

CHAPTER 4

Scripture As Form: Following the Way of Jesus

The apocalyptic strong angel, taking the cosmos for his pulpit, one foot planted in the ocean and the other on land and holding the Bible in his hand, preached. He preached the word of God. The words written in the text were thunder in the ears of St. John.

John (you will recall) was impressed, grabbed his notebook and pencil, and started to write down what he had just heard. A voice from heaven told him not to write what he had heard, but to take the book and eat it. The words in the book had just been re-voiced, taken off the page and set in motion in the air where they could enter ears. When John started to take the message he had heard, the rolling thunder of those sentences reverberating through land and sea, and write it down, he was stopped short — why, that would be like taking the wind out of the words and flattening them soundless on paper. The preaching angel had just gotten them off the printed page, and now John was going to put them back again. No, says

the heavenly voice — I want those words out there, creating sound waves, entering ears, entering lives. I want those words preached, sung, taught, prayed — *lived*.

The voice then tells John to take the book from the angel. He takes it and the angel tells him, “Eat this book”: Get this book into your gut; get the words of this book moving through your bloodstream; chew on these words and swallow them so they can be turned into muscle and gristle and bone. And he did it; he ate the book.

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I am using the metaphor “Eat this book” as a way of focusing on and clarifying what it means to have these Holy Scriptures and how the holy community has learned to eat them, receive them in a way that forms us into Christians, men and women created and saved and blessed by God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.

The previous chapter, “Scripture As Text: Learning What God Reveals,” was an orientation in the personal, revelatory nature of Holy Scripture. All these words are person-to-person — the three-personed God addressing himself personally to us in our full capacity as persons-in-relationship. The Holy Trinity provided a way of understanding the irreducible personal and relational nature of this text, and affirmed that the only reading congruent with what is written is also personal and participatory.

In this chapter, “Scripture As Form: Following the Way of Jesus,” I want to observe the way in which these personal words arrive in our lives and connect the Jesus way with the way in which we now live them. I want to attend to the way that the form of Scripture is also the form of our lives.

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I begin with a poem by Wendell Berry, one of our century’s wiser guides, in which he uses the small farm on which he lives and works as a metaphor for form as formative. For forty years, in a succession of novels and poems and essays, Berry has been re-ordering our Christian imaginations to cultivate totalities, to live life as a spiritually organic whole. In his poem “From the Crest” he works his metaphor in a way that invites reflection on the form of Holy Scripture as it gives form to the Christian life.

I am trying to teach my mind
to bear the long, slow growth
of the fields, and to sing
of its passing while it waits.

The farm must be made a form,
endlessly bringing together
heaven and earth, light
and rain building, dissolving,
building back again
the shapes and actions of the ground.¹

What Berry sees in his farm as a form, I see in Scripture as a form. Think of the farm as an organic whole, but with boundaries so that you are aware and stay in touch with all the interrelations: the house and barn, the horses and the chickens, the weather of sun and rain, the food prepared in the house and the work done in the fields, the machinery and the tools, the seasons. There are steady, relaxed rhythms in place.

I did not grow up on a farm but did grow up in farming country and was often on farms and ranches. My father was a butcher and so we were often on the farms buying and slaughtering beef and pork and lamb. I’m sure there are exceptions to this, but as I have thought through my early memories of being on those farms, I can’t remember a farmer who was ever in a hurry. Farmers characteristically work hard, but there is too much work to do to be in a hurry. On a farm everything is connected both in place and in time. Nothing is done that isn’t connected to something else; if you get in a hurry, break the rhythms of the land and the seasons and the weather, things fall apart — you get in the way of something set in motion last week or month. A farm is not neat — there is too much going on that is out of your control. Farms help us learn patience and attentiveness: “I am trying to teach my mind / to bear the long, slow growth / of the fields, and to sing / of its passing while it waits.”

If anything or anyone is treated out of context, that is, isolated as a thing in itself apart from season or weather or soil conditions or the condition of

the machinery or persons, it is violated: “The farm must be made a form, / endlessly bringing together / heaven and earth, light / and rain building back again / the shapes and actions of the ground.”

Holy Scripture is a form in just this way: a fenced-in acreage of words and sentences of many different sorts and kinds, but all of them integral to the work that is being done, working in long, steady rhythms in which we, the readers, participate but don’t control. We meditatively enter this world of words and give obedient and glad assent. We submit our lives to this text that is “endlessly bringing together / heaven and earth....”

