

Most American readings of the Bible produce “interpretations [which] are [inherently] suspect because they are used to grasp hold of and maintain political power. The use of the text to control the behaviors and choices of others has made the Bible a weapon in the hands of Christians who are not so much stuck in the middle ages as they are stuck in the failed philosophical project of modernity.¹ Liberal Christians use the text for similar purposes. They may not be caught up in the downward spiral of modernity (though social sciences serve their criticisms well), but in what appears to be a lack of faith in the God of the Bible, instead turning to a transcendent universalism that mocks the narrative with every proof-text used to buoy the call for social welfare programs, food pantries, and anti-war demonstrations. Some have decided that the Bible, and all of its particularity, is an embarrassment, a technical document for moral discourse, or simply problematic.² The problem of Scripture can be located in the very real difficulty of how Americans in particular have come to view the construct of community; the Bible can only be a meaningful text of faith when it is read together by congregations. The *problem* of the Bible as an informant of moral vision or ethics is not, in fact, a problem. It is best interpreted by a community in a manner through which the biblical ethic is made credible by no

¹ Ellul, *Anarchy and Christianity*, writes “nothing is left. And this nothing is increasingly aggressive, totalitarian, and omnipresent.” 22. Lyotard adds much to the discussion: “Scientific knowledge does not represent the totality of knowledge.” 7. Consider the Bible as an authoritative text in our contemporary intellectual environment as related to Lyotard’s proposal that emotivism is coincidental to the self-justifying nature of reasoned” propositions. Lyotard understands bureaucracy to be a primary example of self-justifying reasoning, but it reflects the nature of denominational religious structures, and the political uses of the biblical text. The Bible must be declared the text of transcendent universal truth in order to justify the political desires of the individual or organization that relies upon it as a supportive, transcendent truth. Moral discourse in the Western democracies often depends on making truth claims that necessarily support the needs of an established economic, legal, or social class, “or it is dysfunctional.” Such “dysfunctional claims,” like the Bible teaches that participation in war is not a Christian behavior, is relegated to the status of “not-credible.” Credibility, according to Lyotard, is granted solely to those universalist propositions and the findings of hard sciences or well-reasoned outcomes within a bounded moral discourse that promote the success and progress of the major stakeholders of a system, and maintain its stability and supremacy as an overarching regulatory structure. *The Postmodern Condition*. 12.

² Cartwright, *Practices, Politics, and Performance*. Cartwright follows the use of the Bible in Christian ethics and draws a line from the rise of modernity to the present. “By 1965,” he writes, “the use of the Bible in Christian ethics was a problem to be solved.” He writes further that if the Bible was to be authoritative for Christian ethics “there is little agreement concerning how it is authoritative.” 40, citing Long Jr., “The Use of the Bible in Christian Ethics, 149-142.

other means than through the embodiment of the biblical narrative in the lives of the interpretive community. Prioritizing individual growth over corporate faithfulness can only result in a lack of accountability for how one uses the text to his or her advantage, or to the disadvantage of others.

The Bible was not written by individuals and is never about individuals. Instead, it describes the faith and faithfulness (or lack thereof) of a people and those communities that have confessed that YHWH is the one true God, and that Jesus is the full representation of God. Yet, the Bible can only be interpreted properly within the context of community that has no concern for finding a universally held transcendent truth spelled out within it. If we can take Derrida seriously enough to know that he has something to contribute to theology, then we can acknowledge not so much that there is no truth, but more aptly that humans will construct a plethora of truths in order to suit their immediate and long-term needs. Derrida calls for the liberation of humanity from all oppression by identifying many texts as oppressive by their very nature while, at times, calling for the liberation of the text. Much of the world must be liberated from the bonds of Scripture that are as much shackles of the empire as representative of western truth.³

The Bible, however, needs liberating as much as humanity does -- from its bondage to those constituents who insist it is an overarching arbiter of truth. It needs liberating from dogma and systematics and the aggressive contentions that the text has absolute authority. Any authority given to the Bible can only be legitimized by the embodiment of the interpretive twists and turns which produce positive outcomes regarding its moral vision. These outcomes will vary, as will the comparative moral vision of any community who comes together in the name of Jesus as the

³ Caputo, 156. He paraphrases Derrida by writing “we create as many truths as we require... It has to be liberated from the illusion of a single truth. It is to be liberated from dogmatism and hermeneutics and to adapt a strategy of writing...” I now add a disclaimer gleaned from the writing of Ruf, *Postmodern Rationality, Social Criticism, and Religion*. He writes: “One can only write for one's own rhetorical purposes in response to Derrida's writing” 13.

Christ.⁴ There can be no *a priori* authority assumed, but instead faith in an interpretive body that participates in repeated readings, enjoys the challenges of new understandings, and then promotes actualizations that lead back to reading the text through fresh hermeneutical lenses; once again ready to be acted out and reviewed by others. Reading the Bible, as Fee says, "for all its worth,"⁵ means that it must be read -- not so much by every individual as much by individuals together as part of a community which prioritizes corporate faith. Otherwise, readings of the text, understandings of Jesus as Christ, and the mission of the church will inevitably stagnate. The proof of such stagnancy, so to speak, is evident in the post- Enlightenment pudding that we call the contemporary church.

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⁴ This claim is representative of the work of many Christian theologians and ethicists, beginning with MacIntyre, and including much of the work of Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, and Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*. See also Yoder's *The Priestly Kingdom*.

⁵ Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All its Worth*.