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Theology and the Practice of Ministry

Reading the Bible Together: The Virtue of Patience as a Resource for Navigating Interpretive Disagreements in Congregations

Mason Lee

***Abstract:** Disagreements over the meaning of Scripture and how it should shape congregational action can be great sources of conflict in congregational life. Yet as contentious as these disagreements can be, appeals to method have been unable to resolve them. This article proposes that a fruitful way of navigating these arguments within our congregations is not by trying to establish a single way of reading Scripture or of determining what Scripture “means,” but by becoming people able to peacefully hold an irreducible diversity of interpretive options. This article focuses on one virtue in particular—the virtue of patience—and suggests that it is a virtue that enables us to hold diverse and often irreconcilable readings of Scripture without fracturing or dividing over that diversity of interpretation and the disagreements that result from them. In doing so, this article demonstrates that the virtue of patience is a hermeneutical virtue and reflects on how ministers can cultivate hermeneutical patience in their congregations.*

Disagreements over the meaning of Scripture and its application are intense sources of conflict within congregational life. As ministers go about their calling to shape and lead their congregations more into the image of Christ, they often find themselves in the middle of disputes over what Scripture “says” about some issue, and what the congregation should do as a result. These disagreements can be contentious, even threatening the life of the congregation. In this article, I suggest that a fruitful way of navigating these arguments within our congregations is not by trying to establish a single way of reading Scripture or of determining what Scripture “means,” but by becoming people able to peacefully hold an irreducible diversity of interpretive options. I focus on one virtue in particular—the virtue of patience—and suggest that it is a virtue that enables us to hold diverse and often irreconcilable readings of Scripture without fracturing or dividing over that diversity of interpretation and the disagreements that result from them. In doing so, I demonstrate that the virtue of patience is what I will

call a hermeneutical virtue, and to reflect on how ministers can begin to cultivate hermeneutical patience in our congregations.

This article proceeds in several parts. First, I provide a working definition of virtue and its impact on one's engagement in a practice like reading Scripture. In the second section I explore the "case" of First Street Church of Christ and the conflicts they face over issues of interpretive diversity. I diagnose the source of the congregation's conflict as arising from an assumed "determinate" view of biblical interpretation and demonstrate how this view of Scripture does not accurately reflect the lived reality of how they read the Bible. I then turn to the hermeneutical theory of Paul Ricoeur as a resource to explain what is actually going on in the congregation's interpretive practice. In doing so, I show the reality of the congregation's experience reveals the proper question is not how to find *the* meaning of the biblical text but how to respond to the reality of an irreducible number of potential meanings. In the third section I examine the Christian virtue of patience as a hermeneutical resource for First Street. I clarify what patience is and name how patience's function as a hermeneutical virtue would help First Street address interpretive difference. I conclude by suggesting ways for the minister of First Street to cultivate hermeneutical patience within the congregation. Above all, this article offers a way to navigate hermeneutical differences in our congregations when appeals to "meaning" and "method" are no longer adequate.

Virtue: An Account

Generally speaking, a virtue is *a trait of character that orients its possessor toward the good such that its possessor is able to function well*. Three aspects of this definition deserve exposition: virtue as enabling excellent functioning, a mean between extremes, and their contextual quality.

Virtue as Enabling Excellent Functioning

Virtues, as traits of character, take the faculties, talents, and skills we possess and enable us to use them to a degree we might otherwise be incapable.¹ It is often the case that we face obstacles to living and acting well. We can desire something harmful to us. We try to live as truthful people and encounter situations in which it is more immediately beneficial to lie. We often know what the good is that we should do, but for a number

¹ Mara Brecht, *Virtue in Dialogue: Belief, Religious Diversity, and Women's Interreligious Encounter* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2014), 139-142.

of reasons find our wills resistant. It is in the face of such obstacles that virtue does its work. Virtues shape our habits and desires, directs our skills, talents, and faculties, to help us overcome those obstacles and use our abilities well. The possession of a skill, for example, is enhanced when the person is empowered by virtue to use that skill even in difficult circumstances.² Similarly, virtue enhances one's talent. A reporter may have a talent for research yet—without the aid of virtue—fail to use that talent when obstacles become too difficult. Virtue could have the same result on something as innate as our faculties. While we do not require virtue to see or hear, the optimal performance of these faculties could depend on our being people who act virtuously.³

Virtue as a Mean Between Extremes

Virtue makes one an “excellent functioner” by regulating between extremes. The claim something is “good” implies that nothing could be added or subtracted. It follows that either excess or deficiency would ruin it, whereas equilibrium, or the intermediate, would preserve it.⁴ Speaking of a particular virtue is speaking of the mean between extremes that get in the way of one's excellent human functioning. Two aspects of the idea of virtue as a mean between extremes are important: the mean as equilibrium and a mean between vices.

