

THE BIBLE AS A COMMUNITY ENCOUNTER: AN ESSAY ON CHALLENGES FOR FACULTY AND STUDENTS OF SCRIPTURE

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Engaging in the Journey

The Bible is a narrative that invites us to peer into the encounter between God and creation. As we read and study this story, we are invited to become one of the characters, joining the long line of the faithful stretching back through time to the first humans. This journey, however, is not without its obstacles, challenges, and roadblocks. Those involved in theological education serve as guides to help their students navigate the many critical junctures where questions about the Bible are raised.

Many students come to their theological studies with good intentions and dreams of deepening their spiritual commitments and growing in their knowledge of the Bible, theology, and church history, but soon find some of their long held beliefs challenged by the broad knowledge to which they are exposed. It can be threatening or even frightening to find out that Moses did not write the Pentateuch or that the book of Isaiah is made up of two or three separate books not written by the prophet Isaiah. The simple answers taught in Sunday School about the differences in the four gospels do not hold up under close scrutiny. For some students, exposure to these new ideas can be a frightening experience. It raises questions about the historical reliability, accuracy, and inspiration of the Bible. If there are contradictions or inaccuracies, how can the Bible still be God's inerrant word?

This encounter with new knowledge has sometimes been called "the loss of naiveté." Without adequate guidance, students may begin to question their call to ministry or even their faith in Christ when this "enlightenment" comes. They may also experience a tension with loved ones when they return home to share their new ideas, which often lead to criticism of the denominational college. Or, they may begin ministry eager to share their new insights learned in college studies only to find their jobs threatened by a church board inclined to traditional thinking. The result is a tension (or sometimes even animosity) between the church and university, or between personal piety and academic inquiry. The student or graduate is caught in the middle, wanting to use his or her new knowledge about the Bible but unsure how to do this in real-life ministry settings.

How can students balance the new ideas and theories to which they are exposed in their theological studies with the cherished beliefs of their home church community? Do they have to end up abandoning one for the other, possibly alienating themselves from those to whom they minister? More broadly, how can the two worlds of the academy and the church be brought together in harmony or even dialogue? Must the two worlds of the pew and the lectern always be separate?

I. The Bible that Critiques Community

One of the challenges in the academic study of the Bible is how to embrace the message of the Bible while being objective and scientific with the text. Different interpreters have attempted to do that with various degrees of success. One approach is represented by Rudolf Bultmann who was a major voice in New Testament studies over a half century ago. Bultmann approached the question of history existentially: “To understand history is possible only for one who does not stand over against it as a neutral, nonparticipating spectator, but himself stands in history and shares in responsibility for it.”[1] As interpreters, we become participants in history, never completely free from the influence we have in how the story unfolds. We each are bound to a historical setting and in constant dialogue with the events around us. “This dialogue is no clever exercise of subjectivity on the observer’s part, but a real interrogating of history, in the course of which the historian puts this subjectivity of his in question, and is ready to listen to history as an authority.”[2] Bultmann distinguished between two words for history: *historie* and *geschichte*. *Historie* means a historical factual event, an existential encounter with history. *Geschichte* refers to a significant and meaningful historic event.[3] For example, that Jesus lived in first century Palestine is *historie*, a historical fact. On the other hand, that Jesus died on the cross is *geschichte*, a historic, significant event that has eternal consequence. Bultmann also wrote, “When he [an interpreter] turns his attention to history, however, he must admit himself to be a part of history; he is considering a living complex of events in which he is essentially involved. He cannot observe this complex objectively as he can observe natural phenomena; for in every word which he says about history he is saying at the same time about himself.”[4]

In Bultmann’s interpretation, then, the Bible is not a scientific record of historical events but a proclamation of God’s salvation. The events that are recorded must be “translated” through the filter of interpreted history. Bultmann labelled this process as “demythologization,” by which he meant “preaching again the gospel of the New Testament, releasing it from the world of the first century and getting it into the life of the present-day man.”[5] One negative ramification of this concept is the separation of the Jesus of history (about whom we can know little) with the Christ of faith (about whom the early church proclaimed and the New Testament bears witness).

