Teaching the Bible confessionally in the church

Ellen F. Davis

One day some years ago I sat around a table dreaming with a group of theologians, biblical scholars, and scholars in secular disciplines who regularly enter into dialogue between their own disciplines and theology.[1] We were Catholics and Protestants, the latter representing a broad spectrum of reformed traditions. Our enviable task was to identify the kinds of theological inquiry that should be pursued and funded in order to provide solid intellectual grounding for this stage of the church's life. We did not need to worry about raising funds or administering projects; we were asked only to imagine what would most benefit the church. Somewhat to our surprise, it took no more than an hour—probably an academic record—for us to agree on the most fundamental need, namely, to learn again to read and teach the Bible confessionally within mainstream North American and European Christianity.

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By "confessional" reading and teaching, we did not mean interpreting in accordance with a particular doctrinal statement. Rather, we identified the need for the church to learn afresh to acknowledge the Bible as the functional center of its life, so that in all our conversations, deliberations, arguments, and programs, we are continually reoriented to the demands and the promises of the Scriptures. Reading the Bible confessionally means recognizing it as a word that is indispensable if we are to view the world realistically and hopefully. We acknowledge it as a divine word that is uniquely powerful to interpret our experience. But more, we allow ourselves to be moved by it, trusting that it is the one reliable guide to a life that is not, in the last analysis, desperate. Reading the Bible confessionally means reading it as the church's Scripture.

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[1] This essay is excerpted from Ellen F. Davis, "Teaching the Bible Confessionally in the Church," in *The Art of Reading Scripture*, edited by Ellen F. Davis and Richard B. Hays, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 9–26. It is adapted here with permission of the publisher and author.

This essay summarizes my own goals as a teacher of Bible in a seminary context; it is at the same time intended to provide guidelines for the kind of teaching that would in my judgment be most effective in congregational settings. It is important to note at the outset that everything of substance here applies equally to preaching and classroom teaching of the Bible.

In brief, teaching Christians to read the Bible confessionally means equipping them to do three things: to read with a primarily theological interest; to read with openness to repentance; and to read with an understanding of the Old Testament witness to Christ.

I. Reading with a theological interest

An earlier generation of biblical scholars rightly perceived that people who read the Bible were looking for theological meaning but did not take with sufficient seriousness the historical character of the Bible—or, more likely, knew nothing of it. The challenge facing that generation was to demonstrate convincingly how it is that the "words of Torah [come to us] through human language;" as the ancient rabbis said: how deeply the biblical texts are embedded in a particular culture; how they reflect current events; how they are shaped and in some ways limited by the Zeitgeist as well as by the Holy Spirit.

I am myself profoundly indebted to this historical work and draw upon it daily in my teaching. Nonetheless, in the present intellectual climate, I believe the Bible is often read "too historically"—that is, too narrowly so. Yet a confessional reading sees in the Bible a different aim: first of all, to tell us about the nature and will of God, to instruct us in the manifold and often hidden ways in which God is present and active in our world; and second, to give us a new awareness of our selves and our actions, to show us that in everything, we have to do with God. In a word, the Bible's aim is to do theology.

Since the Bible is about human life in the presence of God, it follows that teaching the Bible confessionally is not primarily a matter of conveying historical information. The teacher's task is to impart the information and the conceptual framework, but even more, the imaginative skills for wondering fruitfully about the ultimate facts of life: love, sin, redemption, forgiveness—facts that can be pondered and confirmed as true, yet never really explained, and certainly not explained away. The Bible confronts us with facts that are peculiar in this way: the better we understand them, the more we wonder about them. So teaching the Bible confessionally means enabling people to wonder wisely and deeply.

The capacity for fruitful theological wondering resides chiefly in the imagination. Theologian Garrett Green has argued persuasively that in many instances the biblical term "heart" (*lev*; *kardia*) refers to what we call imagination.[2] This notion wonderfully illuminates the use of that word in the eucharistic liturgy: "Lift up your hearts"—lift up your imaginations, open them toward God.

In addition to imaginations fit for the reading of Scripture, students also need literary skills. One of my students in the introductory Old Testament course put the problem succinctly about eight weeks into the first semester: "When we started, I thought the problem was that I read too slowly. Now I see that the problem is, I read too fast." Making mileage through the text invariably impedes movement into what Barth rightly calls "the strange new world within the Bible." Slowing down, we can begin to see how the (sometimes frustratingly) complex literary artistry of the Bible conveys theological meaning.

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The most difficult aspect of the Bible's literary complexity is its use of symbols. The Bible speaks often in symbolic, or imaginative, language for the simple reason that the realities of which it speaks exceed the capacity of ordinary, "commonsense" discourse. Symbols are inherently ambiguous and necessarily so; their continuing validity depends on their ability to take on new meanings in new situations and in light of new insights and challenges.

