

From the December 3, 2007 Issue

How to Read the Bible

The bible is filled with *seemingly* contradictory statements. Before writing any angry emails, please note that I said “seemingly” contradictory statements. It’s even italicized to further draw your attention to it.

Contradictions are present in the biblical text. For example, in Leviticus it says to remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy. In Colossians it says to not allow anyone to judge you with regard to the Sabbath.

“Oh,” you might say, “that’s not really a contradiction because . . .” and then you would have a nice, neat way of resolving it. Just because contradictions can be resolved doesn’t mean they aren’t contradictions. It just means they are resolvable contradictions. The fact is that the bible sometimes says one thing and sometimes says another.

Because we believe that our Father in heaven is real and that he loves us we want to find the most faithful ways of resolving these contradictions. Some people think that the “bible interprets itself.” If that was true then everyone who reads the bible would come up with the same interpretation. After all, if the bible interprets itself you just have to read it to understand it.

The bible does not interpret itself. Jesus interprets the bible and shares his understanding of scripture with us through his Holy Spirit. The reason we don’t all read the bible the same way is that we aren’t all willing, able, or ready to listen to what Jesus has to say.

Let’s clarify what we mean when we say “Jesus interprets the bible.” The scripture itself makes clear that Jesus is the Word of God (John 1:1-14.) There’s nothing wrong with calling the bible the word of God, but it is not The Word. It is a book. The Word is God, the second person of the Trinity. Perhaps you would like to stop now and meditate on the profound ontological difference between being a book and being the second person of the Trinity. There’s no comparison really. The Word is the exact representation of God’s being, he is The Truth. The book is an inspired reflection of him.

What this means is that whenever we read the bible, and seek to resolve its contradiction, we have to use the passages that tell us who The Word (Jesus) is in order to interpret and clarify all the other passages.

Take our earlier example: in resolving the contradiction between Leviticus and Colossians we have many options. You could say that since Leviticus is older it gets priority, and therefore whatever Colossians means it can’t contradict Leviticus. Or, you could say that since Colossians is newer it gets priority. It’s the freshest information, hot off the press, so to speak, and therefore whatever Leviticus means it can’t contradict Colossians.

Neither approach would be correct, although the second approach might get you to the correct resolution of the contradiction. The correct approach is to set The Word of God, Jesus, above the scripture and seek a resolution of the contradiction that is faithful to him. Allowing Jesus to interpret scripture means that whatever we read in the bible, and whatever it may seem to say to us, we never

accept an interpretation that contradicts the person and identity of Christ.

So in this case we know that Jesus is our Sabbath rest (Matt. 11:28) and that he is the end of the law (Rom. 10:4.) In this way The Word (Jesus) explains to us that the word in Colossians is a clearer expression of who he is and therefore has priority over the word in Leviticus.

If you'll start looking at the way the NT writers interpret the bible (which was for them the OT only) you will see them reading scripture in this very way. For example, when Paul goes to interpret the story of Israel in Exodus 17 he says "that rock was Christ" (1 Cor. 10:4). What historical, grammatical or contextual basis does he have for this statement? None. His hermeneutic is fully Christ-centered. The word of scripture is always about The Word of God, Jesus Christ.

At a practical level this means that biblical texts which speak clearly of Jesus' identity as The Word must take interpretive priority over other texts. Passages such as John 1, Romans 5, Ephesians 1-2, Colossians 1-2, and Hebrews 1 (just to name a few) must be used to interpret and understand such passages as Matthew 25, Acts 2, Romans 10, and Leviticus 23 (just to name a few).

It also means that we must have Jesus' identity as The Word of God fixed in our minds as we read and must constantly refer back to him as we reach interpretive conclusions. He is the one who lives in intimate, unbreakable union with the Father and the Spirit (John 14). He is the one in whom all humanity exists (Acts 17:28, Col. 1:17), in whom all humanity is adopted into the Triune Life (Eph 1:5, 2:15), and in whom all humanity is reconciled to the Father (Col. 1:20).

However we read and interpret the bible, our interpretations must always be faithful to these descriptions of who Jesus is and what the eternal Word of the Father is saying to us in his Spirit.

For a practical methodology of how we read the bible in this way you can check out Bill Winn's article about Lectio Divina on page 10. Following a method like Lectio allows us to still our souls before Jesus and let him tell us what his Spirit is saying in the words of scripture.

Our Father in heaven has spoken to us through his Word, the one who is his only begotten Son, Jesus Christ. Let's listen to him as we read the bible.

~ Jonathan Stepp