

A New Kind of Bible Reading

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[This is material I decided to extract from *A New Kind of Christianity: Ten Questions That are Transforming the Faith*, in hopes of a) keeping the length of the book within limits, and b) making this material more widely available. The second of the ten questions from the subtitle is about the Bible and what it means to speak of the Bible as being authoritative. I deal in some detail with the ways the Bible has been used in harmful ways in the past, and I suggest that we must raise “the Bible question” in order to avoid repeating similarly tragic mistakes in the future. In particular, I suggest that the standard way of reading the Bible -- as a legal constitution -- is inherently inappropriate and problematic, and I propose a quest for more appropriate approaches, recommending one as a place to begin: seeing the Bible as the essential library of a culture or community known as the descendants of Abraham. The following material details what it might look like for us to read the Bible in those more appropriate, “non-constitutional” ways.]

1. Reading the Bible narratively: This means reading the Bible in context of the nested series of stories it is telling. For example, if you’re reading the Epistle to Philemon, you need to read this letter within the story of Paul’s fourth (probably) missionary journey, which unfolds within the story of Paul’s life and ministry, which unfolds within the story of the early church, which unfolds within the story of Jesus and his mission, which unfolds within the story of Israel under the Roman empire and the empire’s economic dependence on slavery, which unfolds within the story of the Jewish people, which

unfolds within the story of economic systems that use slaves to advance their ends, which unfolds within the story of humanity, which unfolds within the story of creation. Every word we read in the Bible needs to be seen in the context of local and larger narratives like these. To do otherwise – which we do when we read and use the Bible as a timeless constitution or legal code - would be like trying to understand Dr. Martin Luther King without understanding the larger stories in which his story was nested – including the stories of the United States, the African slave trade, the African American church, the Civil War and Reconstruction, Jim Crow laws and segregation, the Social Gospel movement, and the global post-colonial movement for human rights that emerged in the aftermath of World War II and the holocaust.

2. Reading the Bible conversationally: If a culture is a community of people who converse (or argue) about the same things across many generations, it makes sense to learn the contours of the main players in the conversation. For example, in the gospels, Jesus enters ongoing conversations among Pharisees, Sadducees, Zealots, Herodians, priests, scribes, prophets, Roman authorities, excluded sinners, and the poor. Across the Hebrew Bible, there is a persistent tension between priests (who are the institutional caretakers of what we might call “organized religion”) and prophets (movement leaders who critique the very status quo of ritual and sacrifice that the priests work so hard to defend from the forces of chaos and compromise). There is a tradition that celebrates the monarchy and another tradition that deplores and laments it. There is a tradition that sees order and justice in history (embodied in Deuteronomy and Proverbs) and a tradition that sees chaos and injustice (embodied in Ecclesiastes and Job). Every statement we

encounter in the Bible comes from someone situated in one or more of these ongoing conversations. Put differently, we need to read the Bible dialectically, sensitive to conflict and counterstatement, placing every action and statement in relation to the parts of the conversation that have gone before and those that will come after. Extracting statements from their larger conversational context would be like plucking and applying a statement from one of Job's friends, unaware that later in the story of Job, God will discredit what these friends have said.

3. Reading the Bible missionally: If we believe there is a narrative arc to the Bible, we would agree it has to do with God's creative project, the *missio dei*, God's mission of making a world, healing it when it goes astray, and calling it to ever-greater justice, beauty, goodness and truth. We could frame this mission in terms of the call of Abraham, where God promises to bless one people so they can in turn bless all peoples (Genesis 12:1-3). Notably, the apostle Paul calls this "the gospel preached in advance" to Abraham, Galatians 3:8. So we ask, in each passage of Scripture, how is God extending God's overarching mission of blessing all nations through a called and commissioned community of people?

4. Reading the Bible politically/economically: The God of the Bible loves justice, especially for people who suffer under the domination of violent and oppressive empire. God's counter-imperial mission is therefore both personal and public, individual and social. Since social and public life involves the just use and unjust abuse of money, sex, and power, we need to be sensitive to the ways a text relates to the human struggle for

justice, involving money, sexuality, power, violence, and law. Power, wealth, oppression, and poverty are not peripheral themes in the pursuit of justice, and as such we need to be highly sensitive to them in our reading of Scripture.

