

A Doctrine of the Bible

Taught by Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Summer 2015

Lecture 3: The Literal Text

10 a.m. Sunday, August 16, 2015

Welcome, everyone, to our third session on “A Doctrine of the Bible.” Please feel free to interrupt me as we go along. We are talking about important matters, and I want us to be able to ask questions or raise objections while they are still fresh on our minds.

These things are not easy. Today’s lecture is not an easy one. We could well spend a semester, for example, studying any of the eucharistic treatises of Martin Luther in order to note how he honored and read Scripture. We don’t have time for that this morning, and so I fear that the best I will be able to do is to offer suggestions and beginning evidence and my own personal testimony about how Luther read Scripture.

We all read and love the Bible. But also, each of us has underlying theological notions about the Bible and about how it should be understood. What I am doing in these lectures is trying to methodically lay out a doctrine of the Bible. For better or worse, we are all theologians when it comes to the Bible. What I am trying to do is to share my theology of the Bible. I am aiming for what I think is a high and honorable way to think about the Bible. At least, it might open your eyes to your own ways of thinking about the Bible.

In our first session I offered the theme that the Bible is a text. It is a fixed array of words that opens up a world and can be entered into well or poorly. Let us, then, try to read the Bible well and honestly.

In our second session I spoke of the classical doctrine of the Inspiration of Holy Scripture. I believe that doctrine. I think you do too. We believe that the Bible is not simply another human text from a bygone age and culture, but is rather a Spirit-crafted text granted to the church by God for the purpose of preserving true faith across continuing centuries of the church.

In this lecture, I want to speak of two things:

- 1) The difference between a literal reading of the Bible and a fundamentalist reading of it.
- 2) Martin Luther and his devotion to the Bible.

A LITERAL READING OF THE BIBLE

Let's begin with the difference between a literal reading of the Bible and a fundamentalist reading of it.

There are a lot of fundamentalist Christians here in America. I think of them as brothers and sisters in the Lord. I do not agree with them in their relationship to the Bible, but I do admire them for their high regard for the Bible.

Here is the problem with a fundamentalist reading of the Bible as I see it: As soon as you reduce the faith of the church to a list of fundamental matters, then you are free to set the Bible aside and to rest content with the fundamentals.¹ Or, perhaps even worse, you are tempted to miss or distort what the Bible actually says because of your commitment to your fundamentals. It does not matter how important the fundamentals are, nor how many of them there are. Once you have built your faith on a list of fundamentals, you are tempted to set the Bible aside or to distort what the Bible actually says because of your commitment to the fundamentals.

Let me give you an example. One of the classic fundamentals is the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. Certainly this is a true and fundamental part of our faith. The Creed, for example, affirms the Second Coming of Jesus Christ: "He will come again to judge the living and the dead."

The problem with fundamentalist preaching about the Second Coming is that too often it fails to dive into the Bible for its picture and notions about the Second Coming of Christ. I know this by experience. I grew up in a church that preached about the Second Coming in a works righteous and terrifying way – in a way that had too little to do with the many, many stories about Jesus in the Bible. The teaching on the Second Coming became its own engine, churning up images and terrors that were not much disciplined by the complex witness of the Bible as a whole. I think it would have been better to have used our faith in the return of Christ as an important dimension to keep in mind in studying every story about Jesus in the Bible.

For example, what does the story of Jesus forgiving the adulterous woman suggest about the return of Jesus to judge the living and the dead?

And Jesus said unto her, Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more. (John 8:11, KJV)

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christian_fundamentalism

- + The inerrancy of the Bible
- + The literal nature of the Biblical accounts, especially regarding Christ's miracles and the Creation account in Genesis
- + The Virgin Birth of Christ
- + The bodily resurrection and physical return of Christ
- + The substitutionary atonement of Christ on the cross

That is, the One who is returning is the One who did not condemn this sinner but called her onwards to holiness of life. Does this have any meaning for the Second Coming?