It is largely in response to the literary complexity of the Scriptures that some seminary faculties are placing increasing emphasis on the study of biblical languages. I am one of those who believe that it is best to enter this strange new world within the Bible by becoming radically uncertain about the language spoken there—at first, uncertain of every letter. But as one progresses a few weeks or months into language study, the theological fascination becomes obvious. Biblical statements that seemed straightforward now become curious; they become the ground from which new questions spring up. Does divine compassion appear in a new light when one learns that the Greek word implies intestinal activity and the Hebrew word evokes the maternal womb? It is the business of published translations to resolve ambiguities, but those who read in the original language revel in them. Jonah proclaimed: "Another forty days and Nineveh is inverted!" (Jonah 3:4). Was his prophecy of doom subsequently annulled by God's predictable mercy (4:2), or was his prophecy of conversion fulfilled?

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[2] Garrett Green, *Imagining God: Theology and the Religious Imagination* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), 109–110.

Study of Greek and Hebrew gives us a fruitful unsettledness about the language of the Bible. And as we take that unsettledness to heart, then we may gradually become unsettled in our own language. The church would be hugely blessed if its teachers, preachers, and theologians were to suffer a loss of fluency in speaking about how things stand with us, before God.

If study of the biblical languages has created a lively awareness of the awkwardness, the inadequacy, the slipperiness—and the potential richness—of words woven together, then the church may be well served by those of us who stammer on her behalf.

Cultivating unsettledness about biblical language and unsettledness about our own—these are good reasons for studying Hebrew and Greek. But perhaps the best reason is the most obvious: reading in the original languages slows us down, and reading the text more slowly is essential for learning to love the Bible. As we know from other areas of experience, giving careful attention is not just an outcome of love; it is part of the process of growing in love. We love best those for whom we are obligated to give regular, often demanding, care: a child, an animal, a sick or elderly person, a plot of land or an old house. Inching patiently through the Greek or Hebrew text is best seen as "an act of charity"[3]—ultimately, charity toward God. Poring over every syllable, frustration notwithstanding, we affirm the ages-old conviction of the faithful that these words of Scripture are indeed "some molten words perfected in an oven seven times."[4]

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[3] For this phrase I am indebted to my teaching colleague and former Hebrew student, Amy Laura Hall.

[4] This rendering of Ps 12:7 (Heb) is that of poet Jacqueline Osherow, *Dead Men's Praise* (New York: Grove, 1999), 53.

II. Reading with openness to repentance

Acquiring literary competency with Scripture should make us suspicious of our interpretations. "The hermeneutics of suspicion" has become a byword in contemporary biblical scholarship, the chief object of suspicion being the text itself, viewed as a social product. But if we are reading from a confessional perspective—that is, as members of a community that regularly confesses its sins as well as its faith—then it is well to begin by suspecting our own interpretations.

Whenever we pick up the Bible, read it, put it down, and say, "That's just what I thought," we are probably in trouble. Using the text to confirm our presuppositions is sinful; it is an act of resistance against God's fresh speaking to us, an effective denial that the Bible is the word of the living God. The only alternative is reading with a view to what the New Testament calls *metanoia*, "repentance"—literally, "change of mind."

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One of the important literary features of the canon is the way its multivoiced witness exposes the tendency to read the Bible "for ourselves." The book of Jonah sounds an "anti-prophetic" note in Israel's face: "So you think the oracles against the nations (e.g., Isa 13–23; Jer 46–51; Ezek 25–32) mark the end of God's concern for the Gentiles? Rethink that." The divine speeches in Job counter an anthropocentric reading of Genesis 1: "So you think the P(riestly) creation account means that the whole world was created for human beings and their self-gratification? Wrong again."

Because the Bible speaks with multiple voices, it attests to the perpetual struggle of the faith community to test different perspectives. Some of these voices are complementary, probably reflecting gradual shifts in Israel's religious perception; they allow us as readers gradually to broaden our vision. Other voices stand in sharp disagreement and press us hard to examine entrenched positions.[5] In other words, the canon itself models for us a process of *metanoia* within the community of faith, and this is one of the best reasons to trust its witness.[6]

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[5] See my essay "Critical Traditioning," in *Art of Reading Scripture*, 163–80.

[6] See Thesis 2 in my essay, "Nine Theses on the Interpretation of Scripture," in *Art of Reading Scripture*, 1–5.

For Christians, the ultimate goal of *metanoia* is that our minds be conformed to the mind of Christ (1 Cor 2:16; cf. Rom 12:2). In our present state of sin, seeking immediate identification—“What would Jesus do?”—may be dangerously self-deceptive if it leads us to ignore the incomparability of Jesus’ sinless life to our own. The Old Testament is the best hedge against overhasty identification with Jesus. For it offers something the Gospels do not, namely, a wide range of developed human characters whose stories clarify where we now are, both as individuals and as a community.

