
Barriers That Prevent Us From Encountering the Word

Common Pitfalls in Reading Scripture

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Here are some common pitfalls in reading Scripture. They are best demonstrated when a group practices reading the Scriptures in ways that make these barriers clear AND when they offer fresh readings that demonstrate alternatives.

1. Hyper-Personalism

We tend to fuse ourselves with Scripture in a way that prevents us from experiencing the otherness and distance of the Word. Premature closeness leads to false intimacy. We need to respect and honor the voices in the text and let the text do the work of engaging, challenging, encouraging, unmaking and remaking us. In a sense, we need to dummy up before the text, stand with the text and let the text speak its liberating Word of Life.

2. Domestication

Our tendency is to “tame” Scripture and make it safe. While we desire to encounter Scripture on its own terms and allow it to speak its liberating word in into our lives, very often we (consciously or unconsciously) work to control it. Because of our fears (real or imagined) we “de-claw” it and domesticate it. We are eager to protect ourselves from its transformational nature. Safe and self-absorbed interpretations come almost automatically.

- As we address the text we must confess the temptation to tame it and force to conform to our ideas, desires and self-interests.
- Reflect from a place of active listening. Humble unknowing. Respect for the other. A place of non-power.
- Reading the Bible (Old and New Testament) means that we keep in mind the NT’s claim about Jesus. Jesus is the most complete revelation of God (Col. 1:15) Reading the Bible from the perspective of faith in Jesus unlocks the Scriptures and releases its untamable liberating power.

3. Reductionism

We often reduce the complex realities of life into simple formulas. Unfortunately, this easily gives way to overly simplistic thinking. We are uneasy with mystery. We like to compartmentalize the world in artificial categories of black and white – often these categories are extremely rigid and unyielding. But so much of Scripture calls us into mystery and paradox. It resists the temptation to be overly simplistic. Instead, Scripture often “complexifies” things and asks us to be willing to do the same.

- We must acknowledge our resistance to mystery and our desire to over-simplify things because of our need for control.
- Be willing to explore the complexities of Scripture and live with those tensions.

4. Isolationism

We tend towards isolation - especially from those who are different or distant from us. This adversely affects our reading of Scripture because Scripture casts a wide net and is most liberating when read in the context of a broad and diverse community, especially among those who are marginalized. If we live in a closed community with rigid boundaries, the temptation is to have a closed and rigid reading of Scripture. In that case, we easily smuggle our political, cultural and ideological leanings into our interpretation of the text without even knowing it and gut the text of its power to transform.

- Read Scripture from the “margins” the place where God prefers to be... the poor, rejected... and their context.
- Read Scripture in canonical context... not just your favorite passages.
- Read in communion with saints who have preceded us.
- Read with the lens of diverse theological approaches (i.e. Protestant, Catholic, Mainline, Orthodox, Pentecostal).
- Let your reflection be in active dialogue with social sciences (psychology, sociology, political science).
- Let your reflection be in active dialogue with the “powers” (i.e. courts, police, immigration, politicians).

5. Heroism

Hero worship stems from a deep desire to “clean-up” humanity and celebrate the human potential. We desperately want heroes to remind us of how truly deserving we can be. To that end, we dangerously elevate certain Biblical characters as models to emulate (Abraham, Jacob, David). Creating Biblical heroes is often a backdoor way of escaping the scandalous nature of God’s grace. We are constantly tempted to try and contribute to our own salvation by maximizing our role in it. We are tempted to maximize our role and minimize God’s. Ironically, heroism is often a twisted attempt to rescue God as well as ourselves from the reality of the Cross. The Biblical narrative has only one hero – God.

- Avoid searching the Bible for model characters. This can easily blind us to the anti-heroic nature of Biblical characters. Consider (Abraham, Jacob, David).
- Avoid minimizing the failings of Biblical characters.
- Resist “cleaning-up” Biblical characters even for the youngest crowd. They understand failure better than we think. Rather than maximizing their contributions, use their failures as a way of pointing to God’s overwhelming and sometimes scandalous grace.

6. Moralism

Very often we come to the Bible as though it were a rule book primarily concerned with our behavior and our activity. We often search the Bible looking for information about what we are supposed to “do” in a given situation. Like the rich young ruler we want to know, “What must I do to be saved?” But the Bible is not a rule book about what we are supposed to do. The Bible tells the story of a God who saves by grace. (Ro. 3:22-26, Gal. 3:21-29, Eph. 2:12-22). Moralism turns away from grace and makes us and our activity the focus of Scripture rather than God and his activity.

- Resist the temptation to interpret all passages as lessons of personal morality and therefore miss the larger story line. (i.e. the parable of the prodigal son is not a recipe for how we should stop sinning and return to God, as much as it’s about the overwhelming love of God towards those who are lost).
- Consciously ask the question, :What does this Scripture tell us about who God is? What has God done for us according to this passage. What part do humans play or not play? Who really is the subject of the passage?

7. Dualism

This is the tendency to disincarnate the Word. We divide reality into two realms – spiritual and material. We are tempted to think that spiritual realm is good and the material realm is bad. (Consider the Gnostics that Paul addressed throughout his Epistles). When applied to our interpretation of Scripture we are tempted to disembody or disincarnate Scripture from its human and historical context. Very often we fear the humanness of the text just like we fear the humanness of God in Jesus. As a result Scripture becomes a set of free-floating abstract principles that are not grounded in real life flesh and blood. As a result Scripture is easily misapplied, mishandled, abused and often irrelevant to daily life.

- Always seek to understand the real life context in which the Scripture was written.
- Do not jump over the realities of the human condition to get the “spiritual” truth of the passage.
- Acknowledge and bring your own real life context into dialogue with the text.
- Never let the text become a disembodied disincarnated abstraction.

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