

One New Book for the Preacher

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INTERPRETING THE TRUTH: CHANGING THE PARADIGM OF BIBLICAL STUDIES by L. William Countryman. Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 2003.

L. William Countryman's 1988 study, *Dirt, Greed, and Sex: Sexual Ethics in the New Testament and Their Implications for Today*, was arguably the seminal work behind the 2003 decision by the Episcopal Church to consecrate a partnered gay man as a bishop – thereby establishing a sexual ethic unparalleled symbolically by that of any other faith community to date.

Drawing on insights of the anthropologist Mary Douglas regarding purity and danger, Countryman, Professor of New Testament at the Church Divinity School of the Pacific, Berkeley, California, reevaluated biblical texts dealing with purity in light of their ancient Jewish context in order to clarify the foundations of theological-ethical discourse in the New Testament and to arrive at surprisingly fresh understandings of the truth of the reality of our human (and therefore sexual) lives.

In his new book, *Interpreting the Truth: Changing the Paradigm of Biblical Studies*, Countryman describes his interpretive practice employed earlier. Substitute “preacher” whenever he mentions the “interpreter” or “reader” of biblical texts, and here we have an insightful and provocative challenge to our understanding of the homiletic enterprise. With apologies to Countryman, I make this substitution throughout this article.

For preachers tempted weekly to scour the biblical text for information or content, or to latch on to a single word, a single passage, or a single theme in isolation from the larger complexity that gave the text meaning in its age of origin, Countryman reminds us that texts are rhetorical and must be read rhetorically – or “between the lines.” Indeed, in this book he models how to do exactly that through his exegeses of the Letters of Jude, James, and Romans.

Rhetoric, like homiletic, is speech used to sway others, to move them toward a “point,” to effect *metanoia* or “change of mind.” Because in New Testament letters the authors delay making their “point,” thereby allowing time to build their argument, leaving it to the end, Countryman recommends reading them “back-to-front.” Like preachers, their authors stand in “the interpretive triangle” between the text and the social environment of the human community, using imagery, rhythm, sound, assonance, appeals to emotions, variations in pacing, use of unusual vocabulary, chains of argument, to encourage and make possible certain responses and definite actions. Indeed, from his reading of New Testament letters, Countryman lists rhetorically persuasive devices instructive for every preacher. He also charges preachers to demonstrate “a certain teacherly care and concern” by approaching the text for its pastoral effectiveness, its results, its *sophrosune* or “practical wisdom.”

Practical wisdom comes through an “interpretive practice” that “expects both questions and answers to emerge, develop, and change in the living process of

interpretation through a conversation involving many partners and significant human complexity on all sides.” The practice takes seriously both the “spiritual dimensions” and the “social nature of interpretation,” is based on experience, and is experimental. Because it is experimental and experiential, Countryman confesses that he came to what he is proposing “by osmosis,” that it is “deliberately somewhat vague,” and that he pursues it through “intuition,” a process of trial and error, and of “hypothesizing and confirming or relinquishing our hypotheses.” In a process of oscillation between *theoria* and *praxis* reminiscent of that described by Don Browning in *A Fundamental Practical Theology*, Countryman contends that “sometimes practice changes and makes theory rethink itself; sometimes the reverse happens.” Whatever critical methodologies he employs, he does so, not as prescriptions leading to conclusive answers, but as heuristic devices to be used artistically and creatively in order to ask new questions and see things the preacher might not otherwise have sought or may even regard as bizarre.

For Countryman, the preacher is not simply a functionary analyzing or taking apart the text, but “a creator continually creating the culture of the present and future in the act of interpreting the past.” The text is like a musical score that is constantly being brought to life anew by its performance. Every performance, moreover, is *de novo*. No two are ever the same. In contrast to much current practice, preachers should engage in less analysis and more synthesis.

Practical wisdom is grounded in an understanding of the truth different from or contrary to what we often assume. “Remember,” Countryman warns, “that the text itself is not the point of the conversation. The ideas in the text are not the point. Ideas *about* the text are certainly not the point. All these are means, not the end. The goal of the conversation is illumination of life, of reality, of all the ‘out there’ of our existence, which we understand in large part through our culture’s construction of it, but which always remains also, to a significant degree, undomesticated by our cultural constructs and ready to break them.”

Because the texts themselves are projects of a particular culture, they cannot be reduced to abstract, timeless, “high-theory” doctrines. By the same token, however, because the culture of which they are products is not our culture, they can help us see “reality” beneath the social constructions of our own prevailing culture. Thus they are useful to us precisely because they are foreign and not contemporary with us. Coming from other than our own time and place, their use to the preacher is to make relative “the certainties of the present, break their stronghold on human possibility, and offer a few alternative directions, and so set our collective imaginations free to continue into the future.” As an illustration, Countryman points out that through scriptural interpretation, gay and lesbian persons have come to see that the social constructs of sexuality we have inherited have been in error because they have not adequately described those persons’ reality.

