Theological Approaches to Scripture: A Brief Overview

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All Christians believe that Scripture is God’s word for the Church and humanity, but Christians have different views of Scripture’s nature and of how to best read and understand it. I cannot present the full range of modern Christian perspectives on the Bible in this short paper, but it is possible to survey the most common viewpoints.

Readers should attend closely to the following issues when comparing the different viewpoints. First, does the perspective assume that the Bible is an “inerrant” document (without errors of any sort), or does the perspective admit to human errors in Scripture? Second, does the perspective assume that the Bible is “easy reading” (clear in its meaning), or does it suggest that Scripture is difficult to understand. Third, does the perspective assume that the human discourse of Scripture (what the human author is saying) is equivalent to the divine discourse (what God is saying)? Fourth, what role does the Christian tradition (outside of Scripture) play in the interpretation of Scripture? Does tradition count at all? And, if so, how much? Fifth, what role does ecclesial authority (Church authority) play in biblical interpretation? Must readers interpret the Bible according to the dictates of higher Church authorities, or are readers “free” to interpret Scripture as they see fit?

Protestant Views of Scripture

1. Protestant Fundamentalism

Protestant Fundamentalism assumes that the Bible is wholly inerrant (without error) and speaks the truth on anything its authors addressed. It also assumes that the Bible is “perspicuous,” a fancy word that means the Bible’s meaning is clear to any competent reader. Because the Bible is clear and without error, Fundamentalism believes that perfect truth (or very near it) can be discovered by reading the Bible carefully. Because every verse of Scripture is perfect truth, the Bible is like a written “jigsaw puzzle” in which none of the pieces have any rough edges. The proper goal for a Fundamentalist is to become familiar with all of the pieces and then assemble them into a neat, theological whole. The more Scripture one knows, the closer one comes to understanding God’s perfect truth.

Assumed in this account of the Bible and theology is that the Bible “trumps” all other human efforts to discover the truth. As an example, Fundamentalists assume that the six-day creation story in Genesis is wholly factual and that the earth is only a few thousand years old, just as a straightforward reading of the biblical chronology seems to suggest. Because the Bible must be right about this, any ostensible scientific evidence to the contrary (such as evidence that the earth is very old or that humanity was formed through an evolutionary process) can be assumed, from the outset, to be mistaken. Thus, in science and in the other academic disciplines, Fundamentalists pursue their own “biblical” versions of biology, chemistry, geology, psychology, sociology, anthropology, etc.
The foregoing highlights an important feature of Fundamentalism. Namely, it is highly insular and very suspicious of information and perspectives that come from outside of its own circles of influence.

2. Conservative Evangelicalism

Evangelicalism is the more open-minded cousin of Fundamentalism. The movement was founded to overcome the insularity of Fundamentalism and to help Christians engage the broader world more directly and effectively. Nevertheless, its theological temperament shares much with Fundamentalism. Biblical inerrancy is a basic principle of conservative Evangelicalism and, because of this, Evangelicals (like their Fundamentalist forebears) tend to create biblical and/or Christian versions of science, psychology, and anthropology. These Evangelical approaches are formulated to compete head-to-head with other Christian viewpoints and with non-Christian or secular views of the world.

Although they view the Bible as inerrant, conservatives are generally more flexible than Fundamentalists when they interpret Scripture. When it comes to the creation story in Genesis, for example, conservative Evangelicals will generally read Scripture so that room is left for the ancient earth science has revealed. They will argue (for instance) that the six days of creation are not literal days but rather “periods” or “eras” during which God created the universe. Evangelical science is thus free to create theories of creation that include an ancient earth and a very long creation process.

Some conservative Evangelicals are willing to go even further than this. They believe that the Bible contains many different genres or “types” of literature and that these genres dictate how Scripture should be read. When they read the creation story in Genesis, for example, they will argue that the story is “mythical” or “allegorical” and was intended to teach theology rather than science. These Evangelicals are thus able to uphold biblical inerrancy while allowing, at the same time, for a scientific approaches that admit the evolutionary origins of humanity.

Respecting gender, both Fundamentalists and conservative Evangelicals hold that men have authority over their wives; they also forbid the ordination of women and, in general, do not allow women to preach or hold positions of authority in the Church. While some in conservative Evangelicals circles are beginning to raise questions about this traditional position, the majority of conservatives hold that the Bible, which is inerrant, speaks very clearly about the roles that women should and should not fill in the Church and in society.

