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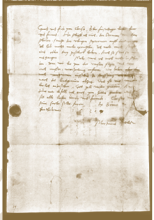
LWF



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Witnessing to God's Faithfulness. Issues of Biblical Authority

The Lutheran World Federation
A Communion of Churches

Witnessing to God's Faithfulness. Issues of Biblical Authority

LWF Studies, 2006

November 2006

Edited by
Reinhard Boettcher

on behalf of

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Iris J. Benesch, LWF–DTS

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Stéphane Gallay, LWF–OCS

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Introduction

Throughout the history of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), questions regarding the authority of the Bible have surfaced at different times and in different places. Closer examination has revealed that in debates and controversies, which at first sight had nothing to do with the Bible, the underlying issue was indeed the authority of Scripture and how it was to be interpreted.

For example, at the Assembly of the LWF in Winnipeg, Canada, August 2003, tensions surfaced over how to assess same-sex relations in light of the Christian faith. One of the key questions is how to approach this issue from a biblical perspective. Many similar issues could be cited.

The Bible in contest

The very cohesion of the LWF could be at stake unless ways are found constructively to come to terms with conflicting approaches to the Bible. The stakes are high and the situation complex. On the one hand, to hold the Bible as the Word of God in high esteem has always been one of the hallmarks of the Lutheran tradition. It has been appreciated as the sole norm for the church's life, preaching and teaching.[1] In article II of its constitution, Doctrinal Basis, the LWF explicitly refers to this principle.

On the other hand, in the actual life of the church, questions regarding the authority of the Bible have been raised in various ways. Under the conditions of modernity and postmodernism, some Western church circles regard the Bible as merely one authoritative voice among others. In theological faculties, highly sophisticated hermeneutical theories have been developed which some feel undermine and relativize the Bible's authority. The historical-critical method in particular has often aroused suspicion. In many churches, especially in the global South and East, the Bible is highly appreciated as the Word of God and, influenced by charismatic movements and Pentecostal churches, sometimes regarded in an almost fundamentalist manner. Furthermore, Christians who read the same Bible and are determined to take it seriously in their daily lives may come to divergent results, in particular when they apply it to complex and controversial issues of faith and ethics. We listen to the Bible and inevitably interpret it in terms of our human understanding informed and shaped by

our specific historical and contextual conditions. Modern hermeneutics and especially contextual theologies such as liberation and feminist approaches have provided insights that help us to understand this correlation, but can also raise questions regarding the authority of the Bible. If the latter is in jeopardy, then faith itself seems to be at stake.

The ecclesial challenge

The ecclesial challenge to the LWF is obvious. How can we, a communion of churches, bound together by the same faith, based on the same Bible, but living out our faith in different contexts, meaningfully communicate with each other and celebrate our unity in the Triune God? Who in the church has the authority to decide how to interpret the Bible?

This challenge is one also faced by other church communions and ecumenical organizations and attention has been given to the considerable work done in this area by the World Council of Churches' Faith and Order Commission and others. With this book we hope to make a specifically Lutheran contribution to this ongoing task confronting the wider ecumenical movement. In 2005, for instance, the LWF Council requested that the possibilities be explored for an ecumenical symposium on interpreting the Bible in the face of fundamentalist tendencies.

The contributors to this publication are driven by the conviction that there is no alternative to attentively listening to and patiently dialoguing with one another as we read the Bible and try to explore its meaning with regard to our communal and individual lives and for the mission of the church.

The study process

This publication is the result of a study program entitled, "The Authority of the Bible in the Life of the Church," launched by the LWF Department for Theology and Studies in 2004. The study team consisted of seven theologians from member churches in Argentina, Germany, Hungary, Malaysia, Russia, South Africa and the USA, all of whom have teaching engagements and are familiar with the life of their respective churches.

The group met twice under the leadership of the study secretary for The-

ology and the Church. At its first meeting in September 2004, in Cartigny, Switzerland, the members discussed their own experiences and perspectives. Their vastly different approaches to the subject reflected the reality of the LWF. The study team identified seven crucial issues which are identical with the seven chapters of this book. Each team member agreed to write an article on two of the topics so that each subject was dealt with by two authors from their different contextual perspectives.

