

Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology

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Editorial

Dan Epp-Tiessen

Humanity does not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD. (*Deut.* 8:3; cf. *Matt.* 4:4)

Our human need for God's life-giving word stands at the centre of all the articles in this issue of *Vision*. The original goal for this issue was to focus more narrowly on the authority of scripture, but for a variety of reasons the topic became broader, and I think the results are better. Each of the articles comes from a different angle, but each contributes to a conversation about how we might hear and experience scripture as God's life-giving word. Not surprisingly, the question of authority still remains central. Why should

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we read and reflect on scripture, and why should we orient our lives around the story it tells, unless we believe that it is authoritative in some way?

Just as the order of some biblical books is deliberate and hermeneutically significant (see the conclusion of Waldemar Janzen's article), the order of articles in this issue is deliberate and intended to guide the reader's experience and interpretation. I believe that reading the articles in order will allow them

to speak cumulatively, so that their message and impact become more than the sum of the parts.

Gerald Gerbrandt's lead article begins by noting the decline of biblical authority over the last decades, and it documents various Christian attempts to rescue this lost authority. He observes that theoretical arguments about the inerrancy or authority of scripture rarely convince anyone (except those already convinced). Biblical authority, he suggests, can best *be demonstrated* by a

Christian community for whom scripture *has authority* in matters of faith and practice. “The challenge for the church then, is to be a community within which scripture has authority, which practices scriptural authority, which responds with trust to the invitation of scripture to be an authority” (10). Gerbrandt then asks, “How might the church become this kind of community?”—a key question to which all the other articles respond in one way or another.

Karl Koop explores the promise and problems of the Protestant Reformation’s rallying cry, *sola scriptura* (scripture alone), a principle originally intended to ensure the primacy of scripture but not to deny the importance of tradition in interpreting scripture. In many cases, tradition represents the collective wisdom of past generations, and by protecting the church from false beliefs and false ways of reading scripture, tradition can assist the church in practicing biblical authority. Waldemar Janzen analyzes how two hundred years of historical-critical study of the Bible tended to direct attention away from scripture as the word of life. Instead, many biblical scholars mined the text for data about ancient Israelite and Christian history or traces of earlier oral and written sources. Janzen highlights the promise of recent canonical approaches that focus on the shape and content of the final biblical text, and once again ask how scripture addresses the community of faith as life-giving word.

Following these more theoretical articles are several that reflect on how the church actually uses its scripture and is thereby shaped into a community that practices biblical authority. The way we read scripture aloud in worship communicates what we believe about it, Mary Klassen reminds us. Therefore, public reading of scripture should be done with expression, sensitivity, passion, and careful preparation that “begins with seeing the scripture reader as one who speaks God’s word to the people” (33). Lois Siemens offers a theological basis and many practical suggestions for allowing scripture to infuse all elements of our worship.

June Alliman Yoder begins by asking what we mean when we speak of “biblical preaching,” and then she explores the interplay between different elements responsible for the authority of our preaching. She concludes that the Holy Spirit predominates,

because the Spirit has given us the biblical text, makes the scripture's message known to the preacher, and assists the preacher in knowing what the congregation most needs to hear. Mary Schertz makes an impassioned (and sometimes humorous) case for learning the biblical languages. Among the benefits she cites of knowing Greek and Hebrew are greater sensitivity to nuances of meaning in the text, respect for the otherness of the text so that we do not domesticate it, and finding our voice and authority as interpreters.

From the perspective of many years of pastoral ministry, Menno Epp reflects on how scripture can be the means whereby God speaks a word of healing, strength, and guidance into human pain, brokenness, and longing. Dan Nighswander points out that sometimes the biblical witness contains a diversity of perspectives on events or moral issues. Rather than seeking to eliminate this diversity or treating it as a problem to overcome, Nighswander suggests that we honour the diversity and allow it to inform our life as a community endeavouring to practice biblical authority.

Poet Jean Janzen's piece artfully traces how the "intersection of the Story and my story has grown during my lifetime" (78). Through Janzen's insightful testimony, we develop deeper appreciation for how the story of our lives can be shaped by God's larger Story, and we are reminded that it is precisely through such shaping that the authority of scripture is demonstrated and practiced. Ruth Preston Schilk's sermon continues the theme of scripture's power to transform. The Bible is "dangerous" because it has the power to change us, to challenge our worldview, to make us see and hear things we prefer to ignore, and to make us cast off old masters. Because of the Bible's power, Schilk challenges us to "consume" this dangerous book hungrily.

May this issue of *Vision* assist the church to practice and demonstrate the authority of scripture, and also to experience scripture as the word of life we cannot do without.

Practicing scriptural authority

Gerald Gerbrandt

A recent contribution by Karlfried Froehlich to a dialogue within the Lutheran church around the role of scripture begins, “The crisis of Biblical authority in our churches must be seen in the wider context of the general crisis of authority in today’s culture—a culture from which the notion of the Bible as an authoritative word for anyone has long since vanished.”¹ Although presumably an exaggeration, the statement provides a helpful context or starting point for the present conversation.

It is difficult to imagine any church, much less one with roots going back to the Reformation, not granting to scripture some form of authority. The very term *scripture* implies an authoritative writing. Historically, Protestant churches were born through struggle with the church of the time over the primacy of scripture as an authority. *Sola scriptura* (scripture alone) became a catch phrase for this reliance on scripture. Today the church against which the Reformers struggled is more willing to recognize how it too privileges biblical authority. Within the context of church, scripture and authority go hand in hand.

The challenge for the church is to be a community within which scripture has authority, which practices scriptural authority, which responds with trust to the invitation of scripture to be an authority.

The article on scripture in the 1995 *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* reflects this larger historical commitment:

“We acknowledge the Scripture as the authoritative source and standard for preaching and teaching about faith and life, for distinguishing truth from error, for discerning between good and evil, and for guiding prayer and worship.”¹ The language of the article avoids many of the fighting words frequently used in contemporary debate around the doctrine of scripture, but it makes the clear affirmation that scripture is authoritative. For the

Christian church, including its Anabaptist wing, scripture has authority and therefore holds a unique power and place. Through it, God speaks and gives life.

But, Karl Froehlich asserts, this biblical authority is in crisis, a crisis or loss of place it has in common with many other authorities formerly respected. Using the historical analysis of Jeffrey Stout as a background,² Froehlich sees this “flight from authority” as linked to the phases of Western intellectual history. External authorities have been replaced by an almost unquestioned faith in individual reason and judgment, resting on personal experience. Lesslie Newbigin speaks of a way of thinking that rejects appeal to traditional authorities “except insofar as they could justify themselves before the bar of individual reason and conscience.”³ The language for and explanation of the present dynamic may vary, but an overall consensus prevails: we live in a time when suspicion of all authority is dominant, with reliance on external authority largely replaced by confidence in autonomous and individual reason. The church is not exempt from this dynamic: it too has lost authority in society, and those who are part of it have been influenced by the same general trend. The result, regardless of official statements, is a significant undermining of scriptural authority within the church, which creates the crisis of authority referred to by Froehlich.

The reality described above presents a significant challenge to the church. Perhaps most obviously, a tension or gap has developed between official church statements on scriptural authority, and day-to-day life and thought of people in the congregation. Of course, one way of resolving that tension is by bringing the official church statements into line with practice. This appears to be the approach of some, including Robin Scroggs, who suggests that the claim that the Bible has authority no longer makes sense, and that we therefore “forthrightly give up any claim that the Bible is authoritative . . . in guidance for contemporary faith and morals.”⁴

A more common approach in the past thirty years or so has been to defend as aggressively as possible the authority of the Bible through polemical debates around the doctrine of scripture. Harold Lindsell opened the preface of his 1976 *The Battle for the Bible* with this claim: “I regard the subject of this book, biblical inerrancy, to be the most important theological topic of this age.

A great battle rages about it among people called evangelicals.”⁵ For much of the second half of the twentieth century, espousing a high view of scriptural authority was the benchmark for the evangelical movement. When the Evangelical Theological Society was founded in 1949, it insisted on only one doctrinal affirmation: “The Bible alone and the Bible in its entirety, is the Word of God written, and therefore inerrant in the autographs.”⁶

Debate about what this statement meant and who was orthodox has been intense, sometimes highly technical and philosophical, and frequently vicious. Terms such as *infallible*, *inerrant*, and *plenary inspiration* were defined over and over again and minute distinctions made among various positions. In its early years, Fuller Theological Seminary’s faculty devoted countless hours to debate over how to understand scripture, and some faculty left the institution, or felt forced to leave, because they did not hold the right position or were not persuaded that others on faculty held the right position.⁷ Because commitment to an inerrant scripture was the primary affirmation holding some movements together (or not holding them together, in many cases), having a

precise doctrine of scripture was considered critical, with the result that arguments and refinements were almost endless.

The intensity and focus of these debates give the impression that participants considered defining and proving scriptural authority to be the key strategy in defending scriptural authority in the face of contemporary suspicion of it or hesitancy about it. Some of the arguments used, however, remind one of Eve’s exaggerated response to the snake in the garden when she quotes God as having said, “You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree which

is in the midst of the garden, *neither shall you touch it*, lest you die” (Gen. 3:3; cf. 2:17). Those concerned sought to ensure that scripture was protected, by adding an extra layer of insurance.

I question the effectiveness of this strategy. Proofs for God’s existence may provide comfort to those who have faith, but they seldom persuade nonbelievers of God’s existence, much less of God’s personal dynamic and love. In the same way, arguments for

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biblical authority tend to be inadequate for persuading those who are suspicious of it. Added to this limitation is the reality that all too often the debates appeared to be more about determining orthodoxy than about securing scripture's authority. Those who affirmed a particular doctrine were considered acceptable and faithful; those who held a somewhat different position were denounced and even rejected.

My contention is that a more effective response, and perhaps one more appropriate to the "crisis of biblical authority," is the

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reality of a community finding in scripture the source of life. An Anabaptist approach to scripture can never be satisfied with focus on a theoretical position. To adapt the words of Jesus (Matt. 7:21): Not everyone who has a correct doctrine of scripture will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. A communal witness to biblical authority, I suggest, is more effective in persuading people of the power of scripture than are

proofs and arguments for the authority of scripture. What is more, this approach is faithful to the direction of scripture itself.

When I make these statements, I imply a particular understanding of the nature of authority. One aspect of the so-called crisis of biblical authority is a misunderstanding of how the Bible has authority. *Authority* in many—perhaps most—contexts implies ability or power to enforce that authority. Thus the authority of law passed by legislation includes the enforcement of that law through the use of police and the judicial system. The authority of a professor includes the element of grading. The authority of a CEO of a corporation includes in various ratios the ability to reprimand, reward, and release employees. Sometimes the arguments for biblical authority appeared to accept this notion of authority and seemed to want to impose or enforce that authority.

But the Bible's authority is not enforced. Rather, biblical authority is invitational. Froehlich suggests that "in the religious realm, acceptance alone established authority, an authority that is unable to motivate compliance except by persuasion."⁸ He quotes Catholic theologian Avery Dulles: "Authority is that which (or

the person whom) one has reason to trust.”⁹ Biblical authority thus cannot be proved or enforced but must be lived and demonstrated. As the church lives from the authority of the Bible, it witnesses to that authority and invites others to trust it and accept it for themselves.

The challenge for the church, then, is to be a community within which scripture has authority, which practices scriptural authority, which responds with trust to the invitation of scripture to be an authority. How might the church become this kind of community? I have no magic formula, no simple answer to that question. But several practices and principles can aid in the process. The final paragraph of the article in the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* provides a helpful starting point for a number of these:

*The Bible is the essential book of the church. Through the Bible, the Holy Spirit nurtures the obedience of faith to Jesus Christ and guides the church in shaping its teaching, witnessing, and worship. We commit ourselves to persist and delight in reading, studying, and meditating on the Scriptures. We participate in the church’s task of interpreting the Bible and of discerning what God is saying in our time by examining all things in the light of Scripture. Insights and understandings which we bring to the interpretation of the Scripture are to be tested in the faith community.*¹⁰

Scripture study is a source of delight. Psalm 1 speaks of blessed people as those whose “delight is in the law of the Lord,” on which they “meditate day and night” (v. 2). Similarly, our confession of faith commits us to “persist and delight in reading, studying, and meditating on Scriptures.” One inescapable prerequisite for practicing biblical authority is regular study of the Bible, as individuals and, more importantly, with other members of the church. And this study is to be embraced not as duty or obligation but as joy and delight.

Scripture points beyond itself to God. Scripture is not the ultimate or supreme authority. God is. The confession of faith speaks of the Holy Spirit nurturing “obedience of faith to Jesus Christ”; through scripture study we discern “what God is saying in

our time.” Ultimately, the goal of scripture study is not to hear what *scripture* is saying but to discover what *God* is saying and doing today, and what God wishes us to do and say today. Scripture’s authority is derivative; it can never replace the living God who acts and speaks today.

The primary context for authoritative interpretation of scripture is the church. There is no use of scripture that does not include interpretation. It is therefore meaningless to speak of scriptural authority without at the same time speaking about how scripture becomes authoritative. And that process requires interpretation.

The church is the community of those who have responded to God’s call to become a people through whom God acts. Those in the church *practice* the faith. Scripture is not authoritative within the society of professional biblical scholars, committed Christians though they may be. Scripture is not authoritative as individuals study it by themselves, valuable as this study may be in the interpretative process. Rather, it is in the community of those

Scripture is not authoritative as individuals study it. Rather, it is in the community of those committed to making scripture central to their life that the interpretive process can be authoritative.

committed to making scripture central to their life that the interpretive process can be authoritative.

Ironically, the tendency in parts of the church to emphasize individual Bible study, to stress each individual Christian’s responsibility to come to his or her own understanding of scripture, fits with the spirit of our times, giving individual reason and judgment supreme authority, better than it fits with a church-centred approach to interpretation.

The language of the confession of faith may be inadequate when it calls for insights and interpretations to be tested in the faith community: at this point it appears to make individual study of scripture primary and broader testing secondary rather than pointing to the communal process as the norm.

Scripture study leads to transformation. The appropriate result of scripture study is not merely increased knowledge but transformation and change. Ethicist Stanley Hauerwas suggests that “North American Christians are trained to believe that they are capable of reading the Bible without spiritual and moral

transformation.”¹¹ The Bible is not a book we should turn to when we want to find support for positions we already espouse; it is a book we turn to when we want to open ourselves up to God and to the ways God wants to change us to make us part of God’s ministry in our world.

Applying a hermeneutics of suspicion to our interpretations has value. The phrase *hermeneutics of suspicion* is used of an approach in biblical studies that asks interpreters to be suspicious of the text as we have received it. This approach recognizes that biblical writers did not have complete information and wrote to support particular positions, perhaps in the midst of controversy with other positions. If we accept this premise, we will approach the text with a critical, even suspicious, mind.

We might debate the helpfulness of this kind of hermeneutics of suspicion. But I would suggest that a hermeneutics of suspicion that focuses on the interpretive process rather than on the writing process is essential. The natural tendency when doing biblical study is to discover in scripture support for previously held positions and validation for our own situations. Given this tendency, a hermeneutics of suspicion should raise questions about any interpretation that confirms previously held theological positions, or that appears to fit too comfortably with our gender, economic status, political leanings, etc. Such an interpretation is not necessarily wrong, but we have to take care so as not to read our preferences into the text.

We also need to be suspicious of readings that appear to apply primarily to others. Frequently in Bible study we discover texts that we read as God’s word of judgment or correction to others. Again, such readings may not be wrong, but we must exercise caution. Even if they are legitimate readings, in most cases they are less helpful than readings that address us. We do well to remind ourselves that quoting or using scripture is seldom an effective weapon in battles with others about theology or ethics. This kind of hermeneutics of suspicion can be valuable in granting scripture authority for us.

Froehlich suggests there is a crisis of biblical authority within our churches. I expect he is correct. Developing a doctrine of scripture that helps us understand how scripture is and has come to be authoritative is an appropriate theological endeavour. But I

doubt that this effort will resolve the crisis. Rather, what is needed is for the church community to turn to the Bible and study it in anticipation that we will be transformed. Through such study we can come to see and hear more clearly what God is doing and what God wants us to do. At various key moments in the history of the people of God, scripture has played a seminal role in the beginnings of a reformation. That potential also exists today.

Notes

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

² Jeffrey Stout, *The Flight from Authority: Religion, Morality, and the Quest for Autonomy* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981); quoted in Terence E. Fretheim and Karfried Froehlich, *The Bible as Word of God: In a Postmodern Age* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 11.

