

USING THE BIBLE WELL

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Introduction

'Using the Bible Well' is based in part on some of the themes of my book *The Savage Text – The Use and Abuse of the Bible*.¹ In that book I nowhere call the Bible a 'savage text'. My target, rather, was the intolerance and violence which Bible readers have justified, and still sometimes do justify, by annexing biblical passages in support of their savage actions. *They* turn the Bible *into* a savage text. Almost no attempt has been made to repent of these mistakes and learn from them.

The Argument

My talk today will show first, that the use of the Bible in the hands of at least some Protestants has a shadow side to it, a theological and moral bleakness that continues to compromise the churches' witness to a post-Christian world. We can learn from this shadow side. It takes us to the heart of the basic issues – what the Bible is, and how to read it well. So, second, I will offer some thoughts about both these issues. Marcus Borg in a recent influential book, *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time*, expresses well the ambiguous legacy of the Bible in the vernacular:

The accessibility of the Bible to anybody who can read has been a mixed blessing. Positively, it has resulted in a democratization of Christianity. No longer are the riches of the Bible known only to an educated elite. But it has also had negative consequences. It has made possible individualistic interpretation of the bible; and that, coupled with the elevated status given to the Bible by the Protestant Reformation, has led to the fragmentation of Christianity into a multitude of denominations and sectarian movements, each grounded in different interpretations of the Bible.²

¹ Adrian Thatcher, *The Savage Text – The Use and Abuse of the Bible* (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008).

² Marcus Borg, *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time* (New York: Harper Collins, 2002), p.8.

1. Four Sets of Problems

There are four sets of problems here, all of which need to be teased out further. First,

1.1 Individualistic Interpretations of the Bible

The early Anglican theologian Richard Hooker wanted to know how, among Christians who held to the 'priesthood of all believers', people who were barely literate were able to understand the Bible for themselves.³ He was rightly concerned that the immediacy of the text in the hands of eager readers had already led to another kind of immediacy: that of believing that one could understand what one read without also grasping the theology and history which had elapsed since the text had been written. After the Restoration Thomas Hobbes was able to reflect how, prior to the Civil War,

Every man, nay, every boy and wench, that could read English thought they spoke with God Almighty, and understood what he said, when by a certain number of chapters a day they had read the Scriptures once or twice over...this licence of interpreting the Scripture was the cause of so many several sects...⁴

1.2 The Multitude of Denominations

The fission of Reformed Christianity into major denominations, then into branches and sub-branches of each, still continues today, when according to one best guess published in 2001 in the *World Christian Encyclopaedia*, there are over 38,000 Christian denominations,⁵ not counting major sects and an ever-growing profusion of non-denominational and independent house churches. The priority, not just of the biblical text over against tradition, reason, wisdom, and experience, but the certainty thought to attach itself (with the alleged aid of the Holy Spirit) to surrounding autonomous, individualistic interpretations of it, is a major reason for this fissiparous state of affairs, all contrary to the prayer of Christ that His followers might be one. (Jn.17:20-1)

³ Richard Hooker, *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* [1594]. In John Keble (ed.), *The Works of That Learned and Judicious Divine, Mr. Richard Hooker: with an Account of His Life and Death* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1876), Preface, 3.3, p.144. On-line at Project Canterbury. See <http://anglicanhistory.org/hooker/preface/142-151.pdf>

⁴ Thomas Hobbes, *Behemoth* (ed. F. Tönnies, London, 1889)[written 1668, published 1681], pp.21-2. Cited in Katz, op.cit., p.40.

⁵ David B. Barrett, George T. Kurian and Todd M. Johnson, *World Christian Encyclopaedia, 2nd edition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

1.3 The Loss of Catholic Substance and Sources

The new emphasis on Bible reading as the primary activity of Christian devotional practice, beginning in the 16th century, had a *displacement* effect upon several Christian beliefs and practices hitherto deemed important. Protestants think themselves well rid of five of the seven sacraments of the Catholic faith (along with priestly confession, prayers to the saints, papal authority, devotion to Mary, and so on). The right emphasis on personal faith, sustained by Spirit-guided preaching and reading of God's Word, may nonetheless render marginal the benefits of Tradition which of course include developed doctrine, creeds, a deeper understanding of the sacraments, and the teaching authority of the Church.

