

## **Christian Doctrine and the Discipline of Reading Scripture**

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I work in the field of Christian doctrine. Were you to plot my location on those maps of the theological subdisciplines that have shaped many departments and seminaries in the last two centuries, I would fall in the territory marked ‘systematic theology’, rather than in those marked ‘biblical studies’, ‘historical theology’, or ‘practical theology’. Looking at such a map more closely, you might find me located downstream from my biblical studies colleagues, collecting and arranging the scriptural data that they have harvested. My distinctive task would be to build all that harvested material into a coherent structure – or to use it to repair and extend the structure I have inherited from earlier labourers in this territory, whose work is studied by the historical theologians. I would then hand over to my practical theology colleagues, who would ask how Christians today might inhabit the structure that I had helped to build.

In recent decades, the criticism of such maps has become as familiar as the maps themselves, and this chapter will be no exception. The picture painted above does not do justice to the ways in which I hope for my work to be ‘systematic’; it doesn’t do justice to the ways in which my work relates to questions of ongoing Christian practice; it doesn’t even (quite) do justice to my relation to historical theology. Above all, however, it fails to correspond at all to the ways in which I, as systematic theologian, understand myself to relate to scripture, or to the work of biblical scholars.

How I do, instead, understand those relationships will take the rest of this chapter to explain, and my explanation is going to revolve around the idea of the ‘rule of faith’. That is because, as a systematic theologian, I understand my role to be that of investigating and elaborating the rule of faith. To understand the relationships in which my work stands to

scripture and to other forms of theological labour, I therefore need first to understand the relationships in which the rule of faith stands to those things. I will begin by sketching very briefly how scripture and the rule of faith appear together in the life of the church. The rule of faith is, I will argue, not an imposition upon scripture, but it is nevertheless a rule for the devout reading of scripture, and it is only when read under this rule that scripture is authoritative for the church. The twofold task of the systematic theologian is, I will then claim, to elaborate that rule (and so to elaborate the ways in which scripture should be read in the life of the church), and to help restrain our collective attempts to stray beyond the rule. Finally, I will argue that, in pursuit of these tasks, the systematic theologian needs to be in constant unruly conversation with biblical scholars, with the contemporary practice of the church, and even with members of other faiths, and that those conversations are messy and their implications for systematic theology unpredictable.

#### **[A] I. Reading and the Rule of Faith**

The church was founded as a community of witnesses to Jesus. Whether you trace it to the commissioning of the women at the tomb in Mark 16:7, or to the Great Commission in Matthew 28:19-20, or the pentecostal commission promised in Acts 1:8, the church exists for the same purpose that John assigns to his gospel: to witness to those in and around it so that they ‘may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing . . . may have life in his name’ (Jn 20:30).

The church’s relation to scripture is governed by this purpose. When the church was founded, its scriptures were the existing Hebrew scriptures – but it was given, in its founding, a new relation to them. It was when, on the Emmaus road, the resurrected Jesus took his companions through ‘Moses and all the prophets’, and ‘interpreted to them the things about

himself in all the scriptures' (Lk. 24:27) that those scriptures became *Christian* scripture. And when these witnesses themselves went on to produce further texts, they were precisely texts of witness – and they became Christian scripture precisely to the extent that they were recognized as faithful and true witnesses. 2 Timothy 3:16 famously says that 'All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching', but that claim flaps empty in the wind without the previous verse: these scriptures are useful for teaching insofar as they are 'able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus'.

Later generations of the church, heirs to this beginning, do not simply inherit the text of scripture on its own, as if they should ideally take from it only what it yields when read without presuppositions. We don't receive this text cold and, upon reading it, discover a number of things, among which are some claims about Jesus. Rather, we inherit it accompanied by a rule, and the most basic form of that rule is this: *It's all about Jesus*. Scripture is scripture – it is inspired and useful for teaching, it is trustworthy and true, it is authoritative for Christian life – insofar as it witnesses to Jesus as Lord. Scripture is scripture *only* insofar as it witnesses to Jesus as Lord.

There are, of course, other ways of approach this set of texts. One can, for instance, quite properly approach them as historical artefacts, and use them for the purpose of historical investigation. That is, however, a different task from the task of reading them as Christian scripture, and there is no saying in advance or in principle how these two forms of reading might interact, or be of relevance to one another. Christians reading these texts as scripture can only work out their relation to other practices of reading on the fly, as they pursue the ongoing task of discovering what it means to read these scriptures as witness to Jesus as Lord.

