

## CHAPTER 15

# The Use of Scripture

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The Bible is at the heart of Christian faith and practice. Reading and interpreting the scripture is constitutive of Christian worship and spirituality. As the primary witness to the apostolic faith, the Bible is a formative authority in Christian doctrine and ethics. The Bible, therefore, is central to the theological enterprise, and that in two ways: in the critical study of the Bible itself, and as a theological resource informing Christian understanding. However, despite its importance, the use of the scripture as a central concern in practical theology has proven elusive and problematic.

### The Elusiveness of Scripture in Practical Theology

Numerous cross-currents make the use of scripture in practical theology far from straight sailing. First, all Christian traditions accord the Bible a fundamental authority. But this authority is interpreted quite differently. For the Orthodox churches the Bible is at the root of, but essentially part of, tradition, woven into the liturgical and theological life of the church (Ballard and Holmes 2006: 42–58). In Catholicism the Bible is indeed the fundamental witness but it is interpreted in and through the magisterium, the teaching authority of the church (Houlden 1995: 85ff.). In Protestantism, with its slogan of *sola Scriptura*, the Bible stands over the church and its meaning is received through the work of the Holy Spirit. However, there is a tension, especially in Protestantism, between a more conservative (even fundamentalist) emphasis on the priority and literal authority of the scriptures and more liberal interpretation that reads the Bible in relation to contemporary insights and culture (Trueman 2006).

Second, the fragmentation of modern academic theology into a series of separate disciplines, each with its own methodologies, expertise, and literature (Farley 1983: 100–116), has created a (sometimes yawning) gap between biblical studies and practical theology. A similar situation is also found between biblical studies and systematic

theology (see Fowl 1998). Biblical scholars see the Bible as their field of inquiry. In modern times, they have understood their task as predominantly historical and literary. They set the Bible firmly in the ancient world, sometimes at great distance from our present context, making interpretation dependent on specialist knowledge. Of course, many biblical scholars are members of faith communities and see their work as being in the service of such communities. Indeed, despite the elusive nature of assured results, biblical studies has produced a greater understanding of the Bible and its background.

More recently, under the influence of philosophers such as Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur, the focus in biblical studies has moved to hermeneutics, shifting attention from the earlier interest in what lay "behind" the text to the text itself and what lies "in front" of the text. This fostered fresh interest in the history of interpretation and the contextuality of the reader and thus increased interest in the contemporary use of the Bible (Oeming 2006: 25–26). But the shift also gave rise to a plethora of hermeneutic methodologies, sometimes in tension with each other. Interpretation has become more complex and the search for meaning more layered. There are many readings of the same text. Moreover, according to biblical scholar Manfred Oeming, the approach of biblical studies in both modern phases (as historical study and as hermeneutics) has served to undermine the authority and scriptural status of the Bible (2006: 41–42).

Finally, practical theology has its own pitfalls. It is a broad field of study, inquiring into the nature and norms of Christian practice in and for the world. But its definition as a discipline has shifted in the last several decades, raising new questions about how it should engage with biblical studies and with scripture. Traditionally, until the last half-century, ministers and scholars saw practical theology as predominantly theological education for ministry. As greater disciplinary focus emerged, they divided the enterprise into a series of subdisciplines (liturgy, preaching, pastoral care, education, etc.) each with its own focus and literature (Farley 1983: 175–195). More recently, there has been a growing perception that practical theology finds its primary coherence in a contextual approach to the theological task. Roman Catholic missiologist Stephen Bevans provides a good definition of contextual theology that adheres nicely to many contemporary depictions of practical theology:

Contextual theology can be defined as a way of doing theology in which one takes into account: the spirit and message of the gospel; the tradition of the Christian people; the culture in which one is theologising; and the social change in that culture . . . As we understand it today, contextualisation is part of the very nature of theology itself. (Bevans 1992: 1)

Consequently, practical theology is now defined more by its methodology, as a "way of doing theology," than by its content or parameters as a field. It addresses every expression of Christian life and witness, including professional formation and practice, seeking to clarify faithful contemporary living. This broad understanding has led to more diverse and diffuse understandings of the place and use of the Bible.

