

## Reading Scripture in Church

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One of the aims of this essay is to distinguish between what we mean by “bible” and “Scripture”. The bible is the book that anyone can buy and read whether they belong to the church or not. However, not everyone can read or hear the bible as Scripture. For that you need to be guided by the Church as was the case for the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26-39). To read or hear the bible as Scripture is to understand the meaning hidden from the world. The idea that the bible could be read using common sense reasoning came from those in the radical wing of the Reformation who desired freedom from tradition and the authority of the Church under the banner of “scripture alone”. We think that we can read the Bible without the tutelage of the Church because we are all still enamoured by the idea of throwing off all external authority and thinking for ourselves. We are dominated by ideas of the sufficiency of the common man and of egalitarianism. It is enough, we think, for the common man to sit alone and read the Bible. This idea explains why Protestantism has been so vulnerable to splitting into the various denominations that we see today, since each person becomes his or her own church. The problem is that each isolated reader brings to his or her reading their own unrecognised political bias and individual interpretation. The result, for the Church, is endless dispute over the meaning of texts. Indeed, the early Reformation was split over just such considerations.

The background of the current dispute over the place of same sex attracted persons in the Anglican Communion is a dispute about the difference between reading the bible and hearing Scripture. The former relies on the plain sense of things and the latter hears Scripture through the lens of God’s act in Christ to redeem the world. It holds that redemption is not achieved through an historical search for the opinions of Jesus but through his welcoming all into the house of God and His continuing presence with us through the Spirit.

When one is baptised into the church, the body of Christ, one comes under the authority of the Church that gains its authority from the ancient creeds and the

understanding that we know God as being revealed to us as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. (The Father sends the Son and the Son sends the Spirit) When Scripture is read in Church it is read in unity with all that the Church understands about how God has revealed Himself. Such understanding does not rely on our interpretation of individual texts, which is why, for example, Christian ethics cannot be derived from proof texts. When we understand Scripture, not as a collection of ancient texts, but as the result of the providence of God gifted by Him in order to draw us to Himself, we understand the difference between the bible and Scripture.

The bible can only be read within the politics of the Church and its theology. For example, it must be acknowledged that reading Scripture is an encounter with God on God's terms and not on ours. Paul tells us in 1Cor. 12:2 that "no one can say "Jesus is Lord" except by the Holy Spirit"; becoming a disciple of Jesus is not a personal project that we can adopt. Rather, we require an encounter with God before we can make such a statement. The medium of this encounter is the Spirit, the continuing presence of Christ with us. We may likewise say something similar; "no one can read the Scriptures except by the Holy Spirit."

I hope you are getting my drift. This is not an elitist clerical grab for power but an indication of the place and use of Scripture in the Church. While it is all very good to describe the bible as a great book of literature, if somewhat opaque in various places, this is not the view of the Church. While the bible is also understood as a window into ancient cultures and history, this is not the focus when Scripture is read in Church. Rather, the Church mystifyingly, regards it all as being the Word of God, and not just the bits we understand and agree with. The Church bears witness that salvation comes from the Jews and that Christians believe that Jesus is the final and proper outcome of Israel's relationship with God. This binds the Old and New Testaments together, the one speaking to the other in the Spirit.

As an example of how the Old and New Testaments talk to each other is given in the following:

“Eve disobeyed as a virgin, while Mary obeyed as a virgin. Eve disobeyed an Angel, while Mary obeyed Angel. Adam was restored in Christ, so Eve was restored in Mary: for what the virgin Eve had bound fast through unbelief, this did the virgin Mary set free through faith. And thus, as the human race fell into bondage to death by means of a virgin, so it is rescued by a virgin; virginal disobedience having been balanced in the opposite scale by virginal obedience.”

The writer has used Adam and Eve, Christ and Mary as types that refer to each other. The result is a memorable connection that illuminates the faith and reminds us of the unity of Scripture.

Any study of the bible that does not recognise this but instead insists on a “scientific” analysis of the texts missed the point. Although modern biblical scholarship has produced much useful knowledge of the bible, its role is to be a servant of the Church that sees the unity of the Word of God. Interpretation is not an exercise in history or archaeology. Rather, interpretation is an exercise in theological insight. Before the rise of the research university in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, theology was the queen of the sciences. Biblical studies and church history were not disciplines in their own right but handmaidens to the theological task of the Church.

If we are to make our way through the present controversies over how biblical texts are to be understood, we need to retrace how doctrine was formed in the early Church. The most important example was the dispute between Arius and Athanasius about whether Jesus was of one substance with the Father. While there are biblical texts that suggest that Jesus was subordinate to the Father, the Church, championed by Athanasius, decided otherwise. If they had not, we would have been left with an unworkable theology that reduced Jesus to being a teacher of doctrine and not the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.