

{ Chapter One }

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Shake 'n Bake:  
Reading Scripture  
with Ricky Bobby

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*Because reality is always in process, the meaning and the impact of concepts in reality change through time and space. . . . Similarly, theology is influenced by the ideological and material grounds of the historical reality from which it emerges.*

— MAYRA RIVERA<sup>1</sup>

Fact: *Talladega Nights: The Ballad of Ricky Bobby* is one of the funniest films of all time. #shakenbake Maybe it's because of the many years I've lived in the southeastern United States, or maybe it's on account of my juvenile sense of humor, or maybe because I hold all things NASCAR in rather low esteem (seriously, they just drive in circles for hours on end)—perhaps all three—but I am not ashamed to admit that I can quote most of this film verbatim.

One of the funniest scenes in the movie is centered on prayer.

With his family and best friend and racing partner Cal Naughton Jr. gathered around the supper table, eager to enjoy the bountiful harvest of Domino's Pizza, KFC, and "the always delicious Taco Bell," Ricky Bobby leads his family in saying grace.

Ricky Bobby's prayer is remarkable in many ways, but the most theologically significant aspect of his prayer is that it's directed exclusively toward *Baby Jesus*. When his wife Carley interrupts his prayer in frustration that Ricky always prays to Baby Jesus, he replies, "Well, look, I'm saying grace and I like the Christmas Jesus best. When you say grace you can say it to Grownup Jesus, or Teenage Jesus, or Bearded Jesus, or whoever you want."

Here's the point of this brief excursion into cinematic awesomeness: We worship the God we know. For Christ-followers, the Bible shapes our conception of God, but how we understand the God revealed in and through scripture is in turn shaped by our context. Perhaps this is not done as overtly as it is for Ricky Bobby and his family members, but we too do this.

## **The Great Disturbance: Love Meets Life**

Interpreting scripture shapes theologies of scripture, which shape interpretations of scripture. Around and around we go on the merry-go-round of faith. Trying to arrest the movement of God in and through scripture is like trying to draw a bird in flight—kind of hard to do unless you are Bob Ross, and he's got that luscious Afro full of super powers to help him.<sup>2</sup> #happyclouds

Here's another thing. No one has ever made biblical meaning in a vacuum. We can do nothing in a vacuum—including vacuum. True story. We see this clearly in Acts chapter 8 when Philip encounters a financial officer in the service of the Queen of Ethiopia. Philip asks the man, "Do you really understand what you are reading?" To which the man replies famously, "How can I without someone to guide me?" Understanding takes place in community,

especially biblical understanding. Discerning the meaning of biblical texts is like locating dwarven doors in Tolkien's Middle Earth: both must be viewed in the proper light. The doors to scriptural meaning are utterly invisible to those without the proper angle of vision—a community-shaped vision.<sup>3</sup>

Just as the Ethiopian official came to understand scripture through Philip's guidance, I too have come to regard scripture by a certain light. This framework for understanding scripture is drawn from Jesus' assertion that the greatest commandment is to love God with all that you are and to love your neighbor as yourself (Matt. 22:37-40). My own faith formation and theological training have led me to the following belief: *The Bible exists to open us intellectually, emotionally, and bodily toward others—Divine, human, and nonhuman. Such radical openness toward others the Bible calls "love."* This theological wager shapes how I understand the Bible and how I try to treat others. I think it's a pretty good place to begin.

Yeah! Love! Everybody loves 'em some love, right? But here's the problem: the concept of love is as thick and snarled as a 1970s pubic tangle—and I ain't hatin'. Keep it real, Fleetwood Mac! Ain't no shame in your game! Because of love's innate complexity we are going to need to think through what we even mean by love before we can begin to employ love as a framework for understanding where we stand in relation to Holy Scripture.