To speak of virtue as a mean between extremes denotes an equilibrium in one's disposition that makes possible a response consistent with excellent human functioning. Rather than implying one maintains an emotion moderately at all times, “mean as equilibrium” denotes how virtue enables a balanced disposition that responds and reacts in the right way, to the right degree, and at the right time. A virtuous human being “is like a well-tuned instrument; not too tightly wound that he reacts badly to particular situations, not too lax that he fails to have the right emotions and act appropriately.”⁵ There may be times, for example, when a virtuous person responds strongly in one situation but not in another.

The primary way a virtue functions as a “mean between extremes” is by guarding its possessor from the vices at either “extreme” of the virtue; an extreme of deficiency and an extreme of excess. While courage is a virtue,

² Jason Baehr, *The Inquiring Mind: On Intellectual Virtues and Virtue Epistemology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 1.

³ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1098a13-15. Aristotle goes so far as to say virtue is equivalent to a thing's functioning excellently. From this point forward, I will reference the *Nicomachean Ethics* as *NE*.

⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II Q64. A2. From this point forward, I will abbreviate the *Summa* with the initials *ST*.

⁵ Paula Gottlieb, *The Virtue of Aristotle's Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 24.

for example, too little courage means being unable to function excellently when courage is needed. Likewise, too much courage results in rashly throwing one's self into dangerous situations. An important feature of virtue is its protection of its possessor from falling into extremes. Akin to walking down a road with a ditch on either side, one of the purposes of virtue is to keep its possessor out of the ditches. By maintaining a state of balance that allows for the fitting response and by preserving us from sliding into extremes, virtues allow us to fulfill our function as human beings.⁶

Virtues as Contextual

The two preceding sections have hinted at another significant aspect of virtue: its inherently contextual quality. To say that virtues are contextual is to make two interrelated observations about virtues as they interact with particular contexts: a virtue will manifest itself differently depending on the social role of the agent and virtue will be embodied differently in different situations.

Virtues are contextual in that one's social role influences what the virtuous life looks like. This feature takes seriously that all of us are embedded within complex social webs that make demands on us. Our quest for the virtuous life begins while we are already participating in an abundance of social and communal relationships.⁷ We begin the moral life as parents, as a child to particular parents, as a sibling to others, and as an employee with responsibilities. We are members of neighborhoods, cities, and countries.⁸ There are many types of lives that "agents might live, and these types of virtuous lives might vary widely from each other."⁹

This contextual quality of virtue includes the way in which a virtue is expressed in any given situation. Because the virtuous person exists in a state of equilibrium and feels and acts the right way, at the right time, in relation to their circumstances, the correct thing to do will "vary according to circumstances."¹⁰ One cannot say in advance what the proper action will be, since such a determination is "relative to" the situation in all its

⁶ Olli-Pekka Vaino, *Virtue: An Introduction to Theory and Practice* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2016), 1-3.

⁷ Julia Annas, "Virtue Ethics," in *The Oxford Handbook of Ethical Theory* (ed. David Copp; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 515-536.

⁸ Sarah Wright, "Virtues, Social Roles, and Contextualism," in *Virtue and Vice: Moral and Epistemic* (ed. Heather Battaly; Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell Publishers, 2010), 96.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Gottlieb, *The Virtue of Aristotle's Ethics*, 25.

complexity.¹¹ An action that would be a manifestation of love in one context could become an act of terror in another.

Yet to say virtues are inherently contextual is not to render them hopelessly unintelligible. It would be incorrect to assume, for example, that since the virtue of courage is expressed differently depending on the person who acts and the situation in which they act, that there is no way to identify any action as an act of courage. While both contextually sensitive and expressed, virtues retain a “discernable core” that allows us to recognize their particular manifestations as manifestations of *that* virtue. Each virtue has an inherent quality that allows us to understand its expression across contexts as an expression of that virtue, rather than another.

Virtues, Practice, and Scripture

Virtues are vital for our engagement in a practice because engaging well in a specific practice is rarely a straightforward affair. We face obstacles—we can become discouraged, prideful, or even reckless—and how well or deeply we participate in a practice depends on our possessing the virtues necessary to overcome them. A church member wanting to practice hospitality toward the homeless may need either courage or humility to open her home to a group of which she may be afraid or hold negative stereotypes. A newspaper reporter may need perseverance when a government official attempts to block his efforts to get to the truth and is tempted to give up. These examples highlight how our practices require virtues to engage in them well. The character of the one engaged in a practice matters.

Virtues are the traits of character that help us become “excellent functioners”; to use our talents, skills, and faculties in ways that aid our performance in a practice. As a “mean between extremes,” virtues regulate our actions in light of the situation at hand, allowing us to discern the proper action in a practice. This is so because practices are not neutral methods or techniques we simply “apply,” but complex networks of action that make demands of us.¹² Because of this, our character shapes the manner in which we engage in a practice, determining our level of success and depth. Virtues are also practice-specific. One practice may require one virtue while another practice does not require that virtue at all. This is because the challenges and actions within a practice are in some measure

¹¹ David Ward, “Our Lives as Well: Teaching Preaching as a Formative Christian Practice” (PhD dissertation, Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, NJ, 2012), 95.

