

How I read the Bible (6)

Scripture and the people of God

Acts 17:10-12

Over the past weeks I have tried to give you an overview of my own approach to the best way of reading Scripture, whether this is for preaching, teaching or personal study. Firstly, I believe Scripture speaks for itself. Secondly, I believe all Scripture is Christ-centred. Thirdly, I believe Scripture is an unfolding story. Last time I spoke of the need for a personal relationship with God and the work of the Holy Spirit if we are to have a right understanding of what God is saying to us. This evening I want to turn to a fifth principle that is both truly radical and yet part of our historic, Baptist understanding of how to read Scripture.

One of the problems faced by the protestant reformers was how to deal with extremists. When it came to interpreting the Bible there were two groups that held opposite views. First there was the established church that insisted it alone had the authority to interpret Scripture. At the other end there were those who, adopting the new ideas being widely disseminated at that time, thought that each individual had the right to come to their own conclusions. The great reformers, like Luther, Calvin and Knox, approached this problem by saying that the Bible was the only true source of authority, but this didn't answer the problem, for who was to be allowed to interpret the Bible. Indeed, the upshot of this was that in many protestant churches the tyranny of the Pope was simply replaced by the tyranny of the preacher. The believer in the pew was still told what to believe by others.

There were those who felt this was not right. They believed that just as the Spirit of Christ was present in all believers, so all believers had a contribution to make to understanding, interpreting and applying Scripture. These groups of believers were called under the general heading of Congregationalists. They held that God speaks to and through all his people, giving gifts as necessary so that those groups might together interpret and live out God's leading. This process, often referred to as discerning the mind of Christ, still forms one of the most important of Baptist distinctives today.

That such a communal approach is itself Scriptural can be seen in a number of Bible passages. We started by reading about the believers in Berea, who practised an open, multi-voiced form of Bible study. Passages like Ephesians 4, 1 Corinthians 12-14 and Romans 12 all point to or assume a community that works together in discerning God's will and then putting it into practice. Such discernment of necessity involves a joint reading of Scripture.

Even within today's Baptist churches this principle is applied in a wide variety of ways and to varying degrees. I want to stand at the radical end of the spectrum. I do not believe any one person has a monopoly on the truth but that God speaks to us all. It is together we discern what God is saying to his church. Such principles are not to be confined to the church business meeting, where discerning the mind of Christ is limited to constitutional matters and governed by set procedures.

How is such a 'congregational hermeneutic' to be achieved? This is not as easy as it may sound. The early Congregationalists often descended into anarchy and chaos because of their lack of ability to walk together. There are always those who have plenty to say and will overwhelm others, leaving no room for a true meeting of the ways. There will always be those who simply want to be told and not put in the hard, spiritual work involved. Many churches, then and now, start out with or recapture this sense of walking together but find it easier to default to a front led, mono-voiced culture. Both leaders and congregations revert to the old, familiar ways of doing things. To work, this open, multi-voiced approach to reading Scripture requires believing congregations that are committed to one another, eager to hear and obey Scripture and open to the leading of the Spirit. It also requires leaders who see their primary task as encouraging such an attitude across the whole congregation. This will involve helping each member of the group to firstly read Scripture, but also to give them the tools needed to openly and lovingly share together. Many leaders find such an approach both difficult and threatening.

Others question such an approach to reading the Bible as little better than pooling our ignorance. They argue that the interpretation of Scripture is a skill that needs to be refined through training and academic study, but is this really the case? Such training can be most beneficial, giving access to information as well as skills not readily available elsewhere, but I doubt that academic training alone makes a Bible teacher. And even when such training is given to those who are recognised by the church as having the gift of teaching, preaching or leading, it does not mean that the rest of the church is 'off the hook'. The believers in Berea recognised Paul and Silas' authority and gifting, but they still examined the Scriptures together to see if what was said was true.

As I said, such a congregational approach to reading Scripture is hard work. Many rediscover the practice of our forebears and embrace it with enthusiasm only to slip back into the old, easier ways when the going gets tough. But some have persevered and have grown into the practice. They have discovered the strengths and joys of sharing together and have grown in the depth of their fellowship together, the power and effectiveness of their mission and the meaningfulness of their worship together.

Amen

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