Given the two very different academic approaches to scripture in biblical studies and in theology, until recently little systematic attention has been given to the question of the use of the Bible in practical theology. With the hope of stimulating creative dialogue,

the Bible in Pastoral Practice project (2000–2005) brought together practical and biblical theologians and practitioners under the auspices of the Bible Society and Cardiff University, Wales (see Ballard and Holmes 2006). This chapter draws on and develops aspects of that discussion. It suggests, in broad terms, four ways in which the Bible can and should play a role in practical theology, including an agenda for further work. The use of scripture in practical theology has a troubled history.

## The Bible as Resource: The Bible and Pastoral Care

The first mode starts from a given situation and moves toward using the Bible as a resource. This is most clearly seen in the context of pastoral care and counseling. A few decades ago, many pastoral theologians recognized that the appeal of the social sciences had led to models of care dominated by secular ideas and detached from theological roots. Stephen Pattison (2000: 121) offers an example in his analysis of the work of a prominent figure in the counseling movement, Howard Clinebell. Clinebell simply uses the scriptures corroboratively in support of conclusions arrived at elsewhere. To counter this trend, recent scholars have made more conscious efforts to recover a theological basis for pastoral care and to relate the Bible to practice. Broadly speaking, four approaches have been taken.

The first stresses the normativity of scripture. This approach tends to correspond to a conservative theology of scripture that tries to provide a clear Christian framework for pastoral counseling. In the words of Christian psychiatrist Roger Hurding:

Not surprisingly “biblical” counsellors tend to hold either an “excluding” or “integrational” stance. This is because their doctrinal position is often sharply conceived so secular psychology is either roundly condemned (from an exclusive “special revelational” perspective) or cautiously evaluated (where God’s revelation is seen to be through word and works). (Hurding 2003: 276)

Hurding goes on to describe the work of psychologists and theorists, such as Jay Adams, Lawrence Crabb, Gary Collins, and Selwyn Hughes, all influential in what they explicitly call Christian, rather than merely pastoral, counseling.

A second strand also wants to use the Bible to inform pastoral care in a decisive and formative way. But it recognizes the reality of living in the modern world and so hopes to affirm both the challenges of biblical scholarship and the insights and practices of psychology and psychotherapy. These two are, therefore, variously brought into critical dialogue. Frequently this is done by taking up a critical theme in biblical studies and exploring how it can inform pastoral care. British pastoral theologian Stephen Pattison (2000: 115–129) describes three approaches. The “imagist approach” selects themes and images that could provide a model for the pastor’s self-image. Here Pattison offers examples of Alistair Campbell’s reflections on “the good shepherd,” “the wounded healer,” and “God’s fool.” The “informative approach” looks to the Bible for a whole range of insights that could illuminate the human condition. Donald Capps, for example, uses the Bible’s many literary genres, such as wisdom, parable, or lament, to address different situations. The psalms of lament not only respond to and help people through

the grief process: they also free people from obtrusive pious expectations and allow them to be angry with God. William Oglesby exemplifies a third "thematic approach." Here a strong biblical theology, influenced by the Biblical Theology Movement of the immediate post-World War II era, adopts key themes from the Bible, such as creation, redemption, providence, sin, and grace, to provide a framework for self-understanding as people seek to live in loving relationships and in hope with neighbor and with God in a fallen world.

US pastoral theologian Herbert Anderson (Anderson 2006) adds two more recent approaches. The "hermeneutic approach," which aims to interpret present human reality alongside and in relation to an understanding of the Bible as a living text, is well established by Charles Gerkin, but widely used by many pastoral theologians, including Capps. The "narrative approach" adopted by Anderson himself, along with liturgy scholar Ed Foley, uses Ricoeur's narrative understanding of human experience and its affinity with narrative readings of the Bible. Pastoral care takes the form of weaving human stories into God's story. "Each of us has stories that allow the divine narrative to unfold and all human stories are potential windows into the story of God" (Anderson 2006: 203).