The Story

The text for Christian living, and therefore for spiritual theology, set within the spacious contours of this Jesus-welcoming, Spirit-anchored, God-defined, and Trinity-framed context, is the Bible, our Holy Scriptures. This Bible turns out to be a large, comprehensive story, a *meta-story*. The Christian life is conducted in story conditions. The Bible is basically and overall a narrative — an immense, sprawling, capacious narrative.

Story is the primary verbal means of bringing God’s word to us. For that we can be most grateful, for story is our most accessible form of speech. Young and old love stories. Literate and illiterate alike tell

and listen to stories. Neither stupidity nor sophistication puts us outside the magnetic field of story. The only serious rival to story in terms of accessibility and attraction is song, and there are plenty of those in the Bible too.

But there is another reason for the appropriateness of story as a major means of bringing us God’s word. Story doesn’t just tell us something and leave it there, it invites our participation. A good storyteller gathers us into the story. We feel the emotions, get caught up in the drama, identify with the characters, see into nooks and crannies of life that we had overlooked, realize that there is more to this business of being human than we had yet explored. If the storyteller is good, doors and windows open. Our biblical storytellers, both Hebrew and Greek, were good in both the moral and aesthetic sense of that word.

Honest stories respect our freedom; they don’t manipulate us, don’t force us, don’t distract us from life. They bring us into the spacious world in which God creates and saves and blesses. First through our imaginations and then through faith — imagination and faith are close kin here — they offer us a place in the story, invite us into this large story that takes place under the broad skies of God’s purposes, in contrast to the gossipy anecdotes that we cook up on a hot plate in the stuffy closet of the self.

Not all stories, of course, are honest. There are sentimentalizing stories that seduce us into escaping from life; there are propagandistic stories that at-

tempt to enlist us in a cause or bully us into a stereotyped response; there are trivializing stories that represent life as merely cute or diverting.

The Christian life requires a form adequate to its content, a form that is at home in the Christian revelation and that respects each person's dignity and freedom with plenty of room for all our quirks and particularities. Story provides that form. The biblical story invites us in as participants in something larger than our sin-defined needs, into something truer than our culture-stunted ambitions. We enter these stories and recognize ourselves as participants, whether willing or unwilling, in the life of God.

Unfortunately, we live in an age in which story has been pushed from its biblical frontline prominence to a bench on the sidelines and then condescended to as “illustration” or “testimony” or “inspiration.” Our contemporary unbiblical preference, both inside and outside the church, is for information over story. We typically gather impersonal (pretentiously called “scientific” or “theological”) information, whether doctrinal or philosophical or historical, in order to take things into our own hands and take charge of how we will live our lives. And we commonly consult outside experts to interpret the information for us. But we don't live our lives by information; we live them in relationships in the context of a personal God who cannot be reduced to formula or definition, who has designs on us for justice and salvation. And we live them in an extensive community of men and women,

each person an intricate bundle of experience and motive and desire. Picking a text for living that is characterized by information-gathering and consultation with experts leaves out nearly everything that is uniquely *us* — our personal histories and relationships, our sins and guilt, our moral character and believing obedience to God. Telling and listening to a story is the primary verbal way of accounting for life the way we live it in actual day-by-day reality. There are no (or few) abstractions in a story. A story is immediate, concrete, plotted, relational, personal. And so when we lose touch with our lives, with our *souls* — our moral, spiritual, embodied God-personal lives — story is the best verbal way of getting us back in touch again. And that is why God's word is given for the most part in the form of story, this vast, overarching, all-encompassing story, this meta-story.

* * *

One of the characteristic marks of the biblical storytellers is a certain reticence. There is an austere, spare quality to their stories. They don't tell us too much. They leave a lot of blanks in the narration, an implicit invitation to enter the story ourselves, just as we are, and discover for ourselves how we fit into it. “The Scripture stories do not, like Homer's, court our favor, they do not flatter us that they may please us and enchant us — they seek to subject us, and if we refuse to be subjected we are rebels.”²

The form in which language comes to us is as important as its content. If we mistake its form, we will almost certainly respond wrongly to its content. If we mistake a recipe for vegetable stew for a set of clues for finding buried treasure, no matter how carefully we read it, we will end up as poor as ever and hungry besides. If we misread a highway road sign, “Speed Limit 60,” as a randomly posted piece of information rather than as a stern imperative, “Don’t drive over 60 miles per hour!” we will eventually find ourselves pulled over on the side of the road with a police officer giving us a brief but expensive course in hermeneutics. Ordinarily, we learn these discriminations early and well, and give form and content equal weight in determining meaning.