Although there are many problems with Bultmann’s approach, his basic premise continues to find a home in post-modern approaches to the Bible. Postmodernism goes one step further in dismantling any claims of knowing the “truth” of events long past. One useful conclusion from Bultmann’s premise is that any history in the Bible has been interpreted by community. The Bible bears witness to the events the different communities of faith considered important for their understanding of God and God’s relationship with humanity. Many Wesleyans would embrace Bultmann’s interest in the kerygma as the lens by which we need to understand scripture.

How the Bible became the authoritative text for the people of God was a complex process, but several key points about this help us navigate the murky waters of contemporary biblical studies. First, we must note that the Bible emerged out of multiple contexts too distant to be known with confidence. As Bultmann insisted, we cannot get back past the interpretation of history as it is recorded in the sacred memories of Israel and the church. In the distant past, the stories of the patriarchs began to be passed down orally from generation to generation. The

corporate memories of tales long past became the guide for community formation for the people of Israel. Outside confirmation for many events of the Bible is lacking, such as the calling of Abraham, so the reader must trust the memories of the generations that followed. The stories of the ancestors were passed down orally for many generations until at one point or even at multiple points the stories were written down. Tradition attributes the writing of the Pentateuch to Moses, but many scholars consider this too simplistic to account for the many seams and differences in Genesis-Deuteronomy. By reflecting on the past and God's involvement with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the Israelites believed that God also had a plan for them (Exod 2:24; 3:6, 15; 6:3, 8). During the oral stage of transmission, those stories considered important were passed down from one generation to another (others were forgotten, thus not incorporated later into the text). That God called a man named Abram and gave him a promise of land and descendants assured later generations that they too had a purpose and that the ancient promise was being fulfilled through them (Deut 26:5-10).

One of the more complex approaches to biblical studies is Source Criticism, which attempts to understand the documents (both oral and written) that provided the raw material for the Bible as we have it today. Part of this involves determining the settings out of which a text emerged and was accepted as scripture. Sometimes the intended audience can be known, such as when Luke wrote to Theophilus (Luke 1:1-4), but in the case of the Pentateuch, the date of the written text and for whom it was written are debated. The "Documentary Hypothesis" offers a partial solution to these questions, but the extent of the sources, both oral and written, is theoretical and debated.[6] At some point, the teachings, history, poetry, and stories of the Bible were written down. The reasons for this are many and varied but most of them eventually come down to usefulness to the community of faith. Many of the Psalms, for example, were collected for use in the liturgy of the temple or king's court.[7]

What happened in the case of the four Gospels gives a useful summary of the more complex issues of other scripture. Jesus never wrote a book or left his disciples a set of notes summarizing his teachings. After Jesus ascended to heaven in Acts 1, the disciples began to preach what Jesus had taught them. The message of his death and resurrection was alive in their hearts and they believed it was what the world needed. For the first few decades after Jesus, many of the stories and teachings of Jesus were passed on orally, but an oral tradition was not adequate for the mission of the church. At some point, the living memories were put into writing.

Each gospel was written for a specific purpose and audience. Though it is sometimes debated what these were, generally, the gospels were written for the spiritual nurture of individuals or communities of early Christians. Redaction Criticism attempts to unravel the unique contributions of each of the writers. As we look deeper into their accounts of Jesus, we get the sense that they not only wanted to preserve the stories and teaching of Jesus, but more so to convince their readers of the necessity of putting their faith in him (John 20:30-31). Thus, the oral stories took on written form to preserve the past (the teachings of Jesus, or in the case of the OT, the stories of the patriarchs and the rise and fall of the people of Israel), to provide a guide for the edification of the early church (or Israel), and as a tool for the evangelization of unbelievers (or to give meaning to present circumstances in the case of the OT).

