

Voices: Profits and perils of postmodern biblical interpretation

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I have published [multiple articles](#) in the *Baptist Standard* focusing on the subject of biblical hermeneutics. Hermeneutics is a field of study focusing on the methods we use to interpret texts. For Christians, hermeneutics centers on the text of Scripture.

Here, I want to address the issue of “postmodern” hermeneutics. In recent decades, this new approach to the interpretation of literature has taken on major prominence, particularly in the academic realm. This approach is taking hold quickly in more popular and nonacademic circles, too.

What is postmodern biblical interpretation?

In a recent [tweet](#), ethicist David Gushee succinctly captured the essence of postmodern hermeneutics, insisting “the Bible is always an interpreted text, and that we flawed, limited, self-interested people are the interpreters.”

According to this understanding, there are no truly “objective” biblical interpretations. All interpretations are determined by the cultural contexts and (usually self-interested) motivations of the interpreters.

Postmodern biblical interpretation has caused significant controversy in the church since it first began gaining steam. In recent years, this approach to hermeneutics—and approaches seeming to resemble it—often have evoked

cries of “wokeness,” “critical theory” and “identity politics” from many Christians.

Profits of postmodern biblical interpretation

Postmodernism is not entirely wrong. The Bible must be interpreted, and all of us human beings—the ones doing the interpreting—are sinful and fallible (Psalm 19:12; Romans 3:23; James 3:2). Postmodernism reminds us of this biblical truth. We humans are not infallible and often have sinful motivations for the ways we interpret Scripture.

It is perfectly valid—indeed, it is necessary—to ask others and especially ourselves to consider how our interpretations of Scripture serve our self-interests. We must examine critically if the benefits we derive from our biblical interpretations are motivating us, either consciously or unconsciously, to be dishonest about the evidence.

Consider a married, male pastor who believes in male headship and male-only church leadership. As a man, such a person clearly derives some obvious benefits from his complementarian interpretation of Scripture passages like 1 Timothy 2.

It certainly is possible such a man favors a complementarian biblical interpretation, because it gives him special privileges and power as a male. He may be less inclined to consider more egalitarian interpretations fairly, because he doesn’t want to risk losing the perks his own interpretation grants him.

This possibility does not entail his interpretation of the Bible *necessarily* is wrong, nor does this possibility entail his interpretation *necessarily* arises primarily from selfish motivations. Nevertheless, such a man needs to be

aware of how his interpretation benefits him and how these benefits might bias his approach to the text.

Perils of postmodern biblical interpretation

Postmodern biblical interpretation is not without its flaws and dangers, however. Jonathan Leeman points out a [glaring](#) inconsistency that often occurs:

“Does anyone, on the left or the right, *ever* disqualify—meaning, actively renounce—his or her own exegesis [biblical interpretation] based on the principle that we’re all self-interested? No, never. Even when someone does abandon an exegetical judgment and adopts a new one, and then confesses that their old position was self-interested, do they immediately turn around and disqualify the new position based on the principle of self-interest? Again, no.”

Leeman acknowledges it is true “everyone’s exegesis is both culturally embedded and self-interested,” but points out “the truism becomes disingenuous ... when it’s turned into a weapon that always and only aims in one direction: to disqualify the other guy’s view.”

In its most extreme forms, postmodern biblical interpretation says there is no meaning in the Bible itself, and all we have are various different meanings readers construct by using the Bible. Dale Martin is one of the foremost scholarly advocates of this view. His books *Biblical Truths* and *Sex and the Single Savior* give a detailed outworking of this interpretive principle.

Such an approach functionally obliterates anything resembling “biblical authority.” All meaning is created by human interpreters, no one can claim

access to the “true meaning” of Scripture, and the idea God speaks authoritatively and directly to us through Scripture no longer holds water.

Applied more broadly to human writing and speech, a full-blown postmodern hermeneutic deconstructs all human communication—including Martin’s books—into cacophony.

If postmodern biblical interpretation dominates our approach to Scripture, we will end up like the Israelites did at the end of the book of Judges—a time of chaos, destruction and wickedness, because “all the people did what was right in their own eyes” (Judges 21:25 NRSV).

Practical concerns

What are we as Christians supposed to do? Should we embrace a morass of postmodern biblical interpretation in which Scripture means anything to anybody and nothing to everybody all at the same time? Should we despair of being able to trust Scripture to guide Christian faith and practice authoritatively, or despair of trusting ourselves to interpret Scripture faithfully?

No. Such an approach is impossible. Even the most radically postmodern thinkers still live their daily lives as though communication between people is possible. Postmodern thinkers still write works they expect others to be able to understand accurately, and they read others’ works with the assumption they themselves can understand what is written. Society functions on the assumption humans are capable of accurately understanding each other.

Reading and studying Scripture *in community* provides the best path forward for Christians. Scripture study is done best with other believers (Acts 18:24-28; Ephesians 5:19), and the church is supposed to be diverse (1 Corinthians 12:12-31; Revelation 7:9).

Believers from a variety of ethnic, national, socioeconomic, gender and other backgrounds all can help each other read the Bible better, pointing out biases and challenging sinful motives. The wealthy financier needs the impoverished day laborer, and vice versa. The American man needs the Nigerian woman, and vice versa. And so on.

For Christians, only reading Scripture together with humility and prayer under the guidance of the Holy Spirit can help us draw on the profits and avoid the perils of postmodern biblical interpretation.

Joshua Sharp is a chaplaincy services assistant at Waco Center for Youth. He holds a Master of Divinity from Baylor University's Truett Theological Seminary. The views expressed are those solely of the author.