But when it comes to Scripture we don’t do nearly as well. Maybe it is because Scripture comes to us so authoritatively — *God’s word!* — that we think all we can do is submit and obey. Submission and obedience are a large part of it, but first we have to listen. And listening requires listening to the *way* it is said (form) as well as to *what* is said (content).

Stories suffer misinterpretation when we don’t submit to them simply as stories. We are caught off-guard when divine revelation arrives in such ordinary garb and mistakenly think it’s our job to dress it up in the latest Paris silk gown of theology, or to outfit it in a sturdy three-piece suit of ethics before we can deal with it. The simple, or not so simple, story is soon, like David under Saul’s armor, so encumbered

with moral admonitions, theological constructs, and scholarly debates that it can hardly move. There are, of course, always moral, theological, historical elements in these stories that need to be studied and ascertained, but never in spite of or in defiance of the story that is being told.

One of many welcome consequences in learning to “read” our lives in the lives of Abraham and Sarah, Moses and Miriam, Hannah and Samuel, Ruth and David, Isaiah and Esther, Mary and Martha, Peter and Paul is a sense of affirmation and freedom: we don’t have to fit into prefabricated moral or mental or religious boxes before we are admitted into the company of God; we are taken seriously just as we are and given a place in his story, for it is, after all, *his* story; none of us is the leading character in the story of our life.

Spiritual theology, using Scripture as text, does not present us with a moral code and tell us “Live up to this”; nor does it set out a system of doctrine and say, “Think like this and you will live well.” The biblical way is to tell a story and in the telling invite: “Live *into* this — this is what it looks like to be human in this God-made and God-ruled world; this is what is involved in becoming and maturing as a human being.” We do violence to the biblical revelation when we “use” it for what we can get out of it or what we think will provide color and spice to our otherwise bland lives. That always results in a kind of “decorator spirituality” — God as enhancement. Christians are not interested in that; we are after something far bigger.

When we submit our lives to what we read in Scripture, we find that we are not being led to see God in our stories but our stories in God's. God is the larger context and plot in which our stories find themselves.

* * *

We require a form that is large enough and resilient enough so that our formation as human beings is not constricted, so that we are not forced into something that is not *us*. We don't want to be stunted in our formation as we grow up in Christ, and we don't want to be forced into something that violates our image-of-God uniqueness.

But by restricting ourselves to a single book, the Bible, don't we risk just such deformations? Isn't there danger that we will outgrow this book? Isn't there danger that this old, old book will impose a way of life on us that we will experience as alien and coercive? Shouldn't we cover our bases with supplementary texts? There are a number of people around who object to the Bible as the authoritative text for our lives on the grounds that it is narrow, constrictive, and imposes a paternalistic worldview on us that we have long outgrown.

We want a spirituality that is world-embracing, all-experience-encompassing. Our sense of life is huge — we are in touch with Asians and Africans and Slavs, with Native Americans and South Americans. We are finding out about the remarkable spiritualities in Australian bush aborigines and the people of the

South African Kalahari. How can we be satisfied to be people of one book?

But maybe we are putting the question wrongly. Perhaps we need to ask how we go about entering into a large life: Do we travel the world and pick up artifacts and souvenirs, bring them home and assemble a museum or workshop in which we can be in visual and sensory touch with as much as possible? Or is there another way to go about it? Does largeness come by acquisition of a lot of stuff from here and there, or by deepening into what is at hand? Do we form a spirituality text on analogy with multinational companies who make their mark by means of buyouts and takeovers, taking control but ignoring local culture and family relationships in order to turn everything they touch into the ultimate depersonalized abstraction, money? Or do we take what is right before us in our own backyard and sink our lives into what is already given to us, enter into the intricacies, the endless organic relationships that make up this world and live in this world? Henry David Thoreau, one of our canonized American sages, wrote of having “traveled a good deal in Concord”³ (the small New England village in which he spent his life). An item in the oral tradition that formed around Louis Agassiz, the celebrated Harvard biologist and professor, remembers that he returned to his classroom after the summer vacation and told his students that he had spent the summer traveling and had made it halfway across his backyard. I want to hold out for traveling widely

in Holy Scripture. For Scripture is the revelation of a world that is vast, far larger than the sin-stunted, self-constricted world that we construct for ourselves out of a garage-sale assemblage of texts.

