



CULTIVATING THE PRACTICE OF READING SCRIPTURE

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WHILE teaching at a conference some years ago, I was startled when a participant announced that he could not imagine how any Republican could claim to take the Bible seriously. Not long afterward, I witnessed a repeat performance in another setting, except in this case we were told that Republicans alone read Scripture correctly. This reminds me of what I imagine to be a first-century “battle for the Bible”: Pharisees, Christ-followers, and Sadducees, all reading the same Scriptures but reading them quite differently, and reaching diverse conclusions about the nature of faithfulness to God. How can this be?

Clearly, a lot has to do with our formation as readers of Scripture and not only with the words written on the page. This underscores the importance of reading Scripture as a “practice,” since the idea of “practice” assumes circularity: Formed by our reading of Scripture, we become better readers of Scripture. This is not because we become better skilled at applying biblical principles. The practice of reading Scripture is not about learning how to mold the biblical message to contemporary lives and modern needs. Rather, the Scriptures yearn to reshape how we comprehend our lives and identify our greatest needs. We find in Scripture who we are and what we might become, so that we come to share its assessment of our situation, encounter its promise of restoration, and hear its challenge to serve God’s good news.

Paradoxically, perhaps, cultivating the practice of reading Scripture first prioritizes Christian formation more generally. This is because there is no necessary, straight line from reading the biblical materials to reading them Christianly; sharply put, one can be “biblical” without being “Christian.”

When Jesus criticizes two disciples on the Emmaus Road for their failure to believe what the prophets had spoken, the problem was not their inability to hear the prophets or take them seriously. Jesus asked, “Wasn’t it necessary for the Christ to suffer these things and then enter into his glory?” (Luke 24:27, CEB). “Of course it was necessary!” we might say, but the question remains, which prophets actually document this necessity? “Isaiah 53,” we might respond, but we would then need to acknowledge that we can say this only because we have learned to read in just this way. After all, Isaiah 53 never mentions the Messiah, and Jesus’ contemporaries were unaccustomed to thinking of Isaiah’s Servant as a suffering Messiah. The problem faced by Jesus’

disciples was their lack of the cognitive categories required for making sense of the Scriptures in this way. They needed more than a commonsense reading of a biblical text. That Isaiah spoke of Jesus was something they had to learn. Accordingly, Luke records: “Then he interpreted for them the things written about himself in all the scriptures . . .” (Luke 24:27, CEB).

This example speaks to the integrated nature of Christian practices, and especially to the ways those practices shape us as readers of Scripture. Christian formation helps us to read the Scriptures Christianly. So it is worth reflecting on the difference it makes to our reading of Scripture that we regularly recite the Apostles’ Creed. What difference does it make to our reading of Scripture that we meet each other repeatedly at the Lord’s Table, that we speak often with people who do not share our faith, that we who share a common faith in Christ eat together regularly, and that we pray to Jesus as though he were God? (And what difference does it make when we do not engage in such practices as these?)

Of course, reading Scripture is itself a central Christian practice, so we may ask how we cultivate this practice among the others—a question I take up more fully in *Seized by Truth: Reading the Bible as Scripture* (Abingdon, 2007). Here let me make six suggestions.

(1) Reading Scripture is not enough.

Theological and ecclesial formation inform and are informed by reading Scripture. Communities that put Scripture into practice through seeking the Holy Spirit, confessing sins and forgiving each other, praying for the sick, and offering good news to others find themselves being prepared to read Scripture.

(2) Read and read again.

It is easy to turn time with Scripture into a game of “Twenty Questions”: how to have a happy relationship, learn financial faithfulness, or whatever. A sharp line can be drawn between utilitarian approaches that treat the Bible as a how-to manual or a database for addressing my questions, and the formation of Scripture-shaped minds that understand God and God’s creation through Scripture-shaped lenses. The latter requires patient, deliberate reading—reading, as it were,

for no good reason but for the sake of having our dispositions and reflexes shaped by Scripture.

(3) Read slowly.

Those of us who find ourselves moving back and forth between blogs, email, texts, news outlets, and social networks on our smartphones and tablets need different rules of engagement for reading Scripture. This practice concerns not how fast I can get through today's reading, but how slowly, combining prayer, reading, and contemplation. To crib Jesus' words, "Let these words sink into your ears" (Luke 9:44, NRSV).

(4) Involve yourself.

If the last century or more has imagined education as the process of stepping back to observe, assess, and attain knowledge, then this practice calls for different habits. This learning is self-involving, a means by which we hear God's address. Why do we resist this text but embrace that one? What does it mean that we are included in the community of God's people addressed by this text?

(5) Read together.

Inasmuch as scriptural texts have their origins and purpose deeply rooted in the community of God's people, we ought to find ways to read in community. By this I refer to the importance of study groups where our assumptions and views are tested, but even more I mean to counter the temptation

to imagine that Scripture is simply for me and about me, or that I am tasked with determining its significance apart from the larger church, historically and globally.

