

## **There Is No One “Christian” Way to Interpret Scripture**

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In modern debates about the ordination of women to the priesthood or their possible consecration as bishop, about the ethics of divorce and remarriage, about the proper “Christian” nature of the family, and about sexuality – either heterosexuality or homosexuality – some Christians have naively and uncritically made pronouncements about “what the Bible says.” Such statements are misleading because they presuppose either that the Bible “speaks” its own message without the need for human interpretation, or that there is really only one legitimate way to interpret scripture in a Christian context.

Most commonly, modern people in “the West” have assumed that “the right” way to interpret the text of the Bible is through the use of historical criticism, by which I mean simply the attempt, using philology and modern historiography, to ascertain “what the human author intended” to communicate when writing the texts, or what we may imagine the “original” readers or hearers of those texts would have understood to be their meaning. Historical criticism seeks to determine the *ancient* meaning of the text of scripture, and many modern Christians then assume that that ancient meaning provides either *the meaning* of the text or perhaps some kind of *foundational meaning* on which any further interpretation must be based.

These assumptions are completely modern and do not represent the beliefs or practices of the majority of Christians around the world even today, much less throughout history. Until the modern period, church fathers and Christian scholars certainly considered the possible intentions of the human author as providing *one* meaning of the text of scripture. But because they insisted that the ultimate author of scripture was God or the Holy Spirit, they taught that the Christian interpretation of scripture must never anchor itself too firmly to the meaning ascribed to the intentions of the human author. Scripture—in the views of Augustine, the Venerable Bede, Thomas Aquinas, Nicolas of Lyra, and almost all other premodern interpreters of scripture—contains many different meanings and even *kinds* of meanings and is patient of many different *kinds* of interpretation. Thus Augustine, for example, teaches that any interpretation of scripture that does not promote the love of God and neighbor *cannot* be a correct meaning of scripture *even if it is thought to coincide with the intentions of the human author*. This is why Augustine and other premodern Christians felt no reluctance to interpret scripture allegorically or anagogically. Indeed, they usually believed that a Christian had not fully plumbed the depths of the meanings of scripture *until* having interpreted the text via several methods of interpretation: literal, ethical, anagogical, allegorical, to mention only the most commonly named “senses” of the text. For modern Christians to assume—or worse, to *state*—that the “literal, historical” meaning of the text provides *the* or

*the controlling* meaning of the text is not only false for us but also contradicted by the church's fathers and traditions.

Thus many modern Christians, even in the United States and even in Episcopalian churches and schools, are experimenting with different ways of reading scripture, ways that are not held captive by the methods and assumptions of historical criticism. Some have advocated that we follow premodern precedent and read scripture analogically. For example, they interpret the Jewish acceptance of gentile converts as an analogy for the modern acceptance of gay and lesbian Christians. The Jewish leaders of the Jerusalem church decided to accept gentiles fully without insisting on the "biblical" imposition on them of circumcision or Jewish dietary laws, and they did so because they saw that the gentiles had received the Holy Spirit without submitting to those laws—even though all Jewish scripture and tradition to that time had been interpreted to insist on the acceptance of those laws as a condition for entry by gentiles into "the people of Israel." Similarly, the modern "heterosexist" church should fully accept gay and lesbian Christians *as they are* since those gay and lesbian Christians have also received the Holy Spirit in their baptism. This is a reading of scripture by analogy.

Since the 1970s, Christian theologians and scholars have urged that we read the Bible not merely for historical data but in order to hear "the story" of God's acts of salvation and love. "Narrative theology" has proposed that all scripture may be read as narratives of divine and human interaction. Thus, the

story of the Exodus may be interpreted as also a story about the liberation of black South Africans, or the freeing of African Americans first from slavery and then, in a long and ongoing struggle, the bonds of white racism. The story of the temptations and suffering of Jesus may be read as also the story of the suffering of the poor, or even of the psychologically depressed, of our own societies.

Reading scripture as “story” is a legitimate Christian way to interpret scripture even though it goes much beyond the simply “historical” meaning of the text.

Theologians and biblical scholars at some schools, such as Chicago Theological Seminary, are teaching their students that all people read texts through particular “lenses.” People in different cultures or in different places in one culture will read scripture somewhat differently from one another, and that is perfectly legitimate. So when students first enter that seminary in Chicago they are taught to read scripture “through the lens,” say, of a “colonized subject” of a particular region of the world, or “through the lens” of an African American, or “through the lens” of a participant in a “base community” in Latin America, or “through the lens” of a woman, or a gay man, or a lesbian. These teachers are showing that scripture will have somewhat different meanings when read by different “sets of eyes,” but it is important for all of us to recognize that the readings of others, especially those we ourselves may have a role in inadvertently oppressing, are legitimate Christian “meanings” of scripture.

To mention only one more current experimentation in teaching Christian interpretation of scripture, many Christians are being taught again the

premodern practice of *lectio divina*, of reading scripture by *praying with and in* scripture. In this spiritual exercise, students are taught to prepare their minds and spirits by quiet and meditation, to focus themselves toward God. Then they are given texts of scripture on which to meditate. They are taught to use the words of scripture as their own words, to immerse themselves, for example, *into* the psalm and let the words of the psalmist become their own words of prayer. They are also taught to hear the words of scripture as possibly addressed to them by God or Jesus. For centuries, Christian monastics daily and nightly used *lectio divina*, the “divine reading” of scripture, as part of their spiritual exercise and devotions. Contemporary Christians are attempting to “relearn” this ancient practice as another way of reading scripture. This is another means of biblical interpretation that differs from simply searching for “the historical meaning” of the text or the “intentions of the human author.” Yet it is incontrovertibly a *Christian* way to interpret the Bible.

The problem with so much appeal to “what the Bible says” on the lips of those who oppose gay, lesbian, and bisexual people in the church today is that it does not acknowledge that the *meaning* of the text of scripture is dependent on *how the text is interpreted*. Throughout Christian history and tradition, Christians have recognized a *variety* of legitimate methods of interpreting scripture.

According to ancient Christian doctrine and belief, scripture does not have *one* meaning. Rather, scripture is a space for Christian thinking, reflection, and prayer. To use it simply as some kind of “answer book” or, even worse, a “rule

book" ignores Christian practice and belief throughout our history as well as the practices of many Christians of our own day.