

Church & Scripture 1

Over the upcoming weeks we are going to be looking at various images of the church. We need to be clear about what hermeneutic we are using. How do we understand the Scriptural development of these images? To begin with, we need to talk about the relationship between church and scripture.

Last week Andy talked about thinking more redemptive-historically about the Scriptures. Over the next two weeks I would like to show that this way of thinking about scriptures is deeply rooted in the church, both in the Early Fathers (this week) and the Reformed tradition (next week).

Turn to 1 Timothy 3:15. How does Paul describe the church? "The household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth." What does it mean that the church is the pillar and support of truth? It is an architectural term referring to a support or buttress. This is referring to the way in which the church is the structure upon which the truth resides. Have you ever heard of the thought-experiment which asks, "If a Bible were left on an island of people who had never read it, would they come to a knowledge of the truth without a preacher?" Scripture seems to indicate NO. Look at Acts 8:26-40. The Ethiopian eunuch is reading Isaiah 53, a passage that clearly--or so we think--speaks of the atoning death of Christ. But he does not understand the passage without Christ being preached to him (cf Rom 10).

So the church is the context in which the truth is understood. This is why the church fathers insisted that the interpretation of Scripture is properly the work of the church. Those outside had no right to it, but, of course, with the caveat that those outside may catch glimpses of the truth, may see certain things clearly. But the church is the structure in which truth is understood. The church is the place where the Spirit has promised to illuminate and enlighten the people of God.

So how should we understand Scripture? If we are to understand it then we must understand it in the context of the church. Over the past hundred years we have developed a hermeneutic that emphasizes understanding texts in their original context, focusing on authorial intent which when applied to Scripture could result in a literalist approach which denies the Christ-centered meaning of Scripture. For example, if you were to read the story of Noah in Genesis 6:13-22; 7:17-21; 8:15-22, would you have connected it with baptism? The Apostle Peter does (1 Peter 3:18-22):

For Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, so that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit; in which also He went and made proclamation to the spirits now in prison, who once were disobedient, when the patience of God kept waiting in the days of Noah, during the construction of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through the water. *Corresponding to that, baptism now saves you*--not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience--through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who is at the right hand of God, having gone into heaven, after angels and authorities and powers had been subjected to Him.

Would you have come up with that on your own? Given what you believe about how you should interpret Scripture, would you proclaim to the church that the flood is a picture of baptism?

Let's take another text: Exodus 12-13. What does this tell us about Christ's Passion? [cf Melito of Sardis, *On Pascha* (mid 2d century)] If there weren't such clear references in the New Testament (Matthew 26:17-30 and parallels, 1 Corinthians 5:7) to passover being a picture of the death and resurrection of Christ would we have thought of that? Rather than learn our hermeneutic from modern literary scholars, we must learn how to interpret the Scriptures from the church, especially from the apostles, who learned from Christ Himself (Luke 24).

The early church Fathers were concerned with how we should read the Bible. Particularly, the question for the Fathers was, "How should we read the Law and the Prophets?" Until the second and third centuries many of the Fathers would have preached almost exclusively from the Old Testament. How does this old Jewish book tell us about Christ? The Fathers were simply elaborating upon the "method" of the apostles. Where they go astray is where they depart from the apostles' teaching. We don't take the Fathers as the final authority, we take them as witnesses to the apostles' way of reading the Scriptures.

Two early examples are Justin Martyr (ca. 155 in Rome) and Tertullian (ca. 200 in North Africa):

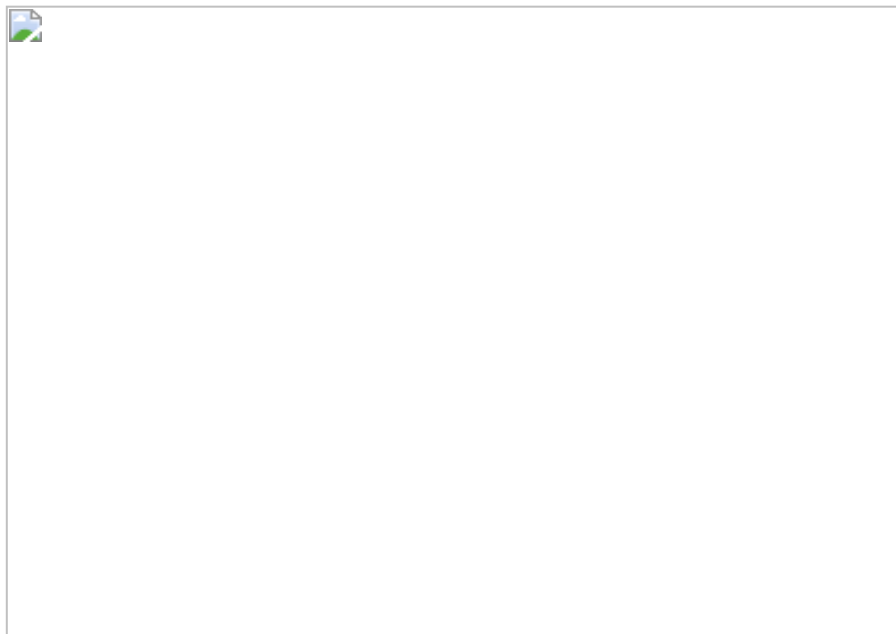
Justin Martyr: To understand and interpret the Scriptures aright:

