Biblical authority: A personal reflection

by Walter Brueggemann in the January 3, 2001 issue

The authority of the Bible is a perennial and urgent issue for those of us who stake our lives on its testimony. This issue, however, is bound to remain unsettled and therefore perpetually disputatious. It cannot be otherwise, since the biblical text is endlessly "strange and new." It always and inescapably outdistances our categories of understanding and explanation, of interpretation and control. Because the Bible is "the live word of the living God," it will not compliantly submit to the accounts we prefer to give of it. There is something intrinsically unfamiliar about the book; and when we seek to override that unfamiliarity, we are on the hazardous ground of idolatry. Rather than proclaiming loud, dogmatic slogans about the Bible, we might do better to consider the odd and intimate ways in which we have each been led to where we are in our relationship with the scriptures.

At my confirmation, the pastor (in my case, my father) selected a verse for each comfirmand, a verse to mark one's life. It was read while hands were laid on one's head in confirmation, read at one's funeral and many times in between. My father read over me Psalm 119:105: "Your word is a lamp to my feet/ and a light to my path." Providentially, he marked my life by this book that would be lamp and light, to illumine a way to obedience and mark a path to fullness, joy and well-being.

Before that moment of confirmation, through baptismal vows and through my nurture in the faith, my church prepared me to attend to the Bible in a certain way. I am a child of the Prussian Union, a church body created in 1817 on the 300th anniversary of the year Luther posted his 39 theses on the door of the Würtemberg church. The Prussian king, weary of the arguments about the Eucharist going on between Calvinists and Lutherans, decreed an ecumenical church that was to be open to diversity and based on a broad consensus of evangelical faith that intended to protect liberty of conscience. This church body brought to the U.S. a slogan now taken over and claimed by many others: "In essentials unity; in nonessentials liberty; in all things charity."

"In all things charity" became the interpretive principle that produced a fundamentally irenic church. The ambiance of that climate for Bible reading may be

indicated in two ways. First, the quarrels over the historical-critical reading of the Bible, faced by every church sooner or later, were firmly settled in my church in 1870, when one seminary teacher was forced out of teaching but quickly restored to a pastoral position of esteem. Second, our only seminary, Eden Seminary, had no systematic theologian on its faculty until 1946, and things were managed in a mood of trustful piety that produced not hard-nosed certitude, but irenic charity.

My first and best teacher was my father, who taught me the artistry as well as the authority of scripture. After my confirmation came a series of others who further shaped me in faith. In seminary I had an astonishing gift of excellent Bible teachers, none of whom published, as perhaps the best teachers do not. Allen Wehrli, who had studied under Hermann Gunkel in Halle, taught us the vast density of the Bible's artistry, with attention to the form of the text. His pedagogy was imaginative storytelling—long before the work of G. Ernest Wright or Fred Craddock, Wehrli understood that the Bible is narrative. Lionel Whiston introduced us to Gerhard von Rad, who was just then becoming known to English readers. I have ever since devoured Von Rad, who showed us that the practice of biblical faith is first of all recital. I learned from Wehrli and Whiston that the Bible is essentially an open, imaginative narrative of God's staggering care for the world, a narrative that feeds and nurtures us into an obedience that builds community precisely through respect for the liberty of individual Christians.

After seminary, purely by accident, I stumbled onto James Muilenburg at Union Seminary in New York, arguably the most compelling Old Testament teacher of his generation. He taught us that the Bible will have its authoritative, noncoercive way with us if we but attend with educated alertness to the cadences and sounds of the text in all its detail.

Since graduate school, I have been blessed by a host of insistent teachers—seminarians who would not settle for easy answers, churchpeople who asked new and probing questions, even other Bible teachers. But mostly my continuing education has come through the writing and witness of people who are empowered by the text to live lives of courage, suffering and sacrifice, people who have found this book a source and energy for the fullness of true life lived unafraid.

This succession of teachers has let me see how broad, deep, demanding and generous is this text, how utterly beyond me in its richness. "A lamp to my feet and a light to my path . . ."

