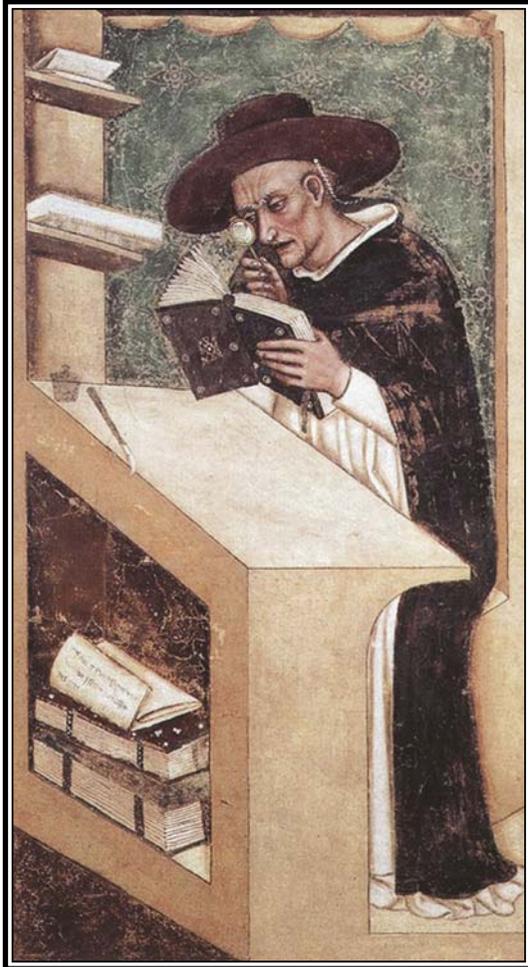


READING SCRIPTURE

INSIGHTS

The Faculty Journal of Austin Seminary



FALL 2008

RIGBY • WORK • TAN • REID • PRAYTOR • SADONGEI
CUMMINGS • GARCÍA • JONES • LINCOLN

INSIGHTS

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COVER: "Cardinal Nicholas of Rouen," by Tommaso da Modena; 1351-52, fresco, Chapter House, San Niccolo Treviso. Image courtesy of the Art Renewal Center®, www.artrenewal.org

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CHRISTIANITY AND CULTURE

A READER'S GUIDE TO THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

... SO FAR

Timothy Lincoln

INTRODUCTION

The B-I-B-L-E! Yes that's the book for me! I stand alone on the Word of God, the B-I-B-L-E!"

Many of us remember that old Vacation Bible School song from our childhood, and it ranks among the top ten for most of us when we think of the fun songs that helped to shape our piety. Maybe, too, in some subtle way, such formative experiences shape an altogether too "neat" approach to scripture that follows many of us all of our lives—even deep into our adulthood. As Professor Cynthia Rigby suggests in the lead article of this edition of *Insights*, the principle of "sola scriptura" is often elevated above every other interpretive principle—even the witness of Jesus Christ—until it leads to a sort of "bibliolatry."

But the Bible is not intended to be an object of worship. So it is that Dr. Rigby invites us to "put on our spectacles and look again" at the Reformed tradition's classical approach to scripture—an approach that sees the Bible instead as an authoritative window into the mighty activity of God in the world in every moment of life and history. When I was still a student, I heard the late John Claypool—then a Southern Baptist preacher from Mississippi, and later a priest in the Episcopal church—deliver the Lyman Beecher Lectures at Yale. He recalled, as a child, going to a revival service in which the preacher snapped open a leather Bible, put it on a pedestal for all to see, and then encouraged the congregation to bow before it as he led them in a vow—a sort of "pledge of allegiance"—to the open book. No doubt it was a dramatic moment, but not a particularly thoughtful one.

When Presbyterian pastors, elders, and deacons make their own vows, answering the constitutional questions as laid out by our *Book of Order*, there is an implied hierarchy in the questions. The first question begins, "Do you trust in Jesus Christ your Savior . . .?" The second reads, "Do you accept the scriptures . . . to be the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ . . . and God's Word to you?" The third begins, "Do you sincerely receive and adopt the essential tenets of the Reformed faith . . .?" Trust Christ, accept the scriptures (accept, not worship!), and receive and adopt our confessional heritage. When we approach the Bible as a witness to God's mighty acts, especially in Jesus Christ—a witness, just like us!—then it rightly remains in a proper hierarchy, and "sola scriptura" becomes appropriately contextualized.

Those early songs of our childhood have their place, but, in our maturity, when we are fortunate, we discover deeper ways to understand the keystones of our faith. As I write these words, I'm still humming the hymn we sang in church two days ago. One verse lifted up for me the truest consequence of thoughtful attention to the church's scripture. "Lord of all, of church and kingdom, In an age of change and doubt keep us faithful to the gospel, Help us work your purpose out. Here, in this day's dedication, All we have to give, receive: We, who cannot live without you, We adore you! We believe!"

Theodore J. Wardlaw
President, Austin Seminary



PUT ON YOUR GLASSES!

SOLA SCRIPTURA

AND OUR EXPERIENCE OF GOD

CYNTHIA L. RIGBY

After the world had been created, human beings were placed in it as in a theatre that they, beholding above them and beneath them the wonderful works of God, might reverently adore their Author¹ ... For by the scriptures as our guide and teacher, God not only makes those things plain that would otherwise escape our notice, but almost compels us to behold them, as if assisting our dull sight with spectacles.²



Jesus loves me, this I know ... for the Bible tells me so.” But do we really know Jesus loves us *because* the Bible tells us so? Many of us knew Jesus loves us before we could even read, or at least before we ever read the Bible. It is our parents, our pastors, or our friends—members of the community of faith—

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that told us so. So convinced are we of the reality of Jesus' love that we struggle with passages of scripture that seem to represent God as less than fully loving. If we are really being honest with ourselves, shouldn't we change the lyrics of the song to: "Jesus loves me, this I know ... *so* the Bible tells me so"?

To even imagine such a change says something about how we understand the relationship between the Bible's authority and the authority of our religious experiences. It says that experience, as well as scripture, has something to contribute to how we understand God. This raises an important question for Protestant Christians, namely: *Can we—and how can we—acknowledge the important contribution our faith experiences make to the development of our theologies while at the same time still honoring the classic Reformation principle of *sola scriptura* ("scripture alone")?*

There are various interpretations of what is meant by "*sola scriptura*," also known as the "scripture principle." Some understand it to mean scripture is the only source we look to in deciding what words to say about God. We may not then, in good faith, evoke our experience of Jesus' love as a guide for interpreting the biblical text. Others claim *sola scriptura* as meaning that scripture is the unique source among many—the "ruling norm" that can somehow be separated out from experience, reason, and tradition and used as the means to assess what is revelatory and what is not. Both of these approaches to living out our commitment to the Bible's authority reject the idea that religious experience can contribute anything novel to our understanding of God. In contrast to both approaches, I show in this essay how the Reformation scripture principle actually invites experience into the theological conversation as a contributing partner.

In developing an argument for how *sola scriptura* can champion religious experiences, I first describe the problem: contemporary figures too often either de-value religious experiences in the name of upholding *sola scriptura*, or reject *sola scriptura* in the guise of honoring religious experiences. I then discuss how *sola scriptura* functioned for the Reformers to welcome and cherish their religious experiences. Drawing from the history of doctrine in my constructive theological work, I argue that: (1) the scripture principle does not insist that scripture is the "only" source for doing the work of theology; (2) *sola scriptura* is the champion of religious experience insofar as it invites engaging, critiquing, and learning from such experiences, and (3) reclaiming *sola scriptura*, in the sense I am developing it here, can help us escape the trap of getting caught between subscribing to biblical literalism, on one hand, or denying the uniqueness of the Bible's authority, on the other. In short, I argue that the "spectacles of scripture" (Calvin) are not to be donned *after* our tryst with experience, for the purpose of discerning if and where there is, in it, any measure of truth. Rather, when we wear our glasses even *as* we live and experience, the Holy Spirit works through them to strengthen our "dull sight"—to show us what gifts God is offering and what wrongs must be condemned as inconsistent with the liberating Word.

SOLA SCRIPTURA : CONTEMPORARY APPROACHES AND SKEPTICISM

Many of today's proponents of *sola scriptura* claim to decide what God is like or what God is saying either by limiting themselves to the "data" provided in scrip-

ture, or by setting scripture up as a kind of judge over all other norms and sources.

Those who understand *sola scriptura* to mean scripture is the *only* norm and source for understanding God tend to minimize the authority of the creeds, councils, and religious experience in shaping theological understanding. The Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals offers, in “The Cambridge Declaration” of 1996, a clear articulation of their understanding of *sola scriptura*:

We reaffirm the inerrant scripture to be the sole source of written divine revelation, which alone can bind the conscience. The Bible alone teaches all that is necessary for our salvation from sin and is the standard by which all Christian behavior must be measured ... We deny that any creed, council, or individual may bind a Christian’s conscience, that the Holy Spirit speaks independently of or contrary to what is set forth in the Bible, or that personal spiritual experience can ever be a vehicle of revelation.³

In this declaration, scripture is represented as the single and only source that can be utilized in formulating theological truth claims. *Sola scriptura*, in this understanding, precludes the possibility that God can speak in and through our experiences. “Special revelation” leaves no room for “general revelation.”⁴

In the “Confession of 1967,”⁵ by contrast, scripture is not understood to be the “sole source” of revelation, as though it can be separated out from our experience of the liberating Word. “The Bible,” in fact, “is to be interpreted in the light of its witness to God’s work of reconciliation in Christ” (9.29). At the same time, the Bible is understood to be the “norming norm” of all other sources:

The one sufficient revelation of God is Jesus Christ, the Word of God incarnate, to whom the Holy Spirit bears unique and authoritative witness through the Holy Scriptures, which are received and obeyed as the Word of God written. The scriptures are not a witness among others, but the witness without parallel (9.27).

Creeds and confessions are clearly recognized as theological resources that are to be formed and ever re-formed in conversation with scripture, even as the Holy Spirit works through the written Word to show us the Word revealed in Jesus Christ:

Confessions and declarations are subordinate standards in the church, subject to the authority of Jesus Christ, the Word of God, as the scriptures bear witness to him. No one type of confession is exclusively valid, no one statement is irreformable (9.03).

In contrast to the “Cambridge Declaration,” the “Confession of 1967” recognizes our *experience* of the Word revealed as a locus of revelation.

