

Recontextualizing the Bible in Small Group Discourse

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“The Bible is the authoritative word of God.”

“The meaning of the Bible is the same today as it always has been, and always will be.”

“The Bible is just as applicable to today’s world as it was when it was written.”

“You can read a passage of scripture one day and it will mean one thing to you. You can read the same passage another day and it can have a whole new meaning.”

“Different people, at different places in their lives, dealing with different issues can read the same scripture and it can speak directly to them.”

“The Bible tells us one, consistent story about the nature of man and the will of God.”

“The Bible is written perfectly.”

“God chose every word in scripture, and every word is equally valid.”

“The New Testament is concealed in the Old Testament, and the Old Testament is revealed in the New Testament.”

Such statements provided a constant refrain during my nineteen months of ethnographic work among mainline, evangelical and charismatic¹ Bible study groups. Together with a litany of similar statements, they convey a set of beliefs, assumptions, and expectations about the Bible, as well as a folk hermeneutic for reading, assessing, and applying Biblical texts. In short, such statements constitute a ‘textual ideology’ surrounding the Bible that is central to contemporary American Biblicism². Widely held notions of literalism and inerrancy could be added to this list, as well as more acute

¹ These categories of Protestant identity are both institutionally and theologically based. “Mainline” refers to denominations and institutions that are part of the National Council of Churches, which has traditionally been associated with more ‘liberal’ positions on orthodox doctrines. “Evangelical” refers to denominations and institutions that are conservative theologically, but often pioneers in emerging forms of worship and evangelism. “Charismatic” refers to denominations and institutions which accept that ‘gifts of the Holy Spirit’ are available to modern believers (e.g., speaking in tongues).

² The concept of Biblicism refers to a dialectical relationship that exists between the beliefs held about the Bible in a given cultural context, and how those attitudes are integrated into (and constitutive of) forms of social practice. See Malley (2004) for an extended discussion.

appreciations of scripture, like the ability to distinguish Paul's writing from other New Testament authors. An exhaustive inventory of this textual ideology, however, is not the focus of this essay. Rather, I will explore one way that believers interact with this set of assumptions, illustrating how this textual ideology is enacted through discursive practice.

The analytical lens I use to do this – the practice of recontextualization – is completely banal in regard to the discourse of small group Bible study. It is, in fact, expected, predictable, and one might even say at first glance, mundane. But, then again, anthropology thrives on revealing the seemingly simple as surprisingly complex. Following Bauman and Briggs (1990) in their seminal essay, recontextualization refers to the process of rendering a stretch of linguistic production into a text that can be extracted from its original context of production and inserted into a new setting. Such acts ultimately provide a meta-commentary upon the extracted text – that it can stand independent of its original, surrounding context and is able to carry meaning into a new discursive situation. Webb Keane (2004) recently noted in his own synthesis that this is an especially potent strategy for religious language. In my research, of course, the primary form of recontextualization occurs when participants invoke Biblical texts in the midst of group discourse.

The cross-cultural work on recontextualization has emphasized several finer theoretical points; in particular, the use of recontextualization to obfuscate responsibility in speech and to garner temporary authority (cf., Bauman, 2004; Kuipers, 1990). I will pursue another, less discussed issue: the way interpretations of an original text come to be embedded in acts of recontextualization. There is precedence for such musings in the anthropological literature. Karin Barber (1999) pointed out how Yoruba practices of quotation implicitly provide a commentary upon the words of the quoted party. Joel Sherzer (1983) observed a similar dynamic in his work with the Kuna of the Panama Islands. The example I use in my "Language and Culture" course to introduce this issue is a recontextualization from the US Constitution, particularly the second amendment. Institutions such as the NRA are fond of recontextualizing "the right of the people to keep and bear arms shall not be infringed." When they do this, they are not only contributing to their rhetorical and polemical work, they are also embedding an interpretation of this textual artifact. Namely, they are suggesting that this statement is not historically bound and that the types of arms are irrelevant alongside the underlying right to bear them. In short, it is no matter that our guns now are different from their guns then.

I argue here that this practice of embedding interpretations of an original text – the Bible – through acts of recontextualization is inextricably tied to the interpretive work accomplished in Bible study discourse. More specifically, the primary form of embedded interpretation pursued by speakers is linked to the interpretive preoccupations of their group. This connection can be extended further to particular components of the textual ideology surrounding the Bible. To demonstrate, I will use data collected from two men's Bible study groups, and focus on the recontextualization style of the group facilitators.