Love is both utterly simple and infinitely complex. Our everyday speech bears witness to this tension. We talk about *falling* in love, as if it were a force that takes hold of us like gravity. At the same time, if you asked ten people to define love, after the stuttering and stammering ceased you would likely receive ten different answers. How can love be both universal and particular? Love is one of those things that's difficult to talk about, but we know it when we see it. As one thinker puts it, "We live with love as if we knew what it was about. But as soon as we try to define it, or at least approach it with concepts it draws away from us."<sup>4</sup> My own

experiences with love affirm the truth of this assessment. How 'bout yours?

## God Is Love: Learning from Scripture

Scripture itself, and 1 John 4 in particular, guides my thinking toward what I will come to call an *erotic theology of scripture*: an approach to God in and through scripture that is guided by love. (Btw, my use of the erotic is not reducible to sensuality, but I'll say more about that later.)

If love is to be more than a gesture of theological hand waving, a bit of interpretive hocus-pocus, then we need at least a cursory understanding of what we mean by love before we proceed. Love is an easy concept to equivocate, and if we're not careful we will reason from our mundane understanding of love toward God's understanding of love. On account of this proclivity, we must bracket what we think we know about love and allow the love we're talking about to conform to God's definition of love revealed in the Bible.

The writer of 1 John urges us to love one another *because* "love is from God" (4:7). Okay, so for starters we learn that love emerges *out of* God. The outward directionality is more pronounced in the Greek. At the same time, in the same verse, love draws us *into* God and such in-drawing is the means by which we are *able* to know God.<sup>5</sup> Thus, love as a force in the world is both centrifugal and centripetal; it flows out of God *and* draws us into God.

Without pausing for a breath, the writer of 1 John declares that "God is love" (v. 8). The love of which the writer speaks is not an adjective, but a noun. He (or she—we don't know who wrote 1 John) isn't saying that God is *loving*, *lovely*, or *lovable*. God *is* love. Love both defines God and defines love. Moreover, we don't know what love *is* until we see it among us in the sending of God's only begotten son into the world "so that we might live *through* him" (v. 9). Hmm.

Moving on, in verse 10, the writer of 1 John makes sure we don't get this whole thing bass-ackwards: it's not by *our* understanding of

love that we come to understand both love and God; but it is by *God's* self-revelation of Godself *as love* that we come to know both. Just like a shotgun, the direction you point the thing makes all the difference.

Love, redefined for us by God's outpouring of Godself, enables us to abide *in God* (vv. 12-13). This is a spatial construction. Loving the world in the way modeled by Jesus *causes* us to dwell in God. It's not that God *is* creation, nor that God is life in a simplistic sense, as certain theologies suggest; rather, in love all of life is *drawn into* God even as God's love *flows into* life.<sup>6</sup> God-is-love is not static. Loving in this way enables us to breathe the very breath of God (v. 13; cf. John 20:22, where Jesus breathes on his disciples), which is . . . wait for it . . . love.

In verses 16-17, we read again that God is love and that inasmuch as we abide in love we abide in God. By this, both love and we who abide in love are made perfect. That is, "we are exactly the same as God is in this world." Love overcomes our imperfection, making us like God and able to approach the world and all that is within it out of love rather than fear (v. 18).

One final word of commentary before we proceed. In 1 John 4:19 we read, "We love because God first loved us." This reiterates what the writer of 1 John has been trying to tell us all along: we don't fully understand love until God shows us what it is, and through it, who God is for us in the person of Jesus Christ. Such love makes the distinction between a spiritual love of God and a sociopolitical love of others forever untenable. Spirituality and liberation are one.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, love begins with a kind of double-vision, one that sees the Word of God revealed *in* and *through* scripture, and that sees the self in relation to the other with the eyes of love.

## **Love Is from God: Living in and through Scripture**

If love comes from God even as it draws us into God, then it stands to reason that God's radical outpouring and in-drawing will change us in some fundamental way. The writer of 1 John does not say,

“Y’all just keep on doin’ what yur doin’, aight!” as he spits tobacco into an empty Bud-light can. No. God calls us toward a perfection guided by love of God and neighbor. Unfortunately, just like our ole pal Ricky Bobby, we are rooted in our respective cultures; they already shape how we see the world, including the world of the biblical text. In order to orient ourselves toward love, we need to get a better understanding of the roadblocks and pitfalls to love arising out of our cultural contexts and attitudes.

