

What Is “Anglican” about Anglican Biblical Interpretation?

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I’m strongly tempted to say: “what he said,” and sit down. I agree with and applaud everything my colleague and longtime friend Neil Elliott has said, and said so much better than I could because of his longer immersion in the subject. Please regard what I have to say as the light dessert to the solid meal he has presented!

A good many years ago, in the time of floppy disks, an Episcopal congregation in Winchester, Virginia published a list of “things Episcopalians really believe.” It contained such obvious truths as that coffee hour is the eighth sacrament, but concluded with: “Episcopalians really believe in Scripture, Tradition, and Reason. While we don’t agree on what any of those means, that’s hardly the point.”

Everyone gets a good laugh out of that, but reviewing the history of Anglican biblical scholarship for this presentation — I am undereducated on the subject because I came into the church in possession of a Th.D. in New Testament and so spent but a single year in seminary — opened my eyes to the fact that the statement is profoundly

true. As far as I can tell, at no time in the history of Anglicanism have its biblical scholars and theologians been united on the meaning of those three legs of the stool, or on their relationship to one another — from the Elizabethan Settlement through Puritanism and Methodism to the Age of Reason to the scientific revolution to historical criticism and beyond. My major reference has been Rowan Greer's *Anglican Approaches to Scripture: From the Reformation to the Present*.¹ On p. 161, at the beginning of his last chapter, "An Inconclusive Conclusion," Greer confesses that "I have become increasingly convinced that it is difficult to speak of a single Anglican view of scripture or of a single Anglican theological perspective"! So there we are.

On the preceding page, however, Greer had written that "the truth of scripture must involve its grounding in historical events but clearly must be understood in terms of what those events mean to believing Christians," which may well be a consensus point, at least for Anglicans, as regards the relationship of Scripture, tradition (chiefly the creeds), and reason/experience. I also think it supports Neil's impassioned call for engagement, since if the truths of scripture grounded in historical events *do* have meaning for believing Christians—and I see it as my priestly and scholarly obligation to help them make the connection—then action is indeed required.

¹ Rowan A. Greer, *Anglican Approaches to Scripture: From the Reformation to the Present* (New York: Crossroad, 2006).

Another profound insight came to me from the priest at my sponsoring parish (himself a convert to Anglicanism, though from an evangelical tradition and not from Roman Catholicism as I was). With regard to the ordination oath, which is an adaptation, as I discovered, of Article Six, he said he always elided “all” in “all things necessary to salvation” because he wasn’t convinced that all necessary things are contained in the Bible. And that, as I later learned, is, or was, one of the ongoing disputes, especially as regards the relationship of the Bible and the creed(s). But my own immediate reaction was to visit Article Six, where I read the further statement that “whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man [sic], that it should be believed as an article of the Faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation” And I said, “hot damn!” That is utterly liberating — because which of us thinks there is *anything* in the universe of thought that can be “proved” (or, for that matter, disproved) from the Bible alone?

Of course, not being from a “*sola Scriptura*” tradition, I wasn’t overly bothered by having to “prove” anything or everything from the Bible, but I was accustomed to having certain meanings dictated “from above,” by human church authorities. That was one of the heaviest chains I threw off when I shifted between the Roman branch of Catholicism and the Anglican one. I suspect it was my having discovered the Episcopal Church and its lack of thought control that resulted in my being dumped from my teaching position in a Roman Catholic school of theology, since that was the era of Pope

J2P2, who might have done very bad things to the school had it come to his ears that one of its faculty believed women should be ordained to the priesthood and actually said so out loud. (Then I went into publishing and became even more of a nuisance, since I had a much broader audience.)

That kind of constraint on theological thinking is very puzzling to Anglicans, I find, while at the same time Anglican openness to contemporary interpretations enrages those of a fundamentalist bent. For example: I very much like Andrew Lincoln's *Born of a Virgin?* and its passionate defense of Jesus' true humanity as indispensable to the doctrine of the Incarnation. I gave it a pretty good review, I guess; Lincoln immediately friended me on Facebook! (and Eerdmans excerpts the review on its website).

Researching other reviews, though, I found this from a Roman Catholic priest: "Lincoln ends his volume with the bold and defiant words that to insist on a belief in the virginal conception of Christ involves being 'totally resistant to serious engagement with biblical and theological scholarship.' It is not so. It only means that one prefers the biblical and theological scholarship of the saints which produced the rule of faith and which has guided the Church for two millennia to the scholarship published . . . by Wm. B. Eerdmans today."² This, I think, comes from the kind of person Dale Martin has in mind when he writes that "a main goal of my writing is to take orthodoxy out of the

² Blogpost by Fr. Lawrence Farley, <https://blogs.ancientfaith.com/nooterfoundation/born-of-a-virgin>.

hands of conservative Christians and to show both scholars and laypeople how to read the Bible beyond historical criticism.”³

