

HOW DOES THE UNITED CHURCH INTERPRET THE BIBLE?

Part II 1950s-1990s: Tradition and Liberation by Robert C. Fennell

Part I of this two-part series, which appeared in the last number of *Touchstone*, was focused on the way in which the United Church approached the Bible in the first half of the 20th century. Reiteration of traditional ways of interpreting, the emergence of alternatives, and a reaffirmation of *tradition* characterized that early era. In this second essay, we will consider how the denomination undertook interpretation in the second half of the century. Tradition continued to be important; however, the theme of *liberation* also emerged and came into dynamic interaction with the traditions of the past.

Tradition

Tradition, as we are using the term, consists of the heritage and theological identity of a denomination, including publications, faith statements, and patterns of life and doctrinal thought. This source of authority for interpreting Scripture clearly dominated the United Church's official publications in the first half of the 20th century, even when popular theological movements were urging newer approaches. Tradition continued to play a significant role in the latter half of the 20th century. In the *New Curriculum*, for example, which was conceived in the 1950s, and published in the 1960s — as a Christian education program for all ages — there was a desire to access respected, traditional voices in interpretation. A “high” view of Scripture was evident (that is, the Bible was held to be authoritative in itself), though this was tempered by respect for other sources of

knowledge and wisdom.¹ Echoing the 1940 *Statement of Faith*, the *New Curriculum* speaks of the Bible as “a sure guide to Christian faith and conduct” that holds “a unique place” in faith formation as “the written record of revelation”.² From the doctrinal patterns that predated Church Union, the emphasis on the “inner testimony of the Holy Spirit” was reclaimed.³ Only through the work of the Spirit would the text render its value. Like their forerunners, *New Curriculum* authors believed strongly in the importance of the communal reading of Scripture. These touchstones locate the *New Curriculum* in continuity with some of the historical perspectives of the denomination.

By the 1960s, however, the sense of tradition had shifted a little, in that the historical-critical methods of the academic world, practised widely in universities for well over a century, were themselves considered a kind of *tradition*. The *New Curriculum* declared that “[higher] Biblical scholarship is necessary to help us to rightly understand Biblical truth[.]”⁴ A serious effort was made to incorporate the knowledge claims of what was by then a *tradition* of historical-critical biblical scholarship. A desire to be in harmony with the historic faith merged fairly seamlessly with a confidence in the fruitfulness of contemporary academic inquiry.⁵

Links to tradition are also made by *The Lordship of Jesus (LOJ)* of 1974, a major study of scripture, christology, and

¹ See The United Church of Canada, “Theological Presuppositions of the New Curriculum” ([Toronto]: The United Church of Canada, 1958).

² *Ibid.*, 6.

³ Donald Mathers, *The Word and the Way: Personal Christian Faith for Today* (Toronto: UCPH, 1962) p. 100. This was the foundational first adult study book for the *New Curriculum*.

⁴ The United Church of Canada, *The Goals of the Curriculum* (United Church Archives: 83.051C Box 198 – 8, 1955) p. 4.

⁵ This was not new, of course: Evangelical Liberals had held the very same position many decades earlier.

ecclesiology by and for the United Church.⁶ Through close attention to the contents of scripture the Christian community is drawn to God and to “the personal decision of faith” that the Lord Jesus calls us to make.⁷ Such urgency about an existential decision for Jesus as Lord was a long-held traditional view of the Bible’s evangelistic purpose. Sound “application” of the Bible, according to *LOJ*, required that the community become aware of the work of the Spirit in interpretation and application. This principle, so important to the faith communities that founded the United Church, and expressed in the *Statement of Faith* and in the *New Curriculum*, is once again affirmed. Further, ancient interpretive practices, such as allegorical reading, were freely used in *LOJ*. *LOJ* presupposed that the Bible was an instrument of God’s self-revelation, and thus assumed the trustworthiness of scripture.

As they had been in the *New Curriculum*, however, the tools of historical criticism are received in *LOJ* as a kind of authoritative *tradition*. Without close, scholarly, historical attention, we are prone to inaccurate and unfaithful readings that will err and even “silence” the Bible. The authors of *LOJ* asked readers to avail themselves of a tradition of trustworthy academic scholarship.

The United Church continued to express the theme of *tradition* in biblical interpretation through a variety of documents in the 1980s. There were, for example, emphases placed on the authority of Scripture, and on using a christological standard when interpreting: “Jesus is for us the central norm by which scripture is to be judged.”⁸ Well-established doctrinal categories like the Holy Spirit and covenant were reference points for

⁶ David Lochhead (ed.), *The Lordship of Jesus* (Toronto: The United Church of Canada, 1978).

⁷ *LOJ*, p. 20.