1.4 Pre-eminence of the 'Literal Sense'

At the Reformation the 'literal sense' or 'plain sense' of the biblical text came to supplant all the others. Robert Grant calls this 'natural literalism.'⁶ It is generally forgotten that prior to the Reformation there was a well-known and accepted technique for reading the Bible. It was called the *Quadrige* (the word for a four-horse chariot). This was a fourfold method, according to which there were believed to be four senses which a passage of scripture might be thought to convey, and depending on the passage one or more could be dominant over the others. The first was the *literal* sense: the second *allegorical*; the third *moral*, and the fourth *anagogical* – conveying something to be hoped for.⁷

While many factors were responsible for the rise of modern science, claims the historian Peter Harrison, 'by far the most significant was the literalist mentality initiated by the Protestant reformers, and sponsored by their successors.'⁸ There is a positive and negative aspect to this. Tradition had long spoken of God's Two Books, the Book of Nature and the Book of Scripture, and they now get read very differently. On the one hand, the literal understanding of the Book of Nature makes modern science possible: on the other hand, it reduces it to its material, observable qualities. A similar transformation happens to the Book of Scripture. On the one hand, the literal reading of the Book of Scripture brings immediate comprehension to its readers who can immerse themselves in it without the mediation of the Church:

⁶ R.M. Grant, *A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible* (London: A & C Black, 1965), p.102.

⁷ See Thatcher, *op.cit.*, 118-9.

⁸ Harrison, *op.cit.*, p.8.

on the other hand it reduces the Bible to a spiritual and moral guidebook which makes fundamentalism possible and ignores other possibilities of reading.

I commend the use of the *Quadriga*. The categories always were loose and overlapping. Readers were free to emphasise one over the others. (For 'allegory', read 'the search for a deeper theological or spiritual meaning'). For example, the creation narratives can be understood doctrinally, not factually: apocalyptic can be understood anagogically, as the hope for an end of the domination of evil powers, not as a chronology; the Household Codes of the NT, with their gendered assumptions that cause so much difficulty today, can be read as an interaction of the theological and the moral senses, which are interacting still, even as the churches read them now. Scripture is deep enough to have more senses than one.

2. Distressing Case Studies

While the rise of modern science may be more indebted to the Protestant Reformation than science recognizes, the impact of the 'literal sense' on theology is much more questionable. By scripture alone was the doctrine and practice of the churches to be determined. Unfortunately as I am about to explain, the 'scripture principle' had very mixed results. Here are four cases of Christian practice where the principle was counterproductive.

2.1 The Case of Witchcraft

The reading of the Bible in the vernacular led to a rediscovery of the Hebrew Bible, and indeed a re-igniting of the oldest theological problem of all in Christian theology - how to balance it with the new one. The Book of Exodus (22:18) contained the command 'Thou shall not suffer a witch to live.'⁹ In Scotland alone, the Kirk ensured the death of over a thousand victims between 1590 and 1670 (not counting hundreds more who killed themselves or died awaiting trial).¹⁰ 'There is now general agreement among historians that between 1400 and 1800, between 40,000 and 50,000 people died in Europe and colonial north America on charges of witchcraft.'¹¹ There were many reasons for this outbreak of lethal misogyny, and a principal one was this savage text. It both reinforced the category of witch (the

⁹ See also Deut.18:10-11.

¹⁰ Dairmaid MacCulloch, *Reformation: Europe's House Divided 1490-1700* (London: Penguin Books, 2004), p.572. MacCulloch's figures are conservative.

¹¹ MacCulloch, *op.cit.*, p.563.

Bible said they really existed), and it lent divine authority to their torture and execution.