As these texts were received, they gained increasing authority over their audiences. This authority came from several sources. Most crucial is the authority that came from the power of the words about “the good news of Jesus Christ” that had been received orally by the church and recognized as life transforming. These teachings had stood the test of the corporate memory of the early disciples and eyewitnesses who had heard and experienced Jesus. Second, those who bore witness to the accuracy of the accounts added another level of authority. Although Luke was not an eyewitness of the events of his gospel, he made a careful study about what he wrote, likely consulting primary sources and those closer to the events (Luke 1:1-4). The community of faith received the gospels and accepted them as accurate and authoritative. As the first generations of disciples passed away and the church began to grow into Gentile areas, the primary witness to the life and teachings of Jesus became the written text, leaving future generations to rely on the written text for the gospel message.[8] The written text continued to have authority because people believed it gave access to the revelation of God in Christ.[9]

The written text became the primary test of orthodoxy and defining criteria for the people of God. There were multiple stages for this in the case of the Old Testament. As the sacred text of the Israelites grew over the centuries (especially during and after the Babylonian exile), from the core of the Pentateuch to the addition of the Prophets and Writings,[10] what it meant to be the people of God became more refined and understood. By the point the Old Testament had taken a more or less set form by the time of Christ, the various books of the Hebrew Bible had become the standard for the faith of the Jewish people.[11]

Paul’s letters in particular had a unifying effect upon the growing church. During the first few decades of the church, there was no one “orthodox” position that defined sound doctrine and was accepted by all, but a diversity of voices and experiences that were socially, regionally, and culturally influenced.[12] There was no unified structure of authority outside of a few traveling apostles and missionaries.[13] Paul’s letters had a profound affect upon determining “orthodox” doctrine. For Paul, orthodoxy was defined by the gospel of God’s grace in Christ, prophesied in the OT scriptures, received through faith, and lived out in obedience. He believed that what he taught was in accordance with both scripture and the traditions he had received (1 Cor 15:1-8). Many of his letters were written in response to heresies and improper interpretations of the gospel. By dealing with these issues, Paul essentially shaped Christology and ecclesiology. Without his letters, the early church might have faced a more significant emergence of heresies or become more regional than it later did.

Going on to another step in the process, we come to an important juncture where choices about the authority of a written document had to be made. The communities that received the written texts had to determine the authority of the texts for their purposes. The length of this process varied from almost immediately, such as with some of Paul’s letters, to perhaps even centuries with some parts of the Old Testament like the Book of Esther which was debated by some Jews even up to Jesus’ time. Not all communities accepted the various writings as authoritative. The Samaritans, for example, only accepted the Pentateuch as their scripture. Once a text had gained authority in one community, it was given to another community through copied manuscripts to help in their spiritual development. As the various texts gained a wider audience, their authority likewise grew. By the middle of the second century, the four Gospels and Paul’s letters were being widely circulated among the churches. As various manuscripts made their way

to new places, people wanted to have the scriptures in their own languages, leading to various translations. The translation process itself involved choosing which words made best sense to the communities that received the texts. Not all texts received universal acceptance, as is evidenced in the Apocrypha and non-canonical writings. These other texts were not accepted primarily because they did not hold the same authority for the community of faith (because of issues such as disputed authorship, date, or heretical content).

Thus, the various texts emerged out of the experiences of the people of God over the centuries. The different communities of faith had a significant impact on the acceptance of a text and its transmission. The books of the Bible were recognized as authoritative as a process of community confirmation. People recognized that there was something special about the human words in the written text. In some cases, these words had divine authority embedded in them, such as the prophetic formula, “Thus says the Lord.” In other situations, like Paul’s letters, what was intended to be a pastoral or personal letter was viewed as having divine instructions within it (2 Peter 3:15-16). The human words contained divine power and authority.

