

CHAPTER 3

Scripture As Text: Learning What God Reveals

Our lives, that is, our experience — what we need and want and feel — are important in forming the Christ-life in us. Our lives are, after all, the stuff that is being formed. But they are not the text for directing the formation itself. Spirituality means, among other things, taking ourselves seriously. It means going against the cultural stream in which we are incessantly trivialized to the menial status of producers and performers, constantly depersonalized behind the labels of our degrees or our salaries. But there is far more to us than our usefulness and our reputation, where we've been and who we know; there is the unique, irreproducible, eternal, image-of-God *me*. A vigorous assertion of personal dignity is foundational to spirituality.

There is a sense in which we can never take ourselves too seriously. We are serious business indeed. We are “fearfully and wonderfully made” (Ps. 139:14 NRSV). But it is possible to conceive of ourselves too narrowly, for there is far more to us than our genes

and hormones, our emotions and aspirations, our jobs and ideals. There is God. Most, if not all, of what and who we are has to do with God. If we try to understand and form ourselves by ourselves we leave out most of ourselves.

And so the Christian community has always insisted that Holy Scripture that reveals God's ways to us is necessary and basic to our formation as human beings. In our reading of this book we come to realize that what we need is not primarily informational, telling us things about God and ourselves, but formational, shaping us into our true being.

It is the very nature of language to form rather than inform. When language is personal, which it is at its best, it reveals; and revelation is always formative — we don't know more, we become more. Our best users of language, poets and lovers and children and saints, use words to *make* — make intimacies, make character, make beauty, make goodness, make truth.

The Revealing and Revealed God

We begin at the beginning. We call this book “revelation,” God revealing himself and his ways to us, not so much telling us something, but *showing* himself. Books have authors. However we conceive the words to have gotten written on the pages of our Bibles, the Christian church has always held that God is somehow or other responsible for this book in a revelatory

way, in contrast to a merely informational way. The authority of the Bible is immediately derived from the authorial presence of God. In other words, this is not an impersonal authority, an assemblage of facts or truths. This is not the bookish authority that we associate with legislation codified in a law library, or the factual authority of a textbook on mathematics. This is revelation, personally revealed — letting us in on something, telling us person to person what it means to live our lives as men and women created in the image of God.

The early Christian community was handed, ready-made, a Bible, what we now name the Old Testament, the Torah and Prophets and Writings that were normative for the Hebrew people. For the first generation or so those Hebrew scrolls were the Christian Bible. But then the writings of Paul and other leaders in the early Christian communities began to be circulated widely, and the stories of Jesus that provided content for the good news, the “gospel” that was being gladly and urgently preached and taught, were written down. These writings were recognized to be continuous with the Holy Scriptures that they were already honoring and believing, preaching from and teaching. It gradually became obvious to them that the two sets of writings were congruent with one another, that there was an “authorial” continuity between these Hebrew Scriptures that had been part of their tradition for so long and these new Gospels and letters that were emerging from the worshipping and

witnessing Christians. The recognition took awhile; it didn’t happen all at once. After all, it required a considerable readjustment of the imagination to put a slim book written by Mark in the same company as the massive five volumes of God’s word attributed to Moses. It was a tall order to take Paul’s letters written to upstart and untested groups of new Christian nobodies and place them on a par with the centuries-tested Psalms and magisterial Isaiah. Brilliantly written as Paul’s letters were, that didn’t seem likely to happen. But it did happen. The holy community ended up putting the two sets together, the two “testaments,” making a single book out of them, our Holy Bible. In a hundred years or so, the early Christians had essentially the same Holy Bible that we have today.

Not everybody agreed on what was done: the vote was not unanimous. There were factions that wanted nothing to do with the old Hebrew scrolls. They argued that the God in evidence in those old books was not even remotely connected with the God revealed and preached by Jesus. And there were other factions (various groups of gnostics) who went to the other extreme — they wanted to include anything that looked good, that promised an “inside” message, from among the many spiritually uplifting texts being written. “Insider” and “uplift” spiritualities were as popular then as they are now. But bit by bit the Christian community sifted out the sensational and the silly and were bold to designate their consensus as God’s word.