There is a close correlation between how we understand the Bible and how we comprehend key notions of the Christian faith, such as God and truth. If we regard truth as being immutable, residing with God who rests above time and history, then the Bible can be interpreted as being the infallible Word of God. If, in constrast, we understand truth as the Good News of the God who accompanies us as we struggle with the biblical texts, then the latter can be perceived in historical perspective without losing significance. Once these presuppositions have been identified a discussion across differences may become possible.

Structure and content

The second meeting took place in February 2006, in Warsaw, Poland. Two members of the study team had submitted draft articles but were unfortunately unable to attend. The presentation of the fourteen articles that constitute the main part of this book reflects the interactive process in two ways. First, some of the authors have inserted their fellow participants' comments reflecting the fact that the papers are not intended to stand on their own, but interactively to communicate with each other. Second, at the end of each chapter, the editor has summarized key insights arising during the discussions, which go beyond the articles themselves. In his article, "The Bible—Word of God?," the editor briefly maps out some of the basic questions that are further pursued in the main body of this book

The group was certainly not of one opinion as is reflected in the article "Once Again: the Bible—'Word of God'?" which documents an e-mail discussion between two group members and the editor following the Warsaw meeting. A third member stepped in later and added his own views.

This publication invites the reader to join a group of people as they wrestle with an issue which, from a Lutheran perspective, is of utmost significance for the Christian faith. Moreover, it can be used as a resource for specific questions,

as a textbook in college or seminary classes and will hopefully be helpful for pastors and others who struggle with these questions in their local parishes.

May this book help us to comprehend the witness of those who tell us:

> this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us—we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete (1 Jn 1:2–4).

Reinhard Boettcher
Editor

Notes

[1] See, "The Formula of Concord, The Epitome, Concerning the Binding Summary, Rule and Guiding Principle," in Richard Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (eds), *The Book of Concord. The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), p. 486.

The Bible: Word of God?

Reinhard Boettcher

If I were to be asked whether or not I believed in the Bible, my answer would be no. If I were to be asked whether or not I considered the Bible to be the Word of God, I would consider responding yes. In the following, I will share with you what I have learned in the course of my life as a Christian and Lutheran theologian.

The Bible—a "library"

The Bible is not a single, cohesive book but rather a library. It comprises different books, written at different times, by different people under specific historical conditions. It has been subject to transformation and adaptation. What were initially small collections were brought together in the overall collections of the First and Second Testaments, commonly referred to as the Old and New Testaments, which we call the Bible.

Tensions and contradictions

Without being experts in historical-critical exegesis, we find innumerable clues hinting at this historical reality. A closer look reveals tensions, ruptures and contradictions such as the accounts of Saul becoming king of Israel in 1 Samuel 8–10. On the one hand, kingship is a *quasi* gift of God (1 Sam 9:15ff) while, on the other, the people of Israel rebel against God by demanding a king (1 Sam 8:6ff; 10:17–19; 12:12ff). Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Paul, the authors of the letters to the Ephesians and Colossians, the author of the letters to Timothy and Titus and the author of the book of Revelation, to name the most prominent in the Second Testament, portray Jesus in very different ways. The church models presented are far from uniform.

The Bible— a human book

While I am not claiming that these differences are irreconcilable, they point to the sometimes complex history behind these texts that were produced and transmitted by human beings. Historical exegesis has painstakingly shed light on these complicated historical processes involving human passions as well as struggles for power, during the course of which the texts might have been manipulated and distorted.

Center of the Bible?

Faithful Lutherans might be inclined to point to justification as the message which holds the Bible together. The Good News is that God has saved us through Jesus Christ by taking our sins upon himself on the cross, sharing his righteousness with us in Word and sacrament, without any merit on our part, waiting for our response in faith. Therefore, salvation is by grace alone, Christ alone, faith alone and Scripture alone.