¹² Christine Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 20-21.

unique, and facing those challenges requires a specific virtue to proceed. In these situations, one's success in a practice will depend on their having that particular virtue.

This is true of scriptural interpretation. Because Christians interpret Scripture as part of their ongoing journey into ever-deeper communion with God, it is unsurprising those who "have grown and advanced in virtue will tend to be masterful interpreters of Scripture."¹³ As other practices require certain virtues, so the practice of interpretation makes equally unique demands that require specific virtues. While no virtue may be *only* hermeneutically significant, there are virtues that are *particularly important*, such that having them makes one a better interpreter of Scripture. This practice-specific quality elevates the question of this project: what virtues are distinctive for their impact on the practice of biblical interpretation? What *hermeneutical virtues* would help communities respond to interpretive disagreement?

First Street and Interpretive Disagreement

Located in the American South, First Street Church of Christ has a membership that ranges between 150 and 200 people.¹⁴ First Street's history reflects the common experiences of Churches of Christ in their geographical region. It is also typical in that the interpretive issues impacting the tradition as a whole have found their way into this congregation.

For most of its history First Street was a homogenous congregation. Conservative in orientation, the congregation consisted of middle and upper-middle class families. Members shared a great deal in common, from family histories to religious upbringing and worldviews. They worked similar jobs, went to the same colleges, shared political views, and generally agreed on matters of "ultimate" significance. Most members had belonged to Churches of Christ their entire lives, often extending back several generations. This fostered cohesion and agreement on the "norms" of the community's life, extending to the community's reading of Scripture. The average member might not frame their interpretive practices in theoretical language, yet there existed a normative view of Scripture and how to read it. These members read the Bible and applied it to their lives through a combination of looking for direct commands, finding examples to imitate,

¹³ Stephen Fowl, "Virtue," in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (eds. Kevin Vanhoozer, Craig Bartholomew, Daniel Treier, and N.T. Wright; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 838.

¹⁴ First Street Church of Christ is not a "real" congregation, but an amalgam of characteristics that I have witnessed through my involvement with congregations as both a minister and member. I use this "imaginary" congregation in the hope that the dynamics within it will be familiar to those involved in ministry. Thus, while this specific congregation is "fictional," I do not believe the situation it depicts is.

and making the necessary inferences when they could not find either a direct command or example.¹⁵ Above all, this way of reading the Bible emphasized that Scripture's meaning was a matter of "commonsense." This does not mean disagreements never arose, but when they did a network of assumptions settled what the passage "meant." This cohesion meant that what disagreements did arise would be minor in nature.

However, over time this homogeneity started to fracture. The composition of the neighborhood around the congregation changed, and with it the composition of the congregation. Older members retired and moved away. Jobs required others to transfer. New individuals and families joined the congregation, having moved to the city for school or work. New converts with little theological upbringing began attending. The congregation's college ministry attracted more students. As a result, the makeup of the congregation became a mixture of "singles" and "marrieds," ethnicities, educational levels, economical class, and theological and political views. Initially the leadership of the congregation absorbed these changes; incorporating voices into different committees, teaching rotations, and positions of leadership within the congregation.

Despite these efforts, the changes within the congregation have become a source of conflict. This new diversity has impacted the practices of the congregation, as new voices weigh in and some of the older members begin to see things differently. And questions of interpretation are not exempt from the conflict. The congregation has found it increasingly difficult to agree on questions of what the Bible "says" about different issues. Different groups within the community have either brought with them or developed their own view of the proper way to read the Bible with the result that both new reading strategies and assertions of what Scripture "means" are now present in the congregation.

One group still affirms the "old" Church of Christ way of reading the Bible. They do not see any reason to change the way the church functions, because they are "doing what the Bible says." Another group within the congregation has started to wonder about the adequacy of this "old" way of reading, and argue that since Jesus himself affirms the primacy of "loving God and loving people," there is a "core" message of Scripture that should govern everything else.¹⁶ This group is now

¹⁵ Thomas Olbricht, "Hermeneutics," in *The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement* (eds. Douglas Foster, Paul Blowers, Anthony Dunnivant, and D. Newell Williams; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 387-390.

¹⁶ Richard Hughes, *Reviving the Ancient Faith: The Story of Churches of Christ in America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 368, argues for a hermeneutical shift that emphasizes a biblical theology centered in the "core message" of Scripture and in "the mighty acts of God."

questioning the place of women in the congregation's worship and leadership. Another group has claimed that God is on the side of justice for the poor, and that the congregation should read the Bible as liberating those under systems of oppression. They read passages of the Bible as a liberating word calling the church to identify with the marginalized. This group is pushing the church even further in their re-evaluation of community practices. To these voices there are countless others, each falling somewhere on the interpretive spectrum and proposing their own views of what Scripture means and the right way to read it.

