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How is the Bible authoritative for us?

Christians who are prepared to rethink the Church's traditional teaching about homosexuality are often accused of being soft on the authority of scripture, willing to see the foundations of the faith eroded in the hope of winning worldly approval with their trendy opinions. It is important for us, therefore, to consider what kind of authority the Bible has for us, and how we can properly appeal to it in this debate.

by John W.B. Hill

In the Second Letter to Timothy we are told, "All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness..."¹ But this does not tell us precisely how the Bible is *authoritative* for us. One of the questions we need to ask, then, is "What can we learn about the nature of the Bible's authority from its own internal evidence?"

Paul's use of scripture

In his letter to the Galatians, Paul observes, "For all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who does not observe and obey all the things written in the book of the law.'" Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law; for "The one who is righteous will live by faith." But the law does not rest on faith; on the contrary, "Whoever does the works of the law will live by them." Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree"—in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.²

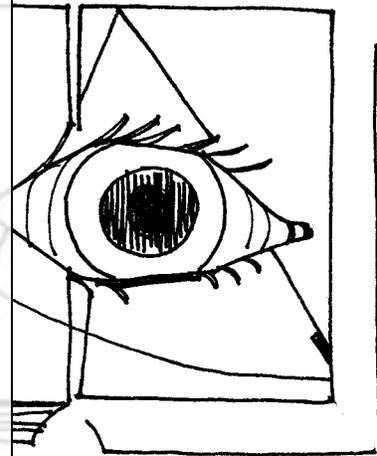
Saul of Tarsus was a renowned enemy of the Gospel. From his point of view, proclaiming as God's Messiah someone who had been crucified was probably outright blasphemy. This is generally thought to have been a major reason for his attempt to silence the first preachers of the Gospel.³

And so, when Paul quotes the text from Deuteronomy ("Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree"⁴), he is recalling the biblical grounds he himself could claim, back then, for denouncing the Gospel.

Paul was thus well aware of the way that scripture could be used to thwart the purposes of God; but his conversion did not lead him to deny the authority of scripture. Rather, his encounter with the Crucified-and-Risen-One revolutionized his way of interpreting scripture.

Indeed, his conversion did not even lead him to ignore or suppress that problematic text from Deuteronomy. Instead, it compelled him to reflect, in the light of Christ, on the larger curse which scripture pronounces: "Cursed is everyone who does not observe and obey all the things written in the book of the law."⁵ This, of course, is an edict that condemns all Gentiles a priori. It also must sound more than a little ominous

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ciation for all Canadians and
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The authority of Scripture

This issue of our publication has had a difficult gestation. Our attempt at a balanced presentation, which would include an equal number of voices from two polarities on the authority of scripture, was unable to be achieved, despite our approaching a significant number of potential contributors.

The search for contributors has meant a lengthy publication delay, for which we ask your forbearance and understanding. Our commitment this year—to put the requisite number of issues in your hands—remains unchanged; they'll just be a bit 'bunched up.'

One of the things I appreciate most about my affiliation with *Liturgy Canada* is being part of a group that, however imperfectly, is serious, committed, and engaged in attempting to play a lead role in theological dialogue and debate. The publication you are holding in your hand is solid evidence of our commitment to both kinds of discourse.

George Sumner and **John Hurd** agree that the people in the pews know little or nothing about scripture. In Sumner's view, one of the fallouts is that our people have "little willingness that it should bind us against our wishes." John Hurd raises the point that "before one can talk of the Authority of Scripture one has to know what Scripture is talking about and, in general, church members do not." And why are our people in this position? Hurd, again: "... the blame lies with the clergy.... They all pass Bible 101. But when they get into the pulpit, it all goes out the window."

It's difficult to disagree with John Hurd that we, the clergy, "should know better and surely the laity deserve better..." Clayton Sullivan provides us with an all too familiar result of our shortcoming:

"... the only unhappy Christians are those who reflect. They sense some-

thing is wrong with their Christian belief system, but they don't know what it is. Some walk away from the church... Others stay but are haunted by a feeling of discontent."*

We all agree that the scriptures are critical, but what does 'critical' mean? Is there no room for accommodation? **John Hill** sees scripture as a liberating authority: "... the Spirit of God uses scripture to exercise an authority far richer and more profound than the authority of binding edicts: an authority to probe our hearts, an authority to create new life."

At this turning point in our Anglican Church of Canada's history, as we debate the possibility of same-sex blessings, George Sumner and John Hurd hone in on the emerging dilemma. They both maintain that we must preserve a full and loving place within our faith communities for traditionalists. This presupposes, of course, that both traditionalists and liberals be willing, as John Hurd urges us, to be "guided by the imperatives of love and forgiveness in the days ahead."

One of the best places to begin this process is to listen to our contributors with love in our hearts and an open mind. May God's Spirit be with you. ☩

John Dunn

*Clayton Sullivan, *Rescuing Jesus from the Christians*, (Harrisburg: Trinity Press Intl., 2002), p. 68.

Now it's your turn

If you have been touched, stimulated, informed, angered, inspired, confused or otherwise affected by the positions taken by John Hill, George Sumner and John Hurd on the authority of Scripture, let us hear about it.

If you or your parish have studied this issue we would love to have you share your insights with others.

Send your responses to *Liturgy Canada*
OR

By e-mail to:
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THE AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE

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to any Jew whose moral consciousness has developed beyond mere veneration of the law out of pride of identity.