That ongoing task – of discovering what it means to read these scripture as a witness to Jesus as Lord – is where systematic or doctrinal theology comes in.

## [A] II. All for the Sake of Witness: The Rule Elaborated

One way of understanding the early development of doctrine is to see it as the ongoing elaboration of the rule of faith as a rule for reading scripture. That is, it is a process in which the animating questions are, first, what are the scriptures that witness to Jesus as Lord, and second, how may these scriptures be read together as a unified witness?

The emergence, for instance, of the doctrine of creation in the second and third centuries is (at least in part) the story of the confirmation that the Hebrew Bible is to be read as witness to Jesus as Lord. That is, it is the confirmation that the church called to witness to Jesus as ‘the Messiah, the Son of God’ is called to witness to him as the Son of the God of Israel, who is the God of the whole world, and to witness to him as the fulfilment of Israel’s hope, which is hope for the whole of creation.

This is not in any straightforward sense a deduction from scripture, because it was a process bound up with establishment of the canon that constituted scripture, but it bequeaths to Christians the ongoing task of reading the two testaments together, and it is tested, and in a sense authorized, by the ways in which it turns out to make sense to go on doing so.

The emergence of the doctrine of Trinity was in turn (at least in part) the elaboration of a set of rules for taking this canon as a unified witness to Jesus as Lord. This unwieldy set of texts includes a bewildering variety of forms of ascription of saving action to different names or characters in the narrative. In the trinitarian debates, various ways of holding those ascriptions together as a unified witness were ruled out – such as those that tried to read it as the story of a single divine character, now appearing as Israel’s God, and now as Jesus. Instead, it was determined that these scriptural ascriptions can best be held together if they are seen as irreducibly attributable to three ‘characters’, that is three interrelated foci for the

attribution of the unified divine action witnessed to in scripture. The doctrine of the Trinity is not so much a deduction from particular scriptures, as a framework for reading all of it together. It provides a complex way of holding the canon together as a unity, revolving around God's gracious love for the world in Jesus. It is tested, and in a sense authorized, by the way in which it enables ongoing, fruitful reading of scripture as witness to Jesus.

That trinitarian development itself made necessary a further elaboration of the rule (and was itself only fully justified because it did allow this further clarification). On its own, the fourth-century doctrine of the Trinity, precisely as a framework for allocating ascriptions of action in scripture, could be taken in such a way as to make a mess of the ascriptions of action to Jesus in the gospels. Either it could end up pulling those ascriptions apart until they were assigned to two different characters, or it could make it impossible to take fully seriously the range of patterns of action ascribed to the one character Jesus. The Chalcedonian solution can be read as proposing a pattern for allocating ascriptions that makes it possible to read the gospels as a witness to Jesus as Lord (as truly the subject of divine action) without any pressure to read them as something other than the story of a fully human life. Once again, this is a way of holding the scriptural witness together as a unified witness, and it is tested, and in a sense authorized, by the ways in which it enables fruitful ongoing reading of scripture as witness.

These are, of course, wholly inadequate sketches of doctrinal development – no more than pointers to ways in which one might begin to construe complex historical processes. I hope it might nevertheless be enough to indicate what I mean when I say that the development of doctrine can be understood as, in significant part, the development of rules for the devout reading of scripture – the ongoing elaboration of the basic rule that scripture is to be read as witness to Jesus as Lord. Doctrine provides a grammar of exegesis, a way of holding together as a unity the ongoing task of Christian reading.

One of the tasks of a systematic theologian, as I understand it, is to seek to understand, to clarify, to re-present this history, and so to explore what it means to take the rule of faith *as* a rule – a framework, and only in that sense a ‘system’ – for reading scripture. This is a significant part of what it means to understand doctrine: to learn what it means to read scripture under doctrine’s tutelage.

### [A] III. Only for the Sake of Witness: The Restraint of Ruled Reading

There is a second aspect of my work as a systematic theologian, closely allied to the first, because the ongoing elaboration of the rule of faith as a rule for reading also involves the identification of forms of reading that are outside the purview of the rule.

