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Rehabilitating the Quadriga

[Peter Leithart](#) | 7.8.2013 | [Bible - Hermeneutics](#)

According to the medieval theory of the “Quadriga” or the “fourfold sense” of Scripture, each passage of Scripture has four dimensions of meaning. Protestants generally cast a suspicious eye on this “method” of reading. That’s a mistake. It’s a handy guide to the questions we should always ask as we study Scripture.

The first question we ask is, What happened? What events or people or

places or requirements does the text give us? Each text has a *literal* sense: It speaks of real people, real places, real events. Medieval theologians of course made allowances for allegories and metaphors. They didn't think that a giant eagle actually had snapped off the top of a cedar to carry off to Babylon. They knew that Jesus spoke in "fictional" parables. But they took the historical narratives of Scripture as fact, and recognized that even Scripture's allegories are pictorial descriptions of reality.

Modern skepticism about the literal truth of Scripture makes it easy to slip quickly past the literal sense. Unfortunately, this tendency hasn't been entirely overcome among contemporary advocates of "spiritual" or "theological" hermeneutics. Many remain embarrassed by the literal sense, preferring to gaze away and pass by, with a sigh of relief, on the allegorical side.

Patristic and medieval theologians didn't share this modern embarrassment. On the contrary, *all* other dimensions of textual meaning grew out of the literal sense. Thomas Aquinas argued that the text referred only to the literal sense, to things and people and events of the real world. Since God writes with things as well as with words, though, the things that the text speaks about are themselves signs of other things. If you don't have a literal sense at the beginning, you don't get the other senses either.

Protestants often want to stop with the literal sense. But that's equally an error, and leads to boring, truncated readings of Scripture. Medieval

theologians knew better. They understood that Scripture speaks literally of things that serve as allegories or types of other things. The word “rock” in Exodus 17 refers to a rock at Horeb, and the water was water. But God orchestrates history so that the real rock and the watery water foreshadow the temple rock of Ezekiel from which water flows, the Rock on the cross whose side is opened by a spear, who was the Rock that followed Israel. The Spirit really did hover over the waters of creation, but that actual event offers a perspective on events of new creation: The same Spirit who hovers on the waters hovers over Israel in the cloud, over the tabernacle and temple, overshadows Jesus at His transfiguration, finally hovers over the apostles in the upper room. Those are all literal events too, but those literal events are *interpreted* as new-creation events by the re-deployment of the imagery of creation. And these events in their turn becomes foreshadowings of still future events. And all of it comes to a climax in Jesus.

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In short, the literal sense thus opens into what the medievals called the *allegorical* sense, and this was because the medievals understood that the second question to be asked of Scripture is, What does it tell me about Jesus? The allegorical sense is about faith: Allegory teaches what

we are to *believe*.

Schooled by Augustine, medieval theologians knew too that they couldn't talk about Jesus without talking about the *totus Christus*, the whole Christ consisting of head and body. This was a basic operating principle in Christology, soteriology, and ecclesiology. It was also a fundamental hermeneutical rule. If the whole Bible speaks about Christ, it equally speaks about the church, since the church is the body politic united to Jesus.

To borrow modern terminology, what the Bible says about the church is both indicative and imperative. When Scripture says that the rock fountain in the wilderness was a literal allegory of Christ, it implies too that the church is a rock flowing with water. The church is a city built of precious stones (Isaiah 54; Revelation 21), and from that bridal city, as from the Bridegroom, living water flows. This is the reality of the church: She *is* a rock city by union with the Rock that is Christ; she *is* a fountain because the eternal Spring of the Spirit dwells in her midst. And what is true of the church is true of each member: "Whoever believes in Me, out of his innermost parts will flow rivers of living water" (John 7:38), just as they flow from Jesus Himself ("Whoever is thirsty, come to Me and drink," John 7:37).

