

## The King or a Fox: Configuring the Mosaic of Scripture



A Study Guide by Matt Gunter, developed over a decade and incorporating revisions after use by clergy and people of the Diocese of Fond du Lac.

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## ***Introduction***

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Reading scripture, according to the great 2nd century theologian, Irenaeus of Lyons, is like configuring a mosaic of precious jewels (see appendix). That mosaic can be configured in more ways than one. According to Irenaeus, it can be configured to reveal a portrait of the King – Jesus Christ as the Church knows him – or, it can be configured, as it was by heretics and other false teachers, as something else, say a fox.

Playing with that image of the scriptures as a mosaic, imagine each verse or passage of the Bible as a jewel. Perhaps each book of the Bible, then, is like a box of these gems. It is important to understand that these boxes of jewels and gems did not just fall out of the sky. Nor were the boxes/books of the Bible we use the only ones being used by various churches in the earliest centuries. Although there was near universal consensus in the Church about most of the books of the New testament, some thought the *Didache* and the *Shepherd of Hermas* should be included, others were skeptical as to whether others that were eventually accepted should be. E.g., the *Book of Revelation*, *2 Peter*.

It took many years of reading and worshiping with the books of the Bible and debating about them before the Church decided which "boxes of gems"/books would be considered reliable and authoritative for configuring a portrait of Jesus Christ and who we are as members of his body. Which books belong in the canon of the New Testament was not decided until well into the 4<sup>th</sup> century. Even with that consensus there was not total agreement on which books to include and how to understand their meaning.

In spite of that, before the whole Bible was available to it, the Church had been teaching and worshiping the King, Jesus, all along. Or to use the metaphor of configuring a mosaic, the Church had an idea of what the King looked like before it had all the boxes of gems at its disposal to configure the portrait in full color.

To be a member of the Church is to be part of an ongoing conversation as to how best to configure the mosaic of scripture and how to configure our lives in light of scripture. At times we struggle with one another as we struggle together with scripture. Absent a Magisterium, as in the Roman Catholic Church, we are left to make sense of scripture in a context in which there is no straightforward, agreed upon, and authoritative hermeneutic for interpreting the writings we believe to be inspired by God and authoritative for the church. The inevitable result is that faithful, pious Christians often come to different conclusions interpreting the scriptures on a given matter.

How do we configure scripture to reveal Christ rather than a fox? How do we read scripture such that we engage and are engaged by the Spirit of Christ? How do we read scripture honestly such that we are not finding only what we want to find? It will not do to say, "The Bible says it. I believe it. That settles it." Mostly because it never actually does. But, simply repeating the slogan, "We take the Bible seriously, but not literally," isn't much better. How might we explain how we take it seriously and why? Why is this collection of texts authoritative and in what sense? It would be good for us to be able to explain to ourselves and to others how we configure scripture the way we do.

## *Inspiration*

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The conversation among Christians about the scriptures takes place in the context of a larger conversation between God and the Church. The Church has always understood that the Holy Spirit in some sense *inspires* the scriptures such that we encounter the Spirit there with particular authority. They are more than simply a collection of historical religious documents about the spiritual insights of some people long dead. If they are inspired they are lively, living texts.

In the *Outline of the Faith*, or Catechism, in the Book of Common Prayer, we learn, "We call them the Word of God because God inspired their human authors and because God still speaks to us through the Bible" (BCP, p. 853).

But, there is no one (and no official) explanation of just what it means for the scriptures to be inspired. One common way of thinking about that is that the Holy Spirit more or less dictated the scriptures word for word. But it might, instead, be more akin (though not reducible) to what we usually think of in the case of those we call "inspired" in the more mundane sense, e.g., Shakespeare, Mozart, Rembrandt. Or maybe it is the community that is filled with the Holy Spirit and then individuals shaped by and in tune with that Spirit have expressed it in writing.

Perhaps the Holy Spirit *enchants* the scriptures or sometimes haunts them (it is the Holy Ghost, after all). In that case, reading scripture is like walking through an enchanted forest in which the enchanting Spirit is free to surprise us – or haunt – us as it will. Or, returning to the image of the mosaic, perhaps the various gems and jewels in the several boxes are infused with that enchanting Spirit such that they glow and illumine the mosaic as they are configured in their place.

