

Desperate Hope, a Hermeneutic

I had just turned 12. My Bible—a leather-bound, name-engraved NIV, a gift from my stepmom’s stepmom—sat in the “secret cabinet” underneath my dresser. *I wonder what the last word in the Bible is?* I snuck into its hiding place and pulled out the crispy-paged book, flipping to the back. I read, “Amen.”¹ *Duh.* My hermeneutical journey started on that day, when I decided to read the Bible for myself. My journey continues now as I try to rediscover that curiosity I had as a 12-year-old. Up until this semester I believed that there was only one way to read the Bible: the literal, evangelical way. Believing this slowly made me bored, frustrated, and disgusted by the Bible. I’m only now beginning to see how this is completely untrue. Not only do each of us have our own hermeneutical lens, but our lenses change as we move through different stages of life. And it’s because of those stages that I have been led to the lens I currently see through: one of movement, love, and desperate hope.

Soon after I started reading the Bible, I immersed myself in the Christian subculture. I read every Christian teen series, sang by heart every Christian melody, and watched hours of Christian TV late at night. I joined youth group too and began attending church more regularly. Everyone and every book, song, and show told me I needed to read the Bible more. So I did. I read through the Bible in a year, and then again in nine months. I memorized passages of Scripture at a time; I had all of Philippians memorized by eighth grade. My mentors encouraged me in my pursuit of God through Scripture, so I worked to please them and to “out-Bible” my

¹ Revelation 22:21, NIV.

friends. I pushed myself to read *more* chapters each night, to memorize *more* verses, and seek *more* understanding. I became obsessed with doing things right and judged those who didn't, quoting my beloved Bible verses at them. To me, every verse of the Bible was meant to tell me what to do or what not to do, and therefore what my peers should or should not do. I felt secure in my salvation (whatever that means), and banked my life on what I believed about God and morality. But mostly morality. That is, until my senior year of high school when my best friend of five years came out as a lesbian. Instead of loving her as I always had—I judged her. I treated her like I thought I was supposed to, as a sinner needing saved. I lost this friend; I chose religion over her.² So I went off to college, to a conservative, evangelical university that reinforced what I had been telling myself for so long: *do*. The more my school told me to keep reading my Bible, the less I read and the guiltier I felt. Scripture didn't speak to me the way it had in the past. All it did—and all God seemed to do—was remind me of some moral life I needed to live, the same moral life I *had lived*, which drove my best friend away.

So I started asking questions. Is the Bible really God-breathed?³ Who is Christ, really? What are we doing here? These were good questions, but they weren't painful questions for me. I still relied on my Christian peers, books, and the Bible itself to answer them for me. But then came winter of sophomore year. I had sensed my hermeneutic shifting when I lost my best friend. It became more guilt-driven, less exciting. But when that winter hit, my hermeneutic transformed dramatically. I began viewing the Author as someone spiteful, unreasonable, dead. I

² I know I'm not giving this story the length it deserves. I don't want to go too far off on a tangent. But it's important to note that this story represents the first time my moral/judgmental belief system had recognizably failed me. It made me rethink my using the Bible as a judging tool.

³ Brandon Hill, a professor I had for a class called "World Changers" my freshman year of college, asked us how we know the Scriptures are from God. Our answer: "It says so in I Timothy." His response: "But Paul didn't consider his writings to be Scripture." This question still follows me.

began reading atheist blogs, written by those who had converted from Christianity,⁴ feeling kinship with them. I wailed the bitter songs of David Bazan⁵ and found my own reasons to curse God. He didn't give me what I wanted—that cute boy who led me on, or that trip overseas. Eventually those answers my church and school were giving me felt cheap and useless.⁶ And to top it off, that spring my New Testament professor reassured me that there are only two *Christian* hermeneutical lenses: the fundamental, literalist view and the evangelical, semi-literalist view.⁷ The hermeneutical category I found myself in was neither.

Ever since then, I have been searching for God again, the God I knew in the pages of Scripture some 10 years ago. But my mind is haunted by the Righteous God I met in high school, the Unenlightened God I met in college. So I read the Bible with fear. I'm afraid to discover that the Author is a dick or a fraud. My hermeneutic, therefore, has been a reactive one. I am so careful to find an Author who loves me, that I have formed a hermeneutic that ignores the righteousness of God and the wildness of God. This hermeneutic has caused me to read only the overtly life-giving sections of Scripture and ignore any ones full of judgment, like the prophets, the Pentateuch, the Pauline epistles.