2.2 The Invention of Racism

There is a confusing pair of stories in Genesis 9:18-27. One of the characters, Canaan, who is either Noah's son or grandson, gets cursed for finding his father drunk and naked. In an exhaustive study, *The Curse of Ham*, David Goldenberg observes,

As the Black slave trade moved to England and then America, the Curse of Ham moved with it... There can be no denying the fact, however, that the Curse made its most harmful appearance in America, and there can be no denying the central role it played in sustaining the slave system. It was the ideological cornerstone for the justification of Black slavery...¹²

In 1862 a man born in the United States to freed slaves claimed that the divine curse upon black people was the 'general, almost universal, opinion in the Christian world.' He found it

...in books written by learned men; and it is repeated in lectures, speeches, sermons, and common conversation. So strong and tenacious is the hold which it has taken upon the mind of Christendom, that it seems almost impossible to uproot it. Indeed, it is an almost foregone conclusion, that the Negro race is an accursed race, weighed down, even to the present, beneath the burden of an ancestral malediction.¹³

Here then, is a partial explanation of how the slave trade and white racism was advocated and practiced. The Bible authorized it. The surface reading of the biblical text, the *sola scriptura* approach to an intensely immoral practice, provided a comforting justification for it.¹⁴

¹² David M. Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), p.175 (author's emphasis). See also R.M. Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

¹³ Alexander Crummell, "The Negro Race Not under a Curse: An Examination of Genesis IX.25," in *The Future of Africa, being Addresses, Sermons, etc., etc., Delivered in the Republic of Liberia* (New York: 1862), pp.327-8: cited in Goldenberg, *op.cit.*, p.176.

¹⁴ See Thatcher, *op.cit.*, pp.39-43.

2.3 The Justification for Slavery

The Bible is not a racist book.¹⁵ Racists, however, have found ideological justification from it. However on the keeping of slaves the Bible was thought to provide overwhelming approval of the practice until late into modernity. 25 years ago the Mennonite theologian Willard Swartley produced an unusually honest study, the conclusion of which he admitted was painful to him. Having examined what the Bible says about four issues, slavery, Sabbath, war and gender,¹⁶ he came to the uncomfortable conclusion that all four issues are undecidable on the basis of textual analysis alone. He found that the guidebook view of the Bible didn't work. He quite properly sought divine guidance from the Bible about these matters, and found that opposing positions on each of the issues attracted roughly equal support.

On the one hand, the Bible was thought to authorise slavery. As an Episcopalian bishop in the diocese of Vermont and defender of the right to own slaves in the South of the USA proclaimed (in 1864),

The Bible's defense of slavery is very plain. St. Paul was inspired, and knew the will of the Lord Jesus Christ, and was only intent on obeying it. And who are we, that in our modern wisdom presume to set aside the Word of God... and invent for ourselves a "higher law" than those holy Scriptures which are given to us "a light to our feet and a lamp to our paths," in the darkness of a sinful and a polluted world?"¹⁷

On the other hand, slavery was eventually thought to be incompatible with the divine love for all people, all of whom are created in God's image. These Christians, whose views thankfully prevailed, were prepared to let their understanding and their way of life be shaped, not by extracting proof-texts but by the values and principles they found taught by Jesus and exemplified by His self-giving in incarnation and crucifixion. In other words, the abolition of slavery was aided, not by *sola scriptura*, but by reading the *scriptura* as their witness to God's revelation in Christ.

¹⁵ Thatcher, *op.cit.*, pp.43-7.

¹⁶ Willard M. Swartley, *Slavery, Sabbath, War and Women* (Scottsdale: Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 1983).

¹⁷ John Henry Hopkins, *A Scriptural, Ecclesiastical, and Historical View of Slavery, from the Days of the Patriarch Abraham, to the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Pooley & Co., 1864), pp.16-17: cited in Swartley, *op.cit.*, p.31.

2.4 Sexual and Gender Questions

Most churches teach that the Bible is somehow against a human condition called 'homosexuality'. The Lambeth Conference in 1998 notoriously rejected something called 'homosexual practice'. Why? Because it was 'incompatible with scripture.'¹⁸ I argue in *God, Sex and Gender* that that reading of scripture remains possible but very unlikely.¹⁹ The argument of Romans 1, I suggest, is that Paul thought that men having sex with men was a case of excessive desire (and if Dale Martin is right, he was against the expression of all sexual desire, not just homosexual forms of it).²⁰ I think that Paul *did* regard men having sex with men as 'unnatural' and 'perverse'. He thought this because a penetrated man consented to being and behaving as a woman, and that was a shocking matter for any man to compromise his superior gender status and voluntarily feminizing himself. But since that view of gendered relations has long been abandoned, the arguments on which it is based, falls.