This plurality has become a source of conflict within the community. Everyone believes Scripture is authoritative for their life and practice, but they no longer agree on what it "means" or how to decide between conflicting interpretations. Since the community is so "Bible-based," this inability is having doctrinal and practical consequences. While past levels of congregational cohesion assured disagreements were nearly inconsequential, they now hold drastic ramifications for the direction and future of the congregation. Disagreements have reached such levels that the congregation is in jeopardy, as groups begin to ascribe the worst intentions to others and threaten to leave. This has left the preaching minister of the congregation unsure how to proceed. The elders, in an attempt to avoid conflict, have tried to shut down disagreements by affirming "the way we've always read Scripture." They have told members they are not allowed to speak or teach in the congregation's Bible classes until they "cut it out." But that has done little to calm tensions, and the conflict continues.

Interpretation: First Street and Determinate Meaning

While conflict is rarely ever the result of a single issue, part of the First Street's disagreements is hermeneutical. The members of First Street hold different interpretive views. And these differences are creating conflict in other areas since how the community reads the Bible influences everything else. Yet it is not the presence of different reading strategies, itself, that is the source of the community's disagreement. There is a view of interpretation within the congregation that leads them to conclude the presence of interpretive plurality is inherently problematic. First Street's conflict stems from a *determinate* view of biblical interpretation and its consequences.

A determinate view of biblical interpretation insists biblical texts have a single, discernable meaning. This is not merely a view about a basic level of intelligibility within a text, but one that understands meaning as "a

sort of property with which the text has been endued.”¹⁷ As a “property” of the biblical text, a determinate view believes meaning is retrievable through the proper way of reading. While the “meaning” of the text may, in this view, be most often associated with something akin to “authorial intention” or the “plain-sense” reading of the text, a determinate view does not demand it. It only insists that meaning resides within the text and it can be retrieved through the proper method.

One sees this determinate view at work within the First Street congregation. While each group may have different approaches for reading Scripture and what it means, there is no disagreement that texts have *a* meaning or that one can uncover it if they “read the text right.” While members may disagree over whether the proper way to read Scripture is a “traditional” or thematic hermeneutic, none questions that there is *a* meaning easily discernable if they would only use the correct method. It is easy to see how such a view could lead the congregation to understand the presence of interpretive diversity as a problem. Since their determinate view understands their practice as merely the application of what Scripture “says” or “means,” disagreements over precisely what that meaning is will quickly result in doctrinal and practical anarchy.

Yet it is also true the community’s determinate understanding had previously served them well. The congregation existed for most of its history as a homogeneous group, and determinate views endure as long as the community agrees on what they are searching for and the proper way to conduct the exploration. This had created a strong sense of communal identity; the community made decisions and got on with its business fairly easily. The longer such homogeneity endured the stronger the community’s belief in a determinate view became since no one questioned this basic assumption, lending plausibility to conceptions of interpretation as determinate. However, trouble arises when a large enough number of community members questions the assumption of the previously agreed-upon meaning.

Several things can happen when these challenges to meaning occur. The community may begin to argue why their proposed meaning and interpretive approach is correct. But because the ways they read and the meaning those readings produce are so closely linked, members cannot argue for specific methods of reading without endorsing the “meaning” that reading produces. So as members argue for their way of reading, they

¹⁷ Stephen Fowl, *Engaging Scripture: A Model for Theological Interpretation* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1998), 33.

are also demanding that others assent to their view of what the text “means.” Yet this is the very matter at issue. Such appeals to method will not get far because they require an agreement about “meaning” that are the source of the conflict.¹⁸ This works both ways. If one does not agree with the reading strategy of “command, example, and inference” then one will not agree with the “meanings” that strategy produces. Likewise, if one does not agree with readings concerning God’s “preferential option for the poor” then one will not assent to the reading strategies that produce them. The inability of methodological appeals to solve these disagreements may lead those in authority to declare what the meaning is and the proper way it is determined. Those who find themselves so ordered face the choice of submitting to the decree or leaving the community.

One sees these responses within First Street. When the community was largely homogenous, interpretive disagreements were easily resolvable because they shared assumptions about meaning and how to read. When the community became more diverse such assumptions faced challenges they could not address. Appeals to method have not worked because such appeals assume the very question of meaning that was at issue within the community. When these appeals failed, the elders of the congregation affirmed the “traditional” way of reading and attempted to silence those who disagreed. And the results are clear, as those within the congregation contemplate leaving.

Yet the divisions toward which First Street is heading are inevitable within a determinate view of interpretation. If a text has *a* meaning and *a* way of uncovering it, this conflict is unavoidable because other interpretations are wrong and should be discarded. In such a case, one group is right and other groups wrong, requiring they assent or in refusing demonstrate their willful sinfulness. From the standpoint of a determinate view of Scripture, the situation facing First Street is an intractable one, since each group sees themselves as the faithful interpreters and others as engaged in sinful rebellion against what the text “clearly says.” No group would see the need to adjust their position, since to do so would be to move against the text’s meaning. The only option is to leave the community or force others to adhere to the “right” interpretation.