Lincoln, in fact, dialogues throughout his book with the most thorough Roman Catholic student of the Infancy Gospels, the late Raymond E. Brown. There are thirty-one references to Brown’s work, vastly more than to any other. Yet Lincoln seems saddened, and even puzzled, by Brown’s vagueness about alternate theories that assert Jesus’ divine status while presenting objections to the idea of a virgin birth as anchored in the gospels. Rowan Greer likewise, writing about Brown’s *Introduction to the New Testament*, observes that “it seems possible to draw the conclusion that while he himself believes that historical criticism serves the cause of Christianity and the church, he recognizes that not everyone will hold this conviction.”⁴

I am not puzzled. Brown suffered throughout his scholarly career from the slings and arrows of the neo-orthodox, even though he was himself quite a cautious and even conservative scholar (I am told that he had a friend who was in a position to arrange for all his books to bear the *imprimi potest* and the Imprimatur). He didn’t go to the length of retreating into abstruseness, like a German scholar I heard about when I was in Tübingen: according to my ancient languages teacher the scholar in question was attacked by the Holy Office of the Inquisition (now called the Congregation for the

³ Dale B. Martin, *Biblical Truths: The Meaning of Scripture in the Twenty-First Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 35.

⁴ *Anglican Approaches to Scripture*, 172.

Doctrine of the Faith, but a rose by any other name . . .) for one of his publications, whereupon he swore: “They won’t get me!” and restricted his further publications to arcane questions of ancient (non-biblical) philology. But you got the feeling that Brown never quite said what he really thought – not in print, anyway.

When Dale Martin, one of my all-time favorite Anglican theologians (likewise a convert) writes that “emphasizing the democratic ideology and functioning of the *ekklesia* should also provide theological and ethical fodder for our own churches,” I think he is expressing a core Anglican principle, as articulated for me in discussion with some lifelong Episcopalians: we may not all *agree* on what Scripture, tradition, and reason assert, but we are convinced that we are meant to *do* something with them – together. We are called to be church, to follow the principle of *lex orandi, lex credendi* that Neil has cited, and Scripture and tradition are our source manuals, among other roles they play.

Being called to be church means we have to get along, and ultimately excludes exclusion. We’re all in this together. It seems to me that what makes our battles over issues of sexuality so desperately painful is that we are being called by the supposed upholders of orthodoxy to *exclude* some people from our communion, and we just can’t do that. Moreover, those upholders of orthodoxy insist that when we *include* certain people we are *excluding them*, so either way we are being pushed to be untrue to our

calling. I've just spent a couple of days in the diocese of Albany, and the pain being experienced there is all but intolerable.

Furthermore, I believe we know we are called to be church because we believe in the Incarnation—and again, I'm glad to have a lifelong Anglican's support on that! If there is one doctrine to which, at least in modernity, all Anglicans are dedicated, it is that. (I make an exception for some refugees from Roman Catholicism who are so intent on intellectual freedom—and I do sympathize!—that they have effectively chosen reason above everything.)

I loved Andrew Lincoln's book because it is such a passionate appeal to affirm the Incarnation in modern terms. At the very end (p. 302) he writes that it is about his effort to indicate "why it is high time that the old conservative-liberal divide on the virgin birth be left behind and why those with different views, not least those who disagree with the views expressed here, should be prepared to explore the issues further." (A very Anglican position!) He wants to convince that "the stance that has been advocated can be critically embraced, refined and developed as part of the Church's ongoing attempt to be faithful in its interpretation and proclamation of Scripture and creeds for our own day. After all," he concludes, "it would be a great pity to get so caught up in debate over the means of incarnation that we lose sight of the still astonishing and potentially life-changing truth claim that in the fully human life of

Jesus of Nazareth, son of Joseph and Mary, and for the sake of humanity and the world God became incarnate.”

Dale Martin, in turn, calls his work “a nonfoundationalist, postmodern, Marxist, orthodox, ecumenical, and provisional theological interpretation of the New Testament.”⁵ And Martin is an active member of a high-church Anglo-Catholic Episcopal parish.

Once, some years ago (though not quite as far back as the floppy-disk era), I had a cat named Daphne. In her old age I once daydreamed about how much I would do for Daphne: when she became seriously ill, would I be willing to enter into cat-nature and let my organs be transplanted to her, thus dying in her place and remaining a cat forever? I decided not. But it set me thinking, and it got into a sermon in which I explained that what I had imagined was somewhat like—thought infinitely less than—what God chose to do for us: to become truly one of us and to live and die and live forever as one of us. And because of that, we are called together to be with each other in the church, for the sake of the people God has chosen to belong to.

My friend Bonnie Thurston wrote a book on the spiritual life of the early church, focused on Acts and Ephesians,⁶ and her outline speaks of that worship as centering around the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, the breaking of bread, and prayer. Sound

⁵ *Biblical Truths*, 32.

⁶ Bonnie Thurston, *Spiritual Life in the Early Church: The Witness of Acts and Ephesians* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).

familiar? Independently, in outlining my commentary on Acts for the Wisdom series, I found myself coming to the same conclusion: that is how Acts describes the beginnings of the church. I feel quite confident I would not have seen that pattern if I did not repeat the Baptismal Promises several times a year in the company of other Episcopalians. It's become part of my being and certainly of my mindset. I think that if doing biblical scholarship as an Anglican leads us to frame our lives in the context of worship, that's not a bad outcome.