

We all know what it's like when we're leaving our driveway and have to return to the house for something we forgot. And then, for some of us, we forget what we were looking for in the first place. We waste time and energy looking for something when we have forgotten even what that something is.

The same is true when we come to the Bible. I would not be surprised if one reason for the popularity of practical "how to" guides to personal Bible reading is that the Scriptures, though revered, are generally regarded as incomprehensible. In the past, we talked about the Bible's "perspicuity"-that is, its clarity or straightforwardness. But many today, if they express their true feelings about it, think of the Bible as the *Encyclopedia Britannica*: if you know what you're looking for, fine, but it cannot be read like any other book, having its own plot which is presented and developed by an ordinary reading of the text.

In that sense, the popular guides to Bible reading, not to mention the myriad "study bibles" (a proliferation we should understand as motivated largely by financial considerations), actually undermine the study of Scripture, in most cases. The writers often assume that the Bible does not have its own clear and distinct message, so they find hidden messages between the lines. Ironic, isn't it: many of those who charge confessional folks with imposing their systems on Scripture end up only imposing a shallow substitute, a "system" that does not arise naturally from the text itself, but emerges from the life-experience of a single individual and his or her friends?

As the late Yale theologian Hans Frei explained, the blame for interrupting this reading of the biblical text as a single story is not the fault only of the higher critics but of conservatives also, as both tried to get above or behind the narrative in order to discover what really happened or what really mattered. In other words, the reader decided what he or she was looking for-and then found it. But what was found was no longer the story of God's saving work in Christ. So Frei, his colleagues and students in the trend of so-called "narrative theology" have called for a return to a pre-critical way of reading Scripture. This doesn't mean that they have rejected the last two centuries of biblical criticism. Rather, they argue that the modern way of reading Scripture has missed the whole point.

While we would have significant concerns about the way some narrative theologians read this text, given their generally Barthian view of Scripture, there is some indication that the insistence on: (a) the Bible as a narrative of saving events, (b) its Christ-centered focus, and c) the unity of the canon as a presupposition of the promise-fulfillment pattern of the testaments, at least points us in the right direction. As Hans Frei, Brevard Childs, and other representatives of this school insist, we need to get past the Enlightenment hangover and begin to read the Bible the way Luther and Calvin did again. So how *did* Luther and Calvin read the Bible? More importantly, how was the Bible *meant* to be read? What are we looking for when we open the Bible or hear a sermon?

"The Scriptures Testify of Me"

If anyone is qualified to answer that question it is surely Jesus Christ, the Living Word himself. And, in fact, he does. To the religious leaders who highly revered but failed to truly understand this book, Jesus declared, "You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me. But you are not willing to come to Me that you may have life" (John 5:40). I am reminded of the type of preaching I often heard growing up in which the answer for nearly everything was: read the Bible more. The last thing I wanted to read was the Bible, since it had become a talisman. It is ironic that as much as these brothers and sisters recoil at any suggestion of an *ex opere operato* (literally, "by doing it, it is done") view of the Sacraments, there seems to be a similar view of devotions and Bible reading-the "quiet time." Just do it, and everything will be better.

But this vague approach to the Scriptures fails to recognize that Scripture itself tells us loudly and clearly what we should come to it to find each time. The Bible is not an end in itself, but a means to a greater end: to lead us

to the living person of Jesus Christ and to unite us to him by the Spirit. It is possible to be a "Bible-believer," but not a Christian—that is, not someone who reads this as a book about the person and work of Christ. But, some will say, not all of Scripture can be about Christ. After all, the Book of Revelation, for instance, is about the end times, right? Yes—and yet, Revelation is a rich tapestry bringing together the threads of redemptive history around Christ: nothing could be more obvious from the text itself. Furthermore, Jesus was criticizing the religious leaders for not understanding that the Scriptures were all about him when the only Scriptures to which he had reference consisted of the Old Testament. If Christ is the center of the Old Testament, then is he any less central in the New? If there is any doubt, we are reminded of our Lord's appearance to his disciples on the road to Emmaus. Not understanding the meaning of Jesus' death, these disciples were utterly despondent. Jesus told them, "O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! Ought not the Christ to have suffered these things and to enter into his glory?" And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, he expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself" (Luke 24:25-7). No wonder their hearts burned within them as he opened up the Scriptures. It could happen on a broad scale today, too, if the Scriptures would only be approached this way in preaching.