While at first sight this is certainly an appropriate answer, justification is only one, albeit prominent, way in which humankind's salvation is described, proclaimed and celebrated in the Bible. Jesus' death on the cross, his coming into the world and his resurrection are depicted in very different ways, the most important of which are: God's judgement over the sins of the world (2 Cor 5:21); a sacrifice (1 Cor 11:25); the reconciliation between the world and God (Rom 5:10); the redemption and liberation of humankind from the powers of sin and evil (Heb 2:14f).[1] Different churches have emphasized different aspects of salvation history. God's covenant, a structure explicitly at work in the Eucharist tradition, has been central to the theology of the Swiss Reformers Zwingli and Calvin. The Methodists and, in very different ways, the Roman Catholics have focused on the reality of sanctification. The Orthodox experience and celebrate deification brought about by Christ's incarnation, the cross and resurrection.

The Bible uses a vast array of images, metaphors and elements of everyday life in order to proclaim and explicate what, in the person of Jesus Christ, God has done for the sake of God's creation. Can we really expect one particular term, even if it is justification, to hold the Bible together?

What about Jesus Christ? All images and metaphors are connected with

him and as we read the Second Testament we never lose sight of this central figure.

But what about the First Testament? Dealing properly with this highly complex issue goes beyond the scope of this essay. The long and powerful tradition of anti-Judaism within Christian spirituality and theology that asserts Christian identity at the expense of the Jewish people is, among others, related to this area. In Christian theology, various models have been developed regarding how the two Testaments relate to one another. These range from a complete rejection of the First Testament, as in the case of the "German Christians" in the 1930s, to the teaching that the First Testament actually proclaims and teaches Christ, merely in different terms, or establishing a kind of dialectical relationship between the two Testaments in terms of promise and fulfillment.

By and large, the Christian church has preserved the First Testament as an integral part of the Bible and recognizes that both Testaments refer to the same God. In recent years, Christian—Jewish dialogue has greatly contributed to the appreciation of the First Testament as the Word of God.

The canonicity of the Bible

In what sense then can the Bible be viewed as the Word of God? This question leads us to the canonicity of the Bible. The Greek term canon means guideline or yardstick. In light of such false teachings as the denial of Jesus' full humanity or the rejection of the world as God's good creation, even though corrupted by sin, it became necessary for the Early Church to defend the Christian faith. The problem confronting the Early Church was on what basis to refute and reject notions and concepts threatening the faith in Christ. One of the instruments, perhaps the most important one, was the Bible. The Early Church had to take far-reaching decisions regarding which Scripture, letter or gospel should be a part of this canon and which should not. The church took over the Old or First Testament from the Jewish community, out of which it had grown itself, and settled on its Scriptures and the Hebrew Bible. Basically, the canon of the Second Testament was universally agreed upon around 360 CE. No formal decision was taken, but the compilation of the twenty-seven books of the New or Second Testament was part of Bishop Athanasius' pastoral letter of Easter 367 CE, and it was received in and accepted by the church universal.[2]

Wirkungsgeschichte (history of effect)

This leads us to one of the two major reasons for the canonicity of these Scriptures and their compilation.[3] One is the Bible's *Wirkungsgeschichte*, the history of the Bible's impact on the church and Christian faith and life over the past 2000 years. The Bible "imposed itself" on the church and is the origin and basis of preaching the gospel. This has created, stimulated and sustained faith and hope and kindled love. It has united people from different cultures and different walks of life in a community of sisters and brothers. It has equipped this community to bear witness to Christ in sometimes hostile environments. There have been aberrations, a decline in faith, paralysis of hope, abuse of power but, time and again, the biblically-based gospel has proved an effective tool with which to correct these aberrations, strengthen faith, give hope and unmask autocratic structures that stifle creativity. From a Protestant perspective, the various Reformation movements, including the Lutheran Reformation in the sixteenth century, are a case in point. While the Reformation was the result of a complicated concatenation of numerous factors, the experience of the Bible as a source of transformation for the universal church was certainly a prominent one. In other words, throughout its history, the Bible has proven to be an instrument in God's hands to make Christ and his saving power present ever anew. This we might call the work of the Holy Spirit.

This happened for instance when Paul's letter was read to the congregation in Rome around 50 CE, or in around 95 CE, when a congregation heard about God's suffering servant in the Book of Isaiah and recognized in him the crucified Christ, or when persecuted Christians found comfort in the message of the Book of Revelation. Still today, as we gather for worship we expect these old texts to guide and critique us. And, our hope is not in vain.