5. Reading the Bible rhetorically: Often, we focus on what a text *says* and miss what it is trying to *do*. For example, a mother might say, “If you hit your brother again, I’m going to lock you in your room for a year!” Grammatically and logically, we might say she is making a conditional promise that would qualify her for a charge of child abuse: *I will do this if you do that*. But rhetorically, she is using hyperbole to encourage one of her children to stop hurting another child. She wants what is best for both children – for one to be non-violent and for the other to be a non-casualty. What seems at first glance to be a threat of cruelty is, in a rhetorical light, the opposite: an expression of love flowing from a desire for peace. In a Constitution, lawyers exclude this kind of colloquial speech in the interest of clarity, but a cultural library like the Bible is written by poets, protesters, storytellers, activists, priests, mystics, and other passionate people, not lawyers, so this kind of speech abounds.

6. Read the Bible literarily: When people claim to interpret the Bible literally, they often unconsciously mean, “like lawyers who write and interpret constitutions.” Constitutional readings trap readers in the grim and limited hermeneutics of the past. But when readers of the Bible develop sensitivity to the ways poets, protesters, storytellers, activists, priests, and mystics use language, the Bible is liberated from its constitutional captivity to be the wild, inspired, and impassioned collection of literary artifacts that it is. To read the

Bible literarily means we listen for the rich overtones and undertones of genre, poetics, semantics, semiotics, context, authorial biography and psychology, paradox, reader response, and other dimensions of grown-up literacy to which more facile constitutional hermeneutics are more or less tone deaf.

7. Read the Bible closely: One of my favorite theologians asks how we can distinguish a better interpretation from a less satisfying one. Better interpretations, she says, account for more of the details in the text than their counterparts. In other words, we should prefer an interpretation that makes sense of details – showing *why* the author or community that produced the text decided each detail was worth including. Because of our weakness in regards to the previous approaches, boatloads of details are little more than filler in conventional constitutional interpretations, local color with little to offer. But in this cultural library approach, these details turn out to be gold mines of meaning.

9. Reading the Bible communally: The Bible is not, as many preachers of my childhood affirmed, so easy to understand that any child can interpret it. A grown-up can't even do it on his or her own. Nor can all the scholars of a generation. Nor can all the scholars of all generations. One dimension, in my experience, of the Bible's inspiration is its depth, its absolute saturation with meaning, its ability to generate meaningful insight again and again, across generations and cultures, and across each individual's lifetime as well.

That's why, with so much meaning to be explored, we need to engage with it communally.

For starters, we need to practice what Chesterton called “the democracy of the dead,” listening respectfully to the ways our ancestors interpreted the text in centuries past, not being prejudiced against them simply because they are no longer visibly with us. But we can’t let our cross-generational democracy degenerate into a totalitarianism or oligarchy of the dead by treating their readings as a ceiling or as a box outside of which we may not think. No, we must listen to the voices of the past – the Second-Century apologists, the early church Fathers and Mothers, the desert Fathers and Mothers, the Celts, the medieval scholars, the Reformers, the persecuted Anabaptists, and so on - in all their harmony and cacophony of agreement and disagreement, reading the text with their voices as part of our ongoing conversation.

But at the same time, we must realize that our institutional past has at various times strongly favored readers with Greco-Roman perspectives, male perspectives, Euro-American perspectives, violent and colonial perspectives, wealthy perspectives, Industrial-era perspectives, and constitutional perspectives. Ironically, the Bible itself was composed by a culture with a profoundly different vantage point: Semitic rather than Greco-Roman; Middle-Eastern rather than Euro-American; colonized, enslaved, and oppressed rather than colonizing, enslaving, and imperial; poor rather than wealthy; agricultural rather than industrial; and poetic rather than constitutional.

So now more than ever, we all – especially those of us in the global North/West who tend to suffer from excessive confidence – need to listen to minority reports on the Biblical text, the readings that arise from the global South, from women, from the poor and

marginalized, from non-Western communities. Instead of either/or ... where we favor either old readings or new, scholarly or non-scholarly, male or female, and so on ... we need to have a both/and, welcoming the whole community around the text to continue the conversation.

10. Reading the Bible recursively: Readers of the Bible have seen it in widely varying ways across centuries. For example, who today would guess that the Song of Solomon would have been the book in the Bible taken most seriously by certain late-medieval commentators, much the way that Romans has been primary for Lutherans and Calvinists, or Daniel and Revelation for Dispensationalists? Just as readers across the centuries have seen it differently, so will we across our personal and denominational life cycles. Our adolescent readings will be expanded in young adulthood, and again in middle age and old age. Our readings after periods of great suffering will differ from our readings before. In times of elation we will notice things we missed in depressed times, and vice versa. So we need to acknowledge the ways in which our past readings and experiences have changed us, so we will see the text in new and fresh ways in the future. If we expect for new truth to break forth from God's Word for us, we must bring a fresh imagination, newly awakened eyes, a more exercised and expanded mind, and a more mature heart to the text as we go through life's seasons.