How each of us reads the Bible is partly the result of family, neighbors and friends (a socialization process), and partly the God-given accident of long-term development in faith. Consequently, the real issues of biblical authority and interpretation are not likely to be settled by cognitive formulations or by appeals to classic confessions. These issues live in often unrecognized, uncriticized and deeply powerful ways—especially if they are rooted (as they may be for most of us) in hurt, anger or anxiety.

Decisions about biblical meanings are not made on the spot, but result from the growth of habits and convictions. And if that is so, then the disputes over meaning require not frontal arguments but long-term pastoral attentiveness to one another in good faith.

A church in dispute will require great self-knowing candor and a generous openness among its members. Such attentiveness may lead us to recognize that the story of someone else's nurture in the faith could be a transformative gift that allows us to read the text in a new way. My own story leads me to identify six facets of biblical interpretation that I believe are likely to be operative among us all.

Inherency. The Bible is inherently the live word of God, revealing the character and will of God and empowering us for an alternative life in the world. While I believe in the indeterminacy of the text to some large extent, I know that finally the Bible is forceful and consistent in its main theological claim. It expresses the conviction that the God who created the world in love redeems the world in suffering and will consummate the world in joyous well-being. That flow of conviction about God's self-disclosure in the Bible is surely the main claim of the apostolic faith, a claim upon which the church fundamentally agrees. That fundamental agreement is, of course, the beginning of the conversation and not its conclusion; but it is a deep and important starting point. From that inherent claim certain things follow:

First, all of us in the church are bound together by this foundation of apostolic faith. As my tradition affirms, "in essentials unity." It also means, moreover, that in disputes about biblical authority nobody has the high ground morally or hermeneutically. Our common commitment to the truth of the book makes us equal before the book, as it does around the table.

Second, since the inherency of evangelical truth in the book is focused on its main claims, it follows that there is much in the text that is "lesser," not a main claim, but

probes and attempts over the generations to carry the main claims to specificity. These attempts are characteristically informed by particular circumstance and are open to variation, nuance and even contradiction. It is a primal Reformation principle that our faith is evangelical, linked to the good news and not to biblicism. The potential distinction between good news and lesser claims can lead to much dispute.

Third, the inherent word of God in the biblical text is refracted through many authors who were not disembodied voices of revealed truth but circumstance-situated men and women of faith (as are we all) who said what their circumstances permitted and required them to say of that which is truly inherent. It is this human refraction that makes the hard work of critical study inescapable, so that every text is given a suspicious scrutiny whereby we may consider the ways in which bodied humanness has succeeded or not succeeded in bearing truthful and faithful witness.

Fourth, given both inherency and circumstance-situated human refraction, the Bible is so endlessly a surprise beyond us that Karl Barth famously and rightly termed it “strange and new.” The Bible is not a fixed, frozen, readily exhausted read; it is, rather, a “script,” always reread, through which the Spirit makes all things new. When the church adjudicates between the inherent and the circumstance-situated, it is sorely tempted to settle, close and idolize. Therefore, inherency of an evangelical kind demands a constant resistance to familiarity. Nobody’s reading is final or inerrant, precisely because the key Character in the book who creates, redeems and consummates is always beyond us in holy hiddenness. When we push boldly through the hiddenness, wanting to know more clearly, what we thought was holy ground turns out to be a playground for idolatry. Our reading, then, is inescapably provisional. It is rightly done with the modesty of those who are always to be surprised again by what is “strange and new.”

Interpretation. Recognizing the claim of biblical authority is not difficult as it pertains to the main affirmations of apostolic faith. But from that base line, the hard, disputatious work of interpretation needs to be recognized precisely for what it is: nothing more than interpretation. As our mothers and fathers have always known, the Bible is not self-evident and self-interpreting, and the Reformers did not mean to say that it was so when they escaped the church’s magisterium. Rather the Bible requires and insists upon human interpretation, which is inescapably subjective, necessarily provisional and inevitably disputatious. I propose as an interpretive rule that all of our interpretations need to be regarded, at the most, as having only tentative authority. This will enable us to make our best, most insistent claims, but

then regularly relinquish our pet interpretations and, together with our partners in dispute, fall back in joy into the inherent apostolic claims that outdistance all of our too familiar and too partisan interpretations. We may learn from the rabbis the marvelous rhythm of deep interpretive dispute and profound common yielding in joy and affectionate well-being. The characteristic and sometimes demonic mode of Reformed interpretation is not tentativeness and relinquishment, but tentativeness hardening into absoluteness. It often becomes a sleight-of-hand act, substituting our interpretive preference for the inherency of apostolic claims.