Was Saul of Tarsus already feeling the burden of this larger curse (while still committed to keeping the law in true devotion)? Did meeting Jesus on the road to Damascus simply bring this burden to the breaking point? We cannot know. What his letter to the Galatians does tell us is that Jesus, by falling under the curse of the law himself, simultaneously exposed for Saul the impossible dilemma of relying on the law for justification, and liberated him from that dilemma; for now God's verdict on Jesus was clear.

And so, when Paul quotes the edict, "Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree," he does so not to put Jesus in his place (as Saul of Tarsus might have done), but to put the law in its place.⁶

The use of scripture in the New Testament

Not surprisingly, then, it is Luke (who was himself so intrigued with the story of Saul of Tarsus) who offers us the most striking picture of this process of reconsidering scripture in the light of the Christ-event. It is, after all, from Luke that we inherit the Easter chronology which shapes our liturgical year – the forty days of mystagogy⁷, the fifty days of Pentecost:

Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you – that everything written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms must be fulfilled." Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and the forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."⁸

This chronology suggests that the Spirit could not be unleashed until scripture had been unlocked from its old interpretation:

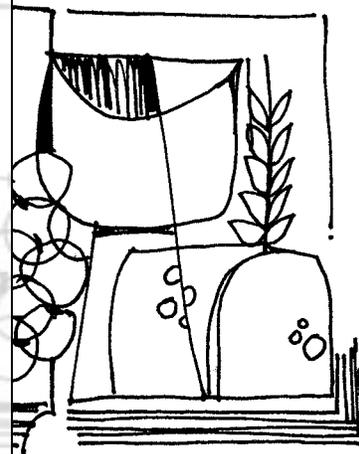
First the disciples had to come to terms with "these things."

Luke also insists that, for those first disciples, this process of rethinking everything they thought they had learned from scripture took considerable time precisely because it kept colliding with the expectations they had built up as People of the Book. Given the opportunity to ask the risen Jesus any question they wanted, what they chose to ask was, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" He replies, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."⁹ He implies a destiny for them quite different from what they had come to expect: not regaining control of their history, but bearing witness to Jesus and his passion in the midst of the world's unfolding history. (Perhaps we are also hearing a suggestion that disciples of Jesus will need to maintain a modest agnosticism about many things.) So, also, for the two whom Jesus had accompanied on the way to Emmaus: They later admit, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?"¹⁰ (And does not this painful process of rethinking continue even to our own day?)

This same process of reinterpretation of scripture is clearly visible in the rest of the writings of the New Testament. Matthew's Gospel includes direct reference to it in the Sermon on the Mount: On the one hand, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil..."¹¹, while on the other hand, "You have heard it said... But I say to you..."¹¹ So also, in the Fourth Gospel we hear Jesus expounding scripture but giving it a meaning previously inconceivable: "...as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.' ...it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven... I am the bread of life."¹² So also, the Letter to the Hebrews announces its theme saying, "Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son..." and then goes on to

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"...we hear Jesus expounding scripture but giving it a meaning previously inconceivable: '...as it is written, "He gave them bread from heaven to eat." '...it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven... I am the bread of life."



“[Paul] tells us that the Gospel he preaches is simply what he ‘received through a revelation of Jesus Christ.’ Did that revelation include a seminar in theology and ethics? Did it include answers to all those questions from the Christians of Corinth to which Paul would later be responding? It seems unlikely.”

THE AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE *(Continued from page 3)*

offer a radical reinterpretation of the entire cult prescribed by scripture, announcing both its fulfilment and its termination in Christ.¹³ And so on.

The authority of the New Testament

These observations are, of course, directly relevant to the interpretation of the Old Testament. By contrast, the writings of the New Testament are already based, from first to last, upon this radical reinterpretation of everything that once was taken for granted by the ancient People of God. Could the principle of reinterpretation then have any relevance to the authority of these explicitly Christian writings?

Once again, Paul can illustrate the way this works. To begin with, he tells us that the Gospel he preaches is simply what he “received through a revelation of Jesus Christ.”¹⁴ Did that revelation include a seminar in theology and ethics? Did it include answers to all those questions from the Christians of Corinth to which Paul would later be responding?¹⁵ It seems unlikely. What Luke suggests in his account of this revelation to Saul is that it consisted simply of an encounter with Jesus (whom Saul had tried very hard to believe was dead) who told Saul that attacking his followers was attacking him and called on Saul to join the company of his witnesses. That was all that was revealed to Saul, according to Luke’s story.¹⁶

Now we know that Saul was a devout Pharisee, a person of integrity¹⁷; his opposition to the Christian preaching had no doubt been based upon good information, carefully assessed. He knew what they were saying about Jesus – and he found it scandalous. So his encounter with the Risen One actually confirmed his worst fears: It was all true! This, then, is the primary significance of the revelation he was given.¹⁸

And so, after seeing the Risen One, what Saul (now Paul) had to do was to begin working out, together with the rest of the company of Jesus, the implications of this revelation. Insofar as his conclusions differed from those of other witnesses, those conclusions had to be tested in debate and weighed by the community over time. Eventually, his radical conclusions became definitive for the emerging international community of Jesus. And the medium of

this widening influence was, of course, his letters.

