

Teaching the Bible: How Can We Do This Better Together?

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“It is the Traditional teaching of the Orthodox Church that the Bible is the Scripture of the Church, that it has its proper meaning only within the life and experience of the people of God, that it is not a thing-in-itself which cannot be isolated from its organic context within the church community, in which and from which and from which it exists”ⁱ

When I was a parish priest teaching a catechism class, a student asked me a startling, but simple, question. “Father, we read the Bible and we hear so many different interpretations, how do we know if it is really true or just something made up?” Of course, we know that people have been asking that same question thousands of years, this question from a person who is a sincere and educated believer gave me pause. What are we really teaching about the Bible and can we teach more effectively?

It is the Orthodox contention that Bible does not exist in a vacuum as a text or as a product of men or culture. It is THE Scripture of the Church. It came from the Church and through the Church. To be sure, various people of a certain time and context wrote it, but it arose from their experience of the Church. It came from the Church and thus must be within the Church that truly effective teaching and reception happens. If not, if it is something that we read as a book of history, of culture, or even, as some think, of science, then we cannot really understand the Bible and cannot teach it to others. We must be immersed in the Church to be able to teach the Bible and those who seek to learn the Bible must likewise be immersed in the Church in order understand it. As Archimandrite Vasileios wrote in his well-known book *Hymn of Entry*, “For this reason, the Gospel cannot be understood outside the Church nor dogma outside worship.”ⁱⁱ

So, in order for us as pastors to teach the Bible effectively together, I am presenting an Orthodox view on the Bible and make suggestions on how we can work together based on what we can do in common. Certainly there will be a difference of opinions between Orthodox and Evangelical perspectives on the Bible. The history of the differences are well documented and has caused some level of conflict through the years. However, in order to work together, perhaps we need to place those differences aside for the moment and discover the common ground between us. While this may be difficult and controversial, such dialogue may dispel some of the more controversial differences while allowing the common factors to emerge. In these days, when we see Christianity attacked from many sides, it is more important than ever to focus on what unites us as Christians.

An Orthodox Understanding

1. The Bible is a Liturgical Book

When I was in Jerusalem, I discussed the Orthodox Liturgy with an Anglican bishop. He proclaimed, “The Orthodox Liturgy is one profound mediation on the Scriptures.” His insight into the nature of Liturgy is probably a good starting place when teaching the Bible. First and foremost, we must encourage our people to attend the liturgical services of the Church. It is there that they will encounter the Scriptures in its fullness. In Orthodox worship, there are few words in the text and the hymns that are not scripturally-based. Over the course of the service, one encounters the Old and New Testaments, as well as the hymns of the Church Fathers. All three are inextricably linked and form a logical progression. The services are replete with

passages from the Psalms and Proverbs and the cycle of Epistle and Gospel readings completes the entire New Testament in every year. We bring alive the words of Christ through the Feasts and the very life of the Church through the saints and other celebrations. For that reason, the faithful know the Scriptures because they constantly hear them. I have a Liturgy book which has the words of the service on one side and the scriptural reference for every single line on the opposite page. This is a remarkable tool for education and we are just talking about the Divine Liturgy. There are the regular cycle of services, the special services, and of course, the height of the liturgical year, Holy Week. During this time in which we read the entire Gospel and the services follow the procession from Jerusalem to Golgotha to the Empty Tomb. Therefore, for Orthodox Christians, to attend the services is to learn the Scriptures.

When one enters an Orthodox Church, the most noticeable features are the icons. These are the painted Word of God and convey the Gospel in pictures as the Bible does in words. For this reason, one cannot separate the icons of the Church from the worship service and allows the communicants to experience the Gospel through multiple senses. I once showed a busy icon of Christ surrounded by a number of images to one of my friends, a Protestant minister, and asked him if he could identify what he saw. He could not, so I explained that it illustrated the passage from Ezekiel 1 in which the image of God, the evangelists, in fact all of Heaven is revealed with Christ on the throne. It was a revelation to him that one could see such a passage in one icon. So it is important to remember that the iconography is not merely “decoration” but rather the entire Gospel message being shown to the faithful. One is literally immersed in the Gospel.

So in order to better teach the Bible, we must learn how to make it come alive liturgically for the faithful. Not just through the readings and sermons but through our very participation in the liturgy itself. We must not only hear the Word of God but also see the Word of God contextually revealed to us through the Liturgy. While the Orthodox and Evangelical services have differing liturgical traditions, perhaps the starting point is to identify how those traditions, through worship, bring the Bible alive. By respecting and utilizing these wonderful “tools” through worship we will find a more effective means of transmitting the truth of Jesus Christ. In other words, immerse the people from every angle available through worship. And just as Isaiah (6) had the glory of God revealed to him when his tongue touched the burning coal, so must we when we too have the Bible revealed to us through our life in the services of the Church.

