

## **A Practical Hermeneutic for the Church\***

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I want to thank Bill for the invitation to begin a conversation at this reception about hermeneutics, particularly in the context of the Stone-Campbell movement. I hope that our discussion of our ancestor and my proposal will be fruitful.

Thanks are due to Doug Foster for his excellent job of setting out Alexander Campbell's hermeneutic. We saw Campbell try to be a literalist of sorts. This literalism was based on his definition of Scripture as a book of facts and on his adoption of the Reformed interpretive method of seeing Scripture as a legal document. Interestingly, both this definition of Scripture and the Reformed interpretive method contradict or stand in significant tension with his seven principles of biblical interpretation. Foster shows us a person pulled between competing commands. On the one hand, there is the command to be one. Campbell's position on slavery was an attempt to follow this command by keeping the movement together. On the other hand, there were the commands to owners and people who were enslaved. As a kind of literalist, he felt compelled to keep both. Yet he also listened to the "spirit of the age." I think that what is talked about as the Wesleyan Quadrilateral might have seen Campbell drawing on "reason" as a source of revelation here. "Reason" here refers to what we could discern about God through non-special or general revelation, some of the things included in what we talk

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about as apologetics.<sup>1</sup> Thus, what we learn about God from nature or logic or philosophy or possibly, for Campbell on slavery, through debates about a more just society. But still Campbell reads the Bible rather flatly, as if the New Testament were a rule book for all times.

I think this approach includes an assumption that cannot be maintained. Campbell assumed that there was one proper way to embody the gospel as the church. He assumed there was one pattern of corporate and individual life that all churches should follow. I think the New Testament texts themselves demonstrate that this is incorrect. We now recognize that the earliest church had different ways of living the faith. Most obviously, some continued to be observant Jews, while others were Gentiles who were not allowed to keep the Sabbath or adopt other practices that would have identified them as Jews to outsiders. Some church members continued to attend synagogue services, others never went to one. Even within Paul's churches there were differences that he imposed. He refused support from the Corinthians, saying it would violate his calling as an apostle (1 Cor 9:12-18; 12:13) if he did. But when he writes to the Philippians, he thanks them for all the times they had sent him money (Phil 4:10-20. See also 2 Cor 11:7-11). How each church embodied the gospel was determined by its social and cultural location and the expectations it brought from that location. I think that was true in the first century and that it is always true. Thus, the church is always in the business of trying to discern what the will of God is for its time and place.

As I watch people try to use a literalist hermeneutic, they always fail to be able to do so consistently. They may read commands about sexual behavior literally, but they do not think it is a sin for women to braid their hair, even though 1 Timothy forbids it. In fact, they may allow that

women can have braided hair (and wear gold jewelry) but take the command that women be silent just two verses later literally. Of course, the defense of this reading is that the command about braiding hair is culturally conditioned. I could not agree more. But it is no more culturally conditioned than the command that women be silent in church. Indeed, every command and instruction in Scripture is culturally conditioned to the same extent as the command about braiding hair. The inconsistency in demanding that women be silent and that they be allowed to braid their hair is so glaring that it should show the impossibility of that method of reading with no further ado. The argument that a theological reason is given for the silence but not for the hair does not rectify the inconsistency. Even though it is not stated explicitly, there is a theological rationale for the hair and jewelry commands—as we will see below.

I think it is vital that we all strive to have a consistent hermeneutic, a single way that we always approach the biblical text. This does not mean that there are not different sorts of texts and passages in the Bible. A hermeneutic that I think will help us discern the will of God recognizes the various genres of biblical books and within biblical books and takes those into account as we interpret them in their original context and seek a word for today.

Reading without maintaining a consistent hermeneutic is not a problem that afflicts only literalists. Nearly everyone (probably everyone) is a part-time literalist. We all, liberals and conservatives alike, have our favorite passages that we quote as literalists and say that ends the argument. For many who lean left it is simply to say, “Jesus said the two greatest commandments are to love God and love neighbor.” They assume that is the end of whatever the debate is about, without really setting that

statement in its context and seeing what kinds of meanings and expectations were in that saying of Jesus. They just lump whatever they are talking about into the category of loving their neighbor and close the case. Reading some texts as literalists and not others is inconsistent no matter who does it.

