

A Question of Hermeneutics

The Christian community today is divided over many issues, despite persistent claims of “unity in Christ.” Apart from the obvious doctrinal distinctions between denominations and traditions, a basic rift historically has been between “liberals” and “conservatives,” with all sorts of gradations in between. The differences are theological, ecclesiastical, political and social. Yet the lines of demarcation are more fluid than is often realized, changing in relation to the topics under consideration. For example, though many conservative Protestants hardly regard the Catholic Church as Christian (and vice versa), the two might come together on attitudes about *Roe v. Wade*, or the ordination of women. Though liberal Protestants generally differ with the Catholic Church’s official position on abortion and birth control, many applauded Pope Francis’ comments on immigration, advocacy for the poor, and climate change in his recent visit to the United States. Liberal Christians, typically open to advocating for justice in the public sector, are suspicious of right wing Christians who display a political agenda. Yet both sides claim to believe in the separation of church and state, rejecting any notion that the state should have a regulatory role in church’s life. Practically all Christian groups proclaim the Bible to be the Word of God. However, they diverge significantly when it comes to the interpretation and application of that sacred text. It is the thesis of this essay that attitudes toward Scripture are at the root of many divisions in the Christian community.

How is the Bible the Word of God? And then, how should it be determinative for contemporary life? These are questions of hermeneutics, a term used to speak of the principles of interpretation of Scripture, as well as other ancient literature. Hermeneutics is like a “lens” through which Scripture is viewed. Inevitably the Bible reader is confronted with the challenge of bridging from the original sense and cultural context of the biblical text to our contemporary life, with application of biblical truth to today’s culture and circumstances. Some scholars refer to the “three worlds of the text,” meaning (a) the world behind the text, its background; (b) the world of the text, its situation in history and geography, along with its literary characteristics, such as poetry or narrative; and (c) the world before or in front of the text, that is, the contemporary situation of today’s readers. Because we affirm the Bible as the Word of God, we consider not only what is said to the original hearers but also what the text is saying to us. Though our attention often is directed at interpreting Scripture, the issue also is how Scripture interprets us! Sermons, Bible studies, presentations of Christian teaching and doctrine are exercises in hermeneutics. The serious Bible student engages in what might be called “creative listening” to the text, that is, seeking to discern the sort of material a particular passage is (such as poetry, prophecy, parable, history, narrative, exhortation, instruction, etc.) and what it may have meant to its original audience, then asking how God is speaking through that passage to our situation today.

There are those who adhere to a dogma of “the verbal plenary inerrancy of Scripture,” by which they mean every word of the Bible is absolutely true and unassailable, with the caveat that this is the case in the original texts – none of which are extant today. The principle of inerrancy affirms that God is speaking through the Bible, but it scarcely takes note of the fact that it was written by human hands over many centuries. Further, Scripture has been copied, translated and published innumerable times, always involving human agency.

On the other end of the theological spectrum there are those who regard the Bible as little more than “helpful hints” for living. Scripture, they feel, is ancient and therefore has practically no bearing on contemporary life. They may appreciate the Golden Rule or some other biblical

dictum that fits their own personal perspective, but to regard Scripture as determinative for their attitudes and decisions seems absurd. They adhere to the oft-repeated belief that ‘you can justify almost anything on the basis of Scripture’ as a means of dismissing the authority of the Bible. They note that the Crusades, the Inquisition, pogroms, slavery, racial and gender discrimination, papal infallibility, paternalism, divine right of kings and antagonism toward scientific discovery have all been supported by appeals to Scripture.

Somewhere in between these two extremes reside most of us. As part of the Presbyterian and Reformed family of Churches that traditionally takes a high view of Scripture, Cumberland Presbyterians revere the Bible as the Word of God. Nevertheless, we do not always look first to Scripture for guidance on matters of politics, business or life choices. Our worship services typically include multiple presentations and references to Scripture. Calls to worship, offertory sentences, responsive readings and benedictions are scriptural, and a sermon without biblical foundation is no sermon at all, we believe. Further, many congregations offer small group Bible studies, Sunday school lessons based on Scripture, seasonal biblical curricula for the Christian Year, and more. Our members and ministers utilize the wide range of Bible translations available today, along with study helps, commentaries and devotional literature. Even so, devout church folks too often neglect the study of Scripture and may express a sense of inadequacy and unfamiliarity with the content of the Bible.