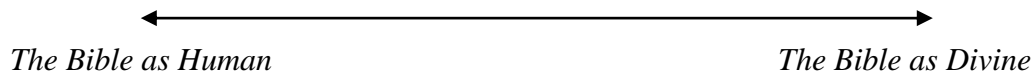
The formation of the biblical canon was a theological process guided by the needs of various communities of faith. Those who put the books together stood within a tradition but also chose which texts to include that seemed most worthy to be called their source of faith. There was some theological end in transmitting a text. The Old and New Testaments were combined, not to create some large story, but for theological continuity as witness to Christ. The early church took over the Old Testament as its own scripture because it pointed to Christ. To call the Bible “scripture” is a statement of faith that recognizes God at work in the ancient words of people.[14]

II. The Tension of the Divine and Human in the Bible

One of the most challenging and debated issues is the extent to which the Bible is inspired. How one addresses this challenge is influenced by how one views the nature of revelation. If one opts for viewing the words of the text themselves as the primary revelation, that will lead to certain appeals to the words of the text as authoritative. One might also appeal to what the words refer, the “referent” that stands behind the words, languages used, historical situations, and cultural influences. In this case, one looks to the divine revelation that imparts the words or thoughts to the writers of the various texts. Wesleyans have tended to start with the second in their emphasis on the soteriological purpose of scripture.

The church has roamed between two major approaches for most of its existence. These approaches can be simply summarized by appealing to two ancient philosophers who embody these two approaches. Plato taught that truth as we experience it is a revelation of a greater, absolute truth, what we call “God.” Aristotle, however, taught that knowledge comes through the senses and observation. A “Platonic” approach to revelation views the Bible as having been revealed directly by God. The emphasis here is on the divine aspects of the Bible. An “Aristotelian” approach to revelation takes into account more of the imperfections and experiences of humanity. These two poles can be illustrated with a simple chart:

The Source of Inspiration in the Bible



The implications of these two perspectives are profound and influential in multiple aspects of biblical interpretation, theological inquiry, and ethics. To loosely characterize these approaches, the emphasis on the human side of revelation would see the Bible more as a literary document formulated by people long ago. This position would question the miraculous or claims of any divine revelation. These interpreters would say that various communities of faith determined the words we have in the Bible and that oral tradition or authorial intent modified many of the stories and teachings, embellishing any divine quality in the text over time. The ethical consequences would be a relativization of the moral commands of the Bible (the OT and Paul may have condemned homosexuality but that was culturally influenced).

The other perspective would emphasize the divine in the Bible. Some people take the position that every word in the Bible came directly from God and that the authors and communities that wrote and accepted the Bible were only writing down what God directed them to write. One more extreme example of this is the “dictation theory” that argues that there was no direct human involvement at all and that the authors wrote down each word as God directed.

Therein lay the battle lines drawn in many churches, denominations, universities, and seminaries. On the one hand, students who were raised to believe a more “fundamentalist” approach to the Bible are shocked and dismayed when they hear “liberal” professors suggesting that the Bible has a human component to it. On the other hand, the professors look down upon the laity for being simplistic and naïve in their interpretation of the Bible as the dictated word of God. How do we find our way through this maze of confusion?

There are several important assumptions to consider in answering this question. First, to recognize any authority in the Bible necessitates accepting some power behind the words. This power could simply be the persuasiveness of proven human experience (a general wisdom found in a lot of literature) or it could be a greater, divine revelation guiding those who wrote the words. To accept the latter necessitates faith. Second, for the Bible to have any persuasive power, there must be a human response to it. Wesleyans would argue that the primary response the Bible invites is to accept God’s offer of salvation in Christ. One passage in particular grabs our attention, 2 Timothy 3:14-17:

¹⁴ But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, ¹⁵ and how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. ¹⁶ All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, ¹⁷ so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. (NIV)

