

How I read the Bible (5)

Scripture and the Spirit

1 John 4:1-3

So far I have outlined (and they have been just brief outlines) three guiding principles I try to follow as I read, study and preach the Bible. First, I believe Scripture speaks for itself. Second, I believe all Scripture is Christ-centred. And third, I believe Scripture is an unfolding story. Under this last principle I also very briefly spoke about the techniques of Bible study that I follow when studying a passage. I did not do this to instruct you so that you may copy my way of study (though I am more than happy to do so if there is a desire for such), I merely wanted to place things in a proper context and to say that right thinking is no substitute for hard work.

This brings us to my fourth principle, that even with right principles and hard work Scripture can only be understood under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. We believe that God speaks through his word. It has been said that actually God speaks twice, first to the original authors and editors and secondly to the hearers and readers. As we have already noted, “No prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet’s own interpretation of things. For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.” (2 Peter 1:20f) And as our reading from John makes clear, we rely on that same Spirit. Indeed, John tells us to test the spirits to make sure we are not misled.

This last passage also underlines the situation we face as people of the word and Spirit. How can we make room for the moving of the Spirit while holding on to the authority of Scripture? How are we to test the spirits as John advises? We are told that the church in Berea studied the Scriptures to see if these things were true (Acts 17:11). But we also note that the Spirit guides our understanding of Scripture – these two are inextricably entwined. By the way, that is why our Bible reading group, Engage, is called a word and Spirit group. Like love and marriage, as the old song puts it, you can’t have one without the other – no matter what laws Parliament may try to pass.

My first three principles can all be applied to our study of Scripture in a mechanical way, but bringing word and Spirit together changes the picture. It’s no longer about techniques and interpretive keys, it is about personal relationship specifically, my relationship as an interpreter of Scripture with the ultimate Author, God. Without this fundamental relationship all interpretation is suspect: it doesn’t matter how well versed I am in the mechanics of Bible study.

When we come to Scripture, if we are serious about discovering what God has to say to us today, we have to do more than master the techniques of Bible study (though I would want to add that we shouldn't do less). We have to enter into, and maintain, a close, personal relationship with God. As with other healthy relationships, this relationship is built on a foundation of secure attachment and is maintained with love and commitment. The Bible itself draws a strong connection between our relationship with God and that of marriage. The stories of how and why two people marry are as varied as the couples who tell them. For some it is love at first sight, others can't stand each other at first but something changes, for others it is a gradual process, one day reaching the point when one of them realises they can't imagine the future without the other. There is no one, correct path to follow. That my experience is different from yours does not invalidate either. So it is with coming to know God. There is no one, correct path, but all our different paths bring us to a point where we know we love God, that he loves us and that we want to take up his cross and follow him, and that we can no longer imagine a future without him.

Although all marriages begin differently they do have certain things in common. Three of the most important that maintain a healthy relationship are passion, intimacy and commitment. Your partner has to be important to you, someone you want to be with, to care for. You will share things with your partner you share with no-one else, and you will feel safe in doing so. And you will do these things without an eye on the exit, planning for when the stress and strain of the relationship become more than you care to bear. I know of no better description of the Christian life.

Are you passionate about Jesus? Does he mean more to you than life itself? Is pleasing him your main aim in life or do you put him in second place, behind some other desire? Jesus said, "If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even their own life—such a person cannot be my disciple." (Luke 14:26)

Are you intimate in your relationship with Jesus, or do you still behave as though you can hide things from him? Are you willing to let your barriers down in his presence, to risk being vulnerable, trusting him not to hurt you or mistreat you? In short, do you love him? Past experience in this world makes such intimacy difficult for some, but do you allow him into every part of your life and so begin to experience his welcoming, forgiving, transforming grace? Without this intimacy any relationship we have with Jesus will be weak and half-hearted.

And are you committed to Jesus, or is he someone you're happy to share your life with only when there isn't something more pressing to draw you away? If one or another partner in a marriage is drawn aside by other considerations, that marriage is heading for trouble. If we are not whole-hearted in our commitment

to Jesus, as he undoubtedly is to us, then our relationship with him will be less than it could be and in danger of deteriorating further.

It is only within this healthy, passionate, intimate commitment that we can experience a life-changing, life-affirming relationship. And it is within this relationship that God speak to us. Of course, by his powerful Spirit he can speak into the lives of anyone, like a man phoning a woman he wants to get to know better, but my thoughts this evening are about how I read Scripture. Reading the Bible without this meaningful relationship is a bit like reading someone else's love letters. When we are passionate, intimate and committed to Jesus, suddenly these words, delivered to us by the Holy Spirit, are to us, and we will see things hidden from other eyes and hearts.

Amen.

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Sunday 10 February 2013