

Reading Scripture with Heart and Mind

The Fourth in a Series of Six Sermons on Progressive Christianity

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“Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.” – Psalm 119:105

Like many of you, I still have the first Bible I was ever given. Here it is. It's a King James, red-letter edition, with study aids. It has maps of the Holy Land and Jerusalem. It has photographs of some of the plants and places mentioned in the Bible. It has a few brief scholarly articles introducing various books and topics that feature prominently in Scripture. I didn't realize it at the time – and I was presented with this Bible when I finished third grade, on June 30, 1968, according to the presentation page – but this was my first study Bible, the kind of Bible I ask all of you to bring to our Bible studies here at Faith, and the kind of Bible I insisted that students bring to class when I taught in the university. Everybody needs a good study Bible.

And study it I did. I nearly studied my first Bible to death, as you can see from its physical condition. I nearly wore this Bible out before I got my next Bible, when I went off to college and took Jim Ackerman's Introduction to the Hebrew Bible class.

But I didn't need to go to Indiana University, one of the Big Ten party schools, to study the Bible. I'd already begun studying my Bible in Sunday School on Sunday mornings and in Baptist Youth Fellowship on Sunday evenings. In those days and in that tradition, we went to Sunday School at 9:00 a.m. on Sunday mornings, followed by worship at 10:30, which lasted until noon. Then we went home to Sunday dinner and a quiet afternoon, until it was time to put some decent clothes back on and go to BYF at 6:30, followed by Sunday evening service at 7:30, that typically was a touch shorter than Sunday morning worship; we were often home by 8:45 and getting ready for bed by 9.

That was the routine of my family when I was growing up, and the Bible was at the center of it. We studied the Bible in Sunday School. We listened to it being read and preached on in worship. We studied it again on Sunday evening, and the minister would often preach on another passage from it on Sunday night. In the American Baptist tradition in which I was raised, you were saturated with Scripture. You couldn't escape it. And you were expected to learn it, and by learn it my elders meant “learn it from memory,” and the first thing you memorized was the order of the books of the Old and New Testaments. Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, and so on. Matthew, Mark, Luke, John. I can still do it. I'm a little out of practice now and struggle a bit with those pesky minor prophets – Nahum and Habakkuk and that bunch – but I can still find my way around a Bible, and for that gift alone I remain immensely grateful to my bibliocentric upbringing.

But the sun always casts a shadow, and the shadow side of bibliocentrism, which is a good thing, is bibliolatry, which is a bad thing. Bibliolatry is a kind of worshiping the Bible instead of the God of the Bible. It's an attitude of reverence for Scripture that goes beyond the respect Scripture commands and rightly deserves. It's the kind of authoritarianism embodied in that bumper sticker we used to see that says, “The Bible says it, I believe it, that settles it.” In my little town in southern Indiana, if the Catholics

were guilty of worshiping their church – ecclesiolatry – we Baptists and believers like us were certainly guilty of bibliolatry, of worshiping our book.

I got my first inkling of what bibliolatry is one evening when our youth group was studying a bit of Scripture – as we always did before we diverged into talking about what we teenagers wanted to talk about, which was ourselves and each other – and a young man was struggling to read the passage in the King James Version. When he had finally labored his way through the “thee’s” and the “thou’s” and the “mightest’s” and the “shouldst’s,” one of us asked him why he didn’t use a more modern translation, such as the Good News Bible, or Good News for Modern Man, as it was called in those days. He looked at us blankly for a minute and then he said, in complete innocence, “Because that’s the way Jesus spoke.”

Even as a teenager in the basement of a Baptist church in the mid-1970s I knew that Jesus didn’t speak Elizabethan English, and I began to realize, in that moment, that there is such a thing as misguided devotion to Scripture. It’s not that you can love the Bible too much – I don’t think that’s possible – but rather that you can love the Bible in the wrong way, which we often do with so many things in life. You can love the form of Scripture – its sonorous phrases, its specialized vocabulary, its memorable characters, its antique mystique – and miss its meaning.

Or to say it another way, you can love the Bible in such a way that you fail to recognize that the Bible is not an end in itself, but is, rather, a means to a greater end, which is loving God and loving and serving God’s creation in response. That’s the true meaning of Scripture, because that’s the point toward which Scripture points. That’s what Scripture is trying to get us to do. We study the Bible to increase our love – and that is reading the Bible with heart as well as mind.

The Bible is like one of those pointing fingers that directs your attention to something else; Scripture was never meant to be, and never presented itself to be, an end in itself. Scripture points us toward God, just as nature points us toward God, and just as reason points us to God, and just as experience points us to God, and just as our religious tradition points us to God – all provided we have the spiritual intelligence to comprehend what all of those things are pointing us toward.

And that’s why, in the progressive Christian tradition, which is what this sermon series is about, we read the Bible not simply with our hearts – with a deep love for God and for God’s world – but also with our minds, with the eyes of our hearts enlightened, as Ephesians 1:18 puts it.

The eyes of my heart were enlightened that Sunday evening in Youth Group when I realized that I could read Jesus’ words – and perhaps get a great deal more out of them – in a translation other than the King James Version. In fact, in time I came to realize that reading the Bible faithfully, for me, meant not using my old King James Version – the first Bible I was given and which I treasure to this day – because I was struggling with the language rather than with the demands of the gospel which were confronting me in the text. By clinging to a particular translation of the Bible – even one as beautiful as the King James is in many places – I was actually hindering my own spiritual growth.

And I don’t think I was alone in experiencing the Bible, cast in a particular form, as an impediment rather than as a help toward spiritual growth.

Bert McGrath and I joined one of our neighbors recently at a mass celebrated in Latin, and even though I could figure out, with my very rusty Latin, what the Gospel reading was about, the rest of the service was pretty much an aural blur to me. And as I looked around at the packed pews, I could see other people, especially the younger people who were present, who were also disengaged from what was going on in the front of the church. And I realized, all of sudden, where the Reformation came from, and I was grateful that Martin Luther had the courage and insight to say, on behalf of all Christians, “This is our church, not the church of priests and bishops, we started it, and we’re taking it back, and we’re going to begin by understanding it in our own language.”

Some people were horrified, of course. The church had, for 1,500 years, conducted its prayers and business in Latin. The church’s Bible had been in Latin since St. Jerome had translated it late in the

fourth century. To hear the Bible read in one's own language seemed to many people disrespectful at the very least and more likely downright wrong.

But a progressive view of Scripture means that Scripture's authority and power come not from how it's translated or where it's placed on the altar or what loaded language like "inerrant" or "infallible" we apply to it, but rather from its message of God's redeeming love for the entire world, no exceptions, and God's call to us to be part of that redeeming work.

To read the Bible with heart as well as mind, as I pointed out in the John study earlier this summer, is to hear those incomparably beautiful words of John 3:16, "For God so loved the world," in such a way that we devote ourselves to sharing that good news, and, at the same time, hearing those words as an echo of the cosmic prologue with which John opens his gospel – it is the world God loves, and not just the Christians, not just the non-Christians, and not even just the people. It is the world for which God gave God's very Self, and it is to that world that we are, as Jesus' followers, called to serve.

To read the Bible with heart and mind is not an either-or proposition; it's a both-and proposition. For progressive Christians, to read the Bible intelligently is not to read it less devotionally; it's to read it more devotionally – with greater love for God and the world – because you see more of the beauty and skill and devotion of the Bible's writers. And the more of that you see, the more you realize how vast and deep and beautiful God's word really is.