

How I read the Bible (7)

Living Scripture

Matthew 7:24:27

This evening we draw to a close this present series on how I read the Bible. Because of weather, illness and other things beyond our control this series has taken much longer than I expected but I have resisted the temptation to shorten or compact it. Because it has taken longer than I planned I'm going to recap the story so far.

You will remember, hopefully, that I started by saying that my interpretation of Scripture grows out of my experience of God. It has been a journey, and I am not the same person as I was back in July 1967 when Jesus called me to take up my cross daily and follow him. But I am not fickle, at least I hope I am not, and have not simply changed my mind, being blown every which way by the profound changes in society we have all seen over the last 45 years. I have always held that my walk with Jesus was central to my life and witness as a Christian. I have always held that the Bible has a key role to play in the life of individual Christians and in the community of faith, the church. Some things are less important to me now, in particular, I am not convinced that theological orthodoxy is as important as I once did. But some things have remained unchanged, even growing in their importance and significance to me. Certain key Scriptures remain at the heart of my relationship with Jesus. Jesus' own manifesto in Luke 4:18f, God's call to a radical lifestyle in Isaiah 58:1-12 and the personal implications of Philippians 3:7-14 continue to shape my life.

With this personal background I come to Scripture with certain presuppositions. First and foremost is that the whole of the Bible speaks about and points to Jesus. All other interpretive frameworks and assumptions are, to me, suspect or, at best, secondary. This is not to say that every single verse in the Bible is directly referring to Jesus, but all of Scripture points to God's plan of salvation and as Jesus is the only name given whereby we must be saved, all Scripture ultimately points to him.

I also believe Scripture to be simple, that is it is an open book whose meaning is clear to any who want to grasp its message. We do not require special insights, training or experiences before we can meet with God through its pages. But while I believe the Bible to be simple I do not believe it to be simplistic. Indeed, the Bible is a profound book and every opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of it should be taken advantage of. Academic study of the background, language, and theology of Scripture is a valid and worthwhile

pursuit, as is an understanding of the unfolding nature of Scripture. The Bible is a book that benefits from close study, and the more we put in the more we get out.

But Scripture is also a spiritual book and cannot be understood apart from the work of God's Holy Spirit, and the presence and enlightening work of the Spirit only happens when we are in a living, loving relationship with Jesus. Without this personal connection we can still know a lot about God and his word but we cannot know him, and if we do not know him then our learning is in vain and we are still lost.

Even if we apply all these principles to our reading of Scripture, how are we to be confident that our understanding is true to God and his word? After all, the world is full of interpreters who sit in their studies pouring over the Bible to see what it might say on this subject or that. You only have to spent a short time on the internet to discover that all sorts of people, each claiming to fulfil each of the principles I have set out, come up with all sorts of ideas. To navigate through these murky waters God has given us each other. The proper place for studying Scripture is in fellowship with other believers. Personal interpretations of the Bible are to be avoided and made subject to the fellowship of believers God has gathered us into, not held in isolation from or defiance of the local church.

And so we come to my final principle for reading Scripture. Many churches, both historically and in today's world will say 'Amen!' to the principles I have outlined yet still miss the point. This is because for many the aim of reading the Bible is to gain an understanding of what it says and so have a better grasp to sound doctrine. Such groups will proudly describe themselves as 'Bible based'. They will use words like, evangelical, reformed or fundamental, but I want to ask if this is enough. What really makes a church 'Bible based'? Is it their grasp of sound doctrine, their depth of Biblical knowledge, or is it the quality of their life and witness, both as individuals and as a fellowship?

Our forefathers used a technical sounding expression: they spoke of 'the hermeneutics of obedience'. Jesus put it in simpler language when he told the parable of the wise and foolish builders, and James summed it up, saying, "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says." (James 1:22) Reading Scripture is never about mere knowledge or theological understanding. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. (2 Timothy 3:16f) Scripture is meant to be applied, and Bible study should lead to a changed life.

I have known many Bible teachers in my life. I have known, and still know, many who have a greater depth and breadth of Bible knowledge, but when I look back I discover that the people who have had the most profound effect on me are those who were the most Godly, the most Christ-like. Many of them (though by

no means all) were indeed great Bible teachers, but that was because they allowed what they studied and taught to challenge and change their lives. And what is true of individuals I have discovered to be true of churches. Fellowships that are willing to be challenged and changed by their shared reading and understanding of Scripture, and not just conformed to a set of doctrinal standards, have a deeper impact on their neighbourhoods.

So, these are the principles I try to apply as I read Scripture. It is not always easy, for a variety of reasons, but I believe them to be a proper framework on which hang the interpretation and application of our Bible study. They are no guarantee that we will always agree with one another, but if we can at least agree on the principles we will, I believe, find strength in our diversity, and the kingdom of God, which is about God's active rule in the lives and hearts of all mankind, will be brought nearer.

Amen.

Kevin Dare

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