

Eric D. Barreto: Reading the Bible in public



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How do we rightly read the Bible in the midst of the political issues of our time? A New Testament scholar calls for a renewed theological imagination, filled with generosity, hope and grace.

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When politicians read the Bible, they almost always end up merely echoing their own partisan commitments. When Attorney General Jeff Sessions, for example, recently cited Romans 13, he was using the text to justify the administration's policy separating migrant children from their parents -- and was roundly criticized by scholars, clergy and others from across the religious and theological landscape.

But the controversy was about much more than misinterpreting a handful of verses. At its core lies a far deeper and more important issue. How do we read Scripture in public? That is, how do we rightly read the Bible in the midst of public conflicts and crises, including the political issues of our time?

After all, perhaps our representatives are merely reflecting the way too many of us read the Bible. The truth is that many of us often read the Bible self-interestedly, using it to shore up our own partisan leanings instead of inviting Scripture to teach us anew the shape of God's grace. When it comes to much of our reading of the Bible in public, a lens of fear and a lack of theological imagination predominate. Such reading betrays the good news of Jesus Christ and serves only to intensify crises both political and theological.

If we are to read and interpret the Bible faithfully, then we must renew our theological imagination, learning anew who God is and who we are as God's children and neighbors, one to another. For too long, too many churches have told a misshapen and misshaping story about who we are, whence we have come. They have pronounced upon who is in and who is out, who is saved and who is lost. And they have fed partisan positions about immigration and race alike that assume scarcity and loss rather than abundance and the hope that draws communities together.

Before such a marred imagination consumes us, we must look elsewhere to find the fabric and shape of a new imagination. It is precisely in Scripture that Christians can find the resources to renew our theological imagination, filling it with the generosity, hope and grace granted to us by God.

What would a more imaginative, more generous, more faithful reading of Scripture look like?

First, we might begin by realizing that [no one cultural location holds a monopoly](#) on the depths of the Bible's meanings. Armed with that knowledge, we would then look to larger, more racially, ethnically and gender-diverse bookshelves, websites, resources and social media networks. We would understand that multiple, even differing perspectives are not a threat but an enhancement to our own interpretation. Interpreting Scripture is not something we do as isolated individuals but as a community of believers who embrace diverse contexts as gifts -- not obstacles -- to interpretation.

When we read Scripture that way, treasuring the many perspectives that people bring to it, we can approach it with greater curiosity and imagination. We can acknowledge how power is used and abused by reflecting on the biblical writers' complex negotiations with imperial power. Drawing upon postcolonial perspectives and readings from the Majority World, American Christians, some perhaps for the first time, can learn what it looks like to read Scripture from the "underside" of history.

Reading Scripture faithfully requires humility. It requires us to note the limitations of our own perspectives, but also the richness found therein. That is, each of us reads Scripture through a narrow lens, but what we see -- though not complete -- can be full of divinely granted insight.

Finally, reading Scripture faithfully requires realizing that we never read Scripture by ourselves, not really. Reading the Bible is a communal activity, one that requires discernment and charitable listening as much as it does knowledge of ancient contexts and languages.

Over the past 18 months, I've come to realize how important the stakes are for how we read Scripture. A renewed, more generous biblical imagination is not an academic exercise, an ethereal reconsideration of old, dusty texts. Instead, such a biblical imagination can energize a revolution in our thinking, our identities, and yes, even our politics.

Consistently, Scripture calls us to welcome the exile, the refugee and the stranger, drawing us from our fear to a radical hospitality that is the very essence of the good news of Jesus. Unfortunately,

fear of the “other” is an easy political lever for our leaders to pull. Asking us to fear is easy; calling us to the welcome of the gospel is the work of God’s grace and the extraordinary work to which Christian churches are called.

That grace -- the grace that churches proclaim -- can reshape us and our communities. No, the Bible does not list the legal and judicial steps we should take to address our current and future immigration crises. It does not prescribe legal remedies for centuries of gendered oppression. And neither will our readings of the Bible effortlessly unravel America’s original sin of racism.

But a generous, grace-filled imagination can be a sure guide for us in these times, a guide away from fear and toward Jesus’ destabilizing hospitality, a hospitality that calls us all home.

In a divisive time marked by theological and political crises, many people may be tempted to lament that Christianity ever “became political.” But that is to misdiagnose the errors too many of us have made. The problem isn’t that the church “became political.” After all, the gospel has always been political. When God calls us to love our neighbors, we are called into political questions.

The problem is that we are continually tempted to sacrifice the good news at the altar of partisan power. We are tempted to mistake our partisan commitments for God’s decrees. We are tempted to be manipulated by partisan actors who know how to pull the levers of fear, anxiety and hopelessness.

Yet the call from Scripture is both simple and worthy of much contemplation: “Love your neighbor.”

The call is to love.

So let’s not retreat from political questions. Let’s re-enter them with a renewed imagination and the love of our neighbors at the center of all that we do. Let’s not despair. Let’s not give up hope. Yes, we will get things wrong and will need both accountability and repentance.

But let’s love.

After all, “love never ends” (1 Corinthians 13:8). And let’s hope, for “hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us” (Romans 5:5 NRSV).