

TEACHING THEM TO READ: THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS ON THE PASTORAL TASK TODAY

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“As the preacher stands up to preach among the exiles, the primal task... concerns the narration and nurture of a counteridentity, the enactment of the power of hope in a season of despair, and the assertion of a deep, definitional freedom from the pathologies, coercions, and seductions that govern our society. The preacher is not called upon to do all the parts of public policy and public morality, but to give spine, resolve, courage, energy, and freedom that belong to a counteridentity.” – Walter Brueggemann, Cadences of Home

Sisters and brothers,

May the Spirit of God give you courage and strength as you shepherd the people of God in your unique community. I'm writing to offer my theological reflections on our common task of pastoral leadership in today's incredibly complex, contentious, and fear-filled cultural environment. I believe Brueggemann is correct when he identifies our primal task as “the narration and nurture of a counteridentity.” For the people I lead, I have found that a central concern of this pastoral vocation is teaching them to read their Bibles. And many of them have been reading their Bibles their whole lives.

On first pass, the suggestion that a central task of our pastoral vocation in today's world is teaching people to read their Bibles may seem trite, almost ridiculous. A superficial platitude or a throwback to a tired fundamentalism.

But it is Bible readers who have been seduced by the dangerous allure of Christian nationalism. It is Bible readers who have been complicit in the perpetuation of the ugly legacy of white supremacy. It is Bible readers who turn neighbors to be loved into enemies to be battled in endless and unwinnable culture wars.

I pastor what has historically been a predominantly white church in what has become one of the most ethnically diverse cities in the country. We are a church that is learning what it means to become multiethnic and multicultural, to reflect the beautiful diversity of the place to which God has called us. Central to my pastoral task is teaching *this* people to faithfully read *this* book in *this* time for *this* place.

Many American Christians—particularly many white evangelicals—have been taught to read the Bible in ways that are fundamentally flawed and that, therefore, open up the possibility of significant distortions of the Christian faith. In my experience, I have observed at least three—sometimes overlapping—deeply defective ways that people approach the Scriptures. A *reductionistic* approach treats the Bible as little more than a set of disconnected stories or proof

texts primarily concerned with getting people into heaven when they die. A *moralistic* reading reduces Scripture to a list of rules or behaviors to follow or avoid, a strict moral code not only to be personally embraced but to be imposed on other people. And, finally, a *therapeutic* reading engages the Bible primarily as a self-help manual designed to provide comfort or meet emotional needs, prioritizing individual well-being over the Bible's call to communal life, mission, and sacrifice. These approaches can obscure the deeply transformative message of Scripture, turning it into a tool for self-improvement rather than a testimony to cruciform love and both an invitation and means toward cruciformity, toward formation into Christlikeness.

When the Bible is read in these limited ways, Christianity becomes vulnerable to being co-opted by things like zealous nationalism, partisan politics, and the adversarial pursuit of cultural power. These approaches can strip the gospel of its radical call to love, justice, and humility, reducing it to a tool for advancing particular ideologies or defending personal interests, often prioritizing winning or exerting control over embodying the gospel's message of self-sacrifice and reconciliation. In this distorted framework, the mission of the church shifts from bringing hope and healing to the world through self-giving love to protecting power and influence, making Christianity more about dominance than about serving others and seeking the flourishing of all people.

When Christianity is shaped by these flawed readings of the Bible, it becomes susceptible to or blind regarding issues like ethnic prejudice, racial discrimination, and the perpetuation of structural inequalities. By reducing the gospel to individual salvation, personal morality, or emotional comfort, these approaches often overlook the Bible's profound calls for justice, reconciliation, and the dignity of all people made in God's image. This can lead to a faith that either ignores or passively accepts systemic injustice, failing to recognize how deeply sin distorts social structures and perpetuates disparity.

So how might we teach our congregations to read the Bible in ways that “narrate and nurture a counteridentity?” How might we help them learn to read in ways that avoid the pathologies made possible by reductionistic, moralistic, and therapeutic approaches to the Scriptures?