³ Lesslie Newbigin, *Truth and Authority in Modernity* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996).

⁴ Robin Scroggs, "The Bible as Foundational Document," *Interpretation* 49, no. 1 (1995): 23.

⁵ Harold Lindsell, *The Battle for the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976).

⁶ *Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society* 1, no. 1 (Winter 1958), quoted in D. G. Hart, *Deconstructing Evangelicalism: Conservative Protestantism in the Age of Billy Graham* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 132.

⁷ See the absorbing account of this conflict in George Marsden, *Reforming Fundamentalism: Fuller Seminary and the New Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987).

⁸ Fretheim and Froehlich, *The Bible as Word of God*, 14.

⁹ Avery Dulles, "The Authority of Scripture: A Catholic Perspective," in *Scripture in the Jewish and Christian Traditions: Authority, Interpretation, Relevance*, ed. Frederick E. Greenspahn (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1982), 14.

¹⁰ *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*, 22.

¹¹ Stanley Hauerwas, *Unleashing the Scripture: Freeing the Bible from Captivity to America* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993), 15.

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Scripture and tradition A dilemma for Protestants

Karl Koop

In the spring of 1521, Martin Luther was called to the city of Worms to defend his theology before Emperor Charles V. He had reason to believe that his day in court would go well. Cheering crowds greeted him as he traveled from Wittenberg to Worms. The preaching services that he held from one city to the next were jammed so full that in one instance a church balcony almost collapsed. Yet Luther also had reason to be concerned. A century earlier, Czech reformer John Hus had also been invited to defend his beliefs before a great council, in the city of Constance. Hus had been promised a fair hearing but was condemned as a heretic and burned at the stake. When Luther's friends reminded him of

"I am bound by the Scriptures . . . and my conscience is captive to the Word of God." With this dramatic response to the authorities, Luther established what would be foundational for Protestant Christians.

Hus's fate, Luther knew that his future was in doubt. Nevertheless he vowed to press on.¹

Having been ushered into court, Luther was instructed to renounce his writings. He begged to be given an extra day to prepare his answer. When he was brought back before the court the following day, he expected a further hearing but was met with a demand to recant the error of his writings. Luther's response included these memorable lines: "Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason . . . I am

bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God."² With this dramatic response before the authorities—the emperor, nobles, and lords—Luther established what would be foundational for Protestant Christians: Scripture would be their primary source of authority, and their consciences would be subject to the word of God.

Some of the German princes in the court were impressed with Luther's willingness to stand up to the powers of the world. They

understood Luther's bravado, even if they did not comprehend the details of his theological arguments. But others were not amused and responded with a question that Protestants have perhaps not always taken seriously enough: "What if everyone simply followed his or her own conscience?"³

Some of the authorities responded to Luther with a question that Protestants have not always taken seriously enough: "What if everyone simply followed his or her own conscience?"

The following days did not go well for Luther. He was placed under the imperial ban and excommunicated from the church, and his writings were to be burned. He might have met Hus's fate, had not his own prince, Frederick III, elector of Saxony, kidnapped him and taken him into protective custody. In secret, Luther was transported to the Wartburg Castle. There, ensconced above the surrounding hills, he translated the New Testament into the language of the common people. With a translation of the Bible that could be easily understood, and an accompanying doctrine emphasizing the sole authority of scripture [*sola scriptura*], Luther unleashed a revolution that would free Christians from the tyranny of the medieval church and enable them to interpret the gospel message for themselves. Yet such a revolution was not without potential shortcomings. What would guarantee that people would interpret the scriptures faithfully? And what would prevent them from being ensnared by their own private interests, and by the biases and prejudices of their own culture?

The formation of tradition

The church has always been confronted with the responsibility of interpreting scripture. In early Christianity, members in the community had the right to speak (1 Corinthians 14), yet Christ's apostles were the primary interpreters of the gospel. After their passing, the churches turned to apostolic writings for guidance but soon faced the difficult challenge of having to decide which writings were authentically apostolic. By the end of the fourth century, the church had more or less identified twenty-seven writings as inspired and authoritative. This selection did not resolve matters entirely, because the question of how these writings were to be interpreted also needed to be addressed. All texts

demand elucidation, and competing interpretations confronted the church with the hard work of discerning the meaning of particular passages of scripture.

Theologians of the church responded by developing an authorized way of interpreting scripture that could be tied to the apostles themselves. Scripture was not apprehended in some arbitrary fashion but was interpreted in continuity with the way the church had read the Christian message from the very beginning.⁴ Scriptural commentaries and creedal statements were soon adopted as means of providing support for this approach, and these writings were used to defend the faith against heresy. They became important points of reference for Christians, and they became part of the church's tradition alongside scripture.

Because scripture did not explicitly speak to every issue confronting the church, some claimed that God had wisely provided another source of revelation to supplement this deficit—an oral tradition. In their view, this additional source was passed down from one generation to the next, and councils and the teaching office of the church, including the pope, carried it forward. In the late Middle Ages, theologians and canon lawyers debated about whether to accept this second source, but they could not reach consensus.

In the sixteenth century, the Catholic church resolved the issue at the Council of Trent by supporting a two-source theory of tradition, arguing “that alongside the tradition embodied in scripture, there [was] *another*, extrabiblical, oral tradition deriving from Jesus’ post-Easter instruction to the apostles, and passed down to succeeding generations by the magisterium of the church.”⁵

Martin Luther was especially troubled by this oral tradition that was disconnected from scripture. When, for example, the church supported the sale of indulgences or the veneration of saints—practices that had developed independently of scripture—he protested. In his writings, he emphasized the authority of scripture and rejected papal and conciliar decretals that, in his view, were in discontinuity with scripture.

Not surprisingly, the authorities were in turn troubled by Luther's ideas, which they believed were dividing not only the church but also the empire. His views seemed dangerously indi-

vidualistic, and members of the imperial court were quick to point out that if everybody followed his example and relied on their consciences, the result would be religious fragmentation and political chaos.

Luther had no intention of elevating private judgment above the corporate wisdom of the church, nor was he intent on rejecting all that the church had held dear for 1500 years. Luther's *sola scriptura* principle was meant to secure the primacy of scripture.

Scripture was “the *norma normans* (the determining norm) not a

Luther's *sola scriptura* principle was meant to secure the primacy of scripture. But tradition also had its place when it was consistent with scripture and when it reflected the consensus of the church.

norma normata (determined norm) for all decisions of faith and life.”⁶ This conviction did not imply, however, that tradition should be categorically ignored. Tradition had its place when it was consistent with scripture and when it reflected the consensus of the church. Luther placed value especially on the early creeds and writings of the church fathers, and he saw them as trustworthy guardians of the truth that could help protect the church from error.

But Protestant Christians did not always understand the way scripture and tradition were linked. Many viewed tradition with ambivalence and eventually rejected its place in Christian theology.

The demise of tradition

Wanting to distance themselves from Roman Catholicism, Protestant theologians in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries increasingly emphasized the primacy of scripture and gradually nudged the concept of tradition toward the periphery of religious life. Protestant scholastics, for example, “declared that the authority of scripture was self-authenticating and thus valid apart from the faith of the church.”⁷ All that was required was a rational mind that could effectively understand the objective meaning of the text.

A more serious attack on tradition was soon launched during the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, when scholars began to view with skepticism appeals not only to tradition but also to scripture. In theology, as in other fields of inquiry, individuals

were encouraged to think for themselves, to strive for dispassionate objectivity unencumbered by the past, and to subject all truth claims to a rationality that was supposedly unbiased.

Christian theology was not unaffected by this intellectual current. By the nineteenth century, liberal Protestants influenced by Enlightenment rationalism sometimes viewed both scripture and tradition as hindrances to religious experience. Some liberals believed that any formulations of the past hindered the task of theology, and they viewed such formulations as having been superseded by the new spirit of the modern world.⁸ Christians influenced by the Pietist movement during this era were also critical of tradition, because, in their view, it interfered with personal religious experience and heartfelt spiritual expression.

In the twentieth century, neo-orthodox theologians once again granted scripture primacy but also recognized the importance of tradition. Doctrinal statements of the church were viewed as giving witness to scripture's unity and centre. Yet the temptation to relegate tradition to the periphery persisted. Today, tradition is often associated with hierarchical Catholicism, from which faithful Christians broke away, and it is deemed antithetical to the absolute authority of scripture. Protestants often point out that somewhere between the death of the apostles and the Reformation, the church "fell" from the original vision of the New Testament. They spend time learning about the traditions of the Bible but give little consideration to the interpretive process that entails drawing wisdom from the church's past and subjecting current interpretations to the church's experience of worship and communal life.

Stanley Grenz and John Franke, writing from an Evangelical perspective, have criticized the way contemporary Christians, especially Evangelicals and Anabaptists, have read scripture with the view toward finding meaning for the individual. Such an approach may stimulate a person's interest in Bible study, but it may also encourage a reading that is directed toward self-interest. Grenz and Franke note that if the individual's need is the primary concern in Bible study, contemporary Christians will encounter a proliferation of interpretations of the biblical text. Drawing on the work of another evangelical, Richard Lints, they make the following observation: "In banishing all mediators between the Bible and ourselves, we have let the Scriptures be ensnared in a web of

subjectivism. Having rejected the aid of the community of interpreters throughout the history of Christendom, we have not succeeded in returning to the primitive gospel; we have simply managed to plunge ourselves back to the biases of our own individual situations.”⁹ In their critique, Grenz and Franke are not questioning the centrality or primacy of scripture. Their concern is that, by ignoring the tradition of the church, Christians have become vulnerable to their own subjective interpretations.

This outcome may have been anticipated in the city of Worms, when the imperial court asked Luther what would happen if all people determined for themselves the truth of the gospel. In asking this question, representatives of the European powers were clearly acting out of self-interest. Yet even as they defended the status quo, they may have correctly anticipated the theological pluralism and religious relativism that besets our own time.

Reconsidering tradition

Postmodern theorists question whether any knowledge is attainable without tradition. Increasingly, theologians of all stripes are also recognizing that interpretations of the Christian story are

Theologians of all stripes are now recognizing that interpretations of the Christian story are always shaped by religious, social, and cultural contexts, which in turn are shaped by some kind of tradition.

always shaped by religious, social, and cultural contexts, which in turn are shaped by some kind of tradition. For this reason, they claim, it is really not possible to read any text, including the Bible, without coming to it from some particular standpoint.

If they are right, then interpreting scripture faithfully can never mean holding strictly to the principle of *sola scriptura*. With this awareness, we can understand why denominations—or theological traditions, at least—do matter, and why the tendency among contemporary Christians to downplay the importance of their denominational affiliation is so problematic. All texts demand interpretation, and the interpretive process is always shaped by a particular stream or streams; it can never simply be generically Christian. As Grenz and Franke point out, Christians that “seek an interpretation unencumbered by the ‘distorting’ influence of fallible ‘human’ traditions are in fact enslaved by interpretive

patterns that are allowed to function uncritically precisely because they are unacknowledged.”¹⁰

Christians must look to scripture for guidance in matters of faith and life; yet they should not ignore their own traditions, which are sustained by a secondary set of texts. Within Protestantism, these texts—creeds, confessions, catechisms, martyrologies, hymns, devotionals, theological writings, liturgies, and so forth—serve to identify the unifying message of the biblical canon for the church. They are points of reference, which assist Christians as they attempt to speak meaningfully about their convictions and commitments. They are valuable because they keep the Christian

Reading scripture faithfully entails reading not only through the lens of a written tradition but also through the lens of a living community of faith that has subjected itself to the guidance and direction of the Holy Spirit.

community from diversifying to the point that identity becomes meaningless. At the same time, they are not infallible, nor do they present a final word. At their best, secondary texts that make up a tradition generate further discussion that may lead to renewal and even reformation of the tradition, for confessional statements of the church belong to living, dynamic, and Spirit-filled communities.

Behind scripture and secondary texts, then, lies the embodied Christian community, the church. This community is the present embodiment of tradition and is “simultaneously the epistemological test of the truth of that tradition.”¹¹ Making sense of the faith is not simply an intellectual activity for spectators; neither can it be carried out on the basis of some disembodied, ahistorical principles. It demands that interpreters themselves be participants. “How the mind thinks must eventually be tested by how the body lives.”¹² For this reason, commitment to a particular, local, visible community is imperative. Reading scripture faithfully entails reading not only through the lens of a written tradition but also through the lens of a living community of faith that has subjected itself to the guidance and direction of the Holy Spirit.

The living community of faith is the local congregation that includes regional and national affiliations. But the church must also go beyond its own theological and confessional particularity.

Reading and interpreting scripture faithfully in the context of the community entails becoming conscious of the fact that one is also a member of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church, which spans the ages and is found in all parts of the world. Neither individuals nor denominations should proceed in isolation or hide from the wisdom of others. The hermeneutical community is not simply the local community in dialogue with itself and its own history, but it encompasses the church universal irrespective of ethnicity, class, gender, or confession.

Notes

¹ Carter Lindberg, *The European Reformations* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 89.

² *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann (St. Louis: Concordia, 1958) 32:112–13; quoted in *ibid.*

³ Mark Noll, *Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2000), 155–56.

⁴ Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1994), 188–89.

⁵ Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformers* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1988), 81.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Stanley J. Grenz and John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 103.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 105.

⁹ Richard Lints, *The Fabric of Theology: A Prolegomenon to Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), 93; quoted in *ibid.*, 109.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 112–13.

¹¹ Harry Huebner, “Imagination/Tradition: Conjunction or Disjunction?” in *Mennonite Theology in Face of Modernity: Essays in Honor of Gordon D. Kaufman*, ed. Alain Epp Weaver (North Newton, KS: Bethel College, 1996), 75.

¹² *Ibid.*, 76.

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Canon and canonical scripture interpretation

Waldemar Janzen

Canon transliterates a Greek word meaning “measuring rod,” and then “rule,” “standard.” In this article, the term will designate the collections of writings set apart from others by the faith communities of Judaism and Christianity as having special authority in matters of faith and practice. *Canon* is therefore more or less equivalent to “Bible” and “holy/sacred scripture.”

Canon has traditionally been used in the context of discussions of the origin, extent, and level of authority of these collections. Scholars generally agree that the Jewish scriptures (our Old Testament) were canonised in three successive stages: the Law/Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings. This canonisation process was complex and probably extended from the fifth or fourth

century BCE, at the latest, to the end of the first century CE; much debate surrounds the details and dates of the process.

Historical-critical methods uncovered valuable knowledge about the development of the texts and about the ancient world. But the theological meaning and message of the Bible became increasingly elusive.

The early Christian church had at first only one canon, the Jewish scriptures, used primarily in their Greek version, which is known as the Septuagint. The Septuagint contains a number of writings, called the Apocrypha, which are not found in the Hebrew canon; most of them were originally composed in Greek. The early churches circulated, read, and held in high esteem the

writings now in our New Testament, but for some time they did not consider these writings equal in authority to the Jewish scriptures.

By the second century, the church felt it necessary to establish its own canon, called the New Testament (new covenant) because the church understood itself to be living under the new covenant predicted in Jeremiah 31:31. For Christians, this designation

effectively made the Jewish scriptures their *Old Testament*. The church had increasingly recognised the authority and power inherent in the writings now making up our New Testament. Councils and official pronouncements only affirmed this authority; they did not confer it.

Against Marcion, a church leader who rejected the Old Testament altogether and accepted as canonical only a truncated Gospel of Luke (“cleansed” of Jewish elements) and ten letters of Paul, the main church affirmed the Old Testament as canonical for Christians and added many of the writings now found in our New Testament. As was the case for the Old Testament, the process of finalising the list of New Testament books took some time; that process was completed by the end of the fourth century. Regarding the extent of the Old Testament canon, the church has never reached complete agreement. The Roman Catholic, Anglican, and (with slight differences) Orthodox churches have included the Apocrypha in the canon as deuterocanonical (having a lesser authority). Protestants have generally accepted only the list of books in the Hebrew canon.¹

Historical-critical scholarship and theological scripture interpretation

Prevailing trends in biblical scholarship from the eighteenth-century Enlightenment on led increasingly to a reading of biblical texts from the outside, first from a rationalist point of view, and then from a historicist one, rather than from the vantage point of faith. Both modes of reading resulted in fragmentation of the biblical texts in search of specific data. Rationalists decided on the basis of (supposedly) universal reason what of the Bible’s content God (if there was one) could have intended, and what God did not intend. Historicists avoided the question of God and anything supernatural by defining the transcendent claims of the Bible as lying outside their competence; theirs was the task of mining from scripture “historical” data for constructing a “true” picture (as judged by empirical yardsticks) of the history of Israel, the “historical Jesus,” and the early church.