A third strand in the use of the Bible as resource is part of the emergent contextual theologies of the latter part of the twentieth century. Drawing on Marxian analysis and critical theorists such as Michel Foucault, scholars in liberation theology, in other theologies from the Southern world, and in theologies arising from oppressed or minority groups adopt an approach to scripture that emphasizes the struggle with the text. There are three slightly different patterns here. As Zoë Bennett Moore (2002) argues, feminist readers can find the Bible oppressive and not liberating. The text needs to be challenged to see if it carries a word of grace and wisdom at all. Second, a liberation perspective, adopted by Pattison (1994) and James Poling (1991), for example, suggests that a radical reading of the text affirms "God's preference for the poor" and enables a questioning of institutions and power. Finally, others work in and with their own particular context. So US pastoral theologian Edward Wimberly (2006) offers an approach to scripture that arises from and speaks to the African American scene.

A fourth and final use of scripture as a resource is indirect. It is not always appropriate in many pastoral situations, especially in secular and pluralistic settings, to refer directly to faith or to introduce scripture overtly. Reticence, respect for the other, and sensitivity to the needs of those involved are proper considerations. Biblically this corresponds with the manner of God's dealings with us in weakness and pain. However, the biblical perspective may still be present as it informs the pastoral relationship through the orientation of the pastor (Lyll 2001: 89–107). A survey of ministers and church leaders in Britain found that almost all pastors, of every denomination and theological persuasion, normally operate in this way in most situations (Georgiou 2000).

## Working from the Bible: The Bible in Worship and Spirituality

Whereas pastoral care starts from experience and calls on the Bible to illuminate or to deepen that experience by setting it in the context of God's word, in worship and spir-

ituality the Bible is at the center. Christian identity is openly acknowledged and the congregation and individuals place themselves deliberately before God, who is mediated in and through the Bible. Thus, for example, in corporate worship, the liturgy of the Word comprises largely the reading of scripture and its exposition (see van Olst 1991; McKim 1995). The liturgy of the sacrament draws participants into the scriptural drama of Christ's death and resurrection. The gospel story shapes the form of the Christian liturgical year. Biblical phrases and images permeate praise and prayer. The liturgical offices or regular times of prayer are designed to take worshippers through the Bible in a systematic way. Personal devotion largely consists in meditative reading of scripture, with or without additional aid.

These distinct and often formal uses of scripture in worship and spirituality should be part of the concern of practical theology. More attention should be given to integrating them in its work. Three points are of immediate interest here.

First, it is in the corporate worship of the church that the Bible is most demonstrably scripture, a canonized text. Yet strangely this "scriptural principle" is largely neglected and undermined by modern scholarship (Bartholomew et al. 2006: 207–235). This dimension needs to be recovered. This can be done dogmatically by appeal to authority; but within biblical scholarship there are two approaches. The first is confessional. One asserts that the Bible as received in its final form and as used in the church is a given datum for scholarly inquiry. This is, for example, the starting point of canonical criticism, of which Brevard S. Childs is the leading proponent. The second approach is more pragmatic and starts from the reader's intention. One can read the Bible simply as literature or as history, but in the community of faith one also reads it as scripture and as such recognizes how it sustains the church through the ages (Bartholomew et al. 2006: part 1; Oeming 2006: 65–70).

Second, by and large, the formally structured reading of scripture in corporate worship and the more contemplative act of private devotion have tended to proceed in faith contexts uninterrupted by the challenge of biblical criticism. This has sometimes caused considerable tension. However, the new hermeneutic's interest in that which is "in front" of the text has helped undermine this tension. As a result, people have begun to recover and reappropriate pre-critical approaches to interpreting the Bible, such as the classical medieval fourfold reading (historical, allegorical, analogical, tropological), Protestant Christological interpretations, and models of biblical meditation, such as *Lectio Divina* or Franciscan and Ignatian prayer. This has opened up new ways of working with the Bible, not only in pastoral and other communal practice, but as a theological resource (Oeming 2006: 77).

