

## Respecting scripture's varied voices

### How we read a Bible with different views of truth

Dan Nighswander

**T**he Bible is the source that Christians instinctively and intentionally turn to for comfort, teaching, and meaning. “We believe that all Scripture is inspired by God through the Holy Spirit for instruction in salvation and training in righteousness. We accept the Scriptures as the Word of God and as the fully reliable and

**We want the Bible to speak with one clear voice to the questions we pose. But on matters of doctrine or ethics, and even in reporting historical events, it sometimes includes different versions.**

trustworthy standard for Christian faith and life.”<sup>1</sup> We have found it to be “useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (2 Tim. 3:16).

When the church faces questions of doctrine and ethics, we turn to the Bible for direction. A cynic might claim that we—or perhaps, rather, the people with whom we disagree—turn to scripture only to confirm what we have already determined on the basis of other sources and influences. But even that

misuse acknowledges that the Bible carries authority in matters of belief and behaviour.

It is, therefore, a cause for dismay for many that sincere Christians reading the same body of literature, sometimes even the same text, may come to opposite conclusions about its meaning and application to the questions at hand. That problem, however, can be attributed to differences in the experience, training, and presuppositions of the reader, or perhaps to obstinacy.

It's an even greater challenge when searchers turn to different parts of scripture and find apparently contradictory counsel and information. Variance in reader response is more acceptable than variance in the text itself. We want the scriptures to speak with one clear voice to the questions we pose. But that doesn't always happen. On matters of doctrine or ethics, and even in reporting historical events, the Bible sometimes includes different versions.

Examples of this variety abound, beginning with the two accounts of creation in Genesis 1 and 2, and continuing through the various accounts of the history of Israel and the different portrayals of Jesus' life in the Gospels.

The example I have chosen for consideration here consists of two accounts of the Jerusalem Council and the church's determination that Gentiles could become Christians without first becoming Jews. These accounts are found in Acts 15 and Galatians 2. When we put them side-by-side, we observe some differences between them.

*According to Acts 15:*

*Paul and Barnabas and others were sent by the church at Antioch to Jerusalem; there they discussed the issues with the apostles and elders (15:1-4).*

*Peter's testimony was crucial (15:7-11), and James had the deciding word (15:13-21).*

*Those present agreed that four regulations are binding on the Gentiles (15:28-29).*

*It was Peter who was first sent to preach to the Gentiles, when his vision led him to Cornelius (15:7, 14).*

*A letter was sent to the churches, and everybody was happy (15:22-31).*

*One decisive action apparently settled the matter forever.*

*According to Galatians 2:*

*Paul went to Jerusalem, taking Barnabas and Titus with him, because of a vision, in order to confirm that the gospel he preached was "not in vain" (2:1-2).*

*The so-called leaders added nothing to Paul's teaching (2:6).*

*Nothing is required for Gentiles except sending money (2:10).*

*These leaders agreed that Paul and Barnabas should go to the Gentiles, and Peter and the other apostles should limit their ministry to the Jews (2:9).*

*No letter is mentioned.*

*The debates continued, and the application took a long time. Peter himself didn't live up to the principles of the agreement, and Paul had to correct him in public (2:11-21).*

So which of these two stories is true? Why are they so different? What does the disparity do to our confidence in the Bible as “the fully reliable and trustworthy standard for Christian faith and life”? And how can Christians find guidance from these texts on the issues we face in our quest to be faithful to God’s will?

### **How can we know which account is true?**

Arguments have been advanced on both sides, and attempts have been made to harmonize the two accounts. We are left with the dilemma of Tevye, in “Fiddler on the Roof.” Listening to one side of an argument he said, “You’re right,” and hearing the counter-argument he said, “You’re right.” And when challenged that they couldn’t both be right, he agreed, “You also are right.”

The Bible doesn’t tell us which of these narratives is true, in the sense of being an accurate report about a historical event. Its purpose is not to answer that question. To Paul’s readers, the account in Galatians 2 reveals truth about the acceptance of Gentiles into the church; to Luke’s readers, the account in Acts 15 reveals truth about the concord achieved in the church about incorporating Gentiles into an essentially Jewish Christian movement. To us as we read both accounts, they reveal separate truths and a common truth. But the differences between the historical facts in these two accounts cannot be reconciled.