It can also be helpful to think of the Bible as sacramental. It is an outward and visible sign that points to meaning beyond itself. As the bread and wine remain physical objects prepared by human hands, yet become something much more than bread and wine in the Eucharist, so, the scriptures remain a physical text written by human beings, yet because they are inspired witnesses to Christ, they become much more than merely human texts.

Whatever else we mean when we claim that the Bible in particular is inspired, we mean something like the following. The scriptures are *sacramental*. We know that we cannot control where Christ by his Spirit might encounter us. He might surprise us anywhere, any time. But, we claim the promise that he will not surprise us by not being present in the bread and wine of the Eucharist or the waters of baptism. Similarly, we expect to engage and be engaged by the Spirit of Jesus Christ in the scriptures. They are enchanted and haunted by the Holy Spirit /Holy Ghost. Though the Church discerned which writings are included in the Bible, the scriptures are not simply the creation of the Church. They are somehow over against us – a *Thou* rather than an *it* encounters us there. We cannot understand the scriptures unless we stand under (under/stand) them. This is what Ellen Davis calls an "ethical interpretation." That is, she writes, "an approach to the text that evidences curiosity about the unknown, the strange, the other-than-ourselves – curiosity acute enough to open us to the possibility of personal change in response to what we

learn" (Imagination Shaped, 1995, p.244). We should, therefore, read the Bible with a hermeneutic of humility. But also with expectancy. When we read scripture, we expect to encounter the living Spirit of Christ the King.

Among other things, honoring the scriptures means we must attend to the kinds of texts they are rather than impose theories of what we think they should be. Wooden theories of inerrancy and expectations that scripture can be read in all cases as straightforward history or science actually disrespect the texts as they are. C. S. Lewis pointed out some of the problems with that approach:

Whatever view we hold of the divine authority of Scripture must make room for the following facts:

1. The distinction which St. Paul makes in 1 Cor vii between "[not I but the Lord]" (v.10) and "[I say not the Lord]" (v. 12).
2. The apparent inconsistencies between the genealogies of Matt 1 and Luke 3; with the accounts of the death of Judas in Matt 27:5 and Acts 1: 18-19.
3. St. Luke's own account of how he obtained his matter (1:1-4)
4. The universally admitted unhistoricity (I do not say, of course, falsity of at least some narratives in Scripture (the parables), which may well extend also to Jonah and Job.
5. If every good and perfect gift comes from the father of lights then all true and edifying writing, whether in Scripture or not, must be in some sense inspired.
6. John 11:49-52: Inspiration may operate in a wicked man without his knowing it, and he can then utter the untruth he intends (propriety of making an innocent man a political scapegoat) as well as the truth he does not intend (the divine sacrifice).

It seems to me that 2 and 4 rule out the view that every statement in Scripture must be historical truth. And 1, 3, 5, and 6 rule out the view that inspiration is a single thing in the sense that, if present at all, it is always present in the same mode and the same degree. Therefore, I think, we can rule out the view that any one passage taken in isolation can be assumed to be inerrant in exactly the same degree as any other: e.g., that the numbers of OT armies (which in view of the size of the country, if true, involve continuous miracle) are statistically correct because the story of the resurrection is historically correct. That the overall operation of Scripture is to convey God's Word to the reader (he also needs inspiration) who reads in the right spirit, I fully believe. That it also gives true answers to all the questions (often religiously irrelevant) which he might ask, I don't. The very kind of truth we are often demanding was, in my opinion, not even envisaged by the ancients." Lewis, Clive Staples. (*The Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis Vol. III, Narnia, Cambridge and Joy, 1950-1963*, New York, New York, HarperCollins, 2007, p.1044 ff.)

Lewis does not address those passages that are morally problematic such as the mauling of children by she-bears (2 Kings 2:23-24), God's commanding Israel to slaughter men, women, and children (e.g., 1 Samuel 15), the endorsement of slavery, etc. How are such things to be interpreted in light of the revelation of Jesus Christ? Do they all carry equal weight of divine authority?