The Confession of Faith for Cumberland Presbyterians affirms Scripture to be “the infallible rule of faith and practice, the authoritative guide for Christian living,” [COF 1.05]. The first question posed for the ordination of ministers, elders and deacons is: “Do you believe the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be the inspired word of God, the authority for faith and practice?” [Constitution 2.92, 6.36] The Directory for Worship suggests a form for public profession of faith and church covenant which includes a similar question of the new member: “Do you believe the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be the inspired word of God, the source of authority for faith and practice, and will you read and study them for guidance in living the Christian life?” [DFW, emphasis added] The Confession also offers comments about the proper interpretation of Scripture, a hermeneutic. “In order to understand God’s word spoken through the scriptures, persons must have the illumination of God’s own Spirit. Moreover, they should study the writings of the Bible in their historical settings, compare scripture with scripture, listen to the witness of the church throughout the centuries, and share insights with others in the covenant community.” [COF 1.07] We do not have an ‘anything goes’ hermeneutic! Our Confession, firmly based on the Bible, is our standard of doctrine and interpretation. Note what this statement does not affirm: that God wrote or dictated the scriptures; that the scriptures are viewed as “inerrant,” rather as “infallible” in matters of faith and practice. Instead of a rigid “bibliolatry,” the scriptures are considered to be the “authoritative guide.” It may seem to be splitting hairs to differentiate between “infallible” and “inerrant,” but there is in fact an important distinction between the two. The latter case often comes across as God literally dictating the Scripture – much like the views of adherents to the Koran or the Book of Mormon. But our Confession understands the matter differently. God speaks through the Bible, but does so by using the language, customs, culture, and (yes) weaknesses of human beings. Further, the doctrine of inspiration of the Holy Spirit we espouse includes not only the centuries-long process of writing the Scriptures, but also the canonization process, and the continuing work of interpretation and application of biblical truth from generation to generation. In this connection we can allow for a reasonable distinction between the ‘letter’ and the ‘spirit’ of many Scripture

texts, taking seriously the original context of the writing and today's situation in mission and service.

While it is unlikely that differences between denominations in approach to Scripture will be overcome, perhaps it is not quite as unrealistic to work toward a common understanding of biblical interpretation within our own Churches. This has practical implications for our attitudes toward one another in small group Bible discussions, Sunday school classes, responses to messages from the pulpit and so on. At a time when unification between our two sister denominations is under prayerful consideration, let us make the conscious effort to remove any impediment to our unity that has biblical interpretation as a basis. We acknowledge that within both Cumberland Presbyterian denominations there is a wide range of biblical understanding and interpretation. With that said, we should resolve – first and foremost – to love one another, and as an expression of that love to listen to each other, affirming the even greater common ground we enjoy and embrace as Cumberland Presbyterians. Our goal need not be one hundred percent agreement on biblical interpretation, but rather a mature awareness and consideration of the diversity of theological perspectives that a global and multi-ethnic denomination manifests.

We believe Scripture to be the written Word of God. At the same time we affirm that Jesus Christ, God's only Son, is the Word of God Incarnate, so that Scripture "should be understood in light of the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth." [COF 1.06]. This suggests our reading of Scripture is Christocentric. Yet we readily understand that, for example, passages such as the Suffering Servant prophecies in Isaiah had an original meaning and impact that was not focused on Jesus Christ, though we in our reading and proclamation of those texts find him there. We believe further that God's Word is also spoken – through creation, through prophets and apostles, and the proclamation and witness of the church. It is remembered that much of Scripture existed as oral tradition before being written. The conviction of inspiration by the Holy Spirit, necessary for understanding of Scripture, is an important component of our hermeneutic, so that the role of the individual believer as well as the corporate community of faith is taken seriously. In other words, we believe the Word of God is still speaking today!

What if we added a "missional" calibration to our hermeneutic lens? The word "missional" has come to mean the recognition that God's mission, revealed in Scripture and supremely in Jesus Christ, is the only legitimate purpose of the church in the world. In fact the church is God's strategy for mission in the world. We are a "sent" people -- sent to proclaim and demonstrate, teach and learn, the gospel of Christ in a world of spiritual, physical, emotional, economic, political need. It is sometimes not recognized that the Bible is a book about mission from beginning to end, that it was written by missionaries for missionaries [Kirk, p. 20]! This is a way of saying that Scripture points God's faithful people outward to share (and seek to live out) God's gracious Good News in a world overburdened with bad news. Scripture was written from faith for faith, indeed to inspire others to faith. It was written from within a specific culture and history, yet it has trans-cultural and timeless implications as God's Word for all. Our Church's forbearers were missional in their desire to spread the gospel across a vast frontier. The frontier of the 21st century beckons us to a reading, proclaiming and demonstrating of the biblical message that is missional for the time in which God has granted us to serve.

One of the strengths of the Cumberland Presbyterian Churches, again, is the wide latitude with regard to biblical understanding, worship style, approaches to ministry and mission. What needs greater cultivation, perhaps, is an appreciation of varying opinions. It would be helpful to lay aside the labels intended to diminish the faithfulness and motives of our brothers

and sisters in Christ – conservative and liberal, evangelical and traditional, right and left wing, along with the “isms” and “phobias” in currency today. If we agree that our calling is to serve God’s mission in the world, then a healthy dialog about strategies, ideologies, and emphases is more attainable, and genuine unity in Christ can grow.

WORKS CITED

Confession of Faith for Cumberland Presbyterians. Cordova, Tennessee: Office of the General Assembly, 2014, print.

Kirk, J. Andrew. What Is Mission? Theological Explorations. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000, print.

FOR REFLECTION

1. What governing principles should characterize our use of Scripture?
2. Many Christians take some portions of Scripture literally, but not all. How is this difference in determination made?
3. Study Bibles and commentaries are helpful tools for biblical understanding. Does our church library include some of these?

Suggested Resources:

Bible Dictionary

Harper Study Bible

Interpreter’s Bible Commentary Series

Interpretation Bible Commentary Series

4. If a small group were to devise a “Bill of Rights” for biblical discussion and attitudes toward differing viewpoints, what would that look like?
5. What role does prayer play in the ongoing work of biblical interpretation?

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