tradition, Spirit, reason, and even individual experience. Branches of Protestantism have distinguished themselves in part by the authoritative priority they attribute to these sources. But Christian authority cannot be possessed as a static and absolute quality of any single entity. Its shape is fundamentally relational, emerging from the dynamic interchange between ancient scripture and present context, inspired tradition and Spirit-endued community. In short, the authority of the Bible functions dialogically.

Section one of this dissertation traces the ways Christian perspectives on authority have shifted over time as the church has encountered new challenges. Section two describes how branches of Christianity have attempted to solve the authority problem by anchoring it in different primary sources—tradition, scripture alone, Spirit, experience, and reason. Section three introduces a dialogical paradigm as a fresh way for conceiving how religious authority functions and points to the distinct contributions of various dialogue partners. It concludes with the case study of gay marriage, exploring what dialogic authority looks like in practice. Section four describes the artifact, a book entitled *The Bible Unwrapped: Making Sense of Scripture Today*, which provides a lay introduction to core questions of biblical interpretation and authority. Section five contains the book proposal. Section six reflects on the importance of what I have learned

in the course of this dissertation and suggests ideas for further work that may be of value to the church.

SECTION 1:

THE PROBLEM

Introduction

Survey religious headlines of the past decade and it is hard to avoid concluding that the attention of the American church has been consumed by a single subject. The debate around human sexuality is splitting families, fracturing congregations, and dividing denominations. Careers of countless Christian leaders, bloggers, and teachers lie shattered across its contentious rocks. It is a fault line stretched across the face of American Protestantism.

This is hardly the church's first experience of theological controversy. Recent decades have witnessed other heated ecclesial debates around such matters as divorce and women's ordination. Yet to many this debate feels somehow different—unique in the passion and fear engendered, unique in the scope of the stakes.

The furor surrounding the sexuality debate is perhaps best accounted for when understood as not merely reflecting a clash of competing anthropologies but the culmination of a crisis in religious authority building for centuries. The fundamental question on the table is not just the definition of marriage but where and how Christian authority is anchored. Is such authority held within the biblical text itself? Within the Spirit who inspired the ancient writers or illuminates modern readers? Within the church that canonized and interprets the text? And if the church, then *which* church? The church of history, which speaks through the voice of tradition? The consensus of the living

community? The institutional hierarchy? The educated experts? The pious individual with her Bible open on her knees?

From its inception, Protestantism has been centrally concerned with where religious authority is located. However, far from resolving this question, the sixteenth-century Reformation and subsequent history of Protestantism has revealed the depth of its complexity. The Enlightenment, rise of democracy, and currents of post-modernity have only exacerbated the challenge, exposing the limits of any simplistic notion of authority vested in scripture "alone."

It is my contention that largely unacknowledged beneath the present debate over human sexuality lie radically diverging visions of biblical authority and how it functions in living communities. Five hundred years after the Protestant Reformation, the church appears to be arriving at another turning point, requiring a fresh explication of where Christian authority is located and specifically of how authority is operative within Christianity's holy book.

This section will briefly trace the development of religious authority through broad periods of the church's life, with particular attention to the ways the relationship between biblical text and human interpreters has been continually renegotiated. My hope is that such an overview will help locate present debate within a larger historical conversation as well as expose unexamined assumptions underlying contemporary discourse.

Authority in the Early Church

Nearly four hundred years of Christian history passed before the church made a concentrated effort to delineate the boundaries of a canon.[1] Half a millennia later, six distinct canon lists were still circulating in the East,[2] and the boundaries of the biblical canon as Protestants now recognize it were not settled until more than 1400 years after composition.[3] Yet even in the absence of a formal canon, Christianity flourished for centuries. This was possible in no small part because of early Christianity's high views of the Spirit and the church.

Pre-canonical scripture was treated by the early church as authoritative, but that authority "functioned…within its wider ecclesial tradition."[4] For truth the church relied not only on authoritative texts but on the authoritative tradition of the gospel and core doctrines handed down by generations of trustworthy leaders. This 'elastic' oral tradition, known as the Rule of Faith, was part of the basis by which authoritative scripture was recognized.[5]

Achtemeier observes, "Church and Scripture grew up alongside each other—the traditions shaping the life of the church, and the church interpreting and reshaping the

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[1] Craig D. Allert, *A High View of Scripture?: The Authority of the Bible and the Formation of the New Testament Canon* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 106.

[2] Ibid., 144.

[3] Paul J. Achtemeier, *Inspiration and Authority: Nature of Function of Christian Scripture* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Pub., 1990), 106.

[4] Allert, 130.

[5] D.H. Williams, *Evangelicals and Tradition: The Formative Influence of the Early Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 155.

traditions in light of its own proclamation of those traditions."[6] This perhaps helps explain why papyrus finds indicate "the text of the New Testament was much more fluid during the first two hundred years of transmission than originally thought."[7] The canon was composed and compiled as part of a centuries-long conversation between the church and the tradition. The authority of scripture was thus irreversibly bound to the dynamic faith of a living community, indwelled by a living Lord, continually discerning its own living story.

The early church applied the term 'inspiration' liberally to refer not only to canonically-destined books but also to leaders, martyrs,[8] commentaries, the decisions of church councils, and even tomb inscriptions.[9] Inspiration was viewed as not only a quality of holy texts but of holy people and communities.[10] This free use of 'inspiration' reflected not a low view of scripture but a high view of the Spirit's involvement in the on-going life of the church. It was confidence in the Spirit's reliable activity in the community of faith, guiding it in ways consistent with the past yet thoroughly grounded

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[6] Achtemeier, 78.

[7] John J. Brogam, "Can I Have Your Autograph? Uses and Abuses of Textual Criticism in Formulating an Evangelical Doctrine of Scripture," in *Evangelicals & Scripture: Tradition, Authority, and Hermeneutics*, eds. Vincent Bacote, Laura C. Miguélez, and Dennis L. Okholm (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 102. Brogam notes this is one of the problems with theories that ascribe inerrant inspiration to hypothetical autographs without accounting for the transmission or canonization processes by which scripture took shape.

[8] Allert, 59.

[9] Ibid., 155.

[10] Walton and Sandy attempt to distance themselves from this view in a late disclaimer: "We are not suggesting that the term *inspiration* should apply broadly to inspired persons or to an inspired process, only that oral texts were the initial stage of revelation." It is not clear, however, on what evidentiary basis they seek to deny such an application as the position of the early church. John H. Walton and D. Brent Sandy, *The Lost World of Scripture: Ancient Literary Culture and Biblical Authority* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013), 295.

in the unique particularities of the present, which allowed the early church to maintain a sense of 'faithful fluidity' about its tradition.

Overall, the authority of scripture in the early church was tied closely to its *function*, and here emphasis fell on scripture's essential usefulness.[11] The church fathers employed methods of interpretation frequently discomforting to modern readers steeped in the historical-critical method. But these methods become more comprehensible when considered in light of their goal, the "use" for which scripture is intended. The primary goal of exegesis, for these early thinkers, was "to dispose the reader in such a way that he or she can 'see' Christ."[12]

Christ, for the early church, is the end toward which all scripture points. The spiritual exegesis of a writer like Origen has a "preparatory, disposing quality."[13] Its goal is to move readers beyond the text and into contemplation of and participation in Christ. Augustine insists that the "chief purpose of…all divine scriptures is to love the thing which must be enjoyed"—namely, God and neighbor.[14]

These early Christians were keenly aware of portions of Scripture that present interpretative difficulty. In his commentary on Genesis, Augustine warns Christians against staking too much on controversies that have little to do with scripture's ultimate goal and could simply serve to bring biblical authority into disrepute. He writes:

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[11] See this emphasis in 2 Timothy 3:15-17.

[12] R.R. Reno, "Origen," in *Christian Theologies of Scripture: A Comparative Introduction*, ed. Justin S. Holcomb (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 28.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* I 35.39.

> Usually, even a non-Christian knows something about the earth, the heavens, and the other elements of this world…and this knowledge he holds to as being certain from reason and experience. Now, it is a disgraceful and dangerous thing for an infidel to hear a Christian, presumably giving the meaning of Holy Scripture, talking nonsense on these topics…[15]

Biblical authority is undermined when its context or content is misrepresented. Michael Graves observes it is to early Christians' credit that they "did not believe the answer to every imaginable question could be found directly in Scripture."[16] Proper interpretation meant reading in light of scripture's intended purpose.

Early exegetes were conflicted about the role of authorial intent in interpretation. For the church fathers, it was always possible the Spirit could birth new or unexpected meaning. Augustine observes that departing from an author's intent increases risk, like a hiker wandering off a marked trail. But this does not necessarily preclude one from ending up at "the right destination."[17] He notes, "Anyone who derives from [the scriptures] an idea which is useful for supporting…love but fails to say what the writer demonstrably means in the passage has not made a fatal error, and is certainly not a liar."[18] This reasoning is rooted in the conviction that the text's primary purpose lies outside itself. The text is the window through which we see, but Christ is the one who draws our gaze and whom we are led forth to encounter.

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[15] Augustine, *Literal Commentary on Genesis,* 1.19.39.

[16] Michael Graves, *The Inspiration and Interpretation of Scripture: What the Early Church Can Teach Us* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2014), 32.

[17] Ibid., 120.

[18] Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine,* I 41.89.

Authority in the Late Medieval Context

In Christian history, it has frequently been heresy which prompts clarification in channels of authority. The fact that prior to the Middle Ages Christianity went seven centuries without serious concern around heresy may be credited in part to lack of access to the Bible. Without widespread access, "one of the great sources of heretical inspiration was cut off."[19] There was no problem in the medieval worldview with competing authorities, because knowledge was conceived as a unified whole "whose different disciplines [political, metaphysical, spiritual, etc] complemented each other perfectly."[20]

However, the rise of the university system in the twelfth century significantly altered the landscape. Early Christian thinkers had operated primarily out of the church. But while schools in ancient settings were "oriented toward a kind of 'conversion'"—a comprehensive "transformation of 'way of life' provoked by the interpretation of received texts"—the trajectory of the evolving medieval university system moved toward abstraction.[21] The increase in numbers of universities resulted in "unprecedented theological speculation."[22] A subtle shift was occurring from a vision of biblical authority centered in the spiritual *encounter* the text facilitates toward a vision of authority centered in the *ideas* the text generates.

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[19] Felipe Fernández-Armesto and Derek Wilson, *Reformations: A Radical Interpretation of Christianity and the World, 1500-2000* (New York: Scribner, 1997), 31.

[20] Jonathan Hill, *Faith in the Age of Reason: The Enlightenment from Galileo to Kant* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 10-11.

[21] Peter M. Candler, Jr., "Aquinas," in Holcomb, 62.

[22] Alister E. McGrath, *The Intellectual Origins of the European Reformation*, 2nd ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2004), 16, accessed April 22, 2017, http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com.georgefox.idm.oclc.org/book/10.1002/9780470775882.

While the spiritual exegesis of the patristics remained in use through most of the Middle Ages, its relationship with interpreters grew strained, and the twelfth and thirteenth centuries saw marked movement toward literal readings.[23] The trouble was, many established doctrines and practices "were validated by appeals to nonliteral interpretation of Scripture."[24] The allegorical or "spiritual" readings common in previous eras were flexible, making text amenable to a variety of uses. As a more literal hermeneutic took hold, many established ecclesial practices abruptly lost defense. The movement away from spiritual exegesis thus corresponded directly with the ascendency of "the two-source concept of tradition" necessary to justify these "marooned" practices.[25] In other words, the questions around the authority of tradition which so concerned Protestant reformers were generated in part by major hermeneutical shifts that resulted in an unprecedented level of textual inflexibility. The more restricted the biblical text became to a literal reading, the harder some parts were to account for and the more obvious it seemed that certain matters vital to church life were not addressed at all.

Increasingly it was recognized that "absolute biblical literalism" was not always viable in areas such as worship or church discipline. This is where the pope came in, not as independent authority but as authoritative interpreter. McGrath observes, "recognition of the need for a final court of appeal was regarded as an endorsement of, rather than as a challenge to, the primacy of Scripture."[26] Extrabiblical tradition was called upon as a line

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[23] Keith A. Mathison, *The Shape of Sola Scriptura* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2001), 66.

[24] Ibid., 68.

[25] Ibid.

[26] McGrath, 141.

of authority "primarily in relation to matters of liturgical custom and church discipline, rather than doctrine."[27]

Papal power, which had increased since the fall of the Roman Empire, reached its zenith in the early thirteenth century.[28] The idea of papal infallibility emerged around 1279, not as an increase in authority but as a check against absolute power—the notion of "immutable" decrees being proposed to constrain the authority of individual popes by binding them to the judgments of their predecessors.[29]

By the mid-twelfth century, there was already debate among theologians regarding the relationship of papal authority to that of general councils. The authoritative edge was generally given to the councils.[30] This debate took on new urgency with the events of the Great Schism (1378-1417). With multiple popes competing for power, for decades "there was no certain direction to turn for an authoritative statement of faith."[31] The Council of Constance deposed two popes before appointing Martin V. This action lent significant weight to the argument that the heart of church authority lay in the general council. But future popes—including Martin himself—contested this.[32] The debate raged for the next century, with monarchs frequently siding with the conciliarists in hopes of reinforcing their own power.[33] The medieval struggle between papists and

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[27] McGrath, 144.

[28] Mathison, 56.

[29] Ibid., 59-60.

[30] Ibid., 58.

[31] Ibid., 84.

[32] Ibid., 98.

[33] Patrick Collinson, *The Reformation: A History* (New York: Modern Library, 2004), 26-27.

conciliarists reveals recognition that an authoritative Bible requires an authoritative interpreter. To speak of the authority of "the church" in general was not enough, because it left outstanding the critical question of who represented the church.

The tremendous abuses and excesses perpetrated by popes during the medieval period compounded the authority question. The moral authority of religious leaders at all levels of church hierarchy was continually undermined by scandals and corruption. Even as moral authority eroded, there were increasing challenges to the social and intellectual authority of church representatives as the populace became better educated and the invention of the printing press made devotional literature more accessible.[34] New ideas spread quickly, and competing voices proliferated. This made the lack of clarity around ecclesial authority even more problematic, as there had never been more ideas to discern between or less clarity regarding who had authority to rule on them.

This lack of clarity regarding who spoke for the church had significant consequences for the Reformation. McGrath has convincingly argued that Luther's notion of justification was well within the range of fifteenth-century Catholic orthodoxy. Yet Luther's actions were driven to a significant extent by his perception that Pelagianism had taken over the medieval church. The fact that Luther appears not to have recognized the view he was combating did not represent the official Catholic stance demonstrates the level of confusion surrounding who was able to speak authoritatively for the church.[35] While Luther does achieve his goal of correcting significant abuses, he

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[34] McGrath, 14.

[35] Ibid., 28.

does not so much "reinvent" theology as call attention to long-standing confusion over who gets to say what authoritative theology *is*.

Authority in the Reformation Period

Headed into the Reformation period, then, critical questions of authority were already open. Most central was the question of who had the power to interpret scripture. The doctrine of sola scriptura championed by the reformers was not qualitatively different from the Catholic Church's existing position. The Reformed wing of the Reformation radicalized the doctrine, making scripture "now the touchstone of matters of church order and morality" rather than doctrine only.[36] Therefore the field of subjects over which scripture held authority arguably increased. But Protestant reformers did little to resolve the key outstanding question of who serves as authoritative interpreter.

McGrath observes that Luther "initially appears to have favored the view that all individuals could and should read the Bible in the vernacular, and base their theology directly upon that reading."[37] In this view, the authoritative interpreter is the individual lay reader. But the Peasants' Revolt of 1525 appears to have been a wake-up call to Luther regarding the dangers of this approach, causing him to become "somewhat skeptical concerning the ability of Herr Omnes to interpret Scripture."[38]

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[36] McGrath, 147.

[37] Ibid., 130.

[38] Ibid.

The Bible of late medieval Catholicism was "almost universally published with the text of the Gloss and the comments upon that Gloss by other interpreters."[39] Reformers like Luther worked to disentangle the biblical text from such received commentary. However, after the Reformation, commentary was quickly reintegrated into Protestant Bibles as a means of offering critical "ministerial guidance" in interpretation.[40] The qualifications might have been different—language skills, for example, rather than church office—but Protestantism nevertheless soon arrived at a practice remarkably close to the Catholic practice of putting authoritative interpretation in the hands of a few who were specially qualified.

The irony of this correspondence was not lost on the leaders of the Radical Reformation. While magisterial reformers like Luther and Calvin argued that "Scripture was the sole source of revelation, the sole infallible authority,"[41] they held that scripture should be "interpreted in and by the Church within the hermeneutical context of the rule of faith."[42] For the radical reformers, however, "secondary authorities such as the Church, the regula fidei, and the fathers were considered irrelevant at best. All that was necessary, according to these men, was the individual and his Bible."[43] They were, in their minds, simply following through on the reformers' own project by distancing themselves completely from both tradition and ecclesial authority. Although this position was

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[39] Mathison, 99.

[40] Harry S. Stout, "Word and Order in Colonial New England," in *The Bible in America: Essays in Cultural History*, eds. Nathan O. Hatch and Mark A. Noll (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 22.

[41] Mathison, 128.

[42] Ibid., 151.

[43] Ibid., 123.

condemned by both Catholics and Protestant reformers, Mathison argues it is the Radical Reformation's treatment of authority that contemporary evangelicals reflect in their practice of sola scriptura.[44]

Calvin was among the Protestant reformers who initially tried to retain a role for tradition within the church's vision of authority. But this became increasingly difficult as reformers used accusations of "influence by tradition" to discredit those with whom they disagreed.[45] For its part, during the Council of Trent, the Catholic Church attempted to maintain a sense of fluidity between scripture and tradition. But backlash against Protestantism quickly overpowered the council's nuance, with the result that scripture and tradition were increasingly treated by the Counter-Reformation as "two separate sources of revelation."[46] Protestants reacted by rejecting tradition even more forcefully. In short, Protestantism and Catholicism worked like repelling magnets, pushing each other toward unhelpful extremes.

Calvin described the Bible as "dictated" by the Spirit[47]—strong language reflecting the post-Reformation need to reinforce the one remaining source of Christian authority. For Protestants, the authority of the Spirit's testimony in scripture was increasingly set against the authority of the Spirit's testimony in the living community of faith. As N.T. Wright notes, the result was that instead of taking on the question of how

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[44] Mathison, 244.

[45] John R. Franke, "Scripture, Tradition, and Authority: Reconstructing the Evangelical Conception of Sola Scripture," in Bacote, Miguélez, and Okholm, 198.

[46] Ibid., 199.

[47] Randall C. Zachman, "John Calvin," in Holcomb, 115.

authority itself should be conceived, Protestants simply instituted "a paper pope instead of a human one."[48] While addressing the problem of ecclesial corruption, new problems were created by locating authority in the individual interpreter's subjective experience of Spirit and Word.[49] In addition, by trying to cut tradition completely from their hermeneutical grid, Protestants often became blind to how tradition was already operative in their interpretative assumptions.

In addition to the critical questions surrounding the "who" of authoritative interpretation, the Reformation period saw increasing concern around the "what" of the authoritative text. By the late fifteenth century, humanism's project of "returning to the sources" had begun to generate interest in "evaluating the reliability of received texts."[50] For the first time, significant questions were raised about the textual tradition of the Vulgate, upon which much of medieval theology was built.[51] The development of philology was embraced by reformers like Luther as "providentially ordained" to provide "the means by which a much-needed purification and reform of doctrine might come about."[52] Philological examination exposed, for example, the vital difference between "doing penance" and "being penitent."[53] In the Reformers' enthusiasm for how philology could support their theological project, however, they rarely observed how this

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[48] N.T. Wright, "How Can the Bible Be Authoritative?" *Vox Evangelica* 21 (1991), accessed November 27, 2015, http://ntwrightpage.com/Wright_Bible_Authoritative.htm.

[49] Hendrick van den Belt, "Scripture as the Voice of God: The Continuing Importance of Autopistia," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 13, no. 4 (October 2011): 444-445, accessed November 29, 2015, http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2400.2011.00593.x.

[50] McGrath, 119.

[51] Ibid.

[52] Ibid., 134.

[53] Ibid., 131-132.

methodology was sowing the seeds of lasting uncertainty into the biblical text. With the criticism of the Vulgate, the question shifted for the first time from "Is the Bible authoritative, and on what subjects?" to "Which Bible?"

The victory the reformers achieved in the Protestant Reformation was a victory for doctrine. But it could be argued that this achievement did not involve a fundamental change in the overall standing of scripture. While modestly expanding the Bible's authoritative reach to a wider range of subjects, the reformers also made scripture more vulnerable by exposing textual and interpretative uncertainties without a means to resolve them.

Authority in the Enlightenment

The period immediately following the Reformation saw an explosion in vernacular Bible translations, which were crucial for Protestants aiming to combat Catholic doctrine. But vernacular translations were not without dangers. First, as Luther discovered with onset of the Peasants' Revolt, it is impossible to anticipate in advance what people will make of the text. Second, the multiplication of vernacular translations with nuanced differences "revealed the very human side of the biblical text that the doctrine of sola scriptura could never admit."[54] In comparing vernaculars, people were essentially seeing behind the authoritative curtain.

This is the reason that, after an early flood of translations, in the seventeenth century the flow of translations abruptly stopped. As Sheehan says, "First, the vernacular

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[54] Jonathan Sheehan, *The Enlightenment Bible: Translation, Scholarship, Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 4, accessed April 21, 2017, ProQuest Ebrary.

Bible was made legitimate and authentic; and then it was fixed into a canon that hid those worrisome human aspects of the Bible."[55] But it was too late. In conflicts, religious groups like the Puritans drew "inspirations and proofs from different translations of Scripture" to use against each other.[56] Once again the question of the authority of scripture was complicated by the question "Which scripture?"

Legaspi observes that the Reformation effectively marks the end of the Bible's capacity to function as "scripture" in any straightforward and uncomplicated sense. Because both Catholics and Protestants claimed scripture, "its nature and authority had to be explicated and legitimated with reference to extrascriptural concepts, whether juridically, as among Catholics, or doctrinally, as among Protestants."[57] Adjudicating required some kind of outside authoritative appeal.

Although Catholics had warned Protestant reformers about the "spiritual anarchy" that would result from their dismissal of ecclesial authority, Protestants staked their project on their assumption of the "perspicuity of Scripture."[58] There proved to be a limit on what perspicuity could be trusted to cover, however, and within a few decades Protestant groups had "fortified their positions by drawing up creeds that effectively precluded private interpretations."[59] By the late sixteenth century, Protestantism entered

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[55] Sheehan, 4.

[56] Stout, 31.

[57] Michael C. Legaspi, *The Death of Scripture and the Rise of Biblical Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 4.

[58] George M. Marsden, "Everyone One's Own Interpreter? The Bible, Science, and Authority in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America," in Hatch and Nolls, 80.

[59] Ibid.

an "Age of Confessionalism" with "different groups…increasingly concerned with defining their own beliefs, or confessions, in contrast with everyone else's."[60] It turned out that 'scripture alone' for Protestants, just as for Catholics, required some kind of theological lens or "rule of faith" to guide interpretation.

One result of the ongoing conflict between Catholics and Protestants was an increased "textualization" of the Bible, as both groups studied the words more and more closely in order to combat each other. Legaspi observes that these habits of engagement served to "objectify the Bible in ways that contributed to many future problems."[61] In the early Enlightenment period, however, textualization was seen as a "remedy," a way to "use critical science to regularize interpretation and save the text from confessional abuse."[62] The hope was that new methods of biblical scholarship could rescue the Bible from entrenched confessional divisions and ultimately restore the unity of the church.

Scholarship, it was believed, could provide a reliable ground for discerning biblical truth, bypassing the risk of too much reliance on the church (Catholicism) or the Spirit (Anabaptism).[63] Scholarship itself became a new anchor for biblical authority. Hopes were high it could produce a definitive biblical manuscript that moved beyond textual errors and translational disputes to achieve the textual "certainty" missing since the first questions surrounding the Vulgate.[64]

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[60] Hill, 75.

[61] Legaspi, 19.

[62] Ibid., 21.

[63] Sheehan, 8.

[64] Ibid., 33.

The original aim of Enlightenment biblical scholarship was to save biblical authority by placing it on indisputable grounds, but the larger Enlightenment investment in the authority of reason complicated matters. Where revelation and reason had been previously assumed to function in cooperation, there was a growing sense of competition between the two.

Some scholars responded to this new challenge by searching for ways to defend the doctrines of Christianity on the basis of reason. The result was the development of deism, which, as Hill describes it, "is what happened when people thought of religion in terms of reason instead of revelation…and then decided that some parts of religion didn't meet reason's strict criteria."[65] It was a short path from deism to atheism, as thinkers like Hume exposed "just how unreliable reason could be," guided as it is by our predispositions, our cultural situations, and our tendency to believe first and rationalize after.[66]

Other groups like American evangelicals responded to this new emphasis on reason by adopting a "common sense" philosophy that assumed "God would do nothing less than reveal the facts of Scripture with an accuracy that would satisfy the most scrupulous modern scientific standards."[67] The mode of biblical truth and the mode of scientific truth were deemed to be the same—clean, certain, classifiable.

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[65] Hill, 153.

[66] Ibid., 170-171.

[67] Marsden, 90.

Theologians found themselves in need of an "intellectually unassailable bedrock on which to construct their theological house."[68] The world of science required a "self-convincing principle" on which to ground itself, and for Protestant universities, the "science" of theology was grounded on the self-convincing principle of scripture.[69] This was a significant step away from the early church's inclination to ground authority in the living Spirit who moves in the community and witnesses through scripture. In effect, during the Enlightenment period, the authority of scripture and of the Spirit's witness were moving increasingly apart.[70]

It is no coincidence that the "definitive statement" on inerrancy, by Hodge and Warfield, came out soon after the Catholic dogmatization of papal infallibility.[71] Both doctrines represent attempts to match the (so-called) certainty of science with an anchor for Christian authority. By the 1940s the movement now known as "evangelicalism" had emerged from fundamentalism. The Bible was taken as "a storehouse for true proposition,"[72] and its authority was located primarily in its power to establish orthodoxy rather than its capacity to serve as the Spirit's "vehicle" for creating transformative encounter with Christ. [73]

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[68] Stanley Grenz, "Nurturing the Soul, Informing the Mind: The Genesis of the Evangelical Scripture Principle," in Bacote, Miguélez, and Okholm, 29.

[69] Belt, 441.

[70] Ibid., 440.

[71] Donald W. Dayton, "The Piestist Critique of Biblical Inerrancy," in Bacote, Miguélez, and Okholm, 77. The doctrine of papal infallibility was defined by the First Vatican Council in 1870. Hodge and Warfield's defining article "Inspiration" appeared in the *Presbyterian Review* in April 1881.

[72] Grenz, 31.

[73] Ibid., 37.

In a curious way, Christian encounter with the Enlightenment authority of reason ultimately led in two directions at once—toward the rejection of biblical faith as indefensible by reason, and toward heightened expectations of how the Bible's authority must operate. Interestingly, the doctrine of sola scriptura received a boost during the Great Awakening by theological liberals who were seeking "to gain leverage against the entrenched Calvinism of the Awakening…"[74] The reformers' own methods were turned against their heirs, as theological ideas were not debated directly but instead were dismissed through a challenge to the underlying basis of their authority.

Authority Following the American Revolution

Just as significant as the ascendancy of science for the question of religious authority was the rise of democracy. Hatch argues that the American Revolution "dramatically expanded the circle of people who considered themselves capable of thinking for themselves…"[75] It represented no less than a "frontal assault on the authority of tradition, of mediating elites, and of organizations that were perpetual rather than volitional."[76]

As the authority of political figures was called into question by the American Revolution, so natural extension of principle led quickly to the clergy. People began to "question the right of any order of men to claim authority to interpret God's Word."[77]

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[74] Nathan O. Hatch, "Sola Scriptura and Novus Ordo Seclorum," in Hatch and Nolls, 62.

[75] Nathan Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 6.

[76] Hatch, "Sola Scriptura," 70-71.

[77] Ibid., 65.

Suddenly the centuries-old debate over authoritative interpretation—Pope or council, Catholic or Protestant, Lutheran or Reformed—was resolved: none of the above. The arbiter of authority became the individual conscience.

