

Cursillo Servant Leadership Education Session
On the Authority of Scripture “notes”
April 28th, 2007

As all of you are aware, one of the big topics of debate in the sexuality conversation has been the authority of Scripture. In the last while I have read N.T. Wright's The Last Word and Rowan Greer's Anglican Approaches To Scripture. In this presentation I will present N.T. Wright's overview of how we understand the authority of Scripture, which I personally found very helpful, and then offer a few tidbits from Rowan Greer. N.T. Wright is the Bishop of Durham and highly respected as a biblical scholar. Rowan Greer held a chair in Anglican Studies at the Yale Divinity School and is a highly esteemed teacher there.

N.T. Wright's thesis is that we can only make Christian sense of “the authority of Scripture” if we understand it as the authority of God, the Holy Trinity exercised somehow through Scripture.

All authority is from God, says Wright, and thus Scripture points away from itself to the authority of God, now delegated to Jesus Christ.

What sort of authority is exercised by Scripture? It is an authority that is communicated primarily by story and not by lists of rules. These stories often teach about the authority of God's Kingdom. In the Kingdom God is and always has been sovereign. But on earth this sovereignty must break in afresh into the world of corruption, decay and death, human rebellion, idolatry and sin. God's authority will renew creation and bring it into harmony. Scripture has a role to play in this renewal. Scripture is there to be a means of God's action in and through us which will include, but go far beyond, the mere conveying of information.

In Old Testament Scripture we see “God was equipping his people to serve his purposes”. This includes:

- the ordering of the nation of Israel
- structured worship
- wisdom for daily living
- rebuke and promise via the prophets
- songs to bring people into God's presence.

In the New Testament Jesus takes the place of the people Israel. Now Jesus is the medium through which God's long-range purposes are worked out. To reiterate: the work which God had done through Israel in the Old Testament is done by Jesus in his public career, his death and resurrection and his sending of the Spirit.

Precisely because of what the early Christians believed about Israel's story having come to fulfillment in Jesus, they developed a multi-layered, nuanced and theologically grounded reading of the Old Testament. They firmly believed that the Old Testament was and remained, the book which God had given to his people, i.e., the covenant people who had spearheaded God's purposes for the world and from whom the Messiah Jesus had come. But from early days of Jesus they began to read the ancient Scriptures in a new way. This new way resulted in their recognizing that some parts of the Scriptures were no longer relevant for their ongoing life – not because those parts were bad, or less inspired or not God-given, but because they belonged with earlier parts of the story which had now, in Jesus, reached its climax.

You may remember that one debate amongst the early Christians had to do with the inclusion/exclusion of the Gentiles. One passage dedicated to telling the story of the Council of Jerusalem is Galatians 2 and 3. N.T. Wright describes what is happening as a change from a single geography and ethnicity to a greater diversity. By the time of the New Testament, the Christians are multi-ethnic and geographically diverse. Thus “those regulations in the Mosaic Law which explicitly marked out Jews from their non-Jewish neighbours were now to be set aside, not because they were not good, or not given by God, but because they had been given for a temporary purpose which was now complete”. (page 54)

This leads us to ask what we want to keep as authoritative and which we want to put aside.

- Continuing:
(stays)
1. the World as God's good creation.
 2. God's duty and promise to deal with evil.
 3. the covenant with Abraham.
 4. the call to holiness.

- Discontinuity:
(goes)
1. Jewish purity laws – dietary, what is clean, etc.
 2. Temple in Jerusalem and sacrifices there.
 3. the centrality of the Sabbath. Day of Resurrection takes prominence.
 4. “holy land” is now the whole world; anticipating the new creation.

Remember John 1.17 “The Law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.”

What this suggests, says N.T. Wright, is that sophisticated early Christians had a sense of continuing to live under the whole Scripture albeit in a multi-layered manner. Not every word, nor every verse, was of equal weight.

At this point read all of Galatians 2 and then:

Galatians 3.23-29

Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified through faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.

Therefore no part of culture, ancient or modern, is automatically good or evil. Much in the Old Testament was endorsed and kept on by the Christians, and much, for good reason, was set aside.

Thus the written word of the New Testament, which embodies the oral word of the primitive gospel, is the Spirit-empowered agent through which God reclaims the cosmos, and invites us to live a truly human life. But we need to remember that during the transition from the ancient Scriptures to the time of Christ and beyond, the understanding of what it meant to be truly human changed.

Scripture in the Tradition: How have we and how shall we read Scripture in context of the world in which we live?

Wright is emphatic that it isn't good enough to judge Scripture and deem it "wanting" if we can't give sound reason for it. To read and interpret Scripture well, one must not be arbitrary. There must be informed historical judgment.

Wright continues on to say that talking about Scripture, tradition and reason as equal authorities is wrong. To have more than one authority is wrong. God is the only authority although we do receive the authority in different ways. Rather than having a three-legged stool of scripture, tradition and reason we have one authority that we access in different ways. I quote:

"scripture, tradition and reason are not like three different bookshelves, each of which can be ransacked for answers to key questions. Rather, scripture is the bookshelf; tradition is the memory of what people in the house have read and understood (or perhaps misunderstood) from the shelf; and reason is the set of spectacles that people wear to make sense of what they read though, worryingly, the spectacles have varied over time, and there are signs that some readers, using the "reason" available to them, have severely distorted the texts they were reading."

Wright calls experience something else again: it's the context in which we hear scripture. It includes one's worldview, the life experience, the political circumstances, etc., within which one reads the books on the bookshelf. Wright points out that if we make experience an authority, we are no longer being addressed by a word beyond ourselves.

A bit later N.T. Wright moves from his picture of the bookshelf to a garden:

- experience is what grows by itself in the garden
- authority is what happens when the gardener decides to and goes ahead with weeding the garden
- over-authoritarian: removing everything from the garden and pouring concrete everywhere
- an over-experiential church solves the real or imagined problem of concrete by letting everything and anything grow unchecked.

I believe that the image of the bookshelf, memory, the eye glasses, and the context and alternatively, the garden that is over-controlled or under-cultivated are helpful images for us to play with as we think about the Bible.

The Big Picture: We might even call it God's picture from start to finish

If we consider the big picture then we can say that we discover what the shape and inner life of the church ought to be only when we look at the mission of the church and we know the church's mission only when we look at God's purpose for the world, as indicated in Genesis 1 and 2; Genesis 12; Isaiah 40 – 55; Romans 8; 1 Corinthians 15; Ephesians 1; and Revelation 21 – 22. God's mission in the world = church's mission. When looking at the big picture we need to keep in mind where we're headed . . .

The way to assess the faithfulness of a particular tradition is to ask whether you could follow it and keep following it in the context of public and private reading of scripture. Tradition is an excellent guide for understanding where we have come from, knowing we have sometimes got it right and sometimes got it wrong. Scripture itself is a better guide for where we should be going in the future. But that is not to say that any reading and interpretation of scripture will suffice. N.T. Wright is emphatic that we must be committed to a totally contextual reading of scripture. Each word must be understood within its own verse, each verse within its chapter, and each chapter within its own book, and each book within its historical, cultural and indeed canonical setting.

When a biblical scholar, or any theologian, wishes to propose a new way of looking at a well-known topic, he or she ought to sense an obligation to explain to the wider community the ways in which the fresh insight builds up, rather than threatens, the mission and life of the church.

Lastly, as we study scripture we need to lay aside the hermeneutic or interpretation of suspicious inclinations that has had so much attention in recent years and try a trusting hermeneutic or interpretation instead. How do we understand scripture if we assume scripture to be as faithful as we would like to be?