

ΤΩ ΧΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

IN THE NICK OF TIME

Occasional Essays and Other Stuff for Christian Students Presented by the President of
Central Baptist Theological Seminary of Minneapolis

American Christianity needs leaders. American Christianity needs Christian leaders. Christian leaders explain the Scriptures, bringing them to bear upon life's urgent questions. Christian leaders exemplify the life of faith, finding their ultimate satisfaction in God alone. They unite intellectual discipline with ordinate affection, turning their entire being toward the love of God. These essays are dedicated to the task of inviting Christian students to become tomorrow's Christian leaders.

—Kevin T. Bauder

"...Be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine."

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Fundamentalism: Whence? Where? Whither? Part 8

Digression One, Still Continuing: Populism and Scripture

Kevin T. Bauder

All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all: yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation are so clearly propounded, and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them.

Westminster Confession 1.7
Second London Confession 1.7

Against the claims of the Roman magisterium, evangelicals of all sorts lay heavy emphasis upon the perspicuity of Scripture. By this they mean that the Scriptures are written to be understood. The Bible can be rightly interpreted without having to submit to a separate teaching office that enjoys some special spiritual unction to lend authority to its statements.

Similarly, evangelicals of all sorts emphasize the authority of Scripture alone (*Sola Scriptura*). Unlike the Catholic magisterium, evangelicals do not accept a separate, oral tradition as a source of revelation and authority. While evangelicals do believe in an apostolic tradition, they affirm that the content of that tradition has been canonized (i.e., its intrinsic authority has been recognized) in the books of the Old and New Testaments alone.

In the wake of Common Sense Realism and Populism, however, some evangelicals, including some Fundamentalists, have become confused about the meaning of these doctrines. They have distorted *Sola Scriptura* to mean *Nuda Scriptura*. They have replaced the perspicuity of the Scriptures with the perspicacity of every interpreter.

The Historic Theory of Perspicuity

The classical Protestant and Baptist doctrine of the perspicuity of Scripture is well stated in the Westminster Confession and copied by the Second London Confession. These confessions acknowledge that the Scriptures reveal different truths with different levels of clarity. They imply that some of the less clear truths may be available only to the learned. One class of truths, however, is adequately comprehensible to learned and unlearned alike. That class includes such truths as must be “known, believed, and observed for salvation.”

In other words, the aspect of Scripture that can be understood by anyone is its saving message. Any truth that is essential to salvation is clearly and comprehensibly revealed “in some place of Scripture or other.” Anyone can learn the way of Salvation by reading the Bible.¹

It is no small matter that the way of salvation has been revealed in language that any person can understand. We do not have to rely upon sophisticated intellectual tools. We do not have to rely upon specially-endued ecclesiastical spokesmen. If we can read the Bible in our hands, then we can know how to be saved.

But suppose we want more. Suppose we wish to acquire a more advanced understanding of the salvation that we have received. Suppose we wish to explore doctrines that are less directly connected with the gospel itself. Should we expect every doctrine of Scripture to be as clearly stated as the way of salvation?

The early Protestants and Baptists thought not, and most of us agree with them intuitively. That is why we have Bible studies. It is why we listen to expository sermons. It is why we usually expect our elders to have received special training in the handling of the biblical text. We do not just read the Word of God; we also want to be helped to understand it.

We still insist that no special, spiritual unction is necessary to become an official interpreter of the Bible. The only anointing that is available is the indwelling Spirit of God acting as our teacher—and He performs this function for all believers equally. This ministry of the Holy Spirit is what we call *illumination*.

Illumination, however, does not take the place of good reading and hard study. It functions less at the level of interpretation and more at the level of application. In His illuminating ministry, the Holy Spirit does not teach us what the text says. Instead, He takes our knowledge of what the text says (gained through study) and shows us its significance for our own lives.

Requirements for Effective Interpretation

If we wish to understand more than the basics of the gospel, how should we proceed? What do we need in order to understand Scripture rightly? I suggest that we must attend to at least three requirements.