In any event, simple theories of inerrancy or the equal inspiration of every word of scripture do not deliver on their promise to make our knowledge of God and our lives more certain. Even among those who are committed to such concepts there is deep disagreement. Conservative Mennonites and most Southern Baptists disagree about the faithfulness of Christian participation in violence and war. Missouri Synod Lutherans and Baptists disagree about infant baptism and believer's baptism. Orthodox Presbyterians and Free Methodists disagree about predestination vs. free will. Grace Brethren and Assemblies of God disagree about gifts of the Spirit like healing and speaking in tongues. The list could go on. And some of these are things Christians have been willing to kill each other and/or split the Church over in the past. They only seem more or less trivial to us now. Then, there are the Jehovah Witness folks who also believe in a verbally inspired and inerrant Bible. That has not prevented them from heresy. That particular approach to scripture has not delivered on its promise to give a sure and certain access to God's truth.

Christians have also disagreed about whether each word of the Bible is equally inspired, (the Reformed tradition) or if the New Testament is more authoritative than the Old Testament (most Lutherans and Anabaptists). Or are certain themes such as salvation by grace through faith (Lutheran) or the Sermon on the Mount (Anabaptists) more authoritative and thus the measure of everything else? And while most Christians have historically accepted so-called "Apocryphal" books as part of the Bible (Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox), since the Reformation, many have not (most Protestants).

Whatever we think it means for scripture to be inspired, there is no escaping the responsibility to interpret and embody it in our context. There is no one true understanding of scripture that will settle all disagreements. Unavoidably, we are left relying on the same Spirit who inspired and enchants the scriptures to inspire us and enchant the Church to configure their meaning faithfully – relying on God's mercy and practicing patience and charity with one another. As the catechism has it, "We understand the meaning of the Bible by the help of the Holy Spirit who guides the Church in the true interpretation of the Scriptures" (BCP, p. 853 - 854).

As Lewis points out, inspiration is not limited to the biblical canon. We might agree with the 17th century preacher, Thomas Manton (1620 – 1677), that, "The Holy Spirit rides most triumphantly in his own chariot." But we need not limit the Holy Spirit to riding only in the chariot of the scriptures. This was the view of the early church theologians who regularly referred to earlier theologians as "inspired." While this did not mean their words were equal to the words of scripture, it does suggest that there are degrees of inspiration. Supposedly, the process by which the Church collected and authorized the canon was in some sense also inspired by the Holy Spirit. In fact, the early church had a broader understanding of "canon." While the canon of the Bible had pride of place, other things were canonical in the

sense of guiding belief and practice, e.g., the rule of faith (the teaching that has been received) and the church's liturgy. Both of those were used as criteria for deciding which disputed writings were included in the Bible and as guides to interpreting the Bible. We also have the communion of saints before us whose prayerful lives and teaching guide our reading scripture. It requires we use our minds to reason with the scriptures. As Nathaniel Culverwel (1619 – 1651) pointed out, "The Holy Ghost is not a bird of prey sent down from heaven to pluck out the eyes of men." There is understanding to be found in our reasonable attention to the rest of creation. Still, we must acknowledge that while the Spirit does not pluck out our eyes or do away with our capacity to reason, it is through attending to the Spirit through scripture that we learn to see. According to Ellen Davis, "The imagination becomes capable of faithfulness as it is filled with scriptural stories, images, prayers, and exhortations." (Imagination Shaped, p. 249)

Interpreting scripture requires prayerful and careful work. But it is not just work. Faithful reading and configuring calls for an engagement not only of our minds, but of our hearts and imaginations. It invites a sort of serious playfulness as we seek to allow the Spirit to lead us deeper into the heart of God where there is love, and truth, and joy. Our ancestors engaged the scripture imaginatively and expected to find symbolic, allegorical, and other levels of meanings in the text. We would benefit from similar disciplined, yet imaginative readings of the Bible.

## ***The Purpose of Scripture***

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It is also good to ask what the Bible is for. It is not an encyclopedia to answer every question we might ask. The main purpose of scripture is to show us who Jesus is, who God is in light of Jesus, and who we are and who we can be when we are properly aligned with God in Christ through the Holy Spirit. It is about shaping our lives and imaginations. It places demands upon us, but it also opens up visions and possibilities for ourselves and our world that we could scarcely imagine otherwise

Here is what the Bible says about itself (or at least what the New Testament says about the Old Testament):

the sacred writings which are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work. (2 Timothy 3:15-17)

whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope. (Romans 15:4)

That encouragement and hope is based on the portrait of God revealed in Jesus Christ as presented in the scriptures and the new creation made possible by his life, death and

resurrection. The teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness is about aligning our lives with that God. More specifically, as we will see below, Augustine asserted that the primary purpose of all scripture is to instruct us in how to love God, how to receive God's love, and how to love our neighbor as God has loved us.