⁸ The United Church of Canada, *In God’s Image ... Male and Female: A Study on Human Sexuality* ([Toronto]: The United Church of Canada, 1980) pp. 14-18.

discerning the meaning of texts. United Church readers were urged to join in “the best available ways to discernment, such as the methods of historical, linguistic, literary and sociological enquiry.”⁹ These academic methods were themselves becoming a *tradition* of interpretation.

Another 1980s appeal to *tradition* was the use of the so-called “Wesleyan Quadrilateral”, which correlated Scripture, tradition, experience and reason. Together, in dynamic tension, the four factors were seen to provide a fruitful model for theological reflection. It was claimed that this was based on the thought of Methodist ancestor, John Wesley. More accurately, it was a reconstruction of Wesley, rather than a restatement of his method.¹⁰ In the United Church’s use of the Quadrilateral none of the four correlating factors was to be granted any more status than the other three. But Wesley lamented that he had been guilty of bending “the bow too far...by making antiquity [tradition] a co-ordinate, rather than subordinate, rule with Scripture.”¹¹ He held that scripture was the trump card that always overruled experience and reason.¹² While the United Church began to downplay the importance of a christological centre of interpretation, Albert Outler notes that Wesley’s approach was always clear in its christological focus.¹³ In any case, the

⁹ The United Church of Canada, “Confessing Our Faith at the 31st General Council: The Nature and Meaning of Work Task Force,” in *Record of Proceedings of the Thirty-First General Council (Sudbury, August 1986)*, 163-179 (Toronto: The United Church of Canada) p. 164.

¹⁰ For more on this term see Albert C. Outler, “The Wesleyan Quadrilateral – In John Wesley,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 20, no.1 (1985) pp. 7-18; Donald A.D. Thorsen, *The Wesleyan Quadrilateral: Scripture, Tradition, Reason & Experience as a Model of Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990); and Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley’s Practical Theology* (Nashville: Kingswood Books/Abingdon Press, 1994).

¹¹ Excerpts from Wesley’s Journal for 24 January, 1738, in *John Wesley*, ed. Albert Outler (New York: Oxford Press, 1964) p.46.

¹² *Ibid*, p. 72.

¹³ Outler, “The Wesleyan Quadrilateral”, p. 9.

“Quadrilateral” was described as “a recovery of part of our United Church *tradition* [emph. added].”¹⁴ Thus the United Church itself was emerging as a source of tradition.

A Christ-centered theological method was renewed, after some de-emphasis in the 1980s: “any claim to authority in the life and work of The United Church of Canada” — including claims about interpretation — must recognize “God’s historic self-revelation in Jesus Christ”.¹⁵ Christocentrism was given special mention:

[f]or Christians, God’s gracious self-revelation in the historic reality of Jesus Christ is the lens through which we must see and the scale by which we must weigh anything that claims authority in relation to us.¹⁶

The United Church’s past teaching was also considered to be “heritage” material that must be honoured. Clearly, the United Church in the second half of the 20th century believed that biblical interpretation needed to be in dynamic dialogue with norms and patterns from previous decades and generations.

Liberation

Liberation is understood here as a pattern of interpretation that names oppression and disenfranchisement within and between individuals and communities, speaks out in opposition to such injustices, and imagines and works toward a hopeful future for God’s people and all creation. Naming *liberation* as a source of authority for biblical interpretation did not explicitly

¹⁴ The United Church of Canada, “Confessing Our Faith at the 31st General Council: Theological Reflection Using Wesley’s Quadrilateral,” in *Record of Proceedings of the Thirty-First General Council (Sudbury, August 1986)* pp. 180-183 (Toronto: The United Church of Canada) p. 180.

¹⁵ The United Church of Canada, *The Authority and Interpretation of Scripture* (Toronto: UCPH, 1992), p. iv.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

emerge in the United Church until the 1970s. Of course, intimations of its importance had been present earlier within movements such as the Social Gospel, the Fellowship for a Christian Social Order, and, beyond them, within the Methodist heritage. It is with the publication of *The Lordship of Jesus (LOJ)* in 1974 that the United Church began explicitly to explore the theme of *liberation* in its interpretive work.

In *LOJ* a variety of norms were articulated that can be clustered together in the theme of *liberation*. Biblical interpretation was cast as faithful only when it disrupted status quo hearings of the text that would otherwise confirm pre-existing values and biases. Readers of the Bible were urged to be attentive to the marginalized, poor, exploited, and oppressed in society, and to critique interpretations that perpetuate injustice. Would this or that reading further oppress and disenfranchise the poor and dispossessed, or empower them? *LOJ* argued that the use of scholarly tools, including attention to *contextual considerations*, might also be liberating, in that they could help us break free from the “captiv[ity] of the lordship of [contemporary] culture.”¹⁷ Drawing from the reservoir of Christian heritage, however, was also seen as having liberative potential. For instance, the confession of Jesus as Lord was considered to be potentially liberating, because it could free us from domination by false contemporary “gods”.