Timothy had been taught the sacred writings as a child (Acts 16:1). They were part of his spiritual formation. These sacred writings had a clear purpose: to help him know salvation

through faith in Christ. The scriptures to which Paul refers here probably were the Hebrew writings, our Old Testament. Paul, like many early Christians, believed that the Hebrew Scriptures pointed to Jesus Christ (Rom 16:25-26). Paul does not say how God inspired the scriptures here, but simply that he did. The scriptures have a practical use in the community of faith through teaching individuals within the community about what it means to work out their salvation through faith in Christ, resulting in fruit bearing in everyday life. The only way this is possible is if the text of the Bible (if we extend the idea of “scripture” here to include the New Testament) has authority over the individuals who make up the community. The assumption in Paul’s statement is that Timothy could reject the sacred writings, but this would impoverish his understanding of Jesus and would lead to unrighteous living.

The authority of the Bible becomes operative for readers as they respond in faith to the fresh inspiration of the Holy Spirit. One of the jobs of the Holy Spirit is to remind us of the words of and about Jesus (John 14:26). Of the ways the Holy Spirit uses—scripture, working with our understanding and experiences, and through the traditions of the community of faith—the one source that provides the surest source of revelation is scripture. In each of these sources, revelation is mediated through human instrumentality, but the Bible serves as the “canon” for all others. Any information about God and God’s purposes for creation must come through revelation. The only source adequate to supply information about salvation is the author of it (Heb 5:9, KJV). The challenge is how to interpret this revelation.

An important bridge must be crossed from the ancient text to the contemporary context. Even though the church accepts the authority of the written word, we still run into the problem of multiple interpretations. We will always interpret scripture from within a community, both past and present. In many ways, community determines the meaning of the text. By “community,” I am describing that group, both large and small, in which a person lives and fellowships. Community is more clearly defined by the smaller group: the worshipping body of believers, the small group Bible study, close friends, family, and those with whom we spend most of our time. The further we go from this primary core of people, the more subtle and general becomes the influence. The larger community might involve a denomination, theological tradition, and culture. Any participation in the larger community is usually mediated through our smaller community, which will either confirm or reject the views of the larger community.

Interpretation does not happen in a vacuum. As members of communities, we bring to the interpretive process the questions of these communities as well as our own experiences and thoughts. Our interpretation is often based upon our needs. We will find what we look for. This can be either positive or negative, depending on our motives, knowledge, and experience. For example, in regards to the larger community, I may come from a Western patriarchal society and this may influence how I view what the Bible teaches about marriage. Or perhaps, I might come from a small independent, evangelical church and interpret the atonement as primarily substitutionary. I could have great biblical support for my perspectives, but because of my cultural lenses, I will be seeing only a part of the larger picture of the Bible. People are often criticized in this regard for having a “narrow” view of the Bible because what they see in the Bible is significantly influenced by their presuppositions, needs, and community. On the individual level, the Bible will speak to particular needs of my life because I come to the Bible

with these needs. As my needs change, so does how I understand and hear the Bible. This point alone accounts for many of the different interpretations among Christians around the world.

The language of a particular community guides interpretation. “Language” can be understood in broad terms to include not just spoken or written words but also the language of body and social relationships. Reader Response approaches point out that those who read a text determine its meaning. Words have different meanings, depending upon when, where, and how they are used and understood. How a word is used in a given context determines the final meaning of that word. Some parts of scripture are timeless for any culture because their words and concepts speak across time and situations. Others, however, are more culturally or historically conditioned, such as some of the laws of the Old Testament. How can these texts still speak to us without our either transposing the ancient culture to our own (something most modern people would reject) or so dismantling the text in our own subjective reading of it that the original meaning is lost (most scholars schooled in the historical-critical approaches would reject this)?