And what does the saying about the millstone have to say about the Second Coming?

but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened round his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea. (Matthew 18:6, RSV)

What does St. Paul's saying about every knee bowing before Jesus and confessing that he is the Lord have to say about the Second Coming (Philippians 2)?

And what does our Lord's saying about judgment "according to works" have to say about the doctrine of justification by faith and about our Lord's Second Coming:

For the Son of man shall come in the glory of his Father with his angels; and then he shall reward every man *according to his works*. (Matthew 16:27, KJV)

The actual truth about the Second Coming of Jesus Christ is a very rich and complex matter. We learn more about it with each Bible story about Jesus we study, together with all the twists and turns of that story and the rich connections of that story with the overall witness of the Bible.

Do you get what I am trying to say? Creeds and fundamentals come from the Bible, and at their best, they lead us back into the Bible. They lead us back into that world I spoke about in the first lecture – the strange, new world of the Bible. It can never be enough to substitute a list of fundamentals for the actual text of the Bible.

LUTHER ON THE BIBLE

However that might be, do not let anyone trick you into thinking that Lutherans do not believe in a literal reading of the Bible. We certainly do. Biblical accounts are true, every one of them, from the creation of all that is, to Jonah in the belly of the whale, to the return of Jesus Christ to judge the living and the dead. How the Biblical accounts are true might be a complex question, but that they are true, we should not doubt. If you find yourself listening to a preacher who does not believe, for example, in the Virgin Birth of Jesus, then walk away. Find yourself a better preacher. Because the Bible teaches the Virgin Birth.

Let me share with you some "Theses on Scripture" from my friend, theologian David Yeago. Here I am sharing just two of David's theses. He has many more –

each of them important. Maybe we could invite David back to Immanuel to lead us through all of them. He loves to be with us here at Immanuel.

So, here are two of David Yeago's theses about reading the Bible:

- ✦ The Reformation theological principle that we must revisit is this: Human reason is not competent to sit in judgment on God's Word – and Scripture is God's Word written. Mainline Christianity has more or less abandoned this principle, or else attenuated it beyond recognition.²

Clergy and even bishops might deny the Virgin Birth, for example. They might say that it just makes no sense. They might say that Christians who live in our modern, scientific world simply cannot believe in the Virgin Birth. But Luther prefers the Bible.

Here is the second of Yeago's theses:

- ✦ The practice of "interpreting Scripture by Scripture" arises from the principle that there is no extra-scriptural principle of interpretation to which Scripture may be subordinated. The practice allows for and indeed requires a distinction between "what Scripture *says*" and "what Scripture *teaches*." The latter can only be discovered by seeking to read the former in the context of Scripture as a whole.³

Does the Bible *teach*, for example, that all reality was made in six twenty-four hour days? Well, the Bible certainly does *speak* of six days, followed by a seventh day of rest. But does it *teach* that humanity and the stars and the oceans and all that is came into being in one six-day burst? For me, I do not think so. I might be wrong about this, but for me, an honest reading of the text suggests that the stories in Genesis have their own theme and their own purpose. They are not teaching a science lesson about six twenty-four hour days. For one thing, the sun was not created until the fourth day – the sun being the usual way of measuring a day. More importantly, a conclusion about six twenty-four hour days does not seem to be part of the flow of the text. The text is teaching a great and immense theme: that everything that is comes from the hand of our God, and indeed comes entirely from his hand. The text teaches the great doctrine of *creation ex nihilo* – God's creation out of nothing of all that is.

Were there dinosaurs? Well, the Bible does not *speak* of them, but it does *teach* of them in this sense: if there were dinosaurs, our God created them. Jesus made them, and without Jesus was nothing made that was made (John 1). Those fellows did not just randomly appear on earth. If they existed at all, and I see nothing in the Bible that would prevent them from existing, then they were created by our God.

² David Yeago, "Theses on Scripture"

³ Ibid.

Let me pause to lift up this distinction between “what Scripture *says*” and “what Scripture *teaches*.” I agree with David Yeago that what Scripture teaches is found by reading what the Bible says in context of *Scripture as a whole*. But I would add this thought too: we should pay attention to the literary genre of each passage.