This data are drawn from my dissertation fieldwork, conducted between June of 2004 and December of 2005. The project involved six congregations: three United Methodist, one Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, one Restoration Movement, and one Vineyard Fellowship. Among these six churches, I tape-recorded and observed the meetings of 19 different Bible study groups. The impetus for this research was the symbolic and practical significance of small group Bible study in American culture. Small group Bible study is the most common type of small group activity in American society, with 30 and 40 million Americans gathering at least once a week to read and discuss the Bible (Wuthnow 1994).

Small groups are also important to local congregational life, serving as filters for decision-making processes in the church and as a space to socialize new members (Roberts, 2005). Lastly, the small group experience is unique among congregational activities for the opportunity it provides members to actively engage in open, critical dialogue about issues of belief and practice central to their faith (Bielo, 2004; Davie, 1995).

The two groups used in this paper are both men's groups. The first group is part of a United Methodist congregation, and the second is part of a Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod congregation (henceforth, UMC and LC-MS respectively). The leaders of each group – William and David³ – both serve as head pastors. The UMC group met every Tuesday morning at the church, so long as William was in town to lead. The 22 tape-recorded sessions cover their study of the first eight chapters in the New Testament book of Acts. They used a study guide to structure their discussions, the Life Guide series published by InterVarsity Press. A set of 10-12 questions was provided for each chapter, which the group worked through systematically. The group's size ranged from four to eight participants, with the same six members typically present.

The LC-MS group met every Thursday morning at a local restaurant. If David was not able to attend, another member could be counted on to lead in his stead. Their only breaks the entire year came on the National Day of Prayer and on Thanksgiving. Twelve of the 46 tape-recorded sessions cover their study of the Old Testament book of Proverbs. The group did not avail themselves of any formal study guide, but met each week having read one to three chapters and were prepared to discuss "what verses struck them in each chapter." The group's size was considerably larger and more variable, with attendance ranging from 10 to as many as 27. Typically, the group drew between 18 and 25 men.

Aside from both being pastors, William and David share a number of other commonalities. They are both fairly new to their congregations, having been there three and two years respectively. Both are well-liked by their church body, and have witnessed growth in membership during their tenure. Both are voracious readers of congregational and theological literature. Both assume similar leadership styles in their groups: favoring open-ended questions; reticent to interrupt, though perfectly willing to sharpen contributions; and inclined to foreground denominational theology and identity. Both are theologically conservative in regard to the Bible. The two men agreed over 80% of the time on a list of 41 questionnaire statements about the Bible⁴. Lastly, both men were most apt to recontextualize the Bible in their respective groups. William managed to do this on 61 occasions in 22 meetings, while David did so 40 times in 10 meetings⁵.

I have suggested that these speakers differ in the interpretations they embed through recontextualization. Moreover, their differences are in accord with the group's interpretive preoccupations. These differing preoccupations, in turn, align with different components of the textual ideology. We will consider William first. The following are three

³ All names used in this paper are pseudonyms chosen by the author.

⁴ I administered a research questionnaire to all participants in each of the project's Bible study groups. A Lickert scale was provided for the 41-statements about the Bible. This list included issues of belief (e.g. "I believe the Bible is authoritative over any other text.") and issues of practice (e.g. "I have made major life decisions based on the Bible.").

⁵ Each instance was coded and entered into a database following transcription. The coded instances only represent acts of recontextualization that occurred spontaneously. In other words, they were invoked in the midst of group discourse from memory without prior preparation.

emblematic examples of his recontextualization style. The first comes from a discussion of how the group understands the role of the Holy Spirit⁶ in their lives. After a lengthy pause, William interrupted the silence:

- (1) “I like David Siemens, who was our pastor when we were at seminary. He’s a very practical guy. And, I like practical theologians. And, he said, ‘I get up every morning and I pray, Holy Spirit, lead me today. And, then, I trust that the Holy Spirit’s leading me, until the Spirit comes and checks me and either stops me or leads me in a different direction.’ And, I like that. I mean, I think that’s surprising. I think we waste a lot of time. I think folks spend a whole lot of time waiting for signs and wonders and miracles, when what they mostly need to do is say, ‘Holy Spirit lead me today,’ and they go in the direction that makes sense and trust that that’s the way it is. Paul even, and when we get later on here in the book of Acts you see Paul saying, *the Holy Spirit stopped us, kept us from going into Macedonia*. We don’t know how that happened. But, I suspect, it may have been something very practical.”