The primary determining test in such difficult situations is the community of faith that stands with Paul and the early church in the “orthodox” tradition stretching back to the witness of Christ in the OT, the proclamation of the gospel of Christ in the NT, and the witness of salvation in Christ of those who have believed throughout the centuries. This test can be done with a smaller community (local church) or a more global one (denominations or the entire Christian church). Community balances the subjective tendencies of postmodernism. The test of time adds authority to one’s interpretation. Tradition is an important counter-balance to reason and experience in the Wesleyan Quadrilateral. Although the Holy Spirit has inspired the Bible within communities of faith throughout the centuries, this inspiration has been interpreted contextually for people’s specific needs at a particular time. To place interpretation solely in the hand of the individual or an isolated community is dangerous precisely because of the influence of our own presuppositions, questions, and needs. We will hear what we want to hear, and what we hear may not be what the authors of the text intended to say. Thus, we can test our interpretation against that of others to determine if it is within the acceptable bounds of orthodoxy as received by the people of God throughout the ages. Determining sound doctrine based on scripture is one of the greatest aspects of being the corporate people of God. The church and the Bible go together; one needs the other. The test of orthodox interpretation begins with the individual (“reason” in the Wesleyan Quadrilateral) and moves further out to ever-larger communities until it is tested against the wisdom of the church over the ages. The church is the living application of what the written word says.

Why is this test important? As with many things in life, the Bible can be used for great healing and can serve as the primary way we know God, but it can also be abused and misinterpreted, causing great harm. If we let our own community (either the smaller or larger culture) be the final test of interpretation, we may be blinded by the presuppositions of this community. This can lead to all kinds of theological and moral issues. For example, there are some significant disagreements among churches today over the issues of same-sex marriages and homosexuality, with both sides of the issue appealing in some way to the Bible. If the test of one’s interpretation is based only on a particular community, the presuppositions of that community can significantly influence the final message one hears. One may choose what parts

of the Bible one likes or may accept other parts as “authentic” or timeless. The time-bound parts of the Bible can be rejected because they do not speak to contemporary situations and needs. This is a dangerous idea that leads to a slippery slope.

III. The Community Dynamic of Love

In any given community, there will be a diversity of backgrounds, ideas, and interpretations. The dialogue of these ideas can be an enriching experience. The danger of conflict, however, can tear apart any unity. Students experience personal conflicts when they are exposed to new ideas that challenge their presuppositions. Churches experience conflict when they hear ideas they consider contrary to their understanding of sound doctrine. At issue in this conflict is authority.

The written word brings diverse people together into community because it points to a greater reality than the letters on the page. The Holy Spirit breathes life into the words, drawing together in unity those who will allow those words to guide their attitudes and actions. This is what makes the Bible “living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Heb 4:12, ESV). This transformation can begin at an early stage in life or it may happen later. In either case, the result will be the development of a biblical worldview. The Bible becomes the lens for how believers view life. Joel Green writes that “the church engaging the Bible as Scripture is itself being shaped in the form of and by Scripture, and it serves both as crucial context within and the premier instrument by which God’s people are formed as persons who embody Scripture.”[15] If the Bible is not allowed to be the key written witness to Christ and if its authority over a community is diminished, the community will be influenced by other worldviews. Biblical illiteracy is a disease that ultimately leads to impoverished lives, churches, and cultures.

Developing a biblical worldview is a demanding process. It involves discarding the inferior perspectives of human wisdom and embracing the divine wisdom of the cross of Christ (1 Cor 1:18-25). It does not take the honest seeker long, however, to realize that this new view of life is complex. Who defines it? Which interpretation is correct? Is it even possible to determine what a biblical worldview is? Again, the answer comes as we journey together in community.

The choices we make about how to interpret the Bible will be based on some criteria or standard. Article IV, “The Holy Scriptures,” in the *Manual* of the Church of the Nazarene states, “We believe in the plenary inspiration of the Holy Scriptures, by which we understand the 66 books of the Old and New Testaments, given by divine inspiration, inerrantly revealing the will of God concerning us in all things necessary to our salvation, so that whatever is not contained therein is not to be enjoined as an article of faith.” As Nazarenes, we understand the key purpose of the Bible is to point the way to salvation provided in Jesus Christ. Therein lies the primary standard of our interpretation: *does my interpretation lead me to Christ or lead me away?* The questions with which I come to the text find their answer in Jesus Christ. My presuppositions are then molded by the message of the text, so that the next time I read the Bible, I come with a slightly different perspective. I become changed through my encounter with the Bible because the Holy Spirit is transforming me more and more into the likeness of Christ. As I change so

does the community of which I am a part. Thus, the key to orthodox interpretation becomes growth into Christlikeness.