Practically speaking, what difference does it make to the way we engage in our ministries whether we understand *sola scriptura* to preclude or to invite to the theological roundtable sources other than scripture? Fred Klooster, working against “reductionistic views of the authority of scripture” such as represented in the “Cambridge Declaration,” argues that *sola scriptura* does not require that we attempt to abdicate all other sources in doing the work of theology, but that we, with the Reformers, “abandon all tradition that conflict[s] with the Word of God and ... confess only what the Word legitimate[s].”⁶ Understanding that one can proof text in defending a myriad of

conflicting views, Klooster reminds us that *sola scriptura* has always presumed *tota scriptura*,⁷ that is, *all* of scripture must be considered in our efforts to discern the will of God.

Many contemporary thinkers quickly tire of such discussions, giving up on redeeming the concept of *sola scriptura* altogether both because they do not believe it is descriptive of revelatory reality and because they are concerned that those with clerical power have and will use the concept to minimize the religious experiences of the marginalized. It is obvious to these thinkers that other sources inevitably contribute to our formulation of truth claims, and silly to pretend we can either bar them from exerting influence or keep them under control. Although it is something of a relief when scholars such as Klooster acknowledge that other norms come into play in our theological reflections, it is not at all obvious, they hold, how he (or anyone) understands *tota scriptura* actually to work in our discerning processes. How do we go about considering scripture as a whole when making a particular decision? And how different is it, really, to bring scripture into play as the ultimate referee than it is to limit ourselves, from the beginning, to drawing from scripture as the only source? If scripture is the final arbiter of truth claims, why bother with other norms and sources at all?

Believing that God does work in and through human experience, Peter Gomes writes that Luther's "slogan," *sola scriptura*, can "make it harder to take scripture seriously" because it seems impractical and irrelevant. If the scripture principle argues that "scripture itself is the sole sufficient rule of conduct and belief for the Christian," Gomes reasons, and if we move to defend this primacy of scripture by arguing that "all is true, or all is not" for the sake of "discouraging picking and choosing," we have compromised on the "public, dynamic, and inclusive" character of the Bible.⁸ Don't we believe that the Bible is God's Word only when and insofar as the Holy Spirit moves to reveal it to us in the context of the particular Christian community?

Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza is also skeptical about the value of appeals to *sola scriptura*. The tendency of our culture is, she believes, to take "the authority of scripture ... at face value" rather than to struggle with the Bible's authority in light of "critical biblical studies," which insist that other sources be brought to the theological roundtable. "How [can one] determine the normative truth of the bible [*sic*] or derive canonical principles from a human document that is limited by its ancient linguistic and historical horizon?"⁹ Saying that the Bible is our final authority is not of much use, given that we do not agree on what it is the Bible is saying. Like Gomes, Schüssler Fiorenza does not think *sola scriptura* can make a helpful contribution to a viable theology of scripture because she associates it with stagnation. She suggests that the authority of scripture not be considered in a general way, but in the context of "believing communities today."¹⁰ For both Gomes and Schüssler Fiorenza, the scripture principle is not especially helpful for articulating the relevance of scripture to real life.

GLANCING BACK AT THE REFORMATION

The Reformers believed that scripture enables us to see God in our daily lives, and that recognizing God in our daily lives is our best defense against false truth claims.

Looking at the lives of the Reformers in relation to their conviction regarding sola scriptura reveals that they modeled a deep integration of the Bible with experience, reason, and tradition.

Historically, Luther's use of the adjective "sola" has often been misunderstood to imply "only." When Luther began using "sola" as an adjective, he was criticized on his own terms by the church because "only" did not occur in the biblical witness. In his translation of Romans 3, Luther believed that he was faithfully rendering the meaning of the text when he translated, into German, "the righteous will live by faith alone." According to Luther, the use of "only" (*allein*) in German grammar presumes that something else is "not" (*kein*). In Romans 3, Luther argues, we are not saved through the law—and the "*allein*" qualifying "faith" reminds us of this. Luther explains that he is reflecting, in his use of "*sola*," the German habit of emphasis. In the phrase, "the farmer brings *allein* grain and *kein* money," Luther explains, "the word '*allein*' helps the word '*kein*' so much that it becomes a clear and complete German expression." The purpose of the "*sola*," for Luther, is less to emphasize the isolation of faith, grace, Christ, and scripture from all else and more to accentuate the "*kein*"-ness of the papal bureaucracy. "Only" communicates the sense of the text to the masses reading it in the vernacular.

We do not have to ask about the literal Latin or how we are to speak German—as these asses do. Rather we must ask the mother in the home, the children on the street, the common person in the market about this. We must be guided by their tongue, the manner of their speech, and do our translating accordingly.¹¹

"*Sola fides*" ("by faith alone") and "*sola gratis*" ("by grace alone") imply, then, *not* works. Works are not the means to salvation. "*Solus Christus*" ("by Christ alone") and "*sola scriptura*" imply, then, *not* the church.

The Reformers also affirm the role of religious experience in formulating theological truth claims. Luther's so-called "Watchtower Experience" and Calvin's account of his conversion testify to the contribution of their experiences of God's grace, precipitated by their study of scripture. It is in the context of struggling to understand Romans that Luther has the ecstatic experience of recognizing that he has had it wrong—we are not saved by works, but by faith alone! In the face of the church's challenges to Luther's experience—its claim that the church, alongside the Bible, is a final authority for disseminating God's Word—Luther cries: *Sola scriptura!* *Sola gratis!* *Sola fides!* *Solus Christus!* I have learned, from scripture alone (not tradition), that I am justified by grace alone (not law) through faith (not works) in Christ (not the church). With this, he defends his religious experience of God's grace against the power mongering of the church. With this, he similarly rejects the church's teaching that "implicit faith" is real faith, reaffirming that there is only one Mediator between God and humanity, Jesus Christ.

Luther and Calvin did not limit their consideration of experience only to experiences of conversion. They in fact reflected continuously on the experiences of day-to-day life. For example, Luther explains that faith in God's grace "makes us happy, joy-

ful, and bold in [our] relationship[s] to God and all creatures.”¹² Similarly, Calvin insists that a cognitive understanding of the mechanics of faith is not enough. In contrast to the church’s ambivalence toward the feelings of the faithful, Calvin insists that faith precipitates confidence in our relationship to God. Faith is, in fact, “a firm and certain knowledge of God’s benevolence toward us. . . .”¹³

Luther and Calvin even cares about how people feel when they read their Bibles. Luther wrestles to bring the text “alive” in the vernacular; Calvin explains that he wrote his *Institutes* not only “to prepare and instruct candidates in sacred theology for the reading of the divine Word” but also “so they will be spared great annoyance and boredom” in their reading.¹⁴

The fact that Luther and Calvin are concerned about such matters challenges another unfortunate misappropriation of sola scriptura in our day—that is, its association with biblical literalism. Clearly by sola scriptura the Reformers do not mean that the biblical witness is always clear. Nor do they believe that all passages in scripture are equally authoritative. Calvin thinks that it is his task as a theologian to “arrange . . . the sum of religion . . . in such an order, that if people rightly grasp it, it will not be difficult for them to determine what they ought especially to see in scripture, and to what end they ought to relate its contents.”¹⁵ Luther’s well-known comment that the letter of James is “an Epistle of straw” is often referenced as a kind of inconsistency in Luther’s thought, supposedly revealing that even he can not follow through with a theological methodology grounded in sola scriptura. I would argue that Luther’s re-thinking of what books should be included in the biblical canon should lead us, rather, to reflect on what he means by sola scriptura. Clearly, the scripture principle does not, for Luther, mean that we set aside our reason, our religious experiences, and our interpretive judgments. Instead, this principle licenses him both to claim and to question the biblical texts in ways that the church would not allow.

PUTTING ON OUR SPECTACLES AND LOOKING AGAIN

As a Christian believer shaped by the Reformed tradition, I find two of Calvin’s insights especially helpful for reflecting on the contemporary relevance of sola scriptura.¹⁶ (1) We do not see God in general revelation (experience, nature, reason) apart from the work of special revelation (election of Israel, incarnation, scripture); and (2) the written words of scripture are not in and of themselves revelatory, but the “spectacles” we put on through which the Holy Spirit works to reveal God to us.

With these principles in mind, I wonder: What kind of glasses are scripture, and when do we put them on in relation to our faith experiences? Are we wearing scripture like those hang-around-the-neck drugstore glasses—the kind wearers grab for when they are looking over admissions statistics in a faculty meeting or can’t see the menu in a dimly lit restaurant? Or is scripture, for us, more like prescription lenses—the kind wearers keep on all the time, so that they forget what it is like *not* to see the nooks and crannies, the beauty and the ugliness? What happens when we imagine ourselves not putting on our spectacles of scripture to *evaluate* experience, but wearing them as we look at experience, tradition, and/or reason?

Karl Barth helps us understand scripture as not a static and stagnant document (that is piously applied “after the fact”), but as the vehicle through which, with the help of the Holy Spirit, we are able to see God’s Word ever-anew in relation to particular contexts. As Barth sees it, the scripture principle leads us to say both that “we do not know Christ outside or alongside scripture but only *in* scripture,” and “that revelation meets us only indirectly; there is an indirect identity of the Bible with revelation.”¹⁷ The Bible is revelatory because the Spirit speaks through it to show us God, in the context of our experiences, Barth believes. He points out, famously, that “God may speak to us through Russian communism, through a flute concerto, through a blossoming shrub, or through a dead dog. We shall do well to listen . . . if God really does so.”¹⁸ If we want to have any hope for recognizing God in even the unlikely elements of our experience, he advises, we’d better keep our glasses on. The purpose of scripture is not to confirm or deny the truth of our experience, according to Barth, but to enable us to see it for what it is.

Reformed theologians who desire to use scripture as a standard for judging human experiences rather than a vehicle for recognizing revelation in and through human experiences are troubled by Barth’s assertion that there is only an indirect relationship between revelation and the Bible. Klooster, for example, correctly describes Barth’s understanding of scripture as “witness to revelation, not itself revelation.”¹⁹ But Klooster does not think that Barth’s understanding, in this regard, is consistent with the Reformation view of *sola scriptura*. “I regret,” Klooster writes, “that Barth thought it necessary to develop a new view of revelation, one that differs significantly from that of Calvin and the other Reformers.”²⁰ I disagree with Klooster that Barth’s appropriation of the scripture principle is inconsistent with the Reformers. Clearly Calvin and Luther did not understand the Bible to be revelatory in and of itself. Calvin, for example, clearly thinks scripture (the Word written) is revelatory because, through the work of the Holy Spirit, it bears witness to the Word revealed (i.e. Jesus Christ). For Calvin, scripture is the “spectacles” we put on in order to see the divine revelation in a multiplicity of sources. In his work as a theologian and biblical commentator, Calvin always has his spectacles on, employing them to see what is revelatory in philosophy, in nature, in politics, and in human experience.