Secondly, during a discussion of the relational concept of accountability, William commented:

- (2) “Well, the practice of confession and going to another person who represents God, I think we misinterpret Luther sometimes when we talk about the priesthood of all believers, saying that means I can just go to God myself. Luther’s point was that anybody can be a priest to another, wasn’t that we can just do it on our own. I think in our zeal to move away from what may have been, what was some negative things around the hierarchy of the Church, we have lost some of the importance of confession and accountability and some of the things that are gifts. I mean, scripture talks to us about *the gifts of confessing to one another*, and really being in that level. It’s a whole other level of relationship.”

And, lastly, from the group’s reaction to reading Acts 7, where Stephen defends his proclamation of Jesus as Christ to the Jewish Sanhedrin:

- (3) “I think Stephen is a guy filled with grace and love, filled with the Holy Spirit. See, there’s a difference between, he didn’t want to just beat them. Okay. I think sometimes we just want to win. And, if you just want to win then I think it’s anger and those kinds of things that come out. If I just want to be right and point out where you’re wrong, that’s a whole different attitude. I mean, it’s what Paul talks about when he talks about *speaking the truth in love*. Stephen is speaking the truth.”

These three recontextualizations coalesce around a single interpretive feature. In each case, William’s recontextualizations posit a disconnect between the actions and motivations of the Bible and those of modern believers. Paul’s words in regard to the Holy Spirit, the scriptural call to confession, and Paul’s directive about speaking the truth are all drawn into the group’s discourse with the implication of dissonance. This style of

⁶ “The Holy Spirit,” in the orthodox Christian tradition, refers to the third person in the Trinity – God the Father, Jesus the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

embedding interpretation aligns, and is likely a product of, the recurring interpretive focus of the group.

Put simply, the interpretive anchor for this group is establishing where and how their congregation, as well as the modern Church in America, lines up with respect to the first century Church portrayed in Acts. Given its position in scripture, its proximity to Jesus, and its involvement of Jesus' disciples, the first century Church is held up as the pinnacle and the standard of what the Church could be and should be. Throughout all 22 sessions, the group's reading of the first eight chapters of Acts unfolds primarily as a running comparison between the two states of the Church. Even when study guide questions prompted the group to consider features internal to the text, they were able to find their way back to this interpretive anchor. This, of course, is not inevitable. Like any text, the Bible is open and polysemous, and can be engaged from multiple orientations. Considering the abundance of proof-texts in this section of Acts for charismatic expressions, a likely alternative might be a running discussion on the availability of the gifts of tongues and healing for modern believers. In this regard, their interpretive inclination parallels that of larger discourses. For example, the world of church growth literature (which William is intimately familiar with) emphasizes the need for the modern Church to 'return to' the model provided by the book of Acts.

A fine example of this interpretive bent comes from the group's reading of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5: the couple who died suddenly after they were revealed to be withholding money from the Church. The study guide sheet for this section of scripture asks the group to identify the sin of Ananias and Sapphira. After establishing with some ease that their sin was lying to God, William asks the group why the couple then died. Note, the reason for the couple's death is not explicitly stated in any English Bible translation. This particular text requires its readers to make an inference (cf. Fairclough, 1989), to provide the reason for the couple's death. The common inference, and one asserted via a Bible footnote by one of the participants, is that God "zapped" them; struck them down for their sin. William, however, offered an alternative inference:

- (4) "I don't think God zapped them. I think the Church was so committed to this kind of lifestyle that when they realized what they'd done, I mean, there's such a sensibility. There's that great line in the hymn 'Take Time to Be Holy.' And, there's a number of things that are asked for by the writer of that hymn, but one of them is a sensibility to sin. A sensing, an ability to sense and to be clear when sin comes. And, I think that was so much a part of this community. And, when Ananias and Sapphira realized what they'd done it just took them out. And, that's pretty hard. I think one of the reasons why that's hard for us to believe is because we tend to be so far from it. I think we're a long ways from that."

This was picked up quickly by the group. They have an appreciation for it, an inclination even, because it is consistent with their interpretive tendency: to establish where there is parallel and where there is difference with the first century Church. As stated, this interpretive preoccupation is reflected in William's style of recontextualization, namely the implication of dissonance between the two. Let us turn, then, to our second, contrasting case.