In what sense, then, are his letters authoritative? In what sense are their teachings guaranteed by the revelation of Jesus Christ upon which he claims they are based? The answer must be: they are authoritative for us insofar as they really are based on what God has done in Jesus – insofar as they are spelling out the incontrovertible implications of that revelation.

Paul himself seems to have been aware of this criterion. When he attempts to rule on the question of headgear¹⁹ (a question not easily settled by appeal to the revelation of Jesus Christ!) he appeals to what is contrary to nature to support his theology of gender hierarchy.²⁰ (However valuable an appeal to nature may be, it can be somewhat hazardous!) In the end, he seems to realize that his readers will not all meekly fall into line; so he concludes, “But if anyone is disposed to be contentious – we have no such custom, nor do the churches of God.” Today we simply ignore his ruling on hats; we even dispute the logic of his argument, and rightly so. We are simply not prepared to believe that rules about hats or theories of male supremacy are incontrovertible implications of the revelation of the risen Christ.

Nor is this the only conclusion of Paul’s that we refuse to be bound by. “Incontrovertible” is a strong word; and there is much argument about the validity of a lot of Paul’s teachings about things we may consider peripheral matters. But who gets to decide what is peripheral? And when is it possible to judge that a teaching truly is part of “the incontrovertible implications of the revelation”? Indeed, we may wonder how the Letters of Paul can be authoritative for us if we cannot even answer these prior questions.

That, I suggest, is the inescapable nature of our dilemma: Much as we might like to have an infallible guide on all such matters, we do not. What we have instead are the words of a faithful witness who is exploring the implications of the mystery to which he testifies – something he has done, to be sure, in a more far-reaching way than any of his contemporaries. His major conclusions have proved decisive for the followers of Jesus, and we are still mining the riches of his insights. But it is as a witness to Jesus and his resurrection that he is authoritative for us.

This is precisely what we must say of all the writings of the New Testament. Indeed we can go further: These writings, by God’s

providence, were the first to explore the implications of this Act of God – in fact, they were part of its unfolding, and they were recognized and endorsed by the faithful. As such, they hold the pre-eminent place amongst all faithful witnesses to that Act. But we shall never escape the responsibility for weighing their words to discern what they are really telling us about the implications of that Word made flesh.²¹ Together, we seek the Spirit's illumination in this ongoing work of interpretation.

An example

Although the various references in scripture to other controverted issues (such as divorce) betray some latitude of opinion²², the few references to homosexuality in the Bible clearly speak with one voice. However, if we use this fact as the grounds for taking these utterances as binding, we are using scripture as authoritative in a legal sense. It is like a lawyer's appeal to case law: Are there any legal precedents (examples of different judgements) that give us "wiggle room"? If we fail to make a case for such "wiggle room," then (some will argue) the plain sense of the prohibition must hold. But the authority of scripture is the authority of a revelation, not of a legal code.

How then shall we read Paul's most explicit condemnation of homosexual relations?

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. So they are without excuse; for though they knew God, they did not honour him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools; and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles.

Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among

themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed for ever! Amen.

For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. *Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error* [author's emphasis].

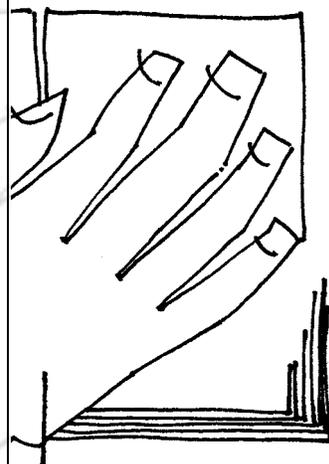
And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind and to things that should not be done. They were filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, they are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious towards parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. They know God's decree, that those who practice such things deserve to die – yet they not only do them but even applaud others who practice them.²³

Undoubtedly, the story of Jesus and his passion compels us to acknowledge our propensity for "suppressing the truth" and sliding into "degrading passions"! But is Paul condemning homosexual relations because they are invariably a manifestation of this propensity? Or is it specifically promiscuous behaviour that he has in mind? Would he have acknowledged the distinction? Would he have acknowledged homosexual orientation as a given for some people? Would he have used this example if he had known the gay and lesbian Christians in the Church today? Most importantly, does his use of this example require us to recognize here an "incontrovertible implication of the revelation"?

It is noteworthy that this description of the rebellion and consequent degradation of humanity strikingly parallels the picture in Genesis 1–11 – but only if the reference to lesbian and gay sex is omitted. In support of this particular example of "the fall," Paul thus finds it necessary once again to appeal to the hearer's sense of what is contrary to

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"...the few references to homosexuality in the Bible clearly speak with one voice. However, if we use this fact as the grounds for taking these utterances as binding, we are using scripture as authoritative in a legal sense."



“It should be clear that expecting scripture to be the source of sovereign decrees for resolving our painful controversies is a fairly limited use of the Bible, and one that may fail us in those very moments when we are most desperate for it to work.”

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nature – an appeal frequently heard today in support of the Church’s traditional teaching about homosexual relations.²⁴

It is one thing, however, to recognize that in the creation story (to which Jesus points as a truer expression of God’s will than the edict of Moses²⁵), enduring, opposite-sex, reproductive relations are presented as the norm for humanity. It is quite another thing to insist that the revelation of God in Christ demands condemnation of those who do not fully embody this “norm.” How must we judge a person whose marriage has not endured until death? a faithful same-sex couple? a marriage in which reproduction is excluded (either by choice or by disability)? a person who refuses to marry altogether? Further, if we acknowledge that male-female complementarity is a key aspect of God’s design in creation, does it follow that homosexuality is “unnatural” in the sense that Paul alleges – something to be repented of?

