

# STROMATA

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## EDITORIAL

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*ON HOW THE CHURCH CAN DOWNPLAY THE SCRIPTURES*

*Isaias D'Oleo-Ochoa*  
*Editor-In-Chief*

Three years ago, I was invited to attend to a five-hundred-member Reformed congregation. Xavier<sup>1</sup>, the seminarian who invited me, shared with me all the aspects he liked about this particular congregation—high liturgical and ceremonial, relevant preaching, and social-focused. In addition, the building was breath-taking. It had several Gothic style elements and beautiful colored stained-glass windows.

Thirty minutes after the start of the morning worship service, the minister started his sermon by asserting that the Bible is responsible of promoting old moral behaviors. It had led people to discriminate against each other so that the most important thing is focusing on the love of Jesus. The minister claimed this after sharing a story of how a Seminary classmate had left the Christian faith due to his classmate's congregation of emphasizing the belief that Scripture is a binding source of absolute moral truth. Although I can understand his reasoning, the minister's assertion is not completely true and accurate. Even among those theologians who hold more liberal views on Scripture, many of them have had to admit that Scripture itself does not promote or endorse discrimination.

More recently, I followed online a couple of denominational annual meetings of evangelical and mainline Christian denominations during the Summer. It was quite an interesting experience! I was surprised, however, with the growing tendency among delegates of promoting “*sola cultura* views” in their voting discussion of a recommendation. “If our culture accepts such behavior, why does the church have to reject it?” —an evangelical middle-aged pastor said commenting on same-sex marriage. Responding to such a question while being both pastorally sensitive and theologically sound is not easy.

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<sup>1</sup> Named changed for privacy.

There is no space for an in-depth discussion here. Nevertheless, what I would like to highlight is that both episodes reminded me of Eugene Peterson’s *Eat This Book*, where he identifies, among other aspects, a series of significant areas of concern in which the Western church has traditionally misread Scripture—areas that also downplay the paramount place of Scripture in the modern church. Because we are celebrating the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Protestant Reformation this year, I believe the topic of the centrality of Scripture cannot be overlooked. Using the metaphor of *eating this book* as “a way of focusing on and clarifying what it means to have these Holy Scriptures and how the holy community has learned to eat them, receive them in a way that form us into Christians,”<sup>2</sup> Peterson argues that as the food needs first to be assimilated in the human body to nourish it, the Word of God also needs to be assimilated in believers in order that they may grow and be formed. I could not agree more! Scripture is the living word by which God transforms believers into Christ’s image and nourishes them so that it must always have a central place in the church.

Let me talk about Peterson’s areas of concern mentioned above. For Peterson, the first way that the Western church has misread Scripture is paying little—or perhaps not the required—attention to language. There are Christians, for instance, that tend to read a parable in the gospels as if it were a historical narrative, or they would like to interpret a biblical verse without taking into consideration its proper context. By doing so, they might fail to recognize a rhetorical device, an irony, or a biblical truth. There are also Christians who pay little attention to language by their tendency to memorize verses without knowing the story behind it. Peterson discussed in a public conversation held by the 2014 *Bast Preaching Festival* that “one of the worst things [he] did early on was to memorize short Bible verses. They were de-storied.” Peterson reminds us here that language does matter when reading Scripture. I also memorized a lot of disparate and decontextualized biblical verses when I was younger—Gen. 1:1, Ps. 4:8, Ps. 23, Isa. 60:1, John 3:16, 1 John 5:14, and the list goes on. This practice led me soon to read the verses that I only liked while overlooking the rest. But what about Gen. 6:6 or Heb. 12:29, for example? “When language is personal, which it is at its best, it reveals; and revelation

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<sup>2</sup> Eugene H. Peterson, *Eat This Book: A Conversation in the Art of Spiritual Reading* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 38.

is always formative—we don't know more, we become more," Peterson writes.<sup>3</sup> These words are noteworthy because reading well Scripture is also about entering into a close relationship with it—that is, the text and the reader create a dynamic partnership that should be nurtured and developed in an integral context.