The problem with an inconsistent hermeneutic is that it does not allow the gospel or the word of God in the text to critique our assumptions and prejudices. That is, we take a passage literally if it confirms what we already think and we say we have to apply another hermeneutic when text does not conform to our prior belief. To be consistent, we should either always be literalists or we should never be literalists. I think that to hear the fulness of God's word, we need a consistent approach to the text that can test our assumptions and judgments.

In my book, *The Politics of Faith*,<sup>2</sup> I work from and briefly describe a hermeneutic that I think can be faithful to the expectations of Scripture in ways that make our faith relevant in all times and cultures. In the book I argue that churches and Christians should be involved in trying to shape social and economic laws and policies. The witness of all of the Hebrew Bible is that God is concerned about such policies. As those writings express God's will, social and economic laws are to favor the disadvantaged (widow, orphan, and stranger/immigrant) to the disadvantage of the wealthy. God holds governments (and not just Israel's governments) accountable for the ways they structure their social and economic lives. The New Testament does little to address this explicitly because the church was in no position to influence the governmental power of the Roman Empire. But critiques of the economic system are evident in everything from the Magnificat to the condemnation of Rome in Revelation. Indeed, the call to imitate Christ in a

number of texts explicitly calls believers to take on disadvantage for the good of others (e.g., Phil 2:1-11). There is no indication that economic and social systems fall outside the sphere of that expectation.

My hermeneutic assumes that Scripture is the primary authority for the teaching and the practices of the church. Rejecting literalistic readings does not mean we give up the authority of Scripture. The hermeneutical approach I use is *contextual* and *analogical*. I take into account the full context that the biblical text addressed and the present reader's own context. Since I do not live in the same cultural context that the biblical writers and their original readers lived in, I cannot assume that the advice they gave their readers is what I should do now to live as God calls us to live. For example, Paul told the Galatians that if male Gentile church members underwent circumcision they would cut themselves off from Christ. (This was not the case for the culturally and ethnically different Jews in the church.) I don't think there are many Christians anywhere in the world who think that is the case now. The reason, of course, is that circumcision had a particular cultural and religious meaning then and signified things for those Gentile church members that is not its primary meaning in the church or the broader culture now, even as it continues to have a religious meaning in important contexts. (This is another example that shows that literalistic readers are inconsistent.) As the cases of circumcision and braided hair show, cultural and ecclesial contexts do matter in discerning how to live out the gospel.

The contextual and analogical hermeneutic I am proposing sets the text in its context by trying to understand what the problem, question, or issue is that the text was addressing as specifically as possible. I work to understand not just the specific question being asked, but what led to it

being a matter that the author needed to address. In our braided hair example, I would look at why this command was given and at what theological issues were at stake. It is clear in the text that the braided hair is a part of the ostentatious displays of wealth being brought into the church. The hairstyles of wealthy women of the era were often very complex. Some even had an enslaved woman who served just as their beautician. The braided hair was an example of flaunting wealth, just like the gold jewelry and expensive clothes were.

The theological issues at stake include the question of the relationship between wealth and status in the church, how one exercises one's rights in relation to the good of their fellow-believers, and what the nature of the church is. It is in some senses a question of ecclesiology and of personal morality. The text does not explicitly give the theological foundation for these instructions, it only sets out the opposites of the displays of wealth: godliness and good works. We have to fill in much of what those mean from the rest of 1 Timothy and then the broader Pauline corpus, and perhaps the rest of the New Testament and the whole Bible. The theological rationale comes from the literary context and the broader treatment of the issues being dealt with.

