

'This is most certainly clear'

Except—contested interpretations still create a dilemma for the church



In appealing to the Bible for the decisions we face, there must be well-reasoned deliberation of how a text functioned for its earliest recipients.

What happens when we, as the church, don't agree about the correct interpretation of the Bible? This situation creates a stunning dilemma for a church that trusts in *sola Scriptura*, the authority of the word alone.

There are many instances in church history where competing factions debated, sometimes bitterly, the proper meaning of biblical texts. Sometimes contests over the interpretation of Scripture led to schism. Other times, after a period of turmoil, to the emergence of new paradigms and new consensus.

The Reformers were confident that God's word would guide the church to truth. Martin Luther argued for the priority of the literal sense of Scripture over other symbolic approaches that had gained prominence. In the medieval church the literal sense was considered inferior to the allegorical, moral or anagogical senses. Luther, however, insisted on the normative meaning of the literal sense: "... we must look and see to whom it has been spoken, whether it fits us."

Luther's confidence in the literal sense was based on his conviction about the perspicuity, or transparency, of Scripture. He believed the Bible would be clear to those who were (finally!) free to read it in their own language. We recall Luther's translation into German, the language of his people, making the Bible accessible in an unprecedented way.

Luther's confidence about the clarity of Scripture was grounded on his belief that the entire Bible points to Christ. Christ is the center of Scripture. The Bible's message, both Old and New Testament, proclaims the gospel: "This is most certainly clear."

Where the meaning of the Bible is confusing or ambiguous, Luther employed another important principle: "Scripture interprets itself." Because the Bible is its own highest authority, one searches the rest of Scripture to shed light on obscure texts.

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Insofar as God's word is clear in its witness to the gospel, Luther trusted the Spirit to enlighten disputed texts through the lens of those that are crystal clear. This wisdom deserves renewed attention as we struggle with difficult texts. How might we appeal to passages about which there is widespread agreement as we struggle with contested texts? For example, what wisdom might we draw from the great commandment—to love God and love your neighbor as yourself (Mark 12:28-34)—as we engage conflicted interpretations?

Despite these strategies for discerning God's word, each generation faces contests over the meaning of Scripture. The Reformation was itself such a contest: Was Luther correct in claiming the gospel as the Bible's central message for implementing reforms? Recent generations have battled over the legitimacy of war or the status of women in the church, arguing vociferously about how the Bible informs these questions.

Today one intense contest rages over what the Bible says about homosexuality and the place of gay and lesbian people in the church. A fundamental complication involves conflicting claims about God's word. How does a church that affirms Scripture as the final norm for its faith and life negotiate conflicted interpretations of the Bible?

As in previous eras, the church is called to a communal process of deliberation to discern which interpretations are legitimate and which are precluded. The church is called to pray fervently for the Spirit's guidance as it seeks to remain faithful to God's word, even in disagreements relating to one another as sisters and brothers in Christ. □

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