

Word-Centred Life

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“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing has come into being.”
(John 1:1-3)

Scripture has the capacity to bring God into our lives the way lightning brings fire to the earth. It can be startling, beautiful, shocking, and powerful; at times it seems to burst from a clear blue sky with irresistible force. This is hardly surprising. There is more here than simply ink on the page; this “word of the Lord” is able to bring us into the presence of the divine Word, the one who brought the spinning galaxies into being and whose nail-marked hands are stretched out towards us in love. Other books may speak of God, but the Bible uniquely is able to become for us a holy ground on which we actually meet with God.

A Word-Centered Life, a life which is evangelical in the very best sense of that word—shaped by the Gospel, and passionately seeking to hear Christ, know Christ, share Christ with others—such a life must always be deeply grounded in Scripture. Psalm 1 offers a perfect description of a Word-Centered people:

“their delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law they meditate day and night. They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither.” (v. 2-3)

In just this way we need to come to Scripture not simply as a resource for preaching or theology, nor just as an inspiring devotional treasury, and especially not as a mine of proof-texts for perfecting our dogmas and defeating our doctrinal enemies. Instead we need to drive deep roots into the refreshing waters of the biblical text, so that we might become more deeply rooted and grounded in Christ. We need to learn to come to the Bible in order to meet Jesus.

But if the whole of Scripture is going to become for us a place of encounter with Christ, we may need to experience a significant shift of perspective. After all, Jesus himself doesn't even seem to appear as a character in the biblical story until somewhere around the thousandth page. Almost four-fifths of the narrative of the Bible is over before we ever get to the stable at Bethlehem. It might be easy enough to imaginatively meditate on the Gospels, for example, in order to meet with Jesus. But what are we to do with Leviticus, or Ecclesiastes, or Lamentations? Many of our Bibles are far more well-thumbed in the New Testament and, perhaps, Isaiah and the Psalms—the most obviously Jesus-centered parts of Scripture. How are we to dive into the rest for becoming like Jesus?

The Mystery of Christ

We need a fresh viewpoint. It's often the case that some experience, event, or piece of knowledge can shift our perspective in a significant way. We interpret a friend's apparently uncharacteristic behavior in a new light when we discover he's recently fallen in love. Visiting the country in which a favorite movie is set helps us understand the story in a fresh way. Seemingly erratic decisions being made in the workplace make sense when we learn that the company is being subjected to a hostile takeover. In each case, a broader understanding of the context leads to enhanced comprehension.

This also happens every time we read a detective story or a mystery novel. At first we are confronted with a seemingly unfathomable sequence of events: some violent crime, perhaps, or a spectacular theft. A diverse collection of characters are caught up in the orbit of these events, each with their own peculiarities and problems. We know, as we read, that at least one of these people is involved in this crime, but which one? And how? As their tangled tales begin to unravel we find ourselves suspecting first one person, then another. But the great detective, of course, is not as nonplussed as we are. Just when everything seems insoluble a revelation strikes as some vital clue is uncovered. The final scene is set and in a dramatic denouement the detective unmask the villain, showing how the trail of evidence leads uniquely to them while explaining all the red herrings and blind alleys. And we, hopefully, close the book with a feeling of rich satisfaction, nodding sagely as we say to ourselves, “Of course—it all makes sense!”

Now imagine going back to the book for a second time. returning to the first page, we already know how the entire story will unfold. When we first meet the murderer, we know he is the murderer. At the first mention of a vital clue, we already know its significance. Hints are dropped about dark secrets—but we already know what those secrets are. for us, the whole book has changed. The story still unwinds along the same course; the detective still reaches the same conclusions. But our reading is so different. Events and remarks we hadn't noticed the first time take on a fresh significance. Characters emerge in a new light. We have been given an oracular knowledge: we still may not understand everything, but we have seen enough of the way this story unfolds to grasp it more fully than those who participate in it. We see what the detective and the other characters cannot see, what even a first reader of the text cannot see. We have the key.

What if we could read Scripture in this way? This was the beguiling idea which enchanted the minds of some of the greatest thinkers, writers, and biblical scholars in the history of the church. And no one articulated the ideas that lay at the heart of their thinking more compellingly than a young Scottish priest named John Duns Scotus.

The absolute primacy of Christ

In the closing years of the thirteenth century John made his way to the university at Oxford to teach theology and philosophy. The Oxford of his day was, of course, quite different from the city modern visitors see. Although John was arriving in one of the foremost cities of England, strategically situated at the heart of the country, it would seem to us little more than a village; there were probably not many more than 2,000 residents all told. Most people, including the university students, were housed in wood-frame, thatched roof homes which were draughty, dark, and infested with rodents.

