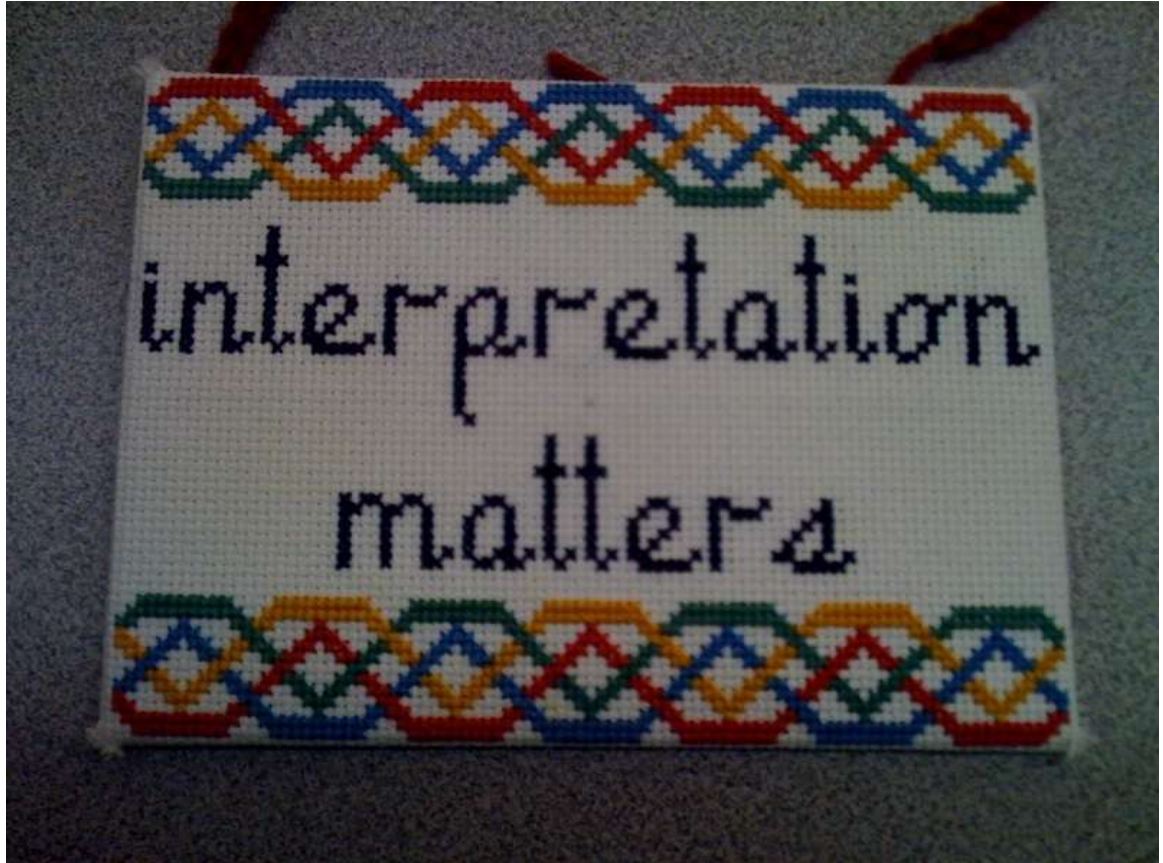


Chapter 6: Biblical Authority and the Ethics of Biblical Interpretation
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My major complaint about this chapter is that Cheryl published it before I did!¹ I have four short sayings that I've cross stitched and hang in my classroom as a reminder to students of core principles I believe they should follow in interpreting the Bible. I've brought two of them with me because they reflect the issues that Cheryl discusses in this chapter. They are: *Interpretation Matters* and *Context is Everything*. I wrote these in the margins on pp. 146 and 147 respectively. These sayings are my own way expressing what Cheryl is defining as "ethical" biblical interpretation.



¹ I do raise the issue of ethical interpretation on pp. of my essay, "Women, Violence, and the Bible, in Linda Day and Carolyn J. Pressler,



Cheryl begins the chapter (pp. 135-139) with a summary of the work done more extensively in chapter 1. She highlights the *mythical norm* (white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, Christian, financially secure) that functions as the normative interpretation of the Bible. By conflating this with “God’s will” or as the “objective” reading, both church and academy continue to uphold the *mythical norm*. In order for both to become inclusive, it is necessary to redefine concepts of Scripture and biblical authority, which is the aim of the rest of this chapter.