I believe we are given crucial insight into these questions in the Gospel of Luke, where, in the upper room, the resurrected Jesus provides his disciples with a single sentence summary of the message of the Bible: “Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, ‘This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem’” (Luke 24:45-47). This passage highlights three themes woven throughout the Bible from Genesis to Revelation, themes that together provide the keys for a faithful reading of Scripture: *Messiah*, *mission*, and *multiethnicity*.

First, to read the Bible *messianically* is another way to talk about a *christocentric* and *christotelic* reading of Scripture. The diverse collection of writings that make up our Bible finds its unity and coherence in Jesus. The good news of Messiah, the great liberator, is the center of the story. He has come to make possible not only freedom from the tyranny of empire but freedom from the

tyranny of sin and death. And this freedom is not won through power or violence but through self-giving love, not by conquest or control but by sacrifice. Cruciform love is the interpretive key that unlocks the Scripture.

And a cruciform life is Scripture's interpretive end. The *telos* of reading the Bible is Christlikeness. As pastors, we are called to teach people to read the Bible in a way that forms them into a community of self-giving love. Scripture is not simply a personal moral guide, but a means through which the Spirit forms us into the image and character of Jesus—into a people who embrace rather than exclude, who seek reconciliation rather than division, who choose sacrifice over self-assertion.

Second, a *missional* reading of the Bible sees the entirety of the biblical corpus as the grand narrative of God's mission to rescue and renew God's good but broken creation. The Bible bears witness to God's purposeful engagement with the world, ultimately aimed at bringing about the full realization of God's sovereign reign, characterized by justice and peace. This missional reading of Scripture gives rise to a missional understanding of the church. As Lesslie Newbigin has argued, "The church is the bearer to all the nations of a gospel that announces the kingdom, the reign, and the sovereignty of God. It calls men and women to repent of their false loyalties to other powers, to become believers in the one true sovereignty, and so to become corporately a sign, instrument, and foretaste of that sovereignty of the one true and living God over all nature, all nations, and all human lives. It is not meant to call men and women out of the world into a safe religious enclave but to call them out in order to send them back as agents of God's kingship" (Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 124). A missional reading of Scripture forms a missional people whose ultimate allegiance is to Christ and his kingdom and who live as signs, instruments, and foretastes of God's reign of justice and peace.

Finally, a *multiethnic* reading of Scripture recognizes what might be called "the multiethnic vision of God" that pervades the biblical narrative, demonstrating that issues pertaining to ethnicity, race, and culture are not tangential concerns but central to the message of the Bible in its entirety. God's heart for "the nations" is woven throughout the Scripture from start to finish, from the promise to bless all peoples through Abraham and his offspring (Genesis 12:3) to the vision of a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual gathering before God's throne in Revelation (Revelation 7:9). The Apostle Paul contended that the realization of this multiethnic vision is a part of the very purpose of the cross of Christ, which breaks down the dividing wall of hostility between Jew and Gentile, creating one new multiethnic humanity like the world had never known before (Ephesians 2:14-18). In Jesus' summary of the message of Scripture in Luke 24 and his commission to his disciples in Matthew 28, this multiethnic vision of God is central (captured in the Greek phrase *panta ta ethne*, "all nations/ethnicities"). The ancient wisdom of St. John Chrysostom speaks powerfully to the church in our cultural moment: "The purpose for which the Spirit was given was to bring into unity all who remain separated by different ethnic and cultural divisions: young and old, rich and poor, women and men" (Chrysostom, Homily on Ephesians 9.4.1-3).

Sisters and brothers, in a world so fractured by division, with many who claim to follow Jesus so captive to distortion, we are entrusted with the sacred task of teaching the people of our congregations to read the Scriptures—to read messianically, missionally, and multiethnically. As we guide them into this way of reading, may we form communities shaped by cruciform love, empowered by God’s Spirit for God’s mission, and united across every barrier. In this work, we proclaim the reign of Christ, who is reconciling all things to himself, and we embody the hope of His coming kingdom. Let us lead with courage and conviction, giving “spine, resolve, courage, energy, and freedom that belong to a counteridentity,” always pointing to the one who is the center of our story.