The motto for this process could be provided by 1 Corinthians 2:2: ‘I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified.’ To put it starkly and negatively: where it does not witness to Jesus as Lord – where it does not contribute to filling out the central claim that God was, in Jesus Christ, reconciling the world to Godself – scripture is not authoritative. This is the sense in which I am, in the end, happy to call myself a systematic theologian: theology has one subject matter, and only one subject matter, and anything that cannot be shown to communicate that one subject matter does not belong.

Let me explain what I mean a little further, by discussing an example that (whatever might be true elsewhere) is not a live question in my context. Consider scripture’s teaching about creation. We are faced with question: Does scripture authoritatively teach us that the earth was created some thousands of years ago, in a sequence aptly described by the opening chapter of Genesis? If we understand scripture’s authority as the authority to witness to Jesus as Lord, I think we have to say that scripture does *not* authoritatively teach us this. I do not think, however, that this is primarily because Genesis 1 is poetic in nature, so that some kind

of genre mistake is being made by young-earth-creationist readings. My belief that scripture does not authoritatively require us to be young earth creationists would not be overturned whatever new discoveries we made about the genres of ancient near eastern writings and their epistemological intents. Nor do I think that we are let off the creationist hook because these elements of the Genesis narrative are clearly culturally determined or conditioned – having to do with the way in which the message of the bible is accommodated to its surrounding culture, rather than with the eternal heart of that message itself. I really don't know how to make much sense of the attempt to divide what we find in scripture into what is culturally determined or conditioned and what is not.

No. The reason that I do not believe that the scriptures authoritatively teach us that the earth is young is because that claim is not *germane to the gospel*. If this were to be an authoritative Christian teaching, then as far as I can understand it, it would have to be an authoritative Christian teaching *in addition* to the gospel. We would have to say, in our catechesis, 'Do you believe that, in Jesus, God was reconciling the world to Godself – oh, and do you also believe that the earth was created some thousands of years ago?'

I can certainly see how the claim that God is creator of all that is, seen and unseen, is germane to the Gospel. I have given, above, the very beginning of a sketch of how the doctrine of creation can be understood as a necessary elaboration of the basic rule of faith. To say 'I believe in God . . . creator of heaven and earth' therefore seems to me quite clearly to be part of what we need to say if we want to say 'Jesus is Lord' with full seriousness. But I cannot see how this further claim, about the timing and mechanism of creation, is a necessary elaboration of the rule of faith in the same way – however clearly I might think it stated in scripture. To insist, therefore, that Christians be young earth creationists seems to me to amount to preaching something other than Jesus Christ, and him crucified.

In other words: to take seriously Scripture's authority as witness is to take seriously the question of what scripture is *not*. Scripture is not a science textbook. That is not to say that scripture says nothing that falls in the realm of what we might call science, nor even that scripture authoritatively teaches nothing that pertains to what we call science. It simply means that the church is not required to approach scripture asking the question, 'What do we learn here about the structures and processes that govern the natural world?' *independently* of asking what scripture is teaching us about the lordship of Christ.

As I say, in my context, the young-earth creationism debate is not a live one, and I can therefore fairly safely use it as an example. The issues become considerably sharper for me if I move on to questions about gender and sexuality. That is because, just as I want to say that the Bible is not a science textbook, so I want to say that it is not a moral textbook – at least, not a moral textbook independently of its witness to Jesus.

So, for me, in my church's debates about gender and sexuality, the question is not simply, 'What messages about gender and sexual ethics can we find in Bible?' It is not even, 'What, if anything, does the bible consistently say about these matters?' It is certainly not, 'What is culturally determined and what is not in what the Bible says about these matters?' Rather, the question – the only question – is, 'What is germane to the gospel in what scripture says about gender and sexuality?' What is authoritatively demanded of us in the realm of sexuality as we are schooled by the scriptures in saying 'Jesus is Lord', and what is not?

For instance, at the point I have currently reached in my ongoing and unfinished thinking about these things, I can't yet see how most of the claims about gender complementarity that I encounter in my church (claims that insist that men and women are by nature different in their gifts, aptitudes and callings) can be anything other than additions to the gospel, if we take them to be authoritative Christian teachings. That is, if they were to be authoritative for Christians it could only be because we said, in our catechesis, 'You must



believe that, in Jesus, God was reconciling the world to Godself – oh, and you must also believe this other thing: that men and women have essentially complementary ways of being.’