The Holy Trinity: Keeping It Personal

What is supremely significant for us right now in understanding how to read this text is what happened as they put these two sets of writings together. They started out with the Scriptures that were normative for God's people Israel. They soon acquired these new Gospels and letters written out of the newly formed Christian community. Now they had to account for the continuities they perceived in these very different sets of books.

In the course of their talking and writing the consensus that emerged was that embedded in all these differences and diversities there was a single voice and that this voice was personal, the voice of God revealing himself. They accounted for this personal, revealing quality by formulating what we now name the Trinity. Trinity is an imaginative construct for enabling us to keep the diversity of the revelation coherent and whole. This is not the place to engage in an extensive discussion of the Trinity; what I want to say in this context is that our ancestors came up with this concept, "trinity," in the process of reading these same Scriptures that we are reading, in order to maintain the sense of a single, personal voice, in the midst of all the voices.

By the fourth and fifth centuries the best minds of the church were concentrating on reading these

Scriptures and understanding how God exercised his sovereignty personally and uniquely among us. Their formulation of the Holy Trinity is an incredible work of genius, large enough and detailed enough to both account for everything that God is and has done, is doing, and will do, and at the same time show that all of us, no matter who we are or what we do or where we are from, are included. They worked hard and long at this formulation, calling councils, writing books, arguing, preaching, lobbying, and, yes, fighting. It was important to get it right and they knew it. They knew it was not a job they could leave to scholarly theologians working in libraries — this was person-in-the-street stuff. It had to do with *living* right, not just thinking right, with keeping everything in these Bibles of ours personal and livable.

In essence, what they came up with was this: As we read these Scriptures, what we realize is that God has a stable and coherent identity: God is one. But God also reveals himself in various ways that at first don't always seem to fit together. There are three obvious ways in which we see God working and revealing himself: the Father (the entire world of creation is in the forefront here), the Son (here we're dealing with the mess of history invaded by Jesus Christ and his work of salvation), and the Spirit (the pulling of our lives into God's life is the experienced element in this). It is always the same God, but the "person" or the "face" or "voice" by which we receive the revelation varies.¹

But here's the thing: every part of the revelation, every aspect, every form is *personal* — God is relational at the core — and so whatever is said, whatever is revealed, whatever is received is also personal and relational. There is nothing impersonal, nothing merely functional, everything from beginning to end and in between is personal. God is inherently and inclusively personal.

The corollary to that is that I, because I am a person, am personally involved in the revelation. Every word I hear, everything I see in my imagination as this story unfolds, involves me relationally, pulls me into participation, *matters* to my core identity, affects who I am and what I do.

What I want to emphasize is that Trinitarian thinking developed out of two or three hundred years of our mothers and fathers patiently, prayerfully, intelligently reading these two Testaments and gradually realizing that the differences weren't all that different. As they read and listened to these sentences of Isaiah and Paul, Moses and Mark, David and John, they realized that they were hearing the same voice, which they named the Word of God. And as they heard and listened to this voice, they also heard themselves *addressed* — addressed as persons who possessed dignity and purpose and freedom, persons capable of believing and loving and obeying.

The authorial character of the Holy Scriptures was established as personal in the persons of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Because it was personal it was also

relational, which meant that all reading/listening of Holy Scripture required personal, relational, participatory reading/listening. This was accompanied by the realization that these Holy Scriptures in which God was revealing everything of who God is, also included everything of who we are: there is comprehensiveness and personal participation on both sides, author and reader.

This may be the single most important thing to know as we come to read and study and believe these Holy Scriptures: this rich, alive, personally revealing God as experienced in Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, personally addressing us in whatever circumstances we find ourselves, at whatever age we are, in whatever state we are — me, you, us. Christian reading is participatory reading, receiving the words in such a way that they become interior to our lives, the rhythms and images becoming practices of prayer, acts of obedience, ways of love.

We must not, even for a moment, suppose that Trinity is something thought up by theologians to deal with advanced mysteries quite remote from the daily work of people like us who have babies and have to work for a living. No, it was the work of Christians like us (some of them maybe a little smarter than we are!) learning and teaching each other how to read their Bibles as fully and attentively and personally and responsively as they were able. They wanted to read in such a way that their lives became congruent with the text. Convinced that this text was the

authority for living well both now and into eternity, they wanted to get it all and get it right.