To come to terms with a hitherto unseen “reality” beneath the prevailing social constructs is to discover “truth.” “Truth” is less the opposite of “heresy” or “error,” than of a “lie.” Consequently, it is not a possession, but a surprising discovery. “Truth,” he writes, “is the chink in the steel helmet of our preconceptions, through which we catch an unexpected ray of light. It is the disconcerting (and perhaps happy) moment when you find that part of what you were told can be peeled back to reveal something

quite different underneath.” “Truth” is not “something I was told on authority,” but “something I have stumbled across.”

Countryman argues that while written texts communicate what James C. Scott in *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* would call the “public transcript” of a culture, because they are written down, they are subject to analysis that can lead to the revelation of their incoherence and eventually the galvanizing of a “hidden transcript” that subverts the prevailing, public one.

To take written texts seriously, the preacher cannot have a “tin ear” for their complexities. Lamentable, therefore, is the current fragmentation between academics and non-academics with the result that “seminarians learn about biblical scholarship; but, in many cases, once they are in positions of parish leadership, it has little effect on their preaching.” Countryman wants to overcome a division wherein the academy feels the community of faith can “be fed off its scraps,” and the community of faith fails to see the text as dangerous, subversive, and threatening to the status quo.

To discover the “truth” of the “reality” that is often veiled by the social constructs of any given culture, preachers must listen attentively and critically to, rather than merely make use of, the text. Only in that way can they hear, and consequently be surprised and challenged by, the ancient, alien, human voice that the text offers. They must attend to “larger wholes,” and read in such a way that the text will defeat their own expectations. They need a willingness to be surprised, and to address the vital question of what human life means in this world, in relationship to God, one another, and the rest of the creation.

Preachers thereby give fresh voice to the human voices embedded in the text. As they do so, they put the faith community in touch with its own humanity, thereby liberating it from the temptation now so rampant across our divided world to identify itself with God, to see itself as superior to other communities, to claim that it has perfect access to the mind of God. “Scripture fulfills its reason for existing,” Countryman writes, “only when it serves to facilitate the community’s fallible, searching approach to the God we shall never fully understand.”

The search for the truth of our reality thus results in its continuing, evolving revelation. Countryman finds a precedent for this search in the Letter to the Romans where Paul demonstrates a capacity to read scripture with new eyes, “seeing things previously passed over as unexpectedly central and questioning the centrality of issues such as purity that he previously thought to be of great importance. In Paul’s experience, Scripture is not in conflict with change. Indeed, it can, however surprisingly, turn out to ground it.”

To be listeners, preachers must be both a part of the faith community and something like what classical Greek called a *zenos*, a “guest-friend” who can bring to the interpretive task a perspective those more closely identified with the community probably do not have. Required is a combination of engagement and detachment, a willingness to be transparent to glimpses of truth, facilitating the encounter between the text and the community. Unless preachers have one foot outside the community as well as one foot in it, the community will become stuck in a claustrophobic, cultural cul-de-sac. To help the community remain human, the interpreter must above all be in touch with his or her own humanity. The task is that of “plumbing human values in the presence of the Holy.”

Countryman claims that the fragmentation caused by globalization, multiculturalism, the entry of new voices in the interpretation of the scriptures, and academic specialization has only multiplied the number cultural cul-de-sacs. Even the postmodern drive to undermine the hegemony of meta-narratives like patriarchalism often eventuates in the enthronement of those meta-narratives in their own right.

Countryman is at his most provocative and instructive in his assertion that the scriptures constitute nothing more or less than a “unique human artifact.” That, indeed, is what makes them practically useful and truth-revealing. Whatever claims are made for divine influence upon them, they result from human effort, are put in the human medium of language, are inevitably limited by their humanity, and connect us with other human voices. It is the scriptures’ humanity that interests us, because through it we can, in conversation with other voices, discover anew our own humanness.

Therefore, rather than being an object of study, the scriptures are a medium through which we humans can encounter God and learn in greater measure than heretofore the truth of our reality and that of the world around us. Like people of other faiths with their canonical texts, our preachers take up ours in order to find out, not just about the texts, but also the world and the meaning of human life within it.

Countryman is an Episcopalian, heir to a pragmatic, empirical, experiential, Anglican “common law” approach that steers away from developing systematic theologies or grand theories or comprehensive meta-narratives. (He expresses dissatisfaction with Rudolf Bultmann’s and Raymond Brown’s schematic treatments of the Fourth Gospel.) He prefers dealing spiritually with concrete questions, issues, and problems in terms of precedence found in what he calls “the larger context of our ancient, scriptural, catholic faith.”

Anglicanism, of course, was born on an island that for much of its history the English Channel kept out of reach from the more hegemonic theological influences that dominated the European continent. People consequently had to rely largely on their own experience of reality for their understanding of the truth, tested over time. Doing so, they realized that, as Countryman puts it, “no two people or communities or moments of history begin from the same point or have the same vocation.”

Of course, the Bible itself, Countryman notes, is not univocal. It is a conversation of many voices. Through the hearing of them the truth may be discovered. When? Countryman borrows from the text for his answer: “When that one, the Spirit of truth comes, it will lead you in all truth” (John 16:13).