After identifying the context of the biblical text as carefully and specifically as I can, I move to the analogical part of my hermeneutic. Now I try to think of how the same kinds of problems or questions are present today. The initial part of this work is analyzing our own social, cultural, and ecclesial context. I assume that there will be analogies with the issues in the biblical text because of our common humanity with the people those texts addressed. In this case, I would ask what makes for godliness and good works in the present context and particularly (but not only)

in thinking about how we treat wealth and status in the church. This allows me to bring the theological point of the text to bear on my context in a significant way. This method will demand much more from me than a literalistic reading would. As a literalist, I could just say no braided hair for women, but men could flaunt \$5,000 suits and Rolex watches in front of church members who are poor as a way to maintain status and power. Using this hermeneutic with this text might call on us to reevaluate our practice of labeling things at church (windows, classrooms, etc.) with the name of the person who gave the money for them. We would need to think about whether these recognitions are a way for some members to retain or gain power or influence in the church, or perhaps to gain some notability (or honor) above others for themselves or their family.<sup>3</sup>

In this discernment of God's will, I think we need the community of faith. I, as an individual, will miss many things the text may say in its original context and to the present. But a community of believers, especially a diverse community of believers, will be able to see things that no individual can see by herself. As a community we have to discern what ideas, ethical stances, and actions today move us closer to what the text wanted for its original readers.

I think I have biblical precedent for this hermeneutic. I think this was something of the practice that we see Paul engaging in his letters and the practice he called his churches to engage. When Paul joined the wing of the church that focused its attention on bringing in Gentiles, he took on the challenge of interpreting the faith for new contexts. Theological commitments (especially the claim that God is the God of the whole world; see Rom 3:27-30) demanded that the church discern how to live as the people of God in a way that was different from the way Jews had done that. The Torah continued to be the word of

God, but its commands did not apply directly and literalistically to these Gentile congregations. The task the church took on was discerning how those laws of Israel should be used as guidance for the Gentile church—and even for the predominantly Jewish churches in important ways (see Gal 2:11-14).

What we often see in Paul's letters is that when he is faced with a question or a dilemma from his churches, he works to an answer from some basic theological principles, some drawn directly from Scripture, others from the church's beliefs and confessions. For example, in 1 Cor 8, Paul is discerning whether believers should be able to have dinner in the dining room of a temple of a god. After acknowledging that those who said yes were right—to an extent—when they cited the theological assertion that only God is a god, he goes on to base his decision on another theological principle. He says they cannot go to the dinner because they might cause a fellow believer to go who thinks he would profit from eating the meal because the god would grant him benefits. That would violate his faith because he would be accepting help from another "god." The principle he bases this on is in v. 11: that person is so valuable Christ died for him. Paul demands that the conduct of the person with the stronger faith in this matter be guided by the value of their fellow believer to God and Christ. This theological assertion about the value of fellow-believers is the basis for the command Paul gives.

I don't have to worry about whether to eat in a temple of another god, but I do have to think about how the value of fellow-believers should shape my conduct in relation to them. Here I have identified the situation and the theological reason for Paul's response. Now it is my job to discern how to live out that principle as one that guides my conduct in the circumstances in which I find myself in this

cultural and ecclesial environment and in my life more broadly.

This is not an isolated case for the ways Paul argues. James Thompson has recently reminded us that Paul does not discuss “the word of the cross” in 1 Cor 1-4 to set out some Christological or soteriological doctrine. Rather, the self-giving love of Christ seen in the cross is presented as the pattern for how the Corinthians should relate to one another.<sup>4</sup> Or consider Phil 2. Paul sets out as a basic principle of the life of believers that they should consider the good of others above their own good. He says this to a church that is having some internal strife (see 4:2 and 2:12-15). The theological foundation of this broad demand is the self-giving love of Christ seen in the incarnation and crucifixion (2:6-11).