John de Gruchy, heavily influenced by Calvin and Barth’s understandings, argues that *sola scriptura* does not inhibit one from seeking after God’s creative Word in the world. Manifesting a concern for the marginalized shared by Gomes and Schüssler Fiorenza, de Gruchy argues that the scripture principle actually provides a means for oppressed individuals and groups to challenge those who claim to have the only “right” interpretation of scripture. When individuals in the Christian community recognize that they are subject to the authority of *sola scriptura*, and not to the authority of a particular interpretation, de Gruchy argues, they are freed to hear “the living, redeeming Word of God.”²¹ Recognizing that scripture “is the ultimate interpreter of the Word”²² not only frees us to move away from oppressive interpretations and their institutions; it also leads us to look *through* scripture, rather than only *in* scripture, for revelation. Understanding *sola scriptura* in this way opens us to the possibility of seeing God at

work in sources other than scripture.

Recently, I was challenged to think again about all of this over dinner, with a colleague from a sibling seminary, at the General Assembly meeting in San José. Having come to the G.A. only for a couple of days, and near the end of some tough deliberations and hard work, my role had been taking the form of listening to stories that were characterized, primarily and understandably, by weariness. In contrast to other conversation partners, my colleague at dinner was full of energy, hope, and sheer appreciation for what was going on around him that was not founded in the fact that his views were “winning” on the floor of the Assembly (in fact, they were not). Looking up at him from a plateful of grilled tilapia and almond-studded rice, I inquired (in so many words): “What’s up with you?”

The long and the short of it is this: my friend had on his glasses. He is a guy who, as it turns out, reads the Bible devotionally every morning and looks through it in the course of the day. He is not the type to have a huge concordance ever-accessible on his iPhone, prepared to arm himself with Bible verses that support whatever side of whatever he wants to be arguing at any particular moment. He does not understand scripture to be some kind of fail-proof weapon to be brought into human debate as the final arbiter of truth. Rather, his witness makes clear that scripture shapes who he is and how he looks at things all the time. It is embraced by him as a gift of God through which he is able to engage the difficult questions that frame our days. He sat at that dinner and pointed out pockets of beauty and potential stumbling places that I was not seeing, in my experience at the G.A., because I was wearing my glasses around my neck and putting them on when I thought they could be helpful to *me*, rather than looking through them all the time so they could affect what I saw to begin with.

What I am advocating, then, is working toward an understanding of *sola scriptura* that encourages us to look at the world and embrace our experiences with our glasses *on*. Imagine what it would be like to look through scripture at the particular experiences of our lives, open to their complexities, nuances, and surprises because we are looking through lenses that accentuate the textures, the flaws, the beauty, the possibilities, the risks. I happen to be typing this sentence three minutes before the seventh anniversary of the terrorist bombing of the World Trade towers. Imagine seeking to discern God’s Word as we look through our glasses at the horror of 9/11. The experience of utter loss and desperation. Looking through the lenses of God’s promises, how can we help but cry out: Why, God, have you forsaken me? Through the lenses that promise us that every hair of our head is numbered, that every tear will be wiped from our eyes. Look again, and the pain will be deeper; the hope more poignant, the experience more real. Look again, and participate in the yearning of creaturely existence.

Imagine seeking to discern God’s Word in the joy of a holiday gathering: the experience of fellowship and affirmation; the experience of blessings and abundance. Look again through the lenses that direct us to proclaim that God is the Giver of all good gifts. Through the lenses that remind us to give away our extra coats, to be wary lest we be cast out from the wedding feast. Look again, and the bounty will be more precious, the responsibility overwhelming, the experience more real. Look again, and abide in

grace—the dependence of the creature on the sustaining God.

When we process our experiences through the lenses of scripture, we look with hope, with curiosity, with a desire to see new things and to challenge those which are life-denying. Contrast this to the spirit of putting on our glasses only “after the fact” of the experience, with the purpose of assessing relative truth. The spectacles go on, as unbiased judge or efficient auditor looks to affirm right answers or condemn that which does not measure up. Such “spectacles” are, actually, empty-lensed imposters because they do not illumine us to the presence of God’s Word in real-life creaturely contexts. A more apt analogy than spectacles might be scripture as “sieve,” sifting out what is already expected. Why look elsewhere than in scripture when all that is kept is all that is already in there, anyway? Such an understanding of sola scriptura sets up barricades to experiencing God rather than renewing us to deepened understanding of God’s living and active Word.

CONCLUSION

I have suggested in this essay that the Reformation principle of sola scriptura invites us ever to be reflecting on what we can learn about God in and through our experiences. Rather than confining us to seeking the shape of God’s Word only in the biblical text, wearing our “spectacles” frees us to see God, through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, wherever it is that God is self-revealed. While I do insist that scripture is the “norming norm,” I have tried to reconceptualize what this means by moving away from the idea that scripture enters into the richness and complexity of our lives as a kind of streamlining judge who approves or condemns would-be revelatory claims. Drawing from Calvin’s understanding of scripture as spectacles, and from Barth’s idea that we see revelation only indirectly through scripture, I have tried to make a case for an understanding of sola scriptura that cherishes the Bible as the God-given means through which we are able to see and to claim the presence of the living Word in the context of our experiences—in everything from “secular” psychological literature, to unlikely “pockets” of the General Assembly, to communism, flute concertos, and dead dogs. Sola scriptura guards us against idolizing our experiences not by barring experience as a locus of revelation, but by recognizing it as the place where God’s Kingdom is both wounded and created.

In closing, then, I want to make a case for the good old-fashioned lyrics of “Jesus Loves Me” as a way of reminding us to look again. Jesus Loves Me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so. In putting on my spectacles of scripture, I am able to look again at a beautiful, pained, ambiguous world and seek the love of God. With my glasses on, I hope to glimpse it, however fragmentarily. I glimpse it; I fight for it; I search for it when it is not there. The scripture promotes, and protects, my often-frail experience of God’s love. It insists on beauty and is impatient with pain. And so I can say, with conviction, that I know Jesus loves me, and I know Jesus loves the world. ❧

NOTES

1. John Calvin, *Genesis*, ed. Alistair McGrath and J. I. Packer (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2001), xv.

2. Ibid, xiv.

3. From *The Cambridge Declaration of the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals* (1996); www.reformed.org/documents/index.html?mainframe=http://www.reformed.org/documents/cambridge.html

4. This is a serious criticism, from the standpoint of Reformed theology. The Reformed tradition holds that, while we cannot identify the one God known to us in Jesus Christ apart from special revelation (God revealing it to us in and through the threefold form of the Word), we can, after receiving special revelation, turn to nature, reason, experience, and learn about God from these sources. Scripture does not close us off to the world, but opens us up to seeing it in full color (For more on this, see John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill [Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960], I.1-10).

5. The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). *Part I: Book of Confessions* (Louisville: The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 1996).

6. Klooster, "The Uniqueness of Reformed Theology: A Preliminary Attempt at Description," *Calvin Theological Journal* 14:32-54, 1979, 40.

7. Ibid., 51.

8. Peter J. Gomes, *The Good Book: Reading the Bible with Mind and Heart* (New York: Avon Books, 1996), 17-18.

9. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Sharing Her Word: Feminist Biblical Interpretation in Context* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998), 83.

10. Ibid., 83.

11. Martin Luther, "An Open Letter on Translating" ("Sendbrief von Dolmetschen") translated by Gary Mann from *Dr. Martin Luthers Werke* (Weimar: Hermann Boehlaus Nachfolger, 1909, Band 30, Teil II, pp. 632-646).

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13. Calvin, *Institutes*, III.2.7.

14. John Calvin, "John Calvin to the Reader," *Institutes*, 4.

15. Ibid, 4.

16. See Calvin, *Institutes*, I.1-10.

17. Karl Barth, *The Göttingen Dogmatics: Instruction in the Christian Religion*, vol. 1. Trans. Geoffrey Bromily, ed. Hannelotte Reiffen (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 215, 218.

18. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I/1, 60.

19. Klooster, 47.

20. Ibid., 47.

21. John W. de Gruchy, *Liberating Reformed Theology: A South African Contribution to an Ecumenical Debate* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 58.

22. Ibid., 65-66.

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CYNTHIA L. RIGBY:
BIBLICAL LITERACY AND
CHRISTIAN FAITH

Biblical illiteracy seems to be growing in many churches. Do you have any idea why that might be the case?

I think people aren't reading their Bibles enough. It's amazing to think of Luther risking his life to print the Bible in the vernacular in an age of widespread illiteracy. He thought it was important to get the Bible in the hands of people, yet we have ten Bibles sitting on our shelves and don't manage to pull them down and actually read them. Why don't we?

One reason we aren't reading the Bible is that people are really overextended and think they don't have time to read anything. Scripture is just one of the things they're not reading! That's something that has to be addressed, culturally speaking. But I also



IT SEEMS TO ME THAT THOSE WHO ARE CLAIMING THE BIBLE AS *THE* FINAL AUTHORITY TEND TOWARD PROOF-TEXTING, AND THOSE WHO SAY THE BIBLE *ISN'T* AUTHORITATIVE TEND TOWARD NOT REFERENCING THE BIBLE AT ALL. NEITHER OF THESE EXTREMES IS USEFUL. BOTH ARE MANIFESTATIONS OF BIBLICAL ILLITERACY.

think people are ambivalent about scripture. Christians know that in some sense it's supposed to be authoritative, but they don't know how to think about the Bible's authority. I think they don't have a clear sense of why they're reading scripture or what direct benefit it has to their lives of faith.

Karl Barth says the Bible has authority not because it's always interesting but because it has in it that which matters most, that which is true. So how do we read the Bible in such a way that we see the truth that it is bearing witness to and are better able to participate in that truth through the power of the Holy Spirit?

Does that understanding of scripture's authority—it contains that which matters most—help us in churches as we argue about what the Bible means?

The Bible doesn't contain the truth in the sense that you have to push aside the words with a small "w" and find the giant "W" Word glowing underneath the surface. It's not that the Bible contains truth, but that the Bible is the vehicle through which we claim the Holy Spirit works to reveal truth to us, the truth of God's revealed Word to us in Jesus Christ. The "authority" word is a tricky one. A lot of people don't want to use it at all. There used to be those buttons that said "Question Authority." And there are certainly people in the pews who say, "I don't trust the Bible as being an authority. I don't want to use that word at all." The reason I use the word "authority" is that it's the traditional way of referring to what we mean when we say that the Bible is essential to our theological process of discerning what God is like: that God exists, that God loves us, that God so loved the world.

That's interesting. Are you saying that ideas about the Bible often get in the way of reading the Bible?