In the indicative is an embedded imperative. If the church *is* a fountain, she is also *required* to be a fountain. If believers have rivers of Spirit coming out of their bellies, they need to make sure they don't quench the Spirit and dam up the stream. "Be what you are" is a constant

Pauline refrain, and it's a refrain built into the Quadriga. Because the church is united to Christ as a body to the head, texts that speak about Christ speak about the church, and those texts both assert something about the church (united to her Husband, she is the rock fountain) and call the church to be what she is (abide in Christ, so that you may be a city bringing living water to the world).

This is the *tropological* or moral sense, and it poses several questions: What does this text tell me about myself in Christ? What does it tell me about the church that is the body of Christ? How does this text instruct the church to live? How should *I* then live? Tropology is about love: It teaches what we are to *do*.

For the church and for each member, being in Christ is a temporal and eschatological fact. The church is situated "between the times," tasting already the age to come but not yet feasting on its full bounty. Modern theologians who "rediscovered" eschatology see this already/not yet distinction as the basic structure of New Testament eschatology, a basic premise of the gospel. This is the mystery of God: Christ brought in the kingdom; the kingdom is among us; the kingdom is yet to come.

This is no new discovery. Medievals knew all about it, and worked it into their reading of Scripture. Every text, they claimed, not only speaks of Christ in His first Advent (allegory) but also speaks of Christ in His final Advent (*anagogy*). They knew that Christ's kingdom had come, but had not come in fullness; they knew that the Rock had opened up a fountain, but they also knew that the flowing water hadn't yet purified

the dead sea and brought the fish to life (Ezekiel 47); they knew that the church was already a crystal city, but knew also that the full revelation of her beauty lay ahead; they knew that the city of God would be constructed, and knew that the path toward that city was the way of the cross, of faithful witness and service, of martyrdom. Anagogy asks the question, What does this text teach me to expect about the growth, struggles, and trials of Christ's kingdom and His future coming? The anagogical sense teaches what we are to *hope* for.

The various senses all work together. Allegory anticipates anagogy, because what Christ accomplished in His first coming He will complete in His second. Allegory is the foundation for tropology, for what is true of Christ and of us in Christ is the only reliable basis for faithful living. Tropology is the bridge between the now and not yet. The "time between" is a time of waiting, but not only of waiting. It is also the time of action. Between allegory and anagogy, between Christ's first and final coming, lay the arena of tropology, of faithful obedience and striving. Between faith and the realization of hope lay the realm of love.

In a church where the literal sense of Scripture is laughed off as myth, the Quadriga demands serious attention to real history, and to the grammatical, syntactical, and semantic features of the text where that history is recorded. Yet in a church where many are unjustifiably satisfied with the literal sense, the Quadriga shows that the literal sense is an entree into the complex pattern of Scripture, which is the tapestry of history itself. In a church where the church's role is sometimes

minimized, the Quadriga teaches us that the church's story is the story of the Bible, because the church is Christ's and, with Christ, *is* Christ (1 Corinthians 12:12). In a church plagued by antinomianism, the Quadriga calls us to attend to the *commandments* of Scripture. In a church equally plagued by moralism, the Quadriga forces us to see that the indicative of being in Christ by the Spirit is always prior to and the only foundation of obedience. Where eschatologies are underrealized, the Quadriga insists that Christ is already the realization of Israel's hope; where eschatologies are overrealized, the Quadriga points constantly to glories yet to come.

It would be too much to say that the Quadriga heals all our hermeneutical diseases, but it heals an awful lot of them. And not only hermeneutical diseases. The Quadriga is not only a method of reading but a practical theology and a spirituality, a historiography, an ethics, and a politics, a way of training our senses to discern Christ not only everywhere in Scripture, but everywhere and in everything.

For a more complete treatment of the Quadriga, see Leithart, "The Quadriga, or Something Like It: A Biblical and Pastoral Defense" in [Ancient Faith for the Church's Future](#).



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