The process of interpretation which precludes final settlement on almost all questions is evident in the Bible itself. A stunning case in point is the Mosaic teaching in Deuteronomy 23:1-8 that bans from the community all those with distorted sexuality and all those who are foreigners. In Isaiah 56:3-8 this Mosaic teaching is overturned in the Bible itself, offering what Herbert Donner terms an intentional “abrogation” of Mosaic law through new teaching. The old, no doubt circumstance-driven exclusion is answered by a circumstance-driven inclusiveness.

In Deuteronomy 24:1, moreover, Moses teaches that marriages broken in infidelity cannot be restored, even if both parties want to get back together. But in Jeremiah 3, in a shocking reversal given in a pathos-filled poem, God’s own voice indicates a readiness to violate that Torah teaching for the sake of restored marriage to Israel. The old teaching is seen to be problematic even for God. The latter text shows God prepared to move beyond the old prohibition of Torah in order that the inherent evangelical claims of God’s graciousness may be fully available even to a recalcitrant Israel. In embarrassment and perhaps even in humiliation, the God of Jeremiah’s poem willfully overrides the old text. It becomes clear that the interpretive project that constitutes the final form of the text is itself profoundly polyvalent, yielding no single exegetical outcome, but allowing layers and layers of fresh reading in which God’s own life and character are deeply engaged and put at risk.

Imagination. Responsible interpretation requires imagination. I understand that imagination makes serious Calvinists nervous because it smacks of the subjective freedom to carry the text in undeveloped directions and to engage in fantasy. But I would insist that imagination is in any case inevitable in any interpretive process that is more than simple reiteration, and that faithful imagination is characteristically not autonomous fantasy but good-faith extrapolation. I understand imagination, no doubt a complex epistemological process, to be the capacity to

entertain images of meaning and reality that are beyond the givens of observable experience. That is, imagination is the hosting of “otherwise,” and I submit that every serious teacher or preacher invites people to an “otherwise” beyond the evident. Without that we have nothing to say. We must take risks and act daringly to push beyond what is known to that which is hoped for and trusted but not yet in hand.

Interpretation is not the reiteration of the text but, rather, the movement of the text beyond itself in fresh, often formerly unuttered ways. Jesus’ parables are a prime example. They open the listening community to possible futures. Beyond parabolic teaching, however, there was in ancient Israel and in the early church an observant wonder. As eyewitnesses created texts out of observed and remembered miracles, texted miracles in turn become materials for imagination that pushed well beyond what was given or intended even in the text. This is an inescapable process for those of us who insist that the Bible is a contemporary word to us. We transport ourselves out of the 21st century back to the ancient world of the text or, conversely, we transpose ancient voices into contemporary voices of authority.

Those of us who think critically do not believe that the Old Testament was talking about Jesus, and yet we make the linkages. Surely Paul was not thinking of the crisis over 16th-century indulgences when he wrote about “faith alone.” Surely Isaiah was not thinking of Martin Luther King’s dream of a new earth. Yet we make such leaps all the time. What a huge leap to imagine that the primal commission to “till and keep the earth” (Gen. 2:15) is really about environmental issues and the chemicals used by Iowa farmers. Yet we make it. What a huge leap to imagine that the ancient provision for Jubilee in Leviticus 25 has anything to do with the cancellation of Third World debt or with an implied critique of global capitalism. Yet we make it. What a huge leap to imagine that an ancient purity code in Leviticus 18 bears upon consenting gays and lesbians in the 21st century and has anything to do with ordination. Yet we make it.