Interpretive Method

The first requirement for understanding Scripture is sound interpretive method. The Bible’s perspicuity has sometimes been so emphasized as to overlook the fact that it is rather a complicated book. It was written in three languages over a millennium and a half. It contains narratives, poems, visions, oracles, biographies, and a species of epistolary literature that combines exhortation with theological treatise. It has its own, rather technical vocabulary that has been adapted from ordinary

usage in order to make special, theological points. Reading the Bible is less like reading a daily newspaper than it is like reading Plato or Seneca.

The least that serious interpreters of Scripture should do is to prepare themselves as thoroughly as if they meant to understand Plato or Seneca. What does this preparation require? At minimum, it must include a sound grasp of the historical-grammatical method of interpretation. This method is what we mean when we talk about “literal interpretation.”²

Along with the method itself, interpreters must add other knowledge and skills. Naturally, historical method requires the interpreter to know the relevant history and the culture in which a document was produced. By the same token, grammatical method means that interpreters must understand grammar. For biblical interpreters this means not only the grammar of the language in which the interpreter is reading, but also the languages in which the Bible was written.³

Skill in applying the historical-grammatical method requires reading the Bible itself. Presumably, all interpreters read the passages that they wish to interpret. To understand the Bible well, however, there is no substitute for wide-ranging knowledge of the whole biblical text. This kind of knowledge is gained only by reading through the Bible, over and over again.

Interpretive method is not learned by simply studying method but by practicing the method under the tutelage of someone who has mastered it. This kind of practice is about the only way through which we can hope to have our bad hermeneutical habits exposed and corrected. It is the reason that every Bible college and evangelical seminary that I know of requires a course in interpretation.

The Interpretive Community

The second requirement for understanding Scripture is life in the interpretive community. I have already implied the existence of such a community by suggesting that interpretive method has to be learned from someone who has already mastered it. Teachers and students together form a community.

Biblical interpretation is a contact sport. While it requires hours of solitude during which we examine the text and reflect upon it, good interpretation also requires the rough-and-tumble of conversation. We submit our ideas about the text to the community of interpreters. The members of that community will invariably notice facts that we have overlooked. They will raise objections of which we have not thought. They will point out to us where we have allowed our interpretation to be influenced by prejudice or self-interest. They will pursue implications that we have left unexplored.⁴

The core of our interpretive community ought to be the local church. Indeed, one of the main functions of a local church is to train its members to become effective readers of the Word of God. This kind of training may certainly include formal instruction in biblical interpretation. Whether it does or not, however, churches offer plenty of informal instruction. Every sermon, every Sunday school lesson, and every Bible study is *de facto* a lesson in hermeneutics. Effective churches must plan occasions for members to practice their interpretive skills. They must also plan occasions for genuine conversation where ideas can be floated, discussed, and even shot down.

Interpretation requires conversation, but not all partners will be granted an equal hearing in that conversation. To whom should we listen most closely? One obvious answer is that we should listen carefully to those who have gained the greatest interpretive mastery. People who are skilled in interpretive method and biblical languages, and people who possess a broad grasp of the biblical text, certainly deserve our hearing. But so do others.

Within the church Christ has given some to be pastors and teachers. The men who hold this office bear a special responsibility, for they will answer to Jesus Christ for our souls. These ought to be men who have already shown themselves to be skillful interpreters, and we should listen to them for that reason. More than that, however, they have a charge from Jesus Christ to teach us, so their office carries with it an authority that comes from the Master Himself. As these bishops faithfully preach and teach the Scriptures, and as they display in their lives the application of their study, we are morally bound to listen to them and even to obey them (1 Thess. 5:12-13; Heb. 13:7, 17).

Special prominence should also be granted to those whose lives have been most marked by the character of Christ, especially to those who have borne great reproach for the sake of His name. Such individuals are exceedingly rare, but the voices of the martyrs are not to be despised. These may not be the most learned people or the most skillful hermeneuticians, but we should never be dismissive of those who give evidence of having known Him and the fellowship of His suffering.

The Christian Past

If we really believe in the importance of the community of interpreters, then we shall also include at least one other group in that community. Besides listening to our peers and contemporaries, we shall also listen to the voices of the Christian past. This is the third requirement of sound interpretation: a knowledge of the development of Christian thought.