For such historical reconstruction, noncanonical ancient writings from within and from outside Israel and the church were as useful as biblical data; in fact, these scholars often considered

such texts more trustworthy, because they were less likely to be “skewed” by faith elements. Archaeological finds were often especially welcome, to support or to discredit biblical claims. What the faith communities of Israel and the church had considered canon, holy scripture, had no distinctive status in this “historical-critical” approach. In retrospect, however, many scholars today recognise that the supposedly objective historicism of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had its own presuppositions, its own beliefs.

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Biblical studies developed ever more sophisticated historical methods to penetrate behind the final text of the Bible to uncover its earlier stages of development. Seminary students learn about literary criticism, form criticism, redaction history, etc. These approaches uncovered much valuable knowledge about the development of the biblical texts, as well as about the ancient past and its cultures. But the theological meaning and message of the Bible, or the place and mes-

sage of God, became increasingly elusive. As a result, many pastors became insecure in preaching from the Bible, and congregations went hungering for the word of God. From the early twentieth century on, various Christian historical-critical scholars recognised this dilemma and attempted to build Old Testament and New Testament theologies on a critically reconstructed textual foundation. They produced impressive works and gained much insight, but this mode of establishing biblical theology by historical-critical means remained problematic for the church.

Toward canonical Bible interpretation

In 1970, Brevard S. Childs issued a major challenge to the whole agenda of historical-critical Bible scholarship with the publication of his epoch-making book *Biblical Theology in Crisis*.² He did not reject historical-critical study as such, but he argued that the historical-critical search for precanonical stages behind the final (canonical) text could not lead to an adequate theological understanding of the Bible. In this work and in many others to follow, he developed a new agenda that has come to be called

“canonical criticism,” although he at first rejected that term.³ Many scholars have found Childs’s appeal convincing and have developed their own versions of canonical criticism/interpretation, following Childs in his basic direction but also modifying his approach in various ways. In the following section, I will outline key points that have marked canonical scripture interpretation in recent decades; I do not intend to characterise Childs’s position specifically.⁴

Canon and community of faith. The Bible, understood as canon, must not be separated from the faith communities, Jewish and Christian, that have discerned it to be canon; they form its first and most proper interpretive communities. Canonical interpretation of the Christian canon (both testaments) is interpretation from within the faith community. That does not make it unscholarly; rather, it defines the context and aim of interpretation differently than Enlightenment-based historical-critical study does. In other words, to derive Christian theology from the Bible, one must interpret it from within, rather than take a “detached” stance so as to interpret it from without.

From precanonical to canonical context. Canonical interpreters generally do not reject historical-critical interpretation as such. However, the two approaches have different interests. Historical-critical study generally proceeds from the final text to its earlier stages, in order to understand the Bible’s prehistory and origins. Canonical study seeks to understand the final text, and it uses historical findings only insofar as they shed light on the final text. Historical criticism sees the proper context for interpreting biblical texts to be the historical context of their time of origin or their stages of transmission. Canonical criticism emphasises that these earlier historical stages were not canon (holy scripture) for either Jews or Christians. To discover the meaning of biblical texts as scripture for these faith communities, one has to interpret them in their final form and in the (literary) context of the whole Bible in its final form.

Final text and canonical authority. Canonical interpretation privileges the final canonical text, but not by disregarding the long process of its shaping. What Childs says of the Old Testament in this respect applies to the whole Bible as well: “The shape of the biblical text reflects a history of encounter between God and

Israel. . . . The significance of the final form of the biblical text is that it alone bears witness to the full history of revelation.”⁵ In other words, the contributions of the various speakers/authors and tradents collectively reach a fuller fruition in the final text than the separate contributions at different stages could achieve—even assuming our data and methods were adequate for reconstructing these earlier stages. This broad collective foundation of revelation is the foundation for the authority of the canon.

Of course, closure of the canon does not mean the end of God’s work or revelation. On the faith assumption that God acts in character—is faithful, to speak biblically—it is precisely the canon that helps the Christian community in discerning new revelation. Further, an ongoing process of exegesis, hermeneutics, and theological creativity offers a wide scope for a dynamic faith development as history moves on. The canon also offers a common base that makes dialogue between various Christian scholars, churches, and denominations fruitful.

Canonical criticism emphasises that to discover the meaning of biblical texts as scripture for Jews and Christians as faith communities, one has to interpret the texts in their final form in the (literary) context of the whole Bible.

Diversity within the canon and intra-canonical dialectic. Christian canonical interpretation acknowledges the great diversity of texts and viewpoints the communities of faith have included in the canon. The analogy of a basketball game can illustrate the diversity of texts held together by the canon, and the nature of canonical theological deliberation. The court represents the boundaries of the canon, the players are the individual biblical books or texts, and the game (the ball’s movement) is Christian

theological interfacing of texts in dialogue. The ball must stay within the court. There is no spot within the court, however, where the ball may not at some time bounce, and no player who cannot at some time handle it legitimately. (Every biblical text can address us as word of God at some time.) Some players are stronger than others, and the players do not all handle the ball equally often. (The Gospels or Isaiah will carry more of the brunt of the game than Nahum, Esther, or 3 John.) There are positions and rules. But the ball cannot be withheld from any team member on the court (any text included in the canon), and sometimes

even the weakest player may shoot a basket (make a theological point).

Sampling the impact of canonical interpretation

To apply canonical interpretation to scripture allows us to hear the Bible's message in new and significant ways, on at least three levels: the level of short texts, the level of longer bodies of texts (a book or another longer literary unit), and the level of the whole canon (for Christians, both testaments). I want to illustrate this effect with a few examples, viewed against the contrasting background of historical-critical interpretation.

Canonical interpretation of a short text within a longer unit

Exodus 2:23-25. Historical-critical analysis generally considers these verses about God's taking note of Israel's suffering to be an insertion of the late P (Priestly) source into a continuous story context from the older J (Yahwistic) and E (Elohistic) sources of the Pentateuch. It disturbs the flow of the story. Martin Noth, for example, in his widely read historical-critical commentary on Exodus, makes this observation in one sentence, and then excludes this text from further interpretation, moving from 2:22 to 3:1 in his exegesis.⁶

From a canonical perspective, on the other hand, which regards all parts of the extant text to have equal integrity (so that none may be dismissed as secondary, intrusions, etc.), I see the use of verses 23-25 as shaping the story in a particular way: The three earlier sections of Exodus 2 (vv. 1-10, 11-15, 16-22) recount the escape (or "salvation") of one Israelite, Moses, from Pharaoh. Like chapter 1, these parts of chapter 2 are marked by an apparent absence of God. A tension is set up for the reader: What about the other Israelites? In 2:23-25, the reader is allowed a glimpse behind the scenes: God has not forgotten the other Israelites but remembers his covenant with Abraham. We, the readers, can now expect that the God who has saved Moses and remembers the other Israelites will save the latter also. Moses is the first fruits (1 Cor. 15:20) of those to be saved. This reading not only sees integral importance in this short text but contributes to my understanding and structuring of the whole book of Exodus (cf. below).⁷

Canonical interpretation of a biblical book

Amos. Historical-critical scholarship has rightly established a long history of textual development of the book of Amos, extending from the prophet Amos himself to the final form of the book. Most of the precanonical layers of the book—to the extent that we can reconstruct them—carry through, even if in ever-revised form, the theme of God’s judgment. Only the very last verses (9:8b-15) introduce the theme of salvation, with focus on the house of David. These verses have been regarded by most historical critics as “inauthentic” later addition(s). Historical critics have generally focused their interest on the “authentic” words of Amos, attributing decreasing value to later stages of the text, and usually dismissing the final salvation verses as inconsequential for the message of the book.

From a canonical perspective, however, Brevard Childs acknowledges the long prehistory but sees precisely in these last salvation verses the most important step in the canonical shaping of the book. The final shapers of the canonical text let the judgment theme of Amos stand in all its harshness, but by adding these verses, they endow the book with a wider interpretive horizon. In Childs’s words, “The editor effects a decisive canonical shaping of the book by placing Amos’ words [of judgment, first on Israel, then also on Judah] within a broader eschatological framework which transcends the perspective of the prophet himself.”⁸ The theological significance of the conclusion is to stress that salvation and not judgment is God’s ultimate plan for Israel.

Exodus. From a historical-critical standpoint, the book of Exodus represents a particularly motley amalgam of materials from diverse sources. The intertwined Pentateuchal sources J and E provide a sort of story line for chapters 1–19, repeatedly interspersed with passages from the source P. Chapters 20–24 and 32–34 seem to show J and E again, but they include a large amount of originally independent legal material. Chapters 25–31 and 35–40 (the tabernacle chapters) are such extensive blocks of P material that they throw the whole book off balance, so that many commentators give them brief and scanty attention. This assessment—though highly hypothetical—may well represent fairly the complexity of the book’s precanonical development. In their concern for sources, however, historical critics have generally paid

little attention to the compositional integrity of the final canonical book, basing their exegesis largely on the interpretive context of the precanonical sources.

My own canonical approach to the book of Exodus began with the literary hypothesis that—in addition to being a part of the larger Pentateuch—Exodus also has its own literary completeness. If so, then all parts must contribute to the meaning and message of the whole. “What is Reuel/Jethro’s function in relation to the whole?” I asked myself with some puzzlement. He is prominent in two places far from each other (2:16–4:20) and (18:1–27) but

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appears nowhere else. Studying these two, I discovered that Jethro’s role is that of host; he welcomes first Moses, escaped from Egypt, and then Israel, also escaped from Egypt. Each of these welcomings is followed by a theophany (appearance of God) with a commission, first to Moses at the burning bush, and then to Israel at Mount Sinai, wrapped in smoke and fire. This parallelism between Moses and Israel became for me the foundation of the canonical-literary structure of the book: salvation, then commissioning (of Moses), followed by salvation, then commissioning (of Israel, foreshadowed in

2:23–25; cf. above). Within this structure of the whole, one can trace a narrative movement from Israel building for Pharaoh as slaves (chapters 1–2) to Israel building freely and enthusiastically for God (chapters 35–40); the main theme of Exodus is not liberation (in the political sense) but change of masters.

Seen thus, the extended tabernacle chapters can no longer be disregarded as an inflated later Priestly expansion but become a necessary completion of the book’s message. Nor can the story of Israel’s engaging in self-chosen and idolatrous worship at the foot of the mountain (the golden calf story in chapters 32–34) be understood properly if one does not keep in mind that this event happens at the very time when up on the mountain God gives Moses instructions for proper worship, although the former derives from the sources J/E, and the latter (chapters 25–31) from P. Canonical shaping has melded the two into one coherent and

meaningful text, even if stylistic differences and other details have not been fully harmonised.

Canonical interpretation on the level of the whole canon

The canon as embracing both testaments. All Christians hold, at least formally, that the Christian canon includes the Old and the New Testament, in that order. This inner structure is not haphazard, and the order is not interchangeable; the church holds the two parts together, giving the Old Testament priority as theological foundation, and granting the New Testament priority as fullness of ultimate direction. Accepting this unity, canonical interpretation insists that a text does not yield its Christian theological message until it has been interpreted in the context of the whole canon (both testaments). Christianity has never defined precisely how this exegesis is to happen but has left it to the probing of exegetes, theologians, and preachers. Our lectionaries, for example, suggest both Old and New Testament readings for each Sunday, but the preacher or worship planner carries responsibility to work with these texts.⁹ The weight of a biblical theme may be lodged in either testament. Christian theology of creation and of family, for example, are based primarily on Old Testament texts but receive significant New Testament nuances. The nature of the coming kingdom of God, on the other hand, and the role of the Messiah in it, although they build on Old Testament prophecy, find their fullest exposition in the New Testament.

The order of books within the testaments. The order of books in the testaments varies for Jews and Christians, and to some extent for Christians in their various Bible translations and editions. We can hardly assume that every aspect of the order within any Christian Bible edition is theologically meaningful. Nevertheless, some arrangements have long been recognised as deliberate canonical shaping. After Judges, which presents a lawless society, especially regarding women (Judges 17–21), comes Ruth, which again puts women at the centre, but here in a Torah-abiding society. What is achieved when an originally coherent work, Luke-Acts, is now separated by the Gospel of John? Does Romans stand at the head of Paul's letters because of theological preeminence or simply because it is the longest of the epistles? Many such questions tantalise the mind of the interpreter.

Conclusion

I believe canonical interpretation to be particularly effective in helping the church read the Bible in search of the biblical foundations of Christian theology, a task that historical-critical methods have failed to do adequately. One must remember, however, that no one method is perfect. The turn to canonical interpretation in recent decades shares many continuities with pre-Enlightenment approaches to scripture, but it is not regressive; it employs historical-critical methods and data to the extent that they are needed to illumine the canonical text. It is an approach—a cluster of methods—that is not static but is being honed to increasing adequacy by the contributions of a growing number of contemporary scholars.

Notes

¹ For the story of canonisation, see V. George Shillington, *Reading the Sacred Text: An Introduction to Biblical Studies* (London: T & T Clark, 2002), 110–36. A recent and new construal of the story of canonisation can be found in John W. Miller, *How the Bible Came to Be: Exploring the Narrative and Message* (New York: Paulist Press, 2004).

² Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970); see especially 97–107.

³ Like Childs, and at approximately the same time, James A. Sanders (*Torah and Canon* [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972]) also called for renewed attention to the canon, but by a “canonical criticism” that would constitute another subdiscipline of historical-critical study and thus not challenge the historical-critical tradition.

⁴ For a thorough, critical, but sympathetic study of Childs’s approach, see Mark G. Brett, *Biblical Criticism in Crisis? The Impact of the Canonical Approach on Old Testament Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

⁵ Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 75–76. Cf. also Brett, *Biblical Criticism*, 97–98.

⁶ Martin Noth, *Exodus: A Commentary*, trans. J. S. Bowden (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962), 33, 36–38.

⁷ For fuller canonical treatment, see Waldemar Janzen, *Exodus*, Believers Church Bible Commentary (Waterloo, ON; Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2000), 44, 49–50.

⁸ Childs, *Introduction*, 407; cf. 405–408.

⁹ In the Believers Church Bible Commentary series, the section “The Text in Biblical Context” also invites the reader to discover intertextual relationships.

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Making the music of scripture

Mary E. Klassen

Studying scripture in silence is like studying Bach's music without the sounds.

That insight, from Tom Boomershine, co-founder of the Network of Biblical Storytellers and professor of Christianity and communication at United Theological Seminary, Dayton, Ohio, pinpoints one important aspect of how we can and should experience scripture.¹ To fully know the power of the Bible, we cannot study it only in silence. We must also experience it aloud—with our voices and with our ears.

Much of our scripture began in oral form. It was honed by generations of speakers so that it communicated with authority and impact. What we know as the Bible was for hundreds of years

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communicated orally as God's people gathered for worship. The stories of Abraham and Sarah and their descendants, the teachings of Jesus, the songs of David, and the letters of Paul guided people in their lives because they heard the words recited or read aloud in the liturgy of their worship.

Reading the Bible in silent meditation is important in forming our spirits, and careful study of the Bible is essential for understanding what it teaches us about God. However, we must experience it not only as words on the page worthy of meditation and scholarly study. It is God's revelation to us, and when we experience it with our voices and ears, we can become more fully involved in it. We bring all of who we are to the scripture, and it gives us a depth of experience in return.

Does this description fit what is happening in our congregations when scripture is read aloud? How often in our worship is scrip-

ture viewed as not much more than a routine, obligatory segment of the service? Is it only a prelude to the sermon?

How often is scripture read without expression and seemingly without preparation? Because almost everyone can read, do we view the oral reading of scripture as something almost everyone can do? Because we want to include children and adults with varying skills and backgrounds in our worship services, do we view scripture reading as an opportunity to be inclusive at the expense of being effective?

The way we read the Bible aloud communicates what we believe about it and can even influence what we believe about God. Poor reading diminishes our worship and our faith; effective reading augments them.

Scripture is the foundation of our worship services. The hymns we sing, the sermons we hear, and the prayers we speak are based on the Bible. When we acknowledge this central place of scripture in our worship, we will recognize how important it is that our oral interpretation be done with care and skill.

Preparation begins with seeing the scripture reader as one who speaks God's word to the people. When you step into that role, there are several steps you can take to prepare yourself.²

Ask what kind of text it is. Is the text to be read poetry, law, story, wisdom? How does the passage contribute to the whole of God's message to us? In what ways can this text make a connection between the story of God long ago and us now?