It is not only legitimate to ask these questions. The refusal to consider such questions appears to be based on a misunderstanding of the authority of scripture. Even for Paul, the issue of same-sex relations was something to be judged in the court of natural law, not something he recognized as revelation.

Liturgical use of scripture

For Christians with a “liturgical tradition,” none of this need be surprising. Our use of scripture in the liturgy suggests as much. The Sunday lectionary is already an interpretation of scripture: Through it we are immersed in the grand sweep of biblical writings, steered away from any “proof-text” sort of reading, encouraged to hear the internal dialogue amongst all these different voices, and invited to contemplate the narrative movement of the whole. The annual pattern of our reading is actually shaped by the story of Jesus: from Incarnation to Pasch and Pentecost. And although we hear four different texts proclaimed each Sunday, the Gospel reading is always treated as central, with a ritual of reverence that recognizes in this reading the personal presence of the Word himself: “Glory to you, Lord Jesus Christ.” Even then, some

attempt at interpretation is expected, in the form of a sermon. Furthermore, this hearing has as its larger context the memorial meal which defines for us, more than any other thing, the meaning of Christ and the meaning of Church. What all of this seems to suggest is that we listen to scripture because we expect to be led ever more deeply into the meaning and implications of Jesus and his passion. It is in that way, above all, that scripture is authoritative for us.

The authority of the Gospel

It should be clear that expecting scripture to be the source of sovereign decrees for resolving our painful controversies is a fairly limited use of the Bible, and one that may fail us in those very moments when we are most desperate for it to work. For the Spirit of God uses scripture to exercise an authority far richer and more profound than the authority of binding edicts: an authority to probe our hearts²⁶, an authority to create new life.²⁷ It is only our modernist hang-up with objectively demonstrable proofs that has seduced us into this all-too-limited expectation of the Bible.

What exercise of authority, then, might we expect from the Word whose presence we celebrate in the liturgy? In the Gospels, we hear that Jesus “taught as one having authority, and not as the scribes.”²⁸ Ironically, the authority of the scribes was an authority grounded in the appeal to scripture; Jesus’ authority, by contrast, was an authority (or power) to liberate those whose lives were dehumanized by disease or oppression (including the oppression of ecclesiastical authority). Certainly, his liberation is not that of a libertine, but one that restores the divine order and dignity of God’s creation, bringing the future Kingdom of God into the present life of the world. The story of the rescued wedding party at Cana is a powerful sign of the way God is at work through Jesus, transfiguring our failures into unimagined joys; it is also an affirmation of marriage.²⁹ But we must not absolutize even the order of marriage; for Jesus himself refuses to do so.³⁰ Is it conceivable, then, that those for whom the order of opposite-sex relationship is impossible may nevertheless, with Jesus’ blessing, enter into the anticipation of the joys of that eternal Kingdom by the ordering of their same-sex relationship in a way that reflects the faithful love of the Creator?³¹ ☩

Footnotes (All biblical quotations are from the NRSV.)

1 2 Timothy 3:16.

2 Galatians 3: 10–14.

3 Galatians 1: 13 ff; cf. Acts 8: 1–3; 9: 1–2; 1 Corinthians 1: 23.

4 Deuteronomy 21: 23 (as quoted by Paul).

5 Deuteronomy 27: 26 (as quoted by Paul).

6 In a similar manner, it has often been observed that the same legal code which condemns homosexual relations (Leviticus 18: 22; 20: 13) also condemns eating pork (11: 7) and wearing clothing woven of different fabrics (19: 19). Such observations likewise attempt to “put the law in its place.”

7 “Mystagogy” is the term used by the ancient church for the process of reflection on the mystery of God’s Acts (both in history and in the sacraments) through which we are enabled to appropriate their meaning. Mystagogy was the business of the Easter season: reflecting on the stories and symbols of Easter to draw out their implications for the life of faith.

8 Luke 24: 44–49. The story suggests not only the necessity of reinterpreting scripture in the light of God’s Act in Jesus, but equally that God’s Act in Jesus can only be recognized in the light of scripture. See also John 5: 39–40.

9 Acts 1: 6 ff.

10 Luke 24: 32.

11 Matthew 5: 17 ff.

12 John 6: 31 ff.

13 Hebrews 1: 1 ff.; 7: 11–10: 18.

14 Galatians 1: 11–17.

15 See 1 Corinthians 7: 1 ff.

16 Acts 9: 4–6; cf. 22: 7–10; 26: 14–18.

17 He tells us about himself in this earlier life, for example, in Galatians 1: 14, and Philippians 3: 4–6.

18 Thus, on the two occasions when Paul refers to the tradition he had received, he is simply quoting – more or less verbatim – what they had been saying about Jesus from the beginning: the things that had been confirmed for him on the Damascus Road. In the first instance (1 Corinthians 11: 23 ff.), he actually says he received a tradition “from the Lord”; but on

both occasions (the other is 1 Corinthians 15: 3 ff.) it is the core elements of the Christian story that he is citing. On one or two other occasions he claims to be quoting the direct command of Jesus (1 Corinthians 7: 10–11; and perhaps 1 Thessalonians 4: 2 ff.); but we learn nothing from these texts that we do not also hear from other witnesses.

