Reading the Bible with the Global Church  
A Response from the United States

Author: Dr Brian D. Russell, Acting Dean, School of Urban Ministries and Professor of Biblical Studies,  
Asbury Theological Seminary, Orlando, Florida (United States)

Thank you for the opportunity to read and respond to Eddie Arthur’s paper “Reading the Bible with the Global Church.” I found the insights helpful and illuminating for readers of the Scriptures in the Western world. It opens our eyes to the profound potential of seeing and hearing the Bible through the cultural lenses of Christ followers from around our planet while also being upfront about some of the challenges and pitfalls of reading the Bible well today. Arthur is well read on the subject and as a “world Christian” he has the personal experience to communicate his ideas clearly and forthrightly.

The paper as a whole

I fully resonated with the ideas and spirit of “Reading the Bible with the Global Church.” For the last three years, I’ve taught a doctoral seminar “Biblical Interpretation for the Church and the World” in a class setting made up almost exclusively of non-Western church leaders. This course has been fruitful in my own thinking and reflecting on the practices of reading the Bible in and for our world today. As typically the lone North American, the key learning for me in the seminar was that I have much to learn from my fellow Christians around the globe, and I have consistently walked away from the seminar with a sense that I gained more than I gave.

Over the last few decades, the discipline of Biblical studies has seen the rise of more reader-centered methods of interpretation. A hallmark of these is an emphasis on the social location of readers. For evangelicals, this has sometimes been unsettling. We’ve always emphasized the biblical context as the most key determinant for meaning. The biblical context will always be primary, but as Arthur shows from his opening illustration of contrasting reading of the Joseph stories, the context of the reader plays a bigger role that perhaps we have acknowledged. Thinking critically about the social location of the reader however is increasingly helping Western evangelicals to see blind spots in our own reading due to our cultural biases.

Arthur has helped us to see that the “plain sense” of Scripture is more complicated and expansive than we sometimes acknowledge. Our interpretive strategies in the Western church have often focused on achieving a sort of “critically assured minimum” of what a text meant and thus means. I think that reading the Bible in the context of the global church helps us to recognize that our exegetical methods are limited by our cultural lenses. The danger for us is that we are tempted to naively ignore readings from global contexts where readers have not been trained in our Western critical methods.

The good news is that the Western church is beginning to awaken to the rich interpretive heritage of the Christ following movement from its inception. Western scholarship continues to reflect critically on the New Testament’s use of the Old Testament. Such study demonstrates the role that 1st Century reading strategies served in influencing the hermeneutical approaches of Jesus and the Apostles. Moreover, we are witnessing the publication of new editions of classic commentaries from the Christ following movement’s seminal first four hundred years. Arthur’s paper shows the fecundity of the interpretive work from the global church that is now joining the interpretive conversation.

What do we in North America need to hear?
The global church can help the church in North America to read the Bible in a number of ways.

1) The Translatability of the Gospel

The varied but faithful readings of Scripture that emerge from the Global church ought to encourage us about the translatability of the Gospel into the emerging cultures of the Western world. Arthur cited the troubling statistics that document the loss of Christian influence in the West. The North American church like those around the former Christian West is currently struggling for traction as it attempts to recomunicate the biblical Gospel to the post-Christendom generations.

The success of the Gospel around the world and the ability of the Bible to speak powerfully and meaningfully into non-Christendom cultures bodes well for the church in North America as it seeks to rediscover its missional and apostolic imagination. Emerging generations may not have Christian memory and may not share Christendom’s philosophical assumptions, but the biblical message can be contextualized successfully here just as it is being done around the world.

2) Community reading

The North American church also needs to grow in its appreciation and practice of communal reading. Small group movements continue to thrive but learning to think communally will enhance the use of the Bible in these group settings. Too often in our small groups in North America we reflect on how Scripture impacts us individually rather than how the Scriptures want to shape us into missional communities that embody the Gospel for the surrounding world.

3) Cultural blindspots

Arthur’s opening illustration demonstrates the importance of reading the Bible through a variety of cultural lenses simply as a means of opening the plenary sense of the Bible. Every culture has blind spots. The North American church needs to recognize humbly that it can learn much from its brothers and sisters from the global church.

4) Attentiveness to the power of the Spirit

The global church models a praying and believing church. The Gospel advances through the power of God and not merely through human ingenuity or slick hermeneutical moves. As I think about the North American church, we must combine serious study of the Scriptures with a believing commitment to renewed prayer.

What can we in North America contribute?

1) Dangers of reading Bible from a position of power

The collapse of Christendom has caused many North American Christians to feel threatened by and sometimes hopeless in the face of the competing ideologies of secularism and the growing diversity of religious expressions all around us. As the emerging culture has moved away from Christendom’s assumptions, the church in North America has continued to read
the Bible as though the Church remains the cultural center. This has neutered the missional and transformational elements of the Gospel. North America was once a missional success story as the Gospel spread across the continent. As the Gospel continues to advance and prosper in former “missionary contexts”, the global church must not repeat the mistakes of the Christendom by equating “success” with prestige or political power.

2) Admission of hermeneutical arrogance

The Western church’s embrace of exegetical conclusions rooted in historical-critical methods to the neglect of alternative hermeneutical approaches runs the risk of putting the Bible into a box of our own design. For generations, we have exported our methods of reading to the global church. Ironically, as we in the Western church begin to awake from our own hermeneutical slumbers, the global church now offer us insights into how to listen to and live out the Scriptures. In my seminar for international leaders I have found the need to offer a critique of Western exegetical methods as a means of validating contextual readings from their homelands. This hermeneutical humility has opened up my seminar to become a rich conversation with exegetes from around the world that is mutually beneficial as we share best practices from our various contexts.

3) Invitation to true Christian conferencing

The Biblical message is rich and always timely. Our growing awareness of the readings and interpretive methods from the global church opens up the possibility of productive and transformative conversations about the meaning and significance of the Scriptures in our day. The Church of Jesus Christ in our day may be uniquely positioned to truly hear God’s word in all of its fullness. As the Gospel permeates the complex multi-cultural milieu of the global church, we have the possibility, maybe for the first time in history, of having a full-orbed conversation about the Bible in a global round table setting where no culture claims to have the privileged position for reading God’s word. How rich are the possibilities for 21st century biblical interpretation!

Again I thank Eddie Arthur for producing and sharing his stimulating paper.

Please Note: The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of Redcliffe College.