

1-1-2010

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Gordon Ferguson

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### Recommended Citation

Ferguson, Gordon (2010) "View of and Use of Scripture," *Leaven*: Vol. 18: Iss. 2, Article 6.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol18/iss2/6>

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# View Of and Use Of the Scriptures

GORDON FERGUSON

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*All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.*  
*2 Tim 3.16–17*

Any writer who starts an article with this title must do so with a sense of fear and trembling. Simplistic answers will not do in the realm of hermeneutics. Yet, the two millennia of Christendom's history have demonstrated that men will seek for and expound upon simple answers. The varied approaches to biblical interpretation are enough to demonstrate that the answers are anything but simple. We are not just talking about the differences between liberal Protestant theology that made such a bold entrance into the theological world in the nineteenth century and in what we would all recognize as conservative theology. Those variations are to be expected. What might be unexpected and even unwelcomed are those variations among conservative Bible scholars and the religious groups they represent. Claiming to accept the Bible as the inspired, authoritative and infallible word of God does not guarantee uniformity in its understanding and application.

What causes such variations among Bible believers? The answers to that one are beyond the scope of this article, but suffice it to say that our level of accurate biblical knowledge and our own spiritual background experiences are likely the most significant factors in determining how we view and use the scripture. While we may view scripture in lofty ways as God's word, inadequate or inaccurate training in the handling of scripture will lead to its misuse. Hence, one's view of scripture generally may be highly commendable and even idealistic, while one's use of it may be quite flawed—with all good intentions. Thus is the challenge of hermeneutics, a challenge that has faced Bible believers from the beginning of the Christian era.

Much could be said about this subject from a historical perspective or from a general theological perspective. However, the stated purpose of the series of articles in this edition of *Leaven* is to introduce the reading audience to a lesser-understood segment of the broader Restoration Movement of churches. Therefore, I will address the rest of my remarks to this particular group of which I have been a member for about twenty-five years.

My own view and use of scripture has been shaped by many varied influences. My early years were spent in a very narrow splinter group among the Churches of Christ, commonly referred to as the "one-cup, non-Sunday school" group. As a young married man, I became associated with the more mainstream Churches of Christ. While in this group, I attended the Preston Road School of Preaching, a very conservative training school, and later taught there for a number of years. During those years, I completed a master's degree in New Testament studies at Harding Graduate School of Religion.

## HERMENEUTICAL PRINCIPLES

Since the Campus Ministry Movement stage of our history was influenced most strongly by a graduate of Harding College, Chuck Lucas, it would be expected that biblical interpretation would follow certain lines. The high view of scripture as the only guide for faith and practice was indeed embraced by his young campus converts. Their hermeneutics were essentially the same as those in other Churches of Christ.

Dating back to the early American Restoration period, one of the cherished mottoes was stated in these words: “We speak where the Bible speaks, and are silent where the Bible is silent.” This emphasis on “doing Bible things in Bible ways” led to some amazing applications of what might be termed “patternistic” theology. Attempting to follow examples of the early church, hence their patterns, was far easier to espouse than to apply consistently.

Just after the turn of the twentieth century, the break in the Restoration Movement between what became known as the Christian Church and the Church of Christ movements allegedly had to do with this hermeneutic. Those in the latter group claimed that those in the former group had now reversed the revered motto. Hence it had supposedly become “We speak where the Bible is silent, and are silent where the Bible speaks.” This difference was said to account for the use of instrumental music in worship. Seemingly logical arguments can be made for either side of this old adage, which suggests that both ways of stating it have pros and cons.

It is interesting to note that this hermeneutical challenge has been present since early Reformation days. According to the church historian Bruce Shelley, Luther would allow whatever the Bible would not prohibit, whereas Zwingli rejected whatever the Bible did not prescribe.<sup>1</sup> This difference states in slightly different terminology the aforementioned Restoration mottoes. While simplistic mottoes may be appealing, no one can totally follow either of these to the ultimate degree. Attempting to limit ourselves to only what we can actually find an example of in the Bible would result in a twenty-first century quagmire. On the other hand, claiming the freedom to do anything the Bible did not specifically prohibit would lead to practices that would surely result in some type of bondage. Such challenges of biblical interpretation should lead us in the direction of striving for much humility toward self and extending much grace toward others.

In what became known as the International Churches of Christ (ICOC), our earlier stricter hermeneutic, particularly as related to a “pattern” to be followed, gave way to a broader interpretation that was quite similar to the supposed reversal of that early Restoration slogan. In the 1980s, our churches grew rapidly by converting people to Christ from all religious backgrounds, as well as atheists and agnostics. The spirit of the law became as important as the letter. As the movement spread rapidly to other continents, many arguments and traditions were reexamined through the lens of a commitment to reach the world with the gospel. In the 1990s, our churches began to use instrumental music in worship, which was part of a trend to focus on what were seen as “weightier matters” with less interest in some of the peripheral issues that seemed to occupy an inordinate amount of time in Churches of Christ in the 50s and 60s. Generally, there was a more relaxed view toward such things as the moderate use of alcoholic beverages and a broader role of women in the church. The relationship of baptism and the new birth was not in this category.