Consider the contexts of the reading. Within the text itself, what comes immediately before and after the passage? Within the worship service, is it a call to worship, is it for meditation and prayer, does it lay the foundation for the sermon?

In this early stage, commentaries and a pronunciation guide are helpful.³ When you know the historical context of the passage, you can avoid presenting it in a way that is not congruent with the biblical story.

In *A Word That Will Rouse Them: Reflections on the Ministry of the Reader*, Aelred Rosser writes, "We need to rely on more than the words themselves. Those who devote their lives to the study of the Bible are our greatest helps. They have mastered the original languages and have studied the culture in which the

scriptures were born. Their scholarship enables us to read the Bible in all its richness and complexity.”⁴

Discover what the passage says. What is the core idea? Where is the high point or the climax to which the text is leading?

It may help to imagine the setting: picture the people, their surroundings, and where they are placed in the scene. Listen for the mood. If the text is a story, can you imagine yourself in it? If it is not a story, can you imagine being the writer and thus let the words become your words?

Through this process you begin to internalize the passage. As a child you may have learned Bible verses “by heart” when you memorized them. While there is significant value in memorizing scripture, the focus here is not on knowing the words one after

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another by memory but on knowing them well enough that the passage as a whole is familiar. You want to be so comfortable with the text that you are giving it life, not just reading it.

Transform the words into sounds, making the music that so far you have studied in silence. Practicing aloud and even warming up (just as a singer warms up) is essential before you enter the pulpit to read to the congregation.

Find ways to embody what you have internalized in your study. Experiment with your voice—pitch, diction, speed and pacing, rhythm, contrast, volume and intensity—to make these tools work for the passage. Just as music is interesting to listen to because it has varied tones, volumes, and speeds, your reading also needs this variety.

Work with the sounds of the words. Pay attention to consonants, especially those known as fricatives (f, s, v, ch, sh, and th) and plosives (b, d, g, k, p, and t). One of the most profound experiences I have had in listening to scripture was hearing Walter Wangerin, a Lutheran pastor, writer, and speaker, read from Isaiah 6. I heard the sizzle of the hot coal as he said “lipss,”—a small detail that surprised me and pulled me into the story.

Prepare yourself to communicate the mood. In your daily conversations you know how to make your voice sound angry,

comforting, warm, and sad. You can bring these moods into the tones you use to read the scripture text.

Reading into a tape recorder can be very helpful. Listen for problems like singsong patterns or muffled diction, make sure the correct words receive emphasis, and pay attention to how sentences end, so the last word is not dropped too quickly in a rush to move on.

Finally, test whether simple gestures may help. Think about posture and stance. Can you make eye contact with listeners at key points in the reading? Keeping a finger at the side of the text as you read (even though your first-grade teacher may have discouraged this practice) gives you some freedom from the page so you can look up for emphasis and speak directly to your listeners. Your preparation should include thought about how you approach and leave the pulpit, because your movement can communicate reverence for scripture and put listeners at ease.

We want to be sure we are using the tools of our voices effectively but not overemphasizing them. If we are overly dramatic, we do a disservice to the text and to our listeners. If we do not project our voices well and communicate clearly, we also do a disservice to the task. Our goal is for the listeners to focus on the scripture, not on us as readers.

This careful preparation is something we owe our fellow worshippers. The people I sit with on Sundays are likely to be in one of two groups. Some may encounter the Bible only in the worship service. If they hear the Bible read in a monotone week after week, they will be convinced that scripture is boring, and that its only relevance is what the pastor explains in the sermon.

But many of the people with whom I worship have heard and read scripture all their lives. If we are part of a congregation that bases its services on the lectionary, we hear the same passages repeated in a three-year cycle. Can we, after so many readings, find something new there? Or have we been so inoculated with lifelong study and lifeless reading that we can no longer experience the impact of the scripture?

The reader's ultimate purpose is to enable the people of God to hear the word of God and keep it, according to Rosser.⁵ We must communicate that the word of God is alive with power and

The reader's ultimate purpose is to enable the people of God to hear the word of God and keep it. We must communicate that the word of God is alive with power and deserves our attention.

deserves our attention. “Readers at the liturgy are not merely teachers; they do not simply convey information. Rather, they enfold the word through human speech. When they proclaim the word at the liturgy, Christ is present in the assembly, speaking the word that is his saving deed.”⁶

For several years I was part of a group of four who presented a twenty-minute message, based entirely on scripture, called “The Bible Speaks.” William Gering compiled the selections to build on the theme of how we respond to God.⁷ When our group presented this message, we relied primarily on our voices to interpret the scripture, although we did incorporate minimal gestures and movement at the front of the worship space. In his introduction to the published version, Gering writes, “The messages of the Bible, if interpreted properly in the oral-aural tradition by heart, as it was hundreds of years ago, catapults its purpose for those times into our present time in a new inspirational way.” We as interpreters experienced this impact over and over as we shared the presentation with congregations.

For me, one benefit of participating was living with those texts so fully that I did know them by heart. One of my assigned passages was the story of Peter’s denial of Jesus just before the crucifixion. I had to experience that scene for myself, and imagine myself there both as Peter and as the maids, before I could speak those verses effectively—with power and emotion but without getting in the way of the message.

Understanding those passages well enough to convey orally their emotional impact and meaning was a challenge. Seeing the impact on the listeners, most of whom had heard those texts many times before, was rewarding. Discovering that scripture can speak for itself, that it does not always need commentary, was a blessing. I wish for all who gather for worship to have these experiences, to hear the Bible as a profound truth from God to us and from one heart to another.

Notes

¹This statement is from an oral presentation. For more on the importance of sound in reading scripture, see Thomas E. Boomershire, *Story Journey: An Invitation to the*

Gospel as Storytelling (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1988), 42–43.

²June Alliman Yoder, professor of preaching and communication at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, led a workshop on oral interpretation of scripture at Hively Avenue Mennonite Church, where I am a member. Some of the suggestions outlined here are drawn from her work with our congregation.

³Susan E. Meyers, *Pronunciation Guide for the Sunday Lectionary* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1998).

⁴Aelred R. Rosser, *A Word That Will Rouse Them: Reflections on the Ministry of the Reader* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1995), 51. Rosser's series of workbooks for lectors and Gospel readers (years A, B, and C) are also helpful resources from Liturgy Training Publications.

⁵*Ibid.*, 84.

⁶*Ibid.*, 10.

⁷William M. Gering, then professor of communication arts at Indiana University South Bend, compiled "The Bible Speaks," which was first printed by Mennonite Biblical Seminary (1975) and later copyrighted by Central District Conference (1986).

About the author

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Planning worship in the shape of scripture

Lois H. Siemens

My stomach assembles several configurations of knots when I am asked to lead worship. In my thoughts, I look around the congregation and notice the bountiful diversity of people: the perplexing and practical, the broken and joyful, the skillful and ticklish. I panic and decide that I dare not enter the space before the congregation and presume to think that my words can help pierce their darkness, be a catalyst for change, or open the way to the holy presence of God.

Leading worship is a sacred task. I begin my preparations by asking: Where will I find the resources for this particular service?

The living word of God grounds us in a language for prayer, agitates us into God's mission in the world, and nourishes our life in community.

How will this service of worship help sustain the congregation's life of faith and mission? I turn to scripture to answer both questions. The living word of God grounds us in a language for prayer, agitates us into God's mission in the world, and nourishes our life in community. As each service is shaped with the biblical text, the sacred task of leading

worship becomes a duet with the Holy Spirit, who knows each heart and intercedes with sighs too deep for words.

This article explores reasons for using scripture in worship and some practical ways to transpose the text.

Grounding a language for prayer

I learned to pray by hearing prayers and then imitating their phrases and appropriating their images. This practice built an internal language which I could draw on for spontaneous and formal, public and private prayers. Scripture also provides a language to imitate and incorporate in shaping prayers for worship. In scripture we find ways to address God: deliverer, wonderful counselor, rock of salvation. Scripture gives us ways to picture

God's activity: reconciling, judging, and loving. We are reminded of our Christian identity and relationship with the triune God as we regularly hear covenant language in worship: beloved, chosen, forgiven. Scripture employs different kinds of language to describe relationships between God and humanity, and among us: familial language of being God's children; marital language of fidelity; royal language of kingship and servitude.

Scripture unsettles us, at times saying, "Go from your country" or "Come and see." Left to ourselves and our own words for worship, our complacency remains undisturbed and our wonder unaroused.

Because of its multilayered character, biblical language needs sign and ritual, metaphor and symbol, to help flesh it out as we communicate with God in worship. But our media-saturated culture does not form us to listen to the poetic and metaphorical prayer language of the Bible. Incorporating scripture in worship (public and private) offers us opportunity to use biblical language to explore the length and breadth, height and depth of the covenant relationship with God and others. Shaping our worship language with scripture is a long labor of love as we trust the biblical narrative to form us into a community that prays.

Agitating us into mission

"Where are you?" (Gen. 3:9).¹ God's call to Adam and Eve was a call to covenant relationship. God longs to restore creation to wholeness. The amazing thing is that we are invited to participate with God, to enter the process of reconciliation, the freeing of prisoners, and the feeding of the hungry. This invitation moves us out of our places of comfort into God's territory. Scripture unsettles us, at times saying, "Go from your country" or "Come and see." Left to ourselves and our own words for worship, our complacency remains undisturbed and our wonder unaroused.

A friend confronted me with questions: "Who is God? What is God doing in the world?" These are questions worship addresses. Our use of scripture in worship reminds us that God is working in all of creation, that God's purpose in the body of Christ moves beyond our church and community. By using covenant language in our calls to worship, prayers, and benedictions, we assert, "This is who God is, and this is how we join in God's mission."

Nourishing our life in community

We long to hear God's word addressed to us, and when this word arrives, it speaks both to the individual and to the community. Biblical texts in worship offer metaphors for our life together and remind us of our individual and corporate identity: you are my chosen people; I have formed you. As we rub shoulders with each other, we need the word to address our relationships. It is dangerous for worship leaders to focus only on biblical texts that reflect the comfortable part of relationships and omit an invitation to undertake the work of reconciliation. Community life includes both comfort and cost: fear not; repent; forgive.

Scripture recognizes a variety of ways for men and women, young and old, to encounter the presence of God in worship. Some experience God with senses and imagination; others need words on a page, contemplative silence, or rigorous study. Community is nourished when this diversity is cared for in worship.

Over time, a congregation is nurtured by scripture as we employ a broad spectrum of biblical metaphors and texts. Rooting our worship in the canon of scripture saves us from extremes of too much novelty and repetitive sameness. It also keeps worship from becoming a projection of the leader's needs and preferences. A narrow canon keeps a congregation comfortable and inhibits our ability to question.

Leading worship is a sacred task for which not everyone is suited. It requires knowledge of the biblical material, insight into congregational life, and spiritual depth. For a congregation to be fed over time in worship, leaders cannot work in isolation. Too often, we hand the task to anyone who wants to try it, and we do not guide those who volunteer. Unfortunately, many worship leaders seem to shun critical feedback and to chafe against the church's authority. As with other leaders whom the congregation recognizes, both call and responsibility need to come from the individual and from the congregation. The pastoral task is to locate those who are willing to be mentored, who love scripture, and who care about the congregation's mission and its questions.

Transposing the text

The worship leader who incorporates biblical texts into worship will find that the Bible has a historical and literary context that is

markedly different from our worship context. F. Russell Mitman suggests we borrow from the discipline of music.² Music is written in a particular key, and musicians sometimes transpose pieces to suit their voices or instruments. “So each liturgical expression in a worship service, each prayer, each response, each hymn, becomes a transposition of the text in its new context and, if crafted carefully, will retain a recognizable connection with the shapes and contours of the text.”³

Moving a text into another medium requires imagination and improvisation.⁴ Some tools I find helpful include a variety of versions of the text, a good concordance (paper or electronic), a thesaurus (an invaluable resource to stimulate one’s imagination), hymnals, and worship resource books. Knowledge of one’s congregation is another essential tool. I recommend writing out words and phrases, adjectives and verbs, questions people in the congregation are asking, metaphors or images they use. Incorporating this language adapts texts for worship to the congregation’s setting, giving the words immediacy.

I invite the congregation into worship by printing the biblical references for prayers and benedictions. These remind the congregation of the biblical context and may inspire them to look up the verses for themselves.

Sampling possibilities for using scripture in planning worship

Working with themes. In crafting a call to worship based on the pouring out of the Spirit at Pentecost, I began with a concordance and listed explicit and implicit ways the Spirit’s action is depicted in scripture. As I read the list, I noted stories that included historically silenced voices, and I considered my congregation’s familiarity with particular stories. I chose stories that would depict a trajectory of time to connect Genesis with the present, a balance of stories about women and men, and stories that include reference to the Spirit’s work within the Trinity.

*From the beginning of time
the Spirit of God encircled the earth—
moving with God over the face of the waters at creation,
going before the Israelites in a pillar of cloud and fire
to the promised land;
interceding for Hannah as she prays for a child;*

*writing psalms;
 bringing visions to prophets;
 moving the hearts of women and men to follow Jesus;
 and coming as God's gift to us at Pentecost,
 in order to increase our access to God,
 that the church might be built, nurtured, and grow.
 The God who gave us the gift of the Holy Spirit
 is the God we have come to worship today.*

Scripture themes can also be used to portray a particular face or attribute of God, as a small portion from a reading for two voices depicts below. I used the method described above, relying on a concordance and a dictionary, and on ways we use *rocks* or *stones* in everyday speech. Then I selected stories with my congregation in mind. This kind of reading can be adapted in various ways: by adding music, changing the narrative or the refrain, weighting it more to Old or New Testament, or focusing on the good news that will be preached that day.⁵ One can do the same thing with faces of God, or with themes such as water or fire.

Reader A⁶

*Our God is a rock
 Our God is the living stone⁷*

*Take two onyx stones
 and engrave on them the names
 of the twelve tribes of Israel*

Hard work

*Our God is a rock
 Our God is the living stone*

*. . . Jesus riding into Jerusalem
 said
 If you are silent
 the stones will
 cry out*

Reader B

*Our God is a rock
 Our God is the living stone*

*Hammer and chisel
 Hard work
 And set the two stones
 on the shoulder pieces
 of Aaron's ephod
 as stones of remembrance.⁸*

*Our God is a rock
 Our God is the living stone*

cry out⁹

Working with phrases. One can take a phrase such as *brooding Spirit* and pour the image into a prayer or other element of worship.

*Holy Spirit of God,
who brooded over the chaos of creation,
brood over us,
that as we open ourselves to worship,
we will find ourselves rebirthed
into the garden of your world.
In the name of Jesus. Amen.*

Calling the congregation to worship. The Psalms have been used in worship for thousands of years and are easily adapted for any part of the service. Some psalms use repeated phrases that the congregation can echo back. A whole psalm can be used effectively with the congregation echoing each line after the leader reads it. Using a concordance, I sometimes search for psalms that can be set alongside the good news the sermon proclaims.

The example below is based on Psalm 33. From this long psalm, I chose verses with lines that could be easily repeated, which showed the face (or identity) of God represented in the sermon. The left side of this chart shows the text and the right side suggests adaptations to fit a variety of settings.

Verses from Psalm 33

Notes on adapting the text

*Rejoice in the Lord, O you righteous.
Praise the Lord with **guitar and
drum, piano and strings.***

Instruments from our setting are substituted for “lyre and harp.”

*Sing to the Lord a new song;
For the word of the Lord is upright,
and all God’s **creative** work is done
in faithfulness.*

An adjective has been inserted to fit our congregational setting.

*The Lord looks down from heaven
and sees all humankind.
The Lord, the One who **designed
and created** our hearts, watches all
the inhabitants of the earth—*

Verses have been condensed to shorten the call to worship.

Verbs have been changed to reflect the good news of the sermon.

*young and married, elderly and single,
workers in the fields
and executives at their computers,*

Lines are added to locate the psalm in the context of the congregation (general enough to include everyone and specific

students in the library
and parents sorting laundry,
**those bedridden, sick at heart,
and despairing,**
the rich, the unemployed,
the grieving and the joyful—

The Lord looks down from heaven
and sees all humankind.
The Lord, the one who designed and
created our hearts observes all the
inhabitants of the earth—

So come and worship.
Wait for the Lord, the One
who is our help and shield.
Trust in God's holy name.

Let your steadfast love, O Lord,
be upon us, even as we hope in You.

enough to aid members' identification
with the words of the psalm; some
categories are included to connect
with the sermon on illness and
healing).