The thought here is not that the churches are wrong and I am right. I'm saying the claim the churches make that so-called 'homosexual practice' is incompatible with scripture is flimsy and question-begging. They should not be so confident that the Bible tells them this. Going on saying it doesn't make it more likely. Worse, there is more than an uncomfortable resemblance between the use of scripture in discussion of same-sex relations (and of course gender) and its earlier use in condemning witches and opponents of racism and slavery. Eventually a more charitable view of sexual minorities will emerge, but by then untold harm will again have been done, and, except at the Last Judgement, no-one called to account for it.

2.5 An 'Immoral Bible'?

Eryl Davies' recent work *The Immoral Bible* recalls the carnage described in Joshua 6-11, and weighs the strategies that attempt to deal with the embarrassment

¹⁸ Lambeth Conference, 1998: Resolution 1.10d.

<http://www.lambethconference.org/resolutions/1998/1998-1-10.cfm>

¹⁹ Adrian Thatcher, *God, Sex and Gender – An Introduction* (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), pp.159-68.

²⁰ Dale Martin, *Sex and the Single Saviour* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), pp.65-76.

that its presence in the canon causes contemporary readers.²¹ He wearily begins his book with the observation that

The Bible has proved to be a useful weapon in the armoury of those who have sought to discriminate against race, colour, gender, class, religion or sexual orientation, and divine authority has been claimed for all kinds of abominable practices which have resulted in the marginalization and persecution of oppressed minorities.²²

Indeed there appears to be a new genre of hermeneutics at the present that might be dubbed the 'moral damage limitation strategy.'²³ Neither is the problem confined to the book of Joshua. It extends to passages (for example, in the Gospel of John) which appear to endorse a virulent anti-Judaism. Feminist criticism has brought to light the catalogue of injustices against women in the Bible,²⁴ and more recently post-colonial biblical interpretation has added serious allegations against widespread reading practices. 'Colonial reading,' asserts R.S. Sugirtharajah,

can be summed up as informed by theories concerning the innate superiority of Western culture, the Western male as subject, and the natives, heathens, women, blacks, indigenous people, as the Other, needing to be controlled and subjugated. It is based on the desire for power/domination.²⁵

3. What is the Bible? How to read it?

Stephen Katz has said 'The era of the English Civil War in the middle years of the seventeenth century was the high-water mark in bibliolatry in the Protestant world before the emergence of Fundamentalism in our own time.'²⁶ I suggest in *The Savage Text* that there is a widespread confusion in large parts of the major churches between God the Word made flesh in Christ, (Jn.1:14) and the collection of books known as the Bible which honorifically attracts the title 'Word of God'. The

²¹ Eryl W. Davies, *The Immoral Bible: Approaches to Biblical Ethics* (London & New York: T&T Clark International, 2010), pp.3-21.

²² Davies, *op.cit.*, p.1.

²³ Davies lists six recent examples, *ibid.*

²⁴ See e.g., Phyllis Trible, 'Treasures Old and new: Biblical Theology and the Challenge of Feminism, in Francis Watson (ed.), *The Open Text – New Directions for Biblical Studies?* (London: SCM, 1993) pp.32-56.

²⁵ R.S. Sugirtharajah (ed.), *The Postcolonial Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), p.15. And see R.S. Sugirtharajah, *The Postcolonial Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998); and M.G. Brett, *Decolonizing God: The Bible in the Tides of Empire* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2008).

²⁶ *Op.cit.*, p.40.

arguments there draw attention to the Bible *as a witness* to God's revelation, not the revelation itself; to the use of the Hebrew Bible by Paul and John as witnesses to Christ; to the fatal confusion between 'the Person' and 'the proposition', between the Spirit and the letter, and so on. The problem in the contemporary Church is not that these arguments are dubious, but that those to whom they are directed cannot believe that the category-confusion between the Word made flesh, and the Bible, pointedly referred to as 'The Word of God,' applies to them.

How to Read the Bible

How then might the Bible be read in a way that enables readers to be faithful to God's revelation in Christ while avoiding present and future catastrophes of interpretation? In the first instance there is a need to create a set of principles governing our Bible use which is itself *holy*, that is, which enables the possibility that God might inspire our reading, and hearers of the Church's proclamation might recognise its divine origin. The final task of this lecture is to suggest principles²⁷ which will help to promote peaceable and faithful Bible reading. There is a longer list in *The Savage Text*.