The nature of the writerly-readerly relationship between you and me means that I can’t address *your* cultural context because a) I don’t know who you are or where you come from, and b) even if I did know you, I wouldn’t have access to all of the experiences in your life that make you see the world as you do. You are in a better position to critique your own contextually conditioned ways of knowing than anyone. I can assume, however, that if you’re reading this book you can read English, which means you were born into or have acculturated yourself to a Western way of thinking. Language and rationality are entwined, didn’t ya know?

I am ambivalent about Western Christianity in the twenty-first century. It has formed me to see the world in particular ways, but not all of those ways are conducive to my efforts to follow God in the way of Jesus. I feel the same way about Western Christianity that I do about every song ever sung by Toby Keith—kind of proud to be an American, but also kind of guilty that we are the world’s biggest assholes. I choose Christ over Uncle Sam; but even this choice is shaped by a culture that has led me to believe I can make such a choice, which isn’t universal.

Theology, how we understand God and participate in God’s mission in the world, is the love-child of life and scripture. Both are essential. The problem of theology is that Western Christianity is far more Western than it is Christian. *Theology* is not even a Christian word. It’s a loanword from Western philosophy. The word appears nowhere in the Bible and it is highly unlikely that Jesus would’ve ever spoken in such terms. Coined by Plato, the term *theology* was later adopted by Aristotle to differentiate the

myths about the gods from philosophy proper.<sup>8</sup> So, when we who are Westerners move toward a theology of scripture that is guided by love, we have to do a bit of ground clearing to keep the weeds of Western thought from choking the life out of our erotic flora.

There are three marks of love that we need to disentangle from Western thought. Think of these as the three essential ingredients in any erotic brew: the self, the other, and the distance between them. Let's look at each of these in turn.

### *The Self Beyond Certainty*

Are you sitting down? Good, you shouldn't be walking and reading—you could fall into a Smurf snare and Gargamel will catch you and feed you to his cat. Ahem. Okay, here it is: the self does not exist. *Kabloom!* Just blew your mind, didn't I? I told you to sit down. The self is a product of Western thought that has no independent existence apart from the processes by which it is made.<sup>9</sup> Allow me to explain.

The modern notion of the self arose in tandem with the Enlightenment. The formation of the self as a fixed and independent entity in the world was a process. Many agree, however, that the self became the gravitational center around which the rest of the universe revolved—particularly following the philosophical advances made by René Descartes. His famous *I think, therefore I am* didn't just establish thought as the dominant form of expression; Descartes also invented the modern notion of the self by setting it in opposition to everything else.

Think of the pre-Cartesian self as a young Han Solo. He's handling his business on the Millennium Falcon with his co-pilot Chewbacca, full of his own comings and goings. One day he is captured by Boba Fet and, oh noes, he's sealed in carbonite to be delivered to Jabba the Hutt. In other words, the pre-Enlightenment self was not set; it was not a *fixed* point of reference until Descartes came along and set the self in opposition to everything else outside the mind.

Of course I am simplifying all of this, but there is no questioning the fact that Descartes established the self as a *subject*: a seemingly self-supported, unshakeable foundation of truth capable of achieving self-certainty. This certainty of the self's existence came at a price. In order to be certain of something, to know it beyond doubt, it cannot be free to change. If something has the ability to change, how can I ever keep up with it? Furthermore, if I can't keep up with something how can I really *know* it? This is the modern dilemma of the self that frustrates love.

In Western thought following Descartes, the self impedes love because the modern self exists to seize possession of the other, transforming everything beyond the self into an *object* of experience. You cannot love an object. You can only love an *other*. You don't really *love* pizza or going to Six Flags. You *enjoy* those things. They give you a certain degree of pleasure. The kind of love the Bible teaches us, and teaches us most clearly through the life and ministry of Jesus, is that love and certitude are mutually exclusive. Genuine knowledge of the world and all that is in it demands a different approach than the self who only knows according to certainty. To know an object is not the same thing as knowing a subject, and that's what we've got to learn to do if we want to love God and neighbor according to Jesus' teachings.