## ***Criteria for Faithfully Configuring the Mosaic of Scripture***

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There is a basic outline that informs any configuration of scripture. That is the story of God's creating the world and declaring it good, the recognition that that goodness has been despoiled rather than lived into, God's call of Abraham and his descendants to be a blessing to the nations, the deliverance of God's people in their exodus from evil, the establishing of the royal line of David, their return from exile, the growing expectation of God's restoration of all things, Jesus Christ as the embodiment and fulfillment of that expectation, and the Church as the community called to bear witness to and live into that expectation.

Beyond that basic outline, what might be some guidelines to help us configure scripture such that we are more likely to end up with a portrait of the King rather than a fox while recognizing the complex ways in which we all make interpretive choices and give some portions of scripture priority over others? How do we recognize the King in a configuration of scripture while still accounting for the reality that we do not always end in the same place and not all faithful portraits will look exactly the same? Can we identify some guidelines or criteria by which we evaluate more faithful biblical configurations from less faithful or even faithless interpretations? Not all configurations are faithful. Not all faithful configurations are equally faithful. But there might be a range of recognizably, more or less, faithful configurations. The following criteria, based on how the canon of scripture came to be accepted and how the early church read the Bible, are suggested to assist in configuring the mosaic of scripture so we see a faithful portrait of the King.

### **1. The Criterion of Jesus Christ**

While any faithful interpretation must take into account the whole witness of scripture, Old Testament and New Testament, Jesus Christ is the center and measure of all things including the rest of Scripture (Hebrews 1:1-2). Here it is important to insist that the Jesus who is the measure is the Jesus of the Gospels (all four), not the reconstituted Jesus of any contemporary scholar or group of scholars. And not only the gospels. The criterion of Jesus Christ includes the Christological passages of the rest of the New Testament, e.g., Philippians 2, Colossians 1, and Revelation 5. Any faithful configuration will have at its center, the recognition of the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ as the climactic revelation of God's character and purpose.

An example: In the Gospels, Jesus welcomes and blesses the children. In 2 Kings 2:23-24, Elisha calls down two she-bears to maul the children who call him "Ol' Baldy." Which story shines brighter with the Spirit of Jesus the Christ? Whatever meaning the passage

from 2 Kings has for us about God or ourselves, must be interpreted in light of what we know of both from Jesus.

Still, those parts that we think shine less brightly with the Spirit of Jesus remain and there is always the possibility that that Spirit might surprise us in the shadows.

## 2. The Criterion of Love

Interpretations of scripture that cultivate mercy and charity are preferred.

Jesus asserts this in Matthew 22:40, “On these two commandments [love of God and neighbor] hang all the law and the prophets [all of scripture]. It is also implied in Jesus’ teaching in Mark 2:27, “The Sabbath [symbolic of the law] was made for humans, not humans for the Sabbath.” Paul reinforces it in Galatians 5:6 (the only thing that counts is faith working through love), 5:14 (“the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”), and 6:2 (“Bear one another’s burden, and in this way you will fulfill the law.”).

The criterion of love was encouraged by Augustine (354 – 430),

“Anyone who thinks that he has understood the divine scriptures or any part of them, but cannot by his understanding build up the double love of God and neighbor, has not yet succeeded in understanding them. Anyone who derives from them an idea which is useful for supporting this love but fails to say what the writer demonstrably meant in the passage has not made a fatal error, and is certainly not a liar.” (*On Christian Teaching [De Doctrina Christiana]*, English trans. R. P. H. Green (New York, Oxford University Press, 1997), 27)

But, we should beware of assuming we know fully what love is or what love requires aside from our engagement with Jesus Christ (Criterion 1). It is good to keep in mind Charles Williams’ observation,

“The famous saying ‘God is love’, it is generally assumed, means that God is like our immediate emotional indulgence, not that the meaning of love ought to have something of the ‘otherness’ and terror of God.” (*He Came Down From Heaven*, Charles Williams (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2nd edition, 1984, p. 11)

With that caveat, the basic principle remains that configurations that encourage the double love of God and neighbor and cultivate habits of mercy and charity are to be preferred.