3. “Great Tradition” Evangelicals

Another brand of conservative Evangelical interpretation takes us still further afield from the old Fundamentalism. These Evangelicals believe that the true Church of Jesus Christ is much broader than Evangelicalism itself and that, moreover, the great traditions of the Church—including those of Eastern Orthodoxy and of the Catholic Church—should figure in our theological reflection. Foremost, they respect the traditional creeds of the Church (such as the Nicene Creed and Definition of Chalcedon) and view them as foundational for good biblical interpretation. Thus, Great Tradition (GT) Evangelicals will reject any reading of Scripture that runs counter to the creeds.
While GT Evangelicals generally believe in inerrancy, they construe it quite differently from how it’s construed among Fundamentalists and Conservative Evangelicals. Fundamentalists and Conservatives assume that the human authors of Scripture spoke directly for God and hence that they never erred. Great Tradition Evangelicals make a distinction between what the human author of Scripture intended and what God himself intends with the text. Take, as an example, this text from Exodus 21:20:

“If a man beats his slave and he dies under his hand, he will be punished, but if the slave survives a day or two he will not be punished because the slave is his property.”

Great Tradition Evangelicals are savvy enough to know that Scripture’s human author didn’t have his theology quite right, but they are not troubled deeply by this because they draw a distinction between Scripture’s human and divine discourse. In this case, they might argue (for instance) that God, with this text, is trying to tell us that human authority has its limits ... We cannot too quickly hurt those who are under our authority in the home or at work.

This approach to the biblical text contrasts pretty sharply with Fundamentalism and Conservative Evangelism, whose adherents will simply admit that the human author’s discourse is inerrant and that beating slaves (even to the point of causing death) was at the time a good thing ordained by a good God.

4. Progressive Evangelicalism

The most salient theological difference between Progressive Evangelicalism and the previous varieties of Evangelicalism is that progressives either do not believe in biblical inerrancy or hold to it very loosely. Because they don’t assume that the Bible speaks rightly about everything it addresses, Progressives believe that Christians should pay very close attention to the varied teachings of Scripture and also attend carefully to other sources of insight, such as the voices of God’s spirit, his creation, Church tradition, and human experience. Also, progressive Evangelicals place a great deal of weight on the teachings of Jesus, which they regard as especially important for healthy theology and ethics.

Let us consider an example. When progressives are confronted by a text such as the slave text mentioned above, they will generally admit that the text is as bad as it sounds. Thus they will likely argue that the Bible’s human author presented as God’s word something that, in fact, was not God’s word but rather the author’s mistaken impression of it. The Progressive reader “knows” this because the teachings of Jesus, which emphasize love and reject the Old Testament’s “eye-for-eye” theology, point her in a different direction.

As we can see, Progressives (like the GT Evangelicals) tend to read the Bible “canonically,” looking for what they take to be the general teaching of Scripture rather than placing too much emphasis on particular biblical texts. As they seek this unity, Progressives are particularly interested in discerning the Bible’s “trajectory theology,” by which they mean the theological destinations to which Scripture is pointing. As one example, Progressives will point out that, while the Bible never actually declared an end to human trafficking (slavery), it did reveal a pattern that progressively moved towards the general emancipation of slaves. The Apostle Paul told Philemon to let his slave go; good theology simply takes the final step and teaches that slavery is wrong altogether.
Because they are alert for “trajectories” that sometimes move “beyond” Scripture itself, Progressives are anxious to ground this move biblical and theologically. Their usual argument is drawn from the book of Acts, where the reception of the Spirit by Gentile Christians was used to prove that the Gentiles did not need to be circumcised (see Acts 15). According to Progressives, the Spirit’s activity in that situation caused early Christians to look beyond the “letter” of the law—which certainly required circumcision for God’s people—to the “minority report” of Scripture, which lent some support for the Gentile cause. In general, Progressives believe that we must “listen to the Spirit” as we read Scripture and try to discern what God is saying to us through it.

In matters of science, Progressives will readily admit that the Bible is not a science book. Because they judge the scientific evidence overwhelming, Progressives believe that human beings were created through an evolutionary process and they have no problem with the idea that “Adam” and “Eve” were literary or theological characters rather than literal people. To be sure, this raises some interesting theological issues, but for Progressives these are issues that Christians cannot evade in good conscience.