3.1 Read the Bible to learn of God's Word!

The first principle must be that Christians read the Bible in order to learn about God's Word, that is, God's self-communication in Christ to which the Bible bears witness. Keith Ward puts it simply:

The Bible gives us its own main principle of interpretation when it tells us that the love of God in Jesus is the culminating point of its teaching. Only when we keep that firmly in mind can we be sure of being true to what the Bible really teaches.²⁸

This principle was used by African-American Christians in the USA in the 19th and 20th centuries. Renita Weems, summarising the handling of the Bible among them, observed that "it is not texts per se that function authoritatively. Rather, it is reading strategies, and more precisely, *particular* readings that turn out, in fact, to

²⁷ Several authors have provided sets of principles. See, e.g., See Katz, *God's Last Words*, p.112; Charles H. Cosgrove, *Appealing to Scripture in Moral Debate – Five Hermeneutical Rules* (Grand Rapids, Michigan / Cambridge, U.K.: Eerdmans, 2002); Davis & Hays, *The Art of Reading Scripture*, pp.1-5; Keith Ward, *What the Bible Really Teaches – A Challenge for Fundamentalists* (London: SPCK, 2004), chapter 2.

²⁸ Ward, *What the Bible Really Teaches*, p.27.

be authoritative.²⁹ There are two obvious points to be made about Bible reading among newly-literate slaves. They were suspicious of the slave masters' interpretation of it, so '...even if one concedes that the Bible is authoritative, one still has not said anything about how the Bible should be interpreted.' And greeted with the polyphony of Protestant voices all speaking from the Bible, they knew they could rely on none of them.

This principle would have been endorsed by Luther. As Karl Barth reminds us, "The well-known criterion of Luther was to test every Scripture by whether 'it sets forth Christ or not.'³⁰

3.2 Expect moral and spiritual development in the Bible!

The Bible is always surpassing itself, and this is evidence for the growing spiritual illumination of its authors, reversing and cancelling the limited wisdom of earlier generations. Here are two examples. There is a prohibition against illegitimate men and men with incomplete or damaged sexual organs being part of "the congregation of the Lord." "He that is wounded in the stones, or hath his privy member cut off, shall not enter into the congregation of the Lord. A bastard shall not enter... even to his tenth generation." (Deuteronomy 23:1-2) The writer of Isaiah 56 understands the sheer moral awfulness of this stuff. As if to compensate for their exclusion he says "...neither let the eunuch say, Behold I am a dry tree. For thus saith the Lord unto the eunuchs that keep my sabbaths, ...Even unto them will I give in mine house and within my walls a place and a name better than of sons and of daughters..." (Isaiah 56:3-5)

The third of the Ten Commandments contains a vicious warning about the punitive consequences of idol worship. "Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the LORD thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me." (Exodus 20:5) Both Jeremiah and Ezekiel repudiate this savagery. "In those days they shall say no more, The fathers have eaten a sour grape, and the children's teeth are set on edge. But every one shall die for his own iniquity: every man that eateth the sour grape, his teeth shall be set on edge." (Jeremiah 31:29-30: see

²⁹ Weems, "Reading *Her Way* through the Struggle," in Felder, p.64 (author's emphasis).

³⁰ Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1963) 1.2, p.478, citing Luther's *Preface to the Epistles of St. James and St. Jude*, 1522.

Ezekiel 18:2-3,20) Jeremiah looked towards a "new covenant" with the "house of Israel" which Christians identify with themselves. However, even if this identification is not pressed, Jeremiah's words are testimony to his conviction of the inadequacy of the Mosaic law and the need for it to be surpassed. The implication is unavoidable. Faithfulness to God, openness to new inspiration, requires some negation of what has been revealed before.