## 3. The Criterion of the Rule of Faith

One of the important criteria the early Church used in discerning which writings to recognize as canonical was whether they conformed to the Rule of Faith – the teaching passed down from the Apostles. Irenaeus appealed to the Rule as the guide to right interpretation in his arguments against the interpretations of the heretics in the 2nd century.



That Rule of Faith finds its expression for us in the Creeds. Scripture and the creeds have a symbiotic relationship and cannot be read separately. Interpretations that are contrary to the Creeds are unfaithful. Charles Gore (1853 – 1932), Anglican theologian and Bishop of Oxford, insisted that more was implied by the Creed:

“There are, indeed, features in the common faith, such as the belief in Atonement, in sacramental grace, in the inspiration of Scripture, which are only slightly or by implication touched on in these formulas of faith; but at least in what they contain they represent what has been universal Christianity.” (*The Permanent Creed and the Christian Idea of Sin*)

That means, as Gore also insisted, that faithful configurations will wrestle with the “whole set of ideas about sin and redemption and the Incarnation and the Trinity which belong to the Catholic Creeds and are the commonplaces of historical Christianity.”

#### **4. The Criterion of the Church’s Prayer**

The rule of prayer is the rule of belief (*Lex orandi, lex credendi*). We believe what we pray. As with the Rule of Faith, there is a symbiotic relationship between the Church’s worship and its reading of scripture. Faithful configurations will be compatible with the Church’s worship. For Episcopalians, that means the prayers of the Prayer Book guide interpretation. Traditionally, this has especially been true of the Rite of Baptism, the Eucharistic Prayers and the Ordinals. Of course, common worship is more than simply the prayers written in the Prayer Book. It includes the simple fact of gathering for worship. It includes words, bodily gestures, use of materials, etc. Faithful configurations will be congruent with, and make sense of, the language and practice of our common worship.

#### **5. The Criterion of the Church's Tradition**

We always read the Bible with the saints. The wisdom of the Communion of the Saints is a gift that shapes our ongoing configuration of scripture. For Anglicans, this has classically meant especially the catholic consensus that developed in the first five centuries. This was stated by the great Anglican preacher and bishop, Lancelot Andrewes (1555 – 1626) in the formula: “One canon reduced to writing by God himself, two testaments, three creeds, four general councils, five centuries, and the series of Fathers in that period – the centuries that is, before Constantine, and two after, determine the boundary of our faith.”

Christians’ engagements with scripture are (and should be) shaped by the successes, failures, debates, discussions, and prayers of previous generations of Christians. The tradition of the church is not a problem to be overcome, but a community in time to which we belong and with which it is possible to dialogue. We are not bound to simple repetition of the past in all things – our ancestors were shaped by their cultural context as are we – but the burden of proof is on novel configurations of scripture which must be demonstrated to be in harmony with what past generations of the faithful have taught and lived.

## 6. The Criterion of Comprehensiveness

The scriptures contain multiple concerns, themes and images, many of which are in apparent tension with others. They are not given to neat systematization. Any comprehensive approach to the Bible ends up with some anomalies. A five-point Calvinist, for example, will have difficulty fitting those passages of scripture that suggest human freedom into her or his configuration. If one gives priority to passages declaring God's sovereignty and providence, those other passages must somehow be made to "fit." Similarly, Luther's approach making salvation by grace through faith the key struggles with passages that suggest that we will be judged according to our deeds.

No one, in practice, gives equal authority to every verse, passage, or theme in the Bible. How we interpret the Bible largely depends on how we shuffle the deck and what we declare is trump.

The fewer passages of scripture (or harking back to Irenaeus' metaphor, the fewer gems) that are anomalous to a configuration the better. Even then, the remainder remains and must be acknowledged and reckoned with.