As a concluding statement to the group's discussion of Proverbs 14, 15, and 16, David offered the following:

- (5) “I wanted to cross-reference Proverbs 16:4 that we were talking about for a while: *The Lord works out everything for his own ends, even the wicked for a day of disaster*. I wonder if that one’s somewhat connected to the Parable of the Weeds and the Wheat where Jesus tells this story about, *no, let the weeds grow up with the wheat. At the right time, God works it out, He’ll take the harvest*. And, if it’s not just another word about, hang on, God’s watching. God’s gonna work things out. And, if you trust in Him it’s all gonna come out in the wash. I wonder if that’s not a cross-reference.”

Secondly, David framed the group’s discussion of Proverbs 17 with an introduction, which includes the following excerpt:

- (6) “There is so much repetition in this, and I don’t think in any one chapter there’s a lot of rhyme or reason or logical organization to why one proverb follows another. But, in a number of the verses we’re looking at today I think there’s an accent on truthfulness. And, maybe John 8:42 or 43 would be a good one to focus this, some of those verses we’re looking at. Jesus is kind of squawking with these, some of the Jews. Some of whom, it looks like, believed on Him, but some of them continue to give him a hard time. And, they were talking about, *we’re Abraham’s children*. And, Jesus said, *I don’t think that’s who your dad really is*. There’s a number of accents on, in the chapters we’re looking at today, on truth. And, this is a thing I hammer on for the catechism kids. When they’re lying, they’re speaking Satan’s language. It’s not unlike what Jesus says about adultery. He said: *Okay, that’s your goal not commit adultery. I’m gonna up the stakes. Whoever looks on a woman has already committed adultery.*”

And, lastly, from the group’s discussion of Proverbs 26 and 27, one of the participants pointed to Proverbs 26:12: *Do you see a man wise in his own eyes? There is more hope for a fool than for him*. David responded:

- (7) “What’s the thing in the New Testament about the Pharisee praying and then the other guy goes in and says: *Be merciful to me a sinner*. But, about the Pharisee it says: *the Pharisee praying to himself*. And, the accent was on *himself*, rather than real prayer. And, this is *wise in my own mind*.”

Do we see here the same style of recontextualization, and the same type of embedded interpretation that we did with William? Is the interpretive work being done through recontextualization a matter of defining the relation between the Bible and the modern believer? Clearly, the answer is no. Are we faced, then, with a fundamentally different implied interpretation?

David’s recontextualizations are caught up in establishing parallels, but parallels among scriptures. More specifically, they are parallels between the Old and New Testaments. The Parable of the Weeds and the Wheat, Jesus’ words about adultery, and the prayer of a Pharisee are all introduced in order to suggest a commonality in principle between the two scriptural canons. The interpretation that David embeds links the Old and New Testaments. This interpretation claims that these two canons do indeed speak to one another, inform one another, and work together to construct a single, consistent Biblical narrative. In short, the implied interpretation characterizing David’s recontextualization style is one of Biblical continuity. As with William, this style emerges from the group’s primary interpretive concern.

Throughout their study of Proverbs, the LC-MS men wrestled with an interpretive dilemma. The recurring issue was a seeming contradiction between promissorial statements from Proverbs and other Biblical examples, as well as examples from the everyday lives of members. Indeed, the question arose on several occasions as to whether or not a verse should be considered as a promise from God at all. The group's first encounter with this came in their reading of Proverbs 3 and 4. Peter – the son of a lifelong member in the congregation, but not himself involved in the LC-MS tradition – challenged the group:

- (8) “As your non-denom brother, I feel obligated that we don't skip over seven through ten, which reads like this: *Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord and shun evil. This will bring health to your body and nourishment to your bones. Honor the Lord with your wealth, with the firstfruits of all your crops; then your barns will be filled to overflowing, and your vats will brim over with new wine. And, you know, the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. Jesus became flesh as the Word, and the Word we believe in has right there healing and prosperity. It's in there like Prego. I mean, it's in there.*”

David's response, which was actually quite deft in taking the sharp edge off of Peter's delivery, went as follows: “Yeah. That's one of the issues that you have to deal with with Proverbs. How much of this is promise? How much of this is just generally the case?” Subsequently, various participants traded examples from the Old Testament that supported and challenged the reading of the verse as a promise.