This "populist hermeneutic" was wildly appealing because "it proclaimed a new ground of certainty for a generation distressed that it could no longer hear the voice of God above the din of sectarian confusion."[78] It suggested all that was required for the knowledge of truth was for an individual to sit with their Bible and listen to their own "spiritual impulses."[79] This was a radically new conception of religious authority, yet its radicalness went unnoticed, according to Hatch, because of its appeal to the accepted Protestant notion of sola scriptura. Unacknowledged was the fact that this notion of authority lodged in the judgment of the individual was reflected not in Reformation Protestantism at large but only in the Radical Reformation strongly rejected by the reformers. "A revolution had taken place," Hatch argues, but nobody even noticed.[80]

This democratized idea of religious authority has continued in American Protestantism for centuries, but time has exposed its profound weaknesses. In the absence of a shared authoritative source, religious practice grew increasingly fragmented. Joseph Smith represents a prominent example of someone who despaired of the lack of an "authoritative religious voice" and turned inward to reliance on personal spiritual

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[78] Hatch, *Democratization*, 182.

[79] Ibid., 10.

[80] Hatch, "Sola Scriptura," 71.

experience.[81] Others were drawn to the way Smith's teachings gave "authoritative answers" they felt were otherwise lacking.[82]

Hatch notes that the radical democratizing impulse, with its aversion to authoritative leadership, also "opened the door to religious demagogues."[83] Lacking the organized authority of earlier ages, popular leaders "could exercise tyranny unimagined by elites in the more controlled environment" of prior periods.[84] Americans had effectively unwound themselves from traditional sources of religious authority, yet they found themselves more vulnerable without it, subject to the winds and whims of changing philosophies, to pains of fragmentation, and to the danger of self-appointed dictatorial leaders.

Implications for the Twenty-first Century Context

This broad historical overview of the church's engagement with biblical authority suggests some of the reasons the contemporary debate around human sexuality has proven so intractable. Participants on both sides of the debate continue to hold an Enlightenment-style faith in the power of biblical or scientific scholarship to overcome division and reestablish consensus. But the truth is, whether on this question or any other, no amount of "facts" or hermeneutical clarity allow us to circumvent the fundamental theological question regarding where and how authority operates. Even granting biblical

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[81] Hatch, *Democratization,* 114.

[82] Ibid., 121.

[83] Ibid., 16.

[84] Ibid.

authority as a given, examination of the church's history reveals crucial differences in the primary end toward which the text's authority is presumed to function. Is the end knowledge of Christ? Transformative encounter? The definition of doctrine? The binding of behavior? The establishment of ecclesial order? The church's understanding of the end of biblical authority has changed over various periods, always with significant implications for how the text is read and applied. A passage read with the assumption that its primary authority is to reveal Christ may produce very different conclusions from the same passage read with the assumption that its primary authority is to dictate contemporary behavior.[85]

Christian history has also demonstrated that the authority of the biblical text is inexorably intertwined with the authority of its interpreters. The early church acknowledged this reality in speaking not only of inspired texts but also of inspired councils and leaders. The Reformation arose in significant part as a response to corruption in the interpretative hierarchy. Its legacy has understandably been lingering suspicion of any authority located in the fallible human person. Yet the subsequent history of Protestantism, including the development of confessional traditions and the rise of charismatic leaders, demonstrates it is functionally impossible to engage biblical authority without grappling with the "who" of authoritative interpretation. Even the most determined refusal to acknowledge human authority ends up simply locating that authority in the individual conscience or submerging it beneath forces like popular media.

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[85] A significant example of this distinction is found in Gregory Boyd's work *Crucifixion of the Warrior God* (Fortress Press, 2017). Boyd explicates the difference between reading Israel's conquest narratives as a model for contemporary behavior and as a story ultimately intended to shed light on the significance and radicalness of Jesus Christ.

Finally, Christian history suggests a fundamental question about the way that authority moves through time. We observed in the early church a kind of "faithful fluidity" in relationship to Scripture, which was gradually "traditioned" over time as core narratives came in contact with new situations. Even after the canon was closed, a kind of faithful flexibility remained in methods of exegesis that allowed diverse observations to be integrated into the conversation concerning 'biblical' faith and practice. The rule of faith and respect for some level of authority in the church's ongoing, lived tradition provided additional sources of insight into evolving contexts. But for Protestants the hardening of confessional boundaries, narrowing of accepted exegetical methods, and rejection of tradition have resulted in a contemporary situation where there are more questions than ever to ask and less resources to address them.

For many, the pressing question of the twenty-first century is whether authority in Protestantism is purely a function of the past, looking backward to recover a word already given, or whether the Spirit's presence in the life of the faith community implies a forward-dimension to authority.[86] Is biblical authority better pictured as a standing stone or moving stream? Is it entirely given by history, or is there any element still emerging?

[86] This debate within Protestantism has remarkable parallels with judicial debates currently unfolding around Constitutional "originalism."

SECTION 2:

OTHER PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

The stakes of the current Christian debate around human sexuality extend beyond grammar and hermeneutics and even such a vital matter as theological anthropology. The twenty-first century church is wrestling with the foundational question of what biblical authority touches, who carries it, and how it moves through time. There is no single, obvious answer to this question, and various segments of the church are grappling with it differently.

This section will briefly survey four prominent approaches to biblical authority and its relationship to Christian faith and practice. It is no coincidence that these four approaches to authority map broadly onto four major "streams" within western Christianity. It could be argued that it is precisely its unique approach to negotiating authority that marks each stream off as distinct. In each case, I will briefly examine the most distinctive elements of the approach and then suggest some of its potential strengths and limitations.

The Authority of Tradition

Perspectives

Protestants have often misunderstood the Catholic position on tradition, thinking of it as a second source of authority, independent from scripture. By contrast, Portier defines tradition in Catholicism as "a living process in which the revelation of God in

Jesus Christ is given and received, handed on, reflected upon, and interpreted anew."[87] Scripture is central to this process but is also understood as a one part of a greater whole.

There is in Catholic understanding an element of superabundance to the kergyma which "goes far beyond the written text" and "can only be preserved in a living subject."[88] The authority of tradition is rooted in part in the recognition that the gospel is too dynamic and encompassing to be contained to book alone. The Word, once made flesh, will never be reduced to less.

The Catholic notion of authoritative tradition is also grounded on the assumption that "Scripture by itself does not furnish us with the complete and authentic meaning of the text."[89] The biblical text always requires some level of interpretation. The authority of the Church, present in tradition and magisterium, is part of how scripture "explains itself" in changing contexts.[90]

Catholic theologians suggest there is hubris in believing any interpreter *could* read apart from a stream of tradition, let alone that such a thing would be desirable. Portier describes tradition simply as "an assumed, shared context of Christian common sense."[91] To refuse any role to tradition is to deny unspoken assumptions already operative within what a group takes as "common sense" and thus to allow those assumptions to function

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[87] William L. Portier, *Tradition and Incarnation: Foundations of Christian Theology* (New York: Paulist Press, 1994), 135.

[88] Yves Congar, *Tradition and Traditions: the Biblical, Historical, and Theological Evidence for Catholic Teaching on Tradition*, 2nd ed. (Granville, OH: Basilica Press, 1998), 348.

[89] Ibid., 154.

[90] Ibid., 267.

[91] Portier, 136.

uncritically. Catholics observe that attempts to withdraw from one stream of tradition merely leads to the institution of another. Protestants who cut ties with the papacy still read under the "authority of a particular living interpretation of Scripture"—whether of Luther, Calvin, Wesley, Barth, or another.[92] Tradition is a vacuum which something always rushes to fill.

But tradition in the Catholic view also has a generative function. As Yves Congar describes it, the text of scripture is like the outline of a painting that must be filled in to come into its fullness.[93] This is the church's role under the authority of Christ and the guidance of the Spirit. Tradition "implies an activity of the Church living its belief, and consequently elaborating it..."[94] In its ongoing life, the church continues to learn from experience, and its experience naturally informs how it reads the biblical text. Congar observes:

> In wishing only to read the text and ignoring what it has produced in the Church's historical life, the Reformers failed to see what the letter could contain or suggest beyond or in addition to itself, things which could be discovered in the light of a living and prolonged experience of Christian realities.[95]

The process of history involves not a "fall" from textual purity, as Protestants fear, but the possibility of real growth in understanding as the text encounters new contexts.

Catholicism takes seriously the authority given the apostles to speak and act in Christ's name, suggesting "the Word of God in Christ is present with the apostles in all

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[92] Louis Bouyer, *The Word, Church, and Sacraments: In Protestantism and Catholicism*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2004), 45.

[93] Congar, 22.

[94] Ibid., 5.

[95] Ibid., 462.

its immediacy, all its power to create and re-create."[96] The transfer of this authority from Christ to apostles to the church—and specifically to the magisterium—is critical to allowing the gospel to be creatively "actualized" in changing historical situations.

While allowing room for creation and development, Congar observes that care must be taken that "no 'development' should occur or become established which cannot be justified, within the living Tradition, on the basis of the revealed deposit…."[97] There is a core to the story that remains fundamentally unchanged. A vital distinction must be maintained between the status of "the events and doctrines *de Christo*, the objects of the kerygma," which have "an absolute and immutable character" and "those rules of conduct laid down by the apostles under the guidance of the Holy Spirit," which may be "open to modification, or at least growth, according to the needs of the historical life of the church."[98]

For Catholicism, it is also vital to recognize that the activity of God is not restricted to scripture only, as "God does not manifest and communicate himself in words alone, and so ultimately in ideas, but in realities."[99] One such reality is the Eucharist, where the presence of God is recognized as real and revelatory. Many scholars have summed up the difference between Protestants and Catholics on this point as the difference between "purity and plentitude." While scripture guards the purity of the kerygma, from a Catholic perspective to look to scripture "alone" for the manifestation of

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[96] Bouyer, 49.

[97] Congar, 403.

[98] Ibid., 11.

[99] Ibid., 67.

God is to overlook God's revelatory presence in history, in the living community, and in creation itself.

Contributions

Five hundred years after the Protestant Reformation, Protestants could gain much from revisiting the insights of their Catholic siblings. One important insight is the vital recognition that the authority of the Bible can never be entirely severed from the authority of the church in which it was written, collected, edited, and canonized. Protestants who would seek to reinforce the authority of scripture might begin by grappling with their ecclesiology—an area which Protestantism has sorely neglected.

Protestants may also be challenged by Catholicism toward greater honesty about the role tradition is playing in debates around scripture, which are frequently fueled by competing claims of "common sense" readings of texts. Protestants would do well to heed the warning that "interpretative communities that… seek an interpretation unencumbered by the 'distorting' influence of fallible 'human traditions' are in fact enslaved by interpretative patterns that are allowed to function uncritically, precisely because they are unacknowledged."[100]

Catholicism issues another significant challenge to Protestantism in asking where God might be manifest in the world outside the biblical text. The Protestant vision could be enriched by exploring the full range of God's gifts and considering the extent to which they may be genuinely revelatory.

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[100] Franke, 201.

Perhaps most importantly, the Catholic approach to embedding the authority of scripture with the broader authority of tradition offers a way to address the need for God's word in response to new questions and situations. Without putting the kerygma up for grabs, it suggests it is possible for the community of faith to learn and grow through its ongoing, lived experience. It acknowledges that the movement of history requires a living authority able to address unprecedented contexts.

Challenges

There are, however, distinct downsides to the Catholic approach to the authority of tradition. These weaknesses were on full display during the late medieval period. Chief among them is the reality that any notion of authoritative tradition involves some level of dependence on fallible human beings. Tradition can be rich, insightful, even inspired; it can reflect true spiritual growth and illumination. But tradition has a way of picking chaff up with the wheat. It is vulnerable to deliberate corruption and accidental distortion.

Tradition may be even more vulnerable to distortion depending on where its authority is anchored. The Catholic Church has historically vested this authority most directly in its magisterium. While some argue that credentialed religious "professionals" are the most qualified for discernment, others suggest that consolidating such power in the hands of a few increases potential for corruption. Even if one were to grant a possible authoritative role to tradition, there would still be an enormous outstanding question of where that living tradition should be discerned. This questioning of the practical implications of the human dimension of interpretative power is one of the vital and lasting contributions of the Protestant Reformation.

The Authority of Scripture 'Alone'

Perspectives

In response to the ecclesial corruption of the late medieval era, the reformers asserted the doctrine of sola scriptura. Mathison offers a classic articulation of the importance of sola scriptura for Protestants: "Because of the Church's propensity to wander from the truth path, she needs a standard of truth that remains constant and sure, and that standard cannot be herself. It can only be the inspired and infallible Scripture."[101] Granting scripture unique status as the only Christian authority beyond the human capacity for error was critical in offering the reformers ground from which to critique the tradition and abuses of ecclesial elites.

Over the past five centuries of Protestant development, however, the doctrine of sola scriptura has undergone significant changes. Mathison observes that American evangelicals, who in many ways act as contemporary standard-bearers for sola scriptura, "do not seem to have noticed that the classical and foundational Reformed doctrine of *sola scriptura* has been so altered that it is virtually unrecognizable."[102] There is an essential difference between understanding Scripture as the "sole infallible authority" and viewing it as the "sole authority altogether."[103] For much of evangelicalism, biblical authority has come to function in a radical new fashion as the *only* source of authority.

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[101] Mathison, 264.

[102] Ibid., 238.

[103] Ibid., 128.

The foundation for this revolutionary shift was laid during the Enlightenment, when evangelical Christianity was exposed to scientific notions such as the perspicuity of truth—the idea that "through careful observation…properly informed individuals…had access to the laws of the nature"—and the immutability of truth—the idea that such laws are "universal and invariable."[104] Evangelicals concluded that "principles for knowing truth in one area of God's revelation should parallel those of another area," implying that the truth of scripture, like that of science, is plain, accessible, objective, and universal.[105]

The idea emerged that people could "access divine commands and instructions in an unmediated fashion through the Bible, without recourse to human authorities or traditions, which are subject to error."[106] The original Protestant reformers had not implied that biblical authority could operate "apart from ministerial guidance."[107] Their notion of sola scriptura included space for legitimate church authority. However, in an American context where "Enlightenment rationalism" came together with "democratic populism," the idea of an unmediated Bible was incredibly seductive.[108] The meaning of sola scriptura was reconfigured to suggest the right "to individually evaluate all doctrines according to the only authority, the Scripture"—a notion quite distinct from the reformers' conception.[109] While ostensibly locating religious authority in scripture alone,

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[104] Marsden, 80-81.

[105] Ibid., 80.

[106] Franke, 200.

[107] Hatch, "Sola Scriptura," 61.

[108] Mathison, 144.

[109] Ibid., 240.

in actuality "this concept of Scripture places the final authority in the reason and judgment of each individual believer."[110]

In practice, the shift in authority toward the individual is never simple or complete. As Hatch notes, declining authority in American church institutions in the early republic corresponded with a rise in "de facto authority" for the religious press.[111] When individuals looked for a uniting voice, it was the press which filled the void.[112] But at the end of the day, it is ultimately the individual who is left to arbitrate between voices.

One consequence to approaching scripture as the exclusive source of authority is that it increases the stakes of hermeneutics. Since the rise of historical-criticism, there has been concentrated effort to anchor textual meaning in the reconstructed "intention" of the original writer. This is true for many Christians but particularly for evangelicals, who have staked much of their argument for objectivity on the notion of discernable authorial intent. What we are seeking in biblical interpretation is, as Blomberg describes, "the meaning its author(s) most likely intended for its original audience(s) or addressees based

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[110] Mathison, 240.

[111] Hatch, *Democratization*, 145.

[112] This pattern continues today in evangelicalism in the influence of religious bloggers. This is a source of increasing concern among many leading evangelicals, who ask where these writers are deriving their authority (See Tish Harrison Warren, "Who's in Charge of the Christian Blogosphere?" *Christianity Today*, April 27, 2017, accessed September 7, 2017, http://www.christianitytoday.com/women/2017/april/whos-in-charge-of-christian-blogosphere.html). The irony is that as long as Scripture is the only acknowledged source of formal authority, there is little ground on which such concerns can be arbitrated.

on the grammar and syntax."[113] For evangelicals "a text cannot mean what it never meant."[114]

Evangelicals typically defend a strong notion of authorial intent for two key reasons. First, without limiting meaning to the author's intent, we are left with the question, "Who speaks for God?"[115] In the absence of anything comparable to the Catholic magisterium, it is unclear where such authority might lie. Second, "when we remove history and authorship…we are left only with a reflection of ourselves, losing the text, which is other, and verging on hermeneutical solipsism…"[116] Interpretation becomes an exercise of gazing in the mirror.

Contributions

The strengths of the evangelical approach to scripture as the only source of Christian authority are most visible in consideration of the Protestant Reformation. Treatment of scripture as the sole source of infallible authority provides a powerful opening for critiquing established power structures and exposing corruption in existing religious practice. It recognizes the way the traditions of any religious community can take wrong tracks. It accounts for the fallibility of human leaders, whose words and

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[113] Craig L. Blomberg, "The Historical-Critical/Grammatical View," in *Biblical Hermeneutics: Five Views,* eds. Stanley E. Porter, Beth M. Stovell, and Craig Blomberg (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 27.

[114] Gordon D. Fee and Stuart Murray, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 30.

[115] Ibid., 31.

[116] Stanley E. Porter and Beth M. Stovell, "Interpreting Together: Synthesizing Five Views of Biblical Hermeneutics," in Porter, Stovell, and Blomberg, 208.

actions may be impacted by their vested interests. Sola scriptura operates perhaps most effectively as a corrective against abuses.

The evangelical approach of Scripture alone also has the positive impact of promoting study of the Bible. It is no coincidence that evangelicalism is perhaps the most prolific Christian stream in producing resources on hermeneutics and providing exegetical tools accessible to laity. The narrow focus of authority offers high motivation to engage that authority deeply and seriously.[117]

Challenges

It is also true, however, that time and shifting contexts have exposed glaring weaknesses in the evangelical approach. To begin with, biblical interpretation is never as "pure" as evangelicals' philosophy suggests. Weber observes "there is something incongruous about fundamentalists who say that they can read the Bible by themselves, then pore over Scofield's notes in order to discover what the text really means."[118] No quarter of evangelicalism approaches the Bible from scratch. Evangelicalism, like all Christian streams, is shaped in significant ways by accepted doctrines and by the influence of charismatic leaders. These are precisely the sorts of influences other Christians identify as "tradition." Because evangelicalism is so invested in granting no authority outside the biblical text, however, it is difficult to acknowledge where that

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[117] A 2014 Pew Research study found that 63% of evangelicals read the Bible at least once a week, compared to 30% of Mainline Protestants and 25% of Catholics. See Abigail Geiger, "5 Facts on How Americans View the Bible and Other Religious Texts," *Pew Research Center*, April 14, 2017, accessed September 6, 2017, http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/04/14/5-facts-on-how-americans-view-the-bible-and-other-religious-texts/.

[118] Timothy P. Weber, "The Two-Edged Sword: The Fundamentalist Use of the Bible," in Hatch and Nolls, 114.

outside authority is already operative and even harder to correct it when it becomes abusive or distorted. By refusing to acknowledge other sources of authority, evangelicalism risks becoming blindly captive to them.

The autonomy given the individual also makes evangelicalism vulnerable to certain excesses. Evangelical scholar Michael Graves concludes that, given the reality of individual subjectivity, the ethical response is to conclude that "the authority of Scripture functions to mediate God's authority to me as an individual Christian, and does not give me divine authority to exercise over others."[119] In an era of polarization, there is a great deal to be said for such a posture of tolerance. However, as Mathison quips, "Anarchy is not the cure for tyranny."[120] Too often in evangelicalism anarchy is the practical result, as groups endlessly divide and fracture and individuals seek out communities that agree with their own subjective judgments.

One way evangelicals have sought to put a check on unconstrained subjectivity is through emphasis on authorial intent. However, when a strong inerrantist view of scripture is combined with a doctrine-driven approach that respects only literal meanings, the result is sometimes dangerous textual readings that the early church took pains to avoid. Origen, for example, discusses the need for a figurative reading of Joshua, recognizing that a literal reading could only serve to generate appetite for violence.[121] Evangelicals, in narrowing their interpretative techniques, can back themselves into hazardous corners earlier Christians avoided by holding their strong notions of biblical

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[119] Graves, 141.

[120] Mathison, 153.

[121] Graves, 125.

authority within a framework of rich interpretive possibilities made possible by "layered" spiritual exegesis.

In shifting the focus of the ends of scripture from divine encounter or spiritual transformation to a propositional focus, evangelicals have often been forced to hyper-extend their notion of biblical infallibility in ways that leave them vulnerable. James Orr, one of the founders of fundamentalism, observed that a strict inerrantist position is "a most suicidal position for any defender of revelation," hanging the entire edifice of faith on "minute details," any one of which, if threatened, could collapse the whole.[122] But contemporary evangelicalism has largely taken this risk, measuring infallibility by standards that in many cases are foreign to the text itself, and thereby making the entire project more fragile.

Finally, the approach to scripture as sole authority, when combined with a strict emphasis on authorial intent, leaves evangelicalism in some sense less "flexible" than other Christian streams. The strength from an evangelical perspective, of course, is that this limits the possibility of error. Yet it is also true that granting some element of authority to tradition or church or Spirit leaves open the possibility of creative development or fresh insight as God speaks to new questions or contexts. With scripture as the sole authority, for better or worse the speech of God is largely constrained to what God has already spoken.

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[122] Grenz, 33.

The Authority of the Spirit

Perspectives

Pentecostalism originated in part in reaction to the excessive rationalism of modernity. It bears notable resemblance to post-modernity in its rejection of "the hegemony of reason," its interest in narrative, and particularly its emphasis on "the essential function of experience."[123] For Pentecostalism, knowledge has many sources and forms, and direct experience of the Spirit itself possesses "epistemological status."[124] According to Martin,

> While religious rationalists (Evangelical fundamentalists) define truth in terms of their dogma that is undergirded by the historicity and inerrancy of Scripture, Pentecostals define truth in terms of the genuineness of their encounter and continuing relationship with God through his Word and his Spirit.[125]

Authority is anchored in relational encounter with God that takes place both in and beyond the biblical text.

For Pentecostalism, the living community is in a constant process of seeking to integrate its own experience of the Spirit with the experience of the community of faith attested to by scripture. Many Pentecostals point to Acts 15 as a key example of their approach. Faced with significant questions concerning Gentiles in the church, early

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[123] Bradley Truman Noel, *Pentecostal and Postmodern Hermeneutics* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2010), 9.

[124] Mark J. Cartledge, "Text-Community-Spirit: The Challenges Posed by Pentecostal Theological Method to Evangelical Theology," in *Spirit and Scripture: Exploring a Pneumatic Hermeneutic,* eds. Kevin L. Spawn and Archie T. Wright (New York: T & T Clark, 2012), 137.

[125] Lee Roy Martin, "Hearing the Voice of God: Pentecostal Hermeneutics and the Book of Judges," in *Pentecostal Hermeneutics: A Reader*, ed. Lee Roy Martin (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2013), 211, accessed March 12, 2016, EBSCOhost E-book Collection.

Christianity "seems to have begun with the church's experience and only later moves to a consideration of the Scripture."[126] It appears that experience of the Spirit significantly impacted which biblical texts were viewed as authoritatively relevant to a given situation and how those texts were applied.

Pentecostal scholars also note the role experience plays in influencing which textual interpretations readers find plausible. As Spawn points out, "each approach to biblical hermeneutics is experientially informed, since every interpreter inevitably weighs testimony through the lens of the past."[127] One's own experience with supernatural phenomenon, for example, will impact how one interprets the significance of the Bible's testimony to such phenomena. Therefore, Pentecostals argue experience of the Spirit (or lack thereof) is functioning authoritatively at some level for all interpreters, whether acknowledged or not.

One defining feature of Pentecostalism is a closing of the distance between the work of the Spirit in the biblical text—from revelation to canonization—and the work of the Spirit in the living community. This emphasis puts Pentecostals at odds both with evangelicals, who prefer to speak of scripture in terms of a "closed divine deposit," and with liberals, who prefer to see it as "an open and merely human process."[128] Pentecostals, by contrast, leave room for a "substantive ongoing revelatory role" for a living Spirit, who continues to "speak an inspired message to the congregation which is relevant for

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[126] John Christopher Thomas, "Women, Pentecostalism, and the Bible: An Experiment in Pentecostal Hermeneutics," in Martin, 85.

[127] Kevin L. Spawn, "The Principle of Analogy and Biblical Interpretation in the Renewal Tradition," in Spawn and Wright, 71.

[128] Rickie D. Moore, "Canon and Charisma in the Book of Deuteronomy," in Martin, 15.

the time."[129] This inspired message for the present is what Pentecostals call "prophecy." A "written authoritative text" is placed in conversation with "extemporaneous prophetic revelation" that "provides insight not available to those restricted to reading the text" regarding how a biblical word applies to a given situation.[130]

Beyond applying a past word to a contemporary situation, Pentecostalism's high regard for the present speech of the Spirit allows for the possibility a text could "occasion an insight" of a different force and meaning than originally intended and still function as "the word of God."[131] Clark Pinnock argues that "the Spirit opens up Scripture today under a controlled liberty."[132] This manner of thinking takes Pentecostals well beyond the evangelical preoccupation with authorial intent. As Davies describes it, reading the Bible as a Pentecostal means interpreting scripture "by encounter more than exegesis."[133] The "original intention" of the author is less important than allowing God to "bring his own agenda" as God addresses the "questions, circumstances, and needs" the contemporary reader brings to the text.[134]

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[129] Robby Waddell, "Hearing What the Spirit Says to the Churches: Profile of a Pentecostal Reader of the Apocalypse," in Martin, 198.

[130] For example, 2 Kings 22-23. Mark J. Boda, "Word and Spirit, Scribe and Prophet in Old Testament Hermeneutics," in Spawn and Wright, 27.

[131] Clark H. Pinnock, "The Work of the Holy Spirit in Hermeneutics," *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 1, no. 2 (April 1993): 22, accessed April 5, 2016, ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials.

[132] Kevin L. Spawn and Archie T. Wright, "The Emergence of a Pneumatic Hermeneutic in the Renewal Tradition," in Spawn and Wright, 9.

[133] Andrew Davies, "What Does it Mean to Read the Bible as a Pentecostal?" in Martin, 254.

[134] Ibid.

Inspiration for Pentecostals is not merely a quality of the biblical text but also of the interpretive community guided by the Spirit.[135] Thomas argues terms like "illumination," commonly used by evangelicals to describe the Spirit's ongoing role in relation to scripture, are too "tame" to capture the extent of the Spirit's creative activity in the interpretative process.[136]

Pentecostalism also takes seriously cases within Scripture—such as circumcision or divorce—where "an experience of the Spirit…was seen to be sufficient to override previously hallowed Scripture and tradition."[137] For Pentecostals, this suggests it is possible for something to be the word of God in one situation yet be "no longer appropriate for the new situation that has emerged," "no longer effective word of God for now."[138] This understanding, Pentecostals argue, is visible in the way both Jesus and the early church interacted with scripture. It suggests that biblical instructions are authoritative not in some generic universal sense but only as they are applied by the living Spirit in appropriate linkage to present context.

Contributions

The Pentecostal emphasis on the Spirit suggests that the Bible's ultimate goal is not to convey abstract knowledge but to open living relationship—a vision which is close to the early church's. In addition, as Noel describes, "the many histories of

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[135] Cartledge, 133.

[136] Thomas, 89.

[137] James D.G. Dunn, "The Role of the Spirit in Biblical Hermeneutics," in Spawn and Wright, 154-155.

[138] Ibid., 155.

Pentecostalism testify that from its beginning, it has thrived where other representations of Christianity have struggled, simply by meeting the everyday spiritual needs of the world's most ordinary people."[139] This may be in part because an approach to the biblical text not strictly bound by authorial intent allows it to speak more directly to contemporary peoples' needs and questions. The expectation of the Spirit's capacity to engage freely within the context of relationship allows for the crucial possibility of an authoritative divine word that speaks personally, specifically, and contextually. The rapid growth of Pentecostalism suggests this is touching a profound human hunger.

Challenges

The major danger of the Pentecostal approach to authority is obvious: subjectivity. There is always danger in listening for the Spirit that one will hear only one's own voice. One way to reduce "the dangers of an uncontrolled subjectivism and/or a rampant individualism" is to discern within the context of accountable community.[140] Furthermore, as Ellington helpfully observes,

> Relationship with God…is not a closed system in which the individual believer is free to manipulate the data to satisfy his or her own desires, needs, and expectations. It is precisely because God is so intrusively real that our subjective experience is constantly being challenged and proved.[141]

It remains true, however, that regardless of any "checks," emphasis on the Spirit's present speech comes with hazards. Every individual and community, no matter how

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[139] Noel, 2-3.

[140] Thomas, 91.

[141] Scott A. Ellington, "Pentecostalism and the Authority of Scripture," in Martin, 153-154.