This does not mean that every single element of this text or, more accurately, this myriad of texts, carries equal weight. Luther had reservations about the letter of James since he had the impression that it compromised the gospel of justification by faith through grace alone which he had discovered in particular in Paul's letters to the Romans and Galatians, but also in the Psalms. He was highly suspicious of James' letter and would have preferred it not to be part of the biblical canon. Liberation theologians highly appreciate the Exodus account, the social critique of the First Testament prophets and Jesus' liberating ministry. Many women reject texts that justify subjugating women and attribute a lesser status to them. These examples demonstrate that the authority of the Bible is

structured and nuanced. Some parts are considered to be central, while others are located more at the periphery. Throughout history what is regarded as being central has varied; it depends on our experiences, is related to our hopes and fears and an expression of what moves us ahead. In light of this context, it is quite obvious why Luther dwelt on the message of justification. Similarly, today many women focus on passages challenging authoritarian and patriarchal structures. The center always revolves around the person of Jesus Christ, but the ways in which he is perceived, invoked, celebrated, preached and taught differ considerably. This is nothing to be deplored, but to be greeted and celebrated joyfully.

Historical argument

The second major reason for the canonicity of the Bible is the fact that it contains the oldest documents that lead us right up to the "Jesus event." Jesus, a human being of flesh and blood and a Jew, lived in the midst of his people Israel. His faith was rooted in God's history with his people. This history took place right here on earth, within human dynamics, as does the Jesus event. The Scriptures of the Second Testament refer to it, recall it and make it present as a concrete event that happened at a particular time, in a particular place. And they are, as far as we know, the oldest witnesses, coming pretty close to the event itself. This is the historical next to the *wirkungsgeschichtliche* argument.

We need to be careful. Not every text is a direct reflection of the event itself. Historical analysis has taught us that much of the material about Jesus is an expression and profession of the Early Church's faith. Some of Jesus' words might owe their existence to the "faith production" of the Early Church, rather than having actually emanated from Jesus' mouth. This does not imply that they are not "true." They are true in the sense that they are the result of Jesus' impact on those who encountered him as a person and whose lives he deeply changed. They did not keep this profound experience to themselves, but shared it with others who, by the power of the Holy Spirit, were struck by this witness so that their own lives were transformed. This is where the historical and *wirkungsgeschichtliche* perspectives converge.

We must not be tempted to dismiss the historical perspective as irrelevant. It is particularly important in a secular or multifaith environment. As Christians we are called to demonstrate that we do not believe in a myth or product of our

pious fantasy as has been part of the Marxist critique, according to which religion is a product of the oppressed soul relieving its agony in an imagined, spiritual, transcendent and better world. We need to insist that the God we believe in, refer to and preach is one who entered history and who became flesh and blood. God promised to transform history and has done so time and again, for example, in terms of people holding on to their faith even in times of oppression. As well as giving account of our hope (1 Pet 3:15), part of this insistence is our attempt to listen to those voices that bring us close to the Jesus event and its historicity. While this may be possible only approximately, we should not refrain from facing up to these hard historical questions.

Can we trust in and rely on the Bible?

Having experienced the Bible as a reliable source of inspiration, transformation, comfort and hope amidst fear and despair, I believe that we have no other choice than to trust and rely on the Bible. This brings us back to the Bible's *Wirkungsgeschichte*, back to the power of the Holy Spirit who is beyond our control.

Verbal inspiration?

Throughout the church's history, many attempts have been made to provide rock solid reasons for the authority of the Bible, one of them being the doctrine of verbal inspiration.[4] What does this actually mean?

A few biblical passages seem to point in this direction (2 Tim 3:16; 2 Pet 1:20f.). Obviously referring to the First Testament, both verses insist that the Scriptures were not just written by human beings, but that God and God's Spirit were closely involved. The exact way in which this occurred is left open.