For example, was there *really* a good Samaritan who bound up the wounds of the man waylaid by the robbers (Luke 10)? Was there really a “sower who went forth to sow” and scattered his seed on various kinds of soil (Matthew 13)? Well, to ask such questions is somehow to misunderstand Scripture. To ask such questions is to fail to read the text in a *literal* way – that is, in a way that is appropriate to the sacred *Literature*.⁴

Martin Luther read the Bible in a literal way, as did the great patristic teachers before him. He rejoiced in the literal text before us. A career of reading Luther has convinced me of this. As I said earlier, we could spend a semester working our way through any of Luther’s eucharistic treatises and note his devotion to the actual text of the Bible. Perhaps a famous scene from Luther’s life will provide a quick illustration of Luther’s devotion to what the Bible actually says. I have in mind the great story of Luther pulling away the table cloth at his Marburg debate with the Zwinglians. He pulled away that table cloth and revealed the words he had earlier written in chalk on that table: “This is my body.” Luther pounded the table, they say. *hoc est corpus meum*. That is what the text says! “This *is* my body.” Not, “This *symbolizes* my body.”⁵

⁴ Here are three more of David Yeago’s theses. We must wait for another time to investigate these:

- ✦ There is no reason why Scripture should not be studied using modern methods of historical research. If Scripture is the Word of God, however, then whenever Scripture teaches us that something happened in the past, the relationship between the scriptural account of the event and the event itself is such that the scriptural account is true.
- ✦ This issue has been made more difficult in the past by the assumption that a *true* account of an event must be a *literally descriptive* rendering of the event. The actual biblical texts seem to have very different investments in “literalness.” Whether the biblical account of an event is to be interpreted literally must be decided on the basis of the text’s own literary character and the analogy of faith.
- ✦ A theologically-based confidence in the historical truthfulness of Scripture should not lead us aside from Scripture’s own inherent goal and target: witness to the mystery of Christ. The confidence that the truthful God has taken care of the historical truthfulness of Scripture should rather free us from anxiety and an over-emphasis on apologetics so that we may devote ourselves to exploring the scriptural rendering of manifold wisdom of God in our Lord Jesus Christ.

⁵ Luther formulated his argument in this way: he could not understand the words of institution in any way but literally. They would have to prove the contrary to him from the Bible; he would not allow logical reasons. The controversy about the words of institution then continued to be the center of the entire discussion. To strengthen his argument, he wrote *Hoc est corpus meum* with chalk on the table and temporarily covered it with the velvet tablecloth. Martin Brecht. *Martin Luther 1521-1532: Shaping and Defining the Reformation* (Kindle Locations 5241-5244). Kindle Edition.

This story should forever ring in the mind of Lutheran interpreters of the Bible. This is how Luther functioned. He relentlessly drew attention to what the Biblical text actually says. We can make no sense of the Reformation without noting Luther's passion for the literal text of Scripture.

There is a lovely passage in Luther's *Preface to the Old Testament* (1523) in which Luther spoke of the Old Testament as the "swaddling clothes" which present Christ, who lies in them. The quote goes this way:

...these are the Scriptures which make fools of all the wise and understanding, and are open only to the small and simple, as Christ says in Matthew 11[:25]. Therefore dismiss your own opinions and feelings, and think of the Scriptures as the loftiest and noblest of holy things, as the richest of mines which can never be sufficiently explored, in order that you may find that divine wisdom which God here lays before you in such simple guise as to quench all pride. Here you will find the swaddling cloths and the manger in which Christ lies, and to which the angel points the shepherds [Luke 2:12]. Simple and lowly are these swaddling cloths, but dear is the treasure, Christ, who lies in them.⁶

For Luther, the Scriptures are the "swaddling clothes" in which Jesus lies. But such a saying does not mean that we can somehow discard the "swaddling clothes" and just content ourselves with our remaining notions of Jesus. Such a saying can be only be understood against the massive examples of Luther's actual use of the Bible which we can see in his Biblical commentaries, treatises, and sermons. Indeed, I don't know how anyone who actually reads Luther can think that he does not read the Bible literally. Indeed, he reads it as the church fathers read it: He looks for the plain sense of Scripture, assuming that the point of Scripture is to witness to Jesus Christ.