19 1 Corinthians 11: 2–16.

20 Vs. 14: “Does not nature itself teach you...?”

21 See 1 Thessalonians 5: 19–22.

22 Mark 10: 1–12 5 Luke 16: 18 appear to forbid divorce on any grounds, whereas Matthew 19: 1–9 and 1 Corinthians 7: 10–16 both envisage the possibility of legitimate divorce, although on entirely different grounds.

23 Romans 1: 18–32 (emphasis added). See also 1 Corinthians 6: 9 ff., 1 Timothy 1: 9–10.

24 Paul’s argument began with an appeal to what we would call “natural theology” (“...what can be known about God...through the things he has made”). But our perennial dilemma has been whether an appeal to “natural law” could provide decisive answers to our moral questions. A comparable quandary may be observed in the arguments over birth control.

25 Matthew 19: 3–9 5 Mark 10: 2–9.

26 Hebrews 4: 12–13.

27 James 1: 21; 1 Peter 1: 23–25; 1 John 1: 1.

28 Matthew 7: 29; Mark 1: 22.

29 John 2: 1–11. The “six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification” seem to be an allusion to the Mosaic covenant and its legal expectations. The jars turn out to be very useful, but not for their original purpose.

30 Matthew 22: 23–33 5 Mark 12: 18–27 5 Luke 20: 27–40. See also Matthew 19: 10–12.

31 However, before there could be such a redefinition of what is acceptable among us, we might reasonably expect a process of weighing the evangelical impulse for such a change and the signs of the Spirit’s leading, a reconsideration of the witness of scripture, honest debate, and the formulation of a clear policy by a recognized authority – just as there was for the first generation of Jesus’ followers (Acts 15: 6–21).

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HOW IS THE BIBLE AUTHORITATIVE FOR US?

A SECOND APPROACH *By John C. Hurd*

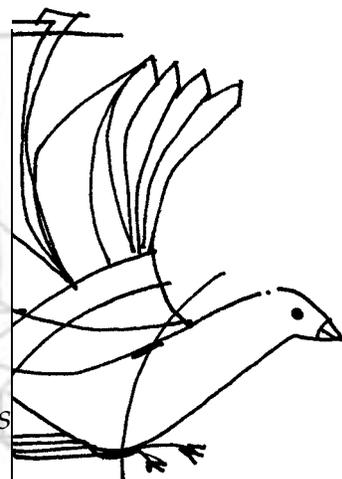
Reading the Bible: not literally but historically

The first step in knowing what the Bible says is to read the text. What could be easier? Anyone who has learned to read can read scripture. There is no need to learn the original languages (Greek, Hebrew, Aramaic); there are a variety of modern translations available. Thus it follows that all but the illiterate know, or can know, what the Bible says. “Bible Study” therefore means simply reading the text, and perhaps also sharing with others what comes into the reader’s head when the Bible is read.

As I look back on a long professional career of teaching the New Testament, I have a profound sense of discouragement that this assumption is not only wide-

spread but becoming more and more popular. I used to think that this simple, direct approach to the Bible was unfortunate and

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“Gone are the allegorical, the analogical, the typological, and the spiritual interpretations of the text by which scripture has been understood during the long history of the Church. The current popular way of reading the Bible, far from being the way scripture has always been read, is a modern phenomenon.”

READING THE BIBLE

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in need of correction, but that as a result of such an approach no one would actually suffer in their faith. Now recent events convince me that the issue is vital. The basic reason that the Church is threatened with divisions today is that its members do not know how to read the Bible. Before one can talk of the authority of scripture one has to know what scripture is talking about, and, in general, church members do not.

A large measure of the blame lies with the clergy. The laity look to them for instruction. The Anglican Church has always insisted that its clergy be educated, and they are, more or less. They all pass Bible 101. But when they get into the pulpit, it all goes out the window. In sermon after sermon I've heard the preacher takes a passage from the gospels and treats it as though it were something read in the morning newspaper, as if it were a direct report of an event in Jesus' life as if one can speak of what was said and thought and felt by the participants. Sometimes the preacher even talks about what did not happen or what was not said. These clergy should know better, and surely the laity deserve better. At this point in the life of the Canadian Anglican Church, this thoughtless use of the Bible has come home to roost.

The Bible is popularly read in a curious flat manner unlike any other text – except perhaps a legal statute. Gone are the allegorical, the analogical, the typological, and the spiritual interpretations of the text by which scripture has been understood during the long history of the Church. The current popular way of reading the Bible, far from being the way scripture has always been read, is a modern phenomenon. Earlier interpreters considered the literal meaning of the text to be the least satisfactory. Today, scripture is widely used as though it were a magic book or an oracle, as though it had all been written by a single hand at a single time, expressing a single point of view. The intentions of the many individual authors of the biblical material are brushed aside; the varied historical contexts from which they speak are ignored. I cannot remember hearing a sermon in which the preacher took, for example, a Marcan lection and said, “This is what Mark wants you to see.” Yet Mark is

the one we should be listening to. He stands with us on our side of the Easter event, and, like us, looks back on Jesus through the eyes of Christian faith. I sometimes picture the gospel writers spending their time in the Kingdom consoling one another that, though their books are crucial to the life of the Church, the authors themselves are largely forgotten.