But this largeness, this spaciousness, comes not from piling up details from the bookish study of Scripture but from a realization of its form. Hans Urs von Balthasar, the twentieth century's premier theologian in Christian spirituality, insisted that in matters of spirituality it is form that is formational:

The content [*Gehalt*] does not lie behind the form [*Gestalt*] but within it. Whoever is not capable of seeing and “reading” the form will, by the same token, fail to perceive the content. Whoever is not illumined by the form will see no light in the content either.⁴

* * *

The story that is Scripture, broadly conceived, is the story of following Jesus. The Christian community has always read this story as not just one story among others but as the meta-narrative that embraces, or can embrace, all stories. If we fail to recognize the capaciousness of this form, we will almost certainly end up treating our biblical text anecdotally as “inspiration” or argumentatively as polemic.

The vast and embracing world of revelation to which our spirituality text gives witness is a narrative form that is badly served when we either atomize or privatize it. We obscure the form when we *atomize* Scripture by dissecting it, analyzing it like a specimen

in the laboratory. Every detail of Scripture is worth pursuing endlessly; no scholarly attention expended over this text is ever wasted. But when the impersonal objectivity of the laboratory technician replaces the adoring dalliance of a lover, we end up with file drawers full of information, organized for our convenience as occasions present themselves. It ceases to function as revelation for us. Far too many contemporary spiritualities, as befits our technological age, are obsessed with technique. If the Christian Scriptures are treated as just another tool for enlightenment or access to the knowledge that is power, sacrilege has been committed. We also obscure the form when we *privatize* Scripture, using it for what we are wont to call “inspiration.” Our Holy Scriptures, of course, are pervasively personal. We are personally commanded and blessed, rebuked and comforted, warned and guided. But personal is not the same as private. Privacy is possessive and isolating. The private is what is withdrawn from the common good for individual control or use or enjoyment; it is stealing. When we privatize Scripture we embezzle the common currency of God's revelation. But Scripture is never that — the revelation draws us out of ourselves, out of our fiercely guarded individualities, into the world of responsibility and community and salvation — God's sovereignty. “Kingdom” is the primary biblical metaphor for it.

And so the church community continues to insist on attending to this narrative form that is so power-

fully and enduringly formative. Sometimes we're told that the Bible is a library made up of many kinds of writing: poems and hymns, sermons and letters, visions and dreams, genealogical lists and historical chronicles, moral teaching and admonition and proverbs. And, of course, story. But that is not the way it is. It is *all* embedded in story. Von Balthasar puts it this way: "The older contemplators of Scripture possessed the art of seeing the total form within individual forms and of bringing it to light from within them. But this naturally presupposes an understanding of totality that is spiritual and not literary..."⁵

Nothing comes to us apart from the form. The Bible, the entire Bible, is "relentlessly narrational."⁶ And we cannot change or discard the form without changing and distorting the content. This biblical narrative gathers everything into it, providing a beginning and ending, plot and character development, conflict and resolution. For most of the Christian centuries, attentive readers of the Bible have understood that its many voices and points of view are all contained in the narrative form and are given coherence by it. Instead of attempting to iron out the wrinkles of inconsistency and disharmony, we have to listen for resonances, echoes, patterns — the swarming complexity of lived truth, not pinned-down and labeled facts.

We also find ourselves in the story. This meta-narrative gathers us into the narrative. Good storytellers, by enlisting our imaginations, tease us into participa-

tion in the story they tell. When the storytelling is good, we are pulled into a world that is both truer and larger than the one we ordinarily occupy; but it is not an alien world. (The exception is escapist entertainment that deliberately falsifies by depersonalizing and manipulating reality — horror stories, harlequin romances, pornography, propaganda.) Good storytelling involves us in what has been sitting right in front of us for years but we hadn't noticed or hadn't thought was important or hadn't thought had anything to do with us. And then we do notice — the story wakes us up to what is *there* and has always been there. Without leaving the world in which we daily work and sleep and play, we find ourselves in a far larger world; we embrace connections and meanings and significance in our lives far beyond what our employers and teachers, our parents and children, our friends and neighbors have told us, to say nothing of what is conveyed by the experts and celebrities with whom we anxiously surround ourselves. The Scriptures, simply by virtue of their narrative *form*, draw us into a reality in which we find ourselves in touch with the very stuff of our humanity; what we sense in our bones *counts*. It is a story large with the sense of God, a world suffused with God, a world permeated with God's spoken and unspoken word, his unseen and perceived presence, in such a way that we know that it is the world we were made for, the world in which we most truly belong. It isn't long before we find ourselves imaginatively (imagination and faith

are, again, close kin here) entering the story, taking our place in the plot, and following Jesus.