Certainly, Peter's denominational and theological distance from the group fueled this interaction⁷, as well as several others that were similar in kind. Yet, the impetus for this ongoing interpretive dilemma also came from David and other longtime LC-MS members. In their study of Proverbs 20, 21, and 22, Scott, an early adult convert from the Baptist tradition, now in his early 50s, joined in: “Twenty-two, verse six, *Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it.* And, I guess my question is, how much of that can you hang on to?” David's eventual response, after competing examples are offered, sums up my argument in good form:

- (9) “I think this is one of those words, like I suppose all the words, that we need to understand in terms of letting Scripture interpret Scripture. You always have to see this in the context of everything else that's said. For instance, *train up a child in the way he should go and when he's old he won't depart.* ‘Oh, my kid turned out to be this wayward ner-do-well, good-for-nothing. Maybe I failed. It's my fault.’ Well, but then we balance that out with another verse that says, *the soul that sins shall die.* There's a personal culpability, and so we balance it out.”

Just as with the UMC case, the interpretive preoccupation of the group's discourse is reflected in the leader's recontextualization style. The interpretive concern here takes the form of a dilemma. It is not simply between promise and contradictory evidence, but between scripture seeming to say one thing and then seeming to say something else entirely. David's recontextualizations, and more importantly the interpretation that they

⁷ The non-denominational tradition of Protestantism was a constant Other in the discourse of this LC-MS group. The two traditions differ widely on theological issues (e.g. infant baptism, charismatic expressions, eschatology, etc.)

carry, mediate this. The embedded interpretation accomplished through linking Old and New Testament passages, that of asserting the Bible's continuity, balances the ongoing interpretive dilemma the group encounters.

I have argued, then, that in the discourse of these two men's Bible studies there is a definable interaction taking place. The interaction is between the interpretive environment of the group, and the way leaders embed interpretations through recontextualizing the Bible. In the UMC case, the constant comparison between the first century Church of Acts and the contemporary Church is aided by William's constant implication of dissonance between the two. In the LC-MS case, the struggle to balance the promises of Proverbs with other Biblical evidence is aided by David's implication that the Bible is, in fact, consistent.

I began by claiming that the interaction does not end here. These differences extend a step further and represent issues of praxis occurring within a textual ideology that surrounds the Bible. Two components of this textual ideology are being reflected here. In the UMC case, the interpretive work is tied to the notion that the Bible is not simply a historical record (though, all or parts of it can be read as historical reality), but it is an ongoing model and guide for individual and collective living. The Bible is, in other words, alive and active, and it is the task of the modern believer to draw out the relevant applications. In the LC-MS case, the link is quite explicit to the notion that the Bible tells a single, consistent story from beginning to end, Genesis to Revelation. The interaction in both groups extends from recontextualization to interpretive preoccupation to textual ideology.

Moreover, I would argue that this interaction reveals Bible study discourse as a case of the hermeneutic circle in practice. Hermeneutic theory suggests that readers walk away from a text with an interpretation that is partly an outcome of the assumptions they originally bring to a text. Such assumptions can be directed toward the nature of the text, or toward a finer point concerning its source or construction. These assumptions then act as conditions of understanding for one's reading of the text (Bartkowski, 1996). In this case, elements of the textual ideology are evident both explicitly and implicitly. They are evident explicitly through the interpretive concerns of the group. And, they are evident implicitly through the embedded interpretive work accomplished via recontextualization. In short, the ideological assumptions about the Bible as a text impact the interpretive discourse in group Bible study, which in turn reasserts elements of the textual ideology.

In closing, this essay speaks directly to the linguistic anthropology literature. It does so generally in regard to the significance of intertextual processes (indeed, to the reflexive quality of my own recontextualizations of these Bible study texts). It does so more specifically in regard to the interplay between textual ideology, institutional practice, and embedded interpretations. The arguments presented here add new support to the dynamic observed by Elizabeth Mertz (1996), James Collins (1996), and Richard Bauman (1996): that recontextualization style reflects textual orientation. For Mertz and Collins, in the discourses of law and primary school classrooms respectively, the reigning textual orientation positioned recontextualization as a resource for appropriate inter-subjective behavior and communication. For Bauman, in his work with Mexican festival performances of the nativity play, differing orientations to the text led to differing levels of faithfulness to the original script. My research offers embedded interpretations as another way in which textual orientation patterns recontextualization. The arguments here also speak to a strength of anthropology as a discipline (and, the discourse-centered tradition especially) of demonstrating the complexity of the seemingly simple. After all, what of

significance could one possibly observe about the Bible being referenced during Bible study?

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