I am not speaking from an elitist position. I am not advocating M.Div. degrees for all. A crucial change in perspective for Church members is a simple one, and I would like to suggest the following: Listen to the individual voices of the gospel writers. Get to know them as individuals. Hear what they are trying to say. Read Paul's letters as you would any of the letters that you receive from family or friends, that is, as part of a conversation. Ask yourself why Paul says what he does. Get in the habit of reading between the lines. Instruction on such matters as the relationships among the gospel writers or which letters Paul wrote is helpful, but to look at the biblical documents as expressions of the religious experience of fellow believers is not a difficult task. It is, however, basic and vital.

Jesus and the law

It is clear that the gospel writers understood Jesus as setting aside the legal requirements spelled out in the Old Testament. He summarized the Law as love God and love your neighbour. He ate with tax collectors and sinners. He did things on the Sabbath that one ought not to do on the Sabbath. Clearly he made a distinction between what love of neighbour required and what the ritual Law specified. The religious establishment, after all, did not conspire in his death because he let children come to him.

The narratives of the Old Testament are the great myths that have shaped our Judeo-Christian heritage. The prophetic material has spoken to the consciences of believers over the centuries. The wisdom material is a constant source of wry comment on the way life is. The poetic material, especially the Psalms, continue to enjoy a central place in Jewish and Christian devotion. But it is a wonder that those who honour Jesus' name invoke pieces of Old Testament legislation as ethical absolutes. The same type of “proof-text” arguments were made in the period of the American Civil War to characterize blacks as an inferior race and to justify slavery.

Marriage in the earliest Church

Of course, I am not talking in the abstract about the use of Scripture. The Church currently thinks of itself as facing a profound problem concerning modern sexual mores. The blessing of same-sex unions is in some quarters being violently rejected by persons who strongly support the Church's blessing of heterosexual marriage.

It is remarkable that no one seems to ask by what scriptural authority do we, as Christians, bless marriages. The wedding liturgy invokes the marriage in Cana as proof of Jesus' approval of marriage. But I see nothing in the Fourth Gospel that is historical except the materials that the author derives from the synoptic gospels, and the Cana story is not among them. This story is John's way of playing with the great life symbols of wine and water. He creates a sign for Jesus, who in the Fourth Gospel is not the historical Jesus but the resurrected Christ. And, in any case, the story cannot be said to focus on the institution of marriage. It may be surprising to some to learn that the lengthy article on "Marriage" in the Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible makes virtually no mention of the New Testament. It cites only a couple of gospel parables and a few figurative appearances of terms like "bride," "bridegroom," and "marriage" in the letters.

There is, however, more about marriage in the New Testament than this article, for example, cares to mention. Paul is, of course, our earliest source, and his earliest letters lie far back in the history of the Church at a point within a generation of Jesus' death and well before the gospels were written. It is clear that in these early years Paul, himself unmarried, discouraged marriage. The End of the Age was believed to be at hand ("I mean, brethren, the appointed time has grown very short; from now on, let those who have wives live as though they had none," 1 Cor. 7:29). He encouraged asceticism among those already married ("It is well for a man not to touch a woman" 7:1); he instituted Spiritual Marriages for those couples determined to undertake the outward form of marriage (these are the "virgins" of 7:25), but "he who refrains from marriage will do better" (7:38). Marriage and family are so firmly entrenched in the life of the Church that modern readers generally misunderstand this chapter, if they read it at all.

As an aside: It is ironic that Paul is widely viewed with distaste by women. Partly they blame him for the letters to Timothy and Titus, which he did not write, and partly for the passages that I have cited above. Paul, on the contrary, should be venerated as the patron saint of the women's movement ("There is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus," Gal. 3:28). In the early ascetic Corinthian congregation he expected women to preach (1 Cor. 11:5) and generally to perform key roles in his congregations (note Phoebe, Prisca [Priscilla], Mary, Tryphaena, Tryphosa, and others in Rom. 16:1-16; 1 Cor. 16:19).

Where did Paul get ideas like these? Not from the contemporary Hellenistic Judaism which was his background or from the more traditional Judaism of his day. Apocalyptic sects do not seem to have been part of his world view, except for the one that we know of: Jesus and his followers. Paul got these eschatological ideas from the same source from which he received the tradition of the Lord's Supper (1 Cor. 11:23-26): from Jesus, also unmarried. Not only do modern readers misunderstand Paul, they also fail to notice the apocalyptic asceticism of the synoptic gospels. But "there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven" (Mt. 19:11). If some of Jesus' disciples were married, they had left their wives and families to follow Jesus. Jesus assured them of future reward, and of the Kingdom he said, "when they rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are married, but are like the angels in heaven" (Mk. 12:25), that is, asexual. Both for Jesus and for Paul sexual distinctions are non-existent in the in-breaking Kingdom.

In the Kingdom sex plays no role.

The Church is a foretaste of the Kingdom.

Therefore in the Church sexual distinctions are eliminated.

The disciples of Jesus and the earliest Christians aspired to live as far as possible as though members of the Kingdom. There are many corollaries to the above syllogism, but among them marriage does not find a place.