During the first five centuries, the Early Church held that while God conveyed God's message to the authors of the Bible, the way in which they then formulated this message was left to their creativity. Basically, during the Middle Ages and the sixteenth-century Reformation this concept did not play a major role. The emphases and focal points were quite different. In the Middle Ages, the church's tradition was perceived as being consistent with the Bible. This correlation was safeguarded by the *magisterium*, the teaching authority of

the pope and bishops.

During the Reformation emanating from Wittenberg, Zurich and later Geneva, the Bible became the source of insights which were turned critically against an ecclesial system that in some crucial areas (e.g., grace and justification), was in tension with, even contradiction to, the gospel as proclaimed in the Bible. Thus, a controversy arose over the authority of instances of faith to which Christians were bound. For the Reformers, the Bible increasingly became the instance they claimed to be superior to any other.

In response, the Council of Trent dogmatized that Scripture and tradition were to be equally appreciated. In the eyes of the Reformers, this "domesticated" the freedom, sovereignty and critical power of the Bible as the Word of God. In the wake of this doctrinal decision taken by the Roman Catholic Church, the doctrine of verbal inspiration as we understand it today emerged in the Lutheran as well as the Reformed churches. This meant that ultimately God is recognized as the author of the Bible, with human beings only serving as God's instruments. Thus, the Bible's unshakable authority was established as a firm basis for developing sound teaching and refuting false doctrine.

From an historical perspective, this concept encountered fundamental difficulties during the Enlightenment when tools of historical criticism were developed and applied to the Bible. Critical questions were raised as to its infallibility, the authenticity of its apostolic authorship, the age of particular books and its internal consistency. Scholars became aware of complex processes of tradition and pseudonymity. Tensions, ruptures and contradictions became obvious. In short, historical critique seemed to undermine, erode and even destroy the authority of the Bible. There has been considerable suspicion on the part of some conservative theologians *vis-à-vis* the methods of historical criticism, while critical positions have tended to regard those who seek to defend the Bible's authority through questioning human reason and rejecting historical rigor as the obscure representatives of an obsolete ideology.

It is possible to provide conclusive reasons for the authority of the Bible, including an understanding of "inspiration" which might lead beyond fruitless arguments. Inspiration means that both the faith which has found its expression in the biblical Scriptures and the faith which has been nurtured and sustained thereby have been the work of God's Spirit in human beings. The Bible is both the reflection and embodiment of inspiration as well as a tool for new inspiration.[5]

The Bible as witness to the Word of God

So, do you believe in the Bible? I would still respond that I do not. Instead, I believe in the one the Bible points to. I still hesitate to call the Bible itself the Word of God. I believe it to bear witness to the Word of God, which is ultimately Jesus Christ himself in whom the God of Israel has decisively disclosed Godself.

Let me briefly refer to the rigid doctrine of verbal inspiration and what might be called relativism, which in the name of historical relativity ultimately tends to deny that we can encounter God through the Bible. I can accept the verbal inspiration theory as being an expression of trust that God speaks to us through the Bible and as the determination to safeguard this trust. But this tends to result in denying the dynamics of history and human life or identifying the Bible and Christ as the foundations of our faith making the Bible autonomous over and against Christ. This moves toward idolizing a book, even if it is a "holy" one.

I consider relativism to be right insofar as it takes seriously the historical dynamics of our faith. Nonetheless, it is problematic in that it does not allow for distinguishing between God speaking to us and our own human words.

The challenge for me is to take the Bible seriously as ***the*** reference and witness to God's salvific activity in Israel and the historical person of Jesus of Nazareth, calling me to move toward God's mystery. This will continue for as long as I live; understanding my faith will always be fragmentary and provisional. I will always depend on my sisters and brothers for consolation, support, advice and critique, but trust that in the end God will lead us all to Godself.

Notes

[1]Edmund Schlink, *Oekumenische Dogmatik. Grundzüge* (Göttingen: Vandenhoek & Ruprecht, 1983), pp. 342ff.

[2] For accounts for these historical developments, see e.g., (in German) the respective articles on the First and Second Testaments by Rudolf Smend and Otto Merk, in *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart (RGG)*, vol. 4 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck Verlag, 2001), 4th edition, col. 468-474; Alfred Schindler, "Kanon, II. Kirchengeschichtlich," in *Evangelisches Kirchenlexikon (EKL)*, vol. 1 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1986), 3rd edition, col. 767-770.