Spirit-filled or discerning, has blind spots. The Pentecostal emphasis on present experience of the Spirit runs the risk of losing track of key insights of the past or falling prey to the American myth of history's inevitable progress, assuming those presently living are always in position to see more clearly than those who came before.[142]

It is also worth observing that the Pentecostal emphasis on the physical manifestation of the Spirit reflects what Archer describes as a "modernistic slant on scientific experimentation language."[143] Tongues themselves become a kind "proof" of the Spirit that anchors it beyond subjectivity. This is not so different from what Catholics attempt to achieve for the authority of tradition with the doctrine of papal infallibility or what Protestants attempt to achieve in grounding "scripture alone" on the idea of inerrancy. All reflect attempts to anchor Christian authority within a modernist framework of certainty.

The Authority of Reason and Experience

Perspectives

One result of the Enlightenment was "the disruption of a unified, organic system of thought that had developed during the Middle Ages," which assumed an "essential agreement between faith and reason."[144] Perceiving biblical authority as threatened by the emergence of scientific rationalism, many Protestant scholars looked for ways to utilize

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[142] Mormonism, founded on the visionary experiences of someone formed in the Christian stream, is arguably one example of where the subjectivity of unchecked spiritual experience can lead.

[143] Archer, 33.

[144] Hill, 115.

reason "to bolster and reinforce faith."[145] Thinkers such as Locke attempted to test evidence for key Christian doctrines by the standard of reason, ultimately concluding (most) such doctrines were true, and the Bible trustworthy.[146]

The trouble was, regardless of any conclusion drawn by specific scholars in favor of orthodox Christianity, such attempts to "set the principles of Christianity on a sure and reasonable basis" had the unintentional effect of "undermining the whole edifice."[147] Where others, trained or untrained, perceived a tension between reason and revealed religion—for example, with respect to the divinity of Christ—they felt free to reject what in their judgment had failed the test of reason.[148] The resulting movement of deism came and went quickly, but its lingering impact on liberal Protestantism has been a tendency for some to distance themselves from strong "historical claims" and instead locate the Bible's authority in "transcendental truths" that reason and experience can verify.[149]

The authority of the Bible in mainline Protestant settings has also been subjected in significant ways to the authority of modern biblical scholarship. Legaspi observes that one of the key characteristics of such scholarship is "a focus on the world *of* the Bible" as opposed to "the world as seen *through* the Bible."[150]

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[145] Hill, 122.

[146] Ibid., 115. See for example Locke's work "The Reasonableness of Christianity as Delivered in the Scriptures" (1695).

[147] Ibid., 142.

[148] Ibid., 153.

[149] Marsden, 95.

[150] Legaspi, 25.

Hill notes that today "many theologians try to balance different potential sources of doctrine—scripture, tradition, the authority of the church and reason—rather than treat a single one of these as all-important."[151] The "Wesleyan quadrilateral" is one prominent example of such an attempt. But in any attempt to balance authority, the devil remains in the details, and in many mainline and liberal Protestant settings, reason retains its dominance, interrogating the Bible, tradition, and any claim of spiritual experience.

The movement from modernity to postmodernity has made it clear, however, that reason does not operate as pure and impartial source. Reason itself is informed by culture, personal disposition, and social location. Even as many cling to the modernist ideal of an "objective" and rational approach to biblical texts, other liberal Protestants are beginning to embrace the possibilities of interpretative subjectivity.

Post-modern philosophy has raised awareness of the inevitable role of the reader in creating meaning. This emphasis on the role of the reader has been particularly seized upon by liberationist interpreters. As Lozada Jr. writers, "each reader/interpreter brings her or his own unique identity set to the text, and this provides the worldview through which the meaning and relevancy of the narrative is determined."[152] Rather than attempt to minimize the impact of the interpreter, such an approach forefronts the interpreter's experience—especially class, gender, and social location.

Embracing the element of subjectivity inherent even in reason entails a shift in authority away from the text and toward experience. But experience in this case means

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[151] Hill, 196.

[152] Francisco Lozada Jr., "Toward Latino/a Biblical Studies: Foregrounding Identities and Transforming Communities," in *Latino/a Biblical Hermeneutics: Problematics, Objectives, Strategies,* ed. Francisco Lozada Jr. and Fernando F. Segovia (Atlanta, GA: SBL Press, 2014), 191, accessed December 7, 2016, ProQuest Ebrary.

something very different from what it means in Pentecostalism. For Pentecostals, the experience that counts is experience of the Spirit. But for liberal Protestantism, the experience that counts is social experience. The authority of personal, socially-informed experience is what remains when notions of universal reason collapse.

Part of what the authority of experience allows in liberationist approaches is open critique of the biblical text. A liberationist hermeneutic "does not aim to reassert the authority of the text or the reader but rather to engage both, with the goal of sifting out what is liberative and what is not from such interaction or reading of texts."[153] A womanist biblical hermeneutic, according to Renita Weems, "empower[s] readers to judge biblical texts, to not hesitate to read against the grain of a text if needed, and to be ready to take a stand against those texts whose worldview runs counter to one's own vision of God's liberation activity in the world."[154] It is the authority of experience, particularly that of the oppressed, which is the arbiter of truth and falsehood within the biblical story. The "transcendental truth" of God's liberative intent rises above the rest.

Contributions

It is difficult to argue in a twenty-first century context that Christianity would be stronger for a wholesale rejection of reason. After all, the mind is part of the whole with which Christians are called to love God, and it is impossible to "un-know" that which scholarship has taught us. However, one of the significant challenges post-modernity

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[153] Lozada Jr., 201.

[154] Renita J. Weems, "Reading for Liberation: African American Women and the Bible," in *I Found God in Me: A Womanist Biblical Hermeneutics Reader,* ed. Mitzi J. Smith (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2015), 54.

makes to liberal Protestantism is interrogating how reason is formed. Cultural location, education, and personal experience can all close things out of the field of reason, but our finding them unreasonable does not necessarily make them untrue. It could be argued that one of the purposes of the Bible is to allow the formation of a new worldview in which the death and resurrection of Christ fundamentally alters our vision of what "reasonableness" entails.

Feminist and liberationist critiques have done the church an immense favor in exposing long-standing blind spots and mechanisms of power. They have effectively punctured the illusion that anyone interprets the Bible from "neutral" space. They also offer a helpful reminder that the Bible was written by and for an oppressed community. As Douglas says, it may be that "the revelation of God is best understood by from the vantage point of the marginalized, the oppressed, the least of these in society" who are "less encumbered by the corruptions and temptations of privilege and domination" and thus "better able to perceive the radicality of God's vision."[155]

Challenges

There is, however, in all mainline approaches to authority an ever-present danger of solipsism. Whether beginning from the authority of reason or experience, people may come to Christian faith or scripture and see little more than a reflection of themselves. Walter Brueggemann has suggested that "reading the Bible requires getting into that epistemology that is already an act of repentance, for it is prepared to believe the

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[155] Kelly Brown Douglas, "Marginalized People, Liberating Perspectives: A Womanist Approach to Biblical Interpretation," in Smith, 84.

proclaiming voice without appealing to other norms."[156] No one of any social identity or location is immune from the possibility of blindness or from the need for repentance. The same freedom from "binding" to text or tradition that can empower can also cut us off from the disruptive, reorienting power of an authoritative voice beyond ourselves, leaving us captive in a different way to our own biases and assumptions.

[156] Walter Brueggemann, *The Bible Makes Sense* (Cincinnati: Franciscan Media, 2010), 123.

SECTION 3:

THE THESIS

Here, in sum, lies the challenge before us: throughout history, diverse believers have sought to identify an immutable ground of authority upon which to construct Christian life and order. But every ground staked upon further investigation reveals some vulnerability. Church and tradition can be corrupted. The Spirit can be misheard. Reason and experience can collapse to solipsism. Even the classic Protestant answer of scripture "alone" has a glaring weakness: after five hundred years of careful study, Christians still cannot agree on what the Bible says. There is no way to access the Bible's authority "unmediated," and any attempt to do so inevitably reflects authority back on the individual interpreter and the forces that formed them.

So where does this leave us? In despairing recognition that post-modern skeptics are right and Christian faith has no true authoritative ground on which to rest? I would suggest that the best response to this question is not resignation to a privatized faith that forsakes the category of authority altogether but a radical change in paradigm of how authority is understood.

Authority as Dialogic

What all the approaches to authority examined thus far have in common is the assumption of authority as a static quality. Authority is absolute—either it is present or it is not. Authority is intrinsic–it belongs properly to object which possesses it. Authority is immutable—where it once exists, it remains. By this measure, every source to which Christians look is doomed to fail. But N.T. Wright suggests that in the biblical

worldview, there is only one place authority is vested inherently and absolutely: "in God himself, Father, Son, and Spirit."[157] Any authority possessed by church, tradition, or even the Bible is not possessed intrinsically but only as product of participation in the Triune God.

This critical realization opens a whole new possibility for conceiving of how authority functions within the Christian faith. It suggests that authority in Christianity may not be imparted absolutely but rather mediated dialogically. It is a quality which emerges only in relationship, in interchange between multiple living points. It exists only in motion. Where the dynamic exchange ceases, authority instantly dissolves. It cannot exist in isolation.

The implications of this re-conception of authority are enormous. It suggests that the Bible's authority should perhaps not be understood as taking one static, absolute form which it maintains unaltered between its covers as it sits on a shelf. The Bible's authority is rather fluid, dynamic, relational. It emerges as its pages are unfolded, taking a particular, unique shape in dialogical relationship with living community, living context, and living Lord. Biblical authority may be best pictured not as a solid iron anchor that keeps the ship of faith from sailing but as a dynamic, ever-changing encounter between wind and sails that keep the ship moving where it is meant to go.

The case for a dialogical understanding of biblical authority begins with the recognition that "any appeal to Scripture is an appeal to *an interpretation* of Scripture."[158] There is simply no way to access the Bible's meaning, the content of its authoritative

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[157] Wright.

[158] Mathison, 246.

voice, without reference to outside sources—including the "common sense" known as tradition as well as the social and spiritual experience that form the reader's lens. Interpretation inevitably unfolds in dialogic space filled in part by the assumptions the interpreter brings to the table.

Second, it is crucial to observe that the internal shape of the biblical text is itself dialogical. Biblical writers frequently worked with "already existing traditions, both oral and written."[159] They wrote in particular contexts, for specific communities, engaging the needs and assumptions of those they addressed.[160] Achtemeier suggests the scriptures

> …contain the repetitions, tensions, discrepancies, and differing interpretations that they do precisely because they contain within themselves the whole variety of interpretations and reinterpretations that the living community has undertaken as it sought to understand its past and to respond faithfully to its present."[161]

The New Testament writers' often surprising takes on Old Testament texts assume these sacred texts were to be treated as "living traditions which could be shaped to speak God's new word to the new times."[162] The story of the Bible, with its unexpected turns and tension-points, reflects a running dialogue between God and the people of God. It is a story whose new chapters constantly cast the former chapters in new lights. In addition, we might note that the biblical canon was preserved and consolidated *as* canon over a centuries-long dialogic process in which communities with access to a wide range

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[159] Portier, 133. This is not merely the consensus of scholarship but a fact made explicit in the biblical text. See, for example, the prologue to Luke.

[160] A classic example is the relationship between Chronicles and Kings, whose perspectives on the same historical events differ because the events are not interpreted "neutrally" but in dialogue with living communities whose needs and questions, exilic and post-exilic, are different.

[161] Achtemeier, 115.

[162] Ibid., 114.

of documents considered which texts bore the hallmarks of the Spirit's presence and met their pressing needs. Both text and canon are thus dialogical in their essential formation.

Of course, it is a significant step to move from recognizing the shape of the biblical text as dialogical to accepting that shape as a model for how the people of God ought to continue to relate to God and their own sacred history. The suggestion that the Bible is normative not just in content but in the mode of authority to which its shape witnesses will strike some as surprising. Yet it is less surprising if we consider that one of the Bible's most fundamental assumptions is that, unlike the Aristotelian "unmoved mover," the God of Israel is deeply relational. The God of Israel interacts with humanity, makes the divine self available to move and be moved. A key purpose of scripture is to make God known as one available for such interaction. Through its stories of divine-human relationship, the Bible "sensitizes us to the possibilities of dialogical encounter with God and human beings in life."[163]

Norman Kraus points out that "revelation in the Christian tradition has been understood as a historical communication in which God is the Teacher, but often the teacher has been assumed to be a lecturer."[164] Yet "lecturer" is not the only possible way the application of God's authority could be conceived. As Kraus observes, Jesus demonstrates a radically different model, living "in mutual dependence and interaction with his companions."[165]

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[163] Jonathan Cohen, "Concepts of Scripture in Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig," in *Jewish Concepts of Scripture: A Comparative Introduction*, ed. Benjamin D. Sommer (New York: NYU Press, 2012), 188, accessed March 21, 2016, EBSCOhost E-book Collection.

[164] Norman C. Kraus, *Using Scripture in a Global Age: Framing Biblical Issues* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2006), 22.

[165] Ibid., 23.

Dialogical authority does not presume a relationship between equals. But it does assume authority is exercised not as a neutral, disinterested power but as a dynamic, relational engagement. Authority is vested. It is attuned and responsive to context. It does not merely exist but unfolds interactively.

Christians might be challenged in their perception of how biblical authority functions by considering the Jewish practice of midrash. Midrash reflects a recognition in Judaism that the act of dialogue itself and not merely its outcome is a significant part of Scripture's purpose and meaning. Judith Kunst has written, "it may be more important to be in conversation with each other and get it 'wrong' than to get it 'right' but have the conversation stop."[166] This implies that the end-goal of the Bible is not simply legal clarity but genuine relational connection with God and each other—a connection built through deep and continuous engagement.

Some rabbinic traditions go so far as to suggest that the meaning of the biblical text may be partially constituted by human conversation with it. Rabbis recognize that the potential for change in both parties is an essential condition for genuine dialogue.[167] Stories like the Numbers 27 dispute over inheritance laws boldly place within Torah the possibility of Torah itself being altered by divine-human interchange. When the daughters of Zelophehad protest the inheritance laws are unjust to women, Moses takes their case to God. The same God who ostensibly authored the original terms sides with

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[166] Judith A. Kunst, *The Burning Word: A Christian Encounter with Jewish Midrash* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2006), 47.

[167] Ibid., 108.

the women, resulting in a change in the law.[168] In this biblical story, God engages God's people in an act of scriptural interpretation that appears to fundamentally alter the text's original meaning.

Talmudic tradition suggests God studies the Torah daily alongside the rabbis.[169] By giving scripture to humanity, God has loosed it from being defined purely by God's own authorial intent. What the rabbis make of the text, God has chosen in some sense to be bound by.[170] This is the dialogical vision drawn to its most daring conclusion. It suggests the possibility that the conversation unfolding between God and humans may not just disclose further layers of truth but even change the interpretative outcome.

But even stopping short of this full 'constitutive' view of scripture, there remains in Judaism a broad vision of creative divine-human partnership. A Talmud tractate suggests, "When the Holy One, blessed be He, gave the Torah to Israel, he gave it only in the form of wheat—for us to make flour from it, and flax—to spin a garment from it."[171] While many Protestants understand the purpose of scripture as giving answers and commands, midrash "equates questions with intimacy" and suggests that part of what God seeks in scripture is the intimacy of partnership in the emergence of something new.[172] A monological application of authority might produce more efficient results if the

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[168] Observed by Bryan Moyer Suderman, "Rediscovering Scripture in Jesus' Company" (lecture, Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Elkhart, January 26, 2016).

[169] Robert Goldenberg, "Talmud," in *Back to the Sources: Reading the Classic Jewish Texts*, ed. Barry Holtz (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1984), 167.

[170] Moshe Halbertal, *People of the Book: Canon, Meaning, and Authority* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 66-67, accessed March 26, 2016, ProQuest Ebrary.

[171] Quoted in Kunst, 11.

[172] Kunst, 33.

goal was simply to enforce correct behavior, but in doing so it could fail to foster the ground for creativity, intimacy, or encounter.

Regardless of whether we are willing to go as far as the rabbinic tradition, the core biblical story is indisputably one of God in deep, complex relationship with the world. And dialogical authority is a mode of authority that is fundamentally relational. It is a form of authority that emerges from the interaction of things which are fully alive.

Such a vision of authority invites Christians to let go of the foundationalist notions of the Enlightenment era that seek to anchor authority in something absolute and unquestionable. McGilchrist notes that science itself once "preached that it was exempt from the historicisation or contextualization that was being used to undermine Christianity in the nineteenth century" but has more recently been forced to repent of this myth of its "infallibility" and acknowledge "the contextual nature of all thought."[173] Christianity, whose own present conceptions of authority developed in many ways as a reaction to Enlightenment science, may find the time is right to relinquish its reactionary strategy and discover a notion of authority more faithful to the shape of its own sacred story.

Authority in Christianity unapologetically unfolds in the context of relationship. It does not exist in an "uninvested" form. It emerges in context, in interaction. The "where" of Christian authority isn't simply a matter of planting a flag on a certain hill. It is more like a moving river which has God as its source but which flows and branches and changes shape as it interacts with the landscape around it. Such a paradigm change does

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[173] Iain McGilchrist, *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 385.

not suggest a weaker vision of authority. Rather, it suggests a mature acknowledgement that even massive, immoveable rocks eventually wear apart, while rivers, far more fluid and flexible, have enduring power over time to cut through mountain ranges.

Partners in Dialogue

If Christian authority is understood as fundamentally dialogical in shape, the question becomes who the parties are which interact with each other and how we might best understand the contributions made by each. Section 2 explored the ways four Christian streams have emphasized different primary sources of authority, exercised with a static authoritative framework. We will take up these four sources again here and suggest what they might look like when exercised dialogically.

The Bible

The Protestant instinct to begin the conversation around authority with scripture is a good one, but not, perhaps, for the reason it first appears. The uniqueness of scripture is not to function, as evangelicals often suggest, as the sole source of Christian authority. It may not even be to function as the sole *infallible* authority, as it could be argued the notion of "infallibility" imports a category more related to the Enlightenment than to historical Christianity. What we can say definitively about scripture, what is most important to say, is that the Bible is *inspired*. Inspiration is not, Allert suggests, a claim of dictation by "possession of a divine spirit"—a pagan understanding Paul might well have

gone out of his way to avoid.[174] It is a claim that scripture is a place God "breathes," God speaks—a place the Spirit is active.

Maintaining a strong sense of the Bible's authority does not require us to presume the Bible is the only thing that is inspired. The early Christians did not believe this. As Allert notes, "historically speaking, inspiration functioned in a very broad way in the early church," as the Spirit was understood to be "living and active in the entire community of the faithful and therefore inspiring it."[175] A God who is living and active will keep on breathing.

But what the Bible does offer uniquely is what Yoder describes as accountability to a "common starting point," the record of "the unique beginning of [our] diversity-in-unity as a movement through history."[176] The foundational narrative of Christianity is one given to us in history, recorded in scripture, and which does not change. To be a Christian is to voluntarily bind ourselves to this story. This is our given, our origin-point, unalterable and indispensable. The Bible alone offers us this.

The Bible also offers us "a story moving in a certain direction."[177] We are not free to invent that trajectory; the Bible offers it authoritatively. But this is also not the place the story is meant to stop. In Brueggemann's words, "the central thrust of the Bible, then, is to raise new questions, to press exploration of new dimensions of fidelity, new spheres for trusting. Such questions serve as invitations to bolder, richer faithfulness."[178] The

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[174] Allert, 155.

[175] Ibid., 148.

[176] John Howard Yoder, *To Hear the Word*, 2nd ed. (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010), 110.

[177] Peter Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015), 97.

[178] Brueggemann, 122.

Bible is the word of God in relationship with the world of God. It is meant to open a journey of accountability and discovery. It is a launching pad to the "with-God" life that is always still unfolding.

The unique authority of the Bible, then, is best understood not as the authority to speak 'the final word," as often described, but rather as the authority to speak the *starting word* in a creative, generative, ongoing conversation between God and God's people. It has this authority because it uniquely holds our grounding story and because through that story it casts our trajectory. The Bible's unique and authoritative dialogical contribution is to keep us in touch with this defining story.

Yet as McGrath has pointed out, the notion of biblical authority in any sense "is rendered either meaningless or unusable without a reliable hermeneutical program."[179] From a hermeneutical standpoint, is crucial to note that the biblical story has a clear center in Christ, the culmination of revelation. He is the watershed; biblical authority flows outward from him. He clarifies what came before, and everything which comes after finds its authority reaching back to him as its touchstone.[180]

This means biblical authority is not flat but exists in "gradations" which radiate from Christ as the dialogical center-point. Biblical authority is exercised through a Christocentric hermeneutic. Its authority is never applied in a generic sense but only as it is first run through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. When the Bible engages the conversation of Christian faith with dialogical authority, it always, always speaks in the distinctive tenor of Jesus Christ.

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[179] McGrath, 148.

[180] Yoder, 113-114.

The Spirit

It is generally accepted that one of the essential roles of the Spirit is "illumination"—making it clear what the biblical text means and how it applies to the present. In evangelical settings, the work of illumination is often depicted in a way that suggests any present authority the Spirit exercises is a subset of the authority of the text. But the Spirit's dialogical authority in the Christian life extends beyond even the most dynamic textual engagement. Congar observes, "Jesus and the apostles do not appeal to Scripture from the outside, like… a cook preparing a dish and following carefully the recipe in a cookery book; they live Scripture because they live the history of salvation, under the guidance of the same Spirit 'who spoke by the prophets.'"[181] Christians are invited to full participation in salvation history still unfolding. The invitation to Christian existence is not simply to reproduce chapters already written, but to fully embrace the faithful, with-God life, in all the unique particularities of the present.

Achtemeier notes, "rigid adherence to the form that sacred traditions assumed in the past is precisely the wrong way to honor the word of a God who is living."[182] The creative activity of God in the world does not cease. To live with God is to live with one who, as Congar notes, both was and is and but is also still to come.[183] As Wells describes it, "there is a dimension of the Christian life that requires more than repetition, more even

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[181] Congar, 77.

[182] Achtemeier, 74.

[183] Congar, 76-77.

than interpretation—but not so much as origination or creation de novo. That dimension, the key to abiding faithfulness, is improvisation."[184]

N.T. Wright invites us to imagine that the authority of scripture is the kind of authority the first four acts of play possess for an unwritten fifth.[185] In scripture we are given a "hermeneutical trajectory,"[186] but it is the church's great joy and responsibility to keep on listening and improvising creatively in faithful continuity with that trajectory. We might conceive of the Spirit's work within the play as that of a director, keeping the actors faithful to the overall storyline while unleashing their creative engagement in the act they themselves will have a part in shaping.

To put it another way, the primary purpose of the Bible is not so much to offer an exhaustive list of universal, abstract "rules" as to nurture imagination for the God-shaped possibilities of the world, imagination for the with-God life. The Spirit's work is to guide the formation of that imagination and to direct its application toward faithful relationship with God in the present. There is a possibility that a word which in one context may be the best expression of that covenantal faithfulness may in another context require reformulation. Pinnock suggests Jesus himself read scripture this way, recognizing "a word which was good in its time could be rescinded later if then it did more harm than good."[187] This is not to say everything is up for grabs. As Congar puts it,

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[184] Samuel Wells, *Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2004), 65.

[185] Wright.

[186] Franke, 207

[187] Pinnock, 236.

> the events and doctrines *de Christo*, the objects of the kerygma, have an absolute and immutable character…which is not possessed by those rules of conduct laid down by the apostles under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and which we see would be open to modification, or at least growth, according to the needs of the historical life of the Church.[188]

The kerygma does not change. Yet the Bible's authority includes the dynamism of living conversation between text and present context, with the Spirit guiding and fueling the movement between the two.

Recognition of how the Spirit's authority functions calls attention to the importance of the early church's belief that inspiration is not a quality of scripture alone. According to the biblical creation stories, humans themselves are "God-breathed." In John 20:22 the nascent church is filled with this breath again. A dialogical vision of authority requires a trusting recognition that the divine breath never stops flowing.

It is often easier to trust the power of this breath in those at a distance —the apostles, the early councils, even the reformers—than to trust that breath in the people beside us, whose faults we know. There is always risk in discerning the Spirit that we can get it wrong, miss our cues, blow the line. But Wright suggests we consider the possibility that God does not "give us the Holy Spirit in order to make us infallible—blind and dumb servants who merely sit there and let the stuff flow through us."[189] Rather, God is interested in forming "a church recreated in his image, more fully human, thinking, alive beings."[190] While a static vision of authority might well be effective in forming spiritual children able to follow the letter of the law with minimal mistakes, a

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[188] Congar, 11.

[189] Wright.

[190] Ibid.

dialogical model of authority seems designed for the formation of spiritual adults who are slowly being transformed by the renewing of their minds.

Community

For Protestants, whose origins involve "protest" against the reigning ecclesial powers, it is often uncomfortable to speak about the authority of the church. But while sola scriptura was a compelling rallying cry that allowed the correction of entrenched abuses, its proponents have not always accounted for the ways the authority of the Bible and the church are inextricably bound together. The church's existence is grounded on scripture, yet it was also within the church that the Bible was composed. It was real, historical communities of Christians who preserved and canonized its texts. The Bible and the church have been in dialogical relationship since the first pages were penned.

One authority explicitly granted the church within the Bible is that of "binding and loosing" (Matt. 18:18). In rabbinic tradition, this language is closely associated with acts of authoritative scriptural interpretation.[191] Protestantism has historically been hesitant to attribute this kind of authority to the church, but stories like Acts 15 suggest early Christians did not share this hesitation. The early church took seriously the voices and experiences of individuals as they listened to scripture and encountered the Spirit. But the community of faith itself was understood as the authoritative ground on which competing claims were to be mediated. The authority of the Bible and the authority of the

[191] David N. Biven, "'Binding' and 'Loosing' in the Kingdom of Heaven," Jerusalem Perspective, revised December 28, 2012, accessed September 23, 2017, https://www.jerusalemperspective.com/2433/.

Spirit did not operate independently but dialogically within the sphere of the church's collective engagement with them.

Of course, identifying the church as the sphere in which Scripture and Spirit are authoritatively discerned raises the question, "Which church?" The difficulty answering definitively is perhaps responsible for the long-standing Protestant suspicion around the notion of church authority. The Catholic church of the Middle Ages had made such a claim of its magisterium—in Protestant minds, to disastrous effect. Yet Protestants have not always been careful to distinguish between legitimate critiques of a specific *form* of ecclesial authority and the notion of church authority itself.

For Protestants, the answer to where ecclesial authority is located will likely not be as simple as locating a single, consolidated body with boundary markers clearly delineated. However, I would argue there are at least three essential characteristics Protestants should look for as they consider where such authority may be dialogically operative.

First, the authoritative church is a diverse church. Westphal writes, "Because of their comprehensive coherence, communities deeply rooted in a particular tradition need to hear the voices of outsiders."[192] Otherwise, rather than scripture serving as a mirror to show us ourselves "as we really are," it can simply end up reflecting our "self-deceptions."[193] The more homogenous the body, the more likely such a distortion is to occur, as biases and assumptions go unchallenged. In an age of deep ecclesial divisions,

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[192] Merold Westphal, *Whose Community? Which Interpretation?: Philosophical Hermeneutics for the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 139.

[193] Ibid.

we may need the reminder that the most important question we can ask of those with whom we disagree is not where they are wrong but what we might learn from them.

Second, the authoritative church is one in which the voices of the marginalized are taken seriously. If there is one thing the history of the Middle Ages makes clear, it is that power can breed distortion or corruption. The solution is not to disregard the important contribution of trained leaders, nor is it to suggest that every individual is equally equipped for all matters of discernment. It does suggest, however, that there is a vital role for marginalized members of the community in helping to ensure that what the church hears is truly the voice of God and not merely that of beneficiaries of the status quo. Latino theologian Muñoz-Larrondo suggests that the proper balance involves "voluntary submission to and conversation with the totality of the church, the people of God, but without domination from the center."[194] There must be some space within the system for the voices of the marginal to rise.

Finally, the authoritative church is one deeply shaped by spiritual practices. Stuart Murray writes that in liberation theology, "belief in the hermeneutical privilege of the poor implies that poverty and oppression in themselves equip base communities for interpretation of Scripture, whatever the spiritual experience of the interpreters."[195] For many other Protestants, the authoritative community is taken to be those who show up on Sunday or who hold formal membership in an ecclesial 'tribe.' However, distinctively Christian authority belongs not to just any collection of people but the body of people

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[194] Rubén Muñoz-Larrondo, "Toward a Latino/a Vision/Optic for Biblical Hermeneutics," in *Latino/a Biblical Hermeneutics: Problematics, Objectives, Strategies,* eds. Francisco Lozada Jr. and Fernando F. Segovia (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2014), 212, accessed December 7, 2016, ProQuest Ebrary.