However, and quite rightly, the Church, on this and on many other issues, has adapted. Sexual abstinence is not a recipe for community survival. Thus the Church

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(Continued from page 9)

has learned to bless marriages. Inspired by the imperatives of love and forgiveness, it has in more recent times adapted to the reality of divorce in our society and allowed the remarriage of divorced persons. Surely the Church, as it remembers the road it has travelled, that is, as it remembers, or is reminded of, its history, can be guided by the

same imperatives of love and forgiveness in the days ahead. ☒

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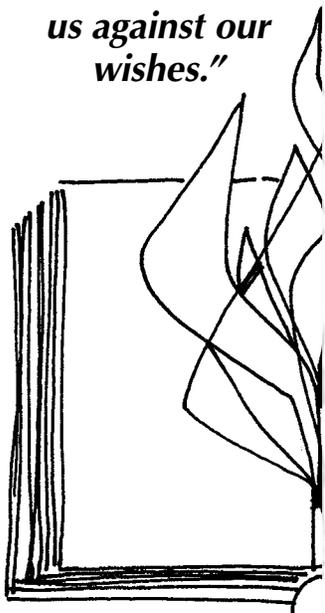
Note: The 1 Corinthians material is discussed at length and with full bibliography in the author's *The Origin of Corinthians* (2nd ed.; Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1983).

The authority of scripture: a response

John Hill's article is as articulate and lucid as we would expect of him. One cannot help but note, however, that it is, in the main, an article about all the ways the scriptures are not authoritative for us. They reprove and train, says Paul, but John points out the absence of any reference to authority.

by George Sumner

"Because of our own brand of cultural Christianity . . . we Anglicans, on the whole, have only a vague sense of what is in the Bible and little willingness that it should bind us against our wishes."



Aul came to see how his old reading of the scriptures did not have authority, in light of the revelation of the risen Jesus. The interpretive letter should be contrasted with the Spirit. The New Testament is not authoritative in the way that Jesus himself is. The scriptures cannot be understood authoritatively apart from the Spirit at work in the Church. In all these claims of non-authority, John has as his assumed adversary a conservative exegetical legalist.

These statements are all, taken by themselves, true enough. But we need also to ask ourselves what kind of church we are speaking to. The truth is that, if you look at the Anglican Church of Canada, John's adversary is a dying breed. Our church is not one suffering from a surfeit of rabbinical intensity or hyper-passionate Biblicism! Because of our own brand of cultural Christianity, our culture's aversion to authority, or the influx of refugees from denominations with stronger claims, we Anglicans, on the whole, have only a vague sense of what is in the Bible and little willingness that it should bind us against our wishes. As a result, I wonder how helpful it is to further convince Anglicans of the ways the Bible is not authoritative. We might compare this to a spiritual director advising someone to relax and take the

week off from their rule – good advice to the scrupulous, bad advice for the lax.

One thing that I particularly appreciate is John's candour. He begins his article by assuming a commitment to the liberal side on the contemporary sexuality debate, wondering how one might parry the accusation that this side is weak on biblical authority. Later in the essay he wonders if there is any biblically warranted "wobble room" for the advocated change in teaching (doctrine). The approach to Christian teaching should, of course, be the other way around. Listening to the scriptures in their authority ought to lead to the position we, as the Church, decide upon.

In fact, if we are honest with ourselves, we must admit that from time to time, we proceed on some issues the way that John has pursued this matter. We do indeed import meanings into our reading, sometimes by an eisegesis that distorts its message. Still, it is important to bear in mind that this is evidence of our failings. Perhaps we really need to be even more critical than John acknowledges, by which I mean, critical of ourselves. What are our criteria for deciding which passages will have a claim upon us, and where do we derive these criteria? How do we know it is the Spirit guiding us?

In this vein, and for this particular journal, I would like to dwell for a moment

on John Hill's treatment of the authority of Scripture as it is read liturgically. John argues that the passage on homosexuality in Romans 1 has a limited authority as it is based only on natural law and not upon revelation (we will leave aside the fact that Paul is basing his argument on Genesis 1-3). John then argues that the lectionary use of the scriptures has a similarly delimiting effect. He does a good job of describing the implications of the lectionary: the scriptures' authority is related to the way it conveys the "grand sweep." Voices in tension should be heard, scriptures' meaning does cohere around the risen Lord Jesus Christ, and the scriptures need to be interpreted, especially through preaching. This amounts to a traditional account of guidelines for a sound biblical hermeneutic. But what exactly are the implications of this? With what is such interpretation contrasted? The only answer I can discover is John's knocking down of a straw man - proof-texting. It is harder to see what further effect a liturgical use of scripture, as an encouragement to the traditional understanding and proper interpretation of the scriptures, would have for the question of authority in the Church.

I, like many in the Church, am bone-weary of the debate on human sexuality and will spare the reader the trotting out of the usual verses and arguments. I prefer to focus on two problems in the deep theological structure of John's argument. Both share the problem of disrupting what I would call the conjunctive logic of our theological tradition. It is certainly true that the three senses of the term Word of God need to be distinguished, and held in their true order.

First, the Word is the eternal Son, the Second Person of the Trinity, "through whom all things were made." The Word incarnate is Jesus, for us crucified, now risen. Finally, the Word written offers a faithful witness to the Word eternal and incarnate. John Hill clearly conveys this role for the scriptures. But what the Church in our time needs to hear is how the three senses of the Word cohere. The point of Nicaea and Chalcedon is that the Word as eternal and incarnate is one. Through what John Calvin called the "inner testimony of the Holy Spirit" the Word written reveals the Word incarnate, or better yet, He uses it (the Word written) to make Himself present to believers. The three senses are dis-

tinct, and John Hill clearly points this out. But they are conjunctively distinct, and woe to any Church where a full-fledged disjunction sets in.