Verses 13-15 are repeated to reinforce
the face of God as the one who sees.
"Watches" is changed to "observes" to
give a different nuance.

The first line is added to call the
congregation to worship, reminding
them whom we are worshiping and
introducing the idea that God helps,
which the sermon will address.

The last lines act as an invocation.
The congregation could repeat them,
ending with an "Amen."

Praying with scripture. One way of praying with scripture is to use a simple form of prayer called a collect (COL-lect).¹⁰ Collects are prayers with a basic structure that can be adapted for many situations. A collect can be used as an invocation, as a bridge from one element of the service to another, or at the end of a longer prayer as a summation. Short or long, the form has myriad possibilities.

A collect prayer

*Sabbath-making God,
whose vision for humanity
includes both beginnings and endings,*

*expand our courage to stop
even when the world pushes us
from every side,
that we may become rooted
in covenant love
in a way that offers
your extravagant hope
to the world.
In the name of Jesus. Amen.*

Description of the form

*A collect begins by naming God.
Then follows a description of the
name, which often begins with the
word "who."
Next comes a petition.*

*Then we state our hope for an
outcome of the petition, which often
begins with the word "that."*

The collect ends with a doxology.

Another way of praying with scripture is to pray through a biblical passage. This kind of prayer is well suited for a pastoral prayer or for a prayer that closes the sermon. Using the Lord's Prayer, one can begin with the first line, "Our Father in heaven," and add one's own words to reflect the congregation's relationship to God as father or parent. Sometimes it is appropriate to read a few verses and then move into one's own words.

Other possible ways of praying with scripture include noting the structure of scriptural prayers and then writing a prayer that uses this structure. A confessional prayer using the structure of 1 John 1:5-9 might move from witness to God's character, to confession, to a statement of trust in God's faithfulness. A prayer based on the shape of Psalm 23 could begin with acknowledging God's character, proceed with testimony to God's active help in trouble and gratitude for the length of God's care, and conclude with resolution to dwell with God throughout our lives. Using Ephesians 3:14-21, one could structure a pastoral prayer that has this shape: acknowledgement of God, petition, intercession, blessing.

Many psalms and portions of scripture can be prayed directly from the text. Prefacing such a prayer with a question or words to look for, for example, can enable those in the congregation to place themselves into the scripture prayer.

Singing. Many hymn texts are adaptations of biblical texts. Most hymnals include a scripture index to assist worship leaders. Worship planners can encourage people to transpose scripture passages into hymn texts, perhaps set to existing tunes.

Offering. A variety of biblical texts can be adapted for use as offering prayers. The offering collect below borrows phrases from Ephesians 4:11-13 and summarizes the gifts included in that text.

*Gift-giving God,
whose hands are held out toward us,
piled high with an astonishing variety of gifts,
help us return a portion of our time, talent, and money,
with gratitude, to you,
that we may join with others
to build up the body of Christ,
to equip the saints for the work of ministry,
and offer practical help to bring healing and hope*

*into our broken world.
In the name of Jesus,
through whom we grow into the unity of faith
and a deeper knowledge of the Son of God. Amen.*

Benedictions. Scripture contains many benedictions. Other phrases in scripture can be adapted as benedictions. For example:

*And now I commend you to God
and to the message of God's grace,
a message that is able to build you up
and to give you the inheritance
among all who are sanctified.
You are sons and daughters of God.
You are God's beloved.
God is well pleased with you. Amen.¹¹*

Numbers 6:24–26 is easily adapted:

*May the God who desires our wholeness
bless you and keep you;
may the very face of God shine warmly upon you,
and be gracious to you;
may the countenance of the Lord be lifted up before you
in all the moments of your week, and give you peace.
Amen.*

A last word

Throughout scripture we encounter new things: new birth, new song, new heart and new covenant, a new heaven and a new earth. God continually creates, births, makes something new. As leaders of worship, we are theologians looking for what God is doing, and poets repeating ancient words and finding new metaphors to declare what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life.¹²

Notes

¹ All scripture quotations are from the NRSV unless otherwise noted.

² See J. Russell Mitman's chapter, "Transposing the Text," in *Worship in the Shape of Scripture* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2001), 55–94.

³ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁴ See Rebecca Slough, "Pastoral ministry as improvisatory art," in *The Heart of the*

Matter: Pastoral Ministry in Anabaptist Perspective, ed. Erick Sawatzky (Telford, PA: Cascadia Publishing House, 2004), 186–97.

⁵ By *good news*, I mean the nugget of truth that the preacher wants to leave with the congregation.

⁶ This reading was originally written for a celebration at Peace Mennonite Church, Richmond, BC, at the conclusion of the Bethel Series, which moves through the big story of the Bible in two years. Readers each read down their column, and where readers A and B have the same words, they speak together.

⁷ Refrain based on 1 Peter 2:4.

⁸ Exodus 28:9, 12.

⁹ Luke 19:40.

¹⁰ For more information on this classic form of prayer, see Ruth C. Duck, *Finding Words for Worship: A Guide for Leaders* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 66–68; and Lois Siemens, “The Collect: A Prayer for Many Occasions,” *Canadian Mennonite* 7 (14 July 2003), 6–7.

¹¹ Adapted from Acts 20:32 and Luke 3:22 by Edwin Epp, pastor at Sargent Avenue Mennonite Church, Winnipeg, MB; used at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary Pastors Week, January 2004.

¹² See 1 John 1:1.

About the author

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What is the Bible's authority in preaching?

June Alliman Yoder

A little girl was watching her father prepare a sermon. “How do you know what to say?” she asked. “God tells me,” he answered. “Then why do you keep crossing it out?” she wondered.

This little story so neatly lays out the question of authority in preaching. Where does our preaching come from? And what is the source of our authority as preachers? These often-asked questions are connected to the often-repeated assertion that “what this church needs is a biblical preacher!” What we rarely realize is how complicated that expectation is. Each of us has our own idea of what biblical preaching is, and we seldom stop to define the terms.

John C. Holbert notes that for some, a true biblical preacher

will quote the Bible with energy and conviction and as often as pulpit time will allow. One might call this the quantitative preacher of the Bible; the more quotes from the scripture the more biblical the sermon will be. Perhaps then a good old expository sermon would be best, preferably one verse at a time.

Others will assume that true biblical preaching will tell the biblical story with grace, no little humor, and a sacred electricity that will light up the room. Biblical exposition, verse by verse, is not necessary. But constant rootage in the stories, psalms, proverbs of the sacred text is. The sanctuary air should be charged with scripture, filled with scripture, saturated with scripture.

Still others on the prowl for biblical preaching will want a biblical linguist. Nothing like a sprinkling of Hebrew, Greek, even Aramaic to provide ancient wisdom to the hearer, not to mention awed adulation from those deeply impressed by the sounds of mysterious tongues. Nothing

*like a little Hebrew or Greek confidently spoken to make even the thinnest point sound all the sharper.*¹

Such approaches may be biblical preaching, but we do well to remember that preachers are called to preach the gospel, not the Bible. To preach the gospel is to be a biblical preacher; to preach the Bible may or may not make one a biblical preacher. The authority of the Bible is the gospel, not the Bible itself.

Scripture is not the subject matter of the sermon. The canon is the lens by which gospel preachers see God's presence in the world and understand the meaning of that presence, which they then offer to the congregation.

To be relevant, biblical preaching must do more than say what the Bible says. Biblical preaching must be more than an expository updating of the ancient text for the present. Holding the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other is inadequate; preachers need to read the news through a biblical lens. Scripture is not the subject matter of the sermon. Instead the canon is the chosen lens by which gospel preachers see God's presence

in the world and understand the meaning of that divine presence, which they then offer to the congregation. The task of post-modern preachers, therefore, is to help congregations re-member the presence of God in their lives and determine the significance of that presence for their understanding of God, self, and world. Clearly, scripture is one significant source of this understanding.

Preaching is a complex communication event, and the matter of sources is one thing that makes it so complex. I have observed that preachers often spend lots of time trying to figure out what the message is but ignore the issue of what shapes the message. Yet it is what shapes the message that really has the authority.

Many think that the Bible is clearly the source from which we as Mennonites preach. But although the scripture is an essential source of authority, it is not the only source. I contend that preaching in the Anabaptist tradition is shaped by four different entities: scripture, the Holy Spirit, the preacher, and the congregation. All four function with one another as well as in tension with one another. And all four need to be present, although perhaps not obviously so, for the sermon to have authority. In what follows, I want to examine the four entities that give our preaching authority. Far from seeing scripture as the single source

for our preaching, I am convinced that we cannot even understand the place of the Bible in the preaching puzzle until we grasp where the other authoritative pieces fit.

The Holy Spirit

Those who study the radical reformation have argued that some Anabaptists devalued scripture and put in its place a sole reliance on the Holy Spirit. For many Anabaptists, the word of God is broader than the Bible. We sometimes talk about the word of God as both the written word (scripture), and the living word (Spirit). Hans Denck wrote in 1528:

Holy Scripture I hold above all human treasure, but not as high as the Word of God that is living, powerful, and eternal . . . for, since it is God himself, it is Spirit and not letter. . . . Therefore, salvation is not bound to Scripture however useful and good it might be in furthering it.

Rationale: It is not possible for Scripture to reform an evil heart even though it enhances its learning. But a devout heart, containing a true spark of divine zeal, is improved through all things. . . . To believers, therefore, holy Scripture is for the good and for salvation, . . . as are all things.²

Sometimes the Spirit is understood to be in charge of the preaching event. In the Swiss Mennonite church of times past, the ministers would meet in a little room just off the sanctuary a few minutes before the service was to begin. In this meeting, they would decide who was going to preach that morning and what the text would be. Then they would proceed into the sanctuary, and worship would begin. In this preaching model, the Spirit is prominent as the authoritative source of the message. Although the process included a scripture text, the role of the Spirit in lifting a message from the text was the ultimate source.

Some preachers have another view. They tend to ignore the Holy Spirit. For these people, it is the preacher's job to study the text and do the necessary work to shape the message. The Spirit is not needed, except when preachers are not doing their work well.

Both extremes—saying the whole preaching task belongs to the Spirit or that none of the preaching task belongs to the

Spirit—are wrongheaded. The Spirit’s authority is just one piece of the puzzle, but the healthy collaboration of the Holy Spirit in the preaching event is essential for sound, authoritative preaching. The work of preaching begins and ends with the Spirit, and those who ignore the Spirit’s authority are not preaching the gospel.

The human community

One of the most under-noticed sources of the message of preaching is the human community. When we think of preaching, we usually think of speaking, and we overlook the need to listen to the congregation, to other believers who are experts on the text or topic before us, or to the larger context around us. The human community plays an authoritative role in preaching.

That congregations call people to be their pastors and preachers reflects the authority of the human community in preaching.

Through the work of good preaching, people in the listening congregation are changed. For this transformation to happen, preaching must include a clear understanding of the needs of the congregation.

From this call a pastor derives the authority to preach. But it is an authority given by the voice of the human community of the congregation. In contrast to the practice of some other Christian traditions, in the Anabaptist tradition authority to preach comes from the congregation of believers.

The needs of individuals in the congregation and the congregation’s corporate needs should both shape the message of the sermon. The preacher’s task is to be aware of the needs of the congregation. Through the work of good preaching, people in the listening

congregation are changed. For this transformation to happen, preaching must include a clear understanding of the needs of the congregation.

Sometimes a significant gap exists between what individuals in the congregation need and what the congregation as a whole needs. The preacher must often hold the text and the congregation next to one another and listen for a message in the text that speaks to the needs of the congregation.

Preachers often benefit from turning to the work of scholars. Through their commentaries on the text, these experts also become sources. The historical and contemporary record of other

preaching on the text is also a source to be acknowledged. Sermons given by others are a part of the human community that may be a preaching source.

The larger human condition, the context beyond the congregation, also shapes the message and therefore becomes an authoritative source. As the preacher interprets the text, so the preacher needs to interpret the congregation and the times. We live in a world filled with fear and violence, as terrorism, war, economic uncertainty, drug abuse, and a host of other issues remind us. The world situation becomes a source that shapes our preaching.

Preaching is significantly shaped by the human community: the congregation and other believers, the community, and the wider world. Preaching that does not take into account the role the human community plays in shaping the message is mere exegesis or Bible study.

The person of the preacher

Many listeners believe that 90 percent of the sermon arises from the preacher, but most preachers believe their sermons include very little of themselves. They prefer to think that the text and the Spirit and the needs of the congregation far outweigh their own impact on the sermon. But the person of the preacher is a significant influence and authority for the sermon.

In sermon preparation, the preacher's influence extends to the choice of text, the message from that text to focus on, the need in the congregation to attend to, the purpose to promote, the structure to be used, the selection of illustrations, and the application to highlight.

And obviously it is the preacher who stands before the congregation to preach. We do well to remember that in speech much of the communication depends on the presence and appearance of the preacher. Ways of encoding the message include gestures, eye contact, word choice, voice quality, rate, volume, pitch, grammar, mannerisms, and use of notes. An otherwise fine message can sometimes be drowned out by the noise that surrounds the preacher.³

There is yet another layer. In part, the preacher's authority derives from the congregation's call, which grants the pastor authority to preach. But a pastor's preaching authority also derives

from her person and life. Is she a person of integrity? Do people trust her? Is she someone they like? Has she earned the respect of the congregation?

Whatever influences the preacher plays a role in how he will experience the call to preach, the preparation to preach, and the preaching event itself. We cannot ignore the authority of the person of the preacher in the preaching event.

The written word

Anabaptist writings are heavily seasoned with biblical quotations. A glance establishes that our forebears' preaching took its authority from the scripture. Now Mennonites around the world name their seminaries "biblical" instead of "theological" seminaries. It is the Bible that stands at the center of our understanding of God, of

Early Anabaptists sometimes used the language of *witness*: the preacher was a witness inspired by the text, illuminated by the Spirit, and authorized by the congregation.

Jesus, and of ourselves in relation to the divine, to one another, and to the world. In this tradition, we expect preaching to be rooted in the Bible and in the Jesus whom the scriptures proclaim.

We prize biblical authority, and we expect sermons to be centered in a biblical text. We come to the scriptures because we believe that in them we will meet God, and that if we linger there, we will hear a message regarding

new and right living in Jesus. It is not that we believe in scripture; rather we believe in the One we encounter and know through scripture. The events of long ago and far away begin to have a claim on our lives here and now. So the preacher goes regularly to scripture to find the message that will form the congregation as God's people in our present context.

The early Anabaptists preached by giving witness to what the Spirit had revealed to them. They sometimes used this language of *witness*: the preacher was a witness inspired by the text, illuminated by the Spirit, and authorized by the congregation.

Collaboration of authority

Those who study homiletics continue to look for a model that adequately describes preaching. Their difficulty in creating a satisfying model reflects the multivalent nature of preaching. All

such models suggest that preaching happens somewhere in the engagement between scripture, the human context, and the person of the preacher. But to those we must add the authority of the Holy Spirit. The biblical text is important, but the Spirit is its illuminator; it is the Holy Spirit who inspired it and who makes its message evident to the preacher. The human situation is vital, but it is the Holy Spirit who inspires the community of believers and fills their ears and hearts. And it is the Holy Spirit who calls and prepares the preacher and attends to the preaching of the word.

Our preaching is prompted on every side by the Holy Spirit. Biblical preaching has authority not only because of our expertise in Greek and Hebrew, not only because of our many years of practicing biblical exegesis, not only because of our shelves of commentaries and theology books, not only because of our extensive experience in pastoral ministry. The authority of our preaching rests with the Holy Spirit who has given us the text and who makes known to us the messages in it, who attends to the congregation and helps preachers see what word is most needed and can be heard. And it is because of their life with the Spirit that preachers can offer a word to their congregations.

So there abide these four: scripture, community, preacher, and Spirit, but the greatest of these is the Holy Spirit. The Spirit inspired the scripture, the Spirit speaks to the preacher through the scripture, and the congregation's needs are made known to the preacher through the Spirit. The Spirit is like an umbrella overarching the preaching event, under which the scripture, the preacher, and the congregation live and learn and are inspired.

Notes

¹ "Preaching Biblically: A Slippery Conundrum," an unpublished paper presented at the Academy of Homiletics meeting in December 2003.

² Clarence Bauman, *The Spiritual Legacy of Hans Denck* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1991), 251.

³ *Noise* is a technical term for sound, activity, or visual interference that impedes the communication of the intended message. It can be in the worship space or in the mind of the individual, but here I am focusing on the noise the preacher produces.