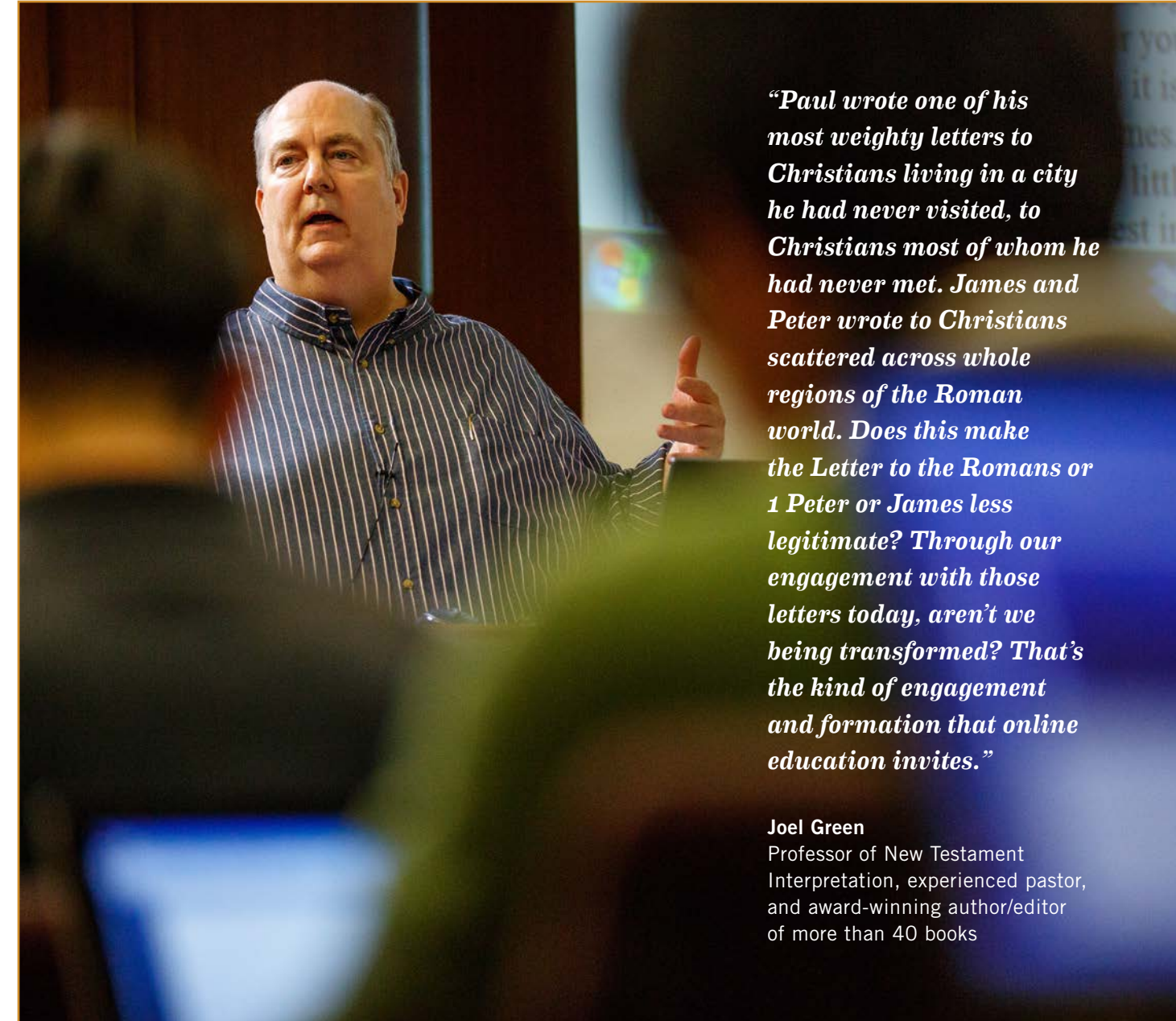
(6) Refuse to distinguish between reading the Bible for a class or sermon and reading the Bible for Christian formation.

We come to Scripture for different reasons at different times, but it would be a mistake to imagine that preparing an exegesis paper or sermon required qualitatively different protocols. Should we leave our theological and ecclesial locations behind when doing exegesis? Should work with Scripture in sermon preparation bypass the reservoir of my regular reading practices? Should the crises that arise as I encounter God's voice in Scripture not shape my reading of these texts with and for others?

As with Christian practices in general, so with developing scriptural patterns of faith and life: the destination is the journey itself. This is a journey in which we discover that the work of scriptural reading is not about transforming an ancient message into a modern application but the transformation of our lives through Scripture. The Bible does not present us with texts to be mastered, then, but with a Word intent on shaping our lives, on mastering us.

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