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C. Kevin Rowe: The formation of scriptural imagination

Learning to read the Bible well and developing a scriptural way of living requires slow reading, sustained attention and community, writes the New Testament scholar.

by [C. Kevin Rowe](#)

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Christian leaders are to lead in the pattern of Christ. In a previous reflection, I drew attention to the importance of [developing a "background" so that Christian thought/practice become second nature](#). Nothing is so crucially important to the Christian shape of this background than a scriptural imagination.

Since speaking of a "scriptural imagination" is not necessarily a common way to talk, however, it makes good sense to explain what we mean.

By imagination we do not mean so much the capacity for certain kinds of play that we have in abundance as a child and often lose as we age, or a distinct area or activity of the brain that corresponds to creativity, fantasy and the like.

Imagination, rather, means more the way the total person is involved in interpreting and being in the world -- the part we actively play in constructing a vision of life for ourselves and for others.

Imagination in this sense is thus not something that exists only in our heads or is used only for particular activities such as artistic depiction; it is also practically dense, or lived. The shape of our lives both testifies to and influences the way we imagine the world, and, conversely, our imagination helps to structure the concrete patterns of daily, lived existence.

A scriptural imagination and reading well

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To speak, then, of a *scriptural* imagination is to speak about the scriptural shape of a whole life, a way of being in the world that evidences a lifelong process of transformation by the power of holy Scripture.

The language of a “way of being in the world” emphasizes the point that a scriptural imagination is not simply a matter of “thinking”; nor is it only a “doing.” Such dichotomies between thought and practice, in fact, hinder our ability to be scripturally shaped precisely because they teach us to conceive of our lives as divisible things.

But human lives are not divisible; insofar as they are human lives, they are unified by the thing that is the human being through time. All of our thought takes place within the lives that we live, and our practices are inseparably intertwined with the thinking that makes the practices intelligible. Scripture aims at the formation of the total pattern that is the way we are in the world -- thought and practice together in one life.

Perhaps it goes without saying, but such a view presupposes the necessity of learning about Scripture -- not only what is in it, of course, but also how to read it. As it turns out, however, reading the Bible well is not something that we naturally do with some ease, like learning to swim or to cut our food correctly with a knife and fork. We need, instead, to learn how to read it well.

Learning how to read Scripture well implies, of course, some sort of corresponding instruction.

A remarkable passage from the Acts of the Apostles illustrates the need for guidance in the way of reading. In Acts 8, the deacon/evangelist Philip is traveling along a road that ran west from Jerusalem over to Gaza when he overhears an Ethiopian eunuch (a court official of the Queen of Ethiopia) reading aloud from the book of Isaiah: “Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb silent before its shearer, so he does not open his mouth. In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth” (Acts 8:32–33, citing Isaiah 53:7–8).

Prompted by the Holy Spirit, Philip runs to join the chariot and asks the eunuch, “Do you understand what you are reading?” The eunuch’s surprising reply goes to the heart of scriptural interpretation: “How can I, unless someone guides me?” He then invites Philip into the chariot with him and asks, “About whom . . . does the prophet [Isaiah] say this, about himself or about someone else?” Philip of course is eager to teach. “Then,” Acts continues, “Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to [the eunuch] the good news about Jesus” (8:26–40). Philip the evangelist becomes Philip the exegete.

In its immediate literary context, the emphasis of the passage is largely on the necessary conditions for understanding Jesus of Nazareth as the one of whom the Old Testament speaks (as well as the result of such understanding -- baptism and the welcome into Christian fellowship). The eunuch, that is, does not know about Jesus and must be shown by Philip how Isaiah speaks of him. Two millennia after the Christian interpretation of Isaiah, the fact that the figure spoken of in Isaiah 53 can be read as a prefiguration of Jesus’ suffering and death is unsurprising.

But in the first century, no such interpretation was available. Isaiah 53 spoke of one who was to suffer, to be sure, but that this one was Jesus of Nazareth was entirely unknown until the Christians developed their exegesis of the passage. That Isaiah spoke of Jesus in particular, in other words, was something that needed to be discovered and learned.

The larger interpretive point of the scene with the eunuch and Philip in Acts cannot be missed: we can read all day long -- even the right passages -- and, without instruction in how to understand what we’re reading, miss what we most need to see. Or, to put it more positively, training in how to read Scripture well is a *sine qua non* of good reading itself.

Tools for reading well

Saying this is the easy part. The challenge lies in knowing how to do it. Particular pedagogical practices will inevitably have some differences, but almost all instruction geared toward Christian training will focus on the acquisition of tools and the development of habits.

By tools we principally mean learning such things as the languages in which the majority of Scripture was written (Hebrew and Greek), the most salient features of the cultures in which the various

scriptural texts were composed (ancient Palestine, Babylon, or the Roman Empire, for example), the basic facts about the individual biblical books (who wrote them and when, what their most prominent concerns or arguments are, and so forth), and the manifold ways that contemporary questions relate to ancient ones.

Strictly speaking, such tools are not prerequisites for encountering God's word through Scripture -- as if God's freedom to speak is constrained by our ability or opportunity to learn Greek. But these tools are a necessary part of a serious education into Scripture's depth and complexity.

