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Hearing God's Voice

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Hearing God's Voice

Abstract

"What is the relationship between the Bible and theology? Gregory Lee's *Today When You Hear His Voice* is a delightful companion on this journey, both in what it gets right and where it exposes where we often go wrong in our use of the Bible."

Posting about Gregory Lee's book 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/hearing-gods-voice/>

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Disciplines

Christianity

Comments

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Hearing God's Voice

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Benjamin Lappenga

Title: *Today When You Hear His Voice: Scripture, the Covenants and the People of God*

Author: Gregory Lee

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It was that magical three or four days in a college semester when students are comfortable enough to speak their minds in class, but have not yet given in to the numbing tumult of exam-prep and the unnatural end of a season of learning. I, too, was feeling witty, and just let it hang: “Theologians don’t really read the Bible—they’ve decided they already know what it says. Theologians just make stuff up; biblical scholars give attention to the text.”

So *there*.

The range of the students’ reactions was understandable—some wondering, “Aren’t *you* a theologian?”; some smirking because they’ve heard me say with half-sincere disdain, “I’m not a theologian, I’m a *biblical scholar*.” My hyperbolic remarks were intended to provoke a long conversation: what is the relationship between the Bible and theology? Gregory Lee’s *Today When You Hear His Voice* is a delightful companion on this journey, both in what it gets right and where it exposes where we often go wrong in our use of the Bible.

Lee is particularly interested in the relationship between the Old Testament and New Testament (and thereby the relationship between scriptural interpretation and salvation history). The book aims to provide a new lens by which we might approach a problem as old as the writings of the New Testament itself: how is it that the Old Testament was and remains Scripture, when the New Testament seems to change and relativize how it is read and understood? *Today When You Hear His Voice* succeeds in making a contribution, for at least two reasons. First, Lee brings in two important voices from the past, Augustine and Calvin, as conversation partners. This is a welcome approach, since especially in biblical studies (where the reading available to the “original audience” is paramount), figures from church history are almost never considered.¹ Second, Lee’s primary interlocutor is Hebrews. This oft-neglected and difficult text is regularly perceived as the *least* helpful book in the New Testament for addressing questions about Judaism and the Old Testament because it is perceived as promoting supersessionism (the view that the church has replaced the Israelites as the people of God, which can veer into anti-Jewish attitudes).² Lee disagrees, arguing that in fact the author of Hebrews offers a fresh model for Christians today: in the words of the Old Testament we hear “what God is saying to the covenant community now (‘today’), in the contemporary moment.”³

My critique of Lee doesn’t concern so much his exegetical and theological conclusions, but rather what his approach implies about the role of the Bible in the life of believers. I suspect that for many Christians, whether examined or not, the default approach to the Bible, and the one tacitly endorsed by Lee’s book, is that the Bible is primarily useful for *establishing right doctrine*.⁴ I think Lee’s book has much to offer us, so long as we affirm that our readings of the Bible ought primarily to be about *the formation of Christian imaginations* that can obediently respond to moral and existential challenges in our current moment and context.

Lee, following scholars like David Yeago and Kavin Rowe, argues in the last chapter that church doctrine represents “the fruitful discovery of God’s Word as mediated through the biblical text.”⁵ The problem here returns us to the

claim I made to my class. There is, however, something of an ironic reversal in play: it is theologians like Lee that wish to use the Bible to support the theology they endorse, while biblical scholars like myself want to insist that the Bible supports multiple readings, and that the church, through the guidance of the Spirit, does indeed “make stuff up”! The idea that careful biblical scholarship can problematize the conclusions of theologians (e.g., Calvin’s reading of Hebrews)⁶ counters the erroneous (and dangerous) understanding of “theology” as an inherited deposit of wisdom that is used to indoctrinate the faithful.⁷

The key point here is that Christians locate themselves within a particular community that chooses to privilege *these* readings (those in accordance with the rule of faith) over other possible readings. That we do this is not because our readings represent the objectively “best” or “clearest” reading—we accept these readings as the right readings through *faith* (importantly, a faith nourished in Christian community). The impulse that plagues Lee’s approach (and the approach of many in the evangelical/Protestant/Reformed world) is the impulse to remove the uncertainty and messiness that comes with such a leap of faith. By claiming that Christian doctrine consists of “rules derived from Scripture,”⁸ Lee means to preserve certain doctrinal positions, such as the superiority of a Protestant doctrine of Scripture (*sola Scriptura*) over that of Roman Catholics (*sola Scriptura et ecclesia*).

However much I agree that Scripture is “the fundamental resource for the Christian imagination,”⁹ I argue that our accent should be on the Christian imagination. However unassailable our theology may seem, it can and must shift and adapt in new times and contexts, just as it has since the beginning. This is no surrender to the whims of *l’esprit de l’époque*. The Christian imagination must be nurtured through the Spirit-led practices of the church: worship, liturgy, service, prayer, and, crucially, the reading of the Bible itself in all its complexity.¹⁰ So go ahead, make stuff up! By continually engaging the Bible within vibrant communities of faith, and in continuity with believers from across the globe and across time,¹¹ we are freed to take to the text our doubts, suspicions, fears, hopes, and creativity—and to do so in the confidence that today we will indeed “hear God’s voice” (Heb 3:7).