Yes, and sometimes our own convictions get in the way of reading the Bible. There's not necessarily a correlation between people claiming they see the Bible as the sole authority and people actually knowing what it says, never mind getting to the point of being able to interpret what it says. So it seems to me that those who are claiming the Bible as *the* final authority tend toward proof-texting, and those who say the Bible *isn't* authoritative tend toward not referencing the Bible at all. Neither of those extremes is useful. Both are manifestations of biblical illiteracy.

I've often thought the Reformation recovers the power of reading. When people started reading the Bible in the vernacular for the first time it must have been a liberating experience: instead of being told what the Bible said, they were reading the Bible for themselves and these texts opened up new worlds.

Even if they were being told what it said, they could at least look at the text in their own hands and say, "OK, where is that coming from?" Calvin and Luther never said, "Reject the church's teaching and go off on your own and read scripture." Reading was always to be done in the context of a community of faith in subjection to those whom God had given one as teachers. Anyone who had a Bible in their hands and could read could look to where the teachings of the church were coming from. And they were at liberty, of course, and invited by the Reformers to question authority when it didn't seem consistent with the biblical witness. Those had to be extremely exciting times.

Reclaiming the joy, the passion, the freedom of those times—the subversive and

revolutionary possibilities—can still happen today. Put the Bible in the hands of those who have been marginalized by the empire and see what happens! Tell them this book is theirs and things will change. Of course, we've seen the transforming effects of reflecting on scripture any number of times in the course of history. In this country in the 1800s, black slaves would go to the white slaveholders' church and hear sermons about how slaves should submit to their masters. Then they would go home and continue talking about the biblical texts in ways that led to very different conclusions. Eventually their conviction about what the Bible is really saying contributed to the formation of the Underground Railroad. The Suffragettes are another example: Sarah Grimké repeatedly gave a speech for women's suffrage that was actually a sermon based on Matthew chapter five—the Sermon on the Mount—where Jesus says You are the salt of the earth, You are the light of the world. She builds from there saying, “How can women be salt and light if they're not voting? Voting is the way we act as salt and light in the world.” Here were women, here were slaves who heard and read the texts and talked about them in community. And they were led to challenge the system.

Those are really great examples. So what you're saying is the experience of reading the text together opens up new horizons for how God works in the world. The Reformers knew the clear connection between scripture and experience, and you're arguing for recovering that connection.

That's the main argument I'm trying to make.

So what happened that made us forget that connection?

There are some understandable reasons why we in the Reformed tradition have sometimes neglected religious experience when talking about scripture's authority. Too often in the course of history, human beings who have not had their glasses on have mistaken their own desires for the will of God. When we draw from our experiences uncritically, we run the risk of idolizing ourselves. Barth saw an example of such idolatry during World War II when the German Christian church was drawing from its experience of nationalism as justification for supporting Hitler. And we have writings from the German Christians where they claim, based on experience, that Aryans are more God-like than Jewish people. And Barth, famously, said “Nein” to all that. By way of the Barmen Declaration he urged German Christians to submit to God's self-revelation in and through God's Word as a correction to sinful experience. By raising the right questions about the relationship between experience and revelation, Barth sought to guard against these kinds of distorted, heinous, abusive imaginings.

That gets us to the image of spectacles from Calvin's writings. You argue that the spectacles aren't simply ones that we put on every now and then like reading glasses, but the kind we wear all the time. If we really read the scriptures, the scriptures read us.

Yes. When we keep them on we see so much more of what God desires us to see!

So having our scriptural glasses on opens us to God's presence in everything that surrounds us.

That's what I think and that's what Calvin thought. Calvin said God reveals God's self

through nature, through human reason, through everything that God made and is making. But Calvin also said that because of our fallenness, because of our sin, because of our depravity, we are not able to discern God's presence without wearing our spectacles.

What's the best way for us to start reading the Bible again, or for the first time? How should we do it?

First, we should consider participating in group Bible studies because for most of us it's hard to read the Bible only on our own as a daily habit. A Bible study is also helpful because it provides a context in which you can run your interpretation of texts by other people and they can say, What are you talking about? That's crazy. I see it this way. Or, they can say, That's very interesting. Thank you for sharing. Now let me show you another way. God's Word is dynamic, not static. Multiple interpretations aren't always a problem; they actually open us up to possibilities.

Second, I think we should be really careful about how we use Bible study materials because they often contain a list of questions that we bring to scripture so that the interpretation of whoever has written the materials is already controlling the study. Similarly, when we go to the Bible always and only with a list of our own questions in hand, we might miss out on the surprising and new things God has to show us. Instead of going to the text with lists of questions we expect the text to answer, we should go with an openness to the text questioning us. God gave us Scripture to challenge us, reorient us, even tell us that our question isn't that important. So: read the Bible, be involved in a Bible study, go to a text and write a list of questions after reading rather than bringing questions to the text.

I'd like to close with a story. A few years ago I was at a conference and I led a workshop. About twenty-five people came to it and we were talking about the problem of biblical illiteracy. One woman in the group began to cry; she felt guilty and really angry and she said, "I hate reading the Bible. I've been trying to read it every day for four years. Every day I get up ..." and she recounted her strategy. She'd been forcing herself to read every single day and she thought the Bible was dull, boring, confusing, and she asked me what she should do. I took a deep breath, said a quick prayer for guidance, and said, "I think you should not read it at all for a year." I think she wasn't thinking about reading the Bible as putting on glasses and going out and looking at the world; she was trying to have the Bible be the sole locus of her spiritual nourishment rather than that which oriented her to be able to receive all that God was offering to her. Certain formulas for "how to read the Bible" were actually standing in the way. I ran into her a couple of years later and she told me she was reading the Bible again and that it had been helpful to take some time off.

There's no magical way to read the Bible, as if we could read the Bible one way and have all this great insight. Finally, any way we can find to live our lives with our glasses on will be spiritually renewing, I believe, and even world transforming.

Scripture and experience can't be separated from each other. Scripture is the vehicle God uses to open us to the fullness of God's gifts. And we have to reclaim that today. ✪

A PLACE, NOT A PIGEONHOLE: SCRIPTURE AS A FRUITFUL THEOLOGICAL TOPIC

TELFORD WORK

The epistle of James scolds those who hear the word but do not do it (James 1:22) as deceivers who forfeit its blessings (1:25). What special curse would James have imagined for us professionals who specialize in crafting accounts *about* the word as a *locus*? These seem to be the kind of academic contrivances Jesus warned his disciples to avoid (Matthew 22:34-23:15). Scripture as a theological topic seems dangerously trivial—too distant from the practical task of building on his words in order to weather the storms of a disciple’s life (Matthew 7:24-27).

This is how more and more of my own students have come to regard theological treatments of scripture. A generation ago, “battles for the Bible” still energized, polarized, and divided American Protestants. Today, even here at an evangelical liberal arts college, they elicit yawns more often than battle cries. My theology students would rather get on with hearing the word and doing it than with either defending or overturning, say, the doctrine of biblical inerrancy. Scripture as a theological topic is passé.

It is not theological apathy that drives this dramatic change from the previous generation, for other topics interest them keenly. Nor is it some kind of shift toward “emergent” postmodernism, for most of them still embrace the modern pigeonholes of left, right, and center. Nor have they surrendered evangelical convictions about the Bible’s character, authority, or work; after all, they are still comfortable using theological claims about scripture as litmus tests to reveal professors’ loyalties and as abstract assurances that the Bible is believable after all. No, my students’ impatience is rooted in theological pragmatism. When actually put to exegetical use, the theological treatments of scripture they know seem to get in the way of honest, powerful readings of the texts. They forfeit its blessings.

Many professional biblical scholars struggle even more than students with the con-



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fessional burdens of their churches and schools where scripture is concerned. At a recent Wheaton theology conference, an Old Testament scholar pleaded for guardians of evangelical orthodoxy to stop chilling his profession's honest study of straightforward historical questions like the complicated text history of Jeremiah. Academic colleagues across the confessional map feel similar pressure from theologians who are Calvinists, Arminians, Lutherans, Catholics, existentialists, liberals, postliberals, fundamentalists, relativists, and race-class-gender liberationists. For these people, theologizing about the Bible seems to make us hard of hearing more often than it opens our ears.

Then should we abandon scripture as a theological topic?

A helpful answer to that question should attend to what a theological topic is in the first place. As if anticipating today's disappointments, Melancthon's *Loci Communes Rerum Theologicarum* gave the term "locus" an open-ended practical connotation compared to the philosophically determined Aristotelian categories of medieval scholastic theology. Yet later Protestant scholastic theology treated the term more as a "core concept"—a category that demanded a thicker theological rationale. This development tied its plausibility to the shifting fortunes of its modern philosophical rationales. I will try to retreat from these commitments with a folksier definition: a theological locus or topic is a matter of the faith that the church ends up talking about long enough, for whatever reason, to take on a life of its own.

Certain matters have taken on enduring, even definitive, importance for the Christian faith. The topics of Trinity, incarnation, atonement, church, justification, and many others certainly belong in this list. They appear over and over through the centuries whenever Christians consider the gospel's fundamental implications. Because that is all Christian theology really is: the exploring of the implications of the good news of Jesus Christ.

Why *these* themes? Why does the list have such a stable core? I doubt it derives from some Greco-Roman influence, Constantinian homogeneity, or medieval-to-modern European hegemony. Rather, it is because the history of Christian consideration of the gospel is, and always will be, the trajectory of biblical exegesis. The same themes come up again and again because churches in every age and every place read the same Bible, so its concerns remain our concerns. Other liturgical forces give the Christian tradition much of its theological consistency, as well as forces beyond the structures of Christian worship; but the liturgical and devotional force of *biblical* texts shapes our reflections more precisely than any other single practice of Christian tradition—even that of the Eucharist or Lord's Supper.

The question of the dispensability of scripture as a theological topic is then largely a matter of its prominence in the biblical texts themselves. If scripture as such is a concern there, then it will remain a matter of theological importance, deliberation, and guidance.

And it is. Over and over, scripture reflects on scripture, as the texts that become the Bible take evolving places in the life of Israel. In Deuteronomy, God's instruction to Israel through Moses becomes a book that guides the king, whose teaching is entrusted to the priests, and whose observance or neglect will bring covenantal bless-

ings or curses. That book is lost, found, and restored to a new place in remnant Israel's life in the subsequent histories of Joshua through Nehemiah. It is a place of the high devotional respect of Psalm 119. Meanwhile, new prophetic words of knowledge are inscribed in apocalyptic scrolls, the book of the twelve, and the major prophets, and other words of insight and worship take their place in Israel's embryonic canon as "writings" alongside the psalms.

