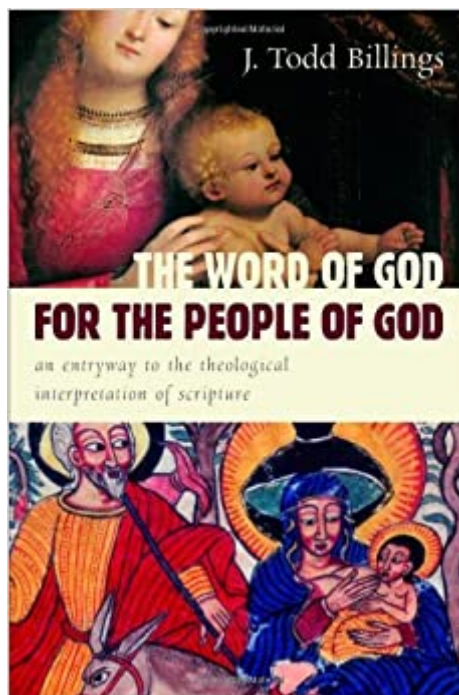




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The Word Of God For The People Of God: An Entryway To The Theological Interpretation Of Scripture



Synopsis

This book fills a real need for pastors and students. Though there is currently a large body of material on the theological interpretation of Scripture, most of it is highly specific and extremely technical. J. Todd Billings here provides a straightforward entryway for students and pastors to understand why theological interpretation matters and how it can be done. A solid, constructive theological work, *The Word of God for the People of God* presents a distinctive Trinitarian, participatory approach toward reading Scripture as the church. Billings's accessible yet substantial argument for a theological hermeneutic is rooted in a historic vision of the practice of scriptural interpretation even as it engages a wide range of contemporary issues and includes several exegetical examples that apply to concrete Christian ministry situations.

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Customer Reviews

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— • University of Dayton "Simply marvelous. . . A major book, The Word of God for the People of God covers a wide range of themes — • and covers all of them well." John Webster — • King's College, Aberdeen "In The Word of God for the People of God Todd Billings gets to the core of the issues and states them with great clarity and firmness of line."

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I have been doing a lot of reading on the theological interpretation of Scripture. Honestly, most of the books on this topic are incredibly boring. This one is the best I have read so far. He explains the Theological interpretation of Scripture better than the other books, provides some examples of how to do this with Scripture, and when he does not give an explanation of "how to" do it yourself, explains why such an explanation is impossible (p. 195). However, I still have the nagging issue with this book that I had with all the others: Either I have always read and studied the Bible using theological hermeneutics, OR I don't really understand what it is. As I read these books, I find myself thinking, "Uh.... yeah, that's how I've always read and taught Scripture. What's the big deal?" It does help me in one way though. If it is true that I've always read and studied Scripture theologically, and if it is true that Bible colleges and seminaries don't teach or encourage this way of reading Scripture, then this explains why the Bible college/seminary method of Bible study and hermeneutics always felt lifeless and dead to me. So I don't really recommend this book, unless you are writing a paper (or book) on the theological interpretation of Scripture. Then this book is one you must read.

Especially valuable is Billings' close attention to the relationship between divine and human agency and the knock-on effects this has for pretty much every facet of TIS: what the Scriptures are (inspiration and canon), who we are as its readers and interpreters (hermeneutics, interpretation,

worship, the Christian life, and mission), and for God as the one into whose economy of salvation the readers of Scripture are drawn (doctrines of God, incarnation, salvation, and eschatology). What the attentive reader should discover is that underlying Billings' entire proposal for a properly Trinitarian-shaped TIS is a noncompetitive view of divine and human agency that (as best as I can tell) arises out of his doctrine of the Incarnation. "We do not see the divine and human agency in competition" Billings argues, "rather, it is the way God works within history that finds its ultimate fulfillment in Jesus Christ" (p. 158). The effects of this for his proposal are far-reaching, and, at least in my opinion, highly compelling in contrast to others more philosophical, scientific, or linguistic. In short, *The Word of God for the People of God* will not disappoint readers looking for an entryway into the theological interpretation of Scripture. Pastors, graduate students, and upper level undergraduates would benefit from his accessible style and informed presentation, and the text could serve equally well in a biblical interpretation course or one in systematic theology. Striking that balance makes for a rare book indeed. Read the full review at Theology Forum ([...])