11. Reading the Bible ethically: Even a cursory review of the use of the Bible in relation to slavery, anti-Semitism, the treatment of Indigenous Peoples, or Galileo's discoveries about the solar system should remind us that interpretation is a moral act. People suffer

and die because of bad interpretations, and they thrive and celebrate because of good ones. That's why I believe that we should test an interpretation by reason and scholarship, using our rational intelligence – as we have traditionally done. But we must go farther, and also test our interpretations by conscience, using our emotional, ethical, and social intelligence - which we have too seldom done, raising questions like these: How might I treat people if I follow this interpretation? Whom might I harm? What unintended social consequences can we predict if this interpretation is widely embraced? Could people be vilified, harmed, or even killed because of this interpretation? Put differently, interpreting texts with mathematical intelligence apart from social, emotional, and ethical intelligence is unintelligent, antisocial, and unethical. As Michael Polanyi and others have reminded us, the pursuit of a kind of objective, amoral knowledge divorced from personal knowledge can lead to concentration camps and gas chambers ... and, we could add, to slave ships, plantations, ghettos, all-white and all-male board rooms and pulpits, mistreatment of gay people, and apartheid.

But an ethical reading of the Bible will sometimes require us to go even farther: to do exactly what its most illustrious characters did, namely *to dare to argue and wrestle with God*. There are moments in the unfolding drama of the Bible – significant moments – when human beings dare to challenge God (or better said, I think, *their understanding or image of God*) to mature and be more ... *humane*! For example, we've already mentioned Job, who has the nerve to challenge the black-and-white understandings of God enshrined in Deuteronomy and Proverbs, and quoted by his friends: God is in control, dishing out calamity on the evil and blessing on the good. Human life can't be so easily explained, he

complains. Even more daring, when God announces to Abraham plans to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham pushes back with horror: “Far be it from you!” he says, and bargains God back from the unjust action of sweeping away the just with the unjust (Genesis 18:16 ff). Several centuries later, Moses convinces God that it would be bad for the divine reputation to destroy the people to whom God has made a commitment, even though they are stiff-necked and hard to lead (Exodus 33). Do we dare, in the interest of the same kinds of ethical concerns Job, Abraham, and Moses shared, to refuse to settle for ethically unacceptable understandings of God and God’s will? Could it be that the Bible itself is daring us to dare to stand before God in this humble-yet-bold way?

12. Reading the Bible personally: The Bible scholar or reader who is a follower of Christ can never pretend to be *apart from* the textual community as she reads the text. She must remember that she is *a part of* that community of faith, accountable to the God to which the text points and by which the text is inspired. It becomes dangerous to the soul to practice reading the Bible outside of this relational, personal context. The reader must always remember, to use Walker Percy’s terms, that the reader is himself or herself in the predicament the text addresses. So faithful readings are habitually humble, expectant, open, and hungry and thirsty to encounter the Living God. Even the “professional” reader and teacher of the Bible must remain forever an “amateur” too ... approaching the text freely and for the love of it (the *amar* in *amateur*), and for the love of God and neighbor most of all.

13. Reading the Bible mystically: To take the personal dimension a step deeper, the

faithful reader must develop the habit of mystical openness, receptivity not only to understanding from the text but to enlightenment from the Holy Spirit, not only to interpretation but to revelation, not only to intelligent engagement with the text but also to personal abduction by its message. As we read about people having dreams and visions, we must remain open to the possibility of having our own imaginations invaded and surprised. As we read about people receiving a summons to mission, we must never render ourselves into the kinds of people incapable of receiving a similar summons, but rather, the reverse: our readings should intensify our vulnerability to God's vocation in our lives. And, in the best tradition of the mystics, we must always remember that true revelation conceals as well as reveals: it experiences truth in a pillar of dark cloud as well as a pillar of bright fire. While it reveals some glimpses as true and knowable, it simultaneously reveals that there is far more that remains hidden, beyond knowledge. Without that profoundly humbling sensibility, people who earn a "masters of divinity" or "doctor of divinity" may misconstrue the meaning and privileges conferred upon them at their graduation ceremony.