While it is not as obvious, the Gospel writers were engaged in this same task. As each Evangelist told the story of the life of Jesus, they told it in a way that addressed concerns and questions in their churches. They were giving theological bases to the practices and beliefs their churches affirmed, or at times trying to correct their practices and beliefs. One example can show how this works. In Mark 7, the Pharisees and Scribes ask why Jesus does not ritually wash his hands before eating. Jesus responds polemically by calling them hypocrites, but then says that it is not what goes in your mouth that makes you unclean, but what comes out of it. The disciples wonder what this means because they do keep the food laws of Judaism. So, they ask him about it in private. There Jesus restates the saying and broadens “what comes out of one’s mouth” to include various kinds of ethical behavior. Mark then inserts an interpretive comment in v. 19. He says that here Jesus declared all foods clean. Mark has this story affirm the dietary practice of his predominantly Gentile church. This

gives Mark's church authorization from Jesus not to keep the food laws of Judaism. Matthew has this same story but as he tells it, it does not mean that all foods are clean. Matthew omits Mark's interpretive comment and instead has Jesus end the discussion saying that it means that eating with unwashed hands does not make a person unclean. Many in Matthew's predominantly Jewish church still keep the Mosaic food laws, so he does not interpret the story to mean that such observance is unnecessary. Rather, it means for his church that they do not need to accept the interpretations the Pharisees give the purity laws to be faithful. (That is probably a bigger assertion than we often think.)

Each Evangelist interprets the story to help their church live faithfully, given their particular cultural and religious setting and identity. They each want to give theological reasons—in this case a saying of Jesus, really an interpretation of a saying of Jesus—for the beliefs and practices of their churches. They each took a story about Jesus and interpreted it to make it relevant to their setting. This parallels what my hermeneutic would do with the meanings the Evangelists give the stories. Note that the meanings they give, even when they are in tension with one another, remain authoritative. I am not free to make the stories mean what I want them to mean. My hermeneutic requires me to take up the meanings they give to the stories and sayings of Jesus because Scripture remains authoritative and their interpretations are a part of Scripture. But like them, I need to think about how to apply the meanings they give the life and teaching of Jesus to my cultural and ecclesial context to see what they call us to believe and do.

The biblical responses to the questions and issues their authors faced provide us with guides for how we

should build on theological principles to discern God's will in our time. We can see the ways they examined problems and thought about which theological principles should be the leading determinations for how to reach ethical and theological decisions.

This not falling into "situation ethics," in which we say there are no moral absolutes. The absolutes are the theological principles, and most especially, as we will see below, the character of God. But how those principles come to expression in different cultural settings will be different.

Beyond these examples of particular biblical authors, I think that seeing the ways they worked to discern God's will fits well with John Goldingay's understanding of inspiration. He defines it in this way: "Scripture mediates divine revelation apprehended in human experience. It does so by means of *theological reflections* on the part of its writers, whose theological reflection provides models as well as resources for our own" (italics added).<sup>5</sup> He sees the words of Scripture as the result of the writers thinking about an experience of God and giving expression to that revelation for their context. That discernment was so powerful that the believing community designated the books we have as the clearest revelations of God that we have. Note that he sees their discernment, their theological reflection, as materials that give us both content, a word from God, and models for how to discern God's will in our own time. We have discussed how we can see some of those models (Paul, Mark, and Matthew) engaging in that theological reflection. I think that is how all the biblical writers worked. I am suggesting that we take the content of the biblical texts and follow the examples of their authors. Thus, we take their authoritative interpretations of those revelations and reflect on what they

mean for our time and place. This move assumes that the character of God is unchanging, a central assertion of the biblical authors.

The theological reason(s) for the specific instruction or idea in a text may not always be as easily discerned as it was in some of the examples we have looked at; in fact, there may be no real theological reason. We may find at times that the biblical writers simply give advice based on cultural expectations. In those cases, we look to the broader witness of Scripture for guidance. That moves us to the central hermeneutical principle I articulate in my *The Politics of Faith*. That broader witness of Scripture points us to the character of God as the basis for deciding what is Christian and what is not. In many places in Scripture, the character of God is given as the foundation for what to believe and how to act. Multiple times Leviticus demands observance of its commands, with the expression, “You be holy because I the Lord your God am holy” (19:2; 20:7, 26; 21:6, 8). The shorthand version is, do this because, “I am the Lord” (18:4, 30; 19:3, 4, 10, 25, 31, 34; 20:7; 23:22, 43; 24:22; 25:17, 55; 26:1).

