

FOUR SENSES OF SCRIPTURE



By Pastor Jerry Truex

Swimming with Sharks

Growing up in California, I spent many hours swimming at the beach. On occasion, the siren would sound calling swimmers out of the water. After a period of time, the siren would sound again, indicating it was safe to go back in the water. This article is a siren. It is safe to go back in the Bible again.

We've been intimidated not to read the Bible. Our imagination tells us there are shark-like "Bible-experts" who would devour us for not using their methods. Our experience tells us there is too much confusion about what the Bible means. Our pragmatism tells us we don't have the time, energy, or background knowledge to read the Bible and make sense of it. If you have been staying out of the Bible for these reasons, I encourage you to go back in once again. Here's why.

Scripture as Sacred Resource

The Bible is an ocean of spiritual resources. It is shallow enough for beginners to wade in and deep enough for experts to drown. Put in another way, the Bible can never be exhausted of meaning whether you have prior knowledge and skills or not. There are many levels or senses of Scripture, which can accommodate different people at different levels.

Four Senses of Scripture

For thousands of years, Christians have recognized that there are at least "four senses" of Scripture: the literal, the allegorical, the moral, and the mystical. Each sense builds on the previous level.

The literal sense refers to the historical message of the passage "back-then-and-there." It's the plain meaning of the text. For example, if the text describes Jesus casting out a demon, then the text is about Jesus having the power and authority to dispel evil. True, your understanding can be enhanced by experts, but with or without expert commentary, you can get a general idea of the literal sense of almost any passage in the Bible.

The allegorical sense refers to finding personal significance in the passage you have chosen. As you read the text for its plain meaning (literal sense), it slowly dawns on you that the passage is about you, about your life, and about the characters in your own drama

(allegorical sense). Your life is mirrored in the text. It can get personal. You are here, alone, with God. No Bible expert or friend can help with this level of reading. For example, when you read that Christ drove out a demon (the literal sense), you may recognize Christ is also trying to drive out demons in your life (allegorical sense). Because the allegorical is sense so personal, different people can derive different “meanings” (or “significances”) from the same text.

The moral sense refers to how the passage shapes your values and behaviors. For example, if you come to believe that Christ is driving out demons in your own life (allegorical sense), then you might also realize you must act on that by adjusting your attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors (moral sense). When you embrace the moral sense, you become a “doer of the word and not a hearer only” (James 1:22-25). Again this is personal—sometimes liberating, sometimes painful—and Bible experts are no help here. What is helpful is a community of friends trying to enact the Word in their own lives too! They can offer encouraging, and sometimes cautionary, words.

The mystical sense points to spiritual realities that transcend earthly existence and lift up desire for God. Here you encounter God. As you read, you transcend the pettiness of your own life and embrace the world from a transcendent, eternal perspective. Again, it’s you and God in an act of sanctified imagination. To follow our example, the text is no longer about Christ casting out a demon (literal), nor about Christ casting out your demons (allegorical), nor about doing the Word (moral), but about God’s eternal redemptive purposes for all human kind (mystical).

The next time you read the Bible, trying reading at the four levels. I find short episodes in the Gospels the best place to begin. See, for example, Jesus casting out the demon (Mk 1:21-28), Jesus healing the blind man (Mk 8:22-26), or the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25-37). Remember, the Bible is about you!