

Disciples and the Bible

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The Bible has been a central authority for the Stone-Campbell movement from the beginning. Indeed, the call to get back to what Scripture prescribed stood as the center-piece of the movement's theology and identity. That call was made with the naïve notion that we could leap over all historical developments and the cultural outlook of our own time and so practice just what the first-century church practiced and believe just what they believed. This understanding of how to appropriate Scripture assumed that all cultures are similar enough that practices that had a particular meaning in one culture will have that same meaning in all cultures. Twentieth and twenty-first century studies of historiography, hermeneutics, and theology all demonstrate that we cannot avoid the influence of our own culture when we interpret events, texts, or anything else. We must come to understand all things within a construct of meaning that our culture bequeaths to us. While this does not mean that we cannot seek to understand how ancient and/or foreign texts (here the writings of Scripture) were understood by their first readers; it does mean that those meanings will have to be translated into a vernacular that makes sense in our time and place.

When taken seriously, this means that we cannot be literalists in any consistent way. We cannot be literalists because we live in a world that is very different from that of the Biblical texts. Some practices had meanings that no longer hold. For example, the cultural meaning of head coverings has changed significantly. It no longer makes a counter-cultural statement for women to cover their heads in worship. Even more clearly, the meaning of the braiding of hair has changed radically. When 1 Timothy tells women not to braid their hair, it is probably because it was a sign of wealth and leisure. It clearly no longer means that in the 21st century. So we think braiding hair is a perfectly Christian thing to do. Yet more clearly, few would argue that the idealized and commanded genocide of Canaanites in Joshua and 1 and 2 Samuel contains an instruction that we should take up today. The texts of the Bible clearly require the use of some means of interpretation other than direct and literal application.

The Disciples wing of the Stone-Campbell movement has accepted this more commonly and more broadly than other parts of the

movement. The practices of Disciples have less often tried to hold to manifestations of 1st century practices than other branches of the movement. Too often this has led to a disregard for Scripture, or worse to unresolved contradictions between what we believe Scripture says we should do and what our culture seems to suggest is more in keeping with what God wants. This contradiction commonly leads to acceptance of cultural norms that make us feel good in some ways, but also cause us to think of ourselves as violating the will and word of God, and so being unfaithful to God. The Disciples' bringing of women into places of leadership is a good example of this dilemma. While we were confident culturally that it must be the right thing to do, many were unable to see how this move could be compatible with Scripture. We may want to say this move was a work of the Spirit, but it also meant some thought they were violating things in Scripture (and so the explicit will of God) to make this move. Such contradictions are damaging to the individuals and the church as a whole. Some, of course, are still not clear that having women leaders conforms to Scriptural norms. Adopting a reading strategy other than literalism, however, leads me to say that the Bible does not just allow women to be leaders but mandates it. This example demonstrates that Disciples need to become better in our practices of interpreting Scripture and respecting its authority. Such work is necessary because the Bible remains the central authority for Disciples' faith and practice.¹

As in so many areas, significant diversity exists among Disciple about how one should appropriate Scripture. Within the congregation I attend, even within the Sunday School class I teach, there are widely divergent views about both the nature of Scripture and how one should use it to determine what Christians should believe and do. Despite the broad differences, there also seems to be a wide stream of agreement among a quorum of Disciples about these issues.

It has been one of the hallmarks of the Disciples that they accept the results of Biblical criticism, both what have been called higher and lower criticism. The so-called heresy trial at LTS in 1917 signaled that the Disciples would accept the methods and thoughtful conclusions of critical scholarship.² This remains consistent with the emphasis on reason and rationality (even rationalism) that have been part of the movement from its beginning. So scholars within the Disciples have not only realized the importance of putting the early church's practices in their historical contexts, they have also accepted the analyses of the Biblical texts that recognize, for example, that Biblical narratives are not straightforward history. The Bible is seen to

be revelation, but not dictation from God. The revelation found in Scripture is the reflection of the Biblical communities and authors on the experience of God that they have received. Those writers and communities came to understand God through interpreting and reflecting on their experiences of God.