First Peter takes up the phrase “You be holy, because I am holy” and makes it the basis for Christian conduct (1:15-16). The Ephesians version is, “Be imitators of God” (5:1). The calls for justice and mercy in the Hebrew prophets are based on the character of God and how those characteristics had been seen in the life of Israel. Jesus makes the character of God the basis for the conduct of his followers when he calls them to love all people because God sends rain on the just and the unjust and he makes the point explicitly saying, “You be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt 5:43-48). I could go on... The more specific theological assertions and ideas we find

in other texts are ultimately also based on the character of God.

As we have noted, how a person lives in ways that reflect the character of God will be different in different cultural contexts. Jews lived it out by being distinctive by their keeping of the Sabbath and food regulations. Those were some ways they were distinctive as the people of God and ways they served as a light to the nations. The coming of Christ did not mean that stopped. But simultaneously, Gentile believers in Christ became a light to the nations by not keeping those food laws and the Sabbath. In our example from 1 Cor 8, Paul says the decision about eating at the temple of another god must be made on the basis of the value of the fellow-believer for whom Christ died. That death of Jesus for others is a manifestation of God's love that demonstrates the value of humans. So, the understanding of human beings as creatures who are extremely valuable is based on love as an element of God's character.

I argue in my book that Christians are to live out the justice and mercy of God in our context not only by helping people who are poor but also by working to change social, economic, and political laws and policies so that they come closer to conforming to the character of God. It is irrelevant that the early church did not engage in that work. They were in no position to do so. But if we need a biblical example, the Hebrew prophets clearly did seek to shape public policy as they spoke to kings and regional rulers. Those governing officials were the primary audiences for much of what the prophets said about justice. They were out to change laws and policies.

But we don't need a direct biblical example. This hermeneutic (and more broadly the life of faith) simply calls us to conform all of our lives to the character of God.

The biblical texts give us examples of ways that the people of God have sought to do that. But none of them lived in our cultural context. It is our duty as the church to discern in our day how to live according to and give testimony to the character of God. I believe that calls us to political and social action, as well as to alms giving. God wants to claim the whole world as a place that reflects who God is. As the people of God, it is part of our identity that we be engaged in reclaiming the world, including its institutional, political, and economic systems, for the will of God.

This hermeneutic functions in the realm of personal morality in the same ways that it functions when we think about social policy or ecclesiology. Again, we cannot be literalists because we know there are commands about ethical decisions that we do not keep (e.g., we do not think it is moral to own other human beings even though there are commands to owners of humans and to people who are enslaved which seem to make it morally acceptable). And we have seen the failures of that hermeneutic in connection with braiding hair and circumcision. The place to begin any discussion of personal morality is with the character of God. The question to ask when we think about moral issues (business ethics or sexual ethics or whatever category) is how we best reflect the character of God in a given situation or relationship. When we ask whether lying is moral, we ask whether it represents the faithfulness and truthfulness of God's character. We might ask whether it reflects God's love and justice if we are considering lying for the sake of personal gain or ease. On the other hand, we might discern that it is right to lie if it means saving a life. For example, we would lie to a Nazi about whether we were hiding Jews in our attic or we would lie to a person trying to find and return an enslaved African-American who had escaped. In such cases, we would reflect the love

of God by working to preserve the life of a fellow human who was being threatened with unjust treatment or death. Here, as always, we would be weighing which aspect of the character of God must be given the most weight.<sup>6</sup> This is not a strange place to find ourselves. Even in our example from 1 Cor 8, two theological truths (that there is one God and that fellow-believers are so valuable Christ died for them) are being weighed in relation to each other.