These traditions are all operative in the career of the Messiah, whose interpretive battles with their custodians bring them into ever sharper conflict, and whose life and work fulfill them. The scriptures become source material for the disciples' first efforts to understand Jesus and clarify the faith, and those efforts become source material for new scriptures. All of these become indispensable guides in the apostles' commissioned communities, functioning as everything from a means of conversion and mission to a judge, an ultimate narrator and chronicler of the past and the future, a mirror of personal experience, a treasury of truth, and a means of spiritual power.

All this both guarantees that scripture will be a significant theological topic and presents a challenge. If systematic theology becomes an arrangement (or even a taxonomy) of "core concepts," where in that arrangement do doctrines of scripture belong? Should systematic theology associate the Bible most closely with revelation, salvation, the church, the Holy Spirit, incarnation, or some other doctrinal locus? Our different proposals draw on and reinforce our confessional loyalties and divisions so much that our various dogmatics construct ecclesial Roman Catholic Bibles, soteriological Lutheran Bibles, sacramental Eastern Orthodox Bibles, foundational fundamentalist Bibles, and sanctifying Wesleyan Bibles—not to mention existential Bibles-as-literature, patriotic Bibles-as-heritage, historicist Bibles-as-sourcebook, liberationist Bibles-as-oppressors (and sometimes liberators), and many others that proliferate in our wider culture. Each of these depictions is smaller than the real thing.

Take two recent examples. John Webster's *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* (Cambridge, 2003) respects the direct relevance of a handful of theological topics to Christian doctrine of scripture: the economy of grace, the character of God, the life of the church, the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and practical theological catechesis. Webster brings all of these under the category of sanctification to describe the whole phenomenon of scripture from its cultural and historical background through its canonization to its present practice. His insights are compelling and refreshing, and sanctification is a fruitful theme with which to associate the roles of the Bible in the mission of God and the life of the church. Yet Webster's Barthian Reformed theological vision practically confines his dogmatics of scripture to this albeit expansive place in his theological system, discouraging lines of fruitful inquiry even as he draws others.

Kenton L. Sparks' *God's Word in Human Words* (Baker, 2008) reviews some of the most convincing data supporting a historical-critical account of the Bible and reflects upon its theological implications. Honest engagement with his crystal-clear presentation ought to finish off the unreconstructed doctrines of propositional inerrancy that prevail in many conservative circles that must ignore or distort clear contrary evidence in the texts themselves. When Sparks moves to his own constructive proposal, howev-

er, the theme of divine-human “accommodation to fallen humanity” turns his use of “inerrancy” into a far weaker affirmation of the Bible’s functional adequacy. Sparks’ endorsement of “an adoptionistic metaphor” for revelation respects the Bible’s thoroughgoing humanity, but at the cost of privileging empirical human experience in interpretation in ways that leave exegesis vulnerable to the old limits of modern liberal theology.

These otherwise strong projects illustrate both the continuing relevance of scripture as a theological topic and the problems endemic to practically any conventional treatment. Our theological and philosophical schematics help us receive some of scripture’s blessings, but they tempt us to forfeit others. Our habit of treating topics the way we do guarantees that scripture’s true significance will overflow the places we make for it in our visions. Yet scripture’s prominence in scripture itself and in subsequent tradition guarantees that scripture as such will be a fruitful theme in any wide Christian theological vision. ❧

For further reading

Continued from page 12

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POSTCOLONIAL ANALYSIS: ANOTHER WAY OF READING THE BIBLE

YAK-HWEE TAN

When we read the Bible, the question of the reality of the empire(s) is cited mainly in passing. For example, the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BCE is mentioned in relationship to the Babylonian Empire, or the birth of Jesus during the time of reign of Caesar Augustus of the Roman Empire. While the references to empires are important for establishing the historicity of events in the Bible, one must not overlook the influence empires have on other aspects of life of their colonized people, such as their identity. To put it differently, the relationship of the Jewish people and the Christian communities as the colonized people and their colonial masters, be it the Babylonian Empire or the Roman Empire, must be raised and also questioned.

Postcolonial analysis is interested in the relationship between the colonizers and the colonized. Practitioners of postcolonial analysis seek to address, for example, the construction of identity of the colonized by the colonizers and in so doing, to interrogate such constructions and to re-produce such constructions anew. Such a re-production of identity on the part of the colonized is possible because of the interaction between the colonizers and the colonized. In other words, the identity of the colonizers as colonizers, and the colonized as colonized, is challenged. As a result of their association, their identity is never fully a colonizer or fully a colonized; it is always shifting. In other words, using the words of Homi Bhabha, that person is “hybridized” and enabled to resist the tendency of an other essentializing her or his identity. “Hybridity” is one feature of postcolonial analysis among other related aspects, such as re-presentation and mimicry.

The New Testament was written during the period of the Roman Empire, and followers of Jesus were not only ethnically either Jews or Gentiles but they were also the colonized people of the Roman Empire. In the light of postcolonial analysis, followers



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of Jesus could be portrayed as “hybridized” characters in the Gospels. An illustration of such a “hybridized” person is in the portrayal of Zacchaeus in the Gospel of Luke.

A Vignette: “Hybridized” Zacchaeus (Luke 19:2-8)

In Luke 19:2-8, Luke describes Zacchaeus as a wealthy, chief tax collector. Who were the tax-collectors? Palestine was conquered by Pompey in 63 BCE and was forced to pay tribute to Rome. To assist in the collection of taxes from the colonized people, the Roman authorities employed local officials to collect on their behalf. They collected taxes such as “head” or poll tax, which was determined by the census (cf. Lk. 2:2) and also land and goods taxes. In addition, the Jews were subject to religious taxes such as the temple tax and tithes on produce for the Jewish priests. Therefore, colonized people of Palestine were under heavy hardships caused by the excessive taxation imposed upon them by their colonial masters, the Romans. Luke describes Zacchaeus as the chief tax collector, meaning that he was in a supervisory position and, therefore, that he could personally profit from such an enterprise as we note from his declaration, “If I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much” (19:8d).

Zacchaeus was disliked by his people. They were hostile towards him. Given his short stature and prominent status in the society, the crowd could have given him the right of way to see Jesus but they did not (v. 3). Moreover, he was called a “sinner,” one to whose home Jesus has invited himself for a meal (v. 7). According to his own people, Zacchaeus was an immoral person because of his business association with Gentiles, namely the Romans who were also their colonial masters. How could Zacchaeus, a colonized person collude with the colonizers, the Romans? In their eyes, such a collusion was betrayal to them as a people; hence, their hostility towards him. However, Jesus reinstated him into his own community, “Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham” (v. 9).

We often read Zacchaeus’ encounter with Jesus as a challenge to the religious and social conventions of his time: that Jesus “came to seek out and to save the lost” (v. 10). Zacchaeus was the “lost” one. However, using postcolonial analysis, colonized Zacchaeus could be seen as a “hybridized” person as well. On the one hand, he was a “son of Abraham,” a colonized Jew, but on the other hand, he associated with the Romans, the colonial masters, because of his business as a chief tax collector. We do not know whether or not colonized Zacchaeus abandoned his job as a chief tax collector after his encounter with Jesus. Therefore, Zacchaeus is an ambiguous person to us. If he would have continued his work as the chief tax collector, his own people could not have deciphered his character. Zacchaeus’ identity would also have appeared ambiguous to his Roman employers.

To put it differently, who is Zacchaeus? Can we trust him as “one of our own”? Such a fluid characterization proves advantageous to Zacchaeus because he could slip between the company of his colonial masters and his own people with ease. His identity is not either one *per se* but “something else”—his encounter with the colonial masters has re-produced a “hybridized” Zacchaeus. In short, he cannot be defined.

Conclusion

In the light of the New Testament times and from a postcolonial perspective, the identity of the Christian communities is fluid to the Roman Empire because on the one hand, they are associated with Jesus Christ who declared that he came “to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (4:19), implying a rivalry to the Roman Empire. Yet, on the other hand, these communities were under the bondage of their colonial masters, the Romans. Therefore, how could one describe the identity of the Christian communities? In short, their identity is in a flux that their colonial masters could not control.

The Jewish tax collector Zacchaeus would have been directly linked with the Roman administration, but his association with them has created a “hybridized” character, a resistance posture to the Empire. Postcolonial analysis provides us with another important way to read the Bible. 58

TO SCRIPT OR NOT TO SCRIPT

STEPHEN BRECK REID

Every life has a script. When my children were younger they would argue and fight. Eventually we would get to the issue of who was at fault. Then someone would say “My fault, your fault, nobody’s fault.” This line, taken from the John Wayne movie “Big Jake,” captured the sense that sometimes consequences outstrip culpability. This family story is but one example of how life provokes references to cultural artifacts, often in the form of narratives and aphorisms. We resort to these to interpret the life we are thrust into. The question is what script drives any particular life. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson recognized this twenty-five years ago when they published *Metaphors We Live By*.¹ The human mind analyzes situations in categories shaped by narrative and aphoristic metaphors.

However, the narrative and aphoristic script often lie so deep in the background that they can seem invisible to the individual. Nonetheless, the institutions of cultural formation have recognized this phenomenon. Hence, the controversy and conflict over what works get included in English literature or history courses on college campuses. In the Modern Language Association (MLA) the battle for the “canon” has raged for more than a quarter of a century.

What Script?

A canon is a collection of texts and metaphors that a community acknowledges as central to its identity. On one level, the Christian church completed battles over the content of the canon during the Reformation. Unfortunately this ecclesiastical canon masks today’s challenge of the operational canon of the church. The Catholic theolo-



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gian David Tracy, with both feet firmly planted in modernity, affirms that Christianity worked with a “classic” model. A classic is a work in a culture that becomes the background metaphor and narrative that structures life together. Krister Stendahl takes this a step further and argues that the Bible is a Christian classic. Notwithstanding such broad claims, biblical illiteracy is so prevalent that few biblical allusions get picked up today. Mark Twain observed that a classic is a book that many people refer to but never read. Eight out of ten Americans who designate themselves as Christians surveyed do not associate Jesus with the Sermon on the Mount, leading George Gallup to suggest that Americans have a reverence for the Bible but little firsthand knowledge of what is in it.²

The evidence about the profound level of biblical illiteracy in the United States and the significant anxiety about it point out that the question of what is the operational canon for persons in the United States and American churches should be taken seriously. Many Americans claim the Bible as scripture, namely literature with divine revelatory qualities, but the Bible does not function for them as an operational canon, a rule of faith and practice.

“For they were afraid”

I remember one day John Alsup shared with several of us a book he found provocative, *If it Ain't Broke ... Break It!: And Other Unconventional Wisdom for a Changing Business World*.³ This made sense because John Alsup and his teacher Leonard Goppelt reminded today's readers to understand the Gospel of Mark as a call to eschatological existence that transformed everything. The end of Mark's gospel frames a hermeneutical principle that fits well into the postmodern age. The end of the gospel matches the disorienting quality of the previous chapters. Before the Cross and empty tomb one should distrust all meta-narratives, including the text that provokes the initial reading.

