

Yesterday's Sermon - In 10 Sentences or Less

1. Today's question asks for principles by which we can read a Bible that is sometimes troubling, confusing, or distasteful (like the massacre of Canaanites in the Old Testament or the alleged prohibition of women from church leadership in the New).



2. One of the things that grounds and unifies us at KW is our Presbyterian (PCUSA) guidelines and creeds, and the latter offers us a great deal of insight in regard to today's question.

3. The Confession of 1967, 9.27-29, offers a first principle to help us engage the Bible profitably: Christ is the one true living Word of God, and as such is the litmus test, climax, and goal of all written scripture.

4. St. Paul understood the scriptures as an unfolding story or a multi-act play that reaches its zenith in Christ: he says that the eras prior to Christ should feel like a "mystery" (Ephesians 3.4-6) and "shadows" (Colossians 1.26-27; see too Hebrews 10.1) to us, meaning that they might be hard to understand, seem confusing, or run counter to what we see clearly in Jesus.

5. Thus, a second important principle emerges: the Bible is not merely a book of divine revelation, as if its human authors were merely stenographers for God's message, but it is also the story of all that it means to be human – the good, the inconsistent, the bad, and the very, very bad.

6. St. Paul says that when we read the Old Testament we should feel "imprisoned" by what it reveals about humanity, and as if it is our "tutor" about our own brokenness (Galatians 3.22-23).

7. Kenton Sparks, a professor of biblical studies at Eastern University, gives his students this simple rubric by which to read the Bible: "Everything that is truly terrible in the Bible can be traced back to human culpability, and all that is good and true in scripture is God's doing."

8. The Confession of 1967, 9.29, gives us a final, third principle for interpreting scripture well, especially the parts of it that may offend or trouble us at first: before you can understand what the Bible might have to say to you or our 21st-century world, you must understand what it meant in its own world.

9. The best we can hope for is a "fusion of horizons," a coming together of what the Bible was meant to say to its original audience in its original world by its original authors, with our own questions, concerns, and priorities from 2000 years later.

10. An example of how we mishandle the biblical text when we don't hear it historically first are the texts in the New Testament used by some modern Christians to prohibit women from teaching or church leadership (we covered 1st Timothy 2.9-15 in the sermon).

Quotes to Chew On

Dr. Christian Smith, professor at Notre Dame (in *The Bible Made Impossible*):

"Seeing Christ as central (to the Bible) compels us to always try to make sense of everything we read in any part of scripture in light of our larger knowledge of who God is in Jesus Christ... We do not read the scripture as a vast collection of infallible propositions whose meanings and implications can be understood on their own... terms. We only, always, and everywhere read scripture in view of its real subject matter: Jesus Christ... For Christians, Christ is the center, the inner reason, and the end of all scripture. From the Bible's account of the creation of the world in Genesis to its final consummation in Revelation, it is all and only about the work of God in time and space in the person of Jesus Christ for the redemption of the world."

Brian McLaren, in *A Generous Orthodoxy*, on how reading the Bible as an unfolding story helps us grapple with the violence of the Old Testament:

According to the OT Law, while God is commanding the destruction of the Canaanites, God simultaneously commands that once they were subdued, the Jews should treat their neighbors... with respect and kindness.... God strictly limits violence and leads the OT Jews to create a society that was a step above that of all other kingdoms ethically with unprecedented protections for foreigners.

And then Jesus comes with a new command that fulfills and supersedes all of the OT Law: to love one another, and especially love one's enemies – to forgive, not to inflict revenge, to give, and not to take or even grasp what you already have...

This narrative approach (to scripture) does not lessen the agony one feels reading about the conquest of the Canaanites by the Jews with the eyes of one taught by Jesus to love all, including enemies. But it helps turn the Bible back into what it is, not a look-it-up encyclopedia of timeless moral truths, but the unfolding narrative of God at work in a violent, sinful world, calling people, beginning with Abraham, to a new way of life.

St. Augustine (300s C.E.), in *On Christian Doctrine*, 1.36.40:

Whoever, then, thinks that he understands the Holy Scriptures, or any part of them, but puts such an interpretation upon them as does not tend to build up this twofold love of God and our neighbor, does not yet understand them as he ought.

Resources for You

Here are some ways to keep leaning into the help we glean from our Presbyterian roots and identity in regard to how we read, interpret, and engage with the Bible:

1) Two pieces from the PCUSA and Presbyterian Mission Agency:

[How Presbyterians interpret the Bible](#)

[Presbyterian Mission Agency The Bible – The Living Word](#)

2) A video and booklet that cover the same ground - the official PCUSA guidance on how to read the Bible rightly, as passed by our General Assembly. The 2nd half of the video covers these, as does pages 8-16 in the booklet (this way you don't have to read the whole booklet):

[Presbyterian Understanding and Use of Holy Scripture](#)

[Biblical Authority and Interpretation: A Presbyterian Perspective](#)

3) A short piece on Martin Luther's shift in how he interpreted scripture, and how this fueled his own spiritual rebirth, as well as the Protestant Reformation:

[Luther and Biblical Interpretation](#)