[195] Stuart Murray, *Biblical Interpretation in the Anabaptist Tradition* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 1999), 235.

who are committed to the essential story of Jesus Christ and who are being actively formed by the Spirit. At its heart, the church is *a discerning body*, a body being shaped by spiritual practices that are gradually transforming members into the character of Christ. Authority as concerns the church is therefore not an absolute quality. It exists dynamically, growing in proportion with key qualities such as humility, charity, faith, and love. The church's authority is tied to its relationship to the Spirit of Christ and to the maturing fruit of the Spirit alive in its faith and practice.

Tradition

In many ways, the authority of tradition is best understood as an extension of the authority of the church. Tradition is the voice of the community over time. It is the way the church of history converses with the church of the present. We have seen that one of the essential characteristics of authoritative community is diversity. Tradition is the extension of that essential diversity not just across space but time.

This voice across time is indispensable to the life of the church because, even allowing for the maximal range of every other form of human diversity, each era in history has its own distinctive characteristics. Historical era is a kind of water in which every human swims. There are certain assumptions, biases, and blind spots people bear by virtue of temporal location.[196] The voice of tradition is a check against the modern

[196] I would suggest one such bias in the modern era may be the assumption of the ultimate importance of individual rights. The assumption is so deeply integrated into the twenty-first century water it is very difficult, if not impossible, to imagine how theology and ethics might look different if such an assumption were not taken for granted.

idolization of innovation and assumption that history is necessarily progressive, that the perspective of the present is inevitably clearer.

Achtemeier writes that "traditions guard those past events which give to the community its uniqueness, and they aid the community in shaping its life in accordance with those originating events."[197] Tradition is already given to the church as a form of authority in the biblical text itself, which was "traditioned" by many generations of the faithful to come to us in its present form. But tradition also offers the kerygmatic story that serves as the Bible's interpretative frame. What the early church called "the rule of faith" is still authoritatively operative at the ground of the church's life.

Each generation has neither the responsibility nor the authority to reinvent the Christian faith. The fundamentals of Trinitarian theology, for example, do not have to be continually re-adjudicated. We can learn from the wisdom and insights of generations of believers before us. We can also learn from their errors. At the same time, the authority of tradition must be held in continuous dialogical relationship with the Spirit. Achtemeier observes, "it is precisely those figures in the biblical literature who find their certainty in the traditions of the past who with alarming regularity find themselves opposed to the will and word of God."[198] The authority of tradition is not the absolute authority of certainty; it is not infallible. However, it is an authority that grows stronger as it is tested across time and space.

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[197] Achtemeier, 109.

[198] Ibid., 74.

Thomas Buchan offers the fascinating suggestion that biblical inerrancy "might be better conceived, defended, and employed as an interpretative strategy, a theological hermeneutic that calls for the suspension of disbelief in favor of faith in what Scripture reveals…"[199] This suggestion might also be applied to tradition. Presumption of tradition's authority invites a "suspension of disbelief" that provides a desperately needed check against the hubris of present-bias. It reminds us we are accountable not just to our own faith reasoning and experience but to generations of the faithful who came before us, whose witness we carry, as well as to generations after us whose traditions even now we are forming.

Experience and Reason

While reason and experience are often treated as distinct sources of authority, I hold them together for two key reasons. First, they share an element of personal subjectivity. Second, they tend to be shaped in close relationship, almost like conjoining twins—reason is formed in significant ways by what experiences we have, and what experiences we are open to having is impacted in significant ways by what we reason is possible.

The authority of personal experience, however fraught with risk it seems, cannot be discounted, because Christians believe God is personal and makes God's self known in history. Biblically, the genuine experience of a divinely-authored call has a genuine, binding authority on the one who receives it. The authority of scripture and community

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[199] Thomas Buchan, "Inerrancy as Inheritance? Competing Genealogies of Biblical Authority," in Bacote, Miguélez, and Okholm, 54.

may be invoked to discern the category of "genuineness," but the call itself does not derive its authority from either of these sources. Its authority is taken directly from its author, God, and is mediated through experience.

In considering the role that experience and reason play within the larger picture of Christian authority, there are a few important factors to keep in mind. First, an individual's, or even a community's, range of experiences never reflects the whole range of Christian possibility. When individuals and communities lack exposure to certain experiences—for example, supernatural healing—they may seem intuitively "unreasonable." However, this is not necessarily mean the idea is untrue, merely that the individual or community has not had access to the kind of evidence that would give the possibility weight in reason.

It is also the case that while an individual or community's genuine experience may have an authoritative quality, one of the most difficult things to measure is how far that authority extends. One person's experience may bump up against another's in a way that seems contradictory. But that does not necessarily mean that either experience is false or that either lacks authority. It might simply mean that the experience and the reasoning generated are authoritative only within a limited range.

This illustrates why it is so important that the authority of experience and reason be held in dialogical relationship with scripture, the church, and tradition. These other sources provide access to a wider range of experiences than any one individual or community possess and, when given dialogical authoritative weight, offer a wider collection of evidence on which to form reason. Recognition of the way reason is formed by experience also reinforces the importance of being in relationship with the poor and

marginalized, whose experience may offer special insight in its proximity to the experiences that shaped the biblical text itself.[200]

Second, when it comes to reason and experience, character matters. Reason and experience are not "neutral" in their effects. Rather like water poured over different patches of ground, the impact is determined by the quality of the soil beneath. Humility, disciplined listening, and receptivity to 'otherness' are all personal qualities whose distribution significantly impacts how reason responds to new experiential input.

Third, for reason and experience to function authoritatively, they must maintain a posture of openness to surprises. Reason and experience only bear authority in relationship with the living God, and to be in relationship with a living God is to open oneself to unpredictability, mystery, and disruption. Reason and experience that have never encountered fundamental challenge to their assumptions have likely disconnected from God and therefore are not operating authoritatively but in the service of idols. Experience and reasons that are functioning in a truly dialogical authoritative frame not only question but allow themselves to be questioned in return.

Case Study: Human Sexuality

Having examined the major elements of a dialogical model of Christian authority, we are at last equipped to return with fresh eyes to the question preoccupying the church—whether there is a place for gay marriage within a distinctively Christian frame. This challenging contemporary question provides an excellent case study in how dialogical authority functions.

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[200] Murray, 176.

A dialogical understanding of authority does not allow us simply to assert "the Bible says it and that settles it," because such an assertion fails to give account of the crucial interpretative matter of how we know what the "it" is that the Bible says. We also cannot settle this question by simply echoing the culture's appeal to some general concept of individual "rights"—a concept foreign to the Christian worldview.[201] We cannot argue that this is simply a matter to be settled between the individual and God, as if the Christian story were not about the formation of a body, whose choices—seen or unseen—affect one another. We cannot take at face value the plain voice of reason, whether that reason appeals to science or a visceral sense of the "natural," as such reason is not neutral but shaped by the assumptions of experience and place. Nor can we appeal to Christian history as the final word, since a new context may evoke a different response from a living God.

As Christians, we may take as given that the Bible's authority applies, but this does not yet answer the question of how or which parts. Therefore, the clearest way to begin is by grounding ourselves on our essential story, its originating events, and its overall trajectory recorded by scripture. In Jesus Christ, God has acted to reconcile all things to God's self. Christ is forming a covenant people who relate to God and each other from a posture of faithful commitment and self-giving. Christ's mission is to heal the world and bring all creation into the fullness of its God-intended life. These statements reflect God's core investments, which play out in all God does.

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[201] Christian appeals to secular conceptions of rights fail to take into account both what it means to live under divine authority and the New Testament's teachings about laying down "rights" for love (cf. Romans 14-15).

But precisely because God is a living God-in-relationship who is fundamentally responsive, we also ground ourselves in a clear understanding of present context. No single factor is ever determinative, so it is vital to take a broad view of the moment into which we are asking God to authoritatively speak. Present context includes, but is not limited to: (a) a hyper-sexualized culture in which individual sexual expression is viewed as core to human identity; (b) high suicide rates among gay and transgender teens as well as violence against gay and transgender people around the world; (c) a philosophical framework that assumes moral choices are made individually and are no one else's business; (d) eroding social and community structures that result in many adults being lonely and isolated; (e) widespread difficulty making and keeping commitments—visible, among other places, in a high divorce rate; (f) an exodus from the church at unprecedented rates at a time when Christianity has become synonymous with "judgmentalism."[202] Note that acknowledging this context does not tell us what to think about it; it merely makes us aware of the larger picture to which the Spirit responds.

Grounded in our core story and a clear perception of present context, we gather as diverse a representation of the community as possible, and we begin to listen. We listen to the celibate gay Christian speak about her loneliness and the married gay Christian describe the experience of losing his faith community. We listen to some Christians talk about God's holiness and their concern about narratives that deny sex its profound spiritual and formational consequences. We listen to other Christians talk about welcome and their concern that people whom God has called are being excluded from the circle of

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[202] See David Van Biema, "Christianity's Image Problem," *Time*, October 2, 2007, accessed September 19, 2017, http://content.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1667639,00.html.

grace. We listen to the voices of global believers who worry the American church no longer knows what it means to submit to divine authority against the ever-shifting currents of popular culture.

We consider the voice of science and what it suggests about how human bodies work. We consider the voice of theology and what it suggests about the purpose for which human bodies were made. We consider the voice of Christian tradition describing what marriage has meant. We ask whether views on marriage have changed over time, and if so, when and how and why. We pay attention to what blind spots in our own era the perspectives of history may help correct.

We look for concrete signs of the Spirit's movement in the present: Where is the living Christ being encountered? Where is faith flourishing, getting stronger? Where are the fruits of the Spirit growing? Where are lives evidencing the genuine transformation that submission to God's Spirit brings?

With all these things in mind, we delve deeply into scripture and ask what parts of its authoritative witness might illuminate what the Spirit is doing in the present. Is it the levitical prohibitions? Paul's pragmatic suggestion, "It's better to marry than burn"? The Genesis creation description "a man will be united to his wife"? Is it the conclusion of the church of Acts 15, "we resolve not to make things harder for those who are coming to faith"? The Song of Songs celebration of sexual expression? The New Testament lauding of celibacy for the sake of kingdom work? Is it the epistles' ethical lists that prohibit sexuality immorality? Is John's sweeping vision that love comes from God? Above all, in considering scripture's authoritative word, we ask if homosexual marriage in our time and place is increasing or decreasing capacity for the faithful, covenant love of God and

neighbor that Jesus himself claims is the heart and soul of the biblical law and prophets' intent.

We come to scripture not to proof-text our established opinions but to allow our assumptions to be challenged. We come to have our imaginations formed in a biblical frame. We come not just to question but to be questioned. We read with humility and openness, with the expectation of being surprised and changed, with commitment to obey whatever it is we hear the Spirit speaking.

In all discerning, we should expect what we will hear will be more complicated than our simple cultural polarizations. It is possible that what we hear might challenge both conceptions of tradition *and* a sexually permissive culture. We might be called to reconsider the whole paradigm of Christian "family" and where and how intimacy in Christian community is formed. We might be challenged to develop a richer understanding of the role of sex in Christian formation. We might be drawn to reconsider the idolization of individual choice.

As the church engages in spiritual practices that form it in the character of Christ, listening in careful and humble submission to the voices of dialogical authority, over time it acquires the authority itself to make a judgment. This "binding and loosing" authority of the church is not an absolute quality but one that emerges from the church's active participation in the discerning movement of dialogue. It is in this context that the church is empowered to say as it did in Acts 15 "it seemed good to the Spirit and to us" and to speak authoritatively what it has discerned in this time and place is the pathway of holiness, love, and true flourishing.

Of course, such judgments made by the church are always tentative. The church decides, and that decision enters the stream of tradition and is wrapped back into dialogue that will continue going forward, as authoritative tradition is tested by time and practice. It is always possible that time and experience will prove the judgment wrong. It is also possible—even likely—that a different context in the future will call for a different authoritative response. Yoder observes both these dimensions when he writes,

> In the spiral movement whereby the mind of the Church constantly links the world's agenda and the canonical texts, one does find a degree of progress in any given context in becoming clearer both about what it is in the present challenge to which Scripture speaks and what the answer is. This growing clarity cannot be imposed on other times and places, but we do learn about some of the priorities in our time and place if we keep the circuit open.[203]

Yoder's description accounts for the role of time in contributing greater clarity. But it also highlights the critical matter of authority's range. It suggests the humbling realization that there may not be one universal answer to "God's opinion on gay marriage." Each new context may contribute a different combination of factors that interact with the core Christian story in a way that evokes a different dialogically authoritative response. This unsettling dialogical openness is the consequence of being in relationship with a living God who speaks and works in the particularity of the present. As Brueggemann puts it, "faithful relationships…can never be reduced to formulae but live always in the free, risking exchange that belongs to covenanting."[204]

Our role is to be fully awake and responsive to God's authoritative word in our time and place. We enter the authoritative dialogue boldly and discerningly, committed to

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[203] Yoder, 92.

[204] Brueggemann, 121.

maturing in the art of relational engagement. We embrace the process, not merely the conclusion, as of critical importance, recognizing the opportunity such dialogue provides for growing in intimacy with God and one another. And we trust that the grace of Christ is wide enough to cover all of us as we stumble together toward the sacred space where love and truth, justice and righteous, kiss.

Maintaining the Dialogue

It has doubtless become abundantly clear that a dialogical approach to Christian authority does not lend itself to easy answers. If the events of the Reformation highlighted the problems with authority, the Enlightenment created a sense of urgent need for an immutable ground of authoritative religious truth. Ever since, Christians have been searching for such a ground.

Some Christians have sought certainty in the infallibility of the pope, others in external signs like tongues. Some have sought it in reason. Still others have absolutized a single principle like "liberation." Many Protestants have tried to invest such certainty in the bedrock of scripture, seeking a Bible whose meaning is plain and democratically accessible, whose application is direct and universal, whose interpretation can be severed from the influences of church, tradition, and personal subjectivity and placed beyond the risk of human corruption.

Yet five hundred years of earnest Protestant experimentation have made it clear that the Bible has never stood alone but only within a web of interrelated parts. If Christian authority requires identifying an independent, immutable, and absolute ground, then we must admit that the notion of authority is little more than an illusion. There is no

such source of certainty. The Christian life does not come with step-by-step instructions or a map on which "X" marks the single ground of authoritative truth.

But such a failure does not mean the end of Christian authority itself, merely the end of one conception of what authority means. What Christians have been offered is not "certainty" or "security" but what Kunst has beautifully described as "the wide and startling liberty of standing in a room where all the idols have been smashed."[205] We are invited into a story that does not begin with us, whose defining contours are given in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We are given in scripture an essential, trustworthy starting place from which to set out on a journey of encounter and dynamic relationship. We are drawn as participants into an authoritative dialogue whose outcome is intimacy and transformation.

Acknowledging the dialogical shape of Christian authority means accepting the possibility that we may at times draw wrong conclusions. This, of course, leaves the challenging question of how to live faithfully within our uncertainty and disagreement. Augustine wrote, commenting on the practice of biblical exegesis:

> See how stupid it is, among so large a mass of entirely correct interpretations which can elicited from these words, rashly to assert that a particular one has best claim to be Moses' view, and by destructive disputes to offend against charity itself, which is the principle of everything he said in the texts we are attempting to expound.[206]

Augustine helpfully reminds the church that the end of all genuine biblical discernment is to learn how to love as God does. If in our pursuit of truth, we violate the

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[205] Kunst, 106.

[206] Augustine, *Confessions,* XII 25.35.

greatest commandment and offend the very end toward which that truth points, we have failed indeed.

It is also worth observing that one notable feature of Jewish interpretive tradition is the "codification of controversy" in places like the Mishnah.[207] Many rabbis hold that "the minority's opinion is preserved…because, while not valid in the present, a future court may rely on this opinion and rule against the present majority."[208] Dissent is maintained in the canonical tradition as an alternative vision that may be required in a new historical situation. Protestantism might take a cue from Judaism in this regard, considering that it is important to draw conclusions and act on them with conviction but also to hold our controversies with a thread of tentativeness, understanding that current "dissenters" might hold the keys to the future's hope in ways that it is not always possible to foresee.

To make such a suggestion is not to imply there is no such thing as truth. Christians believe the world as designed by God has a definitive shape. It is possible to live in line with that shape or in defiance of it, and either choice has consequences. The purpose of Christian authority is to help us live fully and creatively in harmony with the world's true form.

But the reality of human finitude is that we cannot always see the full arch of that truth—not in one lifetime or in many. This is why absolute authority belongs to God alone, the only one in position to see the whole. To accept a dialogical view of authority is ultimately an act of faith that the God who began writing the story will see it through to

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[207] Halbertal, 50.

[208] Ibid., 51.

its conclusion. We can afford to take the risk of presenting ourselves for relationship, of entering into dialogue, even of being wrong, because we believe that the end of our story is secure in Christ and that his grace is enough to cover us all.

SECTION 4:

ARTIFACT DESCRIPTION

It is my conviction that the entrenched polarization and biblical alienation currently afflicting Protestantism can only be resolved as pastors and laity are widely reintroduced to the role of Scripture and the way its authority functions. Christians need help becoming aware of their interpretative assumptions and understanding the range of choices to be made in crossing the bridge from biblical concept to contemporary application. For this reason, I have decided to write a lay-level introduction to the Bible that combines teaching on basic interpretative techniques with insights on what it would look like to approach the Bible dialogically.

The book has three major sections. Part 1 offers a broad view of what the Bible is and where it came from. The purpose of this section is two-fold: (a) to redirect the Bible toward its proper end—transformative relationship with God; and (b) to use the story of the Bible's origins to help reintegrate the authority of scripture with that of church, Spirit, and tradition.

Part 2 focuses on practical techniques of interpretation. My approach is unapologetically Christocentric, which I believe is the often-missing key to understanding how often difficult biblical texts operate authoritatively in dialogic relationship with each other.

Part 3 explores the application of biblical texts in contemporary settings. Here the dialogic relationship between text, present context, Spirit, and community becomes the explicit focus of conversation.

The book will be accompanied by a group study guide, making it amenable to use as curriculum in church and university settings. Herald Press has acquired the rights to the book and study guide, which will be released in fall 2018.

SECTION 5:

ARTIFACT SPECIFICATION

Book Proposal

Title

The Bible Unwrapped:
Making Sense of the Bible Today

Hook

A popular millennial pastor and teacher makes the case for why an ancient book matters and offers a practical, twenty-first century guide to imaginatively engaging the Bible as a window into the wide world of God still unfolding.

Description

It's become standard practice for reports on biblical literacy to be headlined by a single word: crisis. A 2015 report by the Barna Group classifies "Bible readers" as those who open a Bible a minimum of 3-4 times a year. This turns out to include just 52% of U.S. adults.[209] University faculty report that incoming students enter with even less biblical knowledge than they did just a few years ago.[210] While the American church

[209] *State of the Bible 2015 Report* (New York: American Bible Society, 2015), 13, accessed December 6, 2015, http://www.americanbible.org/uploads/content/State_of_the_Bible_2015_report.pdf.

[210] Lillian Kwan, "Biblical Literacy in U.S. at Crisis Point, Says Bible Expert," *Christian Post*, June 16, 2014, accessed December 6, 2015, http://www.christianpost.com/news/biblical-illiteracy-in-us-at-crisis-point-says-bible-expert-121626/. My own informal interview series with undergraduate faculty suggested similar conclusions.

continues to grow increasingly polarized around a variety of biblically-informed social and moral stances, few lay participants in the current "Bible wars" know what text itself says, let alone what hermeneutical assumptions underlie their interpretive conclusions.

As a pastor and teacher who works regularly with Christians across the theological spectrum, I've had a chance to see firsthand the depth of the biblical alienation. While some Christians are consciously breaking their faith loose from scripture, many more remain in the pews who have just quietly stopped reading, maintaining a "high" view of scripture in theory but in practice find the Bible too distant and disconcerting to touch. By far the most common question I am asked about Christian faith by young adults inside and outside the church is "Where did the Bible come from, and why should I take it seriously?"

In the course of my doctoral research on the nature of scripture, I conducted interviews with pastors and religion professors across the country about their experience teaching the Bible. Pastors almost universally confessed to feeling ill-equipped to talk to congregants about complex hermeneutical matters. Meanwhile, many professors admitted perceiving their role as primarily to "deconstruct" students' established textual views and stated frankly that they were counting on the local church to do the work of reconstruction. This apparent disconnect between church and academy is contributing to the overall sense of confusion and biblical alienation—particularly among college-educated young adults, who are often encountering for the first time critical questions about their faith and lacking resources to address those questions in ways that feel spiritually relevant and intellectually credible.

Many authors through the years have worked to make basic principles of biblical hermeneutics accessible to lay-level readers. Most prominent among these are Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, whose introductory text *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* has sold over half a million copies since it was published in 1981. In the twenty-first century context, however, the book suffers from two major limitations. First, it immediately launches into interpretative theory but spends no time building the case for the authority and relevance of scripture, which for many contemporary readers is a significant obstacle to biblical engagement. Second, while Fee and Stuart offer an insightful introduction to literary genre, they give no attention to the principle of christocentricity or to the role of Spirit and community in determining how texts apply.

My vision for *The Bible Unwrapped* is to develop an introductory hermeneutical text with a distinctively twenty-first century flavor. It will be geared specifically toward young adults encountering the biblical text for the first time, answering common questions in a way that is honest, real, and—above all—never boring. The book will make the case for scripture from the ground up and will anchor its hermeneutical approach in Anabaptists principles of christocentricity as well as in insights from post-modern thought about the dialogic nature of authority. In keeping with the reading proclivities of post-modern audiences, chapters will be short, focused, and interspersed with biblical "story-telling" designed to ignite readers' curiosity about scripture as well as to illustrate the hermeneutical principles under discussion. While the communication style will be specifically shaped with the needs and interests of younger readers specifically in mind, it's my belief that "aiming young" will result in a guide that is also

accessible and engaging to older generations of readers who have been quietly struggling with their relationship with scripture.

I estimate a total length of around 70,000 words, about 10,000 of which will involve direct storytelling. I plan to include a short discussion guide to facilitate classroom or group conversation. This book is being written as a direct extension of my D.Min research through Portland Seminary, which is focused on the nature of biblical authority. I anticipate having my dissertation—the research of which forms the foundation of this book—submitted by January 2018. I expect to complete the book manuscript by spring 2018.

Author Bio

Meghan Larissa Good is Teaching Pastor at Trinity Mennonite Church (Glendale, AZ) and a popular guest preacher and conference speaker around such topics as hermeneutics and emerging Anabaptism. She is a regular contributor to *The Mennonite* and *Mennonite World Review* and writes about scriptural interpretation at her personal blog *Mud Pie God*. She has conducted hermeneutical workshops for churches around the country, helping lay Christians develop skills to be better readers and interpreters of scripture.

Meghan has a B.A. from Gordon College and a M.Div from Duke Divinity School, receiving both institutions' highest awards for excellence in biblical interpretation and Duke's top honor for excellence in pastoral field education. This distinctive blend of scholarly chops and pastoral passion distinguish Meghan as a communicator, known for her ability to present complex theological concepts in accessible, engaging ways.

Meghan is currently completing a D.Min in preaching at Portland Seminary, studying under semiotician and futurist Dr. Leonard Sweet. Her research and dissertation work are focused on evolving understandings of biblical authority in contemporary Christianity.

Educational background among both evangelical and mainline Protestants as well as her formation within the Anabaptist tradition have given Meghan a uniquely broad perspective on the biblical questions and reading habits of Christians across the theological spectrum. She is passionate about helping twenty-first century Christians revive dynamic relationship with the Bible as an avenue to deeper engagement with God. One of her greatest joys as teacher and preacher is seeing biblical skeptics experience insight and healing through texts they've previously avoided.

Meghan lives in Phoenix, AZ with a prized dinosaur bone and a ridiculously large book collection. Her life dreams include riding a camel past a pyramid and becoming friends with Walter Brueggemann.

Chapter Synopsis

Introduction

The purpose of Scripture

While some treat the Bible like a painting—flat, static, and self-contained—the Bible functions more like a window, beckoning us beyond itself into participation in God's dynamic life.

Part 1: Opening the Book

Chapter 1

Establishing a biblical worldview

God does not stand at an impartial distance from the world but has God's fingers dug deep into the soil of history, actively engaging and constantly communicating.

Chapter 2

The case for why to engage the Bible

Seeking God without the Bible is like looking in a mirror to learn what it's like outside the house—at best, it's inefficient, and at worst, you end up with only a magnified reflection of yourself.

Chapter 3

The inadequacy of the "instructions" paradigm

Many think of the Bible's role as a kind of instructions manual for human life, yet neither narrative nor poetry, the most common literary forms in the Bible, are directive in any clear and straightforward fashion.

Chapter 4

Developing biblical imagination

Instead of only providing straight-forward instructions, which are limited by context, the Bible forms inspired imagination for the God-shaped possibilities of the world.

Story – Joshua 5:13-6:27

Chapter 5

Inspiration and the writing of scripture

The writing of the Bible involves the meeting place between the human writers' own personalities, experiences, and concerns and God's insights, clarity, and life.

Chapter 6

The process of canon formation

The purpose of a canon is not to eliminate all other voices but to mark where God has been heard and experienced clearly and thus provide a measuring stick by which to evaluate other claims.

Chapter 7

Translation theory

All translation is an act of interpretation, and English translations of the Bible vary depending on whether they prioritize the literal words or the transmission of whole ideas.

Chapter 8

The story of the Old Testament

God is on a mission of restoring the world from a human-made hell of violence, death and destruction to a new creation of intimacy, joy, and holistic flourishing.

Chapter 9

The story of the New Testament

Jesus definitively demonstrates who God is and ushers in the beginning of a new, whole world that works according to God's intended design.

Chapter 10

Establishing a hermeneutic of charity

Although the Bible may feel rather foreign or strange, it's very status as "stranger" encourages us to greet it with hospitality and with expectation it has something to teach us in its "otherness."

Story – Jonah

Chapter 11

Gaining knowledge through action

True understanding of the Bible can only be gained from the inside, as you lead with action and obedience and see the questions and insights which emerge in response.

Part 2: Learning to Read

Chapter 12

Introduction to interpretation

We come to scripture first as authorized eavesdroppers, tuning in midway through someone else's dialogue with God and using the clues to piece together the conversational context.

Chapter 13

Literary context

Attending to what happens around a passage helps ensure we are hearing words within their larger conversational context and not simply bending them to serve our own ends.

Chapter 14

Historical context

Historical context helps us match our own mental images more closely with the mental images of the author, who takes for granted certain knowledge of his own cultural realities and moment in history.

Chapter 15

Introduction to literary genre

Every literary genre follows its own set of rules and conventions, and the mode of truth with which the book speaks varies in relationship with the function of the particular genre.

Story – Matthew 15:21-39

Chapter 16

Reading biblical narratives

Every story has a purpose but not every story has a moral; just because something does happen doesn't mean it should.

Chapter 17

Reading poetry

The range of human emotions are neither endorsed nor judged by the Bible but are channeled into transformative relationship with God.

Chapter 18

Reading Old Testament law

The need for specific laws may come and go in different cultural contexts, but the more important question is what underlying values or interests those laws are meant to protect.

Story – Psalm 22

Chapter 19

Reading the prophets

Prophets call people back to the fundamentals of loving God and neighbor and draw attention to the places word and practice separate.

Chapters 20

Reading wisdom literature

Many profound human experiences defy easy explication, but the Bible honors the questions as much as the answers and holds open sacred space for the act of struggling with them.

Chapter 21

Reading the Gospels

Gospels are history told with an unapologetic slant toward helping real communities in different circumstances understand how the person of Jesus is changing their world.

Chapter 22

Reading the epistles

The epistles are an exercise in improvisational ethics in which people grounded deeply in the story and Spirit of Jesus begin to reimagine all of life in light of his re-creative work.

Chapter 23

Reading apocalypses

It is possible to "over-interpret" the details of an apocalypse when the primary purpose, like a great painting, is the emotional impact and the response it inspires.

Story – Revelation 4-5

Chapter 24

Biblical authority defined dialogically

Far from providing a straight-forward answer-key, the Bible invites readers into a nuanced dialogue, recognizing that the answer to any question may depend significantly on the context in which it is asked.

Chapter 25

Developing a Christocentric hermeneutic

Meeting Jesus is like donning a pair of corrective lenses that bring our previously blurry vision of God and God's desires into clearer focus.

Chapter 26

The greatest commandment as interpretative center

One of the primary things that turned religious people against Jesus was his habit of framing questions like Sabbath in terms of holy imagination rather than simple rules, digging down to the foundation of the law's true purpose.

Chapter 27

Developing a Cruciocentric hermeneutic

The cross and resurrection are a revelation of God's core mission and strategy: to heal the world through the subversive power of self-sacrificing love.

Chapter 28

Reading the Bible's violent texts

The violent and genocidal texts of the Old Testament for Christians are interpreted backward from the cross and its defining revelation of God as a lover of enemies.