The United Church continued to express the theme of *liberation* in a variety of documents published in the 1980s and 1990s. It was claimed that “God calls us to engage the Bible to experience the liberating and transforming Word of God.”¹⁸ There was an expectation that the Bible conveys the message of *liberation* in its own stories and teaching. The “view from the underside,” as Dietrich Bonhoeffer once called it, was lifted up

¹⁷ *The Lordship of Jesus*, p. 19.

¹⁸ *Authority and Interpretation*, p. iv.

as especially important in the quest to hear that transforming message:

most of our historical and literary records are written from the top side rather than the bottom side of history, from the point of view of the privileged and powerful, certainly not through the eyes of the little people of the world[.]¹⁹

Accordingly, awareness of bias, of privilege (gender, racial, or economic), and of social location was essential in the task of right interpretation, for it enabled the identification of injustice. As it had been in *LOJ*, a caution was raised against “using the Bible to confirm values we already hold.”²⁰ Faithful interpretation should *actually disrupt our prior assumptions*. In so doing, interpretation should strive toward the goals of egalitarianism and social justice. To this end, hearing the voices and experiences of marginalized and disempowered persons, such as impoverished, disabled, racial minority, and gay and lesbian persons, was seen as a key methodology for better equipping the Church to challenge the injustices in society and within its own life. In time, *liberation* was explicitly identified as a goal of exegetical work:

We believe in a God of justice, a God who throughout the history of the Israelites was constantly siding with the poor, the marginalized, the outcast — the ones who were oppressed by the powerful. ...The Word proclaimed [in the Bible] is liberation — freedom from all that oppresses[.] ...We believe that God is always calling the powerful to acknowledge their role in oppression and to heed the cries of those being ground under....[W]e believe that the Bible favours the oppressed[.]²¹

¹⁹ *In God's Image*, p. 13.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 17-18.

²¹ The United Church of Canada, *Sexual Orientation and Eligibility for the Order of Ministry* ([Toronto]: The United Church of Canada, 1984) p. 11,12.

A variety of interpretive stances were therefore adopted in order to acknowledge the oppressive role of the powerful and to hear the voices of the oppressed. A more egalitarian and consultative process of doing theology was lifted up and modeled in a number of Church documents and studies. Authority was vested in the community as a whole, rather than in the hands of a few.²²

Further, the deliberate use of “suspicious” reading, a way of reading that attended closely to the ways in which interpretations can benefit one group over another, was named as essential. This “hermeneutic of suspicion”, drawn from feminist theology and Latin American Liberation theology, opened the possibility that the Church in its interpretive work might be able to challenge its own “tendencies to self-justification and self-deception.”²³ An awareness of one’s own assumptions, as well as of power relations between individuals and groups, would enable readers to be more attentive to bias and self-interest. “Suspicion” would also assist the text to speak on its own terms, as well as provide space to hear divergent interpretations from persons in multiple social, cultural, and theological locations.

The Authority and Interpretation of Scripture (AIS) [1992] identified the importance of challenging assumed authority in order to expose the injustices it might perpetrate. Even the work done by the community for itself, therefore, must be evaluated for its capacity to mislead or to manipulate. This self-critical corrective is consistent with other expressions of liberationist interpretation, as described by British theologian Anthony Thiselton. Suspicion helps us

²² This participatory ethos, characteristic of “liberative” interpretation, may also be understood as one aspect of the inheritance of Reformation tradition as well, in that the Reformers (and, later, the Methodists) emphasized the “priesthood of all believers” and a larger role for laity in the governance of the Church.

²³ The United Church of Canada, *Toward a Christian Understanding of Sexual Orientation, Lifestyles and Ministry* (Toronto: The United Church of Canada, 1988), p. 34.

to unmask the uses of texts which serve self-interests or the interests of dominating power structures. Texts can be used for social manipulation or control, or to authorize, or appear to authorize, values that serve the interests of dominating power-structures.²⁴

The United Church in this period was deeply influenced by Latin American Liberation theology and by feminist theology.²⁵ A variety of *liberation* motifs, closely related to Liberation and feminist theology, were therefore expressed toward the end of the century. Great value was placed on inclusivity, diversity, experiential knowing, and community. Contextuality, too, was prized, for it was believed that no good theology could proceed legitimately apart from reflection upon the times and circumstances in which the whole community is living.