Secondly, the Church catholic traditionally has held in conjunction canon, Spirit, and Church. In the second century, in the wake of the Montanist controversy, the Church learned to be wary of un-tethered appeals to the Spirit. In the third century it responded to the threat of Gnosticism by, amongst other things, settling on the canon of writings which had already come to be authoritative for the churches. The coherence of Church as the place (though not the owner) of the Spirit, and the Spirit discerned (though not quenched) through the canon, lies at the heart of what we understand the Catholic Tradition to be. Loosening these ties that bind the Church is a very heavy price to pay for current innovation, or any innovation.

Scripture's authority is, amongst other things, its power to address us immediately and personally. What then does Scripture say to the Church in our situation today? We in the Church should have had a conversation about different pastoral approaches to gay and lesbian members. I agree with Oliver O'Donovan that such a conversation has not taken place.¹ As I am sure John Hill would agree, the scriptures should have provided the wider common ground for such a conversation, in view of the "grand sweep" of creation, sin, redemption, and groaning in hope. The reasons for this failure are three, and two of these pertain directly to the subject-matter of this journal.

The issue of same-sex blessings has proved a cul-de-sac for two reasons: First of all, because blessings of lifelong vows are, for all intents and purposes, marriages, about whose heterosexual nature the scriptures in their "grand sweep" are clear. Secondly, such rites are bound to generate doctrine (not traditionally the role of dioceses). The third reason for our failure is the intense politicization of the issue in Church and society.

Whether an opportunity for a conversation based on shared theological assumptions might again arise in a depressurized time and space no one can say. In the sad throes of the Episcopal Church since its 2003 General Convention, some of the most eloquent words have come from the Very Rev. Paul Zahl of the Cathedral of the

"We do indeed import meanings into our reading, sometimes by an eisegesis that distorts its message."

“I believe that the real challenge for the victors would be to live up to their own liberal claims. F.D. Maurice, whose spirit reigns in North American Anglicanism, claimed that we need the interaction, the sparks, between contrasting and conflicting points of view.”

Advent in Birmingham, Alabama. He has spoken essentially of the Christian ethics of victors and vanquished.² His words, I believe, may soon be pertinent to the Canadian situation. In a moment, soon to come Zahl suggests, the scriptures will challenge the victors to show humility. In this vein, I worry about John’s analogies between the liberal position and that of Paul and Peter as they received the new and wider revelation. Does one truly want to claim so much? Similarly, I expect that John might re-think his casting of his opponents at the end of his piece in the role of the oppressive scribes.

Like Zahl, I believe that the real challenge for the victors would be to live up to their own liberal claims. F.D. Maurice, whose spirit reigns in North American Anglicanism, claimed that we need the interaction, the sparks, between contrasting and conflicting points of view. In other words, good Mauriceans will need to act so as truly to value and protect the traditional minorities. I would choose here an ecological metaphor: For the sake of biodiversity, the liberal victors will need consciously and at some cost to care for these endangered species.

My point has everything to do, in a practical way, with the authority of Scrip-

ture. For all their indubitable failings, the traditionalists in our church tend to know the scriptures. They really do care about the larger doctrinal issues behind the present controversy. The liberal victors need to see how vital the traditionalist reminders of biblical authority are, however aggravating it may be to hear them. After the verdict has ground its way to a conclusion, is the Church ready to admit how important this on-going vocation will be, or will the Church say to these members “we have no need of you”? On this score, I trust that leaders like John Hill will be true Mauricians and, as such, prove to be defenders of those who uphold the traditional notion of the Bible’s authority. ☒

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Footnotes

1 See “The St. Andrew’s Statement” in *The Way Forward?*, ed. T. Bradshaw, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), also Oliver O’Donovan’s “Homosexuality in the Church: Can there be a fruitful theological debate?” in op.cit.

2 Conference on the New Comprehensiveness of the Episcopal Church Foundation in Birmingham, Alabama, February, 2004.

BRIEFLY NOTED

John Hodgins, *Review Editor*

James D.G. Dunn:

Christianity in the Making, Volume 1: Jesus Remembered
(Eerdmans, 2003)

A first rank biblical scholar offers some surprises in this initial volume of *Christianity in the Making* which is a powerful critique of the “lust for certainty” characterized by the Enlightenment ideal of objectivity (p. 105). Detailed research into sources has led Dunn to challenge the conclusions of the redoubtable Rudolph Bultmann, the Jesus Seminar and Dominic Crossan who has recently captured the imagination of the media in this age of pseudo-history, exemplified by the popular best-seller *The Da Vinci Code*.

Unsparring in his analysis of post-modern subjectivity, Dunn concludes that there is no “historical Jesus” apart from the gospels and the theology which they

represent: “any attempt to present Jesus stripped of the garments of faith is doomed to failure” (p. 136). Advocating critical realism Dunn develops his approach, building on the work of such various fellow travelers as R.G. Collingwood, Bernard Lonergan, Joachim Jeremias, B.F. Meyer, and N.T. Wright. Dunn’s work proclaims that a life-giving encounter with Jesus Christ is available today through the living tradition of liturgy, story and community: “Through that tradition it is still possible for anyone to encounter the Jesus from whom Christianity stems, the remembered Jesus” (p. 893).