

The Authority & Interpretation of the Bible

One of the things Anglicanism believes, across the spectrum, is that the Bible, in the words of Article 6 of *The Thirty-Nine Articles*, ‘containeth all things necessary to salvation.’

The Article means that we Anglicans are committed to an intelligent understanding and wholehearted following of the Bible: in its revelation of God and the forming of God’s people; in its intricate, overarching narratives that make sense of human existence; in its teachings on spiritual and moral issues; and, above all, in its adherence to Jesus Christ, the Word of God incarnate, crucified and risen: the core interpreting principle of the Bible.

The immediate issue dividing us across Anglicanism is not actually biblical authority in itself but rather the interpretation of the Bible. Anglican Christians disagree, not on the centrality of Scripture, but rather on the ways in which Scripture is to be interpreted for us today.

To my mind, there are three principles involved in interpreting Scripture. In the first place, hearkening to Scripture means taking seriously the diverse contexts out of which it arises. This includes awareness of the ancient world more generally which is so very different from the modern Western world in its values and structures. It also includes listening to the immediate contexts out of which individual texts might have emerged. Our question is this: to what people and what immediate context are the biblical authors addressing their narratives, prophecies, rhetoric, teachings?

This question is of vital importance in interpreting Scripture because it is possible for any of us to make erroneous assumptions about what the text means. It is all-too-easy to view the text as a mirror in which we see only our own preferred worldview, our own presuppositions, even our own prejudices, reflected back at us.

The second issue is that tradition plays a role in understanding and interpreting Scripture. The early creeds and councils of the Church in the first centuries outlined core aspects of Christian belief. The doctrines of the Trinity and the two natures of Christ are not always explicit in the New Testament. These teachings are drawn out through the experience and reflection of the early church into something much clearer and more specific, something to which we as Anglicans give our assent.

The noted Anglican scholar, Kevin Giles, has argued that tradition plays a part in the interpretation of the Bible (in *What the Bible actually Teaches about Women*). For him tradition represents the ongoing consensus of the church in its exploration of scriptural truth for the current context. It may take time and disagreement before the church reaches consensus on a particular matter but the discussion and even the disagreement are part of the process.

What needs to be discerned, says Giles, is the difference between church teaching that goes beyond the Scripture — that is, moving into new areas that the Bible itself does not envisage — and teaching that goes directly against it. The former is inevitable; the latter theologically problematical. However, on how this distinction operates, Anglicans may sharply disagree.

Yet we all agree that new problems and new contexts that have no direct word from Scripture require new answers, guided by theological principles that derive ultimately from the Bible itself.

The third aspect that is essential in interpreting Scripture is the role of experience. Previous generations might have spoken of this as ‘reason’ but in the end it refers to something similar: the lived out Christian reflection on our context and on creaturely existence in general that informs and shapes our response to Scripture.

In *Surprised by Joy*, C.S. Lewis comments that ‘the universe is true wherever you fairly test it.’ This wise statement confirms that reason and experience can be helpful guides and have a role to play in our interpreting of Scripture. The teachings of the Bible are neither irrational nor arbitrary. They are not there to test our credibility. Rather they arise from the experience of community — Israel and the Church — and are directed at shaping and deepening that experience. Biblical teaching does not run contrary to reason, though it may well take us beyond it.

To complicate matters further we also believe that the Holy Spirit not only inspired the sacred writings but also continues to inspire its interpreters, whether they be scholars and theologians or ordinary Christians endeavouring to live their lives as faithful disciples of Christ in the light of God’s gracious and sovereign rule.

This theological belief presents us with a challenge. It means, apart from anything else, that we need to gather around the Scriptures in dialogue not only with the text but also with one another, bringing our diverse perspectives to bear on how we read and live out the sacred writings. We need each other to understand the text, even when (especially when?) we disagree, and we need to remain in prayerful and dynamic conversation with each other. That is part of what it means to be church.

To sum up: as Anglicans we accept the authority of Scripture in its prophetic and apostolic witness to Jesus Christ, the Word of God. Where we differ is in the ways in which we interpret the text. That might include the different weightings we give to tradition and experience or reason in our interpretation of Scripture. To my mind, Scripture always comes first: to feed and nurture tradition, to help us interpret experience, to show us how to reason in the light of divine revelation.

Our commitment to worship, mission and evangelism — the drawing of people to Christ, the care of creation, and the need to transform unjust social structures — is sourced and nourished by the Bible itself and provides the basis of unity. We are united in our love of the gospel and our desire to proclaim it to the world around us in word and deed. Together, in our diverse readings of the text — no matter how painfully we disagree at times — we are called to bear living witness to Jesus Christ, to the holy Trinity, and to the comprehensive reach and reality of God's grace.

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<https://tma.melbourneanglican.org.au/2022/09/we-all-accept-the-authority-of-scripture-where-we-differ-is-its-interpretation/>