About the author

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It's all Greek (and Hebrew) to me

Mary H. Schertz

I was a reluctant Hebrew and Greek student. One of the wretched secrets of my past—and when it gets out, a source of amusement for my students—is the story of my unsuccessful attempt to be excused from the biblical language requirement of my seminary.

I came across that long-ago petition when I was making my usual New Year's Day pass through long-buried files. What a jumble of emotions it reveals—with earnestness sufficient to keep a person humble to her dying day! One piece of my reluctance, painfully clear in that petition, was an ambivalence about studying

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for the ministry in a denomination that did not at that point welcome women into the ministry. Why do something as *hard* as studying Hebrew and Greek (such was the prevailing wisdom among my fellow students), when my chances of getting a job at the end were so dismal? Another element of reluctance had to do with elitism that I connected with the biblical languages and did not want to perpetuate in the ministry.

Another piece was simple arrogance, a belief that I knew better than the seminary faculty did what I needed to learn in order to become an effective minister. Certainly, much

of my disinclination had to do with my own lack of confidence, a fear of failure that my students have reflected back to me many times over as I now teach biblical Greek.

Fortunately, a wise—albeit blunt—dean told me that because I was not yet forty, the age at which seminarians are evidently old enough to know their own minds, the petition was denied. I say “fortunately,” because learning Hebrew and Greek changed my

life. Hebrew and Greek saved the Bible for me. The text that I thought I knew became strange. The text that I perceived as tame became wonderfully unpredictable. The text that church authorities had occasionally used to deny my call became the wellspring that nurtured me. I have many reasons to be grateful for my

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seminary education. But nothing quickened my spirit the way biblical exegesis in the text's own languages did. These studies empowered me as an interpreter, piqued a lifelong passion for the biblical text, and were the context for an epiphany that forever bonded me with the love of God. But that's another story.

If my days as a (converted) seminary student were a lively dance with the biblical languages, my days as a Greek teacher have included more than a few vocational injuries.

At times, I have felt that the most sensitive topic at the seminary in which I have been teaching for seventeen years has not been, as one might think, homosexuality or war and peace or the church dividing and uniting. Instead questions about the role of biblical languages in interpretation, about how they function in the hermeneutical community of the congregation, have been more fraught and more tense than I had imagined they could be when I signed up for this life.

Certainly the biblical languages can be misused. Hebrew or Greek thrown into a sermon merely to impress the congregation with the pastor's learnedness is not a good use of knowledge. Nor is resorting to "the original languages" to trump another person in a heated argument. Any kind of skill or expertise can be used badly, and the biblical languages are no exception. That is the one point of my ill-conceived petition that had some validity.

But I think that the resistance to the biblical languages that we find in ourselves as church leaders—seminarians, pastors, and seminary teachers—has deeper causes and more pernicious effects on the hermeneutical community than such occasional misuses are likely to have. In the North American (U.S. and Canadian) Anabaptist context, our denominational suspicion of education, and our dominant cultural assumption that we can function in English in any situation, have together had a devastating effect on

our hermeneutical community.¹ Too much of the time, I experience teaching Greek as an act against the grain not only of our culture but also of our church life.

But it is for the health of our beloved hermeneutical community that my Bible department colleagues and I continue to teach biblical languages against the stream. I teach Greek because I believe that there is really no other way to keep the Bible alive for our children and our children's children. What I want my students to acquire is nothing less than intercultural sensitivity, respect for the other, their own identity and voice as interpreters, their place in the hermeneutical community, and their own relationship to God. The biblical languages are not icing on the cake for a privileged few but are essential for healthy pastoral formation and sustained ministry in the church.

Fostering intercultural awareness

The simplest and most important truth I want my biblical language students to grasp is that they cannot make an exact correlation in meaning from one language to another. That reality is so obvious as to need little mention to those who have learned to use a language other than their native one, whether or not they are literate. But it is a concept that often seems to escape those—even sophisticated, highly educated people—who have not learned another language.

I once took part in a conversation in which all the participants had advanced degrees. We were talking about the translation of a contemporary church document into another language. One person remarked about the excellence of the translation but went on to describe some of the theological nuances the document took on in the new language context. Another person sputtered a bit and suggested that somebody should correct the translation. The conversation ground to a halt. No one quite had the courage to express astonishment that a sophisticated thinker could fail to understand that any translation is an interpretation—that the language context in which an idea is expressed shapes the idea.

The meaning of a text may be reasonably represented in a translation. We have excellent versions of the biblical text, and we rely on them in every congregation every Sunday morning. But the wonder and play of a language—its puns, rhymes, alliteration, and

so much more—are only available to us in the original language. The features of a text, the patterns that give it shape and meaning, are only visible in the original. The plain-sense, close reading of the text on which a biblical community relies is dependent on real encounter with the language on its own terms.

Countering the tendency to domesticate the text

The second understanding I covet for my students is that despite our sense that we know it pretty well, the Bible is a foreign book. There are strange and terrible texts in the Bible as well as strange and wonderful ones. But it is not the texts that make us furrow our brows or step back in silent awe that are most in danger when

It is the most familiar passages that are most in danger when we do not know, care about, or attend to the text's own language—precisely because they are so familiar that we think we know what they mean.

we do not know, care about, or attend to the text's own language. Rather it is the most familiar passages that are in danger precisely because they are so familiar that we think we really do understand them and know exactly what they mean.

I usually introduce the Lord's Prayer in Greek early in the first semester of study. The exercise is partly pedagogical—students can measure their progress as their ability grows. But the exercise is mostly spiritual. These, the most familiar words in Christian worship, ring strange in Greek. As Hans Dieter Betz notes,

they sound the desperate notes of theodicy—"God, start being God; start being who you say you are"²—that is a distant experience for most North Americans. As my students stumble slowly through their Greek words, and I supply the most dogged, wooden, awkwardly literal English renditions, we hear first-century prayer more directly than any description could permit. The prayer we thought we knew, the prayer some of us pray every day, the prayer we pray without thinking more times than not, confronts us anew with the Jewish mind of Jesus in his most intimate moments with his disciples.

As Westerners, members of the dominant culture, we have a special obligation to be aware of our own limited perspective. The biblical text has suffered from our unexamined assumptions in much the same way that other peoples and cultures have suffered.

Our prejudices erupt as disturbingly in our studies as in our interactions with others. But the gift of the text is that it remains the text. It remains other. No matter how badly misinterpreted and misused it is in one situation, it remains what it is in all its wonderful strangeness and is available for rediscovery and new delight. But part of letting the text be its “other” self, part of letting the text encounter us anew, is knowing—with head and heart—that it belongs not to us but to the ages. Hebrew and Greek are part of that knowing.

Finding one’s voice as an interpreter

The third—and most personal—understanding that I want my students to acquire in their study of the biblical languages is that they have their own interpretive voice, and they are responsible, with appropriate humility and appropriate confidence, to contribute their insights for the common good of the hermeneutical community.

What I hesitate to say, but what I think is true, is that an acquisition of the biblical languages is essential to a pastor’s authority in preaching the word of God. I hesitate to make this assertion because I risk hurting or angering pastors who have never studied these languages. I hesitate because others will surely argue that the pastor’s heart for the congregation, the pastor’s relationship with God, the pastor’s ability to discern the Spirit, are the true necessities. I am by no means saying that these pastoral and spiritual gifts are unnecessary. Of course pastors must understand and care about the congregational context in which they are preaching. Of course pastors must listen to God and seek the leading of the Spirit.

But the preacher is not only the spiritual and pastoral leader of the congregation. The preacher is also a minister of the word—the word from God, the word that comes through the biblical text. As pastors, we have a dual responsibility—for the people we hold in our hearts and for the text we hold in our hands. Despite the popularity of topical sermons, and despite some preachers’ propensity to fill the pulpit with long quotations from various spiritual books, the biblical text is still the best test we have of whether a word is from God. The biblical text is still the most lively, fullest expression we have from the heart of God.

The confidence and humility essential for authentic interpretation of God's word are acquired as a unit. The two grow together and develop in conjunction with language experience. These qualities are not so much the result of a vast store of knowledge. Extensive vocabulary, lightening-fast parsing ability, and perfect exam scores have never been my concern. (I am hoping, of course, that my students do not read this article!) What I am looking for and working for in my students is the confidence and humility that grow from simply reading text—week after week. There are no shortcuts; there are no substitutes. How do we understand the distance between the text and its translations?

The confidence and humility essential for authentic interpretation of God's word are acquired as a unit. The two grow together and develop in conjunction with language experience.

How do we learn what differences matter and what differences do not? How do we figure out which of conflicting interpretations is the better reading? How do we distinguish between important questions and merely interesting ones? How do we slow down our reading enough to really hear?

Students gain confidence and humility as they give texts their best prayerful, disciplined attention. They learn how to give the text an authentic hearing in the congregation.

They learn to find sustenance in the words that they are reading and from which they discern and then preach the word of God. It is that wisdom, composed equally of confidence and humility, that is the foundation for a pastor's ability to interpret the biblical text with, in, and for the congregation. It is that wisdom that grounds a pastor's excellence in the ministry of the word. It is that wisdom that is acquired through language experience.

Finding the church's unity in hearing

Why does this excellence matter? Some students find this emphasis on finding one's own interpretive voice disconcerting. It smacks of individualism, some say. It threatens notions of objective biblical interpretation. It moves too far toward postmodernism and endless subjectivity. But I would contend that those fears themselves may be more individualistic and postmodern than is the actual search for one's own voice in biblical interpretation.

Perhaps we have misunderstood the locus of the unity of the church. We tend to interpret the injunction to be of one heart and mind to mean that we speak with one voice. But, as one of my students pointed out recently, we have not adequately attended to the first word of the Shema: “*Hear*, O, Israel, the Lord is our God” (Deut 6:4).³ If our unity is not a speaking unity but a hearing unity, then our oneness lies in listening.

We listen to the same God; we listen to the same texts; we listen with the same attitudes of allegiance and devotion. No, we do not all interpret what we hear in the same way—but that matters less, because the burden of unity lies not in our interpretation but in our attention. In fact, uniformity in interpretation is not desirable—for that would shift our concern, as has happened far too often in the history of the church, from the God who speaks through the texts to our own understanding of the God who speaks through the texts. For our concern to be fully rooted in the God behind the text, each voice matters. Furthermore, the honesty and integrity of each voice matters.

Promoting honesty in the church

The issue of integrity is at the heart of the role both of the biblical languages and of the Bible teacher in the congregation. Truly we all read and live by the Bible. Every member of every congregation has a voice in discerning what scripture means for our lives today. But just as we need folks who understand the issues in any discernment process, we also need folks who can keep us honest with the biblical text.

Congregations regularly do discernment about building and space issues. Rarely do those plans and programs succeed if no one in the congregation keeps the group honest about the costs. In all aspects of our congregational and individual lives we rely on professional knowledge. That reliance does not mean that we expect the contractors in our congregations to make our building decisions or the physicians among us to tell us how to pray and provide pastoral care for someone with a life-threatening disease. But we do rely on information that has integrity in both cases. We do seek those who have studied in these fields and have a reputation for competence and trustworthiness. Why would we not also rely on those who have studied scripture to keep us honest as we

struggle to discern what God is saying to us about how we are to live our lives?

Studying the Bible as prayer

Finally, I care about the biblical languages and how they form pastors because I cannot distinguish between reading Greek and Hebrew and praying. If prayer is coming before God with confidence and humility and meeting God in that quiet confluence of body and spirit, then studying the Bible is also prayer. Like prayer, such study requires commitment and practice. Like prayer, study takes time apart; it requires saying No to the excessive busyness of our lives. As is true of the fruits of prayer, the results Bible study yields are not facile or predictable. We can no more control the direction study takes us than we can direct any other kind of epiphany. The pages of text, and our openness to them, constitute one of those “thin places” the Celtic mystics were alert to, places where heaven and earth are scarcely separated. For it is those foreign squiggles scrawled in strange and dusty places so many years ago that proclaim to us today nothing less than the love of God. And that is the very best reason to teach Greek against the grain.

Notes

¹ To be sure, I am speaking from a US perspective. Those Canadian students who know German or French are often more eager to learn Greek and Hebrew. But for the most part, the assumption that we can function in one language applies on both sides of the border.

² Hans Dieter Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount: A Commentary on the Sermon on the Mount, Including the Sermon on the Plain (Matthew 5:3-7, 27 and Luke 6:20-49)*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 378.

³ David Elkins, “Hear, O Israel: Christian Education’s Greatest Commandments” (student paper, Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, 2004).

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Using scripture in pastoral care

Menno Epp

The *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* affirms that “through the Holy Spirit, God moved human witnesses to write what is needed for salvation, for guidance in faith and life, and for devotion to God.”¹ The Bible is a pastoral book. It is an announcement that God cares for all people. All God’s servants—prophets, evangelists, writers, and others—provide a ministry of pastoral care. It is God’s will that we all use scripture in our

It is God’s will that we all use scripture in our pilgrimage through life and from life to life. God intends for us to use the word of God written, in ministry to God’s people in all life’s joys and challenges.

pilgrimage through life and from life to life. God intends for us to use the word of God written, in ministry to God’s people in all life’s joys and challenges.

Pastoral care is a ministry that touches individual members of the group. Our lives include loss of various kinds, including illness, death and subsequent grief, and disappointments. We may experience troubled relationships, failures, lack of self-worth, withdrawal, sin, need for salvation, assurance of salvation, forgiveness, anxiety, abandonment, anger,

transitions, suicide, aging, barrenness. I will reflect on a few of these experiences as settings in which pastoral care takes place and in which pastors may draw on the rich resources of scripture to provide guidance and comfort.

I lived my teenage years in the shadow of the Cold War, and in fear. I was fearful that we could be blasted to smithereens, Jesus would return, and I would be rejected by God. I was not at peace. Late one night when all was quiet, I met my father in the kitchen. I told him of my restlessness. He took the Bible, turned to Luke 15, and read the story of two sons and their generous father. My father, a pastor, focused on the behaviour of both sons: the sins of

the younger son saddened his father; the criticism and resentment of the older son disappointed his father. The father loved both sons! “The father loved,” my father said. Carefully and helpfully, my pastor father used scripture to teach that salvation does not just address our behaviour, but in it we hear and feel God’s love. The Spirit took that beautiful biblical story and the sensitivity of my father to convey to me not merely my sin but also God’s love.

In my teenage and young adult years a lack of self-esteem affected my confidence at every turn. In pastoral ministry I discovered that this malady also afflicts many others. Outside my office window at Oak Street Mennonite Church in Leamington was a little garden, a lovely sanctuary that birds and squirrels visited. These little creatures became God’s reminder to me and to others who sat there of our worth to God. As Jesus said, “Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?” (Matt. 6:26; see also Psalm 8).² Reflecting on these verses gives us an opportunity to remember that our worth and identity rest in God’s creative act. God made us in love and with purpose. In love demonstrated on the cross, God recreated us “to the praise of his glorious grace” (Eph. 1:3-6). This insight shared by the psalmist, Jesus, and Paul, provides ongoing pastoral care to me, which I passed on to others who sat at that window, their spirits and identity nurtured by scripture.

Ephesians 1:3-6 continues with teaching on forgiveness, a gift crucial to a healthy identity and restored relationships: Paul says, “In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins.” This forgiveness, I assured many, addresses our relationship to God, so necessary for our personal freedom and inner peace. It is a forgiveness achieved for us “through his blood” (Eph. 1:7), the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross.

Our living in forgiveness affects our relationships with others. Jesus made this dynamic clear in his instruction on prayer: “Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors” (Matt. 6:12; see also Luke 11:4, where “sins” replaces “debts”). To forgive means to set people free. Jesus’ teaching seems to imply that if we have difficulty freeing others who have harmed us, how can God set us free from our sins? The dynamic of forgiveness is also crucial to a vibrant congregational life. It is the glue that

holds communities together. Likely, it is for this reason that Paul commends forgiveness in many of his writings (2 Cor. 2:7; Eph. 4:32; Col. 3:13).

We also need to forgive ourselves. Whenever we feel guilt, an inner conversation takes place. It may take the shape of self-incrimination as it did for a widow who called on me. In her grief

Jesus' words, "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt. 19:19), remind us that true love of self demands self-forgiveness.

she had to deal with business she had failed to address while her husband was still alive. She now needed to forgive herself for having neglected these matters. She also needed to forgive herself for having burdened her marriage with unfavourable agenda, with which she now also burdened herself. I explained that when we sin against God, we

sin against ourselves. As we acknowledge our sin to God, we must take pains to admit it to ourselves as well. As God frees us completely, we are encouraged to free ourselves from continuing self-condemnation. I quoted Jesus' words: "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt. 19:19). True love of self demands self-forgiveness.