Story – Noah's ark

Part 3: Bringing it Home

Chapter 29

Basic questions of application

The most common mistakes readers of the Bible make in application are to draw false parallels between situations that don't align and to forget to ask what difference Jesus makes.

Chapter 30

The on-going role of the Spirit

The same Spirit who breathes into scripture also breathes into us, forming Christ's imagination within us so that we are equipped to continue extending the story of God in the world.

Story – Romans 14-15

Chapter 31

An Acts 15 model of discernment

The early church looked first for evidence of the Spirit's present activity, recognizable by its "fruit," and then brought that evidence into conversation with the Bible's witness and with a diverse representation of the living faith community.

Chapter 32

The role of community

Every human being, by virtue of experience, disposition, and historical context, has a particular angle of vision and particular blind spots, which means the more diverse the community with which we read, the more likely we are to see the whole picture.

Chapter 33

The relationship between Spirit and Scripture

The Spirit does not self-contradict, yet the very diversity of perspectives represented in the Bible opens the possibility that the most obvious scripture may not be the most relevant to what God is doing in a moment.

Chapter 34

The concern of relativity

Instead of asserting itself as a "last word," the Bible positions itself as a "grounding word" which anchors us even as we plunge into ever-deeper discernment of what the defining act of God in Jesus Christ means for the world.

Story – Luke 16:1-15

Chapter 35

How to hold our convictions

Only time and the practice of obedience have the power to reveal the true words from the false ones, so we stake our claims boldly but humbly and give them over to the test of time and experience.

Chapter 36

Disagreeing in love

Instead of seeking to eliminate the opposition, we would do well to consider carefully what insights they are calling attention to that we might otherwise overlook.

Chapter 37

The goal of Christian maturity

The shape of Scripture suggests that God's deepest desire for us is that we grow up into the mind of Christ, becoming transformed from the inside out until we think, will, and act by a new design.

Chapter 38

Encountering the mysteries of faith

The Bible itself offers witness to times when all the answers begin to unravel and the most truthful thing we can do is simply fall silent before the bright darkness of God.

Story – Job

Chapter 39

Doubt and the quest for certainty

The quest for certainty leaves many people almost paralyzed, yet faith is an invitation not to be certain but to leap in the direction of a truly worthy vision and discover where it carries us.

Chapter 40

The role of grace

In contrast to fear, which stifles hearing and stunts growth, the Bible invites us into the freedom of knowing the abundant grace that covers us and reminds us that it is the seeking and not merely the finding that brings pleasure to God.

Conclusion

Genesis 32:22-32 as a metaphor for engaging scripture

Although the Bible retains its freedom and refuses to be pinned down, it's in the act of struggling with it that we find ourselves blessed and sometimes even catch a glimpse of the face of God.

Marketing

Conversations with pastors and professors across the country have convinced me there is an urgent need for a new kind of book on hermeneutics. The vast majority of introductory books currently on the market are, perhaps unsurprisingly, written by conservative evangelicals. Whatever their merits, these books are out of sync with a large portion of the church, which is awakening to an awareness Anabaptists have long maintained—that a strongly christocentric hermeneutic and rigorous commitment to communal discernment are indispensable to the biblical authority. I believe this book could find a strong market in a significant movement of churches that are looking for ways to call people into a deep, transformative relationship with the Bible that is not premised on the problematic assumptions of evangelical "biblicism."

While readers of all ages need a fresh perspective on hermeneutics, I believe this book could be especially effectively marketed as a resource for young adults. It's in their

teens and twenties that many people ask their most significant questions about religious tradition, and many young adults are desperately searching for a way to shape a faith that feels both spiritually alive and intellectually credible. The book could find a market in church youth groups seeking to introduce scripture to their teenagers, in small groups trying to disciple new believers, and in universities attempting to help incoming students begin to think reflectively about their relationship with the Bible.

At a time when churches are fiercely divided around a variety of social and moral issues, I believe this book could also provide a starting point for deeper conversation about the implicit hermeneutical principles that underlie the diverse ways Christians interact with scripture. It offers churches an opportunity to step back from the sites of their conflicts and ask more foundational questions of what they believe the Bible to be and how they believe it interacts with the Spirit and the community.

While I am still early in my career, I believe my greatest marketing asset as an author may be the breadth and diversity of my field of personal connections. I have strong visibility within Mennonite Church USA due to both conference speaking engagements and writing for denominational periodicals. My sermons have a significant podcast following that extends beyond my own denomination, and several webinar series I've been a part of recently have set participation records for their sponsoring institutions. In the last few years, I've spoken side-by-side at events with prominent Anabaptist voices including Greg Boyd, Brian Zahnd, and Bruxy Cavey as well as with evangelical scholars like Ben Witherington. I have professional connections with several progressive-leaning evangelical organizations including Missio Alliance, The Global Immersion Project, and Fresh Expressions. Due to the diversity of my educational background, I also have

significant relational connections among a broad swath of other denominations, including pastors and leaders within the United Methodist Church, whose theology I've found is particularly amendable to the perspective on scripture I'm teaching.

My doctoral work has put significant constraints on my ability to pursue outside writing projects including blogging and article publication. However, as soon as my doctoral work is competed in January 2017, I plan to devote renewed attention to writing for other venues. I have standing invitations for a regular column in several Anabaptist periodicals as well as open invitations to write for several evangelical blogs. I also have ideas on how to increase readership on my own hermeneutics blog, which I'll pursue when I complete my coursework.

I also believe in this case my gender may be a particular marketing asset. Very little of the work currently taking place in hermeneutics is being done by women, and none of the "popularized" books that I've looked at during my doctoral research have been authored by women. It's been my experience that this gender factor can be especially helpful in increasing professional profile through speaking engagements, where experienced female communicators are often in short supply. I have a track record of being received very well as a conference speaker in both Anabaptist and progressive evangelical settings.

SECTION 6:

POSTSCRIPT

My overall goal in the development of my artifact was to create a resource that would help laity adopt a new approach to biblical authority. As a pastor, I am keenly aware that it is difficult to have a conversation about authority directly, both because most Christians hold their views of authority implicitly rather than consciously and because conversations around the nature of scripture can feel threatening. My approach with the artifact, instead of being primary deconstructive, was to attempt to build a positive, holistic relationship with the Bible from the ground up.

In order to help me determine the most effective ways to communicate my ideas, in the fall of 2017 I taught a live 13-week course on interpreting the Bible, which was attending by more than 100 participants. I put video recordings of the class sessions online and received feedback from pastors and laity all around the country. I also facilitated a three-session "introduction to the Bible" webinar series which included more than 100 live participants and is now being used as curriculum by a number of churches. These activities gave me an opportunity to hear questions and test responses to the ideas I was developing in the written artifact.

The overwhelming response to these course offerings has confirmed the urgent need I have sensed in the church for better resources to facilitate conversation around the Bible. Although I still plan to complete the book artifact for publication in 2018, one of the things that has become clearer to me in the process of development is that there is perhaps an even more pressing need for video teaching resources around this topic, making the material more accessible as a conversation-starter in churches. I believe the

book would pair well with a video teaching series and am hoping to find a way to pursue this additional project after the book is completed.

One of the most important outcomes of this project for me personally has been greater clarity in my thinking on why the Bible matters. Although I grew up in Christian settings that took the importance of scripture for granted, many of those with whom I work both inside and outside the church do not share this assumption. I have learned a great deal about how to make the case for scripture as worthy of deep engagement, and this is proving beneficial in real ministry interactions. The process of making the material accessible for laity has also helped me come to terms with my own relationship to scripture and why its transformative impact in my life has been so profound.

In the course of this project, I have become even more persuaded that the church is in the midst of a new, perhaps quieter, reformation in which the nature of Christian authority is being renegotiated. Distortions in understanding of "sola scriptura," combined with the forces of modern skepticism, have created a situation in which the Bible is alternatively deified or dismissed. Many people find themselves adrift, uncertain if any ground for arbitrating truth remains. I believe that perhaps the most urgent theological task facing the church in the twenty-first century is finding a fresh way to talk about the relationship between word, flesh, and Spirit—a vision of authority that is dynamic, fluid, and powerfully transformative. I have faith that as we meet this challenge, the result for the church will be significant spiritual renewal and an increased capacity for faithful response to the living Christ who is still moving in real ways in the world.

APPENDIX A:

ARTIFACT

The Bible Unwrapped:

Making Sense of Scripture Today

Herald Press, 2018

Meghan Larissa Good

Introduction

Imagine a small cabin in the midst of a vast forest.

The cabin is simple and familiar. It's filled with television and take-out containers and a terrifying backlog of emails demanding an urgent response. It's composed, in other words, of all the usual clutter and clamor that make up modern life.

The forest outside the cabin is wild and wonderful and strange. It contains sunny glens and cool, quiet clefts, morning glories that bloom for just one perfect day and cedars that tower and count ages like breaths. The forest stretches out in every direction for miles beyond counting.

The cabin—this is the world as we know it, the stuff of our ordinary, daily human realities. The forest is the infinite, eternal Life of God, the full Reality of all that truly exists.

It would be possible to live your whole life in the cabin never realizing there is anything outside of its four solid walls. Except that one of those walls contains a glass window, and through that window you catch glimpses of a beckoning Beyond.

The glass window is Scripture.

The point of a window is not the pane of glass in and of itself. The purpose of a window is the light it sheds on everything inside as well as the view it provides of that which lies beyond its frame. A good window draws the gaze through itself, unobstructed; it is a servant of the landscape outside. In similar fashion, the Bible is not the end in itself. It is not God. It is not the forest. It is not the strange and wonderful Really Real. But it is the opening through which we catch glimpses of such things and begin to imagine what it could mean to step outside our walls and meet them face to face.

But this is the point at which many readers of the Bible get confused.

Some mistake the window with the view. Their gaze stops at the surface of the pane. Instead of recognizing the extraneous Reality of the forest, they start to believe the entire world is contained inside the glass. Rather than approaching the window as an opening to the living forest's dynamism, they approach it like a two-dimensional painting that is no more than it depicts. The window in this case becomes a graven image—an idol, not an invitation.

Others become cynical about the dust, chips, and warps that a window which has weathered thousands of years inevitably accumulates. They decide that a view touched by cracks or dust is of no use at all, and they turn their backs on the window to stare at an empty wall. They attempt to hypothesize about what lies without from their experience of what lies within. Having forsaken the window, they end up gazing in a mirror, seeing only a reflection of themselves and the room in which they're standing.

Both of these approaches to the Bible reflect a fundamental misunderstanding of the Bible's role. The primary purpose of Scripture is precisely what lies beyond the pages of Scripture: Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, the Risen One who lives to be encountered. The early Christians understood that the Bible is rightly read when it leads to contemplation of, and participation in, no less than Jesus himself.[i]

This means we don't just read Scripture—we read through Scripture like a window. We read until the ink becomes transparent, a portal to a place where the living Christ is waiting to be met. As interpreters of the Bible, we clean the glass, clear the accumulated fog of historical distance and misperception so that we and others with us have a clearer view outside. The rustling, billowing Spirit sets and resets the scene before

us, somehow both ancient and always new. But Scripture's purpose is not fulfilled until knowledge becomes encounter. The true end of Scripture is eternal life, beginning here and now, as we are drawn outside the confines of our musty cabin-world to play together in the Wind-blown Wilds of God.

PART 1:

OPENING THE BOOK

1

The Great "What If"

All knowledge begins with a leap of faith.

Love exists. Baseball is boring. I am not currently lying in a spaceship pod, attached to a VR matrix. I cannot strictly prove any of these assertions. But the evidence in their favor seems compelling enough that I am willing to believe them and to get on with living as if they were true. And ongoing experience continually reinforces my sense of the accuracy of these conclusions.

Even the most committed scientist bent over her laboratory microscope must choose as a condition of her work to take certain things for granted—that her senses can be trusted; that her measurements correspond with something true within the shape of reality; that the natural laws which apply today will apply the same tomorrow.

Every person approaches the world with some fundamental set of assumptions about reality and how it operates.

Some believe that the material world is all there truly is, that everything that exists must be open (at least in theory) to scientific observation and impartial measurement. The universe is a closed system in which no outside forces intervene. Religious claims are no more than the remnant of primitive superstitions.

Others suspect there could well be a cosmic Designer out there who exists but who is functionally irrelevant to human affairs. This divine being, whoever he or she might be, is either utterly indifferent to the world or firmly committed to a policy of noninterference. Either way, human beings alone determine the course and outcome of history.

Still others picture a God in heaven and humans on earth with a chasm in between. Under normal circumstances, both parties remain cordoned off on their side of the cosmic divide. But on rare occasions, in response to prayer or for other mysterious divine reasons, God breaks through the veil of time and space and nudges things around a bit.

These descriptions of the world cannot be definitively proved or disproved; they can only be accepted as the best representation of the available evidence. Even skepticism itself is a form of belief; to doubt one picture of the world is to begin believing otherwise.[ii] No one, religious or not, escapes the orbit of faith.

So let's suppose for a moment, for the sake of argument, that there is another of way of putting together the evidence. Suppose the universe was filled, down to the bosons and quarks, with the very breath of God. Suppose matter burst into being and stardust spun into the first cells of life under the hand of a masterful Artist. And suppose that Artist, who delighted in each new form, didn't want to go away and settle into distant observation but stayed on to relate, to communicate, to participate in an ongoing process of creative emergence.

This is the Bible's bold hypothesis, its glorious leap of faith: there never was any closed cosmic system into which God has to break as a stranger; from the very beginning until now, the Maker's fingers have always been dug into the soil of creation. God is closer to the world than any of us have dared imagine, speaking to it and hearing its voice, moving it and somehow being moved by it. None of us has ever seen or known a world in the absence of God; we can't even truly imagine one.

In the biblical vision, God has made a voluntary choice to bind God's self to humanity—to love, listen, guide, relate, and leave us room to choose. History is neither fated by some pre-formed divine script nor is it given over to the tyranny of human whims. God acts, and we respond; God speaks, and we talk back. This communication, this interchange, is happening constantly, with ordinary people just like us. History takes shape between our palm and God's as we press together the always-turning clay of time and space.

The world's story begins with God's decisive action and ends with God's decisive action, but everything between is covenant, relationship, a dialogue, a dynamic dance between God and humans, responding to each other's movements. The dips and turns vary depending on the extent to which we tune ourselves to the divine music and how well we learn to follow our divine Partner's lead.

There is no way to objectively "prove" this is the truth about the world. None of us has the luxury of standing at an impartial distance; we can only form our judgments as people situated in the middle of a story. The Bible mounts no elaborate philosophic arguments in defense its great leap. Instead, it simply offers witnesses from the field—the testimony of people who heard a Voice they weren't expecting that both broke and remade them, people who saw with their own eyes death turning into life; the testimony of a community who saw waters part for slaves to cross and who followed a cloud toward freedom, a community whose story cannot be accounted by the sum of its constituent human parts.

All knowledge begins with some leap of faith. Our journey with Scripture begins with willingness to entertain a simple "what if." What if God was closer than breathing?

What if God had something to say? What if human being were capable of hearing? What if God came and walked our streets with sandaled feet caked in the dust of our world?

We come to the Bible to hear the witness of some who've dared to make the leap, to live as if all this were true and see what resulted. If we read it long enough, curiously enough, we just might find ourselves starting to look over our shoulder, wondering what a real God-on-the-loose could be up to now.

2

Quantum Leaps

For some who grew up in the Bible Belt, who cut their teeth on the back of a church pew and could make out like bandits in hymn-lyric Jeopardy, a chapter on why the Bible matters might seem unnecessary at best, maybe even borderline heretical. But I'll let you in on a secret—you're not alone if you have doubts. A few weeks into a class I was teaching on interpreting the Bible, a woman who'd been a regular church attender for more than sixty years burst into my office and threw her Bible on my desk, shouting, "I've been reading this, and it's outrageous! Do you even know what's in there?!" It turned she'd just discovered the book of Joshua.

When I teach about the Bible, it has become common occurrence for me to be pulled aside by people—many of them well-respected leaders in their local churches—who confess with a spark of anger or sometimes with tears in their eyes that they gave up on the Bible years ago. It's obscure laws and bloody tales seem irrelevant at best and often even offensive. "Can't I just get on with loving God and doing good," they ask, "and let this outdated book go?"

If you are one of those quietly wondering if an ancient book deserves its hype, there are many others who share your question. But despite the undeniable challenges involved, there are a few key reasons I'd suggest to you the Bible is still worth your attention.

First, seeking God without the Bible is sort of like trying to rediscover the principles of quantum physics…from scratch. Since God is always at work in the world, it is certainly possible to learn real things about God through direct, personal experience,

whether through prayer or reflection on situations you've encountered or simply by gazing on the mountains. There's no doubt about it—God shows up.

But here's the thing: if you started traveling today, using current technology it would take you 225,000,000,000,000 years to reach the edge of the universe. And that's just the universe we know about. If it stopped expanding. It's safe to assume that the truth of God, well, that is even larger. Even if we somehow manage to be exactly right in every conclusion we draw about God and the cosmos from our own experience (an unlikely prospect, religious history suggests), in one short lifetime we'll still never personally manage to see more than a few grains of sand in the ocean of God.

If every person had to rediscover gravity for themselves starting with Newton's apple, our knowledge of the world would be limited indeed. When we open the Bible, we stand on the shoulders of giants before us. As science has Galileo, Curie, Einstein, faith has Sarah, Ezekiel, John. When we come to the Bible, we have a chance to lay our own small grains of insight along a longer shoreline. Instead of struggling one by one, lifetime after lifetime, to draw together enough scraps of insight to divine some small truth which merits confidence, we are given a foundation reliably laid and offered an opportunity to keep building onto the house.[iii]

Second, it's crucial to remember that every individual, every community, every culture and every generation has its own biases and blind spots. Just as your own personal experience of God and the world opens you to particular insights, it closes you to others. Even pooling our thoughts and ideas with a diverse group of friends is not enough to save us, because there are things in the water of history that all of us are drinking which impact us collectively whether we perceive their flavor or not. Those who set out in

search of God independent of the Bible almost invariably end up finding a God who looks very much like themselves—a God who shares their tastes and politics, their assumptions and ambitions, the trending philosophies of their time.

When we come to the Bible, we look at God through the eyes of ages and cultures who don't share our own presumptions and preoccupations. We enter into conversation not just with the biblical writers but with thousands of years of readers and interpreters who have their own experiences and perspectives. In doing so, we are checked against the temptation to bow to a god who is no more than the spirit of our age, a god who is made in the image of our own particular distortions. We glimpse truth that our companions-in-time, blinded by the same modern lights and myths that we are, are simply not in a position to tell us.

Finally, and hardest to pin down, is the naked power of the book itself. Literature attains status as a "classic" when it speaks in such a way that generation after generation reading it gains insight into the truth of the world or the human condition. The Bible is somewhat like classic literature in this, yet also qualitatively more. Millennia of readers testify that when this book is given space to speak, chains are broken, wounds are healed, lives are changed, and worlds are upended. Those who listen carefully find themselves addressed by a Voice beyond the page that somehow penetrates and breaks things open.

If you haven't yet experienced this phenomenon for yourself, hearing people talk about their experience of the Bible can feel a lot like looking at an autostereogram (more commonly known as a "Magic Eye" image). It's as if everyone around you is saying, "Look, there's a dolphin! What do you mean, 'Where?'?! Right there in front of you!" when all you can see is a blur of random colors.

You could, of course, doubt your witnesses, insist there's nothing for anyone to see here but what is in their heads. But consider this—when person after person standing on the same spot feels the ground surge beneath them, its's reasonable to ask if something powerful is moving under the surface. If enough people over enough time sit before the same page and see it come alive, it's probably at least worth considering that what you need is not new friends but perhaps a new approach to looking. Here I can only testify to my own experience—I've read many thousands of wonderful books in my life, some of them dozens of times. But only one has time and time again caused the earth to quake.

3

Beyond Basic Instructions

In a church I visited regularly growing up, a large banner hung on the wall. "BIBLE:" it read—"Basic Instructions Before Leaving Earth." I stared at that banner for years and never thought to question it. Its pithy statement captured exactly what I assumed the Bible to be—sort of like a Roomba operations manual, only for the human soul. Applying the Bible was a matter of cracking the manufacturer's code so you knew which buttons to press in exactly what order to make this thing called life run right.

The trouble was, like many Bible readers before me, I discovered over time that such a characterization of the Bible's nature was strangely mismatched with its contents. To begin with, it's hard to imagine any definition of "basic" that includes detailed directions for constructing gold lampstands or for determining the cud-chewing habits of cafeteria mystery meat. Yet both these subjects occupy significant sacred real estate. Meanwhile topics that seem of rather fundamental relevance to faithful living—say, how to figure out what kind of work you are meant for, or how to raise a kid who doesn't hate your guts—are seemingly not covered in any direct way at all.

This isn't to suggest that the Bible contains no practical directives relevant to everyday living. To the contrary, the Bible offers many helpful insights on such important subjects as managing money, maintaining relationships, and keeping your tongue from ruining your life (counsel as relevant in the age of Twitter as it ever was). But still, if the primary purpose of the Bible were to efficiently convey the most basic, universally relevant knowledge to maintaining a well-ordered life, most of us would probably expect a very different kind of book—a little more quick-reference index, a

little less poetry; a little more guidance on effective prayer, a little less detail on how to build a massive ark without any power tools.

Instead of sticking to grand universals, the Bible is shockingly *particular*, addressing this person in this culture in this specific situation which might never be precisely replicated. Exodus, for example, explains what to do if your enemy loses his donkey (Ex. 23:4), a situation which has just slightly better odds of arising for a resident of Brooklyn than being gored to death by an ox (a scenario which, coincidently, Exodus 21 also addresses). 1 Corinthians and Romans spill a great deal of ink debating the ethics of eating idol meat—a major dilemma in first century Roman culture but one not likely to arise at your modern deli.

Then there are the difficulties with the term "instructions." Forty percent of the Old Testament and an even higher percent of the New is made up of narrative. And nearly a third of the Bible is composed of poetry—including an entire book dedicated to lauding the goodness of sex. Yet very little of biblical narrative or poetry is "instructional" in a clear and straightforward fashion.

Take for example the Judges 11 tale of a man who makes a wartime vow which he keeps by sacrificing his own daughter. It's far from obvious what the directive of such a story might be. Is this parenting instructions? Advice on keeping your word? Or on when to be smart enough to break it? Or consider the infamous conquest stories in which God's people slaughter the population of whole cities on their way to claiming divinely-promised property. The movement from narrative to instruction here seems hazard-prone at best. And following Song of Songs' example by informing your beloved her hair is

"like flock of goats" and her teeth like "newly shorn ewes" is unlikely to achieve the desired result—that is, if your goal isn't spending the night sleeping in the doghouse.

Biblical passages like all of these may well serve a vital purpose, but the pedagogical value they possess is quite distant from the clear directive function of step-by-step instructions or from the prescriptive clarity of a universal law. The "point" in many cases is far from obvious. In fact, while some texts offer answers, others simply seem to complicate the questions.[iv]

But if the shape of the Bible does not neatly conform to the expected paradigm of *Human Life for Dummies*, what does its unique combination of ancient laws, harrowing tales, private letters, and epic poetry actually add up to? What kind of book is this, really? The reality is a bit more complicated than that five-word banner from my childhood suggested. Perhaps the best place to begin exploring the Bible's nature is with what's most obvious: whatever else we may have in the Bible, at the broadest level what we find there is a story. The Bible tells the story of an encounter between God and humanity.

From the dawn of human existence, long before the Bible's first pages were penned, God has been reaching toward human beings and humans beings back toward God. Humans have struggled to comprehend God's character and being, God's good desires for them and for the whole created order. God has struggled to get humans to listen to the revelation of these things. Whatever else it does, the Bible witnesses to this bidirectional pursuit.

Not every story in the Bible reflects what ought to be. Not everything that happens in the pages of the Bible does so because it should. Not every word which is spoken by someone in the Bible comes stamps with divine endorsement. This is no

fairytale, no snow-globe world. The Bible tells the story of what *is*. It's the true story of a world where hearing is imperfect, where motives are mixed, where evil exists, where bias lingers, where good intentions can go wildly astray. And where God persists in showing up even in the midst of everything.

There is little question that this pursuit to which the Bible witnesses has met with mixed results. Sometimes the divine hand reaches down in a unilateral act of rescue. Sometimes it's ignored or brushed away, with catastrophic consequences. Sometimes two reaching hands meet, and miracles are born. The Bible tells all these kinds of stories. We hear what people speak to God. We learn what they hear back. We watch them try and fail and learn and start all over again. We see them searching and being found—sometimes even despite themselves.

The Bible's story isn't neat because this kind of pursuit never is. It's messy and confusing and frequently uncomfortable. But it's precisely the blood and sweat and tears and questions that certify the Bible's trustworthiness. This is the story of real life—raw and complicated and sacred. By immersing ourselves in Scripture's messy stories, by daring to call them God-breathed, holy, we are reminded if God can be here, God can be anywhere. Even with broken people like us. Even in our cracked and jagged world. Even in our own up-and-down, back-and-forth, missing-and-reaching stories.

4

The World, Reimagined

But if the Bible is a story, it is also something more. It's a book that dares to make an authoritative claim on life. Between the poems and proverbs and parables, a portrait is taking shape of who God is and what God loves. The Bible suggests that to learn to live in open connection with God, to learn to love the things that God loves, is to begin to live in conformity with the world's design.

This description of the Bible—an introduction to God and to the shape of the with-God life—is something rather different from "basic instructions." I'll admit from time to time I still fantasize about possessing a handbook that would answer every problem in a clear, three-step process. Secure a great husband, a la book of Ruth: (1) don your best dress; (2) sneak up to his bed after he's spent a long evening partying with his friends; (3) uncover his (ahem) "feet" and then wait to see what he says. (Check out Ruth 3 to catch the whole story.)

Of course, the trouble with instructions manuals is how quickly they go out of date. A 2015 atlas could offer you a detailed guide for driving from New York to L.A. The instructions might be absolutely perfect on the day they were designed. But what happens when the traffic patterns change? Or a tree falls in your way? Or when cars are replaced by hovercrafts? The precise sequence of turns that once would have carried you safely to your destination could now lead you far astray, even send you skidding into wreckage. The goal, the ultimate destination, remains exactly the same. But the ability to get there safely requires a certain flexibility, the ability to navigate previously unknown obstacles and adapt to new terrain.

The Bible's opening sequence in Genesis 1 could leave some readers with the impression that creation is perfected, tied off, completed—like a highway system laid down once never to change again. If this is the case, then a turn-by-turn map would seem the perfect communication tool. But Genesis 2 immediately complicates this picture of creation by depicting God playing in the mud of the new-minted world. Humans are on the scene now, but so is God, and the creative work is still unfolding. The scene reminds me a bit of kids tinkering in a sandbox. God forms a creature and hands it to Adam and asks, "What do you think we should call it?" Adam replies, "it's a spiny lumpsucker!" And that becomes its name. (Presumably this is about the moment God decides it might be time to bring Eve around, if only for a second opinion.)

In Genesis 2 human beings are not merely passive observers of God's work in the world; they are active participants in the creative vocation of God. They—and we—are assigned the task of cultivating soil that is pregnant with divine possibilities. This vocation, given humanity in Genesis 2:15, is not mechanical, assembly-line work—stamping identical cogs pumping out of a machine. It's creative, nurturing work. It's the vocation of a gardener who tends living, growing things—a vocation not just of preservation but of emergence.

The number and complexity of tasks, the variability of conditions, demands that a gardener have a far more intimate knowledge of her soil than a finite list of instructions could ever contain. The gardener must understand her soil's potential and vulnerabilities enough to recognize potential new threats, adapt to changing conditions, and cultivate flourishing in all seasons. What she needs is a mind that is attuned to the nature of the soil itself.

This is why, I believe, the Bible takes a much more ambitious approach to human formation than a simple rule-book could provide. God is not shaping drones but artists made in the image of a Master. An artist must begin by learning the essential rules of the craft. A sculptor won't get far if she denies the nature of clay, refusing to keep it moist, firing it in ways that crack it. Similarly, there are basic rules to how God's world works—principles of moral gravity, if you will—whose defiance is quite costly. The Bible does indeed point out some of these essential rules so we can work with the nature of our clay rather than against it. But rules alone are not enough! An artist needs imagination, a vision of what can be.

The Bible is more than a story only—it is a story moving us and the world somewhere. Its revelation of who God is, of what God loves, of how the world is shaped, provides the essential information we need to creatively to lean in. We were made for so much more than paint-by-number religion. We were made to paint the dreams of God on many different canvases, in all the diverse shapes and vibrant, Spirit-saturated colors of true life. The Bible trains our eye for the divine aesthetic, and then sends us out with a brush in our hand.