There are loads of approaches to reading Scripture on tap. Most of these methods utilize some aspect that is helpful, though not an end in itself. J. Todd Billings has joined the conversation with his levelheaded book, *"The Word of God for the People of God."* This 253 page paperback was written with pastors and seminary students in mind to "help readers gain a clarity about the wide and spacious yet specified way of approaching Scripture as readers who belong to Christ" (xvii). The primary premises advocated in *"The Word of God for the People of God,"* is that there is a proper way to approach Holy Scripture that moves beyond (though it includes) the greasy mechanic work of other methods. To begin with, the Bible reader needs to come with humility. He is not a technician who manufactures meanings out of Scripture, or manipulates and controls the outcome of this Word of God, but that through Scripture "God "reads" us, reshaping us into Christ's image by the Spirit's power" (80). Instead of Christians owning the truth, we are owned by the One who is the truth (82), which means that as the Word of God comes to inhabit us and our cultural context, it will often critique and challenge us and our cultural context (108). Therefore, coming to Scripture in this expectant humility, there is renunciation and transformation, for "reading Scripture is about being mastered by Jesus Christ through a biblical text that functionally stands over us as the word of God, not under us as a word we can control, rearrange, and use for our own purposes" (203). A second, and extremely important, aspect of properly approaching Scripture is reading the Bible through the lens of the rule of faith. Though this may sound strange to modern Protestant and Evangelical ears, Billings makes a strong case that (1) we already come to Scripture with theological presuppositions

in place (thus the claim of neutrality is a mythical assertion (11-17)), and (2) there is a wholesome, ancient, longstanding rule of faith that comes from Scripture and guides our reading of Scripture (17-26). This rule of faith is external to us, something that we receive and pass on. As the Apostle Paul says, it is "our common faith" (Titus 1.4), or he says in another place, "As you have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him, rooted and built up in Him and established in the faith, as you have been taught, abounding in it with thanksgiving" (Colossians 2.6-7). Though this rule of faith is not the sum total of what a particular Christian believes, it is the central framework through which he reads the Bible (23-24). As Billings points out, the rule of faith, specifically as it is laid out in a tool like the Apostles' Creed, is overtly Trinitarian, announcing how God was active in Jesus Christ. Embracing this rule of faith in reading Scripture gives us the Jesus-authorized (Luke 24) go-ahead to appropriate the Old Testament in such a Jesus-shaped way that "Christians do not receive the Old Testament as a generic "word from God" to be received apart from Christ; it is because of Christ that Christians read the Old Testament as Scripture at all. [...] Christians receive Israel's Scripture as their own because of "the new covenant made by God in Christ," into which they are grafted by God's covenant with Abraham" (168). In "The Word of God for the People of God" Billings defines and fills out his point of reading Scripture with this theological hermeneutic. Each chapter builds on the previous, and smoothly takes the reader, chapter by chapter, subject by subject, further and deeper into a way of reading Scripture with all the Church throughout the ages. In chapter one Billings makes a strong case for the classical view of reading Scripture through the lens of the *regula fidei* (rule of faith). The author then moves into the second chapter showing that a proper hermeneutic is Trinitarian. Though in some ways we read the Bible like any other book, ultimately "the church cannot and should not read" it "exactly like any other book" (xv). Chapter three takes up three interrelated topics of revelation, inspiration and canon by addressing two sets of theological either/or's: either we approach Scripture from an enlightenment/deistic position, or a Christ-focused/Trinitarian posture. After clearing away the enlightenment/deistic position, Billings takes up the cultural context and social location of the interpreter in chapter four, especially the manner in which Scripture inhabits a culture (indigenization) and then critiques it, by the Spirit's work. Moving to the fifth chapter, the author encourages and argues for the need for the modern Bible reader to appreciatively draw on premodern (patristic, medieval and Reformation) exegetes. The final chapter synthesizes the previous concepts while moving forward to concrete reading practices of Scripture. Throughout the chapters the reader will find Billings drawing interesting and intriguing support from such divergent partners as Kierkegaard, Calvin, Nietzsche, Rich Mullins, Bavinck, and Irenaeus of Lyons, to name a few. He does so in such a skillful way as to keep the

reader's attention and bring her to surprising conclusions. The benefit I received from "The Word of God for the People of God" has come out in several different routes, from my recent conversation with an Orthodox Jew from Canada who asked me how Christians interpret Scripture, to my sermon preparation. But the primary profit I have gained from this work has been on a more personal level. Primarily, to be reminded repeatedly that I am not the master of Scripture, but rather Jesus Christ, by the Holy Spirit, through Scripture is mastering me! This is something I believe every preacher and pastor must return to. Though there are places where Billings goes that select Reformed Protestants might find somewhat discomfiting, nevertheless, the thoughtful reader will be engaged, challenged, encouraged, and helped in reading, preaching, and being reclaimed by this Word of God. I highly recommend "The Word of God for the People of God" by J. Todd Billings.

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