1. We need to receive the grace of understanding--"If a man does not receive by the great grace of God understanding of the things spoken and the things done by the prophets, it will not profit him at all to appear to speak the words and deeds himself, unless he can offer some account of them."
(*Dialogue with Trypho* 92.1)
2. We need to be drawn into the sphere of those facts and events; we must be persuaded by the proclamation of the apostles and prophets. Self-evident truth of God.

Tertullian suggested seven hermeneutical principles that were widely adopted in the Western church:

1. Scripture is to be interpreted as a whole in the light of its dominant ideas.
2. The literal sense must be considered first. A spiritual sense should only be envisioned if the text calls for it.
3. Read the text in its immediate context.
4. Interpret the unclear from the clear. Obscure passages must be interpreted by later clearer ones.
5. Scripture does not contradict itself (cf #1 and #3).
6. Interpret according to the rule of faith (*regula fidei*): Trinity, Incarnation and Church (essentially the Apostles' Creed). Never depart from what the Apostolic Churches believe and teach.
7. The apostolic faith can never leave the church; heretics have no right to interpret Scripture.

The following diagram may help us understand how we should approach Scriptural texts:



We start with the text. Our tendency is to start with the question, "What does this text say to me?" The problem with this approach is that it assumes that I am the focus of the text's purpose and meaning. Certainly all of Scripture does speak to us, but the moral application is not always (or even usually) the most important. If we miss the central thrust of the Scriptures, then we may wind up with moral applications that are misleading. We assume that we have understood our situation properly, and then ask, "How does the Bible address this situation?" What the above model suggests, is that we need the Scriptures to show us how to understand even our own situation. So the better opening question is, "How does this text show me who Christ is, and who I am in Christ?"

The line of typology is the quick way to get there. But in order to ensure that our typology is properly grounded, our hermeneutic should provide a thorough study of the original context. We start by asking how the text spoke to its original hearers (what is frequently called grammatical-historical interpretation). Then we must see how the text relates to both previous and later revelation, and especially how it fits into the history of redemption culminating in the person and work of our Lord Jesus Christ (redemptive-historical interpretation). Then, having been reoriented to what is truly the center of the Scripture's purpose and meaning, we are ready to see how it speaks to us.

This comprehensive model helps us avoid misapplying the Scriptures. For instance, how often have you heard someone appeal to God's response to King Solomon's prayer at the dedication of the temple, "If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land," (2 Chronicles 7:14) as a promise that if America repents of its sins, then God will restore our prosperity? This is a result of a straight moral application. If we understand that the dedication of the temple is a picture of the establishment of the New Creation (Jesus, after all, calls himself the true temple where God meets with his people--John 2), then we must see that in our day, no nation can take hold of this promise. The church has God's promise that if we repent of our sin, then he will heal our land--not America (for our citizenship is in heaven!), but our true land. It is a promise that his kingdom will come on earth as it is in heaven. The New Creation will be established.

But not all straight moral applications are wrong. Indeed, by the grace of the Holy Spirit, most moral applications made by the people of God wind up going in the right direction. I once heard a Philippino woman in New York City explain that when she first became a Christian, she thought that she would have to sell her house since it had been used as a drug house by her son. But then she read in Ezekiel the language of God restoring his house (the whole book is full of the language of house), and she became convinced that God would restore her house. As a first year seminary student, my first impulse was to explain that Ezekiel was talking about the restoration of Israel and the temple, but I kept my mouth shut and thought through the implications: she was right! The restoration of the house of God, prophesied in Ezekiel, which came to pass in our Savior, does indeed suggest that God can take that which was abused and misused and use it for his glory.

