

How I read the Bible (1)

Good News to the poor

Luke 4:16-21

Over the years I have tried to encourage, instruct and lead this fellowship into a closer walk with Jesus and a deeper understanding of Scripture. We have a Bible reading group that has been meeting monthly for four years which has read, studied and pondered on Scripture. Most Sunday evenings take the form of a Bible study. On other occasions, as the need or opportunity arose, I have turned our thoughts to the Bible on a variety of issues. I hope all my teaching and preaching has been both Bible-based and Christ-centred. However, it has occurred to me that I have never set before you my approach to Scripture and how I interpret what the ancient text has to say to the world of today. Over the coming few weeks I want to rectify that.

I believe this is an important issue. Many voices beckon and entice us, calling us to follow them and accept their interpretation of Scripture and the world around us. Never has it been so easy to discover what others are saying, and never have we been in greater danger of being misled by these siren voices. How are we to identify and embrace the truth and resist the falsehoods?

Although this is an immediate issue that demands our attention it is not a new problem. Christians have always had to interpret Scripture in the light of their present situation. That is exactly what Paul does as he writes to the first Christians, reflecting on God's self-revelation, first through the Law and the prophets and ultimately through his Son Jesus. That is what the Church Fathers did for the next few centuries as the church faced opposition and persecution from the world. The task was somewhat eclipsed during the middle ages as the power of the centralised church grew, but there were always those who carried on the task of asking new questions of the old stories. Because history is written by the victors, these questioners are known to us largely by the title 'heretic', but eventually these heretics challenged the might of Rome and gave us the Protestant Reformation. Since then there have always been those who asked pertinent, and sometimes impertinent, questions. I would like to think that I am part of that ancient tradition.

Such questioners are not to be thought of as anarchists or iconoclasts, who just want to demolish the old simply because it is old, or are attracted to the new and popular. There are guidelines that keep us grounded in the truth but free from the trammels of tradition and other people's expectations. It is these guidelines that I want to share with you.

Before I outline my guiding principles I want to draw a distinction between principles and techniques. I, like most evangelicals, was brought up on the historical-critical method of Bible study. It is a method I still, by-and-large, use, though age and experience have caused me to modify it somewhat. Techniques are to do with what we might call the tools of the trade. Examples of these are found on most pastors' bookshelves, as with Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher And The Ancient Text* or Fee and Stuart, *How To Read The Bible For All It's Worth*.

I try to be guided by six basic principles. These principles have no particular order, each is of equal standing with the others. At times they don't sit well with one another, but I have found that out of this tension fresh ideas can arise that lead me into a deeper knowledge of God and his word and a deeper relationship with Jesus.

So let me briefly list these guiding principles. Over the weeks ahead I will expand them, show how they work and hopefully give useful examples.

- First, I believe Scripture speaks for itself. My first Bible class teacher said that if you get stuck as to the meaning of a passage the best commentary you will find is the rest of Scripture. Generally speaking the Bible is plain enough to be understood and obeyed.
- Second, all Scripture is Christ centred. That is, all the Bible must be read through the lens of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. But more than that, I believe that a living, personal relationship with Jesus is necessary if we are to understand Scripture aright.
- Third, Scripture is an unfolding story, a history, both of God's dealings with us and our response to him. Like all but the most basic of histories it is far from straightforward, and not all parts speak on every subject with equal clarity. Careful study is required.
- Fourth, Scripture can only be understood under the active, present guidance of the Holy Spirit. It is not enough to assume that the Spirit guides others and simply accept what they say. The Spirit confirms the word to each of us.
- Fifth, Scripture belongs to the people of God and the proper place to interpret and apply it is in the local congregation. Personal study is good but it should take place within the context of all the wider fellowship.
- Sixth, and finally, the goal of Scripture is not to inform us about spiritual things (although it does do that), it is to change us. It is good to understand the Bible, but it is far more important to obey it.

There is one more principle, but it is more foundational than these six and it is summed up in the passage we read from Luke's gospel. It is that the message of Scripture is good news to the poor. Throughout the Bible God's word to his people has always been one of liberation, an outworking of his words to Moses: "I have indeed seen the misery of my people. I have heard them crying out because of their oppressors, and I am concerned about their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them." (Exodus 3:7f) We are repeatedly told that God has a special place in his heart for the oppressed, for the poor and the defenceless.

In the gospels Jesus said that the groups which best demonstrated the gospel in its fullness are the poor and the 'sinners', those on the margins of society. The self-righteous would learn the true nature of the gospel only as they too ate with 'sinners', and learnt what the gospel meant to them. Only as they experienced helplessness and alienation themselves would they be transformed by the gospel and experience its true power.

I am saddened by much of what I see in the life of the church today. I wonder how public spats about women bishops and human sexuality can be construed as 'good news to the poor'. I wonder why it is that even though the Bible so clearly reveals God's heart for the poor, those who our society deem to be poor (the economically deprived, the unemployed, those forced into demeaning existences by the actions of others) are the ones most noticeable by their absence from our churches, and that taking the good news to such is seen as something of a specialist calling for some only.

Maybe the reason the poor, and so many others in our society, don't consider our message to be good news is that we are not telling it aright. My understanding of Scripture is shaped by the God who goes looking for the lost and who is willing to do whatever it costs to rescue them. This is the good news. What shapes your life?

Amen.

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Sunday 6 January 2013