## 7. The Criterion of Dissimilarity

It is certainly legitimate, and perhaps inevitable, to take insights from other areas to inform our reading of the Bible. Liberation theology does this, sometimes more fruitfully, sometimes less. Similarly, feminist theology does this. Reading the Bible in light of other religions and in light of our best scientific knowledge are other examples. Gregory of Nyssa (335 - 394), commenting on Exodus 12:35-36, affirms that scripture itself,

“commands those participating in the free life also to equip themselves with the wealth of pagan learning by which foreigners to the faith beautify themselves. Our guide in virtue [Moses] commands someone who "borrows" from wealthy Egyptians to receive such things as moral and natural philosophy, geometry, astronomy, dialectic, and whatever else is sought by those outside the Church, since these things will be useful when in time the divine sanctuary of mystery must be beautified with the riches of wisdom.” (*Life of Moses*, Paulist Press, 1978)

But when the other insights become the criteria such that they are not fundamentally challenged and shaped by scripture and Christian tradition they tend to lead to less than faithful interpretations. While it is incumbent upon Christians of every time and place to interpret scripture afresh in light of their context, any faithful reading of scripture must be dissimilar enough from the surrounding culture and the interpreter's social/intellectual milieu to maintain the edge of repentance and conversion. This means that a configuration of scripture that fits too neatly into any contemporary agenda or set of cultural/sub-cultural sensibilities is suspect. Configurations of scripture that simply parrot the culture or a segment of the culture are unlikely to be faithful to the voice of the Dove who enchants those scriptures. We need to recognize our own particular cultural, social, and political

prejudices and then be alert to where scripture may call those prejudices into question lest we configure a mirror that reflects ourselves rather than a mosaic of the King. Augustine warns against this,

“But since the human race is prone to judge sins . . . by the standard of its own practices, people generally regard as culpable only such actions as men of their own time and place tend to blame and condemn, and regard as commendable and praiseworthy only such actions as are commendable and praiseworthy within the conventions of their own society.” (*On Christian Teaching [De Doctrina Christiana]*, English trans. R. P. H. Green (New York, Oxford University Press, 1997), 76)

## **8. The Criterion of the Book of Nature/Creation**

Theologians of the early and Medieval Church frequently refer to creation as God’s other “book” of revelation. A faithful configuration of scripture will take into account what we know of creation as it is.

The Augustine of Hippo (354-430) wrote about non-Christian scholars and natural philosophers that:

If they find a Christian mistaken in a field which they themselves know well and hear him maintaining his foolish opinions about our books, how are they going to believe those books in matters concerning the resurrection of the dead, the hope of eternal life, and the kingdom of heaven, when they think their pages are full of falsehoods and on facts which they themselves have learnt from experience and the light of reason? Reckless and incompetent expounders of Holy Scripture bring untold trouble and sorrow on their wiser brethren when they are caught in one of their mischievous false opinions and are taken to task by those who are not bound by the authority of our sacred books. (*On the Literal Meaning of Genesis*, 1.19)

As Sara Maitland has more recently written,

God can be known in the “mighty works.” That is to say in the creation, understood very widely. Not just a once-off starting gun, but in history, in personalities, and “in the way things are.” The way the world is, the way it is to be a human being, the way history goes, the way nature behaves, in the laws of the universe, and the realities of our humanity. (*A Joyful Theology*, Minneapolis, Augsburg Books, 2002, p. 14)

Of course, even as it deepens, our understanding of creation is imperfect and subject to varied and sometimes biased interpretations. Still, any faithful interpreting of scripture will be informed by what we know of what God has revealed of himself in creation broadly understood.

## 9. The Criterion of Community

The God revealed in the scriptures calls people into community and it is to the community that they are addressed with the intention of forming and sustaining a people of witness. Scripture is about the Church. It has its fullest meaning in the context of the Church and its worship. It describes the God who has called us and made us a people who were not a people and describes what kind of people we are to be in response.

The Good News revealed in the scriptures is not first and foremost addressed to individuals and their spirituality. It is addressed to the Church. It is the Church, therefore, not individuals or sub-groups, that discerns whether or not a given configuration of scripture is faithful. This means the Church as the Catholic community of all sorts and conditions of humanity: Jew and Gentile, male and female, slave and free, rich and poor, lay and ordained, etc. A church in which many and diverse ears are listening intently to the scriptures is more likely to interpret them faithfully. And though the divisions in the Church complicate our hearing God's word, the broader the consensus in the Church that an interpretation of scripture is faithful the more likely it is to be so.

