10-13-2015

Cultivating a Biblical Imagination

Jason Lief
Dordt College, jason.lief@dordt.edu

Cultivating a Biblical Imagination

Abstract

"There are parts of the Bible that are puzzling, difficult, and downright mysterious."

Posting about being open to God's Word in new ways from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

http://inallthings.org/cultivating-a-biblical-imagination/

Keywords

In All Things, Bible, hermeneutics, imagination, reading

Disciplines

Christianity

Comments

In All Things is a publication of the Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service at Dordt College.

Cultivating a Biblical Imagination

inallthings.org/cultivating-a-biblical-imagination/

Jason Lief

It's like clockwork; every semester a student will raise a hand and say, "Professor Lief, you're reading way too much into the text. Why can't we just take it at face value?" I don't mind the question — it usually leads to an important discussion about interpretation and inspiration. It's a question that is grounded in what the reformers call the "perspicuity of scripture", or the belief that the message of scripture is clear. Of course I agree; it doesn't take a PhD in biblical studies to understand the message of God's love for the world revealed in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. At the same time, let's admit that there are parts of the Bible that are puzzling, difficult, and downright mysterious. Otherwise, why would the reformers have written so many commentaries?

Along with the clarity of scripture there is also a depth of relationship between the Bible and language. Some, for example, argue that a simple reading of Genesis 1 insists on a strict interpretation of the number of days it took for God to create. "Just take the text for what it says" goes the argument. Only, what does the text say? And who gets to decide? When I read Augustine, for example, I don't come away with a scientific reading of the text. (Honestly… I'm not always sure I know what he's talking about.) If the meaning of the biblical text is always the shallow, literalistic reading, I'm not sure Augustine would have converted to Christianity. Not that he's the standard of orthodoxy, but Calvin seemed to take him very seriously.

A positive impact of postmodernism is the recognition that language and meaning are complex. We understand that our words do not directly correlate to an objective reality; words often create reality, or at least they metaphorically re-describe the world. It's strange that we're okay with complexity in every other part of creation — biology, physics, economics, and in other areas, but when it comes to the language and narratives of the Bible we insist on an unnecessarily reductionistic reading. As Christians we believe that in Jesus Christ God became human, and that God takes our humanity seriously. The radical truth of the incarnation means that God is okay with human language in all of its beauty and complexity. Like the proverbial iceberg, what we see on the surface is enough to let us know there is an iceberg, but there's much more going on beneath the surface.

This is why cultivating our imagination is a crucial part of learning to read the Bible. A few years ago I wrote a short blog about the Hobbit films. For the past five or six years I've spent many nights reading stories like the *Chronicles of Narnia*, *Harry Potter*, and *The Lord of the Rings* to my three kids. My son and I spent much time traversing middle earth first with Bilbo and then with Frodo. The fact is there were many nights when we didn't read the Bible at all; we would read Tolkien. However, I firmly believe that this practice of reading was just as important for the development of my kid's faith as reading the Bible. How? Because it cultivated an imagination, a way of thinking about reality, that prepared them to read the Bible better. I didn't want my kids to become stuck in a literalistic, reductionisitc approach to the Bible that eventually causes them to not want to read it; I didn't want them to develop a way of reading that would foster boredom and maybe indifference. As much as I've heard people testify to how sacred scripture is, and how important it is for Christian faith, I also know that most Christians don't read it as much as they should. Why would they? They've got it all figured out. Growing up in the church, Sunday school, maybe even Christian education, we arrogantly think we know exactly what the Bible says. We don't need to read Genesis 1 or the gospels anymore because we've already read it. Every year I encounter students who are surprised by what they find in the Bible — stories and parts of stories that they haven't heard. Every

semester I read the Judah and Tamar story with students as a way to problematize our tendency to import our morality into the text. Many students are shocked — not because of the sexuality, but that it's even in the Bible to begin with. One student, after hearing the story, gasped, "Why does God talk to us like that?"

So what does this have to do with reading the Bible? I believe the best thing we can do to prepare to read and hear the biblical story is to exercise our imagination. We need to read creatively and deeply in a way that takes seriously the fact that God speaks to us through human authors, human words, and human stories. This means we need to read literature, poetry, history, and philosophy. We need to take seriously our human condition, recognizing that absolute truth is not something that is transmitted through the Bible by some process of osmosis. We need to give the Holy Spirit something to work with, an imagination and way of seeing the world that is open to wonder, awe, and even a bit of mystery. What I'm suggesting isn't academic, it isn't for the highly educated, it's a hermeneutic firmly grounded in love — a love that opens us up to get outside of ourselves so we might encounter the presence of God in the world. Call it a charitable hermeneutic — a reading of the Bible that is open to hearing what God has to say.