It would be great if all of life and all of biblical interpretation, both in the academy and the local church, were this ideal and simple, but it is not. Defining “Christlikeness” is not an easy process. The Bible contains divine communication to us from and about God, but this revelation is embodied in imperfect human channels and interpreted by people influenced by a myriad of perspectives and experiences.

The Apostle Paul offers a way through the interpretive dilemma in his letter to the Corinthians. The Corinthians faced a situation that had a lot of similarities to our proverbial enlightened student. In 1 Cor 8, a conflict had arisen in the church between those who believed that there was nothing wrong in eating food sacrificed to idols because they realized that idols are only man-made objects, and those who had come out of a life of idolatry and still attached meaning to the idols. When the latter saw a brother or sister eating such food, they would be tempted to fall back into idolatry and thus suffer spiritual destruction (v 11). The strong correctly realized that all food is good no matter whether it is laid before an idol or not (v 4). There was nothing wrong with their knowledge in and of itself. The problem was when this knowledge caused another person to violate his or her conscience and fall back into idolatry (v 10).

Paul’s answer to this is that love takes precedence over knowledge (v 1). One’s knowledge may be correct but in its expression it must take second place to love. More important are the consciences of the “weak brother” (i.e. the uninformed brother or sister) and the unity of the community. Paul offers several important principles in chs 8-10 in the following verses (NIV):

- 8:13: “Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother or sister to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause them to fall.”
- 9:19 “Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible.”
- 10:24 “No one should seek their own good, but the good of others.”
- 10:31-33: ³¹ So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. ³² Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks or the church of God— ³³ even as I try to please everyone in every way. For I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved.”

Those who have gone through college, seminary, and even on to doctoral studies have been exposed to a great deal of knowledge. We are convinced that a lot of this knowledge is correct or at least highly probable. At some point in our studies we have become “enlightened.” The problem is that we take this knowledge to our communities in situations where not everyone shares our awareness of the issues. We have to make a fundamental choice: is the use of our knowledge worth the destruction of the weak brother or sister or in the division of the church? I think Paul’s answer to this is quite clear in these chapters. As we join together in community and work through the process of interpretation, love must take pre-eminence over knowledge.

Knowledge is not totally rejected, however, lest truth become subjective and relative. Knowledge of the truth of the gospel (for Paul, this is given in 8:6) is the anchor that allows love to be expressed in contextualized ways. The truth is not compromised but how one learns of this truth must be done through love. Although those “in the know” need to show love, those who lack knowledge need to grow stronger in their understanding. Paul goes on in ch 10 to challenge those with weak consciences to “flee from idolatry” (v 14) and to realize that idol worship opens the door to temptation and sin (10:1-13). Those in leadership positions in ministry have to maintain a fine balance between the lack of knowledge among some of their parishioners and also their need to grow in their understanding of the issues. The bottom line is, “So whether you eat or drink or *whatever you do*, do it all for the glory of God” (v 31, italics mine). Significantly, Paul ends this whole discussion with, “Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ” (11:1). Paul willingly set aside his rights (or “authority,” *exousia* in the Greek) at strategic times in order to win people to Christ (9:19-23). Such an attitude may allow graduates to have a more effective ministry in settings where churches embrace ideas based on shaky assumptions, or may help theological educators help students through the exposure to new ideas. We may find fewer students in conflict within their own minds and eventually with their parish communities.