Having moved from place to place, and from experience to experience, many people identify their life as a pilgrimage. The writer to the Hebrews describes the heroes of faith as pilgrims, "aliens and strangers on earth" (Heb. 11:13). Peter also identifies his readers as people in pilgrimage (see 1 Pet. 1:17; 2:11). The concept of pilgrimage also aptly describes our movement through life. The calendar announces transitions and occasions—birthdays, anniversaries, deaths. Our experiences in pilgrimage may be traumatic, pivotal, life-shaping, or worthy of celebration.

The Bible is the record of a people in pilgrimage. And it is a book of instruction for people on the way. The psalmist was convinced that "your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path" (Ps. 119:105). In my tradition, a specific verse of scripture was given to people at various points in their life experience, along their path. We live in an especially mobile environment. Our young people leave for school or voluntary service. Our families relocate. Others accept temporary assignments away from home. It is appropriate for the community of faith to acknowledge these transitions with a send-off that includes a verse of scripture, such as these words from Psalm 1:

*Happy are those
who do not follow the advice of the wicked,
or take the path that sinners tread,
or sit in the seat of the scoffers;
but their delight is in the law of the LORD, . . .
They are like trees planted by streams of water,
which yield their fruit in its season. (Ps. 1:1-3; NRSV)*

Sharing the wisdom of the sages not only connects us to that wisdom, it keeps us linked to the community that passed this wisdom on. The treasure becomes part of the memory bank by which our lives are nurtured.

Not long ago, I visited a congregation where I had served as pastor. On that morning one of the pastors gave Bibles to all the children in grade three. The pastors had highlighted some verses in each Bible. When the children had found these verses, they were invited to meet the pastor to receive a gift. The children also received stickers they could use to draw attention to the word *love* as they discovered it in their reading. Our delight was heightened as our granddaughter, a member of this group, began reading from her own Bible, a gift from the people of God for her pilgrimage.

Many pastors give baptismal candidates a verse of scripture to encourage them in their faith pilgrimage. The Psalms are rich in words of encouragement for the pilgrimage. Here is one:

*Yet I am always with you;
you hold me by my right hand.
You guide me with your counsel,
and afterward you will take me into glory.” (Ps. 73:23-24)*

Sometimes a baptismal verse became the text for a wedding or an anniversary. Or a new text might be selected for the wedding and used for subsequent anniversary celebrations. Favourites during my years of ministry were passages that dealt with love and the marriage relationship, such as 1 Corinthians 13; Ephesians 5:21–33; Philippians 2:1–5; 1 John 4:19.

For funerals and memorial services, I encouraged families to select scripture texts by which they wanted to remember their loved one. In some cases, the deceased had selected the scriptures that were to be read at their funeral service. My reflections and preparations were enhanced when I could identify a specific verse

that was particularly meaningful in the life of the deceased. The bereaved were also nurtured by these associations. Two texts most frequently selected are Psalm 23 and John 14:1–5.

A verse of scripture that has remained with me from childhood—I suppose my parents felt a need to repeat it frequently!—is Proverbs 1:10: *Wenn dich die bösen Buben locken, so folge nicht.* (“If sinners entice you, do not give in to them”). At my eleventh birthday, my father gave me this verse: “Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me” (Ps. 51:10). And, on that same occasion, my mother gave me a word from the Apocrypha: “And remember the Lord every day of your life. Never deliberately do what is wrong or break his commandments”

Sharing the wisdom of the sages keeps us linked to the community that passed this wisdom on. The treasure becomes part of the memory bank by which our lives are nurtured.

(Tobit 4:5). Such is the legacy that my parents have left me. Their blessing through the use of scripture has accompanied me all my life. Perhaps this legacy is what Paul had in mind when he suggested to the Ephesians that their worship and fellowship should include “speak[ing] to one another with psalms” (Eph. 5:19). Needless to say, the Psalms, Proverbs, and the Epistles are full of instruction for a godly life. And, most impor-

tantly, the Gospels give us a marvellous glimpse into the life of Jesus, who told his disciples: “I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full” (John 10:10).

Illness and adversities of many kinds afflict us along the way. Much pastoral care is given in such times. When illness strikes, questions about the purpose of suffering surface quickly. Pastors are privileged to be caregivers while God is the cure-giver. In being present, pastors and other caregivers offer support and encouragement. I have found the following scriptures helpful to a caring ministry. Psalm 125:2 became dear to me in the West Bank as I was reflecting on my loss: “As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the LORD surrounds his people, both now and forevermore” (Ps. 125:2). During my wife’s dying and in my grieving, knowing that she was at peace even as cancer ravaged her body, I often sang Isaiah 26:3:

*Thou dost keep him in perfect peace,
whose mind is stayed on thee,*

*because he trusts in thee.
Trust in the LORD for ever,
for the LORD GOD
is an everlasting rock. (RSV)*

Isaiah assured his people that God's love will support, redeem, and restore them:

*Fear not, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine.
When you pass through the waters I will be with you;
And through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you.
(Isa. 43:1-2; RSV).*

All who experience illness or adversity and whose life is marred by anxiety and fear need to hear again and again the words of Jesus: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. . . . For I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." (Matt. 11:28-29).

While there is value in reading a passage of scripture in many life situations, perhaps there is still greater value in having pastor and parishioner interact with the word. Such involvement requires thought and prayer in preparation. The interactive experience is then guided by the pastor and the person. The responses of the one with whom we meet become the agenda in the visit.

I was conducting a service of communion in the home where Anne, who had a rare illness, was cared for by her husband John. Near the end of the service, I read Psalm 103:2-4.

*Praise the LORD, O my soul,
and forget not all his benefits—
who forgives all your sins
and heals all your diseases,
who redeems your life from the pit,
who crowns you with love and compassion.*

We went through the passage line by line, celebrating lines 1, 2, 3, 5, and 6. But the line that required further process was line 4—"who heals all your diseases." Anne and John desired healing. I told Anne that I, too, had difficulty with that line when I saw

cancer destroy my wife's body. Anne wondered: What did the psalmist mean by that claim? What is the purpose of suffering? Is suffering the consequence of some sin? In ministry, pastors have opportunity to continue discussion of these crucial questions and to walk with people in their difficult experiences.

One can also offer pastoral care by being scriptural in other ways. That is, we may not always have a text ready, but may instead offer words of encouragement that reflect a biblical spirit. In saying "God loves you" or "God is present to you," we reflect that spirit.

One resource that I often used at the bedside of those who were sick and dying was song. Many songs convey a biblical message. Those who are sick often feel comforted by hearing familiar songs. People I visited would sing along with me as best they could. Sometimes they had sufficient reserve only to move their lips. During my own grieving, I discovered that songs, sung or listened to, ministered to my deep hurts. The word of scripture in song lifts the spirit and encourages the pilgrim from life to life.

Our claim that the Bible is the word of God written, and that God continues to speak through the written word, is a mandate for pastors to use it generously in their ministry.

Note

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

² Unless otherwise indicated, all scripture quotations are from the NIV.

About the author

Menno Epp wanted to be a farmer, but circumstances and opportunities determined other directions. These reflections grow out of his forty-eight years of service with the church as an instructor and administrator, camp director, pastor, and counselor. In all of these settings, scripture was a central feature of his ministry.

Respecting scripture's varied voices

How we read a Bible with different views of truth

Dan Nighswander

The 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.”¹ 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

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

About the author

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Three rooms: God's Story and my story

Jean Janzen

My husband and I live in an old, rambling Tudor house. We moved in with three children in 1970, then were blessed with another child. Together we filled most of the capacious rooms for the first ten years. Gradually our children left home, so that now we have over our heads on the second floor a metaphor of the promised house with many dwelling places.

When I was five years old, my family of nine made a major move. My father chose to answer a call to be the first paid pastor in the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren church in Mountain Lake, Minnesota. We would leave Saskatchewan, my mother's home for virtually all her life, her family, and my father's vocation as a schoolteacher. We rented a lovely Victorian home that first year.

I offer three rooms which exemplify for me how the intersection of the Story and my story has grown during my lifetime.

The church gave us a cow and some garden seeds. It was a dramatic and memorable year.

My sisters and I shared a bedroom above the living room. In the floor was a vent which we could open to allow warmth to rise from the coal-burning stove. This vent was also a source of adult conversation. We would press our ears against the metal grate and hear the

laughter; the stories not meant for children; and the lowered voices that carried concern about the wayward, about the war in Europe (this was 1939), about the world that would one day be ours. And we heard prayers, hymns, and the reading of scripture rise from that room, the assurance that we were held in faith.

I offer three rooms which exemplify for me how this intersection of the Story and my story has grown during my lifetime.

The first is the room of childhood with its walls of language and discovery and play. As I recall those first years in my memory, and particularly my perception of scripture, I begin with part one of my poem "Postcards to My Sister."¹

The room upstairs

*Touring the cathedral today
I thought of how often
I lay beside you trying in vain
to fall asleep, chanting
scriptures in alphabetical order:
All we like sheep have gone astray,
how I stayed awake through Z,
my nerves zinging with Seek ye the Lord
while he may be found—the terror
of losing him, that he might hide
from a searching child, and if I found him,
that I would die in the glory.
Child of the Dark Ages,
chipping away at my block of stone.*

Here I am, the sensitive child, taking the scriptures seriously, making them mine. As I review these verses in my memory, I hear the basic tenets of Christianity: “All we like sheep,” our sinfulness; “Be ye kind one to another,” our ethics; “Come unto me all ye that labor, and I will give you rest,” a promise and a mystery; “Do unto others,” the Golden Rule; “Enter into his gates with thanks-

Children can withstand the shock and dislocation that stories entail. The master-narrative of our heritage offers that space which no room can hold, which allows the child to anticipate a larger room.

giving,” direction for worship; “For God so loved the world,” my salvation; “Go ye into all the world,” my mission; and “Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my Word shall not pass away,” the centrality of scripture. In fact the “H verse” was carved into a huge arc of wood at the front of our church sanctuary. When nothing else stands or exists, the Word will remain—all the way to Z.

This was serious stuff. This was the definition of life even for an eight-year-old. This could keep me awake. I would have carved stones all my life to be worthy of this God of glory, and to feel safe. Scripture as authority? You bet.

In spite of terror, this upstairs room held a measure of safety. It rested on that downstairs room where the adults gathered, the ones who fed me, held me, and taught me the Story. The upstairs

windows looked out over green lawns, red tulips, or brilliant banks of snow, and into the amazing skies which offered both the beauty of stars and the warmth of morning sun. Awe was mellowing the fear. Beauty was comfort. Scripture as authority was not only about morals and character and virtue; the Bible stories opened to the imaginative play and wonder which are a central part of faith.

Josef Pieper writes in his classic book *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*, that to wonder is “not to know fully,” to be aware that truth is hidden, shrouded in mystery, that we are on the way toward the meaning at the heart of mystery. Gregory Wolfe, who quotes Pieper in an essay, “Playing with God,” asserts that children can withstand the shock and dislocation that myths and stories entail: “They need such multi-dimensional wonder as much as they need food and drink, light and love.”² The master-narrative of our heritage offers that space which no room can hold, which allows the child to anticipate a larger room. This second room takes us to part three of “Postcards to My Sister.”

The room downstairs

*If you had been with me in the art gallery
you would have felt it, too, what we missed,
barren as we were of Turners and Rembrandts,
only calendars from the First National Bank
and a motto, Keep Looking Up. And yet,
as I gazed, I recognized our rare possession,
the harmony of our singing, all ten of us
around the piano, the balance of it, radiant
skies of “Crown Him with Many Crowns,”
“He Leadeth Me” with its pastoral greens
and its fetid valleys of death, the rising
clouds, the shafts of light.*

The living room under my bedroom was the place where the family gathered for the joy of singing around the piano—hymns and gospel songs. The authority of scripture translated into music was a secondhand authority, familiar interpretation of the Text, and powerful in the way the melodies and rhythms made the Word memorable. This was the room where members of the

community would join us and become part of us. It was an emblem of the church at home.

Childhood collapses into that room of experience and learning to live in harmony. The call of maturation to love the other is learned in such a room which grows larger as we grow. This is the room for the rituals of marriage and birthdays and baptismal commitment, an extension of the church. It is the space, I realized later, in which I learned about the unity of body and spirit, of the erotic and sexual desire. Here is the place for fellowship around tables of food, connecting the living and dining spaces for celebration and for sustenance, echoing the centrality of the table in the scriptures.

One of my collections of poetry, *Snake in the Parsonage*, explores desire as a part of spiritual growth.³ Writing poems about

Childhood collapses into that room of experience and learning to live in harmony. The call of maturation to love the other is learned in such a room which grows larger as we grow.

my sexuality and my experience with giving birth and raising children allowed me to see this body life as present and evident in the Story. As a result, the Bible became for me a truer guide and allowed me to honor my physical life rather than feel guilty about it.

Music was an open door through which I could celebrate that union. Our singing as a family was body joy as we breathed together, found harmonies, and allowed the text to open the vistas of faith. Poetry with its primal

beat and its elevated language was an echo of scripture rich with poetry and song.

Both my husband and I were exposed to visual art and to the symphony in our first years of marriage in Chicago. Learning to look at art has given us larger spaces for our faith journey, a place to move into truth in unexpected ways. The mystery of suffering and the ongoing challenges of war and disease are in this room. Our aging and our brokenness are part of the reality of the Story. Experience of life with its beauty and its ugliness continues to push at the walls of our living room, and we are challenged to live spaciouly and to be generous in our inclusion of others.

During our Chicago years we worshiped in the Woodlawn Mennonite Church, and it was there that we grew in our understanding of the Gospels. The Sermon on the Mount became for

both of us a definitive text for how to live in this world. We learned not to read it primarily as the blueprint for the future heavenly kingdom.

Our present church community has also been a chief source of enlarging our rooms. As charter members since 1963, we are part of a core of Christians seeking to be faithful. Art, literature, ritual, and liturgy are incorporated to enhance the Mennonite Brethren traditions. We challenge each other to evangelize, to support racial integration in our city, to serve the underserved, and to support immigrants, among other missions. We have continued to open the text to read what we are to be and do, and how we are to be a community in this twenty-first century. The room downstairs is ours, and it brings us to part seven of "Postcards to My Sister."

The room of God

*I have decided that the dead are more visible
than the living—these looming memorials,
eternal flames steady even in the rain.
Maybe it is this lion in Lucerne
who has convinced me. Carved out
of a granite wall, he will weep
for generations. Little boys stroke
his paws lightly, and at night they dream
that they have disturbed him. They feel
his breath in their necks, and cry out
at his awful roar.*

*Tomorrow I will light candles
in the cathedral in a drafty corner
by the old stones, one for you, one for me.
Brief flames, sputtering, leaning.
Nothing to show but a pool of melted wax.*

After the six parts of this poem of memories, I come to the inevitability of our deaths. This is after all the task of the poet, to remind her audience that they are terminal. But it was also a natural flow from childhood memories to our aging. The room upstairs and the room downstairs are held within the room of God, which is the cosmos and beyond, an immensity of space

which embraces us. This is the unknown, like a wilderness, waiting for us to enter.

As I explore this wilderness with my life and poems, I become more aware of the great spaces of the Story, from the majestic story of creation to the revelations of John. More and more I sense how little I know, how I only catch glimpses of “the hinterparts.” As one who values heritage and wants to keep the treasured story of following Christ in a life of discipleship, the challenge of wilderness is a necessary move. It runs counter to my natural bent; I like to be safe. I love home, the domestic, and the predictable. Yet more and more I see and hear the biblical call to keep moving into unknown territory. The walls of my room become thinner; they shake and sometimes fall.

Some of these walls have to do with “exclusion and embrace” to use the theme of Miroslav Volf. I hear the moans of the poor, the diseased, and the victims of war. I hear the voices of gays and lesbians calling to be included. I still see women cowering in

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corners, afraid to speak or to become leaders. I smell the fragrance of other cultures and races offering their gifts and leadership to the worldwide church. And I taste the fresh air of open windows in biblical interpretation.