We live today in a world impoverished of story; so it is not surprising that many of us have picked up the bad habit of extracting “truths” from the stories we read: we summarize “principles” that we can use in a variety of settings at our discretion; we distill a “moral” that we use as a slogan on a poster or as a motto on our desk. We are taught to do this in our schools so that we can pass examinations on novels and plays. It is no wonder that we continue this abstracting, story-mutilating practice when we read our Bibles. “Story” is not serious; “story” is for children and campfires. So we continuously convert our stories into the “serious” speech of information and motivation. We hardly notice that we have lost the form, the form that is provided to shape our lives largely and coherently. Our spirituality-shaping text is reduced to disembodied fragments of “truth” and “insight,” dismembered bones of information and motivation.

Again: the way the Bible is written is every bit as important as what is written in it: narrative — this huge, capacious story that pulls us into its plot and shows us our place in its development from beginning to ending.⁷ It takes the whole Bible to read any part of the Bible. Every sentence is embedded in story and can no more be understood accurately or fully apart from the story than any one of our sentences spoken throughout the course of the day can be understood apart from our relationships and culture and the vari-

ous ways in which we speak to our children and parents, our friends and enemies, our employers and employees — and our God. Northrop Frye, who has so well taught us to read the Bible largely, wrote that

the immediate context of the sentence [any sentence in Scripture] is as likely to be three hundred pages off as to be the next or preceding sentence. Ideally, every sentence is the key to the whole Bible. This is not a factual statement about the Bible, but it helps to explain the practice of preachers who knew what they were doing, like some of those in seventeenth-century England. In the sermons of John Donne, for example, we can see how the text leads us, like a guide with a candle, into the vast labyrinth of Scripture, which to Donne was an infinitely bigger structure than the cathedral he was preaching in.⁸

The Sentence

The story that locates us in the large world of God and that enlists us in following Jesus is told sentence by sentence. Walking and following, for the most part, doesn’t require deliberate thought; it employs conditioned reflexes, muscle and nerve coordination acquired in the first few years of life. We walk without having to think about putting one step before another. We read a story the same way, the sentences unfolding one after the other without us having to stop and ponder each period or verb tense.

But just as in walking without thinking we sometimes take a wrong turn, have to retrace our steps

and recalculate our directions, and just as when we walk without thinking someone sometimes steps in and alerts us to a multitude of important details — flowers, birds, faces — we had missed along the way, and stops us so that we look around, amazed at what we had missed, so also in the reading of our Holy Scriptures.

As we make our way through this story, finding our lives in this story, following Jesus, we find ourselves from time to time stopping, or being stopped, and paying attention to the details that make up the story. We attend to the language, to the sentences that bring words into relationship with one another and into relationship with us. Words are never mere words — they convey spirit, meaning, energy, and truth. Exegesis is the discipline of attending to the text and listening to it rightly and well.

Exegesis introduces another dimension into our relation to this text. The text as story carries us along, we are in on something larger than ourselves, we let the story take us where it will. But exegesis is focused attention, asking questions, sorting through possible meanings. Exegesis is rigorous, disciplined, intellectual work. It rarely feels “spiritual.” Men and women who are, as we say, “into” spirituality, frequently give exegesis short shrift, preferring to rely on inspiration and intuition. But the long and broad consensus in the community of God’s people has always insisted on a vigorous and meticulous exegesis: Give long and close and learned attention to this text! All our

masters in spirituality were and are master exegetes. There’s a lot going on here; we don’t want to miss any of it; we don’t want to sleepwalk through this text.

A sentence of words is a marvelous thing. Words reveal. We are presented with reality, with truth that makes our world larger, our relations richer. Words get us out of ourselves and into a responsive relation with a larger world of time and space, things and people.

But a sentence of words is also a most mysterious thing. Words conceal. Words can be used to falsify and mislead. All of our experience with language is “after Babel.” Much of our experience with language is with its misuse. We cannot assume that any word that we assume we know is identical with that same word when it occurs in the text. And it is disconcerting to find that a word that is used one way on [page 26](#) is used in quite a different way on [page 72](#).

Not only that, but language is constantly changing, in constant flux. If a word was used one way last week, it cannot be depended upon to be used the same way next week. And we have two and three thousand years of “weeks” separating us from the biblical text. Dictionaries never quite catch up.