Questioning the Determinate View

Yet such a determinate view is problematic for Christians who read the Bible as Scripture. First, such a view would require First Street to believe

¹⁸ Jeffery Stout, “What is the Meaning of a Text?” *New Literary History* 14 (1982): 1-12.

the “overwhelming majority of the history of Christian biblical interpretation as a series of errors, of failed attempts to display the meaning of the text.”¹⁹ There has been too much in the church’s history that has been Spirit-directed and spoken truthfully about God that was not done with a determinate view of interpretation. Maintaining a determinate view would require First Street to dismiss as sinful the very traditions upon which they stand.

Perhaps more importantly, a determinate view cannot account for First Street’s *actual* interpretive experience. If the determinate view of biblical interpretation were an accurate depiction of how interpretation works, First Street would not face these issues. That different members read the same text and arrive at different conclusions suggests the community’s actual interpretive practice is more complex than a determinate view allows. Simply stated, a determinate view that emphasizes a single meaning does not hold any descriptive power for how First Street actually engages in the practice of interpretation. What they need, then, is a view of interpretation that accurately depicts their experience and addresses their conflict.

Interpretation and Interpretive Plurality

For Paul Ricoeur, the determinate claim of a text’s having a single meaning is challenged by a text’s independent existence from its author. The moment a text is written down, it gains a life of its own, because it is not open to questions that would make better sense of what a speaker means.²⁰ This increases with time, as the author’s death makes asking them what they “meant” impossible.²¹ This means that in some sense a text is “decontextualized from its original author, intended reader, and situation,” and is now read and interpreted by anyone who reads it.²² Importantly, this is a natural feature of something that is written down and lives beyond the life of its author.²³ Separated from the author and historical situation, the meaning of a text becomes a matter of making connections between the “structure” of the text (the words that are used, the genre, ordering on the

¹⁹ Fowl, *Engaging Scripture*, 36.

²⁰ Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), 26-27.

²¹ Sandra Schneiders, “The Paschal Imagination: Objectivity and Subjectivity in New Testament Studies,” *Theological Studies* 43 (1987): 59.

²² Boyd Blundell, *Paul Ricoeur Between Theology and Philosophy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 38.

²³ Paul Ricoeur, “The Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation,” in *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences* (ed. John Thompson; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 139.

page, and a host of other features), the “world” that structure projects forward, and the possibilities for new action it makes available. Ricoeur also notes that different readers come to the text from different places. We each encounter a text with our own presuppositions, biases, and lenses that shape our reading. How one understands what a text “means” is not a “discovery” of its hidden meaning, but the result of interactions between the structure of a text, one’s context, and one’s presuppositions.

As opposed to determinate views of biblical interpretation, Ricoeur’s emphasis on the separation of a text from its author, the world “in front” of the text, and the “baggage” the reader brings to the text holds greater explanatory power for the presence of interpretive diversity at First Street. If Ricoeur’s view is accurate, we would expect what is happening at First Street to be the case. Each member approaches Scripture and through the “give and take” of reading the text with their own presuppositions and “baggage” arrive at different meanings. These differences are the result of the dynamic of interpretation, not a failure to deploy the right method. And the qualities that lead to different readings are not matters with which the community can do away. While there are certainly interpretive procedures to place “check” these things, there is no getting rid of them completely.

Yet it does not follow that a text can mean *anything*. Because a text is a thing written by someone to someone about something there is a limited field of possible meanings.²⁴ While there will always be more than one way to construe a text, “it is not true that all interpretations are equal and may be assimilated to so-called rules of thumb.”²⁵ One can always argue for or against particular readings of a text, confront interpretations, or seek agreement on an interpretation. To say a text is a “limited field” is to acknowledge that discussions of potential meanings take the form of “better or worse” rather than “right and wrong.”

This holds major implications for the interpretive conflicts facing First Street. Primarily, it means that an irreducible number of interpretations will always exist. Whereas the appeal of the determinate view is the assurance that texts hold one correct interpretation the community can attain; Ricoeur reveals a more *underdetermined* view that resists that reduction. This does not mean First Street cannot debate the meaning of a passage and its implications for practice. Because a text cannot mean *anything*, they can consider the merits of a reading, with the debate potentially leading some to change their position. Yet after having made

²⁴ Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 30.

²⁵ Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 160.

use of all methods, setting the interpretive “frame” of the text, and debating the merits of particular readings, they will reach a point where they have a number of potential meanings—perhaps only a handful, perhaps dozens, perhaps more—between which there is no way to decide what is “final.”

This reality requires a shift in the focus of First Street as they navigate their conflict. Given the inability of an interpretive method to “solve” this interpretive conflict, the question facing First Street is not how to make the conflict go away, but how to hold that conflict in a peaceful tension. The community does not need a method to solve their disagreement, but a disposition towards their disagreement that allows them to maintain their unity *in the face of those differences*. In a word, First Street needs *patience*.