We see Jesus weighing commands and aspects of God's character in relation to one another as he heals on the Sabbath. In Luke 13 he is challenged for healing on the Sabbath. He replies by noting that his challengers would break the Sabbath by rescuing a trapped animal and think they were doing the right thing (13:15-17). His healing on the Sabbath was a reflection of his acknowledging of the high value of the woman he healed. Healing her was a reflection of the love of God that he says his accusers recognize when an animal needs to be rescued. It is not that keeping the Sabbath was not important, but that showing love to the woman was more important. He is considering how best to live out the character of God when there seem to be competing demands.

With this hermeneutic, all kinds of ethical decisions will be determined by whether the behavior best reflects the character of God. The commands and instructions in Scripture provide us with examples of the ways the earlier church lived out God's character, but do not immediately decide an issue for us. We must look for what the cultural meaning of the act was in the time a command was given and look for the theological reason(s) that supports it. We look for how the author based the command on the character of God or a more specific theological assertion, so that means of applying such assertions can help us think about the issue at hand. We are not limited to the

theological reasoning of the specific text, because we still look to the broader witness of Scripture as well.

When interpreters disagree about aspects of the meaning of the act in the ancient cultural context, we must do our best historical work to come to the clearest understanding we can in conversation with others who are interpreting that context. Similarly, we must be in conversation with other interpreters about the theological reasons that support the instructions we find in the text. When we disagree about how an aspect of the character of God should be lived out today, we need to humbly engage those other believers as we all seek to overcome our own prejudices and resistances to embodying fully the self-giving love of Christ. Needing help to arrive at an appropriate understanding of the past or of what the text calls us to in the present is an aspect of our own finitude. Our finitude is at least a part of what prevents us from grasping the fullness of who God is, what God does, and what God would have God's people do.

This hermeneutic is more consistent with Campbell's seven principles of biblical interpretation, including, and especially, the seventh that he identified as the most important, than the hermeneutic he used in his writings about slavery. Had he not adopted his literalist reading of Scripture and followed his own principles of biblical interpretation, he would perhaps have been able to discern that the enslavement of humans violated God's will. With the hermeneutic I have set out here, it is clear that enslaving humans violates many aspects of God character, including God's love, mercy, and justice. It quite specifically violates the way God's love comes to expression in God's willingness to have Christ die for human beings. As we have seen, this is an act that shows the exceedingly high value of all believers, and by

extension all humans. Its rejection further coheres with the dominant witness of Scripture to those characteristics of God and the value of all humans, even as there are instructions for how to live in a cultural setting that approves of the practice of enslavement. Particularly when moved to a new context, those specific instructions contradict that dominant witness of who God is and what God wants for God's people and world.

I think this hermeneutic can help us be faithful to God and to what we read in Scripture as we think about what to believe and do in our time and place, including in our varying cultural and social locations. I think it makes the faith and Scripture more relevant as new questions and new understandings of our world emerge. And I think it calls us to engage the economic, political, and social systems of our time so that we try to move them closer to the will of God.

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### End Notes

<sup>1</sup> See this analysis of John Wesley's theological method in Albert C. Outler, "The Wesleyan Quadrilateral—in John Wesley," *The Wesleyan Theological Heritage: Essays of Albert C. Outler*, eds. Thomas C. Oden and Leicester R. Longden (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991) 21-38.

<sup>2</sup> *The Politics of Faith: The Bible, Government, and Public Policy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2020).

<sup>3</sup> We may note that most of these labels include a phrase such as, "to the glory of God." This may be an attempt at circumventing this problem. We would have to discern whether that is effective.

<sup>4</sup> James W. Thompson, *Apostle of Persuasion: Theology and Rhetoric in the Pauline Letters* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020) 147-51. Michael J. Gorman (among others) refers to this kind of living as 'cruciformity' (see Gorman's *Cruciformity: Paul's Narrative Spirituality of the Cross* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001]).

<sup>5</sup> *Models for Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 360.

<sup>6</sup> Even with his literalism, Campbell found himself weighing competing commands. He chose unity as the command that was more important than commands about slavery or about protecting life. Many parts of the Mishnah show rabbis weighing which command took precedence in particular circumstances. So, advocating for such weighing of commands is not something novel.