

Letting scripture work

by [David L. Bartlett](#) in the [March 3, 1999](#) issue

*By John P. Burgess, Why Scripture Matters. (Westminster John Knox, 186 pp.)*

A more accurate title for John Burgess's book might be *How Scripture Matters* or more modestly *How Scripture Might Matter*. Burgess does not attempt to add to the ever growing library on the doctrine of scriptural authority. Rather, he tries to show how churches can better let scripture work authoritatively in their midst.

To suggest how Christians should read scripture, Burgess uses two images as rough analogues. On the one hand, we are to understand scripture sacramentally. In the reading of scripture, as in the Lord's Supper, the ordinary (words now, not bread and wine) mediates the holy. On the other hand, we are to understand the poetic nature of biblical language. Like poetry, it implies more than it says and cannot be reduced either to a set of rules or to a list of facts.

Burgess, associate professor of theology at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, suggests four concrete ways to enact the appropriate authority of scripture. We can read the texts aloud. We can memorize scripture (so that the Bible becomes the background to our lives, not just a book to throw open to score debating points). We can read scripture in context (there is still a place for historical criticism and for reading a text in the larger context of the canon). And, perhaps most important, we can read scripture together: the Bible is a gift to the community even more than to the individual believer or seeker.

Burgess hopes that if we attend to his models and follow his guidelines, we may be able to deal more openly and faithfully with church conflict, especially in regard to issues of sexuality. At the end of the book he provides two guides to further reflection—a model of the kind of reading he advocates, with a nuanced discussion of Matthew 4:1-11, and a bibliographical essay to help readers think further on the issues he has raised.

Though the book is wise and suggestive, it raises a few questions. The emphasis on the "poetry-like" nature of scripture runs the danger of making aesthetic sensibility a precondition of faithful reading. Some people "get" poetry and some don't. The

riches of scripture can't be the exclusive property of the former group. Furthermore, if all scripture is like poetry, how do we distinguish the Psalms from Leviticus or from Romans? Psalm 8 or even Genesis 2-3 can easily be treated as poetry; Leviticus 19 or Romans 1 can't.

Sometimes Burgess seems to suggest that if we could just get back to the Bible and away from our secular biases, we could come to a kinder dialogue, if not to consensus, on controversial issues. Yet in an endnote he acknowledges that some of the "secular" values that surround such issues as tolerance themselves have scriptural roots. Sometimes "secular" values exert a good influence on developing religious values. Monogamy became the norm for Jews and Christians through the influence of the pagan Roman world, not through meditating on Hebrew scripture. And the Bible itself (especially in the wisdom literature) is sometimes deliberately open to empirical knowledge. Burgess also acknowledges that discussions of sexuality need to attend to what we learn from science and the social sciences. Burgess's assumption that churches following his guidelines will have more open and fruitful discussions of controversial issues is a matter of faith-but faith is what we live by.