The second way the Western Church has done wrong, according to Peterson, with the way it has read Scripture is that the church did not receive Scripture as it should. Many Christians, not always willing to receive what the Scriptures offer, reject what they read in the biblical text and do not live out its meaning in their lives—creating problems with the ways people approach the holy books. Peterson states, "Let's relax, and receive." For him, "Christian reading is participatory, receiving the words in such way that they become interior to our lives, the rhythms and images becoming practices of prayer, acts of obedience, ways of love."<sup>4</sup> Thus, Christians ought to avoid approaching Scripture as they approach a newspaper, magazine, or another media publication, looking for some new information they do not know, or even for entertainment. The sad truth is that many of us tend to misuse Scripture and do not see it as the living word that wants to transform us. Instead of approaching Scripture as if it were a self-help manual, Christians should rediscover the centrality of Scripture in their lives and receive it fully, meditate on it, and use it. They should also let the Word of God form them according to God's will. It is not easy or time-framed but an on-going process of transformation. And such transformational process happens in every moment of the believer's life. What the modern church cannot forget is that God uses Scripture to help us grow not only in the knowledge of the Lord but also in his sublime grace. The Scriptures not only allow us to know God more intimately but also tell us how we can live out our lives according to God's will and his holy law.

Depersonalizing the Word of God—intellectually, practically, and inspirationally—is the third way that Peterson identifies that the Western church has traditionally misread and misunderstood Scripture. Such depersonalization happens when "[we] will be *using* the Bible for [our]

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<sup>3</sup> Peterson, *Eat This Book*, 24.

<sup>4</sup> Peterson, *Eat This Book*, 28.

purposes, and those purposes will not require anything of [us] relationally.”<sup>5</sup> Since the very story of humankind’s creation, one notes that God did not create human beings to live alone, but in a faithful and friendly community. And within the community of God’s people—Israel—God gave his children his Word. Scripture is then both personalized and communal.

Last but not least, “a new twist on non-Trinitarian ways of reading the Bible” is the most epidemic way in which the Western church, Peterson argues, has read Scripture. Peterson understands this non-Trinitarian way as a Replacement Trinity. That is, “The three-personal Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are replaced by a very individualized personal Trinity of my Holy Wants, my Holy Needs, and my Holy Feelings.”<sup>6</sup> Unlike this individualized understanding of Trinity, God has given his Word to believers so that they can know him. The replacement here is just another way of idolatry—it puts the human being first before God and his Word.<sup>7</sup> But this problem does not stop there. Many Christians are currently misusing Scripture for their own agendas.

Peterson’s detrimental tendencies of how the Western church has done wrong with the ways that has read Scripture ought to make us reflect deeply on the issues discussed above. Those tendencies are still alive in the modern church. It is my belief that as educated pastors and church leaders, theologians and scholars, we must strongly address those tendencies in our communities of faith and schools. But this should not be an opportunity where we attack each other verbally or ideologically. On the contrary, we must engage with the Word of God and its centrality in the life of the church throughout thought-provoking but respectful conversations, where main positions are not only assessed but also carefully heard. Some Christians would quickly assess other people’s views, but they might not be interested in listening slowly and carefully to what others have to say. Today more than ever the church must pay attention to the centrality of

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<sup>5</sup> Peterson, *Eat This Book*, 30.

<sup>6</sup> Peterson, *Eat This Book*, 31.

<sup>7</sup> Peterson, *Eat This Book*, 31-32.

the Scriptures in word and deed. I am persuaded that theological research done in community is a great opportunity to do so!

In the present volume of *Stromata*, I invite you to read and reflect critically on the theological issues discussed in this new edition. The topics vary and go from biblical studies to historical theology. I am confident that as a reader you will find the papers, reviews, and essays published beneficial. It is my hope they may encourage you to continue growing in the Christian faith according to the Reformed faith. Let me also encourage you to submit your manuscripts for publication, and let me offer my particular welcome to the writings of our women, racial-ethnic diverse and English as a Second Language students within our Seminary community as well.