This doesn’t tell me whether claims about gender complementarity are right or wrong, but it does mean that until I am shown how they are required by the gospel – how they are not an addition to it, but inherent to it – we must not treat them as binding Christian teaching. That claim is independent of the question of whether complementarian messages are present, widespread, or even consistent in scripture. It is not *wholly* independent – because the more some form of complementarianism does turn out to be present, widespread or consistent in scripture, the more I am forced to *ask* whether it is germane to the gospel – but the presence or prevalence of the idea in scripture does not itself determine the answer to the question of what we must teach, any more than does the discovery that the scriptures persistently and consistently portray a geocentric universe.

#### [A] IV. Reading with Others

Determining what is and is not germane to the gospel is not easy. I do not think that the answers are at all obvious, whether in relation to the issues at stake in my church’s debates about gender and sexuality, or in relation to other telling debates in Christian life. And it is certainly not enough for me, as an individual theologian sitting in privileged isolation in my study, to ask whether these matters are germane to my personal understanding of the gospel. Rather, what is required is a corporate conversation – a serious and almost certainly painful conversation over scripture – in which we look at how the teachings we have taken from scripture do and don’t connect, and so discover whether we have been either adding to or

taking away from the gospel. To be a systematic theologian is, in my understanding, to be called to facilitate that kind of conversation about connections.

Systematic theology therefore needs to be animated by reading with others – especially reading with others who see differently the deep connections that might hold the materials of scripture together. In the remainder of this chapter, I have identified three main kinds of conversation over scripture that I have found myself engaged in over the years, pursued in different contexts and in different ways: conversation with historical critics; conversation with members of other faiths; and conversations about contemporary church teaching.

#### **[B] a. Reading with Historical Critics**

I do not believe there is any single or systematic answer to the question of how the approach to reading I have been advocating – reading the scriptures as witness to Jesus as Lord – relates to the readings of historical critics. Historical critics pursue many different kinds of reading, and any generalisation can't help but slip into caricature. There are, therefore, all sorts of aspects of engagement with historical criticism that I could touch on at this point. To the extent, for instance, that I read scripture not simply as a free-floating text but as the witness of specific people to the human being Jesus of Nazareth, my claims about scripture unavoidably include claims about what at least some of it meant in the contexts of its original reception and transmission. I could not treat those claims seriously without the help of historical critics.

In the context of this chapter, however, I want to draw attention to two rather different aspects of my engagement with historical criticism, aspects especially relevant to the task of

testing the connections that hold together reading of scripture as a single activity, within the rule of faith.

Precisely because exploring and testing these connections is part of my task as a systematic theologian, I find myself in conversation with forms of historical criticism for which the whole activity of making connections across the canon is precarious or suspicious. By reading the various texts of the Bible as artefacts that belong in specific, differing contexts, such criticism tends to draw attention to the local and particular. Where I might want to make connections between the patterns of activity ascribed to God in a prophetic text from the fifth century before Christ and a letter written in the first century after, such criticism will draw my attention to the vastly different political and cultural contexts of those texts, and ask whether the connections I see are more than wishful thinking. As one whose stock in trade is the making and testing of connections, attention to such questioning is a necessary discipline; it forces me to ask exactly what I am claiming when I make the connection, and what forms of testing are appropriate to those claims.

Similarly, I find myself engaging with critics who draw attention to the ethics or politics of specific texts – often to the ways in which those texts are problematic. That forces upon me the question of whether and how those problematic meanings connect to the gospel – whether they are bound up in my ways of understanding and presenting the gospel, whether they are in some way unavoidably required by the gospel, or whether the gospel gives me somewhere to stand over against them. Engagement with such criticism is a proper and necessary discipline for systematic theology.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I have explored these issues further in Mike Higton and Rachel Muers, *The Text in Play: Experiments in Reading Scripture* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2012), ch. 1 and ch. 7, in Rachel Muers and Mike Higton, *Modern Theology: A Critical Introduction* (London: Routledge,

## [B] b. Scriptural Reasoning

Most of my engagements with historical critics are mediated by their writings: I engage by reading their books and articles. I am also, however, regularly engaged in another set of conversations over scripture, mostly conducted face to face. I have for ten years or more been involved in ‘Scriptural Reasoning’ conversations, in which small groups of Jews, Christians, and Muslims – and increasingly people of other faiths as well – meet to discuss extracts of their respective Scriptures together.