God’s room is a room of love and holiness, a huge space where God calls me by name, inviting me to enter what I cannot even imagine. This is the room of Genesis, Job, and the Psalms. But it is also the upper room of intimacy where Jesus invites me to live; he asks to be my life-source, my home. I believe that that paradox is a gift to me: the domestic

and the wild, the ability to know and not know, the great mystery of God lived out in the great mystery of Jesus. Authority of scripture then remains open for greater understanding and for the courage to live by it with joy in the great arms of mercy. It is for me the guide, the call to “keep the commandments,” and the pattern for the transcendent life united to my earthly life. Specifically, as a poet, my task requires what Northrop Frye has called “‘double vision’: the recognition of [my] own limits of understanding, and after that, ‘perhaps the terrifying and welcome voice’ that

‘annihilates everything we thought we knew, and restore[s] everything we never lost.’”⁴

The rooms upstairs in the spacious house in which I live remind me of my own “moving out,” my own death. I rehearse for this dying by daily praise and confession. The alphabet of scriptures remains in its elemental power and expands. It opens into a wider definition of the vowel “O,” incorporating both wonder and sorrow. The Lion of Judah roars with me and weeps with me. I light a candle for the world, another for the church in the world, and another for language. With my poems I hope to honor the Story and to participate in the ongoing discovery of that Story which is alive and changing me.

Notes

¹ The three “postcards” included here are from Jean Janzen, Yorifumi Yaguchi, and David Waltner-Toews, *Three Mennonite Poets* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 1995). The poems are reprinted by permission of the publisher (www.goodbks.com). All rights reserved.

² Gregory Wolfe, “Playing with God,” in *Intruding upon the Timeless: Meditations on Art, Faith, and Mystery* (Baltimore: Square Halo Books, 2003), 121.

³ Jean Janzen, *Snake in the Parsonage* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 1995).

⁴ Quoted in Robert Cording, “Poetry: Finding the World’s Fullness,” *Image* 42 (Spring 2004): 69.

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The word becomes flesh

A sermon on Nehemiah 8:1-12 and Psalm 119:10-16

Ruth Preston Schilk

The story goes that the great Old Testament scholar Gerhard von Rad attended a small church in his native Germany—a church with a young pastor who was not noted for his skill in preaching. When asked why he kept returning to the church, von Rad responded that the pastor, despite his inadequacies, had one great strength. When he read the Bible on Sunday, he always approached scripture “as if he were opening a package that contained a ticking bomb.”¹

But why? Why would that young German pastor approach scripture the way he did? What have we to be cautious about as we read the Bible?

*The voice of the LORD is powerful;
the voice of the LORD is full of majesty.
The voice of the LORD breaks the cedars;
the LORD breaks the cedars of Lebanon. . . .
The voice of the LORD causes the oaks to whirl,
and strips the forest bare;
and in his temple all say, “Glory!”
. . . May the LORD bless his people with peace!
(Ps. 29:4-5, 9, 11)*

When Ezra read from the book, from the law of God, the people wept (Neh. 8:9). They wept for joy at having finally rediscovered words of God’s desire to bless the world and to bless the people of Israel in particular. They wept for sadness at how far they had strayed from being the holy people who loved not only their creator but also their neighbour.

Then Ezra told them not to weep, because he proclaimed a holiday, a holy day. He told the people that they were to celebrate, for “the joy of the LORD is your strength” (Neh. 8:10). But because of who they were and whose they were, Ezra told the

people not to forget the poor but to include them in the celebration, sending portions of the festive food and drink to those who had none (8:10).

Why read scripture with caution? Because it has the power to evoke a response from its readers. It reminds us of who God is, and in light of that knowledge, who we are. By the power of the Holy Spirit, it convicts us of how separate from God or how close to God we are.

In hearing the word of the Lord, the Israelites were not merely being informed; they were being transformed. Their inner space, where God's holiness dwells, was being cleaned and restored, to enable them not only to delight in the law, as we hear from the writer of Psalm 119, but wholeheartedly to seek God the teacher. Their response was an inner one, an emotional one, of weeping.

On reading or hearing scripture, at times a response is called forth from inside us. One year I was asked to read one of the scriptures at the Maundy Thursday service, the night before Good Friday. It was an intimate service of scripture reading and prayer. I

While scripture may stop us in our tracks and hold us captive, we are rescued not from its hold but by scripture's hold on us. As a result of the struggle, we may leave with a limp but also with a blessing.

knew the text, because I had read it over before I left home. But in the context of the gathered congregation, I wept as the scripture pointed ominously to what lay ahead for Jesus. I could not continue reading. Someone came to my side and finished reading the passage. This reader meant well, but I did not want to be rescued. Jesus was not rescued. And while scripture may stop us in our tracks and hold us captive, we are rescued not *from* scripture's hold on us but *by* scripture's hold on us. As a result of the confrontation and

struggle, we may leave with a limp but also with a blessing. And with such a blessing, we are being transformed and recreated to be more like our saviour, Jesus Christ.

Scripture also evokes an outer response. After Ezra read the law of Moses, the Israelites moved beyond their tears to minister to the poor in their midst. The empowering presence and activity of the Holy Spirit speaks through the words of scripture and calls for an outward response. Sometimes hearing the word evokes repentance, a commitment to follow Jesus, a desire to be baptised,

a willingness to forgive or be forgiven. William Willimon warns us that “to read Scripture is to risk transformation, conversion, an exchange of masters. You might think of [it] as a struggle over the question, ‘Who tells the story of what is going on in the world?’ Scripture reading can be uncomfortable, as we are made by the Bible to see things we would have just as soon ignored, as we hear a word we have been trying to avoid.”²

Liberation theology, the view that God cares for and desires to liberate those who are poor and oppressed, came about because oppressed ones dared to read the Bible in a risky way. Having done so, they believed that the revolutionary themes of release for the powerless were also for them. They applied to their own lives the stories of the exodus from slavery in Egypt and of Jesus being anointed to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and freedom for the oppressed.

“Anabaptist emphasis on a church of believers meant that all members were urged to become biblically literate. Even though the majority of Anabaptists could neither read nor write, they knew large portions of Scripture by memory. Time and again, Anabaptists in prison astounded their captors by reciting from memory the biblical foundations of their beliefs. Members were expected to explain and defend their own faith biblically.”³ They knew that the Lord Jesus was their master, and they would not exchange him for any other, even under threat of prison, torture, and death.

But what makes scripture tick? Why does it have the power to make us respond both inwardly and outwardly? The answer is given in the very words of scripture: “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God”; “And the Word became flesh and lived among us” (John 1:1, 14). God, the living, breathing word, became incarnate; that is, God put on skin for a time, and lived, died, and rose again to life for our salvation. Because Jesus fulfilled the scriptures, the Bible is the primary witness to Jesus Christ, whom we claim as our saviour and lord. No other document tells us so much about him and his way. Jesus continues to be the living word.

However, unless we read or otherwise “consume” the Bible, we miss out on this major gift from God who offers us in scriptures not only wisdom and revelation but the guide for living a Chris-

tian life. We need to develop and maintain the holy habit, the spiritual discipline, of reading scripture. We need to consume large quantities of scripture. As the Lord told Ezekiel in a vision, “Eat this scroll that I give you and fill your stomach with it!” (Ezek. 3:1-3).

Studying a few verses of scripture at a time—using a daily devotional book, for example—is helpful. But if this practice is a substitute for reading a large block of scripture at one sitting, it is akin to using vitamins to replace meals. Vitamin-verses are not enough for a growing Christian, and a lack of Bible meals will lead to a lack of spiritual vigour.

As one consumes large amounts of scripture, some of it will go down easily, but other parts will be hard to swallow. We will need help to understand and interpret the scripture. Trustworthy

We need to develop and maintain the holy habit of reading scripture. We need to consume large quantities of scripture. As the Lord told Ezekiel, “Eat this scroll that I give you and fill your stomach with it”!

Christian resources—such as those offered by Mennonite Publishing Network—offer aids for our study, including commentaries on books of the Bible, Sunday school material, study guides, and other materials.

Personal study of scriptures is important, but so is study with other believers. Such study may mean getting involved in a Bible study group or Sunday school class, or interacting with an author through a book you are reading to help you in your Bible study. Third Way Café, an on-line source of readable

information on Mennonites, offers a helpful summary about the Anabaptist practice of discerning scripture in community.

The Anabaptists believed that the best interpreters of Scripture were those who had received the Holy Spirit. This meant that an illiterate peasant who has received the gift of the Spirit is a better interpreter of God's word than a learned theologian who lacks the Spirit.

Anabaptists taught “Scripture and Spirit together” rather than “Scripture alone” [the slogan of Martin Luther's church reform]. This idea was radical in the extreme, especially because it opened the interpretation of Scripture to all. [Not surprisingly,] the political authorities consid-

ered this politically dangerous and theologically irresponsible. . . .

[But] Anabaptists soon found it necessary to modify their teaching on “Scripture and Spirit.” Some individuals had begun prophesying and doing questionable things, claiming to be “led by the Spirit.” How were “the spirits” to be tested?

One early Anabaptist document recommends that the brothers and sisters read Scripture together, and then “the one to whom God has given understanding shall explain it.” This process of congregational discernment provided one way of placing controls on the interpretation of Scripture and prophecy. . . .

A second measure of spiritual claims emerged after so-called prophets had led some Anabaptists to disaster. Menno Simons, especially, emphasized that all claims must be measured by the life and the words of Christ.⁴

And there we are, back again—after the Holy Spirit lights the fuse on our reading of scripture—to what brings forth the life and power of Jesus Christ, the word who became flesh. May we be willing to put flesh on the words of scripture, as God does an inside job on us, transforming us inwardly, so that we may participate in God’s re-creation around us.

Notes

¹ William H. Willimon, *The Theology and Practice of Ordained Ministry* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2002), 132.

² *Ibid.*, 129.

³ From “Who Are the Mennonites?” on the Third Way Café web-site (<http://www.thirdway.com/menno/as/as4.asp>). Edited by permission of C. Arnold Snyder from his book, *From Anabaptist Seed: The Historical Core of Anabaptist-Related Identity* (Kitchener, ON.: Pandora Press, 1999).

⁴ <http://www.thirdway.com/menno/as/as2.asp>

About the author

Ruth Preston Schilk enjoys being pastor of Lethbridge (AB) Mennonite Church, where she has served for the past seven years. She is grateful for her husband, Harold, and her children, Tannis and Isaac. She preached this sermon in fall 2004 as part of a worship series on spiritual disciplines.

Book review

Lois H. Siemens

Set Free: A Journey toward Solidarity against Racism, by Iris de León–Hartshorn, Tobin Miller Shearer, and Regina Shands Stoltzfus. Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2001.

Inevitably, within forty-eight hours of arriving in Manitoba to visit my family, I am happily shivering in an arena, watching a nephew play hockey. This year, for the first time, I took notice of the team's logo—a profile of a native Indian with full headdress. A month earlier, it would have seemed inconsequential, but after reading *Set Free: A Journey toward Solidarity against Racism*, I no longer dismissed it. How we name ourselves and each other has power to promote or dismantle racism.

Set Free calls us to work in solidarity to find the courage to relearn our communal values, reclaim our heritage, rename racism as one of the principalities and powers, and resist the pressure to keep the status quo.

Set Free takes a balanced, honest look at racism through the lens of the word of God. Its approach to dismantling racism is unique in its condensation of a complex, polarizing issue into a manageable conversation. That conversation relies on critical analysis, per-

sonal stories of courage, and willingness to learn from failure. Pastors, other leaders, and individuals will find much here to help begin, sustain, and strengthen conversations over the long haul.

We can define and analyze racism without ever looking at our own role in promoting it. *Set Free* pushes us into that new and difficult territory. It calls us all to work in solidarity to find the courage to relearn our communal values, reclaim our heritage, rename racism as one of the principalities and powers, and resist the pressure to keep the status quo. These goals are in keeping with the reign of God and will free our communities and nations to be who God intended us to be.

The authors of *Set Free* are involved with dismantling racism through the Damascus Road antiracism process, Mennonite Central Committee's peace and justice work, and day-to-day encounters. They offer different cultural perspectives: Iris de León-Hartshorn is Mexi-Amerindian, Tobin Miller Shearer is a white male, and Regina Shands Stoltzfus is African-American. Writing collaboratively out of this diversity has given them opportunities to learn and model healthy cross-cultural relationships. Their collaboration gives the book integrity.

The aim of *Set Free* is to focus on racism's identity-shaping power. The most helpful parts of this concise book are its examination of the underwater dimensions of the racism iceberg, its practical suggestions that encourage awareness and action, its reflection on personal events, and its brief historical sketch of the process through which the white race came to be "white" and privileged. The preface contains foundational information on racism and should be read carefully. I appreciated the vulnerable language of reconciliation, grace, and restorative justice.

The last chapters respond to the question, so what? Chapter headings ask intriguing questions that promote building relationships: How do we respond? What do people of color need from white allies? What do white people need from people of color in solidarity relationships?

So what can I do about an identifying logo for a dominant hockey team? At the game, I turned to my sister and asked, "Why Mohawks? That doesn't describe the character of this team. What about Mitchell Mennonites?" Someday I might add, "The fact remains that the white institution gets to decide what the representation of Native Americans shall be, gets to decide the meaning of the representation, and gets the economic benefits from selling merchandise the representation appears on" (46).

Set Free offers an honest picture of racism from privileged and unprivileged points of view. It will challenge churches to reconsider their view of God's created world and God's intentions for community.

About the reviewer

One of *Set Free*'s suggested exercises is to use race-specific language to describe yourself. Lois Siemens is a white Canadian student at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary (Elkhart, IN).

Book review

Dana R. Wright

Transforming Congregational Culture, by Anthony B. Robinson. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003.

Not long ago I preached a sermon that offended several people who felt I had overstepped the bounds of homiletic propriety. They complained about my reference to street language (I didn't use it) and about my reading from a contemporary play in which unsavory young men ask religious questions of each other (I deleted all expletives). Ironically, my sermon had to do with overcoming our bondage to a civic religiosity that focuses almost exclusively on the proper roles we play at the expense of being gripped by the presence of God. I urged that God calls us to an "odd" vocation in the world, one that offers a despairing culture something more life-giving than conventional social protocols.

Anthony Robinson's book *Transforming Congregational Culture* helped me discern meaning in this ironic experience. In a straightforward but not simplistic way, Robinson provides church leaders with concrete means for guiding congregations to embrace a more truthful vocational identity in light of seismic shifts in consciousness that threaten to render so many communities of faith irrelevant to the culture that is emerging. A seasoned pastor, he describes how contemporary congregations might navigate the crisis Phillip Hammond called "the third disestablishment" of Protestantism in the United States—without losing either integrity or relevance. Not only does Robinson help church leaders understand *that* there is a problem and *what* that problem means, he also offers them a splendid primer for considering *how* to "transform congregational culture" with theological integrity.

Robinson's strategy is interrogative. First, he specifies lingering assumptions about what constitutes religious identity for so many in North America who regard religion as a civic and moral obliga-

tion and the church as a democratic, socially established community-service and missionary-sending organization bent on upholding conventional moral authority in a rudderless culture. He then asks what the presence of “the Other” (God revealed in Christ) and “others” (our pluralistic context) means for reconstructing an ecclesial identity not enslaved to civil religiosity. Under “interrogation,” the congregation understands itself anew as the called-out community, a missionary work-in-progress of sinner-saints whose vocation to discern and to participate in the *Missio Dei* becomes more fully realized in ecclesial practice.

Robinson is not necessarily saying anything new. But he is saying it in such a winsome, accessible, and pastoral way that his book begs to be used as a resource to equip congregational leaders to take up the task of transformation. His is a how-to book that stands out from those promising ready-made techniques for rekindling church effectiveness. Robinson’s interrogative strategy actually places congregations in theological conflict about what it means to embody the gospel of Christ in today’s world. He challenges congregations to see themselves as if for the first time as they “re-question” themselves—“Who are we?” “Why are we here?” “What is our purpose?” He leads congregational leaders out from stale habits of mind and practice that tend to distort the gospel, into more compelling forms of ecclesial self-understanding and service that reveal the gospel’s true meaning for today. *Transforming Congregational Culture* provides an excellent means to encourage the journey toward theological renewal.

The streamlined argument and clarity of style mask Robinson’s profound understanding and integration of insights from various disciplines with his years of pastoral experience. And his strategy moves beyond simple technique, because it requires churches to reform themselves theologically and so to embody their intrinsic mode of being the church. Robinson is asking congregations to do what he has done—renew their minds. Why not include in the book a bibliography indicating the sources of instruction and inspiration that led Robinson to his own transformed understandings?

About the reviewer

Dana R. Wright (Seattle, WA) teaches Christian education at Fuller Theological Seminary (Northwest). His interests are centered in the area of adult discipleship and leadership formation in congregations.