### **How do we explain the differences between these accounts?**

*Difference in writers.* In part, the divergence can be attributed to the personalities of the two writers, Paul and Luke. Paul probably couldn’t have brought himself to smooth over the conflict even if he had wanted to. To do so would have entailed contradicting his character, his identity. Luke, on the other hand, didn’t see the events as a great clash between opposing forces: truth vs. untruth, justice vs. injustice. He by nature saw possibilities for building bridges—for finding common ground, mutually acceptable alternatives, a third way. And his report focuses on those opportunities.

*Difference in readers.* Furthermore, differences between the personalities of readers play a significant part in our understanding of the texts. Some readers (both of the text and of this article) will be impressed by the differences between these accounts and

will find it impossible to reconcile them. They may even accentuate the divergence to the point of casting doubt on the truthfulness and reliability of scripture. Some might deal with the differences by suggesting that Luke and Paul must have been describing different events. Such readers will find commentators and preachers who share their reading.

Other readers will honestly be puzzled by the identified differences. They are inclined to recognize commonalities, to see the variations as insignificant, and to be suspicious of people who seem to want to force a contradictory reading. They would be able to present a synthesized reading, probably on the basis of the Acts account, incorporating Paul's reports into it. And they could find commentators and preachers who share their reading.

*Difference in audience and purpose.* A further dimension of the differences can be attributed to differences in intended audiences and purposes. The implied reader of Acts was Theophilus, a public political figure. At least part of Luke's purpose was to demonstrate that the church was unified and not a threat to the

**Paul and Luke shared a desire to bring people into the grace of salvation and the fellowship of the church. On this they agreed: that salvation is through grace alone, and that the evidence of salvation is the activity of the Holy Spirit.**

Roman Empire. On the other hand, the intended readers of Galatians were lay people in the church that Paul had founded. Paul's purpose in writing was, at least in part, to demonstrate that he had authority as an apostle that was independent of the apostles in Jerusalem, whom he saw as his opponents.

One purpose in writing that was common to Paul and Luke was their desire to bring people into the grace of salvation and the fellowship of the church. On this they were agreed: that salvation is through grace alone (see Gal. 2:21 and Acts 15:11), and that the evidence of salvation is the activity of the

Holy Spirit (see especially Acts 15:8). Both of them held to these convictions. But when they wrote, they were addressing the invitation to different audiences with different concerns.

Paul was promoting the inclusion of Gentiles into God's family. These who were outsiders in relation to Israel and thus to the earliest church had to be persuaded that they were welcome, that they had full access to salvation. And the established members of

the church had to be persuaded that God would accept Gentiles as Christians just as they were; they need not first become Jews.

Luke, on the other hand, took for granted the inclusion of Gentiles, but he was concerned about the Christians who were Jews and who feared that the emerging church was abandoning the faith and the morality that had nurtured them and that defined what it meant to be God's people. He needed to stress the continuity with Judaism and to highlight, by stating it twice in full detail (Acts 15:19-20, 28-29), the requirement that Gentiles observe the commandments that God had given to Noah.

We can easily see why these writers, given their different audiences and different purposes, were bound to report so differently the events that happened in Jerusalem. If Paul had written to Theophilus and Luke had written to the churches of Galatia, their reports would have changed. And if either had written to both audiences, they might well have penned different accounts to each, because the circumstances and needs of the audiences were different. It is an illusion to think that one is communicating the same thing when one says the same words to different people, without regard for the differences in their situation and concerns. Under the circumstances, one will probably be misunderstood by one or both listeners.

***Difference in time of writing.*** Finally, I believe that some of the differences between these two accounts stem from the different times in which these documents were written. Paul wrote about CE 55, in the heat of a struggle for the soul of the church. Acts was written perhaps thirty years later, when the outcome of the debate was known, the heat had dissipated, and the emotionality was a memory rather than an immediate experience.

Think of the issues that were hotly debated in the church thirty years ago. Those who are old enough will recall passionate letters to the editor of our church papers on these topics. Now when we look back, we know how things have turned out, and the heat of those days is moderated, perhaps fully dissipated. We may even wonder (or our children may wonder) what all the fuss was about. So it was for Luke, looking back after the church had resolved the issue of including Gentiles. He could write calmly. In a conciliatory spirit, he could draw the parties together, holding up a consensus and naming it "good to the Holy Spirit and to us."

## What do we conclude about the reliability of the scriptures to guide us?

I have emphasized the differences between these two accounts. Perhaps what is most surprising now is that both versions are included in the Bible. Why not choose one? Wouldn't it have been better for the reputation of the Christian church to present one coherent and consistent voice on the conflictual issues dealt with in the Jerusalem Council? When it comes right down to it, wouldn't the witness of the church be better served if Luke's smoother account had prevailed, and Paul's stories—which some have seen as emotional, self-serving, and embarrassing—had been excised (while the more obviously edifying parts of his letter to the Galatians were retained).