## 10. The Criterion of Character

The scriptures are about the formation of holy communities and holy persons as members of such communities. There is a symbiotic relationship between the scriptures forming holiness and the necessity of a degree of holy living in order to understand the scriptures. Sometimes the question is not, "Is the Bible relevant to our lives?", but "Are our lives relevant enough to the Bible for it to make sense to us?" The character of any given interpreter or community is inseparable from their ability to reliably discern the Spirit in the scriptures and thus configure them faithfully.

Does this community exhibit the kind of character and practices that enable it to discern faithful interpretations? Can it name its own sin? Does it practice truthfulness? Repentance? Reconciliation? Prayerfulness? Care for the poor? Are the fruit of the Spirit evident? A community seeking to be the community envisioned in such Bible passages as Romans 12, Philippians 2, and Ephesians 4 will more likely hear what the Spirit is saying to God's people.

The same goes for any particular interpreter. Does an interpreter exhibit a Christ-shaped life? Can we hear humility, charity, and generosity in the voice of the interpreter?

Athanasius (293 - 373) affirms this in his treatise, *On the Incarnation*:

"But for the searching of the Scriptures and true knowledge of them an honorable life is needed, and a pure soul, and that virtue which is according to Christ; so that the intellect, guiding its path by it, may be able to attain what it desires, and comprehend it, in so far as it is accessible to human nature to learn concerning the Word of God. For without a pure mind and a modeling of the life after the saints a man could not possibly comprehend the words of the saints." (par. 57)

## ***Conclusion***

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No one criterion is adequate and no set of criteria will assure agreement on particular questions of interpretation. And some of the above criteria will sometimes seem to be in tension with one another. They are not a formula to insure that we all find one supposed true interpretation – we will always be living under the mercy of God. But, an interplay of the above criteria would provide a broad measure of relative faithfulness as we seek together to configure an image of the King rather than a fox and to allow our lives to be shaped in his image.

**Appendix:**  
St Irenaeus: the King and the fox

Such, then, is their [the Valentinians'] system, which neither the prophets announced, nor the Lord taught, nor the apostles delivered, but of which they boast that beyond all others they have a perfect knowledge. They gather their views from other sources than the Scriptures; and, to use a common proverb, they strive to weave ropes of sand, while they endeavour to adapt with an air of probability to their own peculiar assertions the parables of the Lord, the sayings of the prophets, and the words of the apostles, in order that their scheme may not seem altogether without support. In doing so, however, they disregard the order and the connection of the Scriptures, and so far as in them lies, dismember and destroy the truth. By transferring passages, and dressing them up anew, and making one thing out of another, they succeed in deluding many through their wicked art in adapting the oracles of the Lord to their opinions. Their manner of acting is just as if one, when a beautiful image of a king has been constructed by some skilful artist out of precious jewels, should then take this likeness of the man all to pieces, should rearrange the gems, and so fit them together as to make them into the form of a dog or of a fox, and even that but poorly executed; and should then maintain and declare that this was the beautiful image of the king which the skilful artist constructed, pointing to the jewels which had been admirably fitted together by the first artist to form the image of the king, but have been with bad effect transferred by the latter one to the shape of a dog, and by thus exhibiting the jewels, should deceive the ignorant who had no conception what a king's form was like, and persuade them that that miserable likeness of the fox was, in fact, the beautiful image of the king. In like manner do these persons patch together old wives' fables, and then endeavour, by violently drawing away from their proper connection, words, expressions, and parables whenever found, to adapt the oracles of God to their baseless fictions. We have already stated how far they proceed in this way with respect to the interior of the Pleroma.

In like manner he also who retains unchangeable in his heart the rule of the truth which he received by means of baptism, will doubtless recognise the names, the expressions, and the parables taken from the Scriptures, but will by no means acknowledge the blasphemous use which these men make of them. For, though he will acknowledge the gems, he will certainly not receive the fox instead of the likeness of the king. But when he has restored every one of the expressions quoted to its proper position, and has fitted it to the body of the truth, he will lay bare, and prove to be without any foundation, the figment of these heretics.

– *Against Heresies (Book I, Chapter 8)*