2. *The Bible is a Communal Book*

Just as the Bible is THE book of the Liturgy, it is also THE book of the church community. It cannot and should never be read or taught in a vacuum. The history of the Church is replete with examples of individual interpretations of the Scriptures: sometimes with success and sometimes (and sadly all too often) with failure. As such the Bible should be read, interpreted, and taught within a context of the community. In Metropolitan Kallistos Ware’s short article in the *Orthodox Study Bible* entitled, “How to Read the Bible” he writes, “We read the Bible personally, but not as isolated individuals. We say not ‘I’ but ‘we.’ We read as the members of a family, the family of the Orthodox Catholic Church. We read in communion with all the other members of the Body of Christ in all parts of the world and in all generations of time. This communal or *catholic* approach to the Bible is underlined in one of the questions asked of a convert at the reception service used in the Russian Church: ‘Do you acknowledge that the Holy Scripture must be accepted and interpreted in accordance with the belief which has been handed down by the Holy Fathers, and which the Holy Orthodox Church, our Mother, has always held and still does hold?’ The decisive criterion of our understanding of what Scripture means is *the mind of the Church*. The Bible is the book of the Church.”ⁱⁱⁱ

This does not mean that it cannot or should not be studied individually as this is the life-blood of the Christian spiritual life (more on this later). But it does mean that relying on self-interpretation is fraught with possible misuse. One can justify almost any position with the Bible if one looks hard enough and is creative enough. Only look at the current diversity of faith traditions which have split from one another over “correct” interpretation of the Scriptures. So the challenge we have here is that despite the split between the Orthodox and Evangelical traditions, how can we teach the Bible as a Christian community?

Perhaps the answer lies with when the Church gathers to hear and teach the Bible, it is doing so that all of the members can immerse themselves into the context of the communal understanding of the Scriptures. Think of the many sermons, Bible studies, *ad hoc* discussions, and church schools that gather to study and learn the Scriptures. There is power and depth in many hearing and receiving the Word of God together. The Bible was written as a Book of Faith by the community and as such must remain as a Book of Faith for the community. So by gathering in community we can together immerse ourselves in the Word of God, not relying on our own, and often flawed interpretation, but rather relying on the Holy Spirit to come and rest upon us all. (Matthew 18:20)

The Scriptures also calls for communal, as well as personal, action. In Matthew 25 we are called, as a community, to put into action our Faith towards those around us. We are called to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the sick and those in prison as a personal action, but also as a communal activity. The Scripture becomes intensely personal while calling a community to action. As an early Church writer Tertullian stated, “It is mainly the deeds of a love so noble that lead many to put a brand upon us. See how they love one another, they say, for they themselves are animated by mutual hatred; how they are ready even to die for one another, they say, for they themselves will sooner put to death.”^{iv} The Scriptures become more than just words but an actual reality. How we love one another is the most powerful manner of teaching the Bible more effectively. As one of the great desert fathers wrote, “Understand the words of Holy Scripture by putting them into practice, and do not fill yourself with conceit by elaborating on theoretical ideas.”^v By gathering as communities together *in action* we can not only hear the Scriptures but live them out. Nothing is more powerful and more effective than not just talking about the Gospel of Jesus Christ, but by actually incarnating the Gospel of Jesus Christ by our actions. The Lausanne Orthodox Initiative has had a history of doing such actions together, far apart from the doctrinal differences, by simply and prayerfully being the Gospel of Christ.

3. *The Bible is the Book of the Church*

Before the Scriptures are read in the Church, the priest says this prayer on behalf of the Faithful, “Illuminate our hearts, O God who loves mankind, with the pure life of Thy Divine knowledge, and open the eyes of our mind to understand Thy Message of Good Tidings. Implant in us the fear of Thy Blessed Commandments; that, trampling down all carnal desires, we may pursue a godly life, both thinking and performing such things as are well pleasing to Thee. For Thou are the Light of our souls and bodies, Christ our God, and to Thee we ascribe glory, together with Thy Eternal Father and Thine All Holy, Blessed and Life-Giving Spirit, now and ever, and unto ages of ages. Amen.”^{vi} It is a powerful prayer in which we ask for a better understanding of what we are about to hear, but also impels us to a more Godly life. This life is found and developed within the Church so that we as a gathering of individuals become something more; a Church. Fr. Thomas Hopko, one of the major Orthodox theologians of the 20th century, wrote, “Once the Bible has been constituted as the scripture of the Church, it becomes its main written authority, within the Church and not over or apart from it. Everything in the Church is judged by the Bible. Nothing in the Church may contradict it. Everything in the Church must be Biblical; for the Church, in order to be the Church, must be wholly expressive of the Bible. More accurately, it must be wholly faithful to and expressive of that reality to which the Bible is itself is the scriptural witness.”^{vii} If we think back on the

differences that separate the Orthodox from the Evangelicals, there was always, from both sides, a real desire to be Biblically based. From the Protestant Reformation to the Patristic witness, both sides have claimed to have a Church based on the Bible. The approaches and conclusions may have been different but the goal has always seemed the same.

