Modern certainty, historical clarity
Rediscovering how saints read scripture

Peter J. H. Epp

On March 18, 2015, Emma Green published her account of the then-very-recent Allegheny Mennonite Conference (of Mennonite Church USA) meeting and vote that reinstated Hyattsville (MD) Mennonite Church as a full conference member, after Allegheny had previously revoked Hyattsville's voting rights for accepting members who were gay and lesbian.[1] The vote required a 51 percent majority, achieved—barely—by a rounded-up result of 50.7 percent. Given this 50/50 split on a particularly divisive issue, it is not surprising that the vote also coincided with the resignation of two churches from the conference over the disagreement and provoked the immediate resignation of a third.

Critical realist approaches to scripture played a major role in pre-Reformation and early Christian history, and such approaches may provide us with the keys to a more honest and faithful approach to our conflicts today.

It might be easy to conclude, as we often do, that some Allegheny members—namely, those voting against reinstating Hyattsville's voting rights—placed a high value on individual purity, whereas others—namely, those voting in favour—did not. It might also be easy to conclude, as we also often do, that some Allegheny members—namely, those voting in favour of reinstating Hyattsville's voting rights—placed a high value on remaining in community, while others—namely, those voting against—did not.

And yet, when we stop to really listen to the voices of those involved, we recognize that our brothers and sisters in faith defy such easy categorization. Did those who voted against Hyattsville's voting rights care less about the continuance of community? Green's interview with Jeff Jones, the pastor who initiated the discipline process for Hyattsville, makes it difficult to sustain such an easy judgment. Green writes:

> *Jones himself was raised a Presbyterian and ordained as a pastor in 1976 as part of a group called the Evangelical Church Alliance . . . [but] he said he liked the community orientation of his adopted denomination. "I'm very connectionally oriented—committed to the conference," he said. "We don't have a priest, or bishops, as many churches do. The congregations decide."*
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> *This sense of community: That's why being in a conference matters, he said. "I've seen too many independent churches . . . go off and do strange things. We need to have a certain degree of interconnectedness to keep us all Mennonite—to keep an identity.*[2]

In fact, later in the article, Jones concludes: "We're all reluctant—we'd rather be together."

Clearly, then, there is something at play here that is more foundational than our opinions about the value of purity or community or even scripture. There seems to be something deeper, something more foundational that affects *the way* we pursue our commitment to purity and community and scripture. One way to uncover some of those foundational differences may be to spend some time considering our unspoken assumptions about reality—or, as a philosopher might put it, to study our competing ontologies.

Competing ontologies

At least three competing assumptions about reality have fueled the spectrum of opinions that typify most arguments among Christians today. First, there are those who express their faith primarily through the assumptions of realism, believing that there is universal, accessible truth, and that we can claim that truth with certainty if we simply discern it properly. In this ontology, Christian disagreement provides us with opportunities to clarify or discover the certain Truth that God will give (or has given) us to resolve the argument.

Second, there are those who express their faith primarily through realism's opposite, relativism, arguing that there is no truth beyond each person's individual experience. In this ontology, Christian disagreement provides us with opportunities to

practice tolerance, to become the kind of community that refuses to presume that anyone should argue about what is right or wrong for anyone else.

Third, there are those who would actively seek to express their faith somewhere in between, through critical realism, the belief that there is universal Truth beyond our experiences, but we will always (in this world, at least) be limited in our ability to know that Truth. In this ontology, we should expect church disagreements to defy easy resolution, but the answers that parties to the disagreement give can never just be dismissed. Disagreements are simply something that we must always be working at, even if painfully.

Realism, as many would recognize, has generally dominated Christianity since the Reformation, a fact evidenced by modern approaches to proving and "proof texting" using scripture. Relativism, as many might also suspect, has recently come to challenge realism in our churches, a fact evidenced by our increasing discomfort with accountability. A closer look at the breadth of historical approaches to scripture, however, demonstrates not only that critical realist approaches to scripture played a major role in pre-Reformation and early Christian history but also that such approaches may provide us with the keys to a more honest and faithful approach to our conflicts today.

As modern realism has gained traction alongside *sola scriptura,* Protestant realists have attempted to compete with secular realism head-to-head under the assumption that scripture provides certain and definitive answers.

