



Missional Journal

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"True Truth"

"What else do I contend for but to bring everyone to an understanding of the difference between the divine Scripture and human teaching or custom, so that a Christian may not take the one for the other and exchange gold for straw, silver for stubble, wood for precious stones...."[1] So wrote Martin Luther in the early days of the Reformation.

Luther was not a Bible-only guy, although some of his statements taken in isolation sound that way. Rather, he was a *Bible-primacy* advocate: Scripture carried for him an authority that surpassed all other authorities in the church (and for that matter, in the world). Luther did not deny the (relative) authority of the fathers or the councils of the church but insisted that they have authority only as they lead us to Scripture and support its message.

Biblical Seminary's statement of *Convictions* follows this same Protestant trajectory:

The Primacy of Scripture for Christian Faith and Life

We believe Scripture is inspired by God and as such is infallible and authoritative for the life and witness of the church throughout history and across cultures.[2]

This leads me to a number of observations:

1. The Bible is "true truth"

I believe Francis Schaeffer first played with this term to describe the nature of the Bible. It is an obvious redundancy, but makes a point: Our fundamental disposition toward Scripture needs to be one of submission, trust, and confidence in its message. The various adjectives-- "inspired,"

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"infallible," "authoritative"--are all designed to point to this "true truth." In the paragraphs explaining this conviction, we actually adopted the additional statement from the 1974 Lausanne Covenant[3] stating that Scripture is "without error in all that it affirms." None of this discussion is new to Biblical Seminary or to a large part of evangelicalism. However, we do feel the need to affirm our commitment to the "true truth" of the Bible for two reasons:

1) We hear in many quarters today what is sometimes described as a "hermeneutic of suspicion." It is an attitude which says, "Guilty until proven innocent." Although this often manifests itself as a general questioning of any and all authority, it is sometimes focused particularly on the Bible. Our "**Conviction**" makes it clear that our faculty and board want no part of that mentality. My faculty colleague John Franke is fond of saying, "The problem is not with the Bible but with us!"

2) Commitment to the missional church movement means we are deeply involved in re-examining what Scripture says about the nature of God's kingdom, the Gospel, the church, and a host of related issues. This is unsettling for some people and sometimes leads to the misunderstanding that we are ignoring or subverting what the Bible teaches. On the contrary! We are trying to be open to having our interpretations corrected by the Word of God. I sometimes ask my students whether they can distinguish (at least in theory) between what the Bible says and what they *think* it says. Without this distinction, we can never be corrected or reformed by the Word.

2. The Bible is the story of God's mission

I received a question recently from a pastor who was one of my students years ago. He asked, "Dave, how have your views changed since I had you in class? Can I still use my notes from your systematic theology class?" Humor aside, these are important questions, particularly because in my last article I stated that, from a missional perspective, "*everything changes*." [4] First let me respond by reaffirming what I said a few paragraphs back: the Bible is God's "true truth" for us. It is the living and life-giving Word. That has not changed. What has changed is the way my faculty colleagues and I *read* the text.

1) Scripture as story

Christians read the Bible in a variety of ways, some helpful and some less so. Some read it primarily as a law book full of rules and regulations. This approach quickly turns the Good News into bad news. Some read the Bible as a how-to manual for getting through life successfully--which unfortunately then makes Scripture primarily about us rather than about God. Still others read it as a scientific treatise or simply a curious piece of ancient literature.[5]

Reading the Bible like this misses the fact that the Bible is primarily a story about God's mission: What God has done, is doing, and will do to reconcile creation to himself through Jesus Christ. When I say "story" I am not suggesting that it is fiction, or folk lore, or a fairy tale. But it does have major and minor characters and a plot with a beginning, middle, and end. In short, it is a narrative.

This is a story that is going somewhere, and it invites us to come along on the journey. It is a drama that has been developing for centuries, with the Three-in-One God as the central actor, while we are summoned on stage to play a supporting role as God's missionary people.