⁴ My favorite blog to read was called "Unreasonable Faith" by a man Daniel Florien who converted from evangelical Christianity.

⁵ Particularly: "Wait just a minute / You expect me to believe / That all this misbehaving / Grew from one enchanted tree? / And helpless to fight it / We should all be satisfied / With this magical explanation / For why the living die"; David Bazan, "Hard to Be," in *Curse Your Branches*, 2009, MP3.

⁶ "For us neither the Epistle to the Romans, nor the present theological position, nor the present state of the world, nor the relation between God and the world, is simple. And he who is now concerned with truth must boldly acknowledge that he cannot be simple. In every direction human life is difficult and complicated. And, if gratitude be a consideration that is at all relevant, men will not be grateful to us if we provide them with short-lived pseudo-simplifications." Karl Barth, "The Preface to the Second Edition," in *The Epistle to the Romans*, 6th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 5.

⁷ Dr. Bud Bence taught this sometime between January and February 2010 at Indiana Wesleyan University. His lecture extrapolated five views of Scripture—secular, liberal, existentialist, evangelical, and fundamentalist—only the latter two he considered valid.

My lens' defects are clear: they're rooted in who God is not, not who God is. I haven't been looking at Scripture holistically,⁸ front to back. I ignore what makes God look bad, something I've had to do when believing in that single hermeneutical lens. This is a very reactive way to read the Bible; it's focused on undoing untruths about God, rather than discovering the truths of God within the Text. On the other hand, this lens has served me well in rethinking the lenses I read through as a child and young adult. It's a lens that is changing constantly. And though for a while it has been a reactive lens, I see it transforming into one that is one of love and of hope.

In the course of the semester, I sense my hermeneutical lens transforming away from a purely reactive nature to one rooted in fluidity, love, and hope. I am drawn to the postmodern hermeneutic, so beautifully described by professors Johnson⁹ and Hudson.¹⁰ The lens isn't so concerned with finding answers, but being OK without answers. Its desire is not to deduce God, the way I had so easily done years ago, but to *dance* with God.¹¹ I want to believe in an Author who doesn't just tell me what to do, but invites me into his Story. I like the freedom of that; it gives me room to breathe. I am also drawn to the lens of love—reading the Bible in light of God's love for us (as seen best in the Resurrection of Christ). Reading the Bible with a “prejudice of love” has us not look at the text “as an ethical textbook,” writes theologian Peter Rollins, “but rather as a text that extrapolates the Christlike way of being in the world.”¹² This

⁸ “Faithful interpretation of Scripture requires an engagement with the entire narrative.” Ellen F. Davis and Richard B. Hays, “Nine Theses on the Interpretation of Scripture,” in *The Art of Reading Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 2.

⁹ William Stacy Johnson, “Reading the Scriptures Faithfully in a Postmodern Age,” in *The Art of Reading Scripture*, ed. Ellen F. Davis, comp. Richard B. Hays (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

¹⁰ Don Hudson, “The Dance of Truth,” *Mars Hill Review*, Fall 1998.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 21.

¹² Peter Rollins, “The Third Mile,” in *How (not) to Speak of God* (Brewster: Paraclete Press, 2006), 64, 68.

hermeneutic drives me to read the Bible with the hope that it will lead me to Christlike living, a sort of life that treats others with the love and dignity Christ showed.

And finally, this semester has filled me with a sense of hope for the Bible. My former lenses made me want to ignore the Bible or cross out the parts I didn't like. It is my hope that I can pick up my Bible again, either in the secrecy of my bedroom or in the company of others, and read with anticipation—anticipation for surprise, for the Spirit to show up. There's an itch inside me to take my shifting hermeneutic and put it into practice. But I say this not without fear too. I'm terrified that the old lenses will take over and lead me to believe the Author is a million things he's not. This too is a dance. When and if I pick up the Bible again, I hope to experience its blessing, a fear-casting blessing, and to let it kiss me like it had when I was a child—not out of obligation, but out of love and hope.

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