All this involved a hermeneutical shift, one that left us with more in common in spirit with the Christian Churches than with the root system out of which we grew. While there are some variations in thinking among individual members about such matters, the vast majority of our members do not come from a Restoration background, and the majority of those who do have made the shift in thinking relatively easily. On matters like the use of instrumental music in worship, we would be equally comfortable in any part of the present Restoration groups, although our preferences would tend in the direction of a less stringent interpretative approach.

1. Bruce Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language* (Dallas, Texas: Word Publishing, 1995), 250.

### A DIFFERENT THEOLOGY?

Those who are even vaguely aware of the Campus Ministry Movement history among Churches of Christ in the 1970s and 1980s are aware of the conflicts that occurred when campus ministry groups grew within existing Churches of Christ. Most of these conflicts resulted when young campus ministers were trained in an “in-house” setting (primarily at the Crossroads Church) and sent out to serve as campus ministers in various Churches of Christ. In these settings, it was not the nature of their theology that caused frequent conflicts with the other leaders and members in those churches, it was primarily the practical application.

Prior to their arrival, the accepted definition of what constituted a faithful member of the church was well understood, as was the terminology used to describe their commitment. The incoming campus ministry group had different standards defining their commitment and different terminology describing it. Their definition of commitment was not about attending all the services of the church, giving consistently and significantly financially, and avoiding the outward sins of the flesh. Those things were presupposed. Now the talk was about “sharing one’s faith,” “being fruitful in evangelism,” “having daily quiet times with God” and “spending time with your prayer partner to put into practice the ‘one another’ passages of the New Testament.”

The stark differences in defining what constituted a committed Christian led to significant upheavals in nearly all congregations who hired young campus ministers trained in churches like Crossroads. These differences were too great to overcome, and reactionary sins on both sides were all too prevalent. The seeds of yet another division in the Restoration Movement were sown too deeply to be avoided. But it is important to note that it was not the view of the Bible or theology as much as its practical application that led to the parting of the ways in the 1980s.

Perhaps a story told me by a close friend in our family of churches illustrates the point. He was brought to Christ in Gainesville and trained there for the ministry. Later serving in another church near a large campus, he eventually was relieved of his duties by the elders during the time of nationwide controversy. As he was leaving, one of the elders told him this: “It is not that you preached anything all that different from what we already knew. It is just that after you preached, you expected us to do it.”

### HELPFUL VIEWS AND USES OF SCRIPTURE

The comment made to my friend reflects one of the early oft-stated views of the Bible within the movement: The Bible is intended by God to be a standard for life, not simply an ideal for which to aim. Many of the young converts in the Campus Ministry Movement phase had been repulsed by what they saw as gross hypocrisy in the lives of professing Christians. In their view, outside “the right acts of worship” and the right doctrine of baptism, most church people viewed the Bible as only a lofty ideal to be admired rather than a standard that was expected to be seriously followed. For these zealous young disciples, no selective obedience was allowed—it was all or nothing, a total commitment of one’s life to the Lordship of Christ. He was either Lord of all or not at all.

This emphasis (and a biblical one at that) led to what was pejoratively referred to as “Lordship baptism.” Young people from all religious backgrounds, including the Churches of Christ, were asked to seriously examine whether their original baptism was based on making Jesus their Lord, and if not, they were urged to be baptized again with a true biblical understanding of conversion.

At bottom, it was an issue of repentance. For many who had been brought up in Churches of Christ, repentance was defined primarily as ceasing to do wrong. Biblically, refusing to do wrong is only the stepping-stone to doing what is right, and that part of repentance can be defined as making Jesus the Lord of your life. Making him Lord means that we, as a part of his spiritual body, will do what he did in his physical body while on earth. We are now his representatives, called to imitate his heart and life and commissioned to carry out his mission on earth, particularly to seek and save the lost.

That commission, as stated in Matt 28.18–20, has two parts. “Then Jesus came to them and said, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations,

baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” The first part gave the command to go and make disciples initially, which culminated in baptism into Christ. The second part was to teach them to obey all things Jesus commanded, another way of saying to mature the converts into the image of Christ. Discipleship must have both a vertical aspect (total commitment to Christ) and its horizontal aspect (helping mature one another), commonly called “discipling.”

I have been asked many times why I became a part of the ICOC, and why I have stayed with it in spite of the systemic sins that have become painfully apparent, especially in this century. The answer is threefold: dedication of the large majority of our membership to evangelizing the world, teaching and practicing full biblical repentance, and discipling one another to become more and more like Christ. The last presupposes a real openness with one’s personal life and a strong desire to keep changing and growing. A failure among some leaders in regard to the last two of these led to a crisis. But through that crisis I saw a return to the practice of them all. I have never encountered these three things in any other group in the measure I have found them in this fellowship of churches. But having listed the helpful things for which I am most thankful, I must also address the sinful things that have regrettably been a part of our movement—honestly and candidly.