Between the lines of its obscure laws and strange and unexpected stories, the Bible forms inspired imagination for the God-shaped possibilities of the world. In it we learn what God's activity has looked like in the past so that we will recognize when it is unfolding right in front of us. We discover what God sounds like so that we can hear when God continues to speak. We learn what God loves so we can be alert in all times and places for opportunities to stir that delight. We learn what God dreams of so we can begin to participate in living that dream. The Bible shapes imagination for how God can

be encountered in ordinary life and for how we can cooperate with God in encouraging the flourishing of the whole creation garden.

The particularity of the Bible's address—God's word to this person, this place, in this specific situation—is precisely what shapes imagination for the universal. God talks to ancient Palestinian farmers about their enemy's donkey and modern American commuters about their enemy's flat tire. God is at work not just everywhere but *somewhere*. God tends not just every bloom but *this one* in its unique soil and shape and conditions. We are shaped by the Bible to join God in the specificity of genuine care, not just in general but in all the 'hereness' and 'nowness' of the particular bit of creation with which we have been entrusted.

In Romans 12:2 the apostle Paul writes, "Don't be conformed to the patterns of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds…" The patterns of the world run across our news feed every minute of the day—cycles of fear, greed, isolation and violence that all the intellect of all the nations can't seem to find a way beyond.

But those who are shaped by Scripture are formed for a more beautiful imagination. We imagine a community where there are no poor because what belongs to one is a gift for all. We imagine marriage characterized by mutual submission, where each partner guards the other's joy as if it were their own. We imagine a justice defined not by matching wounds but by the healing of what's broken. Through Scripture we are shaped page by page into the imagination and the vision of Christ. We learn to see past the surface of the stripped and barren soil all around us to the small but potent seeds of divine possibility planted and waiting to be cultivated.

This is a vision of faithful living so much bigger than a rote performance of a finite set of religious rules. The Bible's invitation is to a life of creative, risk-taking engagement. It's movement continually drives us outward toward a relationship still unfolding, a story still being written—in us, in our children's children, and in generations yet to come.[v]

(Story)

Joshua 5:13-6:27

Joshua is a young man whose star is clearly on the rise.

Joshua's mentor, Moses, is a living legend, the greatest leader in his people's history. Moses challenged the Pharaoh of Egypt to a duel—and won! He rescued hundreds of thousands from slavery. He parted a body of water just by holding out his staff. He delivered the Ten Commandments after speaking face to face with God. And Joshua has been hand-picked as his successor.

When the time finally comes for Moses to pass the baton, he commissions Joshua in front of everyone: "I got them out of Egypt; now you get them into the promised land." Then Moses dies, and the community offers him this modest eulogy: "No one has ever shown the mighty power or performed the awesome deeds that Moses did in the sight of all Israel."

All right, then, Joshua—you're up! It's like being asked to solo right after Pavarotti.

Joshua's first task is to claim the city of Jericho, the gateway to the land he plans to conquer for his people. This is no small challenge, as Jericho, like most ancient cities, is surrounded by enormous walls meant to shield it from exactly the kind of invasion that Joshua is planning.

On the eve of his leadership debut, a messenger of God shows up for a talk. The messenger says to Joshua, "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy." As it happens, these are precisely the same words God had spoken to his mentor Moses from a burning bush on the first day of his career—right before Moses led the

slaves out of Egypt with ten plagues and some crazy miracles. You can almost see hear the fireworks go off in Joshua's head as he connects the dots—"Wait a minute, that's exactly what you said to…Yes! Hot dog! Now it really begins! I wonder who will play me when the movie comes out..."

Joshua is excited, ready for his mission: "So now what, God? What will it be? Moses' first assignment was to turn a staff into a snake. Then he got to send a plague of frogs and be led by a pillar of fire. What do you have in mind for me? Turning a hat into a tarantula? Hordes of angry scorpions that attack on my command? Lightning bolts falling at my word? Please, tell me there will be lightning bolts."

God's messenger replies, "Okay, here's your assignment, Joshua. What God wants you to do is…walk in circles around the city of Jericho thirteen times."

Say what?

"Seriously?! You've got to be kidding me, God! Give me something else to do. Anything! I'll dig tunnels under the city. I'll make a battering ram to beat down the gates. I'll even start chipping away at those walls with a spoon. At least then I'll have something to show at the end of the day for my labor. Anything but walking in circles!"

But God says circles, so circles it is.

The first time the Israelites appear on the horizon, marching toward the city of Jericho, the residents are terrified. A huge foreign army is standing on their doorstep! The Israelites march up to the city gate and stomp around the walls, blasting away on their trumpets of war (because the harps, well, just didn't quite set a conquering-type mood). The people of Jericho huddle in their houses, shaking in their sandals.

But then the trumpets stop blowing, and the Israelites walk away. At first the people of Jericho think, "Those Israelites are just messing with our minds. They'll be back tomorrow to finish the job." And the Israelites do come back that next day. They march around the walls, blasting their trumpets. The people all tremble some more. But again, nothing happens. It's on the same on the third day. And the fourth. By the fifth day, you might imagine the people of Jericho standing on top of their thick city walls, tossing rotten figs and shouting, "Sixth time's a charm! You know how said that? Nobody, like, ever. Hey smart guys, in case you haven't noticed, walking in circles ain't exactly a game-changing strategy."

You'd better believe the Israelites are thinking the same thing. Joshua is probably sitting alone in his tent with his hands over his face, feeling like a total idiot. Everyone knows the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over, expecting a different result. If the wall didn't fall the first time you went around it, why on earth would the thirteenth time be any different? No one ever got anywhere by walking in circles.

There's something about this story that feels painfully familiar to many seekers-after-God. Maybe once upon a time you set out on a spiritual journey with a great sense of resoluteness, expecting that big things would result—mountains would move or walls would crumble and all that jazz. You prayed. You started reading your Bible and made it at least halfway through Leviticus. You might have even gone to church. You rescued cats from trees and carried people's groceries.

But after a while you started to worry about the lack of discernable results. There seemed to be little proof of return on all that effort and investment. Perhaps you started to

feel like you were mostly just going in circles, treading the same old ground again and again without getting anywhere. Maybe you were tempted to give up. Maybe you actually did.

Here's the thing: God does not seem to share our preoccupation with efficiency. A life of faith is much like a great road trip—the point isn't just where you're going but who you're going with and the relationship that forms in the midst of the journey. Sometimes the long way around is the most direct path to the true end.

Spiritual practices like prayer or worship or reading the Bible are exercises in walking circles, round and round, wearing deep grooves in the sidewalk. They often seem at first—even for a long time—to be achieving nothing at all.

But there's something worth noting—

Earthquakes happen when two plates that have been pushing against each other for ages without moving finally build up enough pressure that rock abruptly breaks. Entire cities crumble with the force of the sudden movement. Faith is a lot like that. You don't have to know where you are going. You don't have to see where the pathway leads. You don't have to be certain of what difference it makes. Sometimes all that is required is to just keep walking, keep reading, keep talking, just keep pressing against the rock.

Twelve times you may walk around that circle with God and feel like you've gotten absolutely nowhere. But remember Joshua's story, and take heart: sometimes, on the thirteenth time around, walls really do fall down.

5

Becoming Batman

I've always been a sucker for a good origin story—how Batman became Batman, who decided "blue raspberry" was really a flavor, what sequence of tragically misguided thoughts led to the invention of selfie stick. Many people, if they've thought about it at all, suppose the Bible's origin story must involve something along the lines of a few religiously-super-powered men, equipped with James-Bond-style earpieces, sitting alone in a darkened room and receiving divine dictation.

But in fact between the two covers of the Bible are 66 books, each with its own origin story of who put it to paper and when and how. The Ten Commandments are boldly described by the book of Exodus as carved into stone by the finger of God. For other parts of the Bible, however, the pathways of transmission appear a bit more winding.

The Bible's oldest stories were first transmitted mouth to mouth. They were family stories, the sort passed around a holiday table, one generation to the next, about how great-great-grandfather Simeon—you know, the one with the weird big toe—had once seen God act. Of course, most of us have played enough games of "telephone" to develop reasonable concerns about the reliability of messages passed orally. But pre-literate cultures had a knack for memorization that those of us can hardly conceive who take for granted instant access to knowledge in the form of written (or digital) records. Stories were told with rhythms and repetitions and other memory patterns built in, enabling them to be transmitted over time with an incredible level of accuracy.[vi] As

centuries passed and literacy increased, editors eventually wove these ancient oral stories into written collections, some of which are included in the Bible.

Some books of the Bible explicitly state that they are drawing on material derived from other written sources. Kings and Chronicles, for example, assess the monarchal periods of Judah and Israel using historical records from the annals of the kings (cf. 1 Kings 14:19). In the prologue to his Gospel (Luke 1:1-4), Luke describes the extensive research process he undertook to ensure the stories of Jesus he records are reliable and authentic—a process which included looking at other written compilations.

The book of Psalms contains prayers composed by individuals at the end of their rope and songs communities sang on the way to worship or at the ascension of a king. Some of the Bible's proverbs are strikingly similar to wisdom statements circulating in places like Egypt. The prophets speak boldly as messengers endued with divine authority—"thus says the Lord," they declare—but most functioned in their own time primarily as preachers instead of writers. Many of their books come to us through the pens of generations of their students, for whom their messages, delivered in previous contexts, interacted with new historical situations to produce an explosion of fresh prophetic insights, all of which is woven together in the final biblical tapestry.

Within the New Testament, stories and teachings of Jesus first traveled orally in the eye-witness testimony of those whom Jesus taught or healed. The epistles started out as personal mail, passed along hand-to-hand through a network of friends. The book of Revelation describes a visionary experience, but it also reflects John the seer's deep knowledge of the details of Old Testament books like Daniel and Ezekiel.

Perhaps you've encountered a podcaster who ends every thought with the catchphrase "am I right?" Or a preacher whose metaphors run too often to football and kids for you to believe he's a single guy whose main hobby is calligraphy. The biblical writers, like the rest of us, have real personalities, life experiences, voices and preferences and concerns that inevitably impact their work. Amos, a shepherd, uses metaphors of rescuing sheep from a lion (3:12) and of locust consuming grass (7:1-2)—images as close to his daily life as checking email or hunting tacos is to mine. Mark uses the word "immediately" with a frequency that makes you suspect he's the sort of guy who owns a fidget spinner. Paul favors athletic and military metaphors and isn't opposed to a scathing verbal cut-down when occasion seems to warrant. The individual, fully-human personhood of the writers has shaped in real, visible ways the messages we possess.

But Christians also make a more radical claim about this book—Christians claim the voices of human authors are not the only voices heard here. The words may come through human minds and lips, but there is divine breath behind them. In this collection of songs, laws, proverbs, and stories, God is at work with wisdom and intent that goes beyond the human authors alone. The name we give to God's involvement in this process is "inspiration."

The Bible makes surprising few direct claims about its own nature. It claims that its words aren't just ancient ink blots on a page but alive and up to things—sharp enough to expose and cut to the heart of the matter (Hebrews 4:12-13). It claims to be useful for teaching and showing mistakes and training for what's good (2 Timothy 3:16-17). It

claims that the prophets specifically were led by the Spirit of God (2 Peter 1:20-21). But perhaps the most notable claim of all is that scripture is "God-breathed."

Strangely enough, the term "God-breathed" or "inspired" is not one of which we have any record prior to Paul's use of it in 2 Timothy 3:16 to describe the Old Testament. Some scholars suggest this may be because Paul invented the term himself to set up a deliberate contrast with other religions of his day.[vii] Other religious groups in the first century Roman world believed that a spirit could possess the body of a worshipper, overriding their mind and speaking directly through their lips—a phenomenon known as "ecstatic speech." But unlike these pagan religious cults, the Christian God Paul represented did not short-circuit the human brain, take over the mouth, or override the human personality. Rather, the human writers of Scripture brought their whole selves to the work—their personalities, their experiences, their concerns—and God brought God's self—God's insights, God's clarity, and God's life. Where these two things come together, incredible things result. Frail, clumsy human words, imperfect vessels though they are, fill up with the power of the living address of God. And when those sorts of words go out into the world, they never fail to get stuff done.

The story of how each book in the Bible moved from thought to word to page is as unique as the message within it. But however an individual book came to be, whether it was touched by few hands or many, whether it was written overnight or told and retold and edited over centuries, inspiration is the claim that God was involved in each step of the process, ensuring that what came out is far more than the sum of the human parts. People talk here, yes, and their unique voices can be heard. But so can the distinctive voice of a communicating God.

6

The Breath Test

Of course, it's one thing to suggest that the God of the universe might have something to say, whether thousands of years ago or now. But it's another thing to figure out exactly where God has spoken. We've all probably met someone who claimed to be hearing from God who we suspected might simply be channeling the thoughts of their favorite talk show host. It's enough to make a person wish there was some sort of "divine breathalyzer test" to definitively measure the amount of Spirit a person (or book) has partaken of.

This was, in essence, the challenge which faced the very first Christians. They knew that something amazing and completely unprecedented had occurred in Jesus. Word of his life, death, and resurrection began to spread as witnesses and converts took their story to the streets. Documents describing these world-changing events began to circulate. But from the beginning, the first Jesus-followers recognized that not all storytellers or story-interpreters were equally reliable. One group, for example, called the Gnostics claimed that Jesus had brought special revelation available only to a few initiated elites; you had to drink the Kool-Aid, so to speak, to get let in on the secret. The more time passed and the farther away the church got from the defining Jesus-events, the more important it became to be able to distinguish which voices could be trusted to recount those events reliably.

It's popular to imagine today that the process of choosing which books ended up in the Bible involved some kind of conspiracy. Some people picture a small group of men in a room late at night, whispering plots to stamp out truths they found too bothersome

and feeding the fire page by page with all the books they didn't like. But the truth is, the early Christians involved in the process of canonization didn't see themselves as "choosing" an authoritative set of books. Rather, they simply saw themselves as recognizing which books were already functioning authoritatively in actual communities of Christians.

The Christian church had inherited the Old Testament from their Jewish predecessors. The details of the Old Testament's compilation stretch back too far in history to be fully known with certainty, but it appears that the first books officially accepted as an authoritative collection were the first five books of the Bible—a set of books called the Torah, or the Law. The next collection of books gathered seem to have been the prophets, followed finally by a diverse class of books known in Judaism as the "Writings." 'Scripture' as Jesus and his followers knew it by the first century probably contained all the books currently in the Protestant Old Testament, as well as an additional collection of books called the Apocrypha.

You might be wondering where exactly these extra books went. Their status was the subject of intense debate at various points in the life of the church. The books of the Apocrypha were written slightly later than the rest of the Old Testament, after the period of the biblical prophets, and were generally judged to be valuable for Christians to read but less authoritative than the other scriptural books. The early church debated whether such a set of "second tier" books should be included in the forming Christian Bible, and those favoring inclusion won out all the way until the Protestant Reformation in the 1500s, when the Protestant reformers finally chose to remove them. The Catholic church

chose at that time to maintain the Apocrypha, which is why, depending on what Bible you happen to be reading, you may or may not find this set of books included.

The story of the New Testament's formation is more well-documented than the Old. Paul, who wrote much the New Testament, was aware even in his own lifetime that many of us his letters were being circulated beyond the communities to which he addressed them (see for example Colossians 4:16). The apostles, who had followed Jesus and seen him after his resurrection, were judged by the early Christians to have at least as strong a case for authority as the Old Testament prophets did—after all, they'd been in position to hear firsthand from God-in-flesh!

By the early second century, a collection of Paul's letters was widely in use, and by the late second century, the four Gospels we now have in our Bible were circulating together as a set. The first attempt to establish a formal list of which books functioned as Christian authority came in 200 AD and was called the Muratorian canon. It included all the current New Testament books except Hebrews, 1-2 Peter, and 3 John.

In considering which books should be included in the Bible, the early church weighed several key factors. They looked for books whose authors were reliable—particularly people who knew Jesus firsthand or who had learned under someone who knew him. In keeping with their conviction that they weren't establishing authority but simply recognizing it, they looked for books that were widely accepted by Christians across the world, books that diverse churches were already reading and finding helpful. In terms of content, they looked for books aligned with what was called "the rule of faith"—the fundamentals of the good news about Jesus that Christians had believed and preached as the heart of their message from the very first days of the church.

The process of forming an authoritative collection of books took centuries. What was ultimately established as the Christian canon in 397 AD was the result of generations of diverse communities testing documents for evidence that they witnessed to the truth about Jesus and that God's Spirit was working in them to transform hearts and lives.[viii]

But this process of canonization leaves open one big question: why, on one random day in 397 AD—or on whatever mysterious date the Bible's last sentence was written—did God suddenly stopped talking to people the way God had before? Did the church just suddenly lose access to some divine radio-signal that no one since that day has managed to pick up?

The truth is that God didn't stop talking; the signal is going as strong now as ever before. The closing of the biblical canon did not represent an end to God's capacity to speak to people. What the closing of the canon did was safe-guard the essentials of the Christian story—the definitive events of God's action in history in Jesus Christ, witnessed to by those who, by virtue of proximity to these defining events, were in the best position to describe what happened and what it meant. This foundational part of the Christian story—what God did in Jesus—will never change. No one will ever be in better position than Peter, James, and John and friends to explain what happened, because they were actually there.

But the church also fully expected that God would continue to talk. The early Christians used the language of "inspiration" freely to refer not only to the words of Scripture but also to Christian leaders, the decisions of councils, and even tomb inscriptions.[ix] God's words, infused with the Spirit's breath, were not limited to Scripture alone. The purpose of establishing a Christian canon was not to claim the Bible was the

only place God would ever communicate. Rather, the canon functioned as a kind of yardstick. God would keep talking. But the church needed a way to measure how what God was saying now lined up with who God had revealed God's self in Jesus to be. The canon didn't eliminate all other voices but marked where God had been heard and experienced clearly in the past and by doing so provided a measuring stick from which to evaluate other claims going forward.

The Bible is inspired, and a living God never stops breathing. The biblical canon wasn't compiled as the authoritative final word. The Bible is rather the foundational word, the authoritative opening word, the word-well from which other words spring. The church certifies, "we hear God here," precisely so we will be able to hear God reliably everywhere God speaks. The church certifies, "we saw God act then and there" so we will know it when we see God acting now.

7

When Pets Rain

Shopping the Bible aisle of a bookstore bears distinct similarity to perusing the topping bar at your local fro-yo joint. The display of colors and textures can be both dazzling and overwhelming. Perhaps like me you've stood there puzzling over the nuanced distinction between chocolate balls, chocolate drops, and chocolate chips, terrified you'll make a mistake and end up with a chocolate cricket. I mean, what could the difference between all these Bibles possibly be, and which one will just tell you the straight-up truth about what God really said?

Well, there's good news and bad news on this front. The good news is that God always speaks in the language of those God addresses. To a Mandarin speaker, God speaks Mandarin. To the Sentinelese, God speaks Sentinelese. To a speaker of twenty-first century English, God speaks in twenty-first century English and not the English of Beowulf. The people of Israel, whose story the Bible tells, originally spoke Hebrew, and therefore that is the language in which most of the Old Testament is composed. Two of the later Old Testament books—Daniel and parts of Ezra—are written in Aramaic, the everyday language of Jesus himself. The New Testament is written in Greek, one of the official languages of the first century Roman empire. God speaks the lingua franca of every place and age.

The bad news is that unless you have years to devote to learning the ancient languages recorded in the Bible, chances are you'll be reading a translation. And there are a number of factors involved in moving thought from one language to another that makes the task of translation challenging.

First, language is full of idioms. An idiom is a combination of words that have taken on a distinct meaning which native speakers take for granted but which isn't obvious to non-native speakers who simply know the words' individual definitions. We know what we mean when we say in English, "it's raining cats and dogs out there!" but a Japanese speaker might well wonder why in America pets fall from the sky. Or I might complain, "the food at Disneyland costs an arm and a leg!" leaving a Swahili-speaker baffled as to why I'm trading limbs for funnel cake. In the biblical language of Hebrew, a person "hot in the nostrils" is angry. A translator must decide how to treat this kind of language so a non-native speaker can make out its meaning.

It's also true that the vocabulary of different languages does not precisely overlap. The Georgian language usefully has a word for when you keep on eating despite being stuffed to explosion. In English sadly we possess no term for that familiar Thanksgiving sensation of consuming a second slice of pie after a third helping of turkey. The Greek language of the New Testament has different words for sexual love and love in friendship and the selfless love one can have for humankind. In English we have just one term to cover all these things—not to mention our love for puppies and the smell of a new car.

Different languages treat gender different, and even within a single language that treatment changes over time. Just a generation ago, it was normal for English speakers to use the word "man" to speak generically of any human; today, hearing that a trait is "common to men," most assume this trait, like beards, is typical of half the population. On the other hand, when I yell "Hurry up, you guys!" my friends will easily understand me as calling men and women both. Translators of the Bible must determine when a

biblical writer uses a term like “brothers” or ‘‘men’’ whether in original context the word was “gendered” or intended inclusively.

There are times, particularly in translating an ancient language, when the meaning of a word or phrase simply isn’t clear. A good biblical example is found in the Lord’s Prayer, one of Jesus’ best-known teachings. The line “give us this day our daily bread” (Matthew 6:11; Luke 11:3) contains a Greek word not known outside of this reference. Many translators choose the phrase “daily bread” to capture its meaning, but this is an educated guess. It is also possible the word could mean “bread for tomorrow.”

All these challenges together mean that every translation is also an interpretation. The individual or group of people who translated your Bible have made decisions about what the author was trying to say and how that idea should best be conveyed in English. Many good, reliable translations of the Bible exist, but it’s important to keep in mind that no one translation is perfect. If you are interested in discovering where significant interpretative choices have been made, one way to do it is to look at two English translations side by side.

But the biggest reason that translations of the Bible differ is simply that translators have different philosophies on how best to move between languages. Some translations practice what is called “formal” or “word-for-word” equivalence and try to stick as closely as possible to the original language’s words, grammar, and syntax. The benefit of this approach is that you get the most literal possible picture of the original text. The downside is it may be quite difficult to understand in English. On the other side of the spectrum is a “functional” or “thought-for-thought” translation. In these cases, the translators focus on trying to capture the author’s concept or idea in a way we would

normally say it in English. These translations are willing to make some sacrifices in the literalness of individual words in order to provide greater clarity on the meaning of the author's whole thought.

Every Bible lands somewhere on this spectrum, and there is no right or wrong place to be. The best Bible for you will probably depend on your needs as a reader. For serious study of the Bible, a more literal translation might be useful. A functional translation might help the Bible feel more accessible. For readers new to the Bible, it's a good practice to start somewhere in the middle of the spectrum. The Common English Bible (CEB) is a mid-range translation I recommend, but the NIV and NRSV are also popular options.

If you are interested in discovering where your current Bible falls along the translation spectrum, a quick internet search of the phrase "Bible translation chart" will bring up many diagrams that will help you locate the most popular English Bibles according to their translation philosophy. If you've been reading the Bible for a long time, trying out a new translation from a different part of the spectrum than you're typically accustomed to reading is a great way of hearing the Bible's story with fresh ears.

8

The Story: Act 1

One strange fact about the Bible's final form is that its sixty-six books do not appear in historical order. This means that reading it from cover to cover can sometimes feel like listening to an audiobook on "shuffle." To make matters even more complicated, these sixty-six books encompass a variety of literary genres. It's as if you picked up a library book that moves without warning from romance to history record to legal code to poetry.

This unusual combination of different tones and writing conventions can make it difficult to see how the various parts of the Bible connect with each other or to pick out the broader plotline. Much like reading the cliff notes of *The Iliad* before tackling the book (hypothetically speaking, of course) or peeking at the puzzle box cover before putting together the pieces, starting with a picture of the Bible's larger story can help you begin to make out how seemingly disparate pages interact to form a coherent whole.[x]

So let's dive in…

The first eleven chapters of the Bible establish the universal framework of the story: God designed the world for beauty, order, and sheer joy. We humans were made uniquely in the image of God—given a spark of God's creativity, God's freedom, God's powers of influence. We were made for relationship—for long, laughter-filled dinners with each other and for sunset walks in the garden with God, talking through the complexities of life. We were also assigned a specific job—to participate as God's "authorized representatives" in the world, cultivating the goodness of creation.[xi]

But being created in the image of God is a bit like being an infant born in the image of its parents: the DNA is there, the necessary building blocks of robust, mature likeness, but the journey isn't complete on day one. Through the process of moving through the world with God and practicing our vocation, we were meant to keep on growing up. We were intended to develop into full maturity, each day the resemblance to our divine maker becoming a little bit stronger.

But instead of growing up, we human beings went rogue. We exercised our God-given power and freedom against God's wise design. We ducked God's calls and hid ourselves from the One on whom we were made to depend. Therefore, instead of growing gradually clearer, the divine resemblance became distorted. It turned out that on our own, cut off from relationship with God, the power that remained in the fractured divine image was only enough for us to drag the rest of creation down with us as we collapsed.

The land was ravaged by famine. Men used their strength to dominate women. Human life was bought and sold. Vibrant species went extinct. People were lonely in a crowd. In a frenzy of fear and greed, we tore creation apart.

But despite all this pain and chaos, God decided the world was worth fighting for. So God devised a plan to save us from ourselves and win creation back to its intended, good design. That plan begins to unfold in the Bible in Genesis 12 with a man named Abraham.

Stage one of the plan is simple: God will choose one ordinary person with all the normal human flaws. God will move through the world with him, talk to him, listen to him, bless him, slowly win his trust. And little by little, God will teach this one person

what humanity had never truly understood: how to enjoy friendship with God, and how to participate in God's work of blessing and cultivating all creation.

In stage two of the plan, this one person, whose name was Abraham, will teach his family what he has learned from God about how to become truly, fully human. His children will come to meet God for themselves and learn their God-given vocation. They in turn will teach their own children, and all this will culminate in stage three, where Abraham's family will become a living, breathing billboard on the global highway, revealing God's true design: "Look here! This is the generous God you've been missing! This is the life you were meant for!"

That was the plan. When Abraham's family, who call themselves the Israelites, are enslaved by the empire of Egypt, God breaks them out with dramatic plagues. This is essentially God's way of formally reintroducing God's self to the world: "Hi, my name is YHWH, the God who delivers the oppressed." It turns out that God has a thing for rescuing people who cannot help themselves.

God offers the newly saved family of Israel a plot of earth, a place where they can follow God and model for everyone else God's alternative vision for what the world can be. God even gives them a set of laws, a kind of "family code," to jumpstart their imagination for what it might look like to live a more beautiful, fully human life under the rule of the Rescuing God.

There's just one problem: the family chosen for the mission of being God's advertisement are just as broken and confused as all the other families on earth. They don't aspire to stand out as something radically new and different; they simply want to fit in. They want a piece of the forbidden fruit pie their neighbors seem to be enjoying. They

want to pile up blessing like a dragon lying on its hoard, not be asked to spend their days giving it away to others.

So the Israelites slaughter their way into the plot of land God promised to give them as a gift. Then they settle in next to their new neighbors and get on with becoming exactly like everybody else. Every time they turn their back on God and the mission they were meant for, life falls apart. Then someone will say, "Hey, remember that God who rescued us that time?" The whole family will cry out to God for help, and God will send a leader, called a "judge," to get them out of the jam. But as soon as the crisis passes, they go back to business as usual, and the cycle starts over again.

After centuries caught in this downward spiral, the family of Israel finally decide to get really honest: they don't actually want to be a collection of people bound together by allegiance to the dreams of God; they just want to be a normal nation. They want the safety of an army, not God's promise of protection. They want a human leader to follow—preferably one tall and handsome—not an invisible being. They want a god who will guard their borders and be on their side against everyone else, not a God who has a plan to care even for their enemies. The family of Israel band together and demand that God give them a king.

To be clear, this is not the plan that God had had in mind. This family was chosen to model God's more beautiful design for creation, not to emulate global distortions. But God is committed to honoring the decisions of those made in God's own image. After all, there's no way to grow up where there are no real choices or consequences. So when—despite God's warnings—the Israelites insist, God finally gives them what they asked for: a ruler like the rest.

Just as God had warned, this doesn't turn out well. Three kings into the new monarchy, the country erupts into conflict and splits in half, with a kingdom called Israel to the north and Judah to the south. The two nations war with each other. The rich get richer and the poor get poorer. Some gain power. Others are enslaved. Enemies are slaughtered. The land is torn. The courts miscarry judgment. Instead of introducing their neighbors to a God whose desire is to bless, the Israelites largely introduce a vengeful God who, truth be told, likes no one but them.