Before turning to the “Liberal Protestants,” we should probably note that there are (at least) two strands of Progressive Evangelicalism. One strand is similar to the “Great Tradition” Evangelicals. These Progressives greatly value and tend to follow closely the creedal teachings of the Church. The testimony of ancient Christian scholars, such as Augustine and the early Church Fathers, is taken very seriously by these Progressives.

By way of contrast, the other Progressive strand is almost anti-creedal. It is suspicious of and generally eschews tradition, largely because it views the Christian tradition as corrupted by oppressive theological tendencies. Thus, while “traditional” Progressives attend closely to tradition, these Progressives base their theology almost exclusively on what they believe are the teachings of Jesus Christ.

These differences aside, all Progressives embrace an egalitarian view of gender and hence believe that women can be ordained into Christian ministry. Progressives are still divided, however, on the issues of Gay marriage and the ordination of homosexuals.

5. Liberal Protestants

Liberal Protestants generally differ from the Evangelical groups at three crucial points. First, whereas Evangelicals view Jesus Christ as divine and as God’s unique remedy for our broken world, Liberals tend to view Jesus as a great human teacher who was not necessarily more significant than the Buddha, Confucius or Muhammad. Secondly, in a similar vein, Liberals tend to view the Bible as a human book that is religiously significant but not necessarily a book that God has uniquely selected to speak for him or point to Christ. More than anything else, the Bible is a collection of texts that attest to the varied religious experiences of many different authors and audiences. Readers of Scripture grow as they read and explore these ancient religious testimonies. Third, there’s the matter of tradition. It’s fair to say that Liberals have a “love-hate” relationship with the Christian tradition. In many ways they replicate and draw from it, but in general Liberals are very suspicious of tradition. They tend to view tradition as a conservative oppressor that persecutes and marginalizes anyone whose opinions are different.
Liberals often view Jesus as history’s greatest critic of conservative religion and view themselves as following in his footsteps. One result is that they often read the Bible using what is known as “deconstruction.” Deconstructionists believe that it’s impossible to recover what the Bible’s original authors intended to say (they are dead and can’t confirm our readings), so we are free to understand the Bible in any way that makes sense to us. This, they say, is a good thing because the goal of “deconstruction” is not to understand what the authors meant but rather to interpret the Bible so that its message challenges oppressive power structures in modern society and in the Church. We can take, as an example, the story of Eve’s creation in Genesis ch. 2. Traditional readings of this Scripture argue that Adam enjoyed authority over Eve because he was created first. According to Liberals, the ethical effect of this reading is very negative because those who read the Bible this way oppress women in domestic and social contexts and exclude them from ordination in the Church.

Liberal deconstruction will counter this oppression by reading “against the grain.” It will suggest that Adam was the prototype and Eve the climax of creation, and it will point out that Eve, rather than Adam, had the wisdom to hold a theological dialogue with the serpent in ch. 3. By reading in this way, Liberals hope to free women from social and religious persecution.

Liberals are interested in more than the cause of women. Through “Liberation Theology,” the Liberals work to emancipate all oppressed peoples, especially any minority groups which are wrongly exploited by those with social, political and religious power.

**Catholic Views of Scripture**

Let us begin with the “official” view. The Catholic Church claims the authority to decide what theology should be taught and how Scripture should be interpreted. This teaching authority, known as the *Magisterium*, is shaped by the great creeds of the Church but goes beyond them by adding many details which appear in the Catholic Catechism. As one example, Catholic teaching about Mary’s Immaculate Conception is a part of the *Magisterium* and thus cannot be challenged by Catholic theologians and biblical scholars. No Catholic scholar should interpret the Bible in a way that runs counter to this theological claim.

While this might sound like a very restrictive context for biblical interpretation, it turns out that the Magisterium offers direction on a limited number of theological issues and biblical texts. Catholic biblical scholars are generally free to interpret biblical texts in whatever way that seems fitting. If we wish to characterize the Catholic approach in terms of the other views that we have survey, we could say that conservative Catholic scholars tend to use an approach to Scripture that’s very similar to what one finds among “Great Tradition” Evangelicals. That is, they believe in inerrancy, make a distinction between Scripture’s human and divine discourse, read the Bible canonically, and trust tradition and take it seriously.