So, therefore, everything that the Church does and is needs to be based on the Bible. If it strays from that then it ceases to be a Book of the Church but rather a book with some interesting ideas and concepts. But when it is within the Church and the Church is within the Bible, then the Bible itself comes alive. It becomes the witness of the Church. So we should always look at our own Church and ask that basic question, is this of the Bible? Is our Church being a witness to the Scriptures? If we cannot present the Church as being of the Bible then we will continue to lose to the secularism that is encompassing our world. Fr. Alexander Schmemmann, one the most prominent Orthodox theologians of modern times, warned us on this in 1963, “There exists – such is the assumption – a basic religion, some of basic ‘religious’ and ‘spiritual values,’ and they must be defended against atheism. Materialism, and other forms of irreligion. Not only ‘liberal’ and ‘nondenominational,’ but also the most conservative Christians are ready to give up the old idea of mission as preaching of the one, true universal religion, opposed as such to all other religions against the enemy: secularism. Since all religions are threatened by its victorious growth, since religion and the ‘spiritual values’ are on the decline, religious men of all faiths must forget their quarrels and unite in defending these values.”^{viii}

So we must unite in order to defend the Church but also to present the Church as a witness to what is good and right and holy. We can easily forget this as we teach the Bible, that we are witnessing to something bigger. Our actions must match our words. Our words must be true. And truth can only be found in Jesus Christ. What we can do together is to present this to the world. We know that those outside of it will misrepresent the Church and so we must present the Church as being based on Biblical principles that we live out daily. People will recognize hypocrisy immediately so be true to who we are and what we are: be a church based on the Bible.

4. The Bible is Personal

Saint Tikhon of Zadonsk, writing in eighteenth-century Russia, has this to say about our Orthodox attitude towards the Holy Scriptures, “If an earthly king, our emperor, wrote you a letter, would you not read it with joy? Certainly, with great rejoicing and careful attention. You have been sent a letter, not by any earthly emperor, but by the King of Heaven. And yet you almost despise such a gift, so priceless a treasure.” He goes on to say: “Whenever you read the Gospel, Christ Himself is speaking to you. And while you read, you are praying and talking to Him.”

Daily personal Scripture reading is essential. It feeds the soul and enlightens your life. As St. Tikhon reminded us, when we read the Scriptures we are praying and talking to God. This affects us in a personal way. We are not the same after we read a passage. New thoughts comes to us, we see problems and issues in a different way, and we are enlightened and enlivened by the Word of God. We can all recount the many times we have witnessed people reading the Scriptures on their break from work, on the plane, in the quiet corners of their rooms. We have seen small Bibles marked with passages that touched the person’s heart, gave meaning to a problem, or comfort through a crisis. The Words of God become our words, our foundation, our comfort and our strength As St. Justin Popovich wrote in the 20th century, “By reading the Bible you are adding yeast to the dough of your soul and body, which gradually expands and fills the soul until it has thoroughly permeated it and makes it rise with the truth and righteousness of the Gospel.”^{ix}

Part of such reading is to also immerse yourself in prayer. One should never read the Scriptures without praying first. It opens our minds and our hearts to the understanding of the Scriptures. Only when we are

open to this does meaning come through the Word of God. Therefore, teaching people to pray is essential to teaching them to read the Bible more effectively. St. Isaac the Syrian, a 7th century saint, wrote, “In all things that you find in the Holy Scriptures, seek out the purpose of the words, that you may enter into the depth of the thoughts of the saints and understand them with greater exactness. Do not approach the reading of the Divine Scriptures without prayer and asking the help of God. Consider prayer to be the key to the true understanding of that which is said in the Holy Scriptures.”^x (I would also add reading the Church Fathers’ commentary which are an incredible source of interpretation and analysis).

The irony is that the Bible has never been more available as it is today in the many formats and languages. There really is no excuse for us not to, as the Ordination Exhortation to a newly ordained clergy states, “To peruse the Scriptures daily.”^{xi} Yet with all of this availability, it is easy to fall away from reading the Bible. We are bombarded from all sides with a variety media the quiet refuge of the Scriptures gets lost in the noise. We must seek together a way to reintroduce the reading and study of the Bible to our people. Not as an intellectual or even perfunctory exercise but rather as way to seek refuge and feed our soul. This requires teaching people to read again. It requires relearning the discipline of spending time each day with the Scriptures. It **requires** us to make sure that our church members actually have a Bible in their possession and it is used for something other than a paperweight or decoration. I personally used to give an Orthodox Study Bible to every one of my catechumens at the beginning of their study for reception into the Church and told them to start to actually read the Bible in conjunction with their studies. If they followed the lectionary of the Church readings then they will actually cover the entire New Testament in one year. What better way to introduce someone to the Church then have them actually read the preeminent text of the Church?

