

May, 2018

Robert C. Fennell, *The Rule of Faith and Biblical Interpretation: Reform, Resistance, and Renewal*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2018.

Rob Fennell loves the Bible so much that he wants us to understand how it is meant to be read. And he is specific about how distorted and deceptive many interpretations of the Bible are these days in various branches of the church.

A faithful reading is guided by what he calls “the Rule of Faith” and is always done in community with humility. The ‘Rule of Faith’ is an ancient practice in the church that sees Christian life as an integrated whole. It draws together the instincts, emotions, and intellect into a rule (a measuring stick, boundaries, a governing norm or framework) within which to comprehend the Christian faith (convictions, rather than simply reason, logic, or history). It combines clarity with tremendous flexibility, confidence with humility. It attempts, but never achieves, putting into words the central paradox of the Christian faith – that God took flesh and dwelt among us in Jesus of Nazareth to reconcile us to God and to make us ambassadors of God’s Commonwealth.

So, we don’t interpret Scripture on our own, making it say what we want to hear. We don’t simply say “The Bible says,” and think that kind of proof-texting proves anything. We don’t worship the book, but rather the Creator, Redeemer, and Reformer to which the book constantly and consistently witnesses, if read in community to discover how that triune God renews and revolutionizes our participation in God’s mission in God’s world.

The ‘Rule of Faith,’ in any given place and age, often takes the form of some kind of communal statement of belief that captures the essential features of God’s work in the world. Fennell speaks of the many creeds that have been composed throughout the history of the church. He notes that the shortest and still most widely used down to this day, is the Apostles’ Creed. Recited in worship, studied in class, meditated upon in devotion, it encapsulates the nature, work, and impact of what God did through Jesus Christ and continues to do through the Holy Spirit. All the complexities of Scripture resolve themselves into revelation when they are interpreted as witnessing to the story of this God’s reconciling love for the world.

Fennell has illuminating chapters on the beginnings of the development of the rule among writers of the Scriptures and the church fathers, especially Augustine. He then provides very helpful summaries of the work and emphases of three influential figures in shaping the way the church thinks and acts, Martin Luther, John Calvin, and John Wesley. All read the Bible in light of the ‘Rule of Faith’ and sparked dramatic renewal in the ways the church contributed to God’s mission. In each case, Fennell writes clear summaries of the core doctrines that shaped their understanding of the ‘Rule of Faith.’ For Luther, it’s christocentrism, justification, faith, the nature of God and human nature, the reality of Satan and his antagonism to God’s purposes, and pneumatology. For Calvin, it’s christocentrism, pneumatology, faith as epistemology, the matrix of predestination-election, the dialectic of law and gospel, and the ecclesial horizon. For Wesley, it’s christocentrism, Scripture’s authority and unity, universal salvation by grace

through faith, sanctification and perfection, empirical spiritual experience, pneumatology, and a disciplined ethical and moral life.

That's a whole lot of very specialized and apparently abstract words. Fennell does a wonderful job of unpacking all these ideas in ways that any curious person can follow and comprehend. And these issues are crucial to the Christian church these days as it seeks to find a renewed footing for constructive engagement with a world that is becoming more and more indifferent to its work and witness.

Fennell's final words in the book bear quoting:

The Bible was inspired, written, and passed along as a communal inheritance. It is for everyone, as it reminds us of God's love and teaches us to love as well. Scripture is intended to transform us, to help us to be remade in the image of Christ, and to become agents of God's mission in the world. This is the secret of the renewal of the church that the reformers knew. The Rule of Faith continues to be a trustworthy way for us to enter into the process, in every generation. (160)

At Brentwood, we take this communal reading of the Scriptures, in the light of the church's historic witness, with the utmost seriousness. Each week, everyone participating in the congregation is invited to ponder the passage of Scripture that will be considered the following Sunday in the worship service. We have composed our own 'Rule of Faith,' called 'The Brentwood Declaration.' It reminds us each week, as we recite it together in worship, of the narrative flow and redemptive impact of God's work in God's world. It shapes our discipleship, forming and reforming us to do justice and love kindness with humility.

Your voice in this conversation would be most welcome and most valuable.