Footnotes

1. That Lee’s chapters on Augustine and Calvin would make for solid primers on their respective thought is both evidence of the success of Lee’s book and a sign of its limitations. Like the difficulties I will address below, the problem involves the role of theology vis-à-vis biblical study. For example, even considering Lee’s descriptive aims in these chapters, reading about Calvin’s take on Romans 9–11, rather than trying to understand Paul’s text itself, is irritating in its own right and also sadly reminiscent of the ways many evangelical Christians evade the Bible itself. When Lee attempts to argue for engaging with Scripture itself, he makes use of Augustine’s conversation story (*Today When You Hear His Voice*, 204–5) in a rather convoluted fashion. Lee tries to make the point that although God can speak through other means, “only Scripture effects submission to the divine will” (*Today When You Hear His Voice*, 205). But by using Augustine’s example, Lee basically promotes a kind of “this is what it means to me” reading of Scripture that is more at home in undisciplined evangelical Bible studies than for the kind of serious study of the Bible that leads to sound preaching, teaching, and Christian formation. ←
2. Most notably in Heb 8:8–9 (NRSV): “God finds fault with them when he says: ‘The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will establish a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah; not like the covenant that I made with their ancestors, on the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt; for they did not continue in my covenant, and so I had no concern for them, says the Lord.’” ←
3. Lee, *Today When You Hear His Voice*, 9. My critique below notwithstanding, it is Lee’s engagement with Hebrews in the final chapters that salvages and even champions theology as a rich and powerful way of

encountering the biblical text. His basic move is to show that whereas Augustine articulates two covenants, two peoples (unity of reference), and two levels of meaning, and Calvin articulates one covenant, one people (unity of identity), and a Christologically expansive literal sense, Hebrews articulates two covenants, one people (unity of transformation), and transforming Old Testament locutions according to the new theological situation.

I do, however, have one caveat about Lee's basic approach: if the study is "less a theology of Scripture than a theology of Hebrews' theology of Scripture" (*Today When You Hear His Voice*, 10), doesn't this muddy the waters? Isn't "theology" here then reverting to "theology" as a descriptive enterprise? And if so, how is it helpful? Lee seems to revere Hebrews as a superior theology to Augustine and Calvin, but of course Augustine and Calvin are not just reading Hebrews, but do in fact have to take into account the Pauline categories and other canonical witnesses as they seek to describe a consistent Christian theology. The very presence of diversity in the canon prohibits us from taking Hebrews as the view that all Christians should adopt (on this see further *Today When You Hear His Voice*, 200). For example, it is difficult to see how Lee would ever read Psalm 8 for anything other than what the author of Hebrews finds in it (a Christological reading whereby the psalm validates Jesus' identity as a representative of humanity). Lee claims that "Hebrews does attend to the literal sense... [in a way that is] theologically congruent with the psalm's own trajectory" (*Today When You Hear His Voice*, 176–77). The terms of this theological congruency is, by definition, the theology Hebrews (or Lee) wishes to impose, and in any case Hebrews relies on one particular reading of an ambiguous phrase in Ps 8:5 ("for a little while lower" rather than the more natural "a little bit lower"). Even within the New Testament, there exists a diversity of readings of Psalm 8 (Matt 21:16; 1 Cor 15:27; Eph 1:22). ↩

4. One example where this is clear is Lee's language about "propositional content embedded in the original locutions" (*Today When You Hear His Voice*, 185). ↩
5. *Today When You Hear His Voice*, 232. ↩
6. See, e.g., Lee's discussion of C. K. Barrett's important critique of Calvin on the temporal eschatology of Hebrews—the *spatial* dimension emphasized in Hebrews is what distinguishes the mode of thought in Hebrews from that of Platonic understandings (*Today When You Hear His Voice*, 140–41). ↩
7. Although some wish it were so, theology is not a summary of the Bible's teachings, or even an articulation of church doctrine (on this point, see Lee's comments about "imposing upon [the author of Hebrews] later theological categories that distort historical meaning" [*Today When You Hear His Voice*, 11]). Theology necessarily takes its cues from and is animated by Scripture, but it does in fact go beyond Scripture. It makes claims that are then used as a lens by which Scripture is understood. ↩
8. Lee nearly acknowledges this point, but still speaks as if there is one valid reading of Scripture that determines doctrine: "[T]his is not to suggest that Nicene terminology materialized from Scripture in a ready-made box.... [R]ules derived from Scripture... provide a filter and guide for how the text should be read" (*Today When You Hear His Voice*, 237; italics mine). ↩
9. Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy*, 39; cited in Lee, *Today When You Hear His Voice*, 237. ↩
10. Lee rightly emphasizes that "the best readers will not be scholars but saints" (*Today When You Hear His Voice*, 247), but these are not mutually exclusive, and Lee fails to note the crucial role of close and careful biblical study can play in producing such saints. On the question of what constitutes the "Christian community," Lee writes numerous pages (*Today When You Hear His Voice*, 250–64) on the topic of ecclesiology with little constructive to offer—Lee basically acknowledges that without a magisterium or a return to Rome, Protestants are severely hampered in their ability to reclaim the canonical witness to Christ. ↩

11. As Lee correctly notes, “Protestants must recognize better than they often have that union with Christ presupposes union with the body of Christ and that Christian identity and ecclesial communion are mutually implicative” (*Today When You Hear His Voice*, 256). ↩