15. Reading the Bible Christo-focally: I've saved what is probably the most provocative and important of these habits for last. If our quest for a new kind of Christian faith is to have any lasting value, I believe it will require us to grapple with this habit. Along with interpreting the Bible narratively, conversationally, missionally, and all the rest, we who are Christians must learn to interpret the Bible Christo-focally. This proposal is actually more radical than it may at first appear, since hardly anyone would be against being Christ-centered, but this habit goes beyond Christo-centrism. Three popular reading

habits must be displaced for this one to become habitual.

First, we must displace the habit of reading the Bible flatly. In a constitution, Article 5 has the same authority as Article 2. When the Bible is read this way, Jesus' life and words are pressed down and flattened to the same level as those of Abraham, Moses, David, Isaiah, Paul, and Jude. In this approach, the words of and about Abraham, Moses, David, Isaiah, Jesus, Paul, and Jude are all "inspired Scripture," so they all have the same value and authority. This elevation of the Bible above Christ is remarkably common in conservative churches, where it would never be stated so baldly, but is nevertheless rampant. In this light, it's interesting to analyze the use of the words "Bible" and "biblical" in names and discourse. Think of the subtle (but potentially significant) difference between a Bible church and a community of disciples of Christ, or a Bible college and a discipleship college, or a Bible teacher and a disciple-maker. Think of the difference between arguing that an idea or behavior is biblical (meaning one can use constitutional reading techniques to justify it) and claiming that it is Christ-like. One might argue (by avoiding everything we're recommending here!) that it is *biblical* to commit genocide by quoting Deuteronomy 7, but one could never claim it is *Christ-like*.

Second, we must displace the habit of reading the Bible along a descending line. This approach has a few popular variations. In one variation, the high point of the Bible comes in the first two chapters of Genesis, followed by "the Fall" in Genesis 3, from which point things move downward in a grave trajectory until God destroys creation and history comes to a fiery end. "The Fall" in this way defines the structure of the Bible not as a

story but as a problem, and the rest of the Bible is simply the unfolding or unwinding of a solution to the problem stated at the beginning. In a similar variation, the high point of the Bible is the Law of Moses that sets the boundary conditions: the problem is sin and the solution is law-keeping, with sacrifice-making as a back-up plan. The rest of the story descends from this high point, so that the life and ministry of Jesus have value to the degree that they solve the problem. Jesus keeps the law and makes the needed sacrifice, thus closing the gap between the Law's high standards and humanity's low performance. Again, this is not a storyline or a plotline: this is an equation – a problem followed by a solution.

Third, we must displace the opposite habit of reading the Bible along an ascending line. In this approach, Moses' teaching was good, David's perspectives were better, Isaiah rose higher still, John the Baptist ascended even higher, and Jesus was really wonderful and unique, but the crowning revelation comes with Paul and his writings.

A Christo-focal reading doesn't flatten Jesus into the matrix of revealed information, nor does it merely locate him in the center of a descending problem-solution mechanism or in the middle of an ascending revelatory arc. Instead, in a Christo-focal reading, Jesus becomes more like the catalytic agent in a chemical reaction or the central variable in a mathematical equation. When Jesus is the focal point of the story, he is the climax, the hero, the summit, the surprise, the shock, the revelation that gives all that precedes and all that follows profound and ultimate meaning.

If we follow this approach, we'll speak less about the Bible as the supreme Word of God and more about Jesus as the supreme Word of God. We'll let the person of Jesus – including and integrating his birth, life, teachings, miracles, death, resurrection, abiding presence, and ongoing mission through the Holy Spirit – become the light in which all interpretations are evaluated, the key in which all interpretations are played, the leader behind which all interpretations arrange themselves as followers, and the meaning in which all interpretations have meaning. In so doing, we'll cherish the Bible in a more truly biblical way (recalling John 5:39-40 and Hebrews 1:1-3) -- as a unique, irreplaceable, and God-given witness in “words made print” to the unique, irreplaceable, and holy “Word made flesh.”

There may be other needed habits as well, but these, I believe, lay the groundwork for a far more productive way of reading the Bible for those of us on a quest for a new kind of Christian faith.

[For more about *A New Kind of Christianity: Ten Questions That are Transforming the Faith*, go to www.brianmclaren.net. Questions for group discussion, video introductions, and other resources are available there as well. The book is published by HarperOne, and can be purchased through any bookstore or online bookseller.]

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