Through the Scriptures, Peter says (again referring to the Old Testament), the Spirit revealed "...the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow" (1 Pet. 1:11). The sermons in the Book of Acts all reflect this way of preaching the Scriptures: Christ is proclaimed from the Old Testament. The first Christian sermons, therefore, do not proclaim Moses as a great Christian leader, nor is the purpose to set forth the example of Joshua's courage or David's "heart for the Lord," nor is Gideon's fleece a parable of seeking the Lord's will for our lives. Rather, Scripture is all about Christ, from beginning to end: his sufferings, and the glories that would follow.

Too often in conservative hermeneutics, there is a biblicism which is unbiblical: the naïve (not to mention tautological) assumption that we're simply looking for what is there. Each time we go to the text, we are starting from scratch, as if we had no blinders, no presuppositions. This is not only impossible, it blinds us to our presuppositions so that we cannot critique them. To say that all of Scripture is about Christ and that, therefore, whatever does not proclaim Christ is not sufficiently biblical, is not to *impose* expectations on the text. Rather, it is to come to have certain expectations of the text because it is the text itself which tells us to expect it! One conservative evangelical pastor told me, "I just preach the Word. If I'm in Galatians, I sound like an antinomian; if I'm in the Sermon on the Mount, I sound like a legalist." The assumption here, of course, is that one is just sticking close to the text, preferring exegesis (reading out the meaning) rather than eisegesis (reading the meaning into the text). But in reality, one may be simply engaging in the higher critics' tendency to view the Bible as a patchwork quilt of disparate pieces rather than as a single bolt of fabric. It is ironic when Brevard Childs, at Yale Divinity School, argues for reading the Bible as a single book while my conservative evangelical friend insists on reading it as a collection of fragments.

But if we know what we're looking for (the "big picture"), because the Bible itself clearly sets forth that goal, we sound like neither an antinomian nor a legalist. God speaks with consistency. Therefore, there is a "system" which arises naturally from the Bible itself, a coherent discourse concerning God's redemptive drama. Reading the parts (individual passages) in the light of that whole (redemptive-historical interpretation) becomes a fruitful process. As Jesus himself reminded the religious leaders, it is possible to read the Bible and yet not read the Bible. In other words, it is possible to read the words of Scripture without "getting it," without recognizing that Christ and his saving office is the point of it all.

Another temptation in reading/hearing the Scriptures is our impatience. For something to be useful reading, we unwittingly think that it has to either entertain or inform us. Thus, Scripture somehow has to fit into one or both of those categories. A practical lot, Americans don't like "wasting" their time on subjects whose usefulness cannot be easily and quickly measured. The problem is, Scripture is divided into "Law" and "Gospel," as our Reformed as well as Lutheran forebears insisted. These are categories, not sections, of the Bible. So, for instance, often even the same verse is, in one sense, Law, and in another, Gospel. "I will be your God" may be "Law" to me when I realize God's righteousness and how prone I am to doing things my way, while it may be

"Gospel" to me when I recognize that in the covenant of grace God not only promises eternal life to sinners, but grants repentance, faith, justification, sanctification, perseverance, and glorification. Consequently, nothing—not even my unfaithfulness—will keep God from being *my* God. But what happens when we demand that our reading or hearing of Scripture must be either entertaining or practical? Necessarily, it subverts this Law-Gospel distinction. Good news becomes entertainment and the Law is reduced to practical tips. As a result, the bad news isn't really that bad, and the good news isn't really that good. The bad news is that we are not as faithful as we should be in our discipleship; the good news is that God has provided us with clear instructions as to how we can love him from the heart. From the heart, mind you! After all, the good news is that while the Old Testament required obedience to a lot of rules, the New Testament requires heart-religion: that we love God and our neighbor. That is what we hear often these days, but it is not good news. Jesus summarized the entire Law in terms of loving God and neighbor. All along, the Law had been a matter of the heart and not just of the hands, as the judgments against Israel in the prophets indicates.