The process of determining what books would be included in the Bible took several centuries and evolved as people noticed what was happening in the churches. It was not a top-down decision dictated by those in authority, but it emerged out of the life and testimony of churches about the writings they found

**When the church decided on the limits of the canon, it didn't choose one account and reject the other. It accepted Luke's account but insisted that Paul's account must also be included.**

profitable from among those purportedly written by the apostles. As some church groups pressed for the inclusion of certain writings, and others pressed to exclude those writings, a consensus emerged. The consensus was that the biblical canon must include different kinds of literature, different points of view, different theologies, and different practices.

When the church decided on the limits of the canon, it didn't choose one account and reject the other. It accepted Luke's account but insisted that Paul's account must also be included. It made similar decisions about including four Gospels and multiple accounts of other events.

On the other hand, not all early Christian writings found their way into the New Testament canon. Paul's letter to the Galatians was included, but the *Epistle to the Laodiceans*, *3 Corinthians*, and the correspondence between Seneca and Paul were not included. The Acts of the Apostles was included, but the acts of Paul, John, Peter, Andrew, Thomas, and of Peter and the twelve apostles were

not. For a variety of reasons, many early Christian writings and perspectives were not deemed worthy of inclusion in the canon.

We believe that the Holy Spirit directed those who discerned what should be included in holy scripture. So we are compelled to believe that God wanted us to read Paul's passionate plea for including the Gentiles without prerequisites, *and also* that God wanted us to read Luke's calm account of unity in the church where Christian Gentiles and Christian Jews find common ground and make common cause around shared moral commitments.

### **How shall we read the Bible when we have differing understandings of truth?**

I propose three lessons from these observations on the two accounts described above.

First, it is not necessary for us to agree on all things. Even in the Bible, there are different ways of understanding and speaking truth. We have considered one of many examples where historical facts are reported differently. In many places in the Bible, theological, spiritual, and ethical differences can be identified. And all are included in the one scriptural canon. The Holy Spirit seems to be able to hold contradictory truths together without resolving the contradiction. Perhaps with that same Spirit's aid, we too can achieve some ease with that tension.

There is, of course, a limit to the differences: some convictions emerge with consistency in texts that diverge on other points. In the example above, the accounts in Acts and Galatians agree on the central theological affirmation that salvation is received through grace alone, and that Gentiles can be saved without keeping the regulations that govern God's relationship with Jews. Christians always struggle to determine what understandings are essential (such as acceptance of Gentiles into the church) and what matters are not (such as, apparently, the facts about the Jerusalem Council).

Second, there may be different truths for people with different personalities and different life experiences, living in different places, formed by different cultures at different times. Paul, Luke, Theophilus, Gentile Christians in Galatia, and Jewish Christians in Jerusalem all needed to be addressed by particular truths. And so it is with us. We need to hear the gospel in different ways, and

sometimes those gospel messages may seem to contradict each other.

Finally, the determination of truth is the responsibility of the whole church, not just of individuals or subgroups within it. Both accounts of the Jerusalem Council emphasize the consensus that was defined there. Perhaps the fact of achieving consensus was as important as the content, because on parts of the content the accounts don't agree. Furthermore, it was the discernment of the church that both accounts should be counted as holy scripture,

**The Bible demonstrates the necessity of holding different stories, different perspectives, and different missions in one church. In the stories of conflict in the earliest church, we find inspiration for living together and seeking God's leading in our time.**

part of the authoritative biblical canon. Luke and Paul made their contributions, but they did not determine what the church would do either with their own writings or with the other's writings. That decision belonged to the church under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

The Bible includes multiple theological views and multiple accounts of many events, including these two accounts of the Jerusalem Council. The differences are influenced by different personalities, different audiences, different purposes for writing, and different times of writing. By holding together Paul's

account and Luke's account of this event, the Bible demonstrates the possibility—even the necessity—of holding different stories, different perspectives, and different missions in one church. In the stories of conflict in the earliest church, we find inspiration for living together and seeking God's leading in our time with our issues.

## Note

<sup>1</sup>*Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1995), 21.

## About the author

Dan Nighswander is the General Secretary for Mennonite Church Canada. He has served at various times as pastor, denominational minister and adjunct lecturer in New Testament at Conrad Grebel University College.