The function of canon and scripture shift in a postmodern context. The Bible-as-classic model of Stendahl and Tracy set the Bible up as the grand meta-narrative that defines all other narratives. The post-modern philosopher contends that the meta-narrative carries with it the inexorable baggage of political hegemony as well as narrative and aphoristic dominance. Hence Françoise Lyotard makes the point that in post-modernity there is a distrust of meta-narratives.

Today's Christian reader of the Bible must understand the Bible as scripture, canon, and anti-meta-narrative simultaneously. Michael Jenkins models this sort of move in his article “The Virtues of the Righteous in Psalm 37: An Exercise in Translation.”⁴ He uses the philosophical suggestions of Emmanuel Levinas to help him discern the breaking of the text in on itself, breaking its own meta-narrative quality.

George Lindbeck describes a post liberal age that gives rise to a cultural linguistic approach to religion. However, the cultural linguistic approach of Lindbeck moves in the direction of a new and generous orthodoxy. Kevin Vanhoozer has proposed a canonical linguistic approach that gives witness to the drama of doctrine. This emphasis on the narrative and aphoristic repository of scripture mixed with renewed appreciation of the Spirit in a post-modern age creates a post-conservative strategy that also

values scripture partnered with religious experience as the double source and norm of theology.

Scripture script and superscript

We can think of these scripts and superscripts as sources and norms for the theological task. When source or norm transcends the others it moves to the caliber of a superscript. If every person has a set of scripts, for some there are texts that function as superscripts. A superscript means that there is a text that supersedes the other scripts, confessions and witnesses. In *The Rebirth of Orthodoxy*, Thomas Oden provides an example of doctrine as a superscript.⁵ One might wonder if the confessions function as the superscripts giving direction to the reading of the biblical script, much as a director of a play or film provides the actor direction in script interpretation.

Post-liberalism and post-conservative impulses in theology affirm the importance of narrative. As Roger Olsen notes, “Overall and in general, conservative evangelical theologians are suspicious of theology’s constructive task.”⁶ One difference between conservative and post conservative evangelicals is their diverging opinions concerning these constructive tasks. “Postconservatives, however, tend to regard this constructive task as always unfinished and doctrines as always open to correction and revision.” (98) Post-conservative evangelical theology accents the centrality of scripture over doctrine.

The script (scriptures) requires a level of improvisation and openness. It stimulates certain emotions and affections. The fear and astonishment that characterizes the canonical end of the Gospel of Mark should mark the way we read scripture today. If our reading ain’t broke then we probably aren’t reading “correctly.” ❖

NOTE

1. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (University of Chicago Press, 1980)
2. Karen Long “Bible Knowledge at record, pollster says—George Gallup” *National Catholic Reporter*, July 15, 1994.
3. Robert J. Kriegel and Louis Patler, *If It Ain’t Broke ... Break It! And Other Unconventional Wisdom for a Changing Business World*, (Business Plus, 1992).
4. Michael Jinkins “The Virtues of the Righteous in Psalm 37: An Exercise in Translation” in *Psalms and Practice*, (Michael Glazier Books, 2001), 164-2001
5. Thomas Oden, *The Rebirth of Orthodoxy* (HarperOne, 2002).
6. Roger Olsen, *Reformed and Always Reforming*, (Baker Books, 2007), 97.

We asked church leaders to reflect on the reading, interpretation, and authority of scripture. Here is what they told us:

How do you help others read and interpret scripture in your ministry?

TREB PRAYTOR, ASSOCIATE PASTOR OF OUTREACH AND CONTEXTUAL WORSHIP,
WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, OKLAHOMA CITY, OKLAHOMA

When it comes to reading and interpreting scripture I challenge people to *get in, get to know, and get together*. I believe the best way to start reading scripture is to simply get in. Exciting things happen when we dive into God's Word, because an encounter with God's Word is an encounter with God. Read, reread, and contemplate. Write things down. Search, ask questions, and wonder. Journal. Get involved in scripture. The first step is to just *get in*.

Secondly, I challenge people to *get to know*. This just means spend time getting to know God. We can never truly understand scripture apart from the Holy Spirit. A quest to understand and interpret scripture is ultimately a quest to know the character and heartbeat of God. The beauty of the Lord is that God reveals himself to us. No amount of searching scripture will allow us to "discover" anything of eternal significance. But as we search, seek, pray, and read we *get to know* God, because God reveals himself and his character.

Finally, I challenge people to *get together*. Throughout history people have come together around scripture. From the Jewish communities of the Old Testament to the first century Christians, scripture has been a central point of gathering and teaching. I love to challenge people to *get together* and talk about scripture. It's such a powerful point of community. Spend time with people talking about God's Word. There is a richness that comes from reading, sharing, praying, and wrestling with scripture together. When it comes to reading and interpreting scripture we need to *get in, get to know, and get together*.

MARTHA SADONGEI, PASTOR, CENTRAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH,
PHOENIX, ARIZONA

Central Church, Phoenix, is the only organized urban Native American congregation within the PC(USA) with representation of fifteen different tribal affiliations. One of the great joys that I have in sharing the interpretation of scripture in my ministry is by encouraging my hearers to use our experiences and cultural values found within our Native American heritage. For many it is the first time that they have been able to find the similarities, the affirmation for what has been practiced for generations by our people. In our Bible studies we have heard how some texts would be understood by the Hopis in their understanding of being Hopi. We have heard about the understanding of creation through the stories of the Navajo. And we have heard what it means to offer

hospitality through the Akimal O'odham and Fort Mojave tribes. Such discoveries can only offer hope in not losing the cultural values and some cultural practices that the Creator has given us as Native people.

KATIE CUMMINGS, ADULT MINISTRIES PASTOR, GRACE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH,
HOUSTON, TEXAS

This may sound rather basic, but encouraging people to read and reflect on scripture regularly is something we cannot forget to be intentional about. I work with many adults who are professionals in their fields, with a great deal of knowledge and confidence in their workplace. Yet when it comes to reading the Bible, they may not have had or taken the opportunity to be part of a Bible study class or small group before. They are shy or even embarrassed about being a "beginner." We are all beginners, really, in growing in our knowledge of the grace of God in Jesus Christ, and how we understand that through scripture.

So I try to constantly invite and encourage people to be actively reading the Bible, no matter what their level of "expertise" may be. At Grace, we try to create a variety of opportunities where people can read and reflect on scripture together. This can happen not only at church on Sunday mornings, but also at times and places that connect with people where they live and work—in people's homes and out in the community in the form of small groups, lunch hour study groups, or evening gatherings. And we do this with an excitement and expectation that through our engagement with scripture, God is at work to transform our lives!

As we read and interpret scripture, we are led by the Holy Spirit, we are guided by the experience and wisdom of the church through our creeds and confessions, and we are enriched by the insights of biblical scholarship. One of my roles as a pastor is to teach and equip others, especially those who are teachers and leaders in the church, with these resources. We pray for illumination as we read.

We consider basic exegetical issues such as the historical and social setting, genre and literary structure, word studies, the history of interpretation. We ask, What did this text mean for God's people then, and now? What is the promise, the challenge, the application of this word to us today?

When evaluating curriculum and other teaching and study resources, I look for ones that include all of these elements, and are grounded in Reformed theology. I will often modify or even write a curriculum so that we draw from the richness of all of these resources.

What does it mean to say that scripture has authority in the church and Christian life?

KATIE CUMMINGS

Scripture has authority in the church and Christian life in that we affirm that the words we read there are God's words to us, inspired by the Holy Spirit through human writers, revealing uniquely who God is and who we are as a people created and called to live in relationship to God in Jesus Christ. Scripture has authority because in this way it is authored by God. We acknowledge this every time we read it and say, "This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God."

Scripture is authoritative in the Christian life in that as the written Word of God,

it has the dynamic and transformative power to effect what it says by the work of the Holy Spirit. Scripture contains God's Word of hope, redemption, transformation – even as through it God is at work to lift our hearts, to free us from sin, to turn our lives toward Jesus Christ. It is authoritative because it is a living and active Word that in a sense dwells among us when it is central to our preaching, teaching, and life together as a community of faith. Scripture is dynamically authoritative because it shapes and transforms our lives as followers of Jesus and participants in the Kingdom of God.

TREB PRAYTOR

Scripture is inspired, sufficient, and authoritative. It is God's Word. And being the very Word of God it carries the authority of God Himself. Scripture is not a supplement to be added to or subtracted from as we see fit. It's not to be ignored, marginalized, or rationalized depending on what contemporary culture, Christian or otherwise, may or may not suggest. Scripture shouldn't simply have *some* authority in the church and in the Christian life, scripture should *be* the authority. This is not to say that other things such as tradition, history, etc., shouldn't inform or carry influence. It means that scripture is authoritative, and is the final authority in the church and Christian life.

MARTHA SADONGEI

I believe that “to say that scripture has authority in the church and Christian life” comes in our belief that scripture is the inspired Word of God. If we believe that, then what is being shared with us in scripture are the examples of God's people, faithful or unfaithful, stubborn or willing, deceitful or honest, throughout the ages. Through these words we find our personal lives and our life as the church. They give us examples that though we may think we are the only ones to experience challenges, such challenges have always faced God's people. And yet, through these words we find that God is always present and all things work for God's purposes. The authority comes in understanding that scripture, as God's Word, is given to us to live our lives accordingly.

How do you approach difficult texts in scripture?

TREB PRAYTOR

Scripture certainly has texts that I call “beautifully difficult.” I don't mean beautiful in the sense of how they may look or sound. I mean beautiful in terms of where they come from and where they lead. As I encounter these “beautifully difficult” texts, I remind myself that Scripture is God's Word and ultimately points to Jesus Christ, and there is nothing more beautiful than that. With that beauty in mind I approach the beautifully difficult with trust, humility, and mystery. A trust that God is good, true, and absolutely sovereign. A humility that knows my place as a sinful man, who in reality knows almost nothing. And a mystery that says the depths and ways of God are much bigger than I am. Thus, I can rest in the mystery of God. Of course this mystery in no way serves as an excuse to not search, study, wrestle with, and contemplate difficult text. It simply means that as I approach scripture with trust, humility, and mystery, I can have a peace in not having all the answers.

MARTHA SADONGEI

Difficult texts can be quite challenging, so when I come across them the first thing I

want to do is quickly look for another text! But after taking a deep breath, a quiet prayer for help, I begin to re-read the text out loud and slowly. I believe that I cannot just avoid difficult texts and am quick to share with my congregants any struggles that I may have had in preparing the sermon. I often find that my approach to difficult texts revolves around the historical context that leads to more of a teaching time. It is in looking at the historical context that at times I can find parallels to the American Indian experience and can address what the people of the Bible may have experienced and what we know of our experiences. Just as we don't always know why things have happened to us as indigenous people, we don't know why God does what God does. But what we do know is that even through such difficult texts we find that God is still at work.