Even if such a contrast were legitimate, it is not good news that God used to require adherence to external commands and now enjoins an internal love of God and neighbor. Rather, this is the most rigorous center of the Law itself: it demands far more, not less. So when people preach (or read) the Bible as a handbook of helpful tips or as a practical guide for happier living, they are not really encountering the Bible at all, despite their appeal to it. If one comes to the Bible always looking for the "practical," that usually means that one will come looking for watered-down "Law." Remember, this is already our tendency, as Calvin's successor, Theodore Beza, reminds us: "The Law is natural to man.... But the gospel is a supernatural doctrine which our nature would never have been able to imagine nor able to approve without a special grace of God." (1)

This doesn't mean, however, that one should preach (or read) every passage as a direct republication of "Law" and "Gospel," "Guilt, Grace, and Gratitude," or even of Christ and redemptive history. These latter classifications are hermeneutical (i.e., interpretive) clues, guardrails, and categories, but not the content itself. Each passage has its own life within a larger context of its own place in both Scripture and redemptive history. If every sermon sounds the same, then these categories have become the content rather than the method, rendering every sermon "topical" instead of being genuinely exegetical and redemptive-historical. To say that all of Scripture points to Christ is not to suggest that we can trample on the immediate context and content of a passage. It is more like a light illumining all of Scripture than a vacuum inhaling all of it. The revelation of Christ in the history of redemption is the reference point for interpretation, but should in no way mute the specifics of a given passage. If we fail to recognize that each passage has its own place and must be given its due, we risk turning "preaching Christ," "Law-and-Gospel," or "redemptive-historical interpretation" into new ways of doing merely topical preaching. In other words, it is possible to understand "redemptive-historical" preaching in a way that undermines all sense of real history and a genuine sense of an unfolding plot.

A related temptation is the tendency to regard the Bible as a handbook of timeless principles: Genesis as handbook of science; Leviticus as handbook of worship; Deuteronomy as handbook of government; Proverbs as handbook of helpful tips for life; Daniel and Revelation as handbooks of end-times predictions; the Sermon on the Mount as the handbook of discipleship; Romans as handbook of doctrine. Some people, therefore, read the whole Bible as if it were the Book of Proverbs and others as if it were the Book of Romans: timeless eternal principles of living or of doctrine. But Scripture is full of many different genres, chief among them narrative. Thus, they are to be read as a divinely inspired and authorized account of redemption, from Genesis to Revelation.

Let's use an example from a widespread interpretive mistake: "If my people who are called by my name will humble themselves, and pray and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land" (2 Chr. 7:14). This verse is often used as a proof-text for America's restoration as God's favorite country. But this ignores both the immediate and the wider context. As to the immediate context, this oft-quoted slogan does not even begin at the beginning. The first part of the severed verse reads, "When I shut up heaven and there is no rain, or command the locusts to devour the land, or send pestilence among my people, *if my people who are called by my name....*" This verse's historical context is

discarded so that it may more easily serve as a universal and timeless moral principle, to be applied at will. In terms of the wider context, it ignores the covenantal structure of biblical revelation. In the Old Testament, there are two covenants running concurrently throughout the story: the Abrahamic and the Mosaic. The former represents the covenant of grace, while the latter is strictly conditional on Israel's obedience in the land. To misapply the threats or blessings which God directs to the theocratic kingdom of Israel is to confuse the covenant of grace with the covenant of works. This passage must be understood in the light of its covenantal framework and its place in redemptive history.

While doctrinal and ethical truths are clearly gleaned from this Word, they are subordinate to the central plot and the principal character of this drama. As theologian Richard Gaffin observes,

Revelation never stands by itself, but is always concerned either explicitly or implicitly with redemptive accomplishment. God's speech is invariably related to his actions. It is not going too far to say that redemption is the *raison d'être* of revelation. An unbiblical, quasi-gnostic notion of revelation inevitably results when it is considered by itself or as providing self-evident general truths. Consequently, revelation is either authentication or interpretation of God's redemptive action. (2)

Recovering the Narrative

As noted earlier, it is not only confessional folks who are currently talking about the Bible's plot and the drama of God's salvific action. In reaction to the "scorched earth" policy of the higher critics toward the New Testament documents (characterized by an obsession with getting above, behind, or underneath the biblical narrative), some academic theologians have decided that it is time again to take the Bible's *story* seriously. These "postliberals" or "narrative theologians" trace their lineage back to Hans Frei's insightful *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (1974).