Scripture and ontology

Martin Luther's emphasis on *sola scriptura* helped to codify a realist Christian assumption: that scripture can be clearly understood and applied. In fact, as modern realism has gained traction alongside *sola scriptura*, Protestant realists have attempted to compete with secular realism head-to-head under the assumption that scripture provides definitive answers. As Timothy Beal puts it in *The Rise and Fall of the Bible*: In the 1800s "*sola scriptura* . . . combined with a . . . romantic idealization of . . . Puritan Christianity to promote the Bible as the key to solving all of industrial America's emerging problems."[3] Such "back to the Bible" approaches to scripture

generally present themselves as returning to the true, pure history of earlier Christianity.

Brian E. Daley and James C. Howell, however, highlight two key periods of Christian history to demonstrate otherwise. They show that (1) the approaches to scripture produced by modern realism have not been the predominant approach to scripture of the church through history, and that (2) recovering the wisdom of those approaches can actually help us solve some of the problems created by an overreliance on modern realism.

In "Is Patristic Exegesis Still Usable?" Daley explains that modern realism has led us to the false conclusion that we can find the meaning of a passage by simply discovering "what the author meant," especially by employing literary and historical criticism.[4] While such an approach may feel "true" to history, Daley reminds us that it is not, in fact, how the earliest Christian leaders—whom we often refer to as the church fathers—approached the Bible in the first centuries of the church's existence. Today, for example, in reading scripture through the lenses of modern realism, we paradoxically employ disciplines that eliminate God's agency—in an attempt to find God. We use historical studies of scripture, which are rooted in a method that allows no room for God to be a part of what happened in history, to try to better understand what scripture says about God in history.

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Instead, Daley asks us to consider the exegesis we find when we read ancient Christian authors such as Origen. While Daley acknowledges that our goal is not to read scripture exactly as Origen did, he demonstrates that we would do well to learn from Origen's process. In particular, in modern times, where realism has attempted to apply its own scientific method to scripture, we can benefit from seeing how Origen read the Bible theologically—that is, with faith that God can continually communicate new spiritual meaning through its study. Daley reminds us that early Christian approaches to scripture, while imperfect in their own ways, can help counter the narrowness of a modern approach that assumes it

can find a single, certain, literal meaning in each biblical text.[5] Consistent with critical realism, Origen's approach assumed that there is Truth in scripture, but that we might not always see that Truth in exactly the same way.

In "Christ Was Like St. Francis," James C. Howell explores the way scripture was used by St. Francis in the twelfth century, and the role that later hagiographers (biographers who wrote about St. Francis as a saint) played in documenting his approach. Modern realism, Howell explains, has led us to overlook the stories of saints, because of the hagiographers' historical inaccuracy. Certainly, Howell admits, hagiographers were too "consumed by their zeal to polish" St. Francis's halo to be considered historically reliable.[6] And yet, in rejecting the stories of saints for failing the standards of realism, he argues, we miss out on the theological advantages of seeing them as a critical realist would. To demonstrate this point, he explores the advantages of studying the way St. Francis, the founder of the Franciscan order, used scripture.

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In St. Francis's biographies, we find narratives of one who sought first and foremost to imitate Christ's life as closely as possible, even if he did not succeed as fully as his biographers would lead us to believe. As a result, Francis can remind us that exegesis is not limited to our academic attempts to find the meaning of a text, but that texts often open themselves up to us in personal and unexpected ways as we attempt to embody them. He points to two Christians who pursued Francis's embodied exegesis in recent times: Clarence Jordan, who started Koinonia Farms, who in turn inspired Millard Fuller, who employed his "clever exegesis known as Habitat for Humanity."[7] As with the study of texts, of course, our embodied accuracy and insight will be limited, but such limitations are simply part of what it means to follow God. Contrasting this approach with the empty certainty of realism, Howell writes: "Just as [Karl] Barth famously taught us that our inability to speak of God itself gives glory to God, so our inability to imitate Christ can glorify God as well."[8]

Thus, Howell does not just give us an argument for critical realism; he gives us a tool for trying it out. How, for example, might our conflicts over sexuality be different if we decided that we would put our arguments on pause, attend to the work of the kingdom together, and periodically return to report on what we were learning from God and one another as we do so? What if we also allowed ourselves to believe that God does not require us to come to the perfect solution, but that in fact “our inability to imitate Christ can glorify God as well”? What if, in short, we chose to feel more urgency about attempting the day-to-day work of God’s kingdom and exercised more patience with the theological conundrums that have come up along the way, recognizing that our successes and failures are for God to do with as God will?