The Bible presents a different understanding of the self. Through scripture God teaches us that we are not what we know, but who knows us. We are not ourselves the foundation of truth, but anything worthy of the name truth is founded in God's self-revelation. We are not defined by what we have; rather, we are defined by who has us.

### *The Other beyond Certainty*

The idea of an *other* beyond the self is not new. "No group ever defines itself as One without immediately setting up the Other opposite itself."<sup>10</sup> Greeks defined themselves in opposition to

Barbarians. Israelites to Philistines. Men to women. Whites to blacks. Jedi to Siths. Pure-bloods to Mud-bloods. This is so evident in history and pervasive across cultures that it's hardly worthy of mention, *but* (and this is a big but) scripture calls us to a different way of being in the world, a way beyond objectification.

In a fundamental sense, the other is necessary for the self as a subject. The sense of identity and even certainty that the self takes from the other is folded out of the differences between the self and the other. The other is defined by a certain *difference* (racially, ethnically, sexually, etc.), and this difference is then projected back onto the other as a lack, a deficiency, a cause for derision. Infamously, Sigmund Freud defined women not by what they have, but by what he perceived them to lack. Women lack penises; therefore, Freud reasoned, this lack of a penis is constitutive of woman's essential makeup. Pro tip: Few female-identified women walk around bemoaning their lack of a penis; many more bemoan Freud's lack of insight into "what women want."

Moving toward the other beyond objectification is not only frustrated by our perceived differences. Language itself betrays the other. Every utterance about another reduces the other to the parameters established by the one doing the uttering (i.e., the self). In other words, when I write a sentence in English—in any Western language—I must announce a subject who performs some action, and such an action is often directed to an object (e.g., "Dick sees Jane."). The subject does the acting. The object receives the action. Active/passive. Giver/receiver. A certain duality is already in operation here at our most basic level of thought.

The Hebrew language too structures thought in such a way. However, I believe we can learn much from the fact that the Israelites, along with Jews who adhere to this theological tradition, do not pronounce the name of God. This simple gesture of reverence, of awe at a linguistic level, recognizes that we tilt toward objectification, toward idolatry. Devout Jews teach us how language itself

can be used as a kind of offering to God. They regard God's name as holy: set apart, beyond certainty.

I use the nebulous term "other" on purpose. Its lack of specificity is a good thing, at least for the purposes of this book, because it is less objectifying than its synonyms. Taking a page from the Hebrew playbook, I employ the term "other" to apply to human others and God-as-other, but the term ought also be employed toward nonhuman others. Rainforests, animals, watersheds, mountaintops, ecosystems, and so on are also *other* than the self. They too can be reduced to mere things to be exploited for economic gain, or they can be regarded lovingly, as inherently worthy of preservation and protection.

As soon as we move in the direction of loving the other beyond objectification we must admit that the Bible too is guilty of such objectification. John speaks of "the Jews" in his Gospel as if the mere mention of them is an expletive. Gentiles. Gays. Women. Slaves. The Bible doesn't get a bye from slipping into prejudicial and pejorative descriptions of the other much like Bill Murray doesn't get a bye from being awesome. The presence of such objectification in scripture is proof of one of two things: Either God shares our proclivity to fear, mistrust, and even hate others, or God is so eager to enter into relationship with us that God is willing to risk God's own reputation by allowing Godself to be thought. I'm putting my chips on the latter.

It's easier to accept this second option when you realize that there is a counter-testimony also present in scripture, one that challenges objectification and xenophobia. Consider the final verses in the book of Jonah. The whole book is saturated with Jonah's ethnic disdain for the wealthy Ninevites. Jonah literally runs in the opposite direction when God calls him to preach to them and ends up in the belly of a large fish. And then, when he finally preaches God's message of repentance, the Ninevites do exactly what Jonah told them to do: they repent and turn to God. Jonah shows his undies by his response. God's reaction to Jonah

constitutes the only instance where a book of the Bible ends with a question. God asks, in effect, “What do you care if I show compassion to the Ninevites?” Damn, God even cares about the one-percenters! #whodathunkit?