While we must not forget the problems associated with this movement (especially the Barthian reluctance to address the relationship between the narrative and factual history or other truth-claims), it has helpfully drawn attention once again to the Bible's narrative character. Applying literary theory, of course, is nothing new. In fact, Frei saw himself and recent biblical theologians as reiterating the approach to interpretation embodied in the history of the church's most ordinary Bible reading and preaching.

Long before a minor modern school of thought made the biblical "history of salvation" a special spiritual and historical sequence for historiographical and theological inquiry, Christian preachers and theological commentators, Augustine the most notable among them, had envisioned the real world as formed by the sequence told by the biblical stories. (3)

The most dominant form of interpretation, says Frei, was the "literal and historical reading"; or, if you will, the *sensus literalis* (literal sense), which is not to be confused with literalism. "It actually received new impetus in the era of the Renaissance and the Reformation when it became the regnant mode of biblical reading." (4) Reading the Bible for something other than the story—a strategy employed by liberals and conservatives alike—has led to a colossal distraction and a lengthy hiatus from the most common practice throughout church history. After the Enlightenment, it is demanded, "But to what does this narrative refer?" Both liberals and conservatives tended to see the Scriptures as a source for "what really happened" (i.e., outside of the biblical narrative itself). As a result, the meaning and significance shifted from the dramatic plot of redemption itself to the evidence for or against certain claims, requiring this particular narrative to serve in its own way the metanarrative of universal reason, experience, and morality. At the end of it all, the biblical story was little more than an illustration of universal truths which were already true and knowable apart from revelation.

In some ways, Frei's project was anticipated three decades earlier by his Yale colleague, H. Richard Niebuhr, in the latter's *The Meaning of Revelation* (1941). Especially in the chapter titled, "The Story of Our Life," Niebuhr

defends a contrast between "outer history" (history as told by an "objective" bystander) and an "inner history" (history as told by a participant in that history). Note the following example he uses:

Lincoln's Gettysburg Address begins with history: "Fourscore and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal." The same event is described in the *Cambridge Modern History* in the following fashion: "On July 4, 1776, Congress passed the resolution which made the colonies independent communities, issuing at the same time the well-known Declaration of Independence. If we regard the Declaration as the assertion of an abstract political theory, criticism and condemnation are easy. It sets out with a general proposition so vague as to be practically useless. The doctrine of the equality of men, unless it be qualified and conditioned by reference to special circumstance, is either a barren truism or a delusion." (5)

It hardly seems that Lincoln and the *Cambridge Modern History* could have been describing the same founding event in our national memory, the former speaking from within that history while the latter is detached and distant. "Hence we may call internal history dramatic and its truth dramatic truth, though drama in this case does not mean fiction." Furthermore,

The inspiration of Christianity has been derived from history, it is true, but not from history as seen by a spectator; the constant reference is to subjective events, that is to events in the lives of subjects. What distinguishes such historic recall from the private histories of mystics is that it refers to communal events, remembered by a community and in a community. Subjectivity here is not equivalent to isolation, non-verifiability, and ineffability; our history can be communicated and persons can refresh as well as criticize each other's memories of what has happened to them in the common life; on the basis of a common past they can think together about the common future. (6)

To be sure, there are dangers here of reverting to the classic liberal tendency to see claims such as the Resurrection as statements concerning what happened to the disciples rather than to Jesus: in other words, the "Easter faith" of the apostolic community rather than any truth claim about the empty tomb. Ever present in an Evangelicalism dominated by pietism is the tendency to concentrate on the *act* of faith rather than on the *object* of faith; our experience with Jesus Christ rather than the person and work of Jesus Christ himself; the testimony of what happened to us rather than the apostles' testimony of what happened to Christ. "My Story" begins to take precedence over "His Story."