The Bible as the scripture of the church contains the truth of the gospel as experienced by the people of God and applied in their various contexts. Though our contexts are significantly different than the ancient ones, this message still speaks to our needs. This truth is filtered through the community of believers, both past and present. How the church interprets the truth will in many ways determine the effectiveness of this message upon those who hear it. The witness of scripture about this message does not change, but how we approach it and lead others to it is in constant transition.

In conclusion, as part of the people of God, we are part of a dynamic community involved in the narrative of God’s redeeming work in this world. As interpreters, we join with the people of God--beginning with those who first experienced the events in the first context as well as those who received the words, wrote them down, and passed them on to later contexts--in participating in what God is doing and listening to what God is saying in Christ to human needs. As community we fit into the ongoing story of God. Although there will always be a certain degree of ambiguity because the story is unfinished and the plot continually changing, there is continuity and consistency in this story, maintained primarily through the accountability that community provides. The Bible still serves as the measuring line, the “canon” for the life of the church, but the church also determines the meaning of the Bible. The church becomes the channel for the continuation of divine revelation to the world. God may have designed the ambiguity and mystery of the Bible to offer the church the opportunity to show love and grow in unity through the struggle to understand the meaning of the revelation found in the text. Biblical interpretation ought to be a journey to Christlikeness. The challenges of the journey itself offer occasions to become like Christ in perfect love for others.

Notes:

[1] Rudolf Bultmann, *Existence and Faith* (New York: Meridian Books, 1960), 294.

[2] Bultmann, *Jesus and the Word* (New York: Scribner, 1934), 4.

- [3] John Painter has an extensive discussion of the difference between *historie* and *geschichte* in *Theology as Hermeneutics: Rudolf Bultmann's Interpretation of the History of Jesus* (Sheffield, England: The Almond Press, 1987), 76-89.
- [4] Bultmann, *Jesus and the Word*, 3.
- [5] Carl Michalson, "Rudolf Bultmann," in *Twelve Makers of Modern Protestant Thought*, edited by George L. Hunt (New York: Association Press, 1971), 82.
- [6] For a summary of the problems and alternatives to the Documentary Hypothesis, see T. D. Alexander, *From Paradise to the Promised Land: An Introduction to the Pentateuch* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 53-61.
- [7] Notably Herrmann Gunkel championed Form Criticism of the Psalms in his *The Psalms; A Form-Critical Introduction*, trans. T.M. Homer (Philadelphia: 1967). Most interpreters of the Psalms build on this work in classifying different settings for the various psalms.
- [8] See F.F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 255-269.
- [9] William J. Abraham, *Canon and Criterion in Christian Theology: From the Fathers to Feminism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 10.
- [10] Bruce cautions about setting any order in the canonization of the various parts of the OT, *Canon of Scripture*, 36.
- [11] Even such groups as the Qumran Community appear to have given a high degree of authority to the OT canonical books in relation to their own sectarian writings.
- [12] Evidence for this tension can be seen in especially Paul's letter to the Galatians 1:6-9 and the Pastoral Epistles, 1 Tim 1:3; 2 Tim 4:3; Titus 1:9.
- [13] Walter Bauer noted the regional variations in early Christianity and showed that it is impossible to find any one orthodox position in early Christianity, and early "heresy" was only regional Christianity. These variations become heresy only at a later time when heresy was the loser in a power struggle (*Rechtgläubigkeit und Ketzerei im ältesten Christentum* [Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1934]). Helmut H. Koester continued Bauer's thesis by arguing that the diversity in early Christianity was caused by two factors: "first, by the several different religious and cultural conditions and traditions of the people who became Christians; and, second, by the bewildering though challenging impact of Jesus' own life, works, words, and death" ("The Structure and Criteria of Early Christian Beliefs," in *Trajectories through Early Christianity*, ed. James M. Robinson and Helmut H. Koester [Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1971], 205).
- [14] See also David Kelsey, *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 90.
- [15] Joel B. Green, *Seized by Truth: Reading the Bible as Scripture* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007), 67.