The half dozen or so colleges then in existence were small institutions largely devoted to the study of Latin, theology, and philosophy (many graduates would be drawn into the service of the church), and were dominated by the newly arrived Dominican and franciscan friars. But Oxford's reputation as a leading center for both learning and teaching was already firmly established. Considered to be on a par with such luminary institutions as the universities of Paris or Bologna, it drew some of the greatest thinkers in western Europe.

Even in this rarified atmosphere, John quickly established himself as one of the most brilliant minds of his generation. Probably only in his early thirties when he began giving lectures—maybe even his late twenties—he showed a precocious genius for philosophical analysis. John could be hard to follow, and some of his later critics convinced themselves that his apparently impenetrable writing was simply a smokescreen covering the mundane thinking of a mediocre mind. But history judged them to be wrong. John Duns Scotus is now celebrated as one of the most fascinating, if difficult, of all medieval thinkers

John retold the story of human history from a quite unique theological angle. His starting point was an idea known to us as the Absolute Primacy of Christ. It's rather like a sophisticated version of the classic children's' Sunday School credo: no matter what the question is, the answer is probably Jesus. John looked at the entire universe, and the great sweep of history across the millennia, and began with a simple assumption: this is all about Christ.

All creation was made for Christ, John taught, echoing an idea we already find in Paul's earliest letters: "in [Christ] all things in heaven and on earth were created ... all things have been created by him and for him" (Colossians 1:16). The author of Proverbs expresses the same idea in vibrant poetry (writing about the personified figure of Wisdom, seen in the Christian tradition as a figure of Christ):

"When he established the heavens, I was there, when he drew a circle on the face of the deep, when he made firm the skies above, when he established the fountains of the deep, when he assigned to the sea its limit, so that the waters might not transgress his command, when he marked out the foundations of the earth, then I was beside him, like a master worker; and I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always, rejoicing in the inhabited world and delighting in the human race." (Proverbs 8:27-31)

From the beginning, John asserted, it was God's intention that Christ should take human form, living amongst those in whom he so delighted and participating directly in the created order. For this reason this world was shaped as a place in which Christlike life would flourish, where the "image" and "likeness" of God (Genesis 1:26) would be most at home—an image and likeness most fully seen in Jesus, who is supremely the "image of the invisible God" (Colossians 1:15).

John offered us a very high view of the significance of Jesus. He is the fundamental fact of the universe, the primal reality of our existence. Christ is the foundation, the alpha and omega, the beginning and the end. The cosmos is shaped around Jesus. We are made in his image. He is the determining force behind all reality, all history, our entire human experience. And he is the goal,

the destination, the endpoint towards which all history tends. In short, said John, Jesus is everything.

Christ in all Scriptures

If, as John argued, the whole of creation entirely centered on Jesus, then we might reasonably expect to discover that Scripture is equally Christocentric. Not only that, but the idea of the Absolute Primacy of Christ could then become a compelling starting point for our interpretation of Scripture, especially when we approach Scripture with the desire, above all else, to find in it an encounter with God in Christ.

And in fact this was the way most Christians read the Bible for much of the Church's two millennia long history (and for centuries before John was around to give such a strong theological foundation for the idea). During one of his sermons on the Psalms, the fifth century African bishop Augustine of Hippo exhorted his congregation to "remember that God speaks only a single word throughout the length of Scripture, and that only one Word is heard from the many mouths of the sacred writers—the Word that was in the beginning, God with God." Six centuries later the hugely influential Parisian abbot Hugh of St Victor would write: "All sacred Scripture is but one book, and that one book is Christ, because all divine Scripture speaks of Christ, and all divine Scripture is fulfilled in Christ."

These writers were developing a tradition that reaches right back to the New Testament period. Throughout the Gospels, the epistles, and the book of revelation we see Jesus presented as the fulfillment of the Hebrew Scriptures. We have often narrowed that focus by affirming that in Christ a specific collection of ancient biblical prophecies about the future came to pass; some even claim to be able to enumerate the number and sequence of such prophecies. But the apostles and the New Testament writers asserted so much more: for them, Jesus was the completion and fulfillment of all Scripture, of the whole Bible in its many varied aspects.