Reading the New Testament in Greek, for example, not only slows one down and forces one to pay attention to every textual nook and cranny, it also opens a range of scriptural meaning that is often otherwise unavailable. The "Greek tool" does not create the meaning; Scripture is inexhaustibly meaningful, after all. But knowing Greek does allow a further and potentially more patient exploration of Scripture's inexhaustibility. Acquiring these tools and the ability to use them takes an enormous amount of time and effort, study and memory, writing and testing. It is far from easy.

The habits of reading well

Forming good habits for reading Scripture is considerably more difficult. This is so not only because habits are hard to form (or reform) but also because many of the habits needed to read Scripture well run counter to much of the way we do daily life. Though there are many candidates for mention, four in particular stand out today.

First, reading Scripture well requires us to be slow and patient rather than fast and immediate. Scripture's patterns and treasures are often seen only with the slowest, most patient engagement with the text.

If we read the Bible as we read our email or daily news, we almost guarantee a shallow and impoverished reading. Skimming email is fine in its own way, but this manner of reading will never lead to a scriptural imagination. Of the things we do to combat our speed, perhaps nothing is so basic as study.

The French thinker and mystic Simone Weil once argued that study helps us to pray inasmuch as it helps us to learn how to concentrate our attention (an indisputable necessity -- see the next point). It is no less true that study requires us to take time with the material we are to learn and to read slowly, carefully and with considerable patience.

Second, and inseparable from the first habit, is the need to nourish the habit of paying concentrated and prolonged attention. The riches of Scripture cannot be found, let alone mined, with scattered attention (multi-tasking) or a short attention span (which commercials or sound-bites both depend upon and reinforce).

The entire Gospel of John presupposes and requires a reader who can mull over complex images and their various dimensions of christological significance.

John 10, for example, is long, reflective monologue in which Jesus turns the figure of sheep over and over and meditates on its christological significance: first, it is to the shepherd that the door of the sheepfold is opened. The sheep hear the shepherd's voice, know his voice, and follow him (10:1-6).

Next, Jesus becomes the door of the sheepfold; only those who enter by this door (i.e., through him) can be saved (10:7-10). Then Jesus is the "good shepherd" who "lays down his life for the sheep" and says, "I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep" (10:11-15).

He adds that there are "sheep that do not belong to this fold" and that he will bring these, too, "so there will be one flock, one shepherd" (10:16). Finally, Jesus concludes by saying that the Father loves him because he lays down his life, and that he lays it down of his own accord and has power to take it up again (10:17-18).

Reading John 10 well is simply impossible to do quickly. Despite the continuity in image (sheep/shepherd), the image is not simple. Rather, it requires the reader to ponder different dimensions of Jesus' significance. Indeed, the metaphors are comprehensible only on christological premises and an understanding of the church's mission.

In John 10 Jesus is both the way in (door) -- which is also to say the mediator between the Father and the believers -- and the leader of his followers (shepherd). His language about the shepherd's willing sacrifice and power to rise again refers, of course, to his resurrection, but such a reference is only obvious after the event itself (i.e., later in the story world of John).

So, too, only after the mission to the church has begun does it become evident who the sheep are that are "not of this fold"; they are those whom the church seeks to bring in. In short, John presupposes Christian readers who can concentrate and train their attention on the connections between what they already know of Jesus and the church and what the Gospel is trying to teach them through its imagery.

Third, we need to cultivate the habit of reading in community. The emphasis upon reading in community (or communion) has received much attention of late, but for many understandable reasons the habit of reading alone is hard to break.

By reading alone, I do not mean as much the simple act of reading a book silently by oneself as I do the more damaging notion that reading is what occurs between a text and an individual -- an individual who encounters the text and makes of it what he will in and through his individual judgments, mind, or life.

We read alone when we think that Scripture is a matter of the text and me. Scripture, however, was written both to and for Christian communities, and the theological logic of the texts presupposes a community of readers. The church is the place where reading all the different biblical texts together as one book makes interpretive sense. Anytime we read something called "the New Testament" or "the Old Testament" or "the Christian Bible," that is, we are already reading inside the community that has made the theological judgment about the unity of these various texts and passed down this judgment in the form of the Bible itself.

Not only is it historically the case that we have the texts that form the Bible because the church has transmitted these texts through time, it is also the case that the Bible makes sense as one book only in one hermeneutical place, the church that has received it as its Scripture. In Christian thinking, this community includes not only those whom we now know but also the dead ("the communion of the saints").

Finally, then, reading Scripture well requires us to remember the past -- habitually. With some exceptions, ours is not a culture in which historically deep memory is developed. But we are not the first to read the Bible; indeed, it has reached us only because it has been handed down from generation to generation.

Habitually attending to the past is thus not only a way to read with those whose lives have been formed by Scripture, it is also a way to understand how Scripture has shaped -- or failed to shape -- its readers. Habitual remembrance teaches us, in other words, how Scripture looks when it is lived powerfully and well.

A scriptural imagination is not a "thing" we possess but a whole life, so no one seminary, congregation or workplace could alone account for a leader's transformation. A sustained induction into the lifelong practice of reading Scripture well is indispensable for those who serve the church and a gift to a world that desperately needs it.