Disciples' understandings of the inspiration of the Bible have been influenced by the debates within the wider church about this issue. The various views on inspiration can be grouped into two broad categories. The first of those contends that inspiration provides the specific content of the Bible. For some this means that Scripture is inerrant in history, science, geography, and all things. That most Disciples find this view of inspiration untenable does not mean that the content of the Bible is not inspired. The inerrancy view is one extreme on a spectrum within this broad category. For others that think the Bible's content is inspired, this means only that the Bible contains correct teachings about religious matters, perhaps revealing concepts about God or the world or Christ. The second broad category of understanding inspiration argues that the Bible is the word of God only when it functions to reveal God to us. It is not the content of the texts, but their ability to mediate an experience of God to us through their reflections on the experiences of God that they interpret. Both of these definitions confirm that God speaks to God's people through these text.

A definition that draws on the strengths of both of these understandings of inspiration is that by John Goldingay. He says that we recognize Scripture as inspired by God because it

mediates divine revelation apprehended in human experience.

It does so by means of theological reflection on the part of its writers, whose theological reflection provides models as well as resources for our own.³

According to this definition, the Bible is the product of writers and their communities reflecting on their experiences of God. These reflections give us both some content to believe and some models to think about how to apply those understandings of God in our own contextual setting. The church has judged the writings of the Bible to be the most authentic expressions of the truth about God and so authoritative for the church.

A definition of Scripture such as this one recognizes that the Bible comes to us in the garb of the cultures of its writers. This means its understandings of God, Christ, the world, ourselves, and the church not only allow but require that the Bible be interpreted anew in each

new context. Such an understanding of Scripture requires us to adopt the methods of critical historical interpretation.

Disciples have found it hard to hold this kind of understanding of the Bible while maintaining the tradition's emphasis on the authority of the Bible for the church's thought and life. Appropriating Scripture will have to be a more nuanced task than simply applying its explicit commands to our time. Those who claim they adopt a literalistic reading seldom do so consistently. They nearly always exclude some passage (e.g., the braiding of hair command). Similarly, those who claim to reject literalistic readings almost never do so consistently, but come back to some command they want to apply directly (e.g., "love your neighbor as yourself"). For the Bible to speak to us we must be more consistent in our method of appropriating it for the church.

While earlier Disciples looked for the "plain sense" of Scripture, recognizing the ways the Biblical writers are shaped, limited, and informed by their culture means that what we may see as the plain sense of a passage is not, in fact, what that statement meant in that culture. This indicates that we need additional means to interpret these texts responsibly. Even the Disciples' founders understood the importance of reading these texts in their historical context. Alexander Campbell recognized these difficulties and so set out principles of biblical interpretation. Among these were that the current reader must interpret a Biblical text in light of the situation of both the writer and the recipients. He also asserted that we must recognize the literary forms of the text and take account of the metaphorical and figurative elements in the texts so that we understand their message correctly. Even careful study of the various meanings of words in the correct time period and in particular authors is required.⁴ Campbell insisted that readers use the same methods of interpretation on the Biblical texts that historians and scholars use on other ancient, or even modern, texts.

The methods of historical critical exegesis are consistent with such an approach to interpreting the Bible. The later methods of biblical criticism are in some ways largely more rigorous and more consistent ways of carrying out these tasks. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, leaders among Disciples began to adopt historical-critical readings of the Bible. Accepting these methods moved this branch of the Stone-Campbell movement toward its place among mainline churches and opened doors to ecumenical dialogue. It is also consistent with Campbell's methods of using reason to understand the biblical texts. And Campbell was not reluctant to note that such methods were those used by well-known academic, critical Biblical

scholars.⁵ Following in this tradition, Disciples have continued to produce well-known Biblical scholars who use and refine these methods.⁶

By a critical, or perhaps we could use the term ‘analytical,’ reading of the Biblical texts, I mean employing methods of interpretation that will help us understand the texts in ways the earliest readers would have understood them. This means we will pay close attention to social, political, religious, and philosophical movements of the time. We will need to learn as much as possible about the ways the readers conducted their lives, experienced their places in the social order, and experienced the presence of gods. We will locate the Biblical texts among the writings of their time period so that we can see more clearly what sort of writings we are reading. Only by doing this can we do justice to what they are trying to convey and only so will we avoid trying to make them affirm things they do not intend to assert. We will learn as much as we can about the specific settings of the people to which each text was written. We will need to learn the ways arguments were constructed and points were supported in the ancient world so we can follow the thought and make sense of the things we find in the Bible. Recent study of the Bible has made it clear that our own culture blinds us to some things that are in the text. So we need to listen to the interpretations of people from other cultural contexts and social locations. The point of all of this critical/analytical study is to understand better the Biblical texts.