The Christian Virtue of Patience

Christians understand patience, first, as a divine perfection. Proceeding from the affirmation that God is “merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love” (Ex. 34:6), patience speaks to God’s willingness to endure a human existence “side by side with His own, and fulfilling His will towards this other in such a way that He does not suspend and destroy it as this other but accompanies and sustains it and allows it to develop in freedom.”²⁶ Nowhere is God’s patience more evident than in the life of Christ, since it is patience which enabled Jesus to be conceived in a mother’s womb, wait for a time of birth, gradually grow up, and once grown be uneager to receive recognition.²⁷ Jesus exhibits God’s patience in his willingness to undergo suffering, voluntarily going to the cross and manifesting a divine patience that would rather endure the suffering of evil than subject another to it.²⁸

Viewing patience as a divine perfection led Christians to endorse its cultivation as a human virtue, beginning with the acknowledgment that God has first been patient with us. It is through the imitation of this divine patience that “sons and daughters of God are made perfect.”²⁹ As a Christian moral virtue, patience exercises a determinative role in one’s

²⁶ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics II/1: The Doctrine of God* (Edited by G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance; Translated by T.H. Parker, W.B Johnston, Harold Knight, and J.L.M. Haire; Peabody: Hendrickson, 2010), 410.

²⁷ Tertullian, *Of Patience III*, ANF 3:708.

²⁸ John Howard Yoder, *The Original Revolution: Essays on Christian Pacifism* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1971), 61-62: “God’s love for men begins right at the point where He permits sin against Himself and against man, without crushing the rebel under his own rebellion. The word for this is divine *patience*, not complicity.”

²⁹ Stanley Hauerwas and Charles Pinches, “Practicing Patience: How Christians Should Be Sick,” in *The Hauerwas Reader* (eds. John Berkman and Michael Cartwright; Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 357.

ability to live the Christian life, exercising a two-fold function of enduring sadness and striving towards our future good.

Enduring Sadness

Early Christian accounts spoke of patience as endurance.³⁰ Just as God endures the sin of humanity and Jesus endures suffering, so patience, for the Christian, enables the endurance of trials.³¹ Yet Christian patience involves more than a resigned acceptance of events; it is a view of endurance tied to our creaturehood.

For Aquinas, an accurate understanding of our creaturehood must include an “insuperable sadness, and dejection” in which Christians are saddened by “their own frailty, by the suffering present in the world, and by their inability to change either fundamentally.”³² This sadness over the state of the world only arises if people measure themselves and the world against both the “standard provided by the transcendent sacrality of God” and “God’s presence.”³³ When one combines a recognition of that standard and presence with the distance of normal life from each of them, true sadness results. Yet sadness over the presence of real suffering and evil in the world is a sign of *goodness*. If one no longer experienced sadness over the existence of suffering, it would be because one “did not feel it” or “did not reckon it as something unbecoming.” Either would be “manifest evils.”³⁴ Aquinas considers such ignorance or attempts to form oneself in ways that avoid sadness over such realities sinful because it denies one’s own *creatureliness*. In contrast, for Aquinas, “Knowledge, through which one knows the deficiencies in himself and in worldly things, is the chief motive for mourning, according to what is written, ‘*He who increases knowledge, increases sorrow*’ (Ecc. 1:18).”³⁵ A true understanding of creaturehood—the state of the world and our inability to solve it—implies sadness.

The question is how to prevent this sadness from leading to despair. It is the task of patience “to ensure that we do not abandon virtue’s good

³⁰ Kossi Ayedze, “Tertulian, Cyprian, and Augustine on Patience: A Comparative and Critical Study of the Three Treatises on a Stoic-Christian Virtue in Early North African Christianity,” (PhD dissertation, Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, NJ, 2000), 280.

³¹ Augustine, *On Patience*, (*The Fathers of the Church*, vol. 16; trans. Sister Luanne Meagher; New York: Fathers of the Church, Inc., 1952), 238.

³² Lee Yearly, *Mencius and Aquinas: Theories of Virtue and Conceptions of Courage* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 137.

³³ *Ibid.*, 138

³⁴ Aquinas, *ST II-II*, Q39, A.1.

³⁵ Aquinas, *ST I-II*, Q69, A.3.

through dejection of this kind, however great."³⁶ Patience makes us capable of being properly saddened without giving up hope, keeping "man from the danger that his spirit may be broken by grief and lose its greatness. Patience, therefore, is not the tear-veiled mirror of a 'broken' life, but the radiant embodiment of ultimate integrity."³⁷

Striving Toward the Good

Yet describing patience as only "enduring sadness without despair" would be incomplete. Patience also possesses an active quality. Enduring sadness enables our continued pursuit of our future *telos*. Such endurance finds its purpose in empowering our continued striving toward the good it makes possible. Patience prevents one from falling into despair precisely so that we are able to continue in our work toward the future awaiting those in Christ. Patience "allows people to be properly saddened by their own and the world's state and yet also to remain unimpeded in their pursuit of and adherence to valuable goals."³⁸ Patience faces the sadness of this present life with joy and peaceful rule.³⁹

A Regulative Function

This two-fold quality shows patience's regulative function in the Christian life. Patience enables its possessor to endure sadness, tribulation, and hardship. Yet such endurance is not an end in and of itself; it enables us to continue on the path toward our fullest nature.⁴⁰ One who refuses to strive toward the good, either out of apathy or despair, cannot possess the virtue of patience since the active quality of patience requires that as the creation of a loving God we continue on toward our good and final end. We cannot slip into despair because we are also oriented toward fulfillment.⁴¹ As the children of a gracious God we are called to "press on toward the goal." Patience empowers us to endure sadness so that we are able to take another step of resistance.