The prophets come onto the scene in the midst of all this chaos. The prophet is a person whose job it is to speak on behalf of God. The prophets remind Israel of the reason God chose their family to start with, point them back toward God's beautiful vision that they were meant to represent. They warn the people of Israel, and especially their leaders, that if they persist in ignoring their God-given mission, they'll eventually lose the gifts of land and protection that God has provided as equipment for living that mission out.

But the people of Israel and Judah refuse to revisit their purpose. They persist in imitating the same violence, greed, and fear that has the whole world in its grip. As a result, what the prophets predict finally happens. In 722 BC, the empire of Assyria conquers the northern kingdom of Israel. The prophets tell Judah in the south that there's still time to recommit to God's vision and avoid their siblings' fate. But in 586 BC Judah finally falls as well, this time to Babylon. The temple where they worshipped, their center of government, the whole nation they took so much pride in is destroyed, and their leaders are send into exile. All the gold and all the glory for which they'd traded in God's dreams are scattered into dust.

As is often the case with people, losing everything provokes some real soul-searching about what where exactly things went wrong. Eventually the exiles are permitted to return home and start rebuilding their lives. But there is no truly going back. The people of Israel are dominated by foreign powers, much like back in Egypt. They begin to wonder if they've used up the last of their chances. Some dream of a political savior who will get them back on track—by which they mean, get them back to the glory days when they were a free nation with a real king.

By the end of the Old Testament, it is evident that even after all these centuries, the family chosen for the mission of modeling God's alternative plan for the world has still largely failed to catch the vision. Even their dreams have been caught up in the universal distortion. The grand plan for saving creation is bottlenecked.

9

The Story: Act 2

God at last decides there's only one way to get God's message through, and that's to deliver it God's self. God will come into the world as part of Israel, fully God's self but also fully one of the Israelite family.

This plan has several considerable merits. First, this approach of coming in person offers a chance to correct the misconceptions that have proliferated through the years, all the terrible misapprehensions of who God really is. God can introduce God's self to the world firsthand, explain what it is that God has always longed for. But that isn't all. By coming as a member of Israel, God can also take up the job entrusted to Abraham's family—live the truly human life, model the true design, execute the mission of blessing every piece of the broken world.

So God comes into the world as a man named Jesus—fully God and also fully Israel, humanity as humans were truly meant to be. And God-in-human-flesh rather quietly begins to foment global revolution.

It starts with a simple message: the world as you see it isn't as it's meant to be. In fact, it's broken in every part. But God's on a mission to bring the true shape back, a new, vibrant creation called "the kingdom of God." This kingdom of God is something so much bigger than another human nation-like-the-others that Israel was once settled for. This is a whole, entire, borderless world come truly alive under the rule of God.

To be sure the picture is clear, Jesus offers demonstrations of God's more beautiful vision. He brings raging weather under control. He gives food to those who lack it and challenges those who have too much to give up their excess. He heals broken

bodies and broken hearts. He draws outsiders into community. He empowers women. He teaches God's concern for birds and flowers. He brings enemies together and calls them family. He names ordinary people friends and confidantes of God. And everywhere he goes, he says the same thing: "God is so much closer than you think, and a new world is breaking in. Now is your chance to get on board and transfer your citizenship."

Many people are amazed and drawn to what they see in Jesus, irresistibly attracted to the picture of the new world that he casts. But in every system, there are some who profit from the status quo's corruption, and others who prefer pain to a change they can't control. These decide they'd prefer the old world-order, thank you very much. And they plot to kill Jesus just to shut him up.

It would be easy to blame the local leaders for what happens to Jesus. They are acting to guard their social privilege, their excessive religious certainty about what God desires. But these leaders do not act alone. They are abetted by a mob of ordinary people who act reactively to rumors that stoke their fears and fantasies. The man in charge of Jesus' trial chooses popularity over truth. The soldiers who nail Jesus to a cross, an instrument of execution, go through the motions of their jobs without asking what role they're playing in an unjust system.

Jesus' own followers don't perform any better than anybody else. One justifies betrayal in order to line his pocketbook. Another comes out swinging with a sword, perpetuating the cycle of violence Jesus preached against. Some flee when they get scared. Some deny Jesus when the cost of following his lead suddenly seems too high.

In turns out the trouble with the world is that every single person is infected. The greatest atrocity in history is not inflicted by a super-villain; it's the agonizing death of a thousand poisoned paper cuts, inflicted by a thousand different, ordinary hands.

We humans, in our soul-distortion, torture and kill our own Creator, who was only in the world to save us from ourselves. This is rock bottom, as bad as it gets. But something happens next that is hard to explain. The biblical writers stammer trying to wrap words around it. On the cross, at this execution of Jesus—in this moment, all the world-rending chaos humans unleashed finally lands in one giant tidal wave. All the greed and violence, fear and selfishness, pride and hate and deceit, all of it has added up to this: the very murder of God.

But as he hangs there dying, Jesus takes it all. He soaks up all the blood and tears and fears and mistakes into his own body. The worst humans could do, the worst we could think of, all the darkness and pain we unleased into the world, Jesus draws it all into himself. Jesus takes even evil and death itself and pulls it into the center of God.

And do you know what happens when it gets there? All our mistakes are swept away like leaves in a rushing current. The darkness meets God's light and vanishes like the mist. Evil shatters like a glass on a marble floor. The life in God is just too strong for the death and chaos to withstand. Three days after he is killed, Jesus walks back out of his grave, and he carries the rest of the world with him.

On the surface, many things look the same on the far side of resurrection. The world has not been instantly transformed into all it was meant to be. But beneath the surface, sometime defining at the heart of things has changed. The death-grip of evil has been broken. A new story has been opened. A set of choices exists that did not exist

before. Tomorrow no longer has to be just like yesterday. Jesus has begun to untangle the distortions so we can finally grow up in the image of God.

Jesus tells his followers after his resurrection that this next chapter of history will be unlike anything before. God is starting a new world right in the middle of the old one. This world is under the rule of Jesus, and he will sign the citizenship papers for anyone who offers him allegiance. This new world will finally reflect the true shape of God's design.

To those who join his new world, Jesus offers a gift called the Holy Spirit—a deposit on better things still to come. If Jesus himself was God in one human body, the Spirit is God's presence within every person who gives Christ allegiance. The Spirit takes up the work of finally growing that spark of divine image in us into full maturity. The Spirit empowers Jesus' people at last to take up our true human vocation, to be his apprentices, nurturing creation and carrying God's vision to the farthest corners of the globe.

The people who choose to join Jesus' new world, the Bible calls the church. This collective of people who've bound themselves to Jesus are now taking up the mission first entrusted to Abraham's family. The church is a gathering of people living out together God's alternative vision, a way of life so beautiful it makes the neighbors say, "I want some of that!"

The people of Jesus don't get to write the story's final pages. The last pages of the Bible makes clear that only God can act to clear away the rubble of the old world and finally usher in an age when the new world is all there is. God has promised that someday God will do this—sooner than we think. But in the meantime, the people of Jesus witness

to what is still coming. Our life together is meant to be the preview of coming attractions. We live under the new world-order now as a sign of the goodness that's in store for everything. We relate to God as we were meant to from the start—in constant, open communication. We take up our vocation of cultivating creation, tending the flourishing of every part. And in doing this, we keep growing up into the image of our Maker, beginning the work now that will be ours forever—always maturing more and more into a fuller likeness of the Joy of God.

10

Dining with Strangers

Having established the Bible's overall plotline, we are almost ready to start reading. But before we do, there is one more truth, often overlooked, that is worth acknowledging: the long-term outcome of your reading of the Bible will depend significantly on your posture going in.

Have you ever gone to a dinner party in a terrible mood, convinced the conversation would be boring, the music selection appalling, the food atrocious, the entire evening a colossal waste of time? For better or worse, experience has a funny way of conforming itself to expectation. Primed for enjoyment, we find a reason to laugh. Primed for outrage, we generally find a cause for that too. Enter into conversation assuming the worst about someone, and you are almost certain to find the evidence confirming your suspicions.

One of the distinctive challenges of reading the Bible at our moment in western history is that many of us have been educated from an early age for a default reading posture of critique. We've been taught to approach literature with what's been described as a "hermeneutics of suspicion"[xii]—to break it apart, look for concealed motives and problems, respond first with observation of all that may be wrong.[xiii] Faced with an ancient religious text like the Bible, many modern readers find their finely-honed critical instincts triggered all at once: book of Joshua—no loving God would ever command the slaughter of cities! Jonah—are we really supposed to believe this guy was yakked up by a fish? Revelation's "whore of Babylon"—yet another regressive gender stereotype.

Let's be fair to ourselves and each other —there are vital questions to be asked on all these fronts, questions about how our holy texts form us and toward what, questions of how we communicate without perpetuating cycles of harm, questions even of how we understand the core character of God. These are questions of faith, and questions of practice, worthy of careful consideration. We are not wrong to ask them.

But it is also the case that sometimes as modern people we get stuck in a mode of deconstruction. We can even develop a kind of addiction to simply breaking things apart. Legitimate questions of faith and faithfulness become more like a police interrogation. The Bible is a suspect, handcuffed to a chair. We shine a flashlight in its eyes and demand, "Explain yourself!" We throw out questions rapid fire in hopes of tripping it up, catching it in an inconsistent statement.

We often tell ourselves in the midst of such procedures that ours is a crusade of truth and justice. But if we're honest with ourselves, we might also acknowledge that we prefer a bolted table and a bit of skepticism fixed between us and Scripture. The beauty of interrogation is it's a one-directional exercise. It keeps us in the seat of control, feeling superior to the rest. It ensures there's always one more question between us and the need to answer for our own lives, for the ways we ourselves are implicated in the problem with the world. It's much easier to make our way comfortably through life when no one has the authority to challenge us or talk back.

While questions are healthy and important, our relationship with the Bible was never meant to be a one-sided interrogation. The most important thing we may ever do with respect to Scripture is suspend our questions for a while and relinquish the seat of power, put ourselves on the other side of the table for a change. Because if we have

questions for Scripture, it also has questions for us. Joshua—How are you and your own people (your political party, your religious tradition, your online "tribe," etc) behaving toward your enemies, and how does that behavior reflect the character of the God revealed in Jesus? Jonah—are you offering others as lavish a grace as you yourself are dependent on? Revelation—how are you being seduced by the siren song of consumerism, or of nationalism, and overlooking the spiritual cost?

Scripture can take our very hardest questions; the Bible isn't intimidated. Whatever questions you have, you certainly aren't the first to ask. But it's critical that we don't stop, that we don't close the cover, until we've taken our turn on the other side of the table. Until we've allowed our own lives to be questioned with the same level of rigor we applied. The most revolutionary truth the Bible may teach is this: you are suspect yourself.

Thousands of years of careful readers testify to a paradoxical reality: the Bible unveils its power most fully to the one who lets it have its turn leading the dialogue. In a way, our relationship with the Bible is much like interacting a stranger from a foreign country. If I take everything such a stranger says and does and immediately run it all through the filter of my own prior judgments and assumptions, I tend to learn nothing. When we enter into any relationship with a starting posture of suspicion and hostility, it becomes very difficult to truly hear what the other has to say. This happens all the time in our discourse across difference. Instead of gaining the deeper understanding of ourselves and our world that the "other" might bring us, we are deafened by the clamor of our own rebounding judgments.

It is no coincidence that one of the Bible's core ethical teachings concerns hospitality to the stranger and foreigner. In Genesis 18, Abraham, the father of biblical faith, spots three strangers approaching near his tent and rushes out to welcome them. At some point in the process of making these strangers at home, Abraham discovers he is playing host to God. The Bible often comes to us like this, the stranger on the road whose accent and appearance seem foreign, whose unfamiliar customs trigger an impulse for rejection or dismissal. But beneath the ancient Palestinian clothes that seem so strange, it is God who visits us.

Receiving a stranger well requires humility, an openness to be challenged, a willingness to consider the possibility our prior assumptions might not be correct. It requires an expectation that the other may have something to teach us precisely in their otherness. It may be that the Bible's distance, it's "foreignness," is a crucial part of its message—a holy, humbling disruption of our undisclosed distortions and unanchored certainties.

A starting posture of hospitality and hopeful expectation rather than suspicion or hostility fundamentally affect whether we are able to hear God speaking in Scripture or whether all we will make out is the echo of our fears.

(story)

Jonah 1-4

"Am I really supposed to believe a big fish swallowed Jonah?"

This is one of the questions about the Bible I am asked most frequently. To some Jonah's story is emblematic of so many stories in the Bible that seem wildly improbable. Ax heads floating? Bread multiplying? The dead walking out of their graves? Can a thinking modern person really be expected to take such tales seriously?

Before I reply, let me tell you a story…

There once was a guy named Jonah who God called to be a prophet. His job was pretty straightforward: go to the city of Nineveh, home of his nation's most ruthless enemies, and tell the people there that God is displeased with their poor behavior. "Sure thing, God," Jonah says. Then he goes to the local port and gets on the first ship he can find—sailing in the opposite direction.

God sends a storm to rattle the ship, and all the poor pagan sailors get on their knees and pray to their idols for rescue. Who is the only person on the ship who doesn't show up to the prayer meeting? Jonah, representative of the One True and Living God. Good old Jonah is down below deck, giving his God the silent treatment.

With classic maritime superstition, the sailors roll the dice to see who's to blame for the storm. Even the dice know that this is on Jonah. When brought up on deck and questioned, Jonah responds unapologetically, "Well, yes, I am in fact a worshipper of the one true God of the sea who (I maybe should have clarified earlier?) I'm currently on the run from."

It's in the midst of this conversation that it finally begins to dawn on Jonah that it could maybe have been a bit of a jerk move to implicate a boat full of innocent people when he chose to pick a fight with God. When it seems evident they're all likely to go under, Jonah suggests the sailors save themselves by tossing him overboard. It isn't exactly the happy ending he was hoping for, but hey, look on the bright side—at least he won't have to go on that stupid mission of God's.

The pagan sailors, though terrified of the storm, fear Jonah's God too much to threaten his life. This is of course deeply ironic, since Jonah has apparently feared his own God too little to concern himself. But when the storm does not die down, the sailors finally give in to the inevitable and do what Jonah has suggested, sending him down to Davy Jones' Locker.

This is where the story of Jonah should reasonably end—with Jonah as fish food, in just punishment for open rebellion and reckless endangerment. But that isn't what happens. Instead, God has unaccountable mercy on this most pathetic of prophets and sends a fish—that's right, a giant, ridiculously improbable fish—to swallow Jonah whole and carry him to safety.

For a couple of hours, Jonah is pretty jazzed about his miraculous escape from death. He even writes a hymn of praise to the wonderful, blessed, glorious God who saved his life in spite of his rebellion: "Salvation comes from the Lord!" he gushes.

After a days' long intensive worship-song-writing session, Jonah is barfed back on land, and God comes to him a second time and says, "Now go preach to Nineveh." But Jonah's gratitude has faded faster than the fish stench on his robes. It seems that God can in fact make Jonah go to Nineveh, but God can't make him be happy about it. Jonah

shows up in Nineveh and preaches the most half-hearted sermon in homiletics history: "Listen, everybody: in forty days Nineveh will be overthrown. Now, does anyone know where I can get a decent cup of coffee?"

The pitiful sermon is five words in Hebrew. Jonah conveniently "forgets" to mention that the message came from God and skips the altar call completely. But one sentence into the world's lamest sermon, the entire capital population of the evil empire falls to their knees in sorrow for their choices. And God decides to have mercy on them and not destroy them after all.

That's when the truth finally comes out. It turns out that this, in fact, was Jonah's worst nightmare all along. He hadn't sailed off in the opposite direction because he was afraid of being beaten to death by the biker gangs of Nineveh. His real fear had always been that God would go all soft like this. "Isn't this what I said before I left home?" he rants. "I knew you'd get like this, God. You're always so stinking 'gracious and compassionate,' 'slow to anger,' and 'overflowing with love,' constantly refraining from giving people what should be coming to them. That's what I hate about you, God! Your freaking grace ruins everything!"

Jonah stomps out of the repentant city but decides to stay in view, because if God comes to God's senses and decides to fry those Ninevites like the little *#?&! ants they are, he doesn't want to miss the bonfire. He sits out in the desert under the scorching sun, all hot and furious and miserable but determined not to budge from his vigil of terror. God feels sorry yet again for the pitiful prophet and sends a fast-growing plant to give him a bit of shade. Jonah is naturally thrilled. But overnight a worm chews up the plant, and the next afternoon Jonah finds himself pouting under a shriveled stock.

This is the final straw for Jonah. How dare God do this to him! How dare God kill his plant! God inquires curiously, “Do you think it’s right for you to be this angry over the death of one small plant?” “You’re darn right it is,” Jonah replies, “I’m so angry I wish I were dead.”

God responds, “So just so we’re clear, let me make sure I have this straight: you’re furious at me for killing a plant you spent twelve hours with—a plant, by the way, that I sent so you could spend yesterday pouting in comfort. But you don’t think I should give a second thought to killing a giant city teeming with people too ignorant to even tell their right hand from their left, not to mention a whole lot of innocent animals beside?”

Here ends the story of Jonah.

So, is the story of Jonah true?

The Bible is certainly full of tales that do not seem to comport with known natural laws. The ministry of Jesus is saturated with such stories—blind people seeing and lame people walking and vats of water turning into the finest wine.

For myself, I believe in the working laws of science, the principles we know of the world’s staggeringly elegant design. But I also that believe that history is full of occurrences for which no known law accounts. Live long enough and you might just find yourself witness to one of these happenings, encountering something too strange to explain and too wonderful to deny.

I don’t claim to have all the answers, but there are a few things I feel confident about. First, what seems reasonable to believe depends in part on what you have experienced. Second, it would be the height of arrogance for me to claim that because I

haven't personally experienced something, it couldn't possibly be true. And third, in a world that is open to the presence of God, anything is possible. At the end of the day, this is the Bible's radical claim that every reader must grapple with: the door between heaven and earth stands open, and a whole lot of unexpected things can happen in the thin space in between.[xiv]

But it's also possible in reading many of the Bible's stories to get side-tracked by the details and miss the central point. What is the book of Jonah actually about? The fish, despite its prominence in children's picture books, turns out to be a minor player. The self-consciously ridiculous improbability of the fish-belly rescue only serves in this book to drive home the unimaginable lengths to which God will go to show mercy to one bottom-dwelling, irrational, sour-puss of a prophet.

The book of Jonah tells the story of a people—perhaps you might have met them—who are swallowed time and time again by God's extravagant, inexplicable mercy, but immediately forget their own story every time they touch the shore. It's the tale of a people who can't even smell the pungent grace still clinging to their clothes. It's the tale of a people whose very lives—just like the lives of their neighbors—hang on a precious thread at which they are constantly sawing away.

I don't know much about aquatic anatomy, but I can tell you for a fact that I've met Jonah personally: he often shows up in my mirror, staring back at me. When I'm really paying attention, I start to smell the fishy scent wafting off my sweater. Each time I read Jonah, I laugh and I cringe and I awake to the truth of my own life. The question most central to the book of Jonah is not whether I can swallow the fish but what Fish has swallowed me and whether I can allow that same Fish to swallow my enemies too.

Whatever you do, don’t miss the Ocean for the fish.

11

Swimming Dry

There are two factors that impact what you are likely to find when you come to the Bible. The first, as we've have seen, is what you expect to find opening it. Expectation that I have something to learn and the Bible something to teach creates the crucial conditions of hospitality in which Scripture's gifts can be received. But the second, and perhaps more unexpected, factor that significantly impacts what we find in the Bible is what we plan to do with it after we close the cover.

There are some subjects which lend themselves well to abstract learning. My ability to understand geometry is very little affected by whether my grilled cheese last night was cut into trapezoids. But there are other forms of knowledge that are difficult to acquire except in actual practice. When it comes to advanced carving techniques, the best description a world-class instructor could ever offer me will still make limited sense if I've never strapped on skis. People preparing to get married, or to become first-time parents, find themselves recipients of many well-meaning words of wisdom (at least some of which are actually true). But that wisdom often becomes meaningful only over time, in the context of lived relationships.

The principle of practice preceding comprehension is never truer than when it comes to complex matters of God and of the human soul. Some people attempt to sit at a neutral distance and "solve" the Bible sort of like an algebra equation that could be decoded with proper application of known principles. But trying to comprehend the Bible without integrating it into practice, without immersing your life in God's, is more like trying to learn how to swim without ever leaving your lawn chair. All that can truly be

gained in this way is the thinnest veneer of knowledge. If you want truly understand what the Bible is teaching about God, about the world, about the shape of the fully human life, there is only one way to do it: by getting wet.

At the end of the day, the only way to truly comprehend the Bible's message is to lead with obedience. For many, this seems counter-intuitive. We prefer to imagine a process of learning that works more like this: (1) figure out what every word of the Bible means and exactly why God commands the things God does, and (2) then decide if it's reasonable to walk it out. The trouble is, (1) can be incredibly difficult to accomplish, and failing it, many of us never get on to (2) at all.

Far more often, the process of gaining knowledge works more like this: (1) decide to throw yourself into this crazy story and live as if it were true, and (2) begin to discover in practice why God says the things God does and what profound truths the Bible was actually gesturing toward. Comprehension grows backwards. We engage. We step into the pool. We practice the strokes as the Bible outlines them. And over time, we begin to perceive what the strokes add up to. Comprehension grows where mind and muscle meet.

It is certainly possible to learn techniques that will help us hear the Bible more clearly, and that in fact is a significant part of what this book is about. But it's also crucial to recognize from the outset that the most determinant factor in how well you'll comprehend the Bible's message is how much you are willing to engage with it in living practice. Those who wade in the shallows will learn something real. Those who risk the deep end will learn more. How much you'll discover depends in part on how far you are willing to go.

The Bible is not a mathematics textbook but a guide to the oceans of God. In the end, there's no way to truly understand it except by getting wet. You begin by simply gathering up the bits of knowledge you have and heading out into the water. You act. You practice what you know. You see what results. You come back, read the book's pages again, and this time, with salt on your skin, hear it a little differently. Then you head back to the water and swim some more. Sometimes it's only after deep-sea diving a dozen times that the descriptions begin to make sense. Sometimes the action leads, and the comprehension follows.

The most important question you can ask before opening the Bible is whether you're ready to engage, to experiment, to put skin in the game. This decision, this commitment, will have far more impact than anything else in determining what you will find when you open up the book. There is no one in the world God is more eager to talk to than the one who fully intends to go out and do something about whatever they hear.

At the end of the day, God is looking not for sideline observers but for actual dance partners. The Bible sets the music, the Spirit will teach the moves, but if you want to learn the art of dancing, you have to be willing to get on the floor.

PART 2:

LEARNING TO READ

12

Grabbing Buggies

"I don't believe in interpreting the Bible!" the outraged man across from me insisted, upon hearing the topic of the book I was writing. "I just believe in reading the Bible and doing what it says."

This reaction is not uncommon among life-long Bible readers. For many there is something viscerally alarming about the suggestion that relationship with the Bible should require any kind of interpretive "mediation." In my experience, such alarm is typically animated by two main concerns. The first is a worry that if the Bible isn't accepted as sufficiently clear on its own, it could be taken out of the hands of ordinary people, who would their sense of direct access to God. The Bible would become functionally accessible only to educated religious "elites."[xv]

Second, some suspect that "interpretation" is a fancy term to describe the intellectual gymnastics scholars do to avoid a truth that is simply inconvenient or difficult. The notion of interpretation seems to open the Bible to all kinds of potential abuses, offering a ready excuse to manipulate the message according to your own desires. It makes reading the Bible sort of like a "choose your own adventure" novel where the outcome depends on the reader's preferences.

Unfortunately, these concerns are not without cause. The history of the church contains far too many examples of religious professionals bending texts to serve either their own interests or the interests of the institutional status quo. On the other side, there are also many examples in history of untrained people hearing God speak in powerful ways. Truth has never been the exclusive property of the scholars and experts, and the

Bible itself is full of stories of God showing up to talk precisely with those whom the religious system deemed unfit.

It's also sadly true that we all can be guilty of finding ways to avoid the obvious implications of straightforward but challenging texts. For example, take Jesus' words, "love your enemies" (Matt. 5:44)—The church has spent far more time inventing possible exception clauses to this command than asking what we would do if Jesus actually meant what he said.

But despite these reasons for caution, there is no way to avoid interpretation as a necessary aspect of all communication. The truth is, we engage in interpretation all the time, in virtually every interaction, even without noticing. When my friend and I enter the grocery store together and she asks me to grab her a "buggy," I instinctively picture a black covered cart being pulled by a horse. This picture comes to mind because I frequently visit parts of the Midwest where I see Amish men driving such carts down the country roads. However, because my friend grew up in New England, when *she* says the word "buggy," she is picturing a metal shopping cart. I could end up spending the rest of my night searching futilely a man with a horse unless I use my knowledge of my friend's background and context to help me properly decipher what she's truly asking for.

At the most basic level, interpretation is about making sure I am not reaching for a horse and carriage when God wants a shopping cart. When we come to the Bible, we are tuning in on words first spoken to someone else—someone with their own language and background and associations with words. Interpretation is an act of trying to match our images as much as possible with those of the original recipients of the words, making sure that when Luke describes Jesus sleeping in a "boat," I am picturing a small, first

century Palestinian wooden fishing vessel and not the three-level luxury yacht parked on the bay in California. Far from imposing my own preferred meaning on the text, interpretation aims at the opposite—helping me recognize where I might be accidently imposing meaning foreign to the text's intention. It prevents my reading of the Bible from turning into an inkblot test that reveals more about me and my situation than it does about God.

In many ways, opening the Bible is rather like walking into a room in which a group of people are already in the middle of discussion. God and our predecessors in faith are in the middle of a centuries-long dialogue. We are meant to join that conversation. But before we jump in, it's crucial to figure out what everyone else is talking about. Otherwise you might walk in the room to hear someone say, "my battery's dead" and start pulling out your jump cables, never even realizing they were discussing watches. Interpretation is about hearing as clearly as possible what the other parties are saying so that you are in a position to respond appropriately.

Some people like to say when it comes to the Bible that their goal is just to read the "plain sense" of what the text says. This goal seems sensible, even admirable. This is precisely the idea the Protestant reformers had during the Reformation that reshaped the church in the 1500s. The reformers believed if they could just disentangle the Bible from the church's past interpretations and translate it into the language of the common people, everyone would read the book for themselves and agree on what it said. But to their dismay, the reformers quickly discovered that this was not the case. Different social locations, personal experiences, national identities, starting questions and assumptions caused readers to perceive the "plain sense" of the text very differently.[xvi]

2 Samuel 11 tells the story of King David and Bathsheba, a married woman with whom David has an adulterous affair—after he spots her bathing while out strolling on his roof. I've heard more than one reader of this story implicate Bathsheba in a deliberate act of seduction, suggesting she purposefully exposed herself in order to catch a royal's eye. But the details of the story could just as easily suggest a happily married woman who was coerced, even raped, by a powerful man whom she could not resist except at the cost of her life. Which version of the story seems like the plain meaning of the text may say more about your own social location or personal life experience than it does about the story itself. It's often the case that what we see, hear, and assume in the Bible depends on where we stand.

In light of this fact, in addition to helping us match our mental picture with the author's, a second purpose of interpretation is to expose what we are taking for granted when we assess the text's "plain meaning." Learning to recognize the impact of our own experiences and identities on how we are reading is one step toward making sure we're seeing more in the text than a reflection of ourselves. It allows us to take into account the possible gap between our own assumptions that we've brought to the text and the assumptions that original hearers might have brought, coming as they did from a world with more donkeys and less droids.

The goal of interpretation is not to come to the Bible without any assumptions at all. That would be frankly impossible; there is no such thing as a truly "neutral" reader. We cannot help but be shaped by the time and place in which we live. But when we come to the Bible, we do pause to identify what lenses we are wearing and to ask how they may be coloring our view, with the recognition that in order to bring the story into focus, it

may be necessary to deliberately substitute our own lenses for a set more closely matched with the lenses of the original audience.[xvii]

13

Spliced

In 1995 a movie was released called "Se7en." The movie's promoters ran an ad with a quote from *Entertainment Weekly* declaring the movie "a small masterpiece." But anyone who bothered to look up the review itself would have found that it actually read, "The credit sequence, with its jumpy frames and near-subliminal flashes of psychoparaphernalia, is a small masterpiece of dementia."[xviii]

When we sit down in front of virtually any passage in the Bible, there are two fundamental questions of interpretation we can ask that will go a long way toward ensuring we hear its message clearly. The first question requires no special knowledge or outside tools to answer, yet simply paying attention to it has the power to transform our understanding of much of the Bible: "How does this passage relate to what comes immediately before and after it?" The answer to this question is what's known as a passage's "literary context."