Third, Christian prayer and worship are always extempore and contextual. Even when the initial and controlling focus is the scriptures, the intention is for such worship to address the present. In our day, worship in both its liturgically ordered and its more ostensibly free form is increasingly flexible, allowing for local custom, expressing felt needs, and responding to changing events. Preaching has also become more varied in style and more responsive to context, a forum where the concerns of the people are rehearsed before God. In a number of places, for instance, worship and sermon preparation is a corporate activity, arising from the work and prayer of the people.

These considerations show that liturgical practice and theory and the devotional uses of the Bible are indeed central to the concerns of practical theology, both as objects of study and as resources for doing theology.

## The Bible as Wisdom: The Bible and Theological Reflection

A third use of the Bible in practical theology occurs in theological reflection. Bevans (1992) outlines five models of contextual theology, all of which can be found in practical theology. Two predominate in theological reflection. The first is the critical-correlational model, developed from systematic theologians Paul Tillich and David Tracy, in which one engages the demands and perspectives of the tradition in dialogue with the living context in which faith seeks to operate (Ballard and Pritchard 2006: 65–66). The other model first appeared in Latin American liberation theology and uses the pastoral cycle of the “base communities.” It starts from the imperative of the present and moves through analysis to reflection and on to action (Ballard and Pritchard 2006: 82–87). Critical dialogue between the present reality and the tradition lies at the heart of both models. This encounter has increasingly become known as “theological reflection” and is the heart of practical theological method. A growing literature on theological reflection has become a dominant feature in theological education as well as a tool in ministry and mission. Theological reflection is also most often the place where explicit reference is made to the Bible (Graham et al. 2005, 2007; Kinast 2000; Thompson 2008; see also Groome 1999).

In fact this process is fundamental to all Christian discipleship. It asks the question: How do I/we live faithfully in this situation? In theological reflection as a structured activity, however, there is a conscious and deliberate exploration of the integration of belief and practice in a given situation. This could range from a moment in ministry, to working with a congregation, to a personal life decision. The desire is practical wisdom or insight into the way we are drawn into God’s life, as that not only graces the particular issue but also deepens our self-understanding as those who live before God. How can we use the Bible responsibly in this process?

First, it is necessary to have sufficient acquaintance with biblical scholarship to be able to use the scriptures with integrity. One needs to grasp the critical issues, the approaches to interpretation, and what to do with the “nasty texts” that seem to undermine the gospel.

Second, and equally vital, the practical theologian is a member of the community of faith, its worship, fellowship, and witness. So he or she not only serves the church but also draws on its resources for his or her own spiritual life. Thus the Bible will be a familiar part of the round of prayer, reflection, and guidance that shapes the life of faith. One must indeed accept the Bible as scripture.

Third, the aim is the kind of wisdom which Paul Ricoeur calls “the second *naïveté*.” Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann explains:

By the phrase Ricoeur refers to readiness to take the Bible seriously as scripture – as authoritative revelation – after one has abandoned a first simplistic *naïveté* and after one

has seriously engaged in criticism and pushed it as far as it can go . . . It recognises that in the midst of such rationality there is nonetheless "surplus" that cannot be vetoed by critical thought but that continues to be generative when the text is heard in a kind of truthful innocence. (2009: xx)

This kind of wisdom comes only from letting the Bible, in all its diversity and strangeness, become a companion on the way. That is, it comes from long and careful practice. Brueggemann argues that the modern exegete needs to participate in this practice. It also requires an exercise in imagination: "*Imagination* is the capacity to entertain, host, trust and respond to *images* of reality (God and the world) that are beyond conventional dominant reason" (2009: xx; emphases original).

We read the Bible, therefore, as though it were true in its description of the world in terms of God and Christ and we find that, despite the perversity of doing so in the modern world, it makes sense, challenging our assumptions and demanding a response. "What," Brueggemann avers, "we are proposing is: In Scripture study, reading and hearing we are *re-describing the world*, that is, constructing it alternately" (2009: 4; emphasis original).