Think, for example, of Peter's first sermon on the day of Pentecost. These few brief words draw together a collection of different texts from the Hebrew Bible—a passage from Joel and quotations from a couple of Psalms—and apply them all to Jesus. Two chapters later in Acts, Peter is confronting the Sanhedrin and quotes from another Psalm ("the stone that was rejected by you, the builders; it has become the chief cornerstone," Psalm 118:22) which, he asserts, speaks directly of Christ. In a prayer later in the same chapter the disciples apply yet another Psalm to Jesus, while in chapter seven Stephen, during his trial, draws whole sweeps of the Old Testament narrative into his interpretation of the significance of Christ's death and resurrection. Philip hears an Ethiopian official reading from the book of the prophet Isaiah while traveling on the road to Gaza—"starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus" (Acts 8:35). This same pattern continues throughout Acts: the Old Testament is constantly referred to as a text which speaks of Christ.

If anything, the picture becomes even richer as we turn to the New Testament letters. Paul, in particular, seems to see Jesus everywhere he looks in Scripture. Christ is portrayed as a new Adam, a descendant of the first man who overturns the tragic results of the first sin in Eden (Romans 5:12-21). Abraham's unwavering faith in God's promise makes him the spiritual ancestor of those who will place their faith in Christ's resurrection (Acts 4:1-25). Sarah and Hagar become allegories of the challenging choice presented by Christ: between living under the law of Sinai or in the freedom of the new Jerusalem (Galatians 4:21-5:1). In one text Jesus is linked to the entire story of the exodus—to the "baptism" in the red Sea, the leadership of Moses, the miraculous food and drink provided in the wilderness—leading to the startling assertion that Jesus was present to the Israelites throughout their wanderings: "they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was Christ" (1 Corinthians 10:5, emphasis added). And so it continues throughout Paul's letters—it seems that he is able to discern the presence of Christ in almost any biblical text.

The letter to the Hebrews draws on the Old Testament in a remarkable way to expound on the significance of Christ's life, death, and resurrection. After a short, breathless introduction in the first four verses (just a single sentence in the Greek original) the letter launches into a whirlwind tour of the Hebrew Scriptures: quotations from right across the Psalter; excerpts from books as diverse as Deuteronomy, Proverbs, Isaiah, and Jeremiah; allusions to the meeting between Abraham and Melchizedek, the giving of the law at Sinai, Israel's wandering in the wilderness, the design and structure of the temple, the rules governing the priesthood and the sacrificial system laid out in Leviticus, and the prophetic promise of a new heart covenant between God and his people. The eleventh chapter famously presents a panorama of Old Testament heroes, calling to mind the examples of Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Gideon, Barak, Samson ... the list is overwhelming. And all this is offered as one great and glorious witness to Jesus—Jesus who is greater than the angels, who mediates a better covenant than Moses, who embodies the Sabbath rest of the covenant, who fulfills the great priesthood of Melchizedek, who ministers in the true

heavenly sanctuary of which the earthly temple is simply an imitation, who offers the supreme and final sacrifice, and who establishes the foundations of the heavenly Jerusalem.

No wonder, then, that the author of this letter calls Jesus “the pioneer and perfecter of our faith” (Hebrews 12:2). He is the beginning and the end, the one who participates in creation with God at the dawn of time and draws it to its conclusion at the end of days. His presence can be felt on every page, during every incident, through every prophecy, in every life. Jesus is not simply a character who appears in the Bible somewhere towards the end, drawing together the threads of a rambling and complex story. Jesus is the central character from the first page to the last. The Bible is, above all else, the book of Christ.

Reading for encounter

How, then, might we begin to develop our ability to read the Bible more Christocentrically—that is, as a book that speaks everywhere to us of Christ? We need to approach Scripture with new questions. Typically, many of us are taught to interpret the Bible by asking questions such as: What is the history and context of this passage? What theology is taught here? Are there principles I need to uncover and apply to my life? Are there commands to be obeyed, promises to treasure, or challenges to heed? And all these are, of course, good and necessary questions.

But there are other questions we also need to learn to ask. How does this passage speak of Christ? How does it fit within the wider sweep of a biblical story which is centered on Jesus? What does it reveal about Christ’s life, his character and nature, his challenge and call, his love and grace? How does this text help me frame my life in appropriate response to the life of Jesus? In what way does this passage draw me deeper into an experiential relationship with Christ?

One of the most helpful traditional approaches to reading Scripture, an approach which helps to open up exactly these kinds of questions, is known as *lectio divina*, or sacred reading. A recovery of interest in *lectio divina* during recent years has led many Christians and churches to explore a more meditative style of private and public reading of the Bible. But in my experience *lectio* often seems to mean little more in practice than “reading the Bible really slowly ... two or three times ... with a candle.” Genuine *lectio* is far deeper and richer than this.