We are all committed to the high practice of subjective extrapolations because we have figured out that a cold, reiterative objectivity has no missional energy or moral force. We do it, and will not stop doing it. It is, however, surely healing and humbling for us to have enough self-knowledge to concede that what we are doing will not carry the freight of absoluteness.

Imagination can indeed be a gift of the Spirit, but it is a gift used with immense subjective freedom. Therefore, after our imaginative interpretations are made with vigor in dispute with others in the church, we must regularly, gracefully and with modesty fall back from our best extrapolations to the sure apostolic claims that lie behind our extremities of imagination, liberal or conservative.

Ideology. A consideration of ideology is difficult for us because we American churchpeople are largely innocent about our own interpretive work. We are seldom aware of or honest about the ways in which our work is shot through with distorting vested interests. But it is so, whether we know it or not. There is no interpretation of scripture (nor of anything else) that is unaffected by the passions, convictions and perceptions of the interpreter. Ideology is the self-deceiving practice of taking a part for the whole, of taking “my truth” for the truth, of palming off the particular as a universal. It is so already in the text of scripture itself, as current scholarship makes clear, because the spirit-given text is given us by and through human authors. It is so because spirit-filled interpretation is given us by and through bodied authors who must make their way in the world—and in making our way, we humans do not see so clearly or love so dearly or follow so nearly as we might imagine.

There are endless examples of ideology at work in interpretation. Historical criticism is no innocent practice, for it intends to fend off church authority and protect the freedom of the autonomous interpreter. Canonical criticism is no innocent practice, for it intends to maintain old coherences against the perceived threat of more recent fragmentation. High moralism is no innocent practice, even if it sounds disciplined and noble, for much of it grows out of fear and is a strategy to fend off anxiety. Communitarian inclusiveness is no innocent practice, because it reflects a reaction against exclusivism and so is readily given to a kind of reactive carelessness.

There is enough truth in every such interpretive posture and strategy—and a hundred others we might name—to make it credible and to gather a constituency for it. But it is not ideologically innocent, and therefore has no absolute claim.

In a disputatious church, a healthy practice might be to reflect upon the ideological passion not of others, but of one’s self and one’s cohorts. I believe that such reflection would invariably indicate that every passionate interpretive voice is shot through with vested interest, sometimes barely hidden. It is completely predictable that interpreters who are restrictive about gays and lesbians will characteristically advocate high capitalism and a strong national defense. Conversely, those who are

“open and affirming” will characteristically maintain a critique of consumer capitalism, and consensus on a whole cluster of other issues. One can argue that such a package only indicates a theological-ethical coherence. Perhaps, but in no case is the package innocent, since we incline to make our decisions without any critical reflection, but only in order to sustain the package.

Every passionate vested interest has working in it a high measure of anxiety about deep threats, perhaps perceived, perhaps imagined. And anxiety has a force that permits us to deal in wholesale categories without the nuance of the particular. A judgment grounded in anxiety, anywhere on the theological spectrum, does not want to be disturbed or informed by facts on the ground. Every vested interest shaped by anxiety has near its source old fears that are deep and hidden, but for all of that authoritative. Every one has at its very bottom hurt—old hurt, new hurt, hurt for ourselves, for those we remember, for those we love. The lingering, unhealed pain becomes a hermeneutical principle out of which we will not be talked.

Every ideological passion, liberal or conservative, may be encased in scripture itself or enshrined in longstanding interpretation until it is regarded as absolute and trusted as decisive authority. And where an ideology becomes loud and destructive in the interpretive community, we may be sure that the doses of anxiety, fear and hurt within it are huge and finally irrepressible.

I do not for an instant suggest that no distinctions can be made, nor that it is so dark that all cats are gray. And certainly, given our ideological passions, we must go on and interpret in any case. But I do say that in our best judgments concerning scripture, we might be aware enough of our propensity to distort in the service of vested interests, anxiety, fear and hurt that we recognize that our best interpretation might be not only a vehicle for but also a block to and distortion of the crucified truth of the gospel.