KATIE CUMMINGS

Texts are difficult for different reasons. Some texts are difficult because it takes more effort to bridge the contexts between then and now, like the story in Judges 11 about Jephthah, who killed his daughter because he made a careless oath. Others are difficult not because they are remote, but because they hit close to home with a radical imperative from Jesus like "Love your enemy" in Matthew 5:44. Still others are difficult because there are differences in interpretation within the church and conflicting convictions about them run very deep. We are experiencing that right now over texts that impact ordination standards.

So our approach to a difficult text may call for digging deeper into the setting of the story. Or it may call for a willingness to be stretched in our call to obedience in following Jesus. And when interpretations differ, it calls for prayer, and for bearing with one another. It calls for the acknowledgement that the Risen Christ is our ultimate authority and authoritative Word as we seek to be faithful to him. ❖

The Austin Seminary faculty writes on scripture ...

The Post-Resurrection Appearance Stories of the Gospel Tradition

(Wipf and Stock, 2006) by John E. Alsup. ***Commentary on I Peter*** (Goppelt, with updates by JEA; Eerdmans, 1993); ***Theology of the New Testament***, 2 Volumes (Goppelt, with supplements by JEA; Eerdmans, 1981 and 1982); and ***Commentary on the Book of Revelation*** (Roloff; Fortress Press, 1993), translations by John E. Alsup (Revelation with James Currie)

Hosea (Eerdmans, forthcoming), ***Jeremiah and Lamentations*** (Zander van, 2002), ***Religion and Culture in Ancient Israel*** (Hendrickson, 1993), ***Studies in the Mesha Inscription and Moab*** (Scholars Press, 1989), and ***Property Rights in the Eighth Century Prophets*** (Society of Biblical Literature, 1988) by J. Andrew Dearman. ***Harper's Biblical Pronunciation Guide*** (Harper San Francisco, 1994) and ***The Land That I Will Show You*** (Sheffield Academic Press, 2001) edited by Andrew Dearman

Colossians, Ephesians, First and Second Timothy, and Titus (*Westminster Bible Companion*, Westminster John Knox Press, 1996) and ***From Hebrews to Revelation: A Theological Introduction*** (Westminster John Knox, 2000) by Lewis Donelson

“**National Days and Other Celebrations,**” by Jennifer Lord, in *New Proclamation Commentary on Feasts, Holy Days, and Other Celebrations*, David Lott, gen. ed., (Fortress, 2007)

Power, Powerlessness, and the Divine: New Inquiries in Bible and Theology (Scholars Press, 1997) and “**Redeeming Words: Hypostatic Union and the Reading of Scripture**” by Cynthia Rigby in *Reformed Identity and Ecumenicity*, eds. Welker and Alston, (Eerdmans, 2007)

The Gospel of Matthew: A Contextual Introduction for Group Study
co-authored by Monya A. Stubbs (Abingdon Press, 2003)

REQUIRED READING

Books recommended by Austin Seminary faculty

THE GROANING OF CREATION: GOD, EVOLUTION, AND THE PROBLEM OF EVIL, Christopher Southgate. Westminster John Knox Press, 2008, 224 pages, \$24.95.

*Reviewed by Ismael García,
Professor of Christian Ethics at
Austin Seminary.*

Anyone interested in the intersection of science and religion will find Christopher Southgate's text both challenging and valuable. The book is well organized. Each chapter begins with a brief statement of the main topic that he develops and concludes with a summary of the chapter and an indication of how he proceeds in the next chapter. Readers not familiar with this literature are able to follow his line of reasoning without much difficulty. Southgate is also able to present clear and precise ideas without overly indulging in technical language and without oversimplifying his argument.

The dominant theological concern is to develop an eco-theodicy that accounts not only for the arbitrary suffering of human beings but for the suffering intrinsic to nature itself. The text affirms the validity of the Darwinian view of natural evolution, where the survival and development of the species takes place through parasitical and predatory practices that entail the death of weaker species. Southgate engages both Creationism and Intelligent Design theories to show why they are less persuasive than a revised version of Darwin's eco-evolutionary theory. He also provides a Christian theological interpretation of this conflict-ridden and violent evolutionary process.

Southgate claims that an honest look at nature reveals the magnificence and beauty that enables us to experience wonder and awe before the creation, and the fact that such beauty is the result of floods, earthquakes, and other devastating natural disasters that brought about the destruction of innumerable species and the arbitrary death of particular life forms. The same evolutionary process that has created

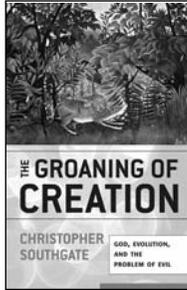
conditions for the emergence of more complex and wondrous life forms, of which homo sapiens is its latest manifestation, has also refined the predatory and parasitical

tendencies of the dominant species that account for the untimely death and unfulfilled life of many creatures. Death and extinction is the way that nature brings forth new value and more complex and refined ways of life. The ambiguity and arbitrary suffering embedded at the core of creation itself brings forth the theological concern with theodicy. It is what forces upon us the question not of the existence of God, but of the moral character of God and the moral goodness of creation

itself.

Southgate refuses the easy way out of this phenomenon which comes with postulating that the destructive tendencies within nature can be explained by the doctrine of the fall. He is persuaded that science is right in claiming that creation was ambiguous from its inception. Human selfishness, idolatry, undue self-regard, and will to power make things worse for both humanity and the rest of creation, but do not account for the predatory and parasitical practices by which evolution takes place. He appeals to the scriptures and to the Christian theological tradition in support of this view. His interpretation of the doctrines of the Trinity, the resurrection, providence, redemption, and particularly eschatology help unveil the meaning of the challenge presented by eco-theodicy and are quite creative.

A significant contribution of the text is the manner in which the author frames his arguments within the larger theological conversation carried on by process theologians, and theologians as diverse as Teilhard de Chardin, Paul Tillich, Jürgen Moltmann, Karl Barth, Philip Hefner, Sallie McFague and Rosemary Redford Ruether, just to name a few. He also frames his main argument within the conversation carried on by leading contemporary environmental theologians and writers, such as Rolston Holmes III, Ted Peters, Martinez Hewlett, Kenneth Miller,



Arthur Peacocke, John B. Haught, Wendell Berry, and Denis Edwards. This allows readers not only to follow some of the trajectories and different ways the topic of eco-theodicy has been dealt with, but also to place themselves within these conversations.

Southgate does not limit his arguments to scientific and theological rationality. He also alerts readers when he engages in imaginative or winsome speculations. He claims that given the destruction and death of many species and of particular animals within species, we must assume the eschatological redemption and resurrection of non-human species, and of nature itself, in order to sustain belief in God's goodness and providential character. He then speculates about the possibility of what a "heaven for pelicans," a new nature where lions and lambs live together within a harmonious community, would look like.

Although he assumes a thoroughly theocentric perspective, he neither negates nor minimizes his anthropocentric and humanistic bent. Humans are the most sophisticated product of the evolutionary process. They embody the individuality, consciousness, and freedom that not only set them apart from the rest of creation, but give the capacity to transform the world. But their capacity for freedom and self-transcendence does not imply that human interests are always to be given priority. If anything, the uniqueness and power of the human being result in greater responsibility to contain the extinction of species and other destructive tendencies of nature. Animals being less capable of self-transcendence and regard for the other, particularly species other than their own, are less likely to care for the well-being of others and be sacrificial for their benefit. What makes humans unique is that while intrinsically intertwined with nature, they are capable of being self-giving, even self-sacrificial, as modeled by Christ.

The moral obligations that humans have toward creation have been defined in a number of ways. Humans have been described as: co-creators, priests of creation, dependent co-preservers of creation, and stewards of creation.

The author makes use of all these possibilities while emphasizing the priestly role.

To Southgate's credit, although he takes strong moral positions, he avoids being dogmatic and never moralizes. A case in point is his advocacy for the vegetarian life style. He claims that being a vegetarian ought to be the preferred practice of humans relating to animals. This is a sign of the human desire to minimize conflicts and to overcome the abuses and cruelty toward other species that turns them into things and instruments for self-satisfaction. It signals our respect and recognition of the value and dignity of all species. At the same time, Southgate does not make the vegetarian lifestyle morally normative or obligatory for all human beings. Rather, he advocates for ways of raising animals for consumption that shows them respect and honors their dignity and value.

The unique vocation of human beings ought to be to minimize all forms of biological extinction. We can engage in eco-justice by financing and working toward the preservation of spaces of wildlife and the protection of endangered species. These and other related practices are worthy of our scientific efforts and economic and political practices. Theodicy is one of those unsolvable problems, but Southgate provides valuable resources for pondering how to best respond to its multidimensional challenges and be faithful to the teaching and way of Christ.

THREE CUPS OF TEA, Greg Mortensen & David Oliver Relin. Viking Press: 2006, 338 pages, \$25.95. *Reviewed by David Lee Jones, Director of Austin Seminary's Doctor of Ministry Program.*



If you are anything like me, you cannot resist a compelling story. Greg Mortensen's remarkable tale is compelling, indeed. It has deep and abiding implications for anyone seeking to make a difference in a world fractured by fear, war, oppression, injustice, materialism, social blindness, racism, and inequity. *Three Cups of Tea* is a powerful testament to the degree of

positive change and healing that one person can accomplish, even in the most unlikely of places. This story chronicles how motivating sincere gratitude, righteous indignation, spiritual awakening, taking the road less traveled, and finding one's true vocation can be. It will inspire you to reevaluate your own life's priorities.

On the afternoon of September 2, 1993, mountaineering buff and former Army medic, Greg Mortensen was high up on one of the world's most formidable mountains—K2 in Pakistan. Finding himself separated from his climbing party, Mortensen wandered—broken, lost, and exhausted—down icy and treacherous mountain trails clutching an amber bead necklace that belonged to his little sister Christa.

As a three year old in Tanzania, where Mortensen's parents were Lutheran missionaries, Christa contracted acute meningitis and never fully recovered. For her 23rd birthday Christa and her mother planned to visit the corn field in Deyersville, Iowa, where the movie that Christa was drawn to watch again and again, *Field of Dreams*, was filmed. But on her birthday, in the dark hours before they left, Christa died of a massive seizure. After her death, Mortensen cherished the necklace. On this trip he wrapped it in a Tibetan prayer flag with plans to deposit it as a tribute to Christa at the 28,267 foot summit of K2. Mortensen wasn't as sure about the Christian faith of his missionary parents, who built a school and a hospital on the slopes of Mt. Kilimanjaro in Tanzania. But he intended to leave the necklace to whatever deity inhabited the tops of mountains.