Recently Christopher Wright produced a massive volume in which he describes a missional reading of the Bible. He likens his hermeneutical approach to a map that can guide us through unknown or unexplored territory. No map provides all the details encountered by a traveler. But a useful map provides necessary markers to keep the traveler from getting lost. Says Wright: "The more I have attempted to use (or stimulate others to use) a missional map of the Bible, oriented fundamentally to the mission of God, the more it seems that not only do the major features of the landscape stand out clearly but also other less well-trodden paths and less scenic scholarly tourist attractions turn out to have surprising and fruitful connections with the main panorama." [6]

My own experience with a missional reading of the Bible confirms what Wright says. I find myself observing aspects of the biblical text that I had not noticed before, while familiar passages take on new significance.

2) Scripture as a collection of stories

Scot McKnight recently used the online encyclopedia Wikipedia as a metaphor of the Bible. He says the over-all "story" is made up of many smaller wiki-stories that offer development and perspective on the "One Story." "None of the wiki-stories is final; none of them is comprehensive; none of them is absolute; none of them is exhaustive. Each of them tells a *true story of that Story*." [7]

One characteristic of these stories is that, much like real life, they are "messy." By that I mean they have unexpected twists and turns, surprising characters and comments, and details that do not seem to fit the "One Story." This brings me back to the question raised by my former student: How have I personally changed?

I used to read the Bible primarily as a collection of texts intended to be collated, sifted, and synthesized to present a logical "system" of religious truth. That is why I was particularly attracted to systematic theology as a teaching profession. And I was a Calvinist because I thought they did the best job synthesizing the texts.

Much of what I learned (and, I hope, taught) was true and helpful from this perspective. But I think much was missed. Today I still consider myself a Calvinist or Reformed theologian, but I am less confident about my ability to make the difficult pieces of the Bible "fit" the system. Now I am more concerned about listening to each part of the text and asking, "How does this part of the Story help me understand what God is up to in the world and what he is calling us to be and do?"

What God is up to is reclaiming, reconciling, and restoring creation through Jesus who is the New Adam, the descendant of Abraham, and the heir of David's throne. The Old Testament sets the stage for the appearance of the long-expected king. The New Testament presents Jesus as the one who, by his death, resurrection, and ultimate return, victoriously fulfills the mission of God.

3) God's story and my story

Reading the Bible from this perspective is transformative. The narcissism of Western culture teaches us that we are the central players in our individual life-stories. [8] Other persons

(including God!) play significant roles only because they contribute to the drama in which we are the chief protagonist. So when narcissists read the Bible they (we!) read it as a story that is "relevant" (horrible word) only when it contributes to the success and fulfillment of our dreams and ambitions.

But when we read Scripture as the narrative of the mighty acts of God played out on the stage of history, our narcissistic self-centeredness is challenged and rebuked. The central story is not about me but about God. As Paul says, "All things were created *through* him and *for* him" (Col. 1:16). The fulfillment of our humanity does not come by adding God to our stories but by finding our place in the "One Story" of the missional God who gathers together all things in the Messiah (Eph. 1:10).

And when we read Scripture this way, *everything changes!*



[1]Martin Luther, "On the Councils and the Churches," cited in Hugh T. Kerr, *A Compend of Luther's Theology* (Westminster, 1943), p. 15.

[2]For our full statement of **Convictions** including explanatory paragraphs look here: <http://www.biblical.edu/images/discover/Convictions0808.pdf>.

[3]<http://www.lausanne.org/covenant>

[4]<http://www.biblical.edu/images/belong/PDFs/vol3no2.pdf>.

[5]A number of these approaches are helpfully described and critiqued in Scot McKnight's recent book *The Blue Parakeete* (Zondervan, 2008), pp. 41-54.

[6]*The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (IVP, 2006), p. 69.

[7]*Blue Parakeete*, p. 65.

[8] I discussed narcissism in a previous article:

<http://www.biblical.edu/images/belong/PDFs/Vol1No11.pdf>