Depersonalizing the Text

But not everyone reads the Bible this way or wants to read it this way. Many find it interesting for other reasons, are attracted to it for other uses. The Bible has acquired a lot of authority through the centuries, and it is thought to be useful or interesting or helpful in ways other than involving us in the revelation of God.

There have always been a considerable number of people, for instance, who are fascinated by the intellectual challenges posed by the Bible. If you have a curious mind and like to use it in demanding ways, you can hardly do better than become a scholar of Holy Scripture. Walk into any theological library and meander through the aisles of the carefully cataloged books that have been written on the Bible and the various books of the Bible and you are simply staggered. Pick a book off the shelf at random and you are almost certain to find yourself holding the evidence of a first-class mind who has been quarrying these sentences for truth and coming up with most impressive and interesting results. Language, history, culture, ideas, geography, poetry — you name it, the Bible has it. A person can spend a lifetime before this Bible — reading, studying, lecturing, and writing — and never exhaust it.

There are others who come to the Bible with a more practical bent: They want to live well and have their children and neighbors live well. They know that the Bible provides sound counsel and provides trustworthy directions for getting on in the world, which is popularly assumed to involve becoming healthy, wealthy, and wise. The Bible has a reputation for charting a sound course for both personal and social behavior, and these people want to benefit from it. People as a general rule are an intractable lot with a tendency to get into trouble. This Bible can keep us out of the ditch and on the straight and narrow.

And, of course, there are always a considerable number of people who read the Bible for what is often called inspiration. There are so many beautiful and comforting passages in the Bible. When we are lonely or in grief or wanting some words that get us out of the humdrum, what is there better than the Bible? The stirring Elijah stories, the grand rhythms of the Psalms, the artful thunder of Isaiah's preaching, the charming parables of Jesus, the charged energy of Paul's teaching. If you're after devotionally cozy Bible reading, you have to pick and choose a good bit — there are such huge chunks of it that either put you to sleep or keep you awake nights. But there are little crib sheets readily available at most Bible bookstores that tell you what parts of the Bible to read when you want to be comforted or consoled — or whatever your present disposition requires.

I don't want to be too hard on any one of these groups of Bible-readers, especially since I've spent considerable time in each group myself, but I do want to call attention to the conspicuous fact that in whatever group you find yourself, you will be *using* the Bible for *your* purposes, and those purposes will not necessarily require anything of you relationally. It is entirely possible to come to the Bible in total sincerity, responding to the intellectual challenge it gives, or for the moral guidance it offers, or for the spiritual uplift it provides, and not in any way have to deal with a personally revealing God who has personal designs on you.

Or to put it in the terms in which we started out: It is possible to read the Bible from a number of different angles and for various purposes without dealing with God as God has revealed himself, without setting ourselves under the authority of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit who is alive and present in everything we are and do.

To put it bluntly, not everyone who gets interested in the Bible and even gets excited about the Bible wants to get involved with God.

But God is what the book is about. C. S. Lewis, in the last book he wrote, talked about two kinds of reading, the reading in which we use a book for our own purposes and the reading in which we receive the author's purposes. The first ensures only bad reading; the second opens the possibility to good reading:

When we "receive" it we exert our senses and imagination and various other powers according to a pattern invented by the artist. When we "use" it we treat it as assistance for our own activities.... "Using" is inferior to "reception" because art, if used rather than received, merely facilitates, brightens, relieves or palliates our life, and does not add to it.²

That is why an awareness of what the church has formulated as the Holy Trinity is so important as we come to this book, the Bible. We read in order to get in on the revelation of God, who is so emphatically *personal*; we read the Bible the way it comes to us, not in the way we come to it; we submit ourselves to the various and complementary operations of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit; we receive these words so that we can be formed now and for eternity to the glory of God.

The Replacement Trinity

A new twist on non-Trinitarian ways of reading the Bible has emerged in our times. It has reached the scale of an epidemic and requires special attention. It can be understood best, I think, as a replacement Trinity. Unlike the depersonalized readings of the text that we have just marked (intellectual, practical, inspirational), this way is very personal and also very Trinitarian, but also totally at odds with what is achieved while reading in submission to the authority of the Holy Trinity.