If patience empowers our endurance toward God's good end, it also prevents us from declaring we have achieved it prematurely. Patience means seeing the world as it truly is so that we do not confuse our continual

³⁶ Aquinas, *ST II-II*, Q136, A.4.

³⁷ Josef Pieper, *The Four Cardinal Virtues: Prudence, Justice, Fortitude, Temperance* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1954), 129.

³⁸ Yearly, *Mencius and Aquinas*, 137.

³⁹ Aquinas, *ST II-II*, Q136, A.2.

⁴⁰ Josef Pieper, *On Hope* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 11-21 speaks of this need to "press on" as the chief mark of our creatureliness.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 25.

striving for our good end with the arrival of that good end. Just as patience requires a proper judgment of the world in light of God's goodness, it also requires a right understanding of our creatureliness that refuses to mistake our present situation for our final end in God.

These two aspects—striving towards our good end and not ceasing prematurely—reveals patience's regulative function that prevents the Christian from falling into either the sin of despair or pride.⁴² On one hand, the sin of despair maintains that all will turn out badly. As a loss of hope, despair posits that in the end all actions are performed in vain. It gives up hope of ever reaching our good end, instead descending into nothingness. On the other hand, pride claims to have achieved that for which we strive. While despair causes us to give up hope, pride asserts we no longer have need of hope because we have reached our end. Pride tempts us to a distorted view of our creaturehood that denies our status as people "on the way" and claims our current state is God's goal for creation. It is fundamentally an assertion of control over events and the ability to make circumstances "turn out right." Protecting against despair, patience enables endurance without sliding into despair through the assurance that such long-suffering will find its end in God's purposes. Guarding against pride, patience supplies a truthful account of our creaturehood that affirms on this side of the *eschaton* we "see in a mirror dimly" (1 Cor. 13:12).

First Street and Interpretive Patience

Applying the previous discussion to biblical interpretation, interpretive or hermeneutical patience is *that disposition or trait of character that allows an individual or community to engage the biblical text in a manner that resists both a prideful clarity that seeks premature closure and a despairing relativism that sees interpretation as nothing but the manifestation of the interpreter's prejudice.*

Protecting against despair, interpretive patience enables the community's engagement with the biblical text in the faith that they encounter more than their own prejudices echoed back to them. While taking seriously the ways beliefs and practices inform our interpretive practices, hermeneutical patience encourages readers to engage that plurality without despairing that the text can mean *anything* and therefore *nothing*. It allows us to press on in our interpretations and engagement with alternative proposals, affirming that Scripture is still "something about

⁴² Aquinas, *ST II-II*, Q136, A. 2: "Patience is said to be the root and safeguard of all the virtues, not as though it caused and preserved them directly, but merely because it removes their obstacles."

something,” and are able to speak of better and worse interpretations.⁴³ Hermeneutical patience affirms that the presence of differing interpretations do not prevent the text, by God’s grace, from being a source of life and witness for the reading community, capable of forming, encouraging, and even critiquing the community’s practices.

Hermeneutical patience also protects us from pridefully closing interpretation and asserting prematurely what the text “means.” It requires we engage with the biblical text, not declaring the meaning of a text “with assertive ‘conviction,’ risking prideful clarity and impatient finality.”⁴⁴ Instead, patience allows us to work with an intentionality that takes seriously the claims of others and our own fallibility. As a result, hermeneutical patience leads us to see interpretive diversity as part of the biblical text and a gift through which we come to see these texts in more meaningful ways. The practice of interpretation is hard work and takes time to hear all the relevant voices. Patience allows us to resist those acts of hermeneutical and epistemic violence through which we silence anyone who does not agree with the “right” reading of a text. Instead, patience invites these alternative readings, and in so doing allows all those involved to see the text in new ways, perhaps even allowing some to read at a deeper level than they were previously able. Hermeneutical patience resists the prideful closure that makes such an event of understanding possible.

Such hermeneutical patience would help First Street see that different readings of a biblical text are not a sin to drive from the community but an invitation to reconsider a text that never stops speaking; a means whereby the community comes to understand themselves and Scripture in more faithful ways. And some in the congregation would ask questions that would lead to some readings being “dropped,” other members would encounter through this process deeper understandings of Scripture than those they held previously. Hermeneutical patience would allow First Street to sustain itself in the midst of its disagreements without giving up on reading the Bible entirely. Hermeneutical patience would help the community resist the false choice of strongly affirming Scripture on one hand or strongly affirming unity on the other. Hermeneutical patience enables the two to exist side by side. Since it will give new readings time to surface, hermeneutical patience would also open up other interpretive

⁴³ Richard Briggs, “Biblical Hermeneutics and Scriptural Responsibility,” in *The Future of Biblical Interpretation: Responsible Plurality in Biblical Hermeneutics* (eds. Stanley Porter and Matthew Malcolm; Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 51-69.