The emphasis on historical critical (i.e., analytical) reading seems, however, to have contributed to the Biblical illiteracy among Disciples. Though we were once known as people of the Book, that is no longer the case. Disciples, including those who enter seminary, are woefully ignorant of the Bible. This is particularly problematic for a community that rejects creeds as guides of faith and has explicitly claimed the Bible as its primary (even sole) guide. In this we follow the Reformation’s path of *sola Scriptura*, but do so with a distinctive rigorousness. (In this respect, Disciples fit the expression the late Anthony Dunnavant used to describe us, “Protestant, only more so.”) While other Protestants accepted some creeds as guides, Disciples have not. Since our central authority has been the Bible, it is imperative that we be competent interpreters of it. The specialization that historical critical reading of the Bible seems to entail appears to make its interpretation the work of specialists in academic settings rather than the work of the church and its leaders. I think this is a misconception. While this method makes teaching a central task of pastors, learning to

read Scripture critically, or analytically, is a task within the reach of most people in our churches.

Acceptance of historical-critical reading of the text contributed to Biblical illiteracy in two other ways. First, the disciplines of Biblical studies learned well from their colleagues in other fields how to recognize literary types and historical settings, how to spot cultural ideologies and interpretation, but they did not have a clear way to reclaim for faith these new ways of reading the texts. Thus, when seminarians learned some things about Biblical texts, they did not share them with their churches because they did not know how to use what they had learned to build faith. Their seminary education had failed to help them appropriate these understandings of Scripture for the church. As the way pastors read the Bible and the way those in the pew read progressively diverged, pastors stopped teaching Scripture so they could leave the parishioners' naiveté intact and so not do damage to their faith.⁷

The second way this reading led to our current Biblical illiteracy is less noble. Some pastors who learned about critical reading and what that meant for how to understand the Bible and its teachings failed to pass this knowledge and method of interpretation to their churches because they feared for their jobs. Many, perhaps rightly, believed that sharing their understanding of the Bible with the church would cause a church to dismiss them. This self-serving practice has damaged the church. It also evidenced a lack of faith in those who were in our churches. While there are certainly anecdotes to support some of this fear, others within our churches have longed for this kind of teaching. Disciples have wanted to know how to read the Bible with integrity without sacrificing their intellects so that they may have wholeness in their thought and lives. They want to know, for example, how to make sense of the creation stories in Genesis when the physical evidence, read in a scientific paradigm, seems to fit other explanations.

At the same time, the church has been complicit in the move toward Biblical illiteracy. As Disciples have striven to carve out a space for themselves among mainline churches, too much knowledge of the Bible or too much reliance on it for our theology seemed to make us too much like those churches from which we were trying to distance ourselves. It is fundamentalists and evangelicals, Disciples seemed to think, who place such emphasis on the Bible. Even closer to home, Disciples wanted to be clear that they were significantly different from the independent Christian Churches and the Churches of Christ, bodies that clearly claimed Scripture for their teachings. This bit of strategic

presentation of ourselves has been harmful to the extent that it has taken from Disciples knowledge of our most important source for theological reflection.

All of this does not mean that we should abandon either critical reading or an understanding of Scripture that can support such reading. Rather, we need to redefine pastoral ministry so that it reclaims more of its teaching function. Too many church activities include very little discussion of the nature of the faith and even less of the study of the Bible. Youth groups and adult education occasions need to include, indeed be centered around, instruction in both Bible content and instruction about how we read the Bible. This teaching needs to include helping the congregation learn to use the tools of Biblical interpretation. For Disciples, the pastor is not the authority who tells others how they must understand the Bible and precisely what they must believe. The work of interpreting and appropriating Scripture needs to be a task in which the whole church participates. Such community involvement requires pastors to equip the church for this work.

Pastors may need to retool, they may need refreshers in Biblical interpretation to accomplish this function. Seminaries need to engage the task of preparing pastors to teach how to interpret and appropriate the Bible. Churches will need to adjust their expectations of pastors and their own engagement in ministry so that pastors reclaim study and reflection time as they become teachers of the church. Nothing would be more consistent with Disciples' tradition than such an emphasis on clear and careful thought about the faith. Understanding leaders as those able to teach the faith and lead to deeper understanding of it is near the heart of the Stone-Campbell movement's understanding of ministry. When leaders veered from this path, Disciples began to lose something precious and distinctive. Part of our self-definition has been and needs to be again that our pastors are competent teachers so that we may be people who can use Scripture well to understand God and to discern how to do God's will.