Keith Ward calls this "the principle of sublation." He says "sublate" means "to negate and yet to fulfil at the same time."³¹ Ward's examples take him to the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus says "Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil." (Matthew 5:17) The rest of Matthew 5 is taken up with six units of the teaching of Jesus (on murder, adultery, divorce, oath-taking, retaliation and neighbour love), which use the approximate formula "Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time... But I say unto you..." (Matthew 5:21-2) Each of these shows what the fulfilment of the law and the prophets means and requires. The teaching of "them of old time" is not "destroyed," for it is fulfilled in what replaces it. But in each case the new teaching inserts a qualitative difference between itself and its replacement. Take for example the fulfilment of the command to love one's neighbour by widening it in order to include one's enemy:

Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust. (Matthew 5:43-45)

These are obvious, in fact spectacular cases of sublation. Matthew intends to ram home the contrast between the teaching of the Torah and the teaching of Jesus Christ. These cases are also dramatic because the contrast is not simply between one Bible passage and another, but between the teaching of Jesus and what "was said by them of old time." Sublation is a term that *allows* that contrast to be spectacular because it allows what was once accepted as God's "Word" to be negated by the greater revelation that surpasses it. That is why Ward says

³¹ Ward, *What the Bible Really Teaches*, p.23. It derives from the past participle of the Latin verb *tollere*, "to take away."

The Bible is filled with sublations, which means that many biblical passages, taken in their straightforward sense, must now be accounted false. It is a vital principle of biblical interpretation that we gradually learn to discern when and in what way specific biblical texts are to be sublated by others.³²

3.3 Read the First Testament through the Second Testament!

The principle “Read the First Testament through the Second Testament” allows priority to be given to the Second, as the fulfilment of the First. The author of Hebrews clearly thinks that Christ sublates the Hebrew prophets: “God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, Hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son, whom he hath appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds;... (Hebrews 1:1-2) This author is clear that, at the very least, the new covenant supersedes the old. Commenting on Jeremiah’s prophecy of a new covenant he remarks “In that he saith, A new covenant, he hath made the first old. Now that which decayeth and waxeth old is ready to vanish away.” (Hebrews 8:13) On the other hand, Paul uses a horticultural metaphor to explain how the new covenant is based on the old. The old covenant is like an olive tree. Some of its branches were broken off, and a “wild olive tree” grafted on. But the old tree and its roots continues to give life to the new one. (Romans 11:16-24)

Well before the formation of the New Testament canon Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, dealt, in his letter to the Philadelphians, with the problem of the relation between the life of Jesus Christ and the scriptures (the Old Testament) that pointed to him. Ignatius describes the controversy like this: “When I heard some saying, If I do not find it in the ancient Scriptures, I will not believe the Gospel; on my saying to them, It is written, they answered me, That remains to be proved.” The question at issue of course is what *is* written, and Ignatius’ answer is clear, “But to me Jesus Christ is in the place of all that is ancient: His cross, and death, and resurrection, and the faith which is by Him, are undefiled monuments of antiquity.”³³ At the same time Christians needed the Jewish scriptures. How else could they know who Jesus was?

³² Ward, *ibid*.

³³ Ignatius, *Letter to the Philadelphians*, 8. <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf01.v.vi.viii.html>. The passage continues: “To such persons I say that my archives are Jesus Christ, to disobey whom is manifest destruction. My authentic archives are His cross, and death, and resurrection, and the faith which bears on these things, by which I desire, through your prayers, to be justified.”

"...without the Jewish scriptures, Christians lacked the one thing they needed for religious legitimacy in the ancient world: a claim to antiquity."³⁴

3.4 Read the Bible through the Rule!

The Bible should be interpreted through the "rule of faith" or through the principal creeds of the Church. Tertullian (155 – 230) dealt with the problem of the use of scripture in combating heresy. His answer was *not* to use the scriptures (we cannot yet say "the Bible"), not even to discuss them, with heretics. Arguing on the basis of the scriptures, he taught, produces "no other effect than help to upset either the stomach or the brain."³⁵ He was exasperated at the futility of arguing on the basis of scriptural passages against opponents who read them differently or appealed to different passages in support of their opposing views. That was Hooker's view. It is a circle of futility well known today. "Though most skilled in the Scriptures, you will make no progress, when everything which you maintain is denied on the other side, and whatever you deny is (by them) maintained. As for yourself, indeed, you will lose nothing but your breath, and gain nothing but vexation from their blasphemy."³⁶

Robert Jenson has succinctly stated what the Bible is *for*. The Church "gathered these documents for her specific purpose: to aid in preserving her peculiar message, to aid in maintaining across time, from the apostles to the End, the self-identity of her message that the God of Israel has raised his servant Jesus from the dead."³⁷ From this simple position he urges a simple "hermeneutical exhortation" upon his readers: "Be entirely blatant and unabashed in reading Scripture for the church's purposes, and within the context of Christian faith and practice. Indeed, *guide your reading by church doctrine*."³⁸ In other words, "Read the Bible through the Rule!"