⁴⁴ Jacob Goodson, *Narrative Theology and the Hermeneutical Virtues: Humility, Patience, Prudence* (New York: Lexington Books, 2015), 180.

possibilities that hitherto were simply not options for the community. In short, the depth of First Street's reading practices and their ability to navigate these internal conflicts depends on their holding a disposition of hermeneutical patience.

Moving Forward: Developing Interpretive Patience at First Street

To conclude, I would like to identify strategies the minister of First Street could deploy to develop hermeneutical patience within the congregation. To do so, I will speak of these strategies at three different levels: *task competency*, *transactional leadership*, and *transforming leadership*.⁴⁵

Task Competency

Task competency is "the ability to excel in performing the tasks of a leadership role in an organization."⁴⁶ The minister's ability to perform these common functions are a vital part of their role and influence how they are perceived by the congregation. These tasks range from teaching and preaching to visiting the sick and balancing a budget but whatever they are, the well-being of the community dictates what competencies the minister develops.⁴⁷ The minister must consider what new competencies are needed, or what "old" competencies currently exist, through which they model hermeneutical patience to the congregation.

For example, if one of the minister's tasks is the weekly sermon, they might use that opportunity to model hermeneutical patience. Basing a series of sermons on the same text reveals the depth of interpretive possibilities within a single passage. They could also challenge the "accepted" interpretation of a text, thereby questioning hermeneutical assumptions, and moving to a different reading that nevertheless proclaims the gospel in the congregational context. Each of these strategies models the underdetermined quality of Scripture and the interpretive plurality that exists around any biblical text; and that such a plurality is not bad, but is an embarrassment of riches for the congregation.

Transactional Leadership

Transactional leadership is "the ability to influence others through a process of trade-offs."⁴⁸ This form of leadership takes the shape of a "transaction" whereby individuals and groups within a community make

⁴⁵ Richard Osmer, *Practical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 176-177.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 176.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 194.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 176.

“trade-offs” to meet specific needs. It responds to the deep needs of those within the congregation and do so in a way that makes them responsive to the needs of others.⁴⁹

Within First Street, the minister could frame the cultivation of interpretive patience as the deep need to feel a sense of belonging to a community. The minister could be clear that everyone in the congregation desires to feel a sense of belonging, with one way to accomplish this belonging is the practice of listening deeply for the purpose of understanding one another. The minister can note the ways this listening requires patience in the congregation’s interactions with one another and with their understandings of faith and Scripture. In doing so, the minister would encourage the community to develop this sensitivity in their interactions. Connecting patience to the need to belong encourages the cultivation of hermeneutical patience apart from any discussion about “meaning” and biblical interpretation.

Transforming Leadership

Transforming leadership is the process of leading a group “through a process in which its identity, mission, culture, and operating procedures are fundamentally altered.”⁵⁰ It is projecting a vision of what the congregation might become. Such leadership is risky because it confronts the “settled” assumptions of the congregation to move in a new direction.

Enacting this level of change within First Street requires re-evaluating the “traditions” of interpretation upon which the congregation is based. First Street has been a strong congregation for most of its history with “traditional” way of interpreting intertwined with that history. Yet the reality of diversity now presses on that tradition. Part of the minister’s job at this level is bringing marginalized views “into the center.” It may require the minister name what they have observed; that the “old” way of reading does not reflect the realities of how the congregation experiences its interpretive practice. These conversations are difficult and must take place within the context of a host of other task-oriented and transactional moves. It will involve the minister’s projecting a vision of First Street where theological and hermeneutical patience are central. It also requires a moment where the congregation chooses for themselves whether they want to become a more hermeneutically patient congregation. The minister can make these conversations easier by placing them within a larger framework

⁴⁹ Ibid., 195.

⁵⁰ Osmer, *Practical Theology*, 177.

that envisions the congregation as a community of patience, shaped both by God's patience towards us and our need to be patient with one another.

Conclusion

In this article I have sought to help those who work within and lead congregations navigate the challenges we face over issues of scriptural disagreement. While I have not appealed to a specific intervention or action project, my hope is that the reader can easily identify with aspects of the First Street Congregation. I have sought to demonstrate that disagreements and conflict over the meaning of Scripture and its application in our lives cannot be revolved in ways we have typically attempted to resolve them—through appeals to meaning and methods. Instead, I have suggested that navigating these differences is not a matter of making them “go away,” but of learning how to be people who can hold those disagreements peacefully. And I have suggested that the virtue of patience, specifically, has an important role to play in how we read Scripture together and live amidst the tensions our interpretive practices will inevitably create. But by emphasizing the virtue of patience, I hope that we as ministers and our congregations can come to see these disagreements and tensions not as something to avoid, but as invitations to learn and grow in the image of Christ.

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