This may seem to be a lot to expect of a pastor, much less of a regular church member. But the tradition of the Disciples is to hold high expectations of its leaders and members. The expectation that Disciples give careful thought and time to such study is entailed in our rejection of creeds, our reliance on the Bible as the central means of discerning God's will, and our celebration of theological diversity (and with it personal responsibility for faith). Reclaiming the Bible for the church in this way will require pastors not only to know methods of

Biblical interpretation, but to know them well enough to help others appropriate them. In this mode, pastors serve as resources for Biblical study and interpretation.⁸ This “equipping of the saints” requires us to have confidence in the people in the pew because we are giving them genuine access to the Bible. Such confidence has been a distinctive characteristic of the Disciples.

As we read using the tools of historical and literary analysis, we must not seek only the historical meaning or even clarity about what a text required of its original readers. What we are practicing is not an academic exercise, but an action of the church designed to understand better God and God’s will for us. To use Scripture as our guide for theological reflection and discernment of God’s will in the present, we need to use the tools of critical reading to discover the theological reasoning and bases for the views and instructions we find in Scripture. We need to see what element(s) of the gospel comes to expression in a particular command or what understanding of God led to particular theological assertions. In particular, we can look for what element of the character of God serves as the basis for a particular claim about the nature of the world or humanity, for example, or about how Christians should behave in specific settings. We may find that some instructions rest solely on cultural convention (e.g., prohibitions against braiding of hair) rather than more clearly on some understanding of God or the gospel. In those cases, we may discern less, or perhaps no, guidance in understanding God or discerning God’s will.

When I speak of theological assertions, these may be ideas and beliefs that fall within any of the categories of theology. So a text may build its reasons on the basis of an understanding of the church or eschatology or the Spirit or humanity. The specific statements will be bound to that author’s time period and situation, but we are seeking the deeper reason and reasoning pattern that bring the author to those explicit statements. As we read, the central guiding question is how this builds on the character of God or how does this writer work from a particular element of God’s character. This leads us directly to the gospel, the place in which the character of God is revealed to us most clearly. The New Testament’s presentation of the meaning of the life, death, and resurrection of Christ is the definitive expression of the character of God for the church. The texts of the Bible are in the canon because the church has believed that these books give expression to the gospel most clearly, and do so authoritatively. So when we read them, we seek to find the gospel they reveal, we seek the good news about who God is, how God relates to us, and what God wants for us.

Once we have come to understand how a Biblical writer came to offer the advice, give the command, or make the theological statement that he does, we may use the underlying or explicit theological affirmation to discern what we as Christians today should believe and do. It is important to recognize that the Bible, by itself, is not a sufficient source to discern what the church should believe and how it should call people to live. This is the case because Scripture is not our only source of revelation. God is known in nature, through reason, in the traditions of the wider church, and in the experience of the people of God in the present. All of these contribute (whether we acknowledge it or not) to how we come to understand God and God's will. For Disciples, Scripture has served as the central authority to which the others must conform.⁹ The story of the Jerusalem Conference of Acts 15 is an example of the way the early church reached important theological decisions in a way that is similar to what I have described. They drew on Scripture and the experience of God's presence in the church (known through apostles and ordinary Gentile converts). They read both biblical texts and their experience through their understanding of the gospel and the God it revealed to arrive at their conclusion that Gentiles should not be expected to convert to Judaism in order to be in the church.¹⁰

A second and compatible way to think about appropriating Scripture for today is to look for what Richard Hays calls "imaginative analogies."¹¹ This seems to be another way to speak of seeing in Scripture models for our theological reflections. We may say that this interpretive strategy sees a fairly constant human nature, even as cultural and social contexts shift and change in radical ways. Given a constant human nature (which the story of creation and being made in the image of God seems to affirm), similar kinds of problems with inter-human relations will appear in many contexts and in many guises. We may find in the Bible ways to think about the situations we face. Scripture gives us examples of the ways the community of the faithful have discerned and tried to live God's will. We will not find ready made answers to our questions and problems, but *ways to think* about questions and issues. We may look to the ways Biblical writers drew on their understandings of God and the gospel to address the ethical and religious dilemmas of their time. So the Bible helps us discern God's will by providing both knowledge about God's character and patterns of the ways God's people have faithfully applied such knowledge to the questions and problems they faced.¹² Again, we do

not get easy answers, but we can glean authoritative understandings, patterns, and guides.