The Bible offers another way of approaching the other, not as a stranger to be feared, but as a neighbor to be embraced. To illustrate, think of that scene in *The Fellowship of the Ring* where Gandalf faces off with Balrog (the shadow demon brandishing a flaming whip and sword) on the Bridge of Khazad-dûm. Gandalf summons a shield and cries, “You shall not pass!” That’s kind of what the love of God and neighbor demands. Love casts a hedge of protection around the other, barring unfettered access to the other. Love calls us beyond objectification.

### *The Distance beyond Disclosure*

The final necessary element in love is the distance created and maintained between the self and the other, between the lover and her beloved. This distance is crucial. And it is precisely this distance that is disclosed upon and collapses under the weight of Western ways of thinking. Objectification eradicates distance. Objectification operates like Pac-Man, gobbling up others only to be haunted by the ghost of the other whose only recourse is to withdraw.

Western thought, as I’ve already mentioned, is oriented toward *objective* knowledge. It wants to reduce everything that the self encounters to an *object* of experience. This act of radical reduction, where the other is demoted to the rank of an object, erases the distance between the self and the other.

Love demands that we *keep* our distance, that we not muddy the other’s carpet with our dirty-ass intellectual sneakers. This becomes a bit easier as we come to respect the fact that a certain spacing between the self and the other is necessary.

For example, if there were no distance whatsoever between my spouse and me, how could we be in relationship? It is precisely

because of the distance between us that we are able to love each other, and this distance that prevails between us does double duty in love.

On the one hand, the distance between us creates the possibility for yearning. Distance makes desire possible. The distance between us does something to me. It is active. Distance allows a sense of longing to stir up inside me—a hunger to know her more fully, to know her to the fullest extent. The distance allows me to draw toward her as if pulled in by an emotional tractor beam. Our twenty years of intimacy are preserved precisely because neither of us has disclosed fully upon the other.

Sure, there are things that I can tell you objectively about my wife. She has green eyes, for instance. But then, as soon as I utter those words, the second they escape my lips, they seem to fall short. The color green cannot capture the many shades of color, the multiple ways of meaning, the countless hours of engagement signified by such an objective statement as “she has green eyes.” My wife is irreducible to her bodily features. Sure, to *you* she’s a lady with green eyes; to me, those green eyes signal so much more—they structure my very existence.

On the other hand, the distance between us is a kind of pact. Even as it draws me close, it bars my access. The otherness of the other cannot be taken; it can only be received. Love heeds the look of the other as a command: Thou shall not kill. Of course, millions who have been objectified—used and abused to satisfy the insatiable appetites of people with more power—know that objectification is a kind of murder. Objectification can be worse than death.

History bears witness to this. The “final solution” was only possible after the Nazis turned the Jews, along with countless others, into *objects*. Only objects can be discarded. To kill the other you must first objectify the other; that’s why I think Jesus told his disciples not to reduce the other to the rank of “idiot” or “fool” because such objectification makes murder possible (Matt. 5:21-6). We see this so clearly today in the marginalization of those

with mental illness, who can be dismissed and discarded. Even the current vitriol in the U.S. between republicans and democrats displays the pernicious effects of objectification.

Distance is like topsoil. When it is abundant, life flourishes; but when it is not protected, life itself begins to erode. The Bible has names for this space that exists between the self and the other. It's called eternal or abundant life. Eternal life is only possible when the space between God and the self is preserved in love. Abundant life is only possible when the space between the self and others is maintained by love. This prompts two points of concern.

First, God's Word revealed *in* scripture must be allowed to keep its distance. When the Word of God in scripture is reduced to the mere semantic value of the words of the text, when this distance is not respected, the result is idolatry. The doctrine of biblical inerrancy, which forces the Word of God to conform to human ways of meaning, is a form of idolatry. It radically reduces God to a set of ideological assumptions projected in the name of God.