So the cooperative project we can actually do together with great effectiveness is to get Bibles in the hands of the people. Teach them how to read the Scriptures in conjunction with their developing prayer life. Ensure that they are following the readings of the Church on a daily basis and even introduce them to the writings of the Church Fathers who are, in the Orthodox Church, the penultimate interpreters of the Scriptures. Keep away from controversies and differing interpretations as they only introduce conflict and frustration. We do not need people arguing about what the Bible REALLY says but rather, have them just read the Bible. As St. John Chrysostom writes, “It is not possible, I say *not possible*, ever to exhaust the mind of the Scriptures. It is a well which has no bottom.”^{xii}

Conclusion: The Bible is the Book of Faith

So what is the point of all of this? Why read the Bible, why teach the Bible, why even concern ourselves with the Bible? We are spending hours and hours discussing this topic and we must make sure we recognize the purpose of this investment. We do not read or teach the Bible as an end but rather as a means to that end. It is not just the Bible but rather to grow in faith in in our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ that is our goal. It is not just knowledge of the Scriptures but rather to grow in communion with God Himself that is our goal. As Fr. Hopko wrote, “To return to our present concern at this point, we repeat that it is the witness of the Church that the whole Bible reveals God and makes Him known in His Word; that in and through the Bible – as it lives in the community of God’s people through Christ, the enfleshed Word, and through the Spirit – man can come to a genuine knowledge of God Himself in communion with Him. In this perspective, the final meaning of the Bible, therefore, is seen not to lie within it as a text or collection of texts. Its final significance and purpose lies in reality itself, the reality to which it itself bears witness, the reality of God and all things in Him. The purpose of the Bible is to reveal God, to point beyond itself to Him, to indicate Him, to disclose Him, to lead man into a living communion with Him, to lead man into true knowledge. Through the Bible man should see, hear, taste and even touch the Word of Life, who is God Himself, the ground and the goal of all that exists.”^{xiii}

In other words, we read and teach the Scripture to come to know God incarnate and ever-existing. We welcome God into our lives, our thoughts, and our very actions. Through this we change and become more human or, better yet, **real** humans as God intends. Humans are created for the very purpose of being in communion with God by knowing God. We know God through His Word. So if we are to more effectively teach the Bible together we must recognize together that the ultimate goal is know God and grow in communion with Him. The Bible is the tool *par excellence* for growing in communion with God but only if it is conjunction with the Liturgical life, the life in the Church and the community and that we ourselves are personally immersed in the Scriptures as we cannot give that which we do not possess. Fr. Hopko exhorted those who would teach and preach the Word of God to utilize the gifts which are, “prayer, fasting, silence, acts of mercy, and ascetical efforts which provide for the preachers are the dispassion, discernment, humility and love that allow him to truly hear, listen, see, perceive and so to speak. Those who say true words, and surely those who preach God’s Word, must know God, themselves, and others as they really are. This accomplishment, say the saints, is an achievement greater than raising the dead.”^{xiv} So in the final reflection, the Bible is the Book of Faith. How we grow together in that faith is the ultimate test as to whether we are teaching the Bible effectively. If our people are growing in faith through the ways outlined in this paper then we are moving in the correct direction.

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ⁱ Hopko, Thomas. *All the Fullness of God*, (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press 1982), 49.

ⁱⁱ Vasileios, Archimandrite. *Hymn of Entry: Liturgy and Life in the Orthodox Church*, (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 1984), 18.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ware, Kallistos. “How to Read the Bible” in *Orthodox Study Bible*, (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1993), 765-766.

^{iv} Tertullian. *Apology 39*

^v Mark the Ascetic. “On the Spiritual Law Two Hundred Texts”, *The Philokalia*

^{vi} *Orthodox Divine Liturgy*

^{vii} Hopko. *Fulness*, 49-50

^{viii} Schmemmann, Alexander. *For the Life of the World*, (Crestwood, NY:SVS Press, 1973), 108

^{ix} Justin Popovich, *How to Read the Bible and Why* as quoted in <http://www.orthodoxchurchquotes.com/2013/12/11/st-justin-popovich-by-reading-the-bible-you-are-adding-yeast/>

^x Isaac the Syrian. *Sermon 1.85*.

^{xi} *Book of Needs: Volume 1.* (South Canaan, PA:STS Press, 1998), 243.

^{xii} John Chrysostom. *Homily XIX* “On Acts”.

^{xiii} Hopko. *Fulness*, 62-62.

^{xiv} Hopko, Thomas. *Speaking the Truth in Love* (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 2004), 51.