Unofficially, one finds among the Catholics many biblical interpreters who question the legitimacy and authority of official Catholicism and stand closer in approach and temperament to the Progressives and Liberal Protestants. Among other things, these “Liberal” Catholics would be quite happy to ordain women and gays for ministry in the Catholic Church.
The Eastern Orthodox View of Scripture

On the matter of Scripture, the third major branch of the Church, Eastern Orthodoxy, represents a mediating position between the Protestants and Catholics. The Orthodox have no single hierarchy nor final Catechism, but the “Patriarchs” of the major Orthodox Church do together exercise some authority over biblical interpretation. More fundamental as a touchstone for Orthodox biblical interpretation is Church tradition as expressed in the decisions of the Seven Ecumenical Church Councils, the ecumenical creeds formulated at those councils, and the teachings of the great Fathers of the early Church, especially the Eastern Fathers such as Saints Ambrose, Athanasius, Basil, Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa, and John of Damascus. The councils, creeds and Fathers play prominent roles in biblical interpretation for Catholics and for certain Protestants, but in Orthodoxy their role—in the absence of a single Catechism—is especially pronounced.

That said, it’s safe to say that the situation in Orthodoxy is similar to what prevails in Catholicism. One finds conservative “inerrantists” in Orthodoxy, as well as Progressive and Liberal types.

The Theological Interpretation Movement

Theological Interpretation is a hermeneutical movement that has surfaced in the last few decades. During the 1960’s, intellectual developments that began during the Enlightenment finally culminated in the rise of “Biblical Studies,” a new discipline that studied the Bible from an historical rather than theological point of view. Biblical scholars thus tended to abandon theology, and theologians, in response, and for other reasons, tended to abandon Scripture. The result was a methodological fracture between the Biblical and Theological studies. The Theological Interpretation movement seeks to heal this breach by bringing the two traditions of discourse—Bible and Theology—back together again. One prominent theologian has characterized this as “the most significant theological development in the last two decades.”1 Whether this is the case or not, the movement is important and informed students of Scripture should be aware of its basic features.

Theological Interpretation (or Theological Hermeneutics) is characterized by its creedal, ecumenical, biblical, and theological character. It is creedal because its participants embrace the Christian tradition and its great statements of theological orthodoxy, such as the Nicene Creed and Definition of Chalcedon. The movement is ecumenical because it acknowledges that creedal boundaries leave room for a wide variety of legitimate faith expressions and commitments. Scholars from Catholic, Protestant, and Eastern Orthodox communities, some more conservative and others more liberal, are all welcomed to the table of discussion and debate. The movement is biblical because its participants take Scripture seriously and believe that a thoughtful, informed engagement with the Bible is essential for the health of the Church. Many players in Theological Interpretation come from traditions where this has not always been the case, so in some respects we may speak here about the “rediscovery” of Scripture. Finally, as its name implies, the movement is “theological” as opposed to merely “biblical.” Theological interpreters are committed to the Chalcedonian principle that Scripture is both divine and human and that, because of this, its documents present theology through the limited perspectives of the human

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1 Miroslav Volf, Captive to the Word (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 14.
horizon. This implies that Scripture is theologically diverse and that each biblical text contributes a distinctive voice to our theological reflection. As a result, nearly every modern book written in the genre of “Theological Interpretation” will refer to the inevitable “struggle” that theological interpretation entails. One cannot simply read theology off of the Bible’s pages; one must understand the text and then reflect theologically on what is said in light of other biblical texts, and in light of God’s voice as it speaks to us through tradition, cosmos, experience and Spirit.

As a rule, Theological Interpretation is less interested in what the Bible’s human authors had to say than has traditionally been the case in biblical interpretation. The authors are often set to one side (more or less) so that greater emphasis can be laid on hearing the words of the Bible’s divine author. In extreme cases, theological interpreters actually ignore the Bible’s human discourse because they find it problematic or offensive.

Conclusions

The foregoing survey is by no means comprehensive. Orthodoxy and Catholicism have been given short shrift, and I’ve not discussed the particular nuances of biblical interpretation in the Pentecostal traditions nor in the Churches of color (still less biblical interpretation on the international scene). These desiderata are mitigated by the fact that, in general, the range of features reflected in the approaches I have discussed fairly represent most of what one finds in the Church as a whole. Perhaps future editions of this short survey will improve on these weaknesses. But for now, I hope that this brief overview was useful to readers.