It is a way of reading which helps to expose all the different layers of meaning in a passage of Scripture, and at the same time helps us to engage every aspect of the reader—senses, imagination, reason, memory, emotions, and will—to God who is present in the biblical text.

The best written description of *lectio divina*, even though it is some eight centuries old, is *The Ladder of Monks*, a short book written by a medieval French Carthusian prior called Guigo II. At the beginning of his book Guigo describes the practice of *lectio* in very simple terms:

“One day when I was busy working with my hands I began to think about our spiritual work, and all at once four stages in spiritual exercise came into my mind: reading, meditation, prayer, and contemplation.”

Many will be familiar with these four stages by the Latin words Guigo employs: *lectio*, *meditatio*, *oratio*, and *contemplatio* (which some helpfully paraphrase in English as read, reflect, respond, and rest). Throughout the rest of the book Guigo explains what he means by each of these terms.

Guigo writes that reading, or *lectio* itself, is “the careful study of the Scriptures, concentrating all one’s powers on it.” It is, he says, “the foundation; it provides the subject matter we must use for meditation.” In this first stage of reading we are using to the full our powers of perception. We absorb the text as best we can, directing all the power of our senses towards it (throughout most of history Christians have read Scripture aloud, even when reading alone, so that the words are not only seen but also heard—often an enlightening experience, as anyone who has tried it can testify). We also make use of the imagination to allow Scripture to come alive, to speak as fully and presently as possible to us. We try to take everything in; as Guigo expresses it, good reading “puts food whole into the mouth.” All this helps us to explore fully the text’s literal layer of meaning.

Reading is followed by meditation, the act of chewing over the food we have taken in. Meditation, writes Guigo, is “the busy application of the mind to seek with the help of one’s own reason for knowledge of hidden truth.” This includes analysis and study of the text - considering the language, grammar, context, genre, and interpretation - but it also involves the mind in actively seeking the presence of Christ in Scripture. In this way we begin to tease out a deeper layer of meaning. *Meditatio* encourages us to use the skills of cognition, the faculties of memory and reason, to understand the text as fully as possible in the light of our knowledge of the rest of Scripture and of Christ. This leads us to prayer, *oratio*. But for Guigo the nature of this prayer is very

specific: “prayer is the heart’s devoted turning to God to drive away evil and obtain what is good.” Writing about this drives Guigo to prayer himself:

“So the soul, seeing it cannot attain by itself to that sweetness of knowing and feeling for which it longs, and that the more ‘the heart abases itself,’ the more ‘God is exalted’ [see Psalm 63:7-8], humbles itself and betakes itself to prayer, saying: Lord, you are not seen except by the pure of heart. I seek by reading and meditating what is true purity of heart and how it may be had.”

This prayer, then, seeks to address the waywardness of our desires and drives. As we meditate on Scripture and find ourselves being drawn nearer to Christ we become more painfully aware of our corrupted and sinful nature. At this point, our prayer is a longing and begging for grace, for the renewal of our lives, so that we might no longer be alienated from his glorious presence. Prayer addresses our emotions, not only as we feel them but as we inappropriately express them in our habits and behavior.

And finally comes contemplation. “Contemplation is when the mind is in some sort lifted up to God and held above itself, so that it tastes the joys of everlasting sweetness,” as Guigo puts it somewhat rapturously. We have carefully absorbed what we have read. We have meditated on it - studied, reflected, pondered, considered. This has led us into a deeper awareness of our fallenness, which has driven us to a desperate prayer for transformation. But in this final step we find ourselves welcomed into the ever gracious presence of Christ, and we experience a longing simply to be allowed to dwell here. This is truly a movement of the heart, a stretching of the soul into God. Our whole person is joyfully absorbed into the life of God.

Only Scripture truly has the capacity to be read in this way. Other texts may connect with our souls, but no other quite like this. It is because of this capacity that Christians throughout the ages have spoken of the Bible as inspired, as filled with the breath of God. It is this that leads us to give the Bible our fullest and most intense attention. This book draws us into the living presence of the Creator whose gaze sweeps across the breadth of an unimaginably vast cosmos without losing sight of us, in all our humility and smallness.

The living word of God brings us into the presence of the Word of Life. And it is because of the ability of this book to speak to every part of our soul, to touch every facet of our inner life, that we come to it again and again as such ardent seekers and lovers.

This article includes abridged material from Chris Webb’s forthcoming book *The Fire of the Word*, published by InterVarsity Press.

Excerpted from the Renovaré USA website. For this and other helpful resources please visit www.renovare.us

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