Taking a slightly different route than his climbing party, he found himself separated from them and his local guide. After seventy-eight days at high altitude, he was faint and disoriented. All that his day pack contained was a lightweight blanket, an empty water bottle, and one protein bar. His porter had all his other gear. Knowing that it was foolish to travel on icy trails as day became night, he had no choice but to endure the night in sub-zero temperatures. He ate the sole protein bar after thawing it against his body and tried to sleep on a solitary slab of rock with only a thin blanket.

He awoke before sunrise barely able to breathe, for a mask of ice covered his mouth and nose. Hoping to find the main trail, Mortensen realized he had to hike back up the mountain with numb and exhausted legs. He began singing: "What a Friend We Have in Jesus" in Swahili. What an image. An American climber, lost in Pakistan, sings an old European hymn—in Swahili!

After hours of climbing, he heard the tinkling of bells from a donkey caravan. Walking toward the noise, however, he encountered a 5,000-foot wall of ice blocking all progress. So he retraced his steps, looking down for any signs of the trail. A half hour later, he saw a cigarette butt and other debris. A mile or so out, he spotted the silhouette of a man standing on a boulder. Mortensen bellowed at the top of his lungs, but the man disappeared. Hidden by pillars of boulders, Mortensen wasn't visible, and so he echoed his screams off the rock walls. Exhausted, he trotted to the last spot where he saw the man and suddenly the man appeared on the other side of a crevasse. The man was Mou-zaf-er, Mortensen's porter. He yelled: "Mr. Greg! Mr. Greg! Blessings to Allah! You are alive!"

Mouzafer got him in a cave and made him a pot of tea. He then took him to an impoverished village named Korphe, located in Pakistan's Himalaya region. No outsider had ever been to Korphe before. Mortensen was extended the immense hospitality which is unforgivable for the Balti people not to extend any guest. The chief and the villagers nursed him back to health with tea and loving kindness.

Mortensen eventually recovered, forever indebted to the village that saved his life. He wanted to repay their hospitality, but what could a California "climbing bum" living out of an old Buick possibly do? When Mortensen tells chief Haji Ali of a desire to visit the village's school, the old man's countenance drops. Mortensen persists. Seeing eighty-two children, seventy-eight boys and four girls, kneeling on frozen ground in the open air, Mortensen is appalled. Haji informs Mortensen there is no school. The government provides no teachers, and a teacher's salary of a dollar a day is more than the village can afford.

Brokenhearted, Mortensen watched these children standing at attention singing their national anthem which ends with the phrase: “May the nation, the country, the state, shine in glory everlasting. This flag of crescent and star leads the way to progress and perfection.”

Mortensen fumes: Why can't the government provide a dollar a day for these mountain children? Why can't the crescent and the star lead these children such a small distance towards progress and perfection? Mortensen is transformed as he watches these children do their multiplication tables in an open-air school. The fortunate ones have slate boards and write with sticks dipped in mud; the others simply scratch their equations in the dirt.

Mortensen asks: “Can you imagine a fourth grade class in America, without a teacher, sitting all alone—quietly working on their lessons?” Mortensen later added: “I felt as though my heart was being torn out. There was a fierceness in their desire to learn, despite how mightily everything was stacked against them, that reminded me of Christa. I knew I had to do something.” But what?

He had just enough money, if he ate

simply and stayed in the cheapest guest houses, to travel to Islamabad and catch his flight back home. In California, he could find sporadic nursing work but all his earthly possessions were in the trunk of his old Buick he was living out of.

Leaving his sister's necklace on the summit of K2 is now moot. He envisions a far more enduring gesture to memorialize his sister. He tells Haji: “I'm going to build you a school,” not realizing that his life and those of hundreds of others was about to take a new course. “I will build you a school,” said Mortensen, “I promise!”

Since 1993, Mortensen has accomplished what powerful world governments have not. He formed the Central Asia Institute and has built fifty-five schools—mostly for girls—in Pakistan and Afghanistan's poorest communities. Mortensen's story sheds new light on the old words: “I was lost but now am found,” and reminds us that we often have to get lost in order to find our true selves. If you are looking for a book to inspire and motivate you to discover and live into your spiritual vocation more fully by having your life make a difference—this is a must read. 



A READER'S GUIDE TO THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY... SO FAR

TIMOTHY LINCOLN

As we ride on the arrow of time, we have already burned though at least seven years (depending on how you count) of the twenty-first century. The current century already looks strikingly different in some ways from the twentieth. The average American heading out to a New Year's Eve party in December 1999 (or 2000) probably thought very little about different kinds of Muslims or expected the United States to be involved in two wars in the Near East simultaneously. Some might have thought that global climate change was a big deal. I dare say that no one would have bet that 2008 presidential candidates John McCain and Barack Obama would be briefed on the relative merits of wind power, solar power plants, and fuel cell technology. The twenty-first century is more than a little confusing. Because of the work that



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I do as a librarian at Austin Seminary, I've come across some accessible books that have helped me make some sense out of the brave new world of the 2000s. This essay is a partial reader's guide to the present. I touch on globalization, Islam, life worlds of young adults, and global climate change.

GLOBALIZATION

The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-first Century by journalist Thomas Friedman tells the story of globalization, that two-dollar word for the increasing connections between people, goods, services, and culture regardless of where you happen to live. Friedman explains why your call from Fort Worth to a technical support desk is answered in India (or perhaps China) and why many American college students will spend their working lives competing with millions of hungry, talented, and educated workers from São Paulo, Mumbai, and Shanghai. All of these workers are competition, Friedman argues, because a global economy, capitalism, and a powerful telecommunications system have flattened the world. Friedman does not take a fatalistic line about our country's ability to compete in the global market for labor, but suggests that the United States needs to make strategic investments in education and infrastructure if we want to maintain our standard of living in the flat world of the twenty-first century. *The World Is Flat* is a fat, chatty, book. You can skim parts of it and still grasp his interesting argument.

ISLAM

Because of the 9/11 attacks and America's subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, many of us have tried to learn more about Islam. Reza Aslan's *No god but God* is an approachable, beautifully written book that introduces Islam to those who are not Muslims. The book is especially strong in setting the beginning of Islam in the world of sixth century Arabia. Aslan is no friend of traditionalist Islam that appeals to traditional practices without admitting the cogency of alternate views. He is a modernist Muslim who articulately points to strains within his faith that promote peace and toleration.

LIFE WORLDS OF THE YOUNG

I have a 23-year-old son and a 17-year-old daughter. In their world, texting, instant messaging, and MySpace, are as important as e-mail, phone calls, and face-to-face conversation. In their world, the greatest actors of all time just may be Jack Black and Will Farrell. I confess that their world is not identical to mine. My ability to empathize with their world has been strengthened by reading two books. Steven Johnson's *Everything Bad Is Good For You: How Today's Popular Culture Is Actually Making Us Smarter* makes a fascinating argument that the popular culture relished by today's teenagers and twenty-somethings (including video games and Internet-mediated relationships) is not a rotting, debased echo of the Good Old Days of the 1960s or 1970s. Rather, Johnson argues, films like *Memento* and television shows like *24* and *The Sopranos*, *Seinfeld*, and even *The Simpsons* place sophisticated cognitive demands on the viewer far exceeding the sustained concentration required to enjoy hit entertainment in the past. According

to Johnson, the allure of video games lies not in the overt story line, but in the requirement that players constantly probe a virtual world and figure out non-obvious mid-game objectives to advance to the game's ultimate goal. Johnson also addresses the issue of the violent content of some popular games. You may not trade your DVD collection of *WKRP in Cincinnati* for the latest release of *Medal of Honor* or *Zelda* after reading this 200-page book, but church leaders with a few gray hairs and non-gamers will do well to ponder Johnson's argument.

If you've wondered why your child or grandchild took five or six years to finish college (you, after all, did it in four years), shows no interest in getting married, and has had a series of jobs chosen at random, you may suspect western civilization as we know it is ending. Well, perhaps it is. Before you completely make up your mind, I suggest that you read Jeffrey Arnett's *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens through the Twenties*. Arnett is a psychologist who studies the way that twenty-somethings in the U.S. meet the life challenges of education, relationships, work and, to use an old-fashioned phrase, finding themselves. Arnett argues that changes in the global economy and institutional life now constrain twenty-somethings so that they take longer to do things that our society traditionally uses to tag individuals as full-blown adults, such as supporting themselves and committing to a partner in marriage. The title term "emerging adulthood" describes a time of experimentation with jobs, education, and relationships. According to Arnett, your children or grandchildren aren't goofing off or intentionally trying to break your heart or bank account. They are working very hard to find meaning and figure out how adulthood works nowadays.

For church leaders, the logical companion to Arnett's book is Robert Wuthnow's *After The Baby Boomers: How Twenty-and Thirty-Somethings are Shaping the Future of American Religion*. This book is an exercise in sociology, and is more complex than the others I've mentioned so far in this essay. Wuthnow documents how the same trends noted by Arnett (delaying the age of marriage, smaller family size, etc.) have affected church participation over the last thirty years. Any pastor who struggles to relate the ministry of his or her congregation to twenty-somethings will benefit from reading this book.

INCONVENIENT TRUTHS

In the twenty-first century, there appears to be a consensus that global climate change is causing sea levels to rise. Rising sea levels threaten the habitat of polar bears and the way of life of traditional societies on low-lying islands in the Arctic and Micronesia. Andrew Dessler and Edward Parson's *The Science and Politics of Global Climate Change* sets out the data that scientists use when discussing global climate change and also discusses the policy decisions that industrialized countries face as they seek to mitigate the problems that climate change is likely to cause. Theologian Sallie McFague's 2008 book *A New Climate for Theology: God, the World, and Global Warming* provides a Christian reflection on the sobering facts of climate change. McFague argues that we Christians need to discover new ways to envision both ourselves and God as we seek to promote both the integrity of creation and human dignity in the twenty-first century.

IN CONCLUSION: TAKE UP AND READ

Reading is no substitute for prayer or action, but reading can help inform us, open our eyes to different ways of thinking, and inspire. The twenty-first century is not the twentieth century with a slightly revised cast of characters. The world is physically changing, and social worlds are being remade. I hope that you pick up one of the books mentioned here and discover the complexity and challenges that God has put before us in this century. ☪

Books Discussed

Each of the books discussed in this essay are available for purchase through Austin Seminary's online store at www.austinseminary.edu

Arnett, Jeffrey Jensen. *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens through the Twenties*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.

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