Within that analysis of context, *AIS* undertook a critique of the unjust power relations that often exist within faith communities. “As well as being life-giving, nurturing, and challenging,” it was argued that “communities can be death-embracing, stifling, and demonic.”²⁶ The analysis of context therefore sought to enable the honest and prophetic naming of oppression, a naming which in turn could impel the pursuit of justice for all members of church and society. In particular, the horizon of human emancipation, by God, from “those forces that oppress and estrange us from God, God’s community, and God’s creation” was accentuated.²⁷ This value of emancipation was at

²⁴ Anthony C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics: The Theory and Practice of Transforming Biblical Reading* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan 1992) p. 6.

²⁵ See, for example, Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, trans. Sr. Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll: NY: Orbis, 1988 [ET]) and Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983).

²⁶ *Authority and Interpretation*, p. 11.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

times a trump card the United Church laid upon any aspects of “dominant Western Christian tradition” that do not liberate.

To further clear a road to *liberation*, the use of social and other sciences was embraced in this period. It was believed that these secular tools aided in self-critical understandings of reality — including realities of injustice. Such examination of the real lived circumstances of the people of church and society, together with reflection on experience, sought to allow biblical interpretation to proceed more honestly. Ultimately, investigation into real life as it is lived was meant to help “us envision ourselves and the world in new ways that will heal, liberate, and empower us.”²⁸ In other words, the end goal of liberating interpretive practices was *doing justice*.

As we saw in documents from the 1980s, there continued to be an emphasis in the 1990s on the outworking of interpretation in practical ways. By attending to signs of injustice, the whole community was believed to be better able to discern ways of bringing relief to those who suffer, are powerless, or are excluded. All this was considered to help lead church and society to compassion, freedom, and mutuality. Concern for mutuality and participatory decision-making challenged a magisterial approach to doctrine. Theology should come “from below” or “from the base”. In fact, the authors of *AIS* explicitly rejected the function of their document as a magisterial one, for it

was never intended to be a theological declaration, decree, or an external authority over the church. It was intended to be a tool for promoting conversation [...]²⁹

²⁸ *Toward a Christian Understanding*, p. 12.

²⁹ *Authority and Interpretation*, p. 3. Notwithstanding that stated intention, the manner of the reception of *AIS* by the General Council promoted the document as an official statement of the denomination.

Conclusion

Throughout its history, the United Church has embraced a rich range of methods, emphases, and patterns for the interpretation of Scripture. Thus the answer to the question, “How *does* the United Church read the Bible?” is not a straightforward matter. Our purpose in these two articles has not been to harmonize the divergent voices, but to identify and to describe thematically the main factors that made up the United Church’s interpretive style in the 20th century. Within the official documents, within unofficial movements, and within local contexts, people have sought to be faithful in their hearing of the sacred text. The Word is indeed “larger than the text,” but the United Church comes to the book with an expectation and trust that, even in all its frailty, the Bible will still offer to us an experience of “God speaking”. The affirmation of *communal* discernment of God’s “speech” has been essential, both as a way of avoiding highly privatistic readings, and as a key ecclesiological commitment. The Church is the people of God, Christ’s body, and not merely a collection of individual wayfarers. We read and discern *together*, by the grace of the Holy Spirit. *Trust* in the promises that God has given a book to the community, and uses that book somehow to be self-revealing, continues to inform the United Church’s approach to the Bible. The heritage of interpretation is rich, and provides a diversity of legitimate interpretive approaches. Those who framed the *Statement of Faith* in 1940 urged upon us the perspective that “Christians of each new generation are called to state [the gospel of God’s love] afresh in terms of the thought of their own age and with the emphasis their age needs.”³⁰ At the very least, the denomination has succeeded in this “fresh stating” with respect to biblical interpretation. While no single, central norm for interpretation can be named, a number of themes and threads can

³⁰ *A Statement of Faith* (The United Church of Canada, 1940). Accessed 17 February 2008 at www.united-church.ca/en/beliefs/statements/1940

be clustered together, as we have seen, under *tradition* and *liberation*.

On balance, I would suggest that *The Lordship of Jesus* is the best expression of the “classic” United Church approach. Quite distinct from the view that reading the Bible is about escaping the world, *LOJ* urges us, Bible in hand and in heart, to plunge ourselves into the world God loves with a faith and a vocation that are confirmed precisely by the Spirit-led, Christ-centered encounter with Scripture. We do not live apart from the world, but in it: the reality of the world shapes our reading and is the place we live as Bible-encountering Christians. Because we have met Jesus in and through Scripture, we are better able to meet and respond to Jesus in and through the world around us. We attend to the living Word of God in and through the Bible because we believe that it is an instrument in extending God’s Realm. God uses it, and us, to promote God’s just and loving purposes. While the use of *traditional* methods is important, legitimate, and even desirable, for a right hearing of the biblical text, such methods must always be tempered by the destination of the *liberation* that God intends for human beings and all creation. It is precisely the Bible itself, and Jesus our Lord, which call us to be agents of the radical emancipation that God desires for all.