I have come belatedly to see, in my own case, that my hermeneutical passion is largely propelled by the fact that my father was a pastor who was economically abused by the church he served, abused as a means of control. I cannot measure the ways in which that felt awareness determines how I work, how I interpret, who I read, whom I trust as a reliable voice. The wound is deep enough to pervade everything; I suspect, moreover, that I am not the only one for whom this is true. It could be that we turn our anxieties, fears and hurts to good advantage as vehicles for obedience. But even in so doing, we are put on notice. We cannot escape from

such passions; but we can submit them to brothers and sisters whose own history of distortion is very different from ours and as powerful in its defining force.

Inspiration. It is traditional to speak of scripture as “inspired.” There is a long history of unhelpful formulations of what that notion might mean. Without appealing to classical formulations that characteristically have more to do with “testing” the spirit (1 John 4:1) than with “not quenching” the spirit (1 Thess. 5:19), we may affirm that the force of God’s purpose, will and capacity for liberation, reconciliation and new life is everywhere in the biblical text. In such an affirmation, of course, we say more than we can understand, for the claim is precisely an acknowledgment that in and through this text, God’s wind blows through and past all our critical and confessional categories of reading and understanding. That powerful and enlivening force, moreover, pertains not simply to the ordaining of the text but to its transmission and interpretation among us.

The spirit will not be regimented, and therefore none of our reading is guaranteed to be inspired. But it does happen on occasion. It does happen that in and through the text we are blown beyond ourselves. It does happen that the spirit teaches, guides and heals through the text, so that the text yields something other than an echo of ourselves. It does happen that in prayer and study believers are led to what is “strange and new.” It does happen that preachers are led to utterances beyond what they set out to make. It does happen that churches, in councils, sessions and other courts, are led beyond themselves, powered beyond prejudice, liberated beyond convention, overwhelmed by the capacity for new risks.

Importance. Biblical interpretation, done with imagination willing to risk ideological distortion, open to the inspiring spirit, is important. But it is important not because it might allow some to seize control of the church, but because it gives the world access to the good truth of the God who creates, redeems and consummates. That missional intention is urgent in every circumstance and season. The church at its most faithful has always understood that we read scripture for the sake of the church’s missional testimony.

But the reading of the Bible is now especially urgent because our society is sore tempted to reduce the human project to commodity. In its devotion to the making of money it reduces persons to objects and thins human communications to electronic icons. Technique in all its military modes and derivatively in every other mode threatens us. Technique is aimed at control, the fencing out of death, the fencing out

of gift and, eventually, the fencing out of humanness.

Nonetheless, we in the church dare affirm that the lively word of scripture is the primal antidote to technique, the primal news that fends off trivialization. Thinning to control and trivializing to evade ambiguity are the major goals of our culture. The church in its disputatious anxiety is tempted to join the move to technique, to thin the Bible and make it one-dimensional, deeply tempted to trivialize the Bible by acting as though it is important because it may solve some disruptive social inconvenience. The dispute tends to reduce what is rich and dangerous in the book to knowable technique, and what is urgent and immense to exhaustible trivia.

The Bible is too important to be reduced in this way because the dangers of the world are too great and the expectations of God are too large. What if liberals and conservatives in the church, for all their disagreement, would together put their energies to upholding the main truth against the main threat? The issues before God's creation (of which we are stewards) are immense; those issues shame us when our energy is deployed only to settle our anxieties. The biblical script insists that the world is not without God, not without the holy gift of life rooted in love. And yet we twitter! The Bible is a lamp and light to fend off the darkness. The darkness is real, and the light is for walking boldly, faithfully in a darkness we do not and cannot control. In this crisis, the church must consider what is entrusted peculiarly to us in this book.

Recently an Israeli journalist in Jerusalem commented on the fracturing dispute in Israel over who constitutes a real Jew, orthodox, conservative or reform. And he said about the dispute, "If any Jew wins, all Jews lose." Think about it: "If anyone wins, everyone loses."

This article is adapted from an address he gave to the Covenant Network in November.