Because of all this, exegesis cannot be slighted. The scriptural text is complex and demanding. The primary witnesses to God’s revelation are the Old and New Testaments: Torah and Prophets and Writings in the Old Testament, Gospels and Letters and

Apocalypse in the New. And written in Hebrew and Aramaic and Greek, languages that have, as all languages do, their own peculiar way of inflecting nouns, conjugating verbs, inserting prepositions in odd places, and arranging words in a sentence. Written on parchment and papyri. Written with pen and ink. Written in Palestine and Egypt and Syria and Greece and Italy.

Not all of us have to know all of this in order to read Holy Scripture formationally. But we do need to learn to pay attention in and around us as we follow Jesus. Exegesis is not in the first place a specialist activity of scholars, although we very much need these scholars working on our behalf. We are not, after all, deciphering hieroglyphics, as some would have us think. Exegesis is simply noticing and responding adequately (which is not simple!) to the demand that words make on us, that *language* makes on us.

The Reformers insisted on what they called the “perspicuity” of Scripture, that the Bible is substantially intelligible to the common person and requires neither pope nor professor to interpret it. It is essentially open to our understanding without recourse to academic specialists or a privileged priesthood. As the *Westminster Confession* says, “those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation, are so clearly propounded and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due course of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of

them.”⁹ Roman Catholic scholar Hans Urs von Balthasar joins the Reformers regarding the perspicuity of Scripture, adamant in his insistence that “God’s word is simple and clear, and no-one should let himself be turned from a direct uninhibited contact with the word, or allow his contact with it to be dimmed and dulled, by problems and mental reservations aroused by the thought that scholars interpret a text quite differently and more accurately than he can.”¹⁰

But that doesn’t mean that much care is not required. Each book has its own way about it, and generally a careful reader begins to learn how to read a book by slowly and carefully poking around in it for a very long time until he finds his or her way. A careful reader (an exegete!) will proceed with caution, allowing the book itself to teach us how to read it. For it soon becomes obvious that our Holy Scriptures are not composed in a timeless, deathless prose, a hyper-spiritual angel language with all the quirks and idiosyncrasies of local history and peasant dialect expunged. There are verbs that must be accurately parsed, cities and valleys to be located on a map, and long-forgotten customs to be comprehended.

This is an enormous inconvenience, particularly to those of us who feel an inclination and aptitude toward the spiritual. It is almost impossible for those of us who have picked up the word “spiritual” from hanging around church parking lots or clicking on the Internet not to feel that our attraction to the spiritual confers a slight edge of privilege to us, exempting us

from the bother of exegesis. We sense that we are insiders to the ways of God; we get intuitions that confirm our ideas and insights. After that happens a few times, we feel we've graduated from tedious recourse to lexicons and grammars. We are, after all, initiates to the text who cultivate the art of listening to God whisper between the lines. It isn't long, as newspaper columnist Ellen Goodman once put it, before we're using the Bible more as a Rorschach test than as a religious text, reading more ink into the text than we read out of it.¹¹ It isn't long before we're using the word "spiritual" to refer primarily to ourselves and our ideas, and only incidentally and by the way to God.

But, inconvenient or not, we are stuck with the necessity of exegesis. We have a written word to read and attend to. It is God's word, or so we believe, and we had better get it right. Exegesis is the care we give to getting the words right. Exegesis is foundational to Christian spirituality. Foundations disappear from view as a building is constructed, but if the builders don't build a solid foundation, their building doesn't last long.

Because we speak our language so casually, it is easy to fall into the habit of treating it casually. But language is persistently difficult to understand. We spend our early lives learning the language, and just when we think we have it mastered our spouse says, "You don't understand a thing I'm saying, do you?" We teach our children to talk, and just about the time we think they might be getting it, they quit talking

to us; and when we overhear them talking to their friends, we find we can't understand more than one out of every eight or nine words they say. A close relationship doesn't guarantee understanding. A long affection doesn't guarantee understanding. In fact, the closer we are to another and the more intimate our relations, the more care we must exercise to hear accurately, to understand thoroughly, to answer appropriately.

Which is to say, the more "spiritual" we become, the more care we must give to exegesis. The more mature we become in the Christian faith, the more exegetically rigorous we must become. This is not a task from which we graduate. These words given to us in our Scriptures are constantly getting overlaid with personal preferences, cultural assumptions, sin distortions, and ignorant guesses that pollute the text. The pollutants are always in the air, gathering dust on our Bibles, corroding our use of the language, especially the language of faith. Exegesis is a dust cloth, a scrub brush, or even a Q-tip for keeping the words clean.