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Conclusion

A closer inspection of the key historical developments in biblical exegesis demonstrates that our modern approaches do not have the historical support we often assume they have. They are simply the product of the preferred theologies of the Reformation and the Enlightenment that followed it. At the same time, however, rejecting Christian realism has produced its own problems. All too often, our realization that realism has its limitations has led us to the other extreme, relativism. As secular postmodernism has begun to question whether there is anything universal, it has simultaneously begun to marginalize religion, labeling any moral certainty as an oppressive overreach into others’ individual realities. While this development has embattled fundamentalist Christians, other Christians have absorbed the critique. As a result, relativistic Christians have begun looking for expressions of faith that minimize any Christian claims to universal Truth, thus relegating faith to personal experience with little, if anything, to offer to the public sphere.

Privatizing faith, however, can be as empty as realism is overconfident. As Thomas Finger points out, if there were no shared

universal meaning, there would be no need to communicate about meaning in the first place.[9] Furthermore, Richard Bauckham reminds us that relativism only ends in paradox: "the need to insist that there is one truth—the truth that there is no truth—and one justice—the right of every voice to equal status."[10] Not only is it contradictory to require a universal truth to deny universal truth, Bauckham reminds us that relativism fails at its own goals. How can we convince anyone to respect others' uniqueness, if we have no common ground on the basis of which to request it?[11]

In this way, much of our church and society has fallen into the trap of pillaging and oversimplifying Christian history to self-righteously justify inadequate and polarizing ontologies. Thankfully, though, our wisest thinkers have seen the value of reestablishing a middle road, and of using Christian history more faithfully to do so. Leading the charge, of course, would be Karl Barth. Recognizing the trap of liberal relativism while avoiding the pitfalls of fundamentalism, Barth wrote prophetically as a critical realist. Thus, he propounded a neo-orthodoxy that reestablished the pursuit of Truth without claiming an exclusive ability to distill it.

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In doing so, Barth paints a picture of faith that is simultaneously fervently confident in its Truth and mystery. As he writes in *The Word of God and the Word of Man*: "Must we not also grow beyond the strange question, Who is God? As if we could dream of asking such a question, having willingly and sincerely allowed ourselves to be led to the gates of the new world, to the threshold of the kingdom of God!"[12] For Barth, scripture and God, properly understood, point us to a "new *world*." It is a world filled with Truth, but we must constantly keep surveying it, lest we lose that Truth with static conclusions. Thus Barth reminds us that in our faith, as in our history, we find a God who is not limited by our modern or postmodern oversimplifications. In a time when both have worn increasingly thin, and where our relationships with one

another have paid the price, this, indeed, is good news.

Notes

[1] Emma Green, "Gay and Mennonite," *The Atlantic*, March 18, 2015; online at http://www.theatlantic.com/features/archive/2015/03/gay-and-mennonite/388060/.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Timothy Beal, *The Rise and Fall of the Bible* (New York: First Mariner Books, 2012), 6.
[4] Brian E. Daley, "Is Patristic Exegesis Still Usable?" in *The Art of Reading Scripture*, ed. Ellen F. Davis and Richard B. Hays (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003) 73.
[5] Ibid., 69–88.
[6] James C. Howell, "Christ Was Like St. Francis," in *The Art of Reading Scripture*, ed. Davis and Hays, 89.
[7] Ibid., 104.
[8] Ibid., 105.
[9] Thomas N. Finger. *A Contemporary Anabaptist Theology: Biblical, Historical, Constructive* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 11.
[10] Richard Bauckham, "Reading Scripture as a Coherent Story," in *The Art of Reading Scripture*, ed. Davis and Hays, 52.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man* (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith Publisher, Inc., 1978) 47.

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