It is simplest, in the context of this chapter, to focus on the conversations with Jewish readers that are part of this process, because I already mentioned above the idea that the Hebrew scriptures are properly part of the canon of Christian scripture – yet we are by no means those texts’ only readers. We are faced with the question of how Christian readers of these texts will relate to their Jewish readers, and to the markedly different ways in which they read them.

Participation in Scriptural Reasoning has allowed me to explore a particular kind of answer to that question. On the one hand, because members of Scriptural Reasoning groups are not required to agree (or to seek agreement) about what texts are authoritative, or about the kind of authority they have, or about how they should be read, I can participate in those conversations as someone who is committed to a Christian reading of texts of the Hebrew Bible – to reading them within the rule of Christian faith, as Old Testament witness to Jesus as Lord. On the other hand, reading alongside Jewish readers calls me not to deny in word or

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2012), ch. 10, and Mike Higton, *Christ, Providence and History: Hans W. Frei’s Public Theology* (London: Continuum, 2004).

action, explicitly or implicitly, that they read these same texts too – and that they are as much their texts as mine.

That of course means that my readings are not likely to be authoritative or even acceptable to my Jewish colleagues, and that their readings are not likely to be authoritative for me; we are engaged in different reading practices, with different rules. Nevertheless, because we are both committed within our rules to attending to how the words run, our readings together can't help but be mutually challenging. Reading with someone who reads the same text differently, who asks questions about the connections that seem to me to be natural or proper to this text, and who insists that quite other connections should be made, is profoundly and productively unsettling. If one of my central tasks as a systematic theologian is precisely to explore and to test the connections that hold together the scriptures for Christians, these conversations are a rich resource – they draw me in to forms of re-examination and testing that I could not have reached on my own.<sup>2</sup>

### **[B] c. Reading Together as a Church**

The third set of conversations over scripture in which I am engaged is the one most directly connected to my work as a systematic theologian. That is the set of conversations that take place within the church – conversations about what we as Christians can learn from scripture, how we should live in response, and how we can handle the ways in which we give differing answers to these questions. These are conversations in which, at least in principle, we are all

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<sup>2</sup> See Higton and Muers, *Text in Play*, chs 8, 9, and 12, and Mike Higton, 'Scriptural Reasoning and the Discipline of Christian Doctrine', *Modern Theology* 29.4 (2013), pp. 120–37.

governed by the question, ‘What does obedience to Jesus as Lord demand?’, and our differences are differences in how to make sense of that question, and how to answer it.

Part of my task as a systematic theologian, especially in a church riven by deep conflicts in which the interpretation and use of scripture is being fought over, is to try to facilitate these conversations. It is to delve into the construals of obedience – the identifications of what is and is not germane to the gospel, and why – that are present on all sides in our debates.

This cannot, however, simply be a conversation of academic theologians or of our counterparts in the hierarchy of the church. It is a conversation that needs to look also to the lives of ordinary Christians around the world, because those lives are themselves a form of commentary upon the text of scripture. Each way of living a faithful Christian life construes the gospel in a particular way. As such, each way of living a faithful Christian life displays connections, it articulates the rule of faith – and it does so in ways that I might not otherwise see. And just as can a patristic debate or a modern scholarly commentary, so these lives might teach me to break a connection I have habitually made, or to make a connection I have previously missed, and might teach me either a way in which obedience to the rule of faith *can* be construed, or (at times) a way in which, once it has become visible, the rule of faith now *demand*s to be construed. (So, I might ask: how have gender identities and relations been lived by Christians, and how are they being lived? Does attending to those lives help me to see what is germane to the gospel in this area? Do they send me back to scripture to re-articulate what I find there?)

My task as a systematic theologian, as I seek to elaborate the rule of faith, and to explore the limits of what it demands, is therefore properly also a descriptive task, attending to and taking seriously the grammars of Christian faith lived out by others, around the world, who live it differently – and whose ways of construing the rule of faith challenge mine just as

much as mine might challenge theirs. It is a task in which attending to the lives and to the readings of others should send me back again and again to scripture, to examine the way in which I have understood its witness. And it is in this give and take, in the ongoing conversation of members of the Body of Christ about their obedience to their Head, that Christian reading of Scripture properly belongs.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See Mike Higton, 'The Ecclesial Body's Grace: Obedience and Faithfulness in Rowan Williams' Ecclesiology', *Ecclesiology* 7 (2011), pp. 7–28.