Imagine pulling a novel off a shelf and flipping it open at random to find a couple rushing down a grocery store aisle, frantically shoveling food and diapers into a cart. What might you assume is going on here? Well, if you're a resident of Florida and it happens to be summer, odds are good that your mind will immediately jump to preparations for a hurricane.

But if you flip back a couple pages in the book, you might well discover something entirely different unfolding. Maybe there's a raging epidemic leading to quarantine. Maybe they're preparing for the zombie apocalypse. Or maybe they're just

robbing a store. The surrounding context of the story helps you understand the couple's actions on this particular page in the proper light.

We've probably all seen examples where a line from politician's speech is extracted by an opponent and applied in an attack ad in a way that is totally foreign to the original speech's intention. When we see this kind of thing happening to a candidate we support, most of us find it maddening. "He might have said those words," we protest, "but that isn't what he meant!"

Sometimes we treat the Bible this way without even noticing. We take a single sentence or paragraph, disconnect it from the page where it appeared, and apply it ways that have little to do with its meaning in its original context. Even if the words are technically correct, they end up speaking falsely. This is why the most basic and most important step in biblical interpretation is making sure we read each text in light of what appears around it.

A good example of the difference literary context makes is Psalm 51:16-17:

> You don't want sacrifices.
> If I gave an entirely burned offering,
> you wouldn't be pleased.
> A broken spirit is my sacrifice, God.
> You won't despise a heart, God, that is broken and crushed.

Reading this passage on its own like this, removed from its place in the whole chapter, you might conclude, "I guess God doesn't care about offerings. Great! I'll save my money for pumpkin lattes, if all that really matters to God is the inward state of my heart." However, if you read just two verses further into the psalm, you would find that the author goes on to say,

> Then you will again want sacrifices of righteousness—
> entirely burned offerings and complete offerings.

> Then bulls will again be sacrificed on your altar.

When the context is taken into account, it becomes clear the psalmist never meant to imply that God is indifferent to offerings. Instead, the psalmist is arguing that offerings only matter when the heart behind them is right. If you don't read the whole page, you might well miss the point and misrepresent the Bible's message.

An even more potent example of the impact of literary context is found in Mark 12:41-44. Jesus and his disciples are in the temple, watching as an impoverished widow puts her very last pennies into the offering plate. Jesus turns to his disciples and says:

> "I assure you that this poor widow has put in more than everyone who's been putting money in the treasury. All of them are giving out of their spare change. But she from her hopeless poverty has given everything she had, even what she needed to live on."

Read on its own, as it often is, removed from literary context, this story sounds for all the world like a straightforward lesson in radical generosity: if only more people would be like the widow who gave all she had to her church! However, if you pay careful attention to what appears around this story, Jesus' observation regarding the widow becomes much more complicated.

Just before pointing out the widow to his followers, in Mark 12:38-40, Jesus said,

> "Watch out for the legal experts. They like to walk around in long robes. They want to be greeted with honor in the markets. They long for places of honor in the synagogues and at banquets. They are the ones who *cheat widows out of their homes*, and to show off they say long prayers. They will be judged most harshly."

Notice that in this statement, Jesus critiques the religious leadership of his day and specifically accuses them of cheating widows—the very sort of impoverished person whom he is about to make the center of attention.

Now look what happens in the story immediately after Jesus' encounter with the widow. In Mark 13:1-2, on their way out of the temple after seeing the widow, the disciples speak admiringly of the stones and buildings of the temple complex—a symbol of the whole religious system which the widow's offering supports. Far from being impressed by the architecture, Jesus replies, "Do you see these enormous buildings? Not even one stone will be left upon another. All will be demolished."

The story of the widow's offering is sandwiched in Mark between a statement indicting religious leaders for robbing widows and a prediction of destruction of religious space. Why does this matter? Although this poor woman may well have much to teach us in her radical faith and generosity, within literary context it becomes clear that for Jesus, her story is also a challenge to the religious status quo of his day. It raises many profound questions: Why does this widow have only two pennies? What is the reason for her "hopeless poverty"? And what exactly should be the relationship between this dazzling religious system and this poor, invisible women whose plight no one but Jesus has apparently noticed?

In literary context, a seemingly straightforward story becomes infinitely more rich and complex. Reading the story in context helps ensure we don't fall prey to the temptation of cherry-picking words and giving them meanings convenient for us. It's a crucial first step in making sure we are joining the right conversation, the conversation that Bible itself really means to provoke.[xix]

14

Sea-Change

"Why does God hate water?" a woman asked me with deep concern. She was the proud owner of a beach house, and the lapping of ocean waves was the most restful sound she knew. But that afternoon she'd read Revelation 21:1, which says that at the end of time, when God finally sets the world right, "there will no longer be any sea." For what possible reason, she wondered, would God be plotting to eliminate her favorite part of creation?

For many people today, the idea of "the sea" comes with a particular set of connotations. It conjures visions of vacations, cruises, sunbathing, or maybe soothing sleep machines. But in the world of the Bible, the sea represented something else entirely. Storms swept up suddenly and powerfully in the Mediterranean region. Shipwrecks were common and deadly. To ancient people, the sea was an image of chaos, disorder, even evil. Therefore, when the book of Revelation declares that in the world God sets right, there will not be any sea, it isn't speaking about a divine distaste for water or for restful days at the beach. Instead, Revelation is offering an image of a world whose threats have been eliminated, a world that is finally, fully at peace.

John, the author of Revelation, was a first century resident of a small Mediterranean island called Patmos. It's no surprise, then, that when John has a vision of the future, God communicates with him with a picture of the sea that is consistent with his experience. When we come as contemporary readers to John's ancient text—or any text in the Bible—God has things to say to us. But we also enter the conversation first as "authorized eavesdroppers" who are walking in on a dialogue that began between others

and God many centuries ago. The starting terms of the conversation, the vocabulary, images, and references, have already been primed to the original hearers.

This is why, after looking for the literary context, the second essential question we ask of every passage in the Bible is a question of history: "What information about the text's own time and culture might help me better understand the point the text is making?" This is the question of historical context. History context is about uncovering what information the other partners in the dialogue are taking for granted, making sure the picture I have in my head matches theirs as closely as possible.

Many readers of the Christmas story are mystified as to why the people of Bethlehem made Mary the mother of Jesus give birth in a stable. Where's the basic human decency? Was there really no one in this entire town who would give up their room for a woman in labor? We are baffled because when we hear the Christmas story, most of us instinctively picture the sort of houses and barns we have today. We imagine one building out front where the people and their Pringles live, another in the back for the cows and their hay.

But a first century Palestinian home was quite different than ours. Animals spent the night inside the house, both for their safety and to contribute body heat. They stayed in a slightly-lowered space right beside the family's communal living area, with a manger often cut directly into the living room floor. The owners of this ancient house have apparently offered Mary a place to give birth within their own private living space.[xx]

When we fail to ask the question of historical context, we typically begin to insert assumptions based on our own time and context. We try to paint the picture, but we get crucial details wrong. Sometimes, as in the case of Jesus' birthplace, not much damage is

done—aside some minor aspersions on the character of the poor citizens of Bethlehem. But at other times, neglecting historical context can cause us to misconnect the dots in ways that lead us to profoundly mistake the Bible's point.

Many readers through history have struggled to know what to make of 1 Corinthians 14:35, which reads, "Women should be silent in the churches." On the surface, read in isolation, it may well sound like the "plain meaning" of this statement is a blanket prohibition of women making any sound in church. But is this really what the Bible has in mind?

Well, let's begin by examining the literary context. If you examine the verses immediately surrounding this statement about women, you will find that the letter's writer, Paul, is giving instructions to the Christians in the city of Corinth on how to keep decent order during a worship service. Everyone in the community—including women—are told to bring words of insight from God to share as they feel God's Spirit leading them. But Paul also worries that with so many people with things to say, the gathering could easily dissolve into chaos reminiscent of a holiday dinner table, with ten stories and conversations all flying at once and poor Uncle Bob with the hearing aid left out in the cold, unable to make out a word.

In light of this concern, Paul offers a series of instructions on keeping church in order: people speaking in tongues (other languages) should be talk one at a time and have an interpreter so they can be understood; prophets should take turns delivering messages from God and not shout over each other; the women should be quiet. Note that Paul's comment on the women comes as one part of a larger list of instructions meant to help

the Corinthian church make sure its worship services are productive and its visitors can hear the good news about Jesus.

So why might these women be singled out as uniquely disruptive to worship? This moves us to the second question, the question of historical context. In order to understand what Paul is saying, it could helpful to know something about the status of first century women.

Women, just like men, are named in the New Testament as apostles and prophets—the highest roles of spiritual leadership in the early church. However, it's also true that women in this culture had far less educational opportunities than men. In Roman culture, women were rarely included in the public forums from which early Christian gatherings took many cues. It would not be surprising, therefore, if the women at Corinth had both less understanding of how to appropriately conduct themselves in such venues and less background knowledge of the topics being discussed.

The problem with these particular women appears to be not that they are preaching—leading formally in the church—but that they are *talking* during the service—asking questions, interrupting, murmuring back and forth, contributing to the noise and commotion that has Paul so concerned. So along with telling the prophets to speak one at a time, Paul tells these women to zip it during church and save their side-talk and questions for after the gathering.

Understood in historical context, Paul's instructions to the women appears to be not a universal theological statement about the role of gender but a practical appeal addressing the need to minimize distractions in worship. The general principle that emerges might be "don't disrupt the service" or perhaps "those permitted to teach should

be equipped to contribute in a way that edifies the community." To apply the text as a prohibition against trained and gifted female leaders misrepresents the text's intention. (Note earlier in the same letter, in 1 Corin. 11, Paul actually instructs the women on how they are to "prophesy" in church).[xxi]

Sometimes it is possible to uncover pieces of the historical context simply by reading the text carefully and looking for clues that suggest what situation or cultural factors might be assumed. But unlike literary context, historical context often requires outside resources to determine. A good way to begin exploring historical context is by acquiring a study Bible. Most study Bibles provide an overview at the start of each book that offers background about the historical situation the book addresses as well as detailed notes at the bottom of each page that call your attention to additional information relevant to individual verses. If you wish to learn more, biblical commentaries explore in even greater depth details about history, culture, and language that may help illuminate the text.

It's important to remember that because the Bible is an ancient book, much of the historical information we gather is tentative. The evidence for some customs and background is clear and strong, while in other cases it is less certain. Well-intended students of history studying carefully may still draw different conclusions about where the evidence leads. This means that any conclusions we draw based on outside knowledge should be held humbly and tentatively, with openness to new learning.

But despite the fact that our knowledge can never be complete or final, asking the question of historical context is critical in helping us be sure that as much as possible, we are having the same conversation the Bible is having and addressing the concerns the

Bible itself means to address. The pages of the Bible begin to come to full life and color as we realize that what we are reading involves actual people with homes and habits and complications as real and particular as our own. Historical context reminds us that behind every passage—even the most obscure laws or poems—lies somebody's story.

15

Dancing with Dragons

When you walk into a bookstore, one of the first things you probably notice is that the books are divided into sections: science fiction to the left, romance novels to the right, biographies, comic books, self-help guides, science textbooks, poetry. If you're like most of us, you'll probably spend your visit hovering in one or two aisles. Each of these sections in the bookstore represents a distinct genre of literature.

Every genre employs its own set of rules for reading that we largely take for granted. No one reads a sci fi novel asking, "Did that really happen?" because we understand that the purpose of science fiction is not tell us facts about the past but to explore possible futures or counter-factual versions of reality. The poet and scientist both point us toward truth, but each does so with their own accepted standards of presentation. When you open a reference book, you don't read cover to cover but flip straight to the concept you wish to explore. On the other hand, very few people I know start reading a graphic novel from the middle.

The Bible is sort of like a bookstore compressed into one book, bringing together under a single cover a variety of different genres. Each genre follows its own set of conventions, and confusion can result if we misidentify which genre we are reading or aren't aware of how it functions. An apocalypse like Daniel or Revelation, for example, is full of fantastical beasts and symbolic numbers. To expect a future in which an actual seven-headed dragon starts roaming Seattle looking for someone to eat (see Rev. 12) is to misunderstand the way apocalyptic imagery works. Comprehending Revelation's

meaning requires learning an apocalypse's basic rules, which are very different from the rules that guide, say, a historical record like 2 Kings.

Every genre of literature can contain truthful insights, but the mode of truth in which a book speaks also varies according to genre. A proverb, for example, has more in common with an advice column than with a natural law. Its truth is not absolute, like the statement "what goes up must come down." Instead, the mode of truth offered by a proverb is a sort of a generalized wisdom about how life works best.

When a psalmist cries out in despair, it is not a definitive statement that there truly is no hope in the cosmos. Rather, such a statement is an emotionally honest reflection of how the world appears to those who are in a space of deep suffering. It's a truth reflecting God's engagement with genuine human experience and perception.

The truth of a letter is something different still, a contextual truth. Letters speak a truth about God and God's desires as they apply to a particular community of Jesus-followers who are in a particular situation.

While the questions of literary and historical context apply equally to all parts of the Bible, the rules of genre must be learned separately for each set of books. The next step in becoming a better interpreter of the Bible is becoming conversant with the distinctive mechanisms by which each genre delivers its portion of the Bible's larger story, the unique voice in which it speaks its piece of truth. This is not a matter of manipulating books into saying what we wish them to say but rather learning the principles that were assumed in their construction, allowing these books to be heard as they were intended to be.

(Story)

Matthew 15:21-39

It's a terrible story, really—one that just plain makes Jesus look bad.

A woman approaches Jesus, begging for his help. From the very first moment, things are dicey. First of all, she is female at a time when gender alone is enough to render her insignificant. And second, Matthew labels her a "Canaanite." Canaanites were the people ancient Israelites killed in Old Testament stories in order to avoid being tainted by their idolatry. By Jesus' time, however, Canaanites did not actually exist as a distinct ethnic group, making the term more akin to an ethnic slur. Matthew's use of the term signals how a good Jew must perceive her: a religiously-suspect foreigner.

This woman has come to Jesus, breaking every barrier, braving known hostility, out of sheer desperation. She is a mother whose young daughter suffers terribly. And no one else has been able help her.

So how does Jesus respond to this poor, desperate mother against whom the whole social and religious deck is stacked? Well, first he ignores her, pretends he doesn't even hear her calling after him. Then, after his disciples get tired of her crying and ask him to send her away, he replies, "I was sent only to the people of Israel." And when she finally zig-zags past his bodyguards and throws herself on the ground before him, he says again, "It's not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs."

In three quick hits, Jesus has just confirmed the worst fears of anyone who has ever felt overlooked or unworthy of God's attention—"God doesn't notice you;" "God doesn't want you;" "God has more important people to worry about."

The Jesus of Matthew 15 seems like, well, a little bit of a jerk.

But let's return the story a second time and take another look. Only this time, instead of beginning with the woman's approach to Jesus in 15:21, let's go back to where the story really starts, in Matthew 15:1.

The local religious leaders are, per usual, giving Jesus and company a hard time. The issue today is that Jesus' followers have been caught eating lunch with unwashed hands. Perhaps in your world handwashing matters but doesn't quite reach the standard of divine mandate. But devout first century Jews had their own theories about the relationship between cleanliness and godliness.

Old Testament law divided the world into two essential parts. There was what's holy, clean, set apart for God. And there was what's common, unclean, not God's "special stuff." The Jews were a holy people, clean, set apart for a mission from God. The rest of the world, well, largely was not. Eating the wrong food or touching the wrong thing could put a Jew beyond the camp of the holy, out where the rest of the world resided. Therefore, over time a tradition developed of washing their hands before eating so as to avoid any chance of being religiously tainted by their interactions with the unwashed masses.

Jesus defends his disciples fiercely in their failure to wash, pointing out that their critics are guilty of much more egregious violations of divine law than a simple tradition of hand-cleansing. The disciples are at his back, cheering, "Yeah! You tell 'em, Jesus. As if God really cares about some jammy fingers."

The only trouble is, Jesus keeps on talking. He turns to the crowd and suggests to them that maybe they've been looking at all the wrong things to decide what's in and

what's out, who is holy and who is not. What truly makes a person clean (or not) is not what goes into them, but what actually comes out.

The disciples suddenly have a queasy feeling that Jesus is going farther than they ever meant to go. After all, it's one thing to get a little dirt on their hands. It's another thing to entirely redefine the categories of what sort of people God is interested in. What Jesus is implying could disrupt the entire system of religious priority. They can't be sure that in such a new economy they will come out on top. So they say pull Jesus aside and say, "Hey now, Jesus, there's no need to go crazy. You're offending those people over there." (Classic code for, "Jesus, you're offending us").

Jesus is deeply frustrated. He exclaims, "How could you guys not get this yet, after all this time you've spent with me? Are you really this slow? You're looking at the wrong things to define where God is active and who God is active with. It's not what goes into a life but what comes out of it that God judges by."

No sooner has Jesus finished speaking these words than a Canaanite woman approaches. Here is a case study in everything they have just discussed. She is totally outside the religious paradigm—female, foreign, tainted, everything the disciples have been conditioned to assume God disdains. This is a chance for them to prove they finally understand what Jesus is teaching—that, unlikely as it seems to them, there might be something in this woman worthy of God's attention. So Jesus stays silent and waits to see how his twelve apprentices will respond.

And what to do they do? They ignore her until she makes so much noise they can't take it anymore. Then they come to Jesus and ask him to get rid of her.

Jesus replies to his disciples, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.” Here is the disciples’ second test. This sounds like a clear statement of priority. But is it really true? Well, yes and no. Israel has been chosen by God for a special role in history, and Jesus does spend most his time among Jews. But the real question they should be asking is why they were chosen, why Jesus has focused on Israel. God chose to bless one family, Israel, so that all peoples could be blessed through them. Jesus has come to reclaim Israel, to get them back on track with the mission. If the disciples understood their own story, they would know that the reason God has chosen *them* is so God could also choose *her*.

Jesus has set his disciples up to push back on the word “only”—not “only” Israel, but Israel “for the sake of the world.” But, like usual, the disciples completely miss their cue.

Despairing of his disciples ever getting the point, Jesus finally turns his hope toward this Canaanite woman. He presents her with the same test he presented his disciples: “It’s not right,” he says to her, “to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.” Here again is a second statement of priority. Is it true? Well, yes and no. In it situation where children of starving and there is only one loaf, most people would agree a tough decision must be made; you don’t feed the dog while the children waste away. Of course, the crucial question this metaphor leaves unanswered is who’s the dog and who’s the kid. Who is God’s first choice? Who is the last resort?

But the woman bypasses this question entirely. She doesn’t waste time debating if she is the child or the dog. Instead she just replies, “even the dog eats the crumbs that fall under the table.” She has no interested in debating abstract order, system, priority, or principle. Because this Canaanite woman understands what the disciples have missed:

this is not a one-loaf situation. There is enough bread on God's table for everyone, piled up, spilling over the floor. There's no need to ration, no reason to argue over order or priority, to debate who by birth or action deserves first place. Dogs, kids, sheep, who cares about the label—everyone just come and feast on God's goodness!

Jesus is thrilled by the woman's insight. She is the first one in the story to get it, to understand how God's kingdom really operates. He turns to his disciples and says, "Do you see this? This is what true faith looks like." A Canaanite woman is teaching faith to a group of Jewish men.

Not only does Jesus confirm the woman's judgment by giving her what she's asked for, healing for daughter, he also does something more: he leaves his encounter with her, and goes out and multiplies bread (Matthew 15:29-39). "Never mind crumbs under the table," Jesus declares. "Give me seven loaves and I'll give you seven basketfuls to spare." Seven in Jewish culture is the number of completion. This is the abundance of God's grace, enough for everyone. Just as the Canaanite woman had spoken.

16

Farewell to Cinderella

Maybe the most disturbing genre of literature ever invented is the Victorian fairy tale. I can still recall the thrill of childhood terror that accompanied Hansel and Gretel. This genre of children's literature typically moves in a straight line from messed-up story to moral application: "trust strangers and ended up kidnapped and cooked in a witch's oven." Or in the case of Cinderella, "be kind and good and selfless and you'll live happily ever after and never have to clean a dirty shower again."

Many readers coming to the Bible's large collection of stories assuming they function in similar fashion to a Victorian fairy tale. Our instinct is to immediately search for the moral landing place. But the biblical stories are not fundamentally moral tales. They are stories of real human beings making difficult choices in complex situations. Sometimes the choices are good; sometimes they are bad; sometimes it's hard to tell the difference. And somehow in the midst of all these kinds of choices, God keeps showing up.

The most important rule for reading biblical stories, especially in the Old Testament, is to remember that every story in the Bible has a purpose, a meaning, a reason for being remembered—but not every story lends itself to a neat moral conclusion. In many cases, stories are recounted without a clear judgement attached. Just because something does happen in the Bible doesn't mean it should happen. And just because a practice seems strange to us, this also doesn't mean the Bible condemns it. Instead of reducing every tale to a three-point moral principle, the challenge of reading biblical

narrative is to allow these stories to draw us into the complexity of life lived together with God.

When approaching biblical narrative, we begin with establishing basic facts: who are the people involved here, and what is their situation? How are they encountering God, or what is getting in their way?

Reading a biblical story well requires slowing down your reading pace and paying attention to the details. Biblical narrative moves quickly between action scenes and includes details sparingly. This means that when a detail does appear, it is worth pausing to ask what this detail is contributing, why it matters enough to be there. Where details cluster, it's like a flag has gone up indicating to you as a reader that something especially important is unfolding that requires a closer look.

1 Samuel 9:1-10 tells a story rather short on action but long on narrative detail. A man named Saul is out with his young servant boy, searching for his father's missing donkeys. As the day goes on, Saul grows more and more worried. He frets about what his father is thinking. At a certain point, he throws up his hands and decides to go home and leave the donkeys behind. His servant boy insists they persist and proposes a new approach, suggesting they go and ask a local prophet for advice. Saul is full of reasons why this plan could never work—he's not prepared, he has no money and nothing else to offer the prophet. Again, he is ready to turn around. But his servant boy pulls a coin from his pocket and offers to foot the bill. Thanks to the servant's quick thinking, the donkeys are finally found.

In biblical narrative, every detail counts. Why include such a seemingly insignificant episode about missing animals? This story turns out to be the Bible's

introduction to Israel's first king, and for those who are reading the signs, indicators are ominous. Saul is tall and incredibly handsome, and the people are dazzled and impressed. What no one in Israel has noticed, what the reader will also miss if they're not attending to the details of the donkey incident, is that Saul is a man driven by personal anxieties and insecurities, prone to give up the first moment anything gets difficult, easily swayed by the people he's meant to be leading.[xxii] These characteristics will play out through Saul's entire reign, becoming even more problematic as he takes on more authority.

Once we have a biblical story firmly painted in our minds, we can turn our imagination inward toward our own lives and times. What situations in our own world bear resemblance with this story? What might this story ask me about who I am as a person? How might it invite me to engage with God in my own place?

Note these questions are much bigger than a simple moral lesson. They are questions that aim toward developing a God-shaped imagination for the world. The story of 1 Sam. 9 could invite us to reflect on the nature of leadership: are we looking for leaders who demonstrate real character and courage under pressure, or are we, like the people of Israel, fixated on the surface? Or perhaps the pressing question is more personal: in what ways might I myself be behaving like Saul, driven by anxiety and fear of what others think rather than moving forward purposefully, in obedience to God?

Some biblical stories are harder than others to know what to do with. 2 Samuel 13 tells the story of Ammon, son of King David, who rapes his sister Tamar. David, one of the Bible's greatest heroes, misses what is happening in his own household and even after the crime fails to hold his son accountable in any meaningful way. There is no obvious moral lesson in this tragic story to apply, but that doesn't mean its presence in the Bible

serves no purpose. The sad truth is, many people will see aspects of their own life story in the story of Tamar. By including this tale in Scripture, the Bible acknowledges that horrors occur in even the most "holy" households. It honors victims like Tamar by making sure their story is heard and taken seriously as a part of God's own sacred narrative. The purpose of the story is not to demonstrate what *should* happen but to testify truthfully to what *does* happen, even among people of faith, and to open the door to the question of how we could better respond.

When biblical stories seem particularly difficult account for, one possible question to ask is what role the story may be playing in the Bible's whole narrative arch. Remember, all these small stories together contribute to a larger storyline that binds the Bible together. Sometimes the significance of an individual story may be less contained within the story itself than it is tied to the story's function in the Bible's larger plotline.

The book of Judges might be seen as an illustrative case where much of the narrative's meaning comes primarily from the role it plays in the Old Testament's larger story. There are many perplexing and ugly stories in the book of Judges that don't lend themselves to easy moral lessons. One of the book's final tales describes a man who cuts up his concubine and sends out her body parts as a call to war. It's hard to know what to make of a story like this. However, the story's purpose becomes clearer in light of the book's final line—"in those days there was no king in Israel; each person did what they thought to be right." The individual conscience, it appears, may not be the most reliable arbiter of affairs. The stories of Judges serve a valuable purpose of illustrating this point and setting up the need for reliable leadership. The purpose of this particular story in Judges is found primarily in how it helps moves the biblical Story forward as a whole.

The beauty and the challenge of reading biblical narratives is that there isn't just one right answer to what we make of them. The insight comes when we find the intersection between this ancient people's story and our own. Human nature, we will find, has not really changed. In reflecting on these stories, in engaging with them deeply, we begin to develop imagination for what it might look like to share life with God in an almost infinite variety of situations.

Notes and Recommended Reading

Introduction

[i] For helpful examinations of the early church's approach to Scripture, its nature and purpose, see Justin S. Holcomb, ed., *Christian Theologies of Scripture: A Comparative Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 2006) and Michael Graves, *The Inspiration and Interpretation of Scripture: What the Early Church Can Teach Us* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2014).

Chapter 1

[ii] For a compelling argument regarding the personal, intuitive dimension of scientific knowledge, see Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Toward a Post-Critical Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

Chapter 2

[iii] Note that the apostle Paul himself uses this metaphor in 1 Corinthians 3:10-15.

Chapter 3

[iv] For another take on the case for shifting understanding of the Bible away from the paradigm of the instruction's manual, see Peter Enns, *The Bible Tells Me So: Why Defending Scripture Has Made Us Unable to Read It* (New York: HarperOne, 2014).

Chapter 4

[v] Perhaps the best explanation I've seen of how the Bible's authority functions can be found in N.T. Wright's article "How Can the Bible Be Authoritative?" *Vox Evangelica* 21 (1991): 7-32, http://ntwrightpage.com/Wright_Bible_Authoritative.htm.

Chapter 5

[vi] For a more detailed description of this process, see Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Taylor & Francis Routledge, 1991).

[vii] Craig D. Allert, *A High View of Scripture?: The Authority of the Bible and the Formation of the New Testament Canon* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 155.

Chapter 6

[viii] For an in-depth examination of the process by which the canon came together, see F.F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1988).

[ix] Allert, 65.

Chapter 8

[x] For a more thorough introduction to the entire Christian story than I can provide here, I recommend Bruxy Cavey, *Reunion: the Good News of Jesus for Seekers, Saints, and Sinners* (Harrisonburg: Herald Press, 2017).

[xi] The idea of the image of God as meaning "authorized representative" is convincingly argued by J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2005).

Chapter 10

[xii] This term originated in the writings of Paul Ricoeur. See Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1970).

[xiii] For a helpful discussion of the current academic preoccupation with critique-centered readings, see Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

Jonah story

[xiv] For a philosophical exploration of the rationality of believing in miracles, again I recommend Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Toward a Post-Critical Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

Chapter 12

[xv] For a highly relevant discussion of the impact of democratic populism on systems that rely for validation on any sort of specialized knowledge or authority, see Nathan Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

[xvi] See Alister E. McGrath, *The Intellectual Origins of the European Reformation*, 2d ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2004).

[xvii] For further introduction to the role and necessity of interpretation, I recommend Scot McKnight, *The Blue Parakeet: Rethinking How You Read the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008).

Chapter 13

[xviii] Example shared by Joseph McGlynn III and Matthew S. McGlone, "Language," in *Encyclopedia of Deception*, edited by Timothy R. Levine, (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Pub., Inc., 2014), 584.

[xix] To explore the transformative effect of reading literary context, I recommend the translation work of Robert Alter, who reads Old Testament texts with a sharp eye to literary context and detail. See for example Robert Alter, *The David Story* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1999).

Chapter 14

[xx] Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2008), 29-33.

[xxi] For a more detailed exploration of historical background relevant to the Bible's statements on women, see John Temple Bristow, *What Paul Really Said About Women* (New York: HarperCollins Pub., 1988).

Chapter 16

[xxii] I am indebted for this insight to Paul Borgman, *David, Saul, and God: Rediscovering an Ancient Story* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008) 18-19. For another example of the kind of insight a close narrative reading can produce, see Paul Borgman, *The Way According to Luke: Hearing the Whole Story of Luke-Acts* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2006).

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