Nevertheless, that which links us here and now to the founding events then and there, and ties us to everything in between, is the fact that My Story has now become part of His Story. I have been written into the script, joining the cast of players, running the race to the cheering throngs of glorified saints until, one day, I, too, join those satisfied spectators in the stands (Heb. 12:1-2). It is the biblical eschatology of the "already/not yet" which keeps all of this in balance, reminding us that all of us who are baptized into Christ belong already to the "new creation," but that this new creation is not yet consummated. Our "story" is no longer "a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing" (Shakespeare's *Macbeth*). In other words, it is not a merely chronological life ("one damned thing after another," or that which Peter calls "your aimless conduct received by tradition from your fathers"), but is new, eschatological life: "...even while we were dead in trespasses, [God] made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, that in the ages to come he may show the exceeding riches of his grace in his kindness toward us in Christ Jesus" (Eph. 2:6-7).

So in Baptism, the Story of Jesus incorporates My Story. The eyewitness accounts of the apostles focus on the Story of Jesus: how he fulfilled the role of Messiah in Israel's history by conquering sin, hell, and death. Almost entirely absent from the Gospel narratives is a description of what happened to the disciples: so focused are they on being witnesses to the Story of Jesus. And yet, all along in the accounts their lives' plots are rewritten, their characters recast, their roles transformed: Matthew the greedy tax-collector is no longer to exist, but is to be made one of the Twelve, each of whom is to the New Testament what the twelve tribes of Israel are to the Old.

Although Jesus Christ's living, dying, and rising are vicarious acts of redemption, my identity, from character to plot, is inserted into the identity, from character to plot, of this other person and his story. No longer a spectator to this remarkable story, suddenly I-gentile, outsider, "nowhere man living in his nowhere land, making all his nowhere plans for nobody"-get written into the elevated story of chosen Israel, of which Jesus Christ is the crucial character. The outcast gets "re-scripted" as a privileged one. "In Christ," and with his whole body, I am elect and precious, redeemed, justified, sanctified, bodily raised on the last day and glorified forever. Many metaphors hint at this amazing reality: grafting wild branches onto the fruitful vine, living stones being built into the heavenly sanctuary of Christ's body, those "who once were not a people but are now the people of God, who had not obtained mercy but now have obtained mercy" (1 Pet. 2:10). I'm not making this up:

What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? Certainly not! How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it? Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we were buried with him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been united in the likeness of his death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of his resurrection, knowing this, that our old man was crucified with him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin.... Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him, knowing that Christ, having been raised from the dead, dies no more. Death no longer has dominion over him. For the death that he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life that he lives, he lives to God. Likewise you also, reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom. 6:1-11).

But before we get too carried away with "narrative" approaches, let us remember that the Story of Jesus cannot be separated from the truth claims of Jesus and his disciples. This narrative is true not merely in the sense that a poem is true or Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* is "true to life." So "history-like" versus "historical," a distinction often employed by Frei and other narrative theologians, cannot prove very beneficial for those of us who regard the biblical narrative(s) as thoroughly historical. Nor are we imposing an Enlightenment criterion of external reference or rationality upon the narrative, for it is the narrative itself which makes claims to final, external, historical truth.

Nor should this recognition of the power of narrative, which has been emphasized already by such conservative biblical theologians as Geerhardus Vos, Herman Ridderbos, and Meredith Kline, be used by faddish preachers. As Johann Baptist Metz warns, "This is why, in giving renewed emphasis to narrative, it is important to avoid the possible misunderstanding that 'story-telling' preachers and teachers will be justified in their narration of anecdotes, when what is required are arguments and reasoning. After all, there is a time for story-telling and a time for argument." (7) Drawn *to* the Life and, by the power of the Holy Spirit working through the Word, *drawn* into the Life, all other stories fade-not away, but into the background. Rival narratives which threaten to misshape us and ultimately lead to death are exposed for the shallowness of their plot, the narrowness of their vision, and the hopelessness of their characters. His Story becomes My Story, and vice versa, while both become Our Story, the witness of the New Humanity to its Living Head:

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of life-the life was manifested, and we have seen, and bear witness, and declare to you that eternal life which was with the Father and was manifested to us-that which we have seen and heard we declare to you, that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. And these things we write to you that your joy may be full (1 John 1:1-4).