Trinitarian thinking/praying before Holy Scripture cultivates a stance and attitude that submits to being comprehensively formed by God in the way God comprehensively and personally reveals himself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the Holy Scriptures. The alternative to that is taking charge of our own formation. The most popular way of conceiving this self these days is by understanding the self in a Trinitarian way. This way of self-understanding is not as an intellectual interested in ideas or as a moral being seeking a good life or as a soul looking for solitary solace, but as a divine self in charge of my self. And this divine self is understood as a Holy Trinity.

Here's how it works. It is important to observe that in the formulation of this new Trinity that defines the self as the sovereign text for living, the Bible is neither ignored nor banned; it holds, in fact, an honored place. But the three-personal Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is replaced by a very individualized personal Trinity of my Holy Wants, my Holy Needs, and my Holy Feelings.

We live in an age in which we have all been trained from the cradle to choose for ourselves what is best for us. We have a few years of apprenticeship at this before we are sent out on our own, but the training begins early. By the time we can hold a spoon we choose between half a dozen cereals for breakfast, ranging from Cheerios to Corn Flakes. Our tastes, inclinations, and appetites are consulted endlessly. We are soon deciding what clothes we will wear and in

what style we will have our hair cut. The options proliferate: what TV channels we will view, what courses we will take in school, what college we will attend, what courses we will sign up for, what model and color of car we will buy, what church we will join. We learn early, with multiple confirmations as we grow older, that we have a say in the formation of our lives and, within certain bounds, the decisive say. If the culture does a thorough job on us — and it turns out to be mighty effective with most of us — we enter adulthood with the working assumption that whatever we need and want and feel forms the divine control center of our lives.

The new Holy Trinity. The sovereign self expresses itself in Holy Needs, Holy Wants, and Holy Feelings. The time and intelligence that our ancestors spent on understanding the sovereignty revealed in Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are directed by our contemporaries in affirming and validating the sovereignty of our needs, wants, and feelings.

My needs are non-negotiable. My so-called rights, defined individually, are fundamental to my identity. My need for fulfillment, for expression, for affirmation, for sexual satisfaction, for respect, my need to get my own way — all these provide a foundation to the centrality of *me* and fortify my self against diminution.

My wants are evidence of my expanding sense of kingdom. I train myself to think big because I am big, important, significant. I am larger than life and so re-

quire more and more goods and services, more things and more power. Consumption and acquisition are the new fruits of the spirit.

My feelings are the truth of who I am. Any thing or person who can provide me with ecstasy, with excitement, with joy, with stimulus, with spiritual connection validates my sovereignty. This, of course, involves employing quite a large cast of therapists, travel agents, gadgets and machines, recreations and entertainments to cast out the devils of boredom or loss or discontent — all the feelings that undermine or challenge my self-sovereignty.

In the last two hundred years a huge literature, both scholarly and popular, has developed around understanding this new Holy Trinity of Needs, Wants, and Feelings that make up the sovereign self. It amounts to an immense output of learning. Our new class of spiritual masters is composed of scientists and economists, physicians and psychologists, educators and politicians, writers and artists. They are every bit as intelligent and passionate as our earlier church theologians and every bit as religious and serious, for they know that what they come up with has enormous implications for everyday living. The studies they conduct and the instruction they provide in the service of the god that is us, the godhead composed by our Holy Needs, Holy Wants, and Holy Feelings, are confidently pursued and very convincing. It is very hard not to be convinced with all these experts giving their witness. Under their tutelage I become

quite sure that I am the authoritative text for the living of my life.

We might suppose that the preaching of this new Trinitarian religion poses no great threat to people who are baptized in the threefold name of the Trinity, who regularly and prayerfully recite the Trinitarian Apostles' and Nicene creeds, who begin prayers with the invocation, "Our Father ...," who daily get out of bed to follow Jesus as Lord and Savior and frequently sing, "Come Holy Spirit, heavenly dove...."

But this rival sovereignty is couched in such spiritual language, and we are so easily convinced of our own spiritual sovereignty, that it does catch our attention. The new spiritual masters assure us that all our spiritual needs are included in the new Trinity: our need for meaning and transcendence, our wanting a larger life, our feelings of spiritual significance — and, of course, there is plenty of space to make room for God, as much or as little as you like. The new Trinity doesn't get rid of God or the Bible, it merely puts them to the service of needs, wants, and feelings. Which is fine with us, for we've been trained all our lives to treat everyone and everything that way. It goes with the territory. It's the prerogative of sovereignty.