Augustine suggests that there are times when we may miss the "proper" interpretation of Scripture, but so long as our interpretation is consistent with charity (love toward God, and in him, to our neighbor), then we have not sinned. He likens such mistakes to a man who leaves the road and cuts across a field, but happens to strike the right road again by accident. It is not wise or safe to leave the road, but if the detour winds up in the right place, there is no great harm. Still, he says, it is unwise to leave the path, lest one get lost in his own fancies (*On Christian Doctrine* XXXVI.40).

Let us now look at a few examples of how this pattern was utilized by the early fathers.

A. The Place of Typology

Following the apostles, the early fathers were convinced that the whole of Scripture spoke of Christ. They believed that the apostles taught both truth and method. Not only did they seek to learn their theology from the Scriptures, but also their hermeneutic.

1. Hilary of Poitiers's typological treatise, *De Mysteriis* (mid-4th century). Hilary saw Eve as a type of the church born from Adam's side during the sleep of death:

After the sleep of his Passion and upon awakening to his Resurrection, the celestial Adam recognized in the Church his bones and his flesh, no longer formed from the slime of the earth nor quickened by the breath of life, but having grown over the bones and gaining corporeity from a body, reaching completion by the flight of the Spirit [cf. Ezek 37:10]. For those who are in Christ shall rise according to Christ, in whom even now the resurrection of all flesh is accomplished, since he himself is born in our flesh with God's power, in which his Father generated him before time began. . . . The mystery of Adam and Eve is a prophecy concerning Christ and the Church; everything prepared by Christ for the Church, to come about in the fullness of time, was already accomplished at the beginning of the present age, in the guise of Adam and Eve. (1.5)

The eschatological character of biblical history is seen here. Hilary uses Ephesians 5:31 and Ezekiel 37 to connect creation with New Creation. The literal sense is true, but it extends into a spiritual sense, where Christology leads to eschatology. Hilary merely draws out Paul's doctrine of the first and last Adam, suggesting a historical parallel between Adam and Christ.

2. Ambrose (late-4th century) uses a similar approach. Ambrose pointed out that not all texts have a literal sense. Especially parables and apocalyptic passages are not intended to be understood literally. Further, Ambrose despised those who insisted upon "a literal sense shorn of spiritual potential" but insisted that the spiritual sense is immanent in the literal sense.

Commenting on Adam and Eve, Ambrose blends 1 Timothy 1:15, 2:14 15; Ephesians 5:32 and Romans 5:12-21. He sees Christ in Adam and the Church in Eve. The Church sinned in Eve; but Eve (and therefore the Church in her) was saved through bearing Christ through Mary "in faith, in love and in modesty." Eve bore children in unbelief her example was followed by Israel; Mary (who, for Ambrose--drawing on Revelation 12--is also a picture of the Church) undoes what Eve did by bearing Christ in faith.

B. Shadows, Images, and Truth

Ambrose pointed out that while we see more clearly than the Old Testament saints, even in the New Covenant we still anticipate the Consummation (1 Cor 13:12--now we see in a glass darkly). Hence Origen suggested a threefold approach to interpretation: the literal, the moral, and the mystical. Anyone can understand the literal sense of Scripture, but in addition "the Church has two eyes; one sees the mystical realities, and the other the moral realities; for the holy Church not only holds moral discipline, but also teaches the secrets of the celestial Mystery." (Exposition of Psalm 118) The moral interpretation brings out the ethical content of Scripture, what Scripture would have us to DO. The mystical interpretation shows us "the action of the pre existing, incarnate and final Word in the history of salvation"

What, then, is a good example of a moral interpretation? The emperor Theodosius had ordered the secret massacre of 7,000 inhabitants of Thessalonica after a riot. Ambrose preached a sermon on Psalm 51--David's repentance: "David sinned, which is usual for kings. But he repented, wept and groaned, which is unusual for them. He confessed his fault and begged for mercy; lying prone he cried out in misery, fasted, and prayed. By expressing his grief, he transmitted his confession to all future generations. A king was not ashamed to make a public confession, something ordinary men hesitate to do! Men who are subject to the law dare to deny their sin and will not condescend to seek the forgiveness sought by one who was above human law. He sinned; it is a token of his condition; He humbled himself; it is a token of his amendment. His misdeed is the common lot, but his confession is his distinctive merit."