The Scripture Project at the Center of Theological Inquiry in Princeton (1998–2002) proposed a similar model. A group of biblical scholars, systematic theologians, and pastors from the United States and the United Kingdom read the Bible together. Bible scholars Ellen Davis and Richard Hays describe the challenge:

In the course of the consultation, the conviction grew among us that reading Scripture is an *art* – a creative discipline that requires engagement and imagination, in contrast to the enlightenment's ideal of detached objectivity. In our practices of reading the Bible, we are (or should be) something like artists. This conviction carries two corollaries, the bad news and the good . . . The bad news is that, like every other true art form, reading Scripture is a difficult thing to do well . . . there lies the good news as well. Like every other form of art, reading Scripture has the potential for creating something beautiful . . . Our readings will produce such beauty precisely to the extent that they respond faithfully to the antecedent imaginative power of God, to which the Bible bears witness. (2003: xv–xvi; emphasis original)

Theological reflection as a deliberate process, therefore, aims to enable us to discern the wisdom of God in the scriptures for faithful living in the present. To do this properly requires resources in critical understanding and in spiritual depth, patient listening, and reflection, so that in this situation and with these texts something of the critical process can be recapitulated in order to catch the vision anew and afresh. The literature offers countless ways of stimulating and structuring this engagement with the Bible, from traditional modes of contemplative prayer to group work and drama (Ballard and Pritchard 2006: 126–144; Thompson 2008: 75–96). The temptation, however, is to try to avoid the blood, sweat, and tears, to see the method as the substance, and to accept the short cut and easy response. The Bible, in all its diversity and even perversity, is not an easy companion, even if it also invites us to enter into the joy of the Lord.

## Discovering the Bible: The Bible and Empirical Research

The Bible is not only a resource in and for practical theology. Practical theology itself is a resource for understanding the Bible. Practical theology has a responsibility to the theological enterprise and to biblical studies in particular to inquire into how the Bible is received and regarded in the church and the world. This is first an empirical, and then an evaluative, task and it contributes to the history of the reception of the text. Unfortunately, little has been done in this regard. There are few, if any, references to the use of the Bible in the literature on congregational studies. More appears in religious education where the Bible is part of content and process. Organizations concerned with disseminating or reading the Bible, such as the Bible societies, have done some market research on how the Bible is used in churches, study groups, or private devotions. There are occasional pointers in some sociological studies of religious attitudes. Practical theologian Andrew Village introduces his groundbreaking study on lay attitudes with a confession: "the academy remains largely ignorant of what other people do with the Bible" (2007: 2). A number of suggestions can be made for future research in the following areas:

*The laity and scripture:* Much more needs to be known about what is believed about the Bible, how the Bible is read, how it informs daily life, and how critical scholarship impinges on the consciousness of the ordinary reader. It would also be interesting to compare how different groups of the laity and scholars, such as those gathered in the Scripture Project, read particular passages of scripture.

*The Bible in congregational worship:* This is the way the majority of Christians encounter the scriptures. How are the reading and exposition of the Bible perceived? How do they shape knowledge of the Bible? Does the use of a lectionary, or lack of it, affect the notion of scripture? How can the Bible be seen and understood as a whole?

*The Bible in postmodern culture:* The rapid social, economic, and political changes that are overtaking the world mean that we are increasingly living in a mobile, pluralistic society that can so easily lose cultural roots and cultural cohesion. In the West, certainly, it is no longer possible to assume a widespread familiarity with the Christian faith and the Bible, in particular – its stories, its language, and its perspective – which have for so long been at its heart. What does it mean to live in a Bible-poor, post-Christian culture? What does this mean for Christian practice, witness, and ministry?

*Facilitating biblical reflection:* A gap still remains between the academy and religious communities and between different areas of academic study. What opportunities, structures, and resources would facilitate the deepening of biblical awareness, not least in and through practical theology? How can practical theologians be engaged with other colleagues in understanding the Bible?

As this chapter demonstrates, practical theology engages the Bible in four ways: as resource, as focal point, as discernment, and as object of research. In practice these are



interlocking rather than discrete activities. More important, the use of scripture is an area that has not received sufficient attention in practical theology. It is imperative, therefore, that greater attention be paid to how the Bible actually functions and how it acts as scripture. The Bible is too important to be left to biblical scholars and the systematic theologians.

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