For Luther his characteristic question, even when debating such intelligent and learned opponents as Erasmus or Zwingli, was always this:

But what does the Bible actually say? What does the text say?

Luther entirely believed the saying we read in 2 Timothy 3:

¹⁶All scripture [again All scripture] is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness,¹⁷ so that everyone who belongs to

⁶ Luther, Martin, "Preface to the Old Testament" (1523), LW 35: Pelikan, Jaroslav Jan (Hrsg.); Oswald, Hilton C. (Hrsg.); Lehmann, Helmut T. (Hrsg.): *Luther's Works, Vol. 35 : Word and Sacrament I*. Philadelphia : Fortress Press, 1999, c1960 (Luther's Works 35), S. 35:236

God may be proficient, equipped for every good work. (2 Timothy 3:16-17, NRSV)

I mention Erasmus because Luther wrote an important book against Erasmus. The book is called *The Bondage of the Will*. The relevance of that book for our purposes is that it is the classic text for Luther's teaching on what is called the "clarity of Scripture" or the "perspicuity of Scripture."

The relationship between the great scholar Erasmus (1466-1536) and Martin Luther was fascinating. Erasmus was older than Luther. Like Luther, he was a reformer of the Catholic Church. It would have lent much prestige to the Lutheran movement if Erasmus had become a Lutheran, but he never did. He fought for the renewal of the Catholic Church, as did Luther, but he never actually left the Catholic Church.

There came a point where Erasmus distinguished himself from Luther by writing a book called *The Freedom of the Will*. Luther dismissed the book as amateurish and didn't want to deal with it. But eventually Luther was driven to give an answer to Erasmus, which he did, through his contrary book *The Bondage of the Will*.

In Luther's book, he dealt with the claim of Erasmus that the Bible is obscure at many points. Luther seems furious about this point, because he feels that in the end it authorizes people to simply set the Bible aside and to remain content with their own muddled thoughts:

Nothing more pernicious could be said than this, for it has led ungodly men to set themselves above the Scriptures and to fabricate whatever they pleased, until the Scriptures have been completely trampled down and we have been believing and teaching nothing but the dreams of madmen.⁷

Luther points to the saying in the Psalms about God's Word as a "lamp to my feet":

And what in the whole Old Testament, especially in Psalm 118[119], is more often said in praise of the Scripture than that it is a most certain and evident light? The psalmist celebrates its clarity thus: "A lamp to my feet and a light to my path" [Ps. 119:105]. He does not say, "A lamp to my feet is thy Spirit alone" ...

This distinction Luther makes here is very important. He says that God's Word is a lamp unto our feet, not God's Spirit alone. Luther was very troubled by Christian who claimed that they knew the will of God's Spirit *apart* from the

⁷ LW 33:88-99

literal text of the Bible. Luther called such people “Enthusiasts” – people who, in Luther’s fun language, had “devoured the Holy Spirit feathers and all.”(LW 40:83)

Enthusiasm is a continual temptation of the church. Whenever anyone says, “If the apostles had known what we know in our modern and scientific world, they would have written the Bible differently,” there we have the kind of enthusiasm that Luther devoted much of his career to combating.

A final passage from Luther in his *Bondage of the Will* about the clarity of Scripture. It is Luther’s rhetorical question about whether the Bible is really God’s blessing for us if it is obscure and unreliable:

In short, if Scripture is obscure or ambiguous, what point was there in God’s giving it to us? Are we not obscure and ambiguous enough without having our obscurity, ambiguity, and darkness augmented for us from heaven?⁸

I lift up these passages in Luther about the clarity of Scripture for your encouragement. You do not need to be a learned scholar in order to read the Bible. Simply read it – lots of it – and try to believe what the words actually say and teach about Jesus, his cross, and the church.

(End)

⁸ Ibid.