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Why Scripture matters: reading the Bible in a time of church conflict

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“performative” nature of language itself, Reid’s architectural methodology of Mark belongs on every preacher’s bookshelf.

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Why Scripture Matters: Reading the Bible in a Time of Church Conflict

John P. Burgess

Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1998

186 pages, \$32.00 Softcover

While Christians agree *that* Scripture matters in the life of the church, the particular role that Scripture ought to play, the nature of its voice and authority in our lives today can become hotly debated questions, particularly as churches discern together and debate on difficult issues related to sexuality, feminist perspectives on worship and theology, and inter-faith relations. John Burgess’ timely book is a helpful nudge to churches experiencing pressures brought to bear by the kinds of arguments in which polarized positions each cite Scripture in support of their own side and against the other. The approach to Scripture in these contexts of debates can often turn shallow. Burgess seeks to revive a piety of Scripture which challenges our all-too-human tendency to *use* Scripture to serve our needs, rather than being grasped and formed by Scripture in our walk of discipleship. His desire is “to recover a sense of Scripture’s compelling power, in the hope that the church might experience Scripture more as a source of life – a sacrament – than as a set of right answers that one party wields against another” (p. xiv). His is not a new approach as such but rather is a weaving together of insights from select ancient, medieval, Orthodox and classic Protestant spiritual writings.

Written while Burgess served as Associate for Theology in the national offices of the Presbyterian Church, USA, the immediate backdrops for his work were denominational controversies stemming from the 1993 *Reimagining* Conference, a Christian feminist gathering that raised challenging christological questions, and continuing debates about homosexuality. Chapter 1 sets out his call to the church to rediscover the practical disciplines of reading Scripture as “a Word of God” that speaks to Christians in the context of their participation in community. Chapter 2 asks “Whatever happened to the compelling power of Scripture?” and reflects on the dynamics of renewal in times of cultural and ecclesial “Scripture-weariness”, citing Augustine, Luther, Wesley and Dostoevski. Chapter 3 addresses the difficulties of hearing Scripture as a “poetic-

like word” in the context of a “sound-bite” society, and in a culture that is “tone-deaf to poetry”. Chapter 4 builds on the power of poetry to frame and transform life to draw out the disciplines that are to be cultivated in order to engage with Scripture as sacramental: reading Scripture aloud and in community, reading Scripture in its own context, and committing Scripture to memory. Chapters 5-7 reflect on the ways in which Scripture is interpreted in and comes to life in worship and the liturgical arts, including architecture, and urge the more vigorous incorporation of Scripture and the piety of the disciplines described in Chapter 4 into the worship life of the church. The Conclusion offers a reading of the temptation of Jesus in light of this piety of Scripture. The work ends with a bibliographic essay reviewing recent biblical scholarship that focuses on Scripture as the *community's* book.

The strength of his work is to be found in his popularism, his accessible interpretation and blending of these classic resources from the history of Christian spirituality to enunciate a grammar of piety in relationship to Scripture that spells out needed disciplines for the reading of Scripture. However, the book itself seems to call for a second volume that enfleshes Burgess' methodological proposal. While debates within the Presbyterian Church USA about homosexuality and feminist christologies provide the backdrop to his impassioned plea to get beyond polarization, the concreteness of these challenges is not addressed in the content of the book. This is a deliberate choice on the part of the author. He is, in a sense, holding up a hand to put debate on hold, and take serious stock of how the debaters are using Scripture, supposing an, if only temporary, neutral ground of, here, methodological reflection on the ways in which Scripture shapes and forms a community. This is a helpful turn. However, even the best of theological methods and spiritual guides continue to be shaped and formed by our commitment to the kind of dialogue that faces with courage and compassion, faith and love even the most difficult of confrontations. Moreover, the stance of authorial non-involvement in the debates (Burgess' refusal to either state or imply any favour towards any particular position) is more problematic than it is useful. Given the nature of the piety that he puts forward here, I would expect more authorial transparency, and a willingness to explore the issues now in debate. It would be helpful to see a companion-piece or follow-up volume that places itself with more immediacy to the context of difficult dialogue. All that being said, Burgess' work is an important call to all Christians, whether we be located in the context of discussion of difficult issues or in the context of the normal challenges of parish life, to re-examine our relationship with Scripture, and to become more conscious of its more mystical and sacramental powers to shape our lives, to call us continually to conversion, and to compel us toward the One alone who is Holy.

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