It is useful for readers of the Bible to keep company with some of our master exegetes; the easiest way to do it is to use their commentaries. Biblical commentaries are, for the most part, employed by pastors or teachers in the preparation of sermons or lectures. They are treated as "tools." But there are treasures in these books for the ordinary reader of the Bible. Among those of us who read — eat — this text not

in preparation for an assignment, but simply for direction and nourishment in following Jesus, which means most of us, biblical commentaries have for too long been overlooked as common reading for common Christians.

I recommend reading commentaries in the same way we read novels, from beginning to end, skipping nothing. They are, admittedly, weak in plot and character development, but their devout attention to words and syntax is sufficient. Plot and character — the plot of salvation, the character of Messiah — are everywhere implicit in a commentary and persistently assert their presence even when unmentioned through scores, even hundreds, of pages. The power of these ancient nouns and verbs century after century to call forth intelligent discourse from learned men and women continues to be a staggering wonder.

Among those for whom Scripture is a passion, reading commentaries has always seemed to me analogous to the gathering of football fans in the local bar after the game, replaying in endless detail the game they have just watched, arguing (maybe even fighting) over observations and opinion, and lacing the discourse with gossip about the players. The level of knowledge evident in these boozy colloquies is impressive. These fans have watched the game for years; the players are household names to them; they know the fine print in the rulebook and pick up every nuance on the field. And they care immensely about what happens in the game. Their seemingly

endless commentary is evidence of how much they care. Like them, I relish in a commentary not bare information but conversation with knowledgeable and experienced friends, probing, observing, questioning the biblical text. Absorbed by this plot that stretches grandly from Genesis to Revelation, captured by the messianic presence that in death and resurrection saves us one and all — there is so much to notice, so much to talk over.

Not all commentaries fill the bill — some of them are written by scholars who seem to have no interest either in God or the story, but there are enough that qualify to convince me that they provide welcome and indispensable companionship to all of us readers of the text who, as we follow Jesus, don't want to miss anything along the way.¹²

* * *

Too many Bible readers assume that exegesis is what you do after you have learned Greek and Hebrew. That's simply not true. Exegesis is nothing more than a careful and loving reading of the text in our mother tongue. Greek and Hebrew are well worth learning, but if you haven't had the privilege, settle for English. Once we learn to love this text and bring a disciplined intelligence to it, we won't be far behind the very best Greek and Hebrew scholars. Appreciate the learned Scripture scholars, but don't be intimidated by them.

Exegesis is the furthest thing from pedantry; exegesis is an act of love. It loves the one who speaks the

words enough to want to get the words right. It respects the words enough to use every means we have to get the words right. Exegesis is loving God enough to stop and listen carefully to what he says. It follows that we bring the leisure and attentiveness of lovers to this text, cherishing every comma and semicolon, relishing the oddness of this preposition, delighting in the surprising placement of this noun. Lovers don't take a quick look, get a "message" or a "meaning," and then run off and talk endlessly with their friends about how they feel.

* * *

Not that there are not so-called exegetes who do just that: treat the Bible as if it were a warehouse of information, oblivious to the obvious — that it is given to us in the form of a story that is intended to shape our entire lives into the story of following Jesus, a life lived to the glory of God.

A hundred and fifty years ago, when such arid and depersonalized — de-storied — knowledge was a pall on the spiritual life of England, George Eliot created the character of Casaubon (in her novel *Middlemarch*) to pillory this sacrilege of intellect. Casaubon was a scholarly priest in the Anglican Church obsessed with mastering religious knowledge and then writing what he mastered. Dorothea Brooke, a young woman bursting with idealism and vitality, married him intending to assist him in what she thought of as his noble pursuit. But there was no life in the books that

Casaubon studied and wrote — they were dead words without connection with anything or anyone living, least of all his ardent, exuberant, life-affirming wife. It took only a few weeks for Dorothea to realize that she had married a cadaver.

George Eliot's contemporary, Robert Browning, trumped her novel with his poem "A Grammarian's Funeral," mocking the pretentious but lifeless old exegete who "decided not to Live but Know." He "settled *Hoti's* business—let it be!— / Properly based *Oun* — / Gave us the doctrine of the enclitic *De* / Dead from the waist down."¹³

More recently, Marianne Moore used the metaphor of a steamroller (in her poem, "To a Steamroller") to expose this heavy-handed and spiritless violation of the text:

The illustration

is nothing to you without the application.