³⁴ Ehrman, *Lost Christianities: the Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), p.144.

³⁵ Tertullian, *The Prescription Against Heretics* (tr. P. Holmes), chapter 16. From *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol.III. http://www.tertullian.org/anf/anf03/anf03-24.htm#P3125_1133921.

³⁶ Hooker, *ibid*.

³⁷ Robert Jenson, "Scripture's Authority in the Church," in Davis & Hays, *The Art of Reading Scripture* [27-37], p.27.

³⁸ Jenson, "Scripture's Authority in the Church," pp.28-9 (emphasis added).

3.5 Make the Love Commandments the Guide to Ethical Practice!

The love commandments of Jesus *are* Christian ethical teaching and practice. The outworking of these is the fulfilment of the law, (Matthew 22:40) and the ethical practice of the Church needs continuous revision in the light of them. These commands are the “guide” to the treatment of the Other, and to negotiating difference. They also need to be set against reductionistic accounts which do not do justice to the rich moral vision to which these commandments belong. As Pope Benedict XVI has said,

The transition which he [Jesus] makes from the Law and the Prophets to the twofold commandment of love of God and of neighbour, and his grounding the whole life of faith on this central precept, is not simply a matter of morality—something that could exist apart from and alongside faith in Christ and its sacramental re-actualization. Faith, worship and ethos are interwoven as a single reality which takes shape in our encounter with God's agape.³⁹

The practice of Christian love is a sharing in God's own nature, that which was revealed in the self-giving of God in Christ upon the cross. That practice is renewed in the Eucharist. “If ye keep my commandments, ye shall abide in my love; even as I have kept my Father's commandments, and abide in his love.” (John 15:10) The process of “abiding” in love is nothing less than a mystical participation in the Love that God is. This is a qualitatively different experience from that of obedience to a Supernatural Being whose commands we are required to obey: it is rather a being taken over by the Love that reconciles all things to Itself, and that goes on forgiving and reconciling. This is also qualitatively different from “situation ethics,” a theory popular in the 1960s according to which one was supposed to intuit the demand of love in every situation. That was secular intuitionism, commandeered by liberal theology. “Abiding” in God is instead the fullness of Christian life and worship. Everyone knows that “love” is fraught with many meanings. Christians build their understanding of love from the self-giving of God in Christ.

³⁹ Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est* (2005).
http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20051225_deus-caritas-est_en.html.

3.6 The Symphonic Imperative

We Christians will not be faithful if we apply yesterday's answers to today's and tomorrow's questions. A model for Bible reading, may be found in Stephen Barton's question,

What if the Bible is more like the text of a Shakespearean play or the score of a Beethoven symphony, where true interpretation involves *corporate performance and practical enactment*, and where the meaning of the text or score will vary to some degree from one performance to another...?⁴⁰

The emphasis on 'corporate performance and practical enactment' is easily translatable into different contexts. It highlights that we are actively responsible for what we do with the Bible, and just like an unrehearsed orchestra or troupe of actors, we can make a frightful mess with it.

We, the community of readers are shaped by scripture and tradition. But we will read our scriptures and our tradition in our present context, and our present context will also shape how we will read scripture and tradition. Being faithful to Christ entails a 'No' to all those accretions and assumptions that compromise that great love that was poured into the world through Him.

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⁴⁰ Stephen C. Barton, 'Is the Bible Good News for Human Sexuality? Reflections on Method in Biblical Interpretation?', in Adrian Thatcher and Elizabeth Stuart (ed.s), *Christian Perspectives on Sexuality and Gender* (Leominster, Herefordshire: Gracewing / Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans: 1996) [4-13], p.6. [emphasis added]