Love frees us from the temptation of such idolatry because it doesn't want to collapse the distance between the self and the Word. The Word "is" wholly other.<sup>11</sup> Even as the Word is powerful beyond thought or measure, it is revealed in the frailty of human language and culture. Making love with scripture will free you from idolatry. It will draw you more fully into God while at the same time holding you back from the human propensity to objectification, which is a form of violence.

Second, God's World revealed *through* scripture also requires distance (I say more about the World of God in part 3). The World revealed through scripture offers a particular way of seeing the cosmos—the World of the other. The Word structures our imagination, making possible a way of seeing the World according to God's hope and mission to "make all things new" (Rev. 21:5). When the distance that God's Wor(l)d produces in the world is not respected, the Bible can be wielded as a tool of oppression. We need look no farther than the modern missionary movement and

its biblical justification of colonial oppression to see what happens when distance is disclosed upon.<sup>12</sup>

God's World revealed through scripture yields love. It plants seeds of love that can structure an entirely different way of knowing, being, and acting in the world if we will let it. Through scripture we are able to discern the call of the other that says, "Don't kill me; love me." The World of God revealed through scripture structures a way of being that is radically *for* the other just as God is radically *for* creation in Jesus Christ. Distance is thus the proof that I have not reduced the other to an object of my experience. Just as the presence of hunger proves you are not full, the fact that the other's full identity is always in doubt tells me that I have not disclosed upon her subjectivity. Distance is counterintuitive. The drink becomes a thirst. The more I taste the bounty given to me by the other, the hungrier I grow.

## **Be the Change the Bible Wants You to Be**

In those immortal words from the world's most eloquent orator (of course I'm talking about Rocky Balboa), we come to understand our charge as Christ-followers. Rocky cries, "If I can change, and you can change, then anybody can change." Wow! \*grabs hanky\* Sheer poetry.

Another prophet at another time said much the same thing. The Apostle Paul writes to the Christ-followers gathered at Philippi, "Make your thoughts, feelings, and attitudes toward others be like those which were also in Christ Jesus" (2:5), and to those gathered at Rome Paul says, "Don't allow yourselves to be conformed to the ways of being in this age, but allow yourselves to be transformed by the renewing of your minds" (12:2). This, at base, is the task of this book.

We require the means to swim against the current of Western Christianity. To love God and neighbors requires us to place our ways of thinking at risk by opening ourselves to the other in

love. For such a transformation to take place in us we will have to find new ways of thinking and new ways of listening to God's Word revealed in and through scripture. Following Jesus' call to love both God and neighbor entails that we conform our thoughts and behaviors to the way of Jesus, the way of love.

Love of God and neighbor, though inextricable, must be treated separately because all too often in our current modes of thinking, being, and doing, both forms of love end up as self-love, perpetuating the Western patterns of objectification and marginalization.

Loving one's neighbor entails a certain listening for life empowered and structured by love. Such a listening arising *through* scripture demands that we listen to those voices that have been marginalized by Western modernity, and especially those on the underside of our current global economic structures. Listening to God's Word revealed through scripture opens us to love of the other as neighbor only when we refuse to turn from the neighbor's cries of injustice. Such love that the Wor(l)d requires of us who would follow Jesus means that we will attend to the ways in which other communities discern God's life-giving Word in their particular context.

God summons us to a different way of being with God and neighbor than we have grown accustomed to in modern Christianity. The erotic approach is the only way I can see to know God in and through scripture beyond objectification. The erotic approach will thus, by necessity, attend to *both* scripture *and* to human and nonhuman others in relation to the self. "Whoever loves God must also love others" (1 John 4:21). By the erotic approach, defined according to God's radical outpouring of Godself in Jesus, we can no longer separate God's self-revelation as *either* being in the Bible *or* in the world. Through scripture we discover God's love of the world even as we are admitted into God's mission for the world. This way of being with and in God subsumes all of creation; therefore, the erotic approach to God will always be *in* and *beyond* acts of biblical interpretation.