You lack half wit. You crush all the particles down
into close conformity, and then walk back and forth on
them.

Sparkling chips of rock

are crushed down to the level of the parent block.

Were not "impersonal judgment in aesthetic
matters, a metaphysical impossibility," you

might fairly achieve

it. As for butterflies, I can hardly conceive

of one's attending upon you, but to question

the congruence of the complement is vain, if it exists.¹⁴

Marianne Moore's brother was a pastor in a Presbyterian church in Brooklyn, and she worshipped in his congregation every Sunday morning. She probably wasn't referring to him as the "steamroller" — all the indications are that she had a warm appreciation for his preaching and pastoral work — but through him she had access to the dominant mind-set among pastors and scholars at the time (the 1930s) who were contemptuous of all the lively detail and intricacy of the words and sentences in our Holy Scriptures, and instead forced them into the service of a doctrine or a cause: "You crush all the particles [read "words"] down / into close conformity, and then walk back and forth on them," steamrolling the text into a road that is all surface, usable, practical, doctrinal. And dead.

But exegesis does not mean mastering the text, it means submitting to it as it is given to us. Exegesis doesn't take charge of the text and impose superior knowledge on it; it enters the world of the text and lets the text "read" us. Exegesis is an act of sustained humility: There is so much about this text that I don't know, that I will never know. Christians keep returning to it, with all the help we can get from grammarians and archaeologists and historians and theologians, letting ourselves be formed by it.

Yes, humility. For the more we learn and the more

knowledge we acquire — especially when it is biblical knowledge, God-knowledge — the more liable we are to the temptation of going off on our own with our wonderful knowledge and using what we know to run our lives and other people's lives the way we want. But this text was never intended to train us and equip us into competence, graduate us into an expertise that establishes us as a superior class of Christians, certified and sent off to do God's work for him among the biblically unwashed.

If the knowledge we acquire through our reading and study of this text that involves us in following Jesus, diverts us from the very Jesus we started out following, we would have been better off never to have opened the book in the first place.

But without exegesis, spirituality gets sappy, soupy. Spirituality without exegesis becomes self-indulgent. Without disciplined exegesis spirituality develops into an idiolect in which I define all the key verbs and nouns out of my own experience. And prayer ends up limping along in sighs and stutters.

Century after century exegetical techniques in the Christian community have been honed and our methodologies improved. It is an immense irony that a generation that has access to the best in biblical exegesis is, even among the so-called "educated clergy," so largely indifferent to it.

* * *

The story gives form to the sentences; the sentences provide content to the story. Following Jesus requires that they hold together, thoroughly integrated. Without the story form, the sentences in the Bible, the Bible verses, function as an encyclopedia of information from which we select whatever we need at the moment. Without the precisely crafted sentences the story gets edited and revised by seductive suggestions from some and by bullying urgencies from others, none of whom seems to have much interest in following Jesus. But it was to make us followers of Jesus that this text was given to us in the first place, and if either the large story or the detailed sentences are ever used for anything else, however admirable or enticing, why bother?

[1.](#) Wendell Berry, *Collected Poems* (San Francisco: North Point, 1985), pp. 190-91.

[2.](#) Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1953), p. 15.

[3.](#) Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (New York: New American Library, 1960), p. 7.

[4.](#) Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord*, vol. 1:

Seeing the Form, trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1983), p. 151.

[5.](#) von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord*, p. 550.

[6.](#) Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), p. 206.

[7.](#) There is a congruence between the three-personal, Holy Trinity originating presence, comprehensive and coherent (as noted in Chapter 3), and the narrative form that we observe in our Scriptures. Dorothy Sayers is lavish with insights on this in her *The Mind of the Maker* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1941).

[8.](#) Northrop Frye, *The Great Code* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982), pp. 208-9.

[9.](#) *The Westminster Confession* I.vii.

[10.](#) Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Prayer*, trans. A. V. Littledale (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1963), p. 179.

[11.](#) Ellen Goodman, in *The Baltimore Sun*, June 15, 1979.

[12.](#) I have suggested several of the commentaries I value highly in chapter 15 of *Take and Read* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996).

[13.](#) Robert Browning, *The Poems and Plays* (New York: Modern Library, 1934), p. 169.

[14.](#) Marianne Moore, *The Complete Poems* (New York: Macmillan, 1967), p. 84.