#### HARMFUL VIEWS AND USES OF SCRIPTURE

What is said next is not an attempt to shift blame, although it could at first appear as such. However, the influence of one man on our movement for years was so significant that it has to be mentioned and explained. What those of us who had more biblical training did, in either following his lead or allowing his influence to be widely exerted, is our own fault, and we have no one to blame but ourselves. We either knew better or should have known better, but were blinded to some extent by the rather amazing results in converting large numbers of people and planting churches all over the world. I clearly speak of my own guilt in this matter, and I think I speak for many more who share much the same viewpoint and present convictions. The well-known leader to whom I refer is no longer a part of our family of churches, and ultimately it was the determination to return to a biblical model that led to the end of his influence. In the final analysis scripture ruled the day.

In spite of the more in-depth biblical teaching of Chuck Lucas in the Campus Ministry Movement days, that leader just referred to took a different approach to the Bible and to ministry training. Chuck was a good student of the Bible and a preacher of expository sermons. Further, he not only led “on-the-job” ministry training but also encouraged further academic training. This resulted in some of our present older leaders receiving biblical training at the graduate school level some decades back. However, the eventual leader of the movement had a very negative reaction to his attempts at further academic education at one of the Christian graduate schools. As a result, he began touting the “on-the-job” type ministry training as the only type needed and eschewing religious training in academic classroom settings. His argument was that he was training “just like Jesus trained.” Since no human trainer is Jesus, I would judge that he was half right and half wrong in his approach. Some ministry training is best accomplished through a direct mentoring relationship, an apprenticeship, but some training is best accomplished in the classroom.

Too many gaps in our biblical knowledge combined with an often distorted hermeneutic overly influenced by pragmatism resulted in turning a “both/and” need into a “one and only choice” of training ministers. We are now digging out of the pit we dug ourselves into, by availing ourselves of a variety of different educational opportunities, some of which we are establishing within our own ranks by offering more formal teaching done by those having the necessary academic credentials.

Combining this former incomplete philosophy of ministry training with a strong emphasis on practical ministry generally, it would be natural to expect teaching and preaching that was almost exclusively topical in nature, and those expectations would not be unmet. The impact of this is still felt in our churches.

Effective biblical teaching and preaching on a congregational level should contain a good balance between

historical context and present application, stated by some simply as “God’s then” and “God’s now.” My experience in Churches of Christ in former years left me with the feeling that we were focused too much on God’s *then* without enough direct application of scripture to our present life situations. My experience in the ICOC in later years has left me with the opposite feeling. Both are extremes and both yield incomplete or even damaging effects. A present challenge in our churches is to help equip leaders and members alike with enough in-depth Bible knowledge to enable them to accurately handle scriptures contextually.

One encouraging note is that the majority of our members have developed strong personal habits of daily Bible study. A majority of our men and women learned to teach the Bible to others personally and a very high percentage lead Bible study groups.

Finally, it should be stated that all strengths can become weaknesses, if we are not careful. I mentioned previously that what drew me to this family of churches and has kept me here were the strong focuses on evangelism, discipling and repentance. Each of these has been applied well at times and applied sinfully at times, and I will mention some examples.

Regarding evangelism, motivational approaches too often degenerated into something akin to pressure tactics and a performance orientation in our relationship to God. Clearly, the ends do not justify the means, and faulty building resulted in the upheaval in our movement that came to a head in 2003. Regarding discipling, an increasingly authoritarian approach resulted in more of a military model than a Jesus model. A very good thing done in very wrong ways leads to bad results. Understanding repentance as not only a decision before baptism (Acts 2.38), but as a continual, all-embracing part of the Christian life is undoubted biblically correct. However, the challenge is to keep the emphasis on imitating our Master—an emphasis that produces ongoing repentance—rather than focusing on the acts of repentance themselves. The latter focus results in a works mentality that cannot continue to yield good fruit and will not sustain us as joyful Christians for a lifetime.

#### CONCLUSION

I would say (with apologies to Dickens) that the history of the ICOC has indeed been the best of times and the worst of times. But the underlying commitment to the Lordship of Jesus and his cause and a true respect for and commitment to the scriptures has enabled us to deal with sin in even our most influential leaders, to truly repent of the wrong and to recommit ourselves to the right. To me, that is both remarkable and commendable, and a strong indicator of many great things to come.

What is our present view and use of scripture? About the same as it has been throughout our brief history—we see the Bible as the inspired, authoritative word of God, which we are committed to follow as we rejoice in the victories God gives and humbly repent at the discipline he provides. Our desire is still to be a “restoration movement,” which means that we know that we have not arrived at a complete understanding of all biblical truths nor will we ever. Only God is at the end of that rainbow. We must stay open to seeing our blind spots and learning new things. On the other hand, we do believe that we have solid footing on a number of foundational issues regarding how we view and use the scriptures. We are changing, we are growing again and Jesus is still Lord!

**GORDON FERGUSON** IS A TEACHER, AUTHOR AND MINISTER CURRENTLY ENGAGED IN AN INTERNATIONAL LEADERSHIP TRAINING MINISTRY FOR THE ICOC.

