

“Reading the Christian New Testament in the Contemporary World” by Kwok Pui-lan

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Given the growth of Christianity in the Global South, Kwok Pui-lan’s “Reading the Christian New Testament in the Contemporary World,” emphasizes that we need to read the New Testament today as respectful and responsible global citizens by being aware of how New Testament studies is becoming more global and contextual. We need to do so because the New Testament writers were not only concerned with Jewish and Gentile relations but also writing during the time of the Roman Empire in urban and culturally diverse settings; as a result, Kwok shows how the New Testament actually struggles with many of the issues that confront us today, like religious pluralism, imperial domination, racial/ethnic struggles, or gender equality. In addition, Kwok suggests that context is important to both the production and the reception of the New Testament. For example, she highlights how contemporary issues like the Holocaust, the debate over same-sex marriage, and the concern over inclusion and exclusion have led to not only new readings but also new *versions* of the New Testament. In fact, culture, language, and politics had influenced also New Testament translation when missionaries introduced it to different peoples and parts of the world.

To drive home the point that there is no single, definitive, and universal meaning in a New Testament text, Kwok helpfully details how (1) the New Testament can be read as Scripture, as a historical document, and/or as a cultural product; (2) meaning of a New Testament text can be understood as being behind, in, and/or in front of the text; and (3) the New Testament is being read today with diverse approaches (Kwok highlights feminist, social-scientific, racial/ethnic minority, and postcolonial approaches, and illustrates each approach by referring to various scholars and their work on different books and passages within the New Testament). At the same time, Kwok is careful to point out that contextual readings and multiple meanings should not imply relativism. Instead, reading with others who read differently than oneself requires genuine listening, dialogue, and debate.

Kwok also emphasizes the presence of creative re-readings of Scriptures by New Testament writers and the doctrine of *sola scriptura* as a relatively new development in the church’s long history. For Kwok, acknowledgment of and engagement with different contextual readings of the New Testament is part of democratization and of liberation, since, partly for reasons of commerce and conquest, it has been brought and received all over the globe. In other words, the New Testament is no longer only a church book; it is, for Kwok, also a public book for public consumption and public debate. Reading the New Testament, therefore, concerns not only epistemology but also ethics. Kwok thus devotes an entire section to reading the New Testament for liberation. Willingness to engage different readings of the New Testament can expand one’s imagination and enrich one’s understanding to be a more responsible reader and a better citizen of and for today’s world.