As we approach the task of allowing ourselves to be lead and defined by Scripture, it is crucial that we remember that the Bible itself contains multiple voices. While there are core matters that all of Scripture agrees on (such as the necessity of worshiping only God and in the New Testament the confession of Jesus as the Christ who is Lord and savior), how those core matters are explicated and lived varies — sometimes substantially. So reliance on Scripture will not mean that we all fall into lockstep. On the other hand, the combination of calling on Scripture as a central authority and using the interpretive tools of critical study gives us a basis for careful discussion about what God is calling us to be and do. When we have these common bases for discussion, we can determine why we differ and sometimes perhaps discern that differing positions can both be faithful expressions of the gospel and the character of God.

The critical reading and appropriation of the Bible described above are the kinds of readings and use of the Bible that have often been present among Disciples, even when we have not articulated them in these ways. I think these means of accessing Scripture are fully compatible with Disciples tradition. I also think these interpretive methods can lead us to a faith that is credible and significant for our lives and the world in the 21st century.

End Notes

¹In *The Church for Disciples of Christ; Seeking to be Truly Church Today* (eds. Paul A. Crowe, Jr. and James O. Duke; St. Louis: Christian Board of Publications, 1998), the Commission on Theology and the Council on Church Unity remark that the Scriptures are “of unique and normative significance for [the church’s] own life and witness” (37).

²See the account of this controversy in Dwight E. Stevenson, *Lexington Theological Seminary 1865-1965; the College of the Bible century* (St. Louis: Bethany Press, 1964) 165-207.

³*Models for Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994) 360.

⁴Alexander Campbell, *Christianity Restored* (Bethany, Va: M’Vay and Ewing, 1835; reprint Indianapolis: Faith and Facts, 1998) 96-99. These principles are cited more fully in M. Eugene Boring, *Disciples and the Bible; A History of Disciples Biblical Interpretation in North America* (St. Louis: Chalice, 1997) 85-87.

⁵See his listing of scholars of note from America, Britain, and Europe as those who use the same kind of interpretive methods he recommends (*Christianity Restored* 95-96).

⁶Among the more prominent of those biblical scholars in the past few years we find Ronald Allen, William Baird, Eugene Boring, Fred Craddock, Lisa Davison, Beverley Gaventa, Ronald Graham, Leander Keck, Leo Perdue, Martha Steussy, M. Jack Suggs, and Bonnie Thurston. This list is by no means complete. In addition, other branches of the Stone-Campbell movement have also produced an impressive array of biblical scholars. All of these, and the many not listed, are testimony to the importance that this approach to Scripture has had among Disciples.

⁷See also the comments about Biblical illiteracy in M. Eugene Boring, *Disciples and the Bible; A History of Disciples Biblical Interpretation in North America* (St. Louis: Chalice, 1997) 403-19. See also those he cites (including Charles Bayer and Scott Colglazier) who comment on the phenomenon.

⁸Boring (*Disciples and the Bible* 447-48) also argues that ministers need to see teaching, including instruction on how to read Scripture, “an essential element of their ministry” so that they develop “a group of informed teachers in the congregation” (448). Boring suggests that ministers adopt a biblical book and theme to study for a few months so they become well-informed about its interpretation. When that study is completed, they should adopt another so that they continually work their way through the biblical texts.

⁹Here conforming does not mean that we conform science to Scripture, but that the understanding of God that we derive from our analysis of the world through the scientific method (for example) must be consistent with what we know of God from Scripture.

¹⁰What I have described here is (at least largely) compatible with what Boring (*Disciples and the Bible* 417-35) sets out as what Disciples need in their study of Scripture.

¹¹Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians* (Interpretation, Louisville: John Knox, 1997) 1.

¹²The Commission on Theology and the Council on Church Unity (*The Church for Disciples of Christ* 38) comment that “each generation” must accept “the task of interpreting them [i.e., Scriptural images and themes] as wisely and adequately as possible for its own time and place.”