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I once preached at the ordination of a deacon [using] the call of Jeremiah (Jer 1:4–9). Immediately after the service, one of the participating priests looked at me with evident disappointment and said, “It’s too bad you didn’t talk about Jesus.” If I correctly understood his objection, it was to my choice of Jeremiah rather than Jesus as a model for Christian ministers. I stand by my choice. Jeremiah’s story is a model of faithful ministry because, like Jesus’, it recounts persistence—decades-long in Jeremiah’s case—in an “impossible” calling that meets with steady rejection. However, Jeremiah also shows us something about our present situation as ministers of the gospel that Jesus’ story cannot, precisely because Jesus did not know sin in the same way that every other human being knows it. The book of Jeremiah has an essential place in the Christian Bible because it shows us at the same time a long history of resistance to God, beginning with Jeremiah’s first response to God’s call: “Ahhh, Lord YHWH . . . look, I don’t even know how to speak; I’m just a kid!” In Jeremiah’s repeated “complaints,” we hear his prolonged accusation against God for depriving him of friends and family and subjecting him to ceaseless pain. The complaints meet with God’s sharp rebuke, which is also without analogue in Jesus’ story:

If you race with runners, and they weary you,
    then how will you compete with horses?
And if you count on a peaceful land,
    then how will you do in the (wild) majesty of the Jordan?
        (Jer 12:5)

My point is that Jeremiah’s ministry is a resource in a different way than is Jesus’ own for those who are still struggling with their resistance to God—

and that is probably every minister of the gospel. As with Jeremiah, so with each of these biblical characters [Abraham, Jacob, Moses, David, Elijah, Job] we see a movement away from personal absorption and toward God, a movement that could rightly be termed *metanoia*, or in Hebrew, *teshuvah*, "turning"—that is, repentance.

III. Reading with an understanding of the Old Testament witness to Christ

Probably the most far-reaching issue separating traditional and modern (or postmodern) biblical interpretation is whether—and if so, how—to read the Old Testament as a witness to Jesus Christ. My own teaching follows from acceptance of the consensus of virtually all premodern interpreters that it is legitimate—indeed, necessary—for Christians to find in the Old Testament a witness to the One who "came to fulfill the Law and the Prophets" (Matt 5:7). The characteristic of the text that allowed premodern readers to trace the Old Testament witness to Christ is the prominence of symbolic, or poetic, language. With respect to the Old Testament witness to Christ, what is important about language that engages the imagination is that it has the potential to create over time a vision that is both clear and open. After a lapse of six centuries, the crucifixion clarified the enigma of exilic Isaiah's fourth Servant Song (Isa 52:13–53:12). Moreover, it is important to recognize that it is not only prophetic poetry that bears witness to Christ. The New Testament writers range through the whole canon, drawing especially on the Psalms[7] and the wisdom tradition, to clarify the meaning of the Christ event.

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Until the present generation, Christians have generally believed that reading the Old Testament as a witness to Jesus Christ means that the New Testament illumines the Old. But far less attention has been given, even among biblical scholars, to the necessary converse of that view—namely, that the New Testament itself can be understood only in light of a profound theological reading of the Old Testament. In one of his last writings, Dietrich Bonhoeffer states: “I don’t think it is Christian to want to get to the New Testament too soon and too directly.”[8] Study of the Old Testament enables us to hear the demand and the harsh warning that run all through the New Testament. Yet we have been trained not to hear it, by too much soft-pedaling in Sunday school and from the pulpit. In a sermon on a hard saying from the gospel—“It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God” (Mark 10:25)—I heard a preacher surmise that “Needle’s Eye” is the name of a narrow mountain pass in Palestine. So Jesus is saying that the passage takes skill (especially with the rich man’s entourage) but can be accomplished. However, a plain-sense reading would set this saying against the background of Amos’s threats against the rich “who are at ease in Zion and confident on the hill of Samaria” (Amos 6:1), warning that they will be first to experience God’s wrath.

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[7] "David," understood as author of the Psalms, is also viewed as a prophet by the New Testament writers.

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Moreover, finding continuity with the witness of the Old Testament makes it possible to preach parts of the New Testament that would otherwise leave the preacher speechless. The training in reading symbolic language that the Old Testament affords is mandatory before advancing even one sentence into John’s vision, which aims to raise our sights to the ultimate destination of the Christian journey, the heavenly Jerusalem. However, the inference one must draw from John’s allusive style is that we cannot conceive of that goal—let alone reach it—without having firmly in mind a picture of where we have been and where we now are, as set forth in the Hebrew Scriptures.

What does this focus on revelation within the Old Testament signify for a “good reading” of the New Testament? Here is one possibility: Adequate apprehension of the gospel requires that we amplify our vocabulary for talking about God beyond the firm but (sadly) hackneyed truth that God is Love. The Old Testament establishes with equal firmness that God is holy, an affirmation that underlies the first petition of the prayer our Lord taught the disciples. In both Torah and Prophets, it is clear that the proper response to God's holiness is human obedience. Surely Jesus' own submission to death on a cross is just such an obedient response to God's holiness. We have been saved through grace—this is often the first affirmation we make as Christians awakening to the wonder of the life we share with God. But if the fruits of salvation are to be evidenced in the world, then the affirmation of salvation needs to be followed by the question, What form of obedience does Christian discipleship now require?[9]

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[8] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (London and Glasgow: SCM, 1953), 50.

About the author

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[9] Editors' note: Davis's original article includes a conclusion on the value of reading the Bible in dialogue with Jews and with an openness to repentance that demonstrates theological respect for and gratitude toward Jews.