What has become devastatingly clear in our day is that the core reality of the Christian community, the sovereignty of God revealing himself in three persons, is contested and undermined by virtually everything we learn in our schooling, everything presented to us

in the media, every social, workplace, and political expectation directed our way as the experts assure us of the sovereignty of self. These voices seem so perfectly tuned to us, so authoritatively expressed and custom-designed to show us how to live out our sovereign selves, that we are hardly aware that we have traded in our Holy Bibles for this new text, the Holy Self. And don't we still attend Bible studies and read our assigned verse or chapter each day? As we are relentlessly encouraged to consult our needs and dreams and preferences, we hardly notice the shift from what we have so long professed to believe.

The danger of installing the self as the authoritative text for living, at the same time that we are honoring the Holy Scriptures by giving them a prominent place on the shelf, is both enormous and insidious. None of us is immune to the danger.

That is why it is so urgent to revive the strong angel's command to St. John. If we want to keep our identity, if we want a text to live by that keeps us in the company of God's people, keeps us conversant with who he is and the way he works, we simply must eat this book.

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The blunt reality is that for all our sophistication, learning, and self-study we don't know enough to run our lives. The sorry state of the lives of the many who have taken their own experience as the text for their lives is a damning refutation of the pretensions of the

sovereignty of the self. We require a text that reveals what we cannot know by simply pooling the acquired knowledge of the ages. The book, the Bible, reveals the self-revealing God and along with that the way the world is, the way life is, the way we are. We need to know the lay of the land that we are living in. We need to know what is involved in this Country of the Trinity, the world of God's creation and salvation and blessing.

God and his ways are not what most of us think. Most of what we are told about God and his ways by our friends on the street, or read about him in the papers, or view on television, or think up on our own, is simply wrong. Maybe not dead wrong, but wrong enough to mess up the way we live. And this book is, precisely, revelation, a revealing of what we could never figure out on our own.

Without this text, firmly established at the authoritative center of our communal and personal lives, we will founder. We will sink into a swamp of well-meaning but ineffectual men and women who are mired unmercifully in our needs and wants and feelings.

Hoshia

A few years ago while in Israel, my wife and I were invited to an Orthodox Jewish synagogue for morning prayers. We were in the little Galilean village of

Hoshia. It was seven-thirty in the morning. There were fourteen or fifteen boys and young men ranging in age from about twelve to seventeen, along with a scattering of older men. The boys were reading the Bible — it was a large scroll that two boys ceremoniously removed from its place (“the ark”), placed reverently on a reading desk, and unrolled to the place of the assigned reading for the morning. They handled it so reverently, so proudly. And then one of them read, but he only seemed to read for he had memorized it, the entire Torah, the first five books of the Bible. We later learned that all the boys had memorized it in its entirety — knew it by heart from beginning to end. And they were so unselfconscious about what they were doing, so boyish, so obviously comfortable and joyful in what they were doing.

When the service of prayers and readings was completed, a few of the boys stayed behind to talk to us. They were so proud of their synagogue and their scrolls, so pleased to be able to tell us what they were doing. They were the furthest things from reluctant schoolboys having to do their lessons, or pious schoolboys trying to impress God with their devotion. They were just boys, but boys who had discovered with delight how the Bible works in them, revealing a living God for their living, these Scriptures being digested

within them as they came together every morning to eat the book.

We were moved by the joyful devotion of those boys to God’s revelation to them in that scroll, by their not talking about but living the centrality and authority of these Holy Scriptures. And then even more deeply moved when we later talked over how many boys and girls and men and women in gatherings all over the world, hungry men and women, were doing the same thing, and how lucky we were to have had so many good meals with so many of them — hearty meals, soul-filling meals.

1. Karl Barth prefers the term “mode of being or existence.... God is one in three modes of being, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.” See his *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 1: *The Doctrine of the Word of God* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1936), part 1, p. 413.

2. C. S. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism* (Cambridge: University Press, 1961), p. 88. Lewis also provided this illustration: “The one [receiving] ... is like being taken for a bicycle ride by a man who may know roads we have never yet explored. The other [using] is like adding one of those little motor attachments to our own bicycle and then going for one of our familiar rides.”