Most of us will never come up with a truly original interpretation. The Bible has already been read in almost every way that it can be read, whether rightly or wrongly. The wrong readings of the Bible have often become heresies that have challenged the most important truths of the Christian faith. In reaction against those wrong readings, Christians have developed very nuanced ways of detailing what they think the Bible teaches. Such formulas are very important, for they close the doors against disaster to the right hand and to the left. Historic interpretations of Scripture almost always have their guard up against something.

If we ignore the controversies of the past, and if we neglect the formulations that arose from them, then we open ourselves to the possibility of recapitulating mistaken interpretations that have led to error. Even if we manage to avoid the errors, we shall not perceive the importance of the correct interpretations until we understand the conflicts that threatened them.

In some circles, one finds a naïve belief that a solitary individual, given no prior instruction, can simply sit down with a Bible and discover the entire Christian faith. The problems with this view are manifold. The first and most obvious is that no one has ever actually done this. The second is that God never intended anyone to do so—God's plan was for those who had been taught to commit what they had learned to faithful people, who would in turn teach others (2 Tim. 2:2). The third is that wherever people have tried to start from nothing and interpret the Bible for themselves, they have (almost?) invariably produced error and even heresy.

Does anyone really need to be convinced that biblical interpretation has regularly gone seriously wrong? Sometimes it seems as if misunderstanding has been the typical state of affairs. It is out of conflict with misunderstanding, however, that right understanding has justified itself. We cannot afford to be ignorant of those conflicts. Nor can we afford to assume that by just starting from scratch we can avoid all the mistakes of the past. We are neither more intelligent, nor wiser, nor better persons than the interpreters of previous generations.

The attitude of humility is essential for correct biblical understanding. We need humility enough to recognize that we need to be disciplined by method. We need humility enough to submit our

interpretations to the examination of the community. We need humility enough to recognize our betters, to subject ourselves to licit authority, and to honor the martyrs. We need humility enough to recognize that a regard for the past may not be nostalgia, but an important step forward in articulating the correct interpretation of the Bible.

If we lack this kind of humility, then we are doomed to become a generation of do-it-yourself interpreters. We shall be merchandise for those who market their opinions as the teaching of Scripture. We shall be left to the tender mercies of the religious hucksters and ecclesiastical entrepreneurs. And we shall deserve it, for such is the fate of the proud. ✘

¹ Even with respect to the way of salvation, the understanding that all interpreters can achieve is not exhaustive or even advanced, but “sufficient.”

² One of the best books on interpretive method is Mortimer J. Adler, *How to Read a Book* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1940). I have found the earlier edition more useful than the 1972 revision, co-authored with Charles Van Doren. In any case, this volume ought to be required reading in every Bible college hermeneutics course.

³ I have heard people question the value of studying the biblical languages. Invariably the questioning is done by those who have never invested the necessary time and discipline to learn the languages. I have never heard anyone who actually mastered the languages question their usefulness. I grant that most of Scripture can be understood *at the basic level* by reading a good translation. For a more advanced level of understanding (the level at which most pastors ought to be functioning), and for help in solving certain thorny problems, knowledge of the original languages is indispensable. The person who does not learn the languages is doomed to read the commentaries of those who have.

⁴ This is one of the necessary functions of opponents and even enemies. Ideally, our friends should confront us about our mistakes, including our mistakes in interpretation. Often, however, our friends are more afraid of us than for us, so they allow our idiosyncrasies to pass unchallenged. Our opponents and enemies, however, share no such compunctions.

This essay is by [Kevin T. Bauder](#), president of [Central Baptist Theological Seminary](#). Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses. New subscriptions to this electronic newsletter can be requested at inthenickoftime@centralseminary.edu.

The Instruction

Thomas Traherne (1636-1674)

Spue out thy filth, the flesh abjure;
Let not Contingents thee defile.
For Transients only are impure,
And Aery things thy soul beguil.

Unfelt, unseen let those things be
Which to thy Spirit were unknown,

When to they Blessed Infancy
The World, thy Self, thy God was shewn.

All that is Great and Stable stood
Before thy Purer Eys at first:
All that in Visibles is Good
Or pure, or fair, or unaccurst.

Whatever els thou now dost see
in Custom, Action, or Desire,
'Tis but a Part of Miserie
In which all Men on Earth Conspire. ✠

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