On pages 139-145 (“Reconceptualizing Scripture and Biblical Authority”) Cheryl discusses and critiques traditional understandings of Scripture and biblical authority. A liberationist perspective requires a different definition, which Cheryl spells out. A summary statement of the difference is viewing biblical authority as submission and biblical authority as participation. I found Cheryl’s explanations to be right on target. My own way of framing the issue is to consider the theological presuppositions that we start with. One starts with the presupposition that God is without error, therefore we are to submit to the text’s authority. The other starts with the view that that God can work in, through, and despite human failings, including what is recorded in the Bible of our ancestors’ experiences with the Transcendent. The struggle for liberationists is how to understand the Bible as authoritative while at the same time critiquing or even rejecting biblical viewpoints. Cheryl concludes that from a liberationist perspective, “biblical authority becomes a partnership, a process of critical engagement that requires dialogue between and

within communities of faith.”² With this understanding of different views of biblical authority, Cheryl ends this section of the chapter with critiques of the views of biblical authority of Stanley Hauerwas³ and N. T. Wright⁴ and how they continue to exclude marginalized groups.

The third section of this chapter (pp. 145-154, “The Ethics of Biblical Interpretation”) is the one that I found to be most exciting and that I was most engaged with. In order to challenge the dynamic of the *mythical norm* and the resulting violence against the Other, Cheryl argues that two things must happen. First, readers must be honest and self-conscious of their social location (or “Context is Everything”). Second, readers must consider “the impact of a decision or interpretation on any or all of the nondominant groups” (or “Interpretation Matters”).⁵ *Ethical interpretation*, therefore, rejects readings that, while plausible, result from a lack of critical self-awareness or have harmful consequences.⁶ Cheryl gives a summary of some recent trends in biblical scholarship that support the move toward ethical interpretation before giving an excellent summary on p. 148. Although I would love to quote most of that page, here are two sentences that capture the aim of this section. “Today, when we have to recognize that any one text can have different meanings, we must consider not just *how* meaning is derived from ancient biblical texts but *why* a particular meaning, among several plausible meanings, is chosen.” “Specifying the elements of ethical biblical interpretation—assessment of the contemporary context, critical self-awareness, and an analysis of consequences on the “Other”—means that any particular interpretation can be evaluated accordingly.”

Cheryl then applies her theoretical understanding by analyzing the ways in which some interpretations on divorce and homosexuality are ethically questionable and compares how current condemnation of homosexuality is similar to interpretations that supported slavery and women’s subordination. Ethical interpretation challenges claims to objectivity or that an interpretation is “the right” one.

Perhaps the most powerful paragraph in the chapter, if not the whole book, is found on p. 153. The struggles against sexism, homophobia, white supremacy (racism), and neocolonial dynamics are not only intimately connected, but they are united in their struggle against the *mythical norm* of the text and controlling interpretations. Yet the reality is that the struggles of the marginalized are often pitted against each other. Ethical interpretation should call all of us instead to collaborate in a push for inclusive communities.

In my own thinking on ethical interpretation what I ask my students is to consider the kind of community they want to create, such as Cheryl’s “inclusive community.” We then have to engage the text in a way to build that community, to uphold the texts and interpretations that move us toward inclusivity and to critique

² p. 142

³ *Unleashing the Scripture: Freeing the Bible from Captivity in America*

⁴ *The Last Word: Scripture and the Authority of God*

⁵ p. 146.

⁶ *Ibid.*, I wrote “AMEN!” in the margin at this point.

the texts that hinder it. The one thing that I wish Cheryl had said more explicitly is to note that the text itself contains ambiguity. That is, we can't predetermine if a text is ethically inclusive. And I tell my students that this is why we have to read the Bible in community. A text that they may find liberating and inclusive, others may find oppressive and exclusive. But we don't know that if we don't talk to one another.

I commend Cheryl for her work on the book as a whole, but especially on this chapter. If both church and academy would become ethical, inclusive biblical interpreters we just might nudge this world closer to the biblical ideal of the peaceable kingdom.