Theodosius repented after hearing this sermon! (Though it should be pointed out that it appears that Ambrose had convinced him prior to the sermon, and that the sermon was then used to restore Theodosius to the communion of the Church).

Ambrose could resort to occasional direct moral comments, without going through the whole redemptive-historical pattern, because he regularly provided that as well. He argued that it is not enough to say that the just of the Old Testament saw the light and image of Christ through the shadow of the Law, it is also necessary "to encourage all Christians to drink first from the cup of the Old Testament, then from that of the New, in order to drink Christ in both." We read the Old Testament so that we might better see Christ.

Ambrose insisted that since God was the Final Author of all Scripture, we should look for connections far beyond the explicit. God placed all connections in the

text. Therefore, Ambrose taught that the bishop's first role is homiletical and pastoral: interpreting Scripture for the church proclaiming the Word of God to the people. The bishop must study the Word, love the Word, and obey the Word, in order to preach it aright to the flock.

Jerome (early 5th century) provides a simple way of stating the threefold sense of the Fathers:

There are three ways of imprinting Holy Scripture in our hearts and making it our rule. The first is the historical interpretation; the second is the tropological; and the third is spiritual. History confines itself to the recorded order of events; through tropology, . . . which interprets from the moral viewpoint everything that happened physically to the Jewish people, we put history to use for the benefit of our souls; through spiritual contemplation, we are transported into a higher world, leave this earth behind and attend to future beatitude and celestial goods; in this life's meditation we find a shadow of the felicity which is to come. (*Epist* 120, 12)

C. Allegory

But what about allegory? Is there any valid use for allegory in biblical interpretation? In Galatians 4:24, Paul calls his discussion of the two women/two cities an allegory. What does he mean by this? He takes a historical event and uses it as a picture of spiritual truths. Perhaps the most famous allegorizer is Origen (mid 3d century). Origen taught a clear historical method (which he did not always follow himself). He suggested an analogy to the human being: the literal sense is the body, the moral sense is the soul, and the spiritual sense is the spirit. Yet just as the human being is one person, so also these three senses are one. In practice, however, Origen and his followers tended to neglect the literal sense.

Origen's method was rejected by the Antiochene church, who emphasized the historical event. This, however, created an opposite problem. Eustathius of Antioch read the witch of Endor (1 Samuel 28) and argued that "not every word of Scripture can be read as God's words to man." After all, should we rely upon the words of a devil-inspired witch? Gregory of Nyssa, an Antiochene who followed Origen in many respects, will argue later that the RECORD of the words of the witch is inspired, but not the witch herself.

As an example of the difference between Antioch and Alexandria, let us look at an early fifth century debate over the meaning of Micah 4:2: "And many nations shall go and say, come ye and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord . . . for out of Zion shall go forth the Law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem."

1. **Cyril of Alexandria**--The mountain is the Church gathered from the gentiles, the life of those justified in Christ and sanctified in the Spirit; or it can be taken as the Christian dispensation rising above the worship of stones and wood by the Greeks.
2. **Theodoret of Antioch**--This refers to the preaching of the gospel to the ends of the earth, but cannot refer to the restoration from exile, because the language is too grand.
3. **Theodore of Mopsuestia**--This refers ONLY to the restoration from exile (because Jesus says in John 4:21 "neither from this mountain nor from Jerusalem"), where the Law and the Jewish cult will run their course. [For

Theodore only a few peaks of Old Testament history actually foreshadow Christ. Typological exegesis allowed only rarely; typology based on historical fact and close relationships. The Old Testament knows nothing of the Trinity and must not be made to appear as though it does. He denied that Isaiah 53 suffering servant referred to Christ. Only 3 Psalms (2, 8, 44) refer to Christ. (He was later declared heretical for refusing to see OT as a Christian book.)]

Conclusion

Augustine's *De Doctrina Christiana* (On Christian Doctrine) provides us with the best model for early Christian hermeneutics:

1. Follow the rule of faith in interpreting obscure passages.
2. If more than one interpretation fits with the rule of faith, then turn to the context for help.
3. If the rule of faith and the context will permit either one, then you pick!
Both may be true. God put all meanings in the text that we find (3.27.38).

Key themes:

1. Scripture must be interpreted within the church.
2. Prayer is necessary both for the interpretation and proclamation of the Word.
3. If your life does not reflect your teaching, you shouldn't be a bishop.
4. You must KNOW the Word; if it is not hidden in your heart, then you will not understand it aright.

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