[3] *Cf.* Wilfried Joest, *Fundamentaltheologie* (Stuttgart/Berlin/Cologne: Kohlhammer, 1974), pp. 167ff.

[4] Rowan D. Williams, "Inspiration," in Erwin Fahlbusch, Jan Milic Lochmann, John Mbiti, Jaroslav Pelikan, Lukas Vischer (eds), *Evangelisches Kirchenlexikon*, vol. 2 (Göttingen: Vandenhoek & Ruprecht, 1989), 4rd edition, col. 690-694; Wilfried Härle, *Dogmatik* (Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 2000), 2nd edition, pp. 117–123; Joest, *op. cit.* (note 3), pp. 151ff.

[5] Joest, *ibid.*, p. 169

Chapter I:
The Bible and its Authority

The Bible and the Word(s) of God

Günter Thomas

Two contexts

In order to understand the relevant horizon for this article two contexts must be kept in mind. The first is that of the German university, where theology is a reputable academic discipline. Much of this reputation can be attributed, at least to some extent, to the sophistication of the exegetical disciplines. However, contrary to some popular opinions about academic theology, historical criticism made room for a whole array of critical approaches to the biblical texts.[1] Even though there are obvious limits to the various historical approaches, hardly any serious theologian would question the basic value and validity of historical analysis and other critical approaches.

The second context is that of the Lutheran churches worldwide where there is tremendous variety in terms of how they deal with biblical texts. Some churches are well accustomed to critical approaches, others hesitate or even appear somewhat opposed to them. Less naive approaches to the Bible are not the condition *sine qua non* for church growth.

The authority of love—notes on the quest for authority

The term "authority" is not without problems since it points to a very specific Protestant paradox.[2] Any claim to authority begs the question, Who has granted that authority? For the Protestant tradition the church, past and present, stands "under" the authority of the Bible. In contrast to some Catholic understandings, according to which the Bible or canon is carried by the church and its tradition, Protestants are convinced that the authority of the Bible is not given or bestowed by any human institution. The authority of the Bible is a self-imposed authority finally attributable to the power of the Holy Spirit. As a consequence, this authority cannot be reinforced, secured or guaranteed by

the Christian community.

The Word of God does not need protection (Mt 26: 36-56). Indeed, any protection of the Bible's authority would assume a position superior to the one requiring protection and is, as a matter of fact, an act of distrust. All human work in the church is in the service of this "self-imposition in the power of the Spirit." "Ultimately, the authority of the Bible only becomes evident as the Bible proves itself to be authoritative. Its authority cannot be derived from any external criteria."[3] While in historical and theological terms this theological position is not without risk, it forms the core of the notion of *sola scriptura*. The event in which the Bible proves its authority is the emergence of faith in Jesus Christ. It is the very impact that the Bible can have which exemplifies its actual authority.

Unfortunately, this strictly theological perspective on the authority of the Bible in terms of "self-imposition in the power of the spirit" needs to be supplemented by a more sociological one. Three constellations are intertwined and make this more complex. First, the Bible is always used in specific ways by distinct churches and groups. The self-imposition occurs in social contexts of usage. Hence, an appeal to the "authority of the Bible" is often part of a strategy to "authorize" one's own reading of the Bible. Second, even though the various parts of the worldwide church might have developed different "styles" of dealing with the Bible, instances of the "loss of authority of the Bible" mostly occur in the observation of other churches and groups and hardly ever appear as an act of self-attribution. Third, if in situations of conflict several ecclesial agents search for the overarching authority of the Bible they discover that an appeal to the Bible uncovers divergent ways of interpreting what this means. At a very basic level, the role of tradition in the Eastern Church, the place of the *magisterium* in the Catholic church or the function of the confessions in the Protestant churches make a difference in how the authority of the Bible is conceived in the life of the church.

The theological "self-imposition in the power of the spirit" and the perspective of a sociology of knowledge need not be irreconcilable. The Bible's self-imposition as Word of God occurs in the very act of searching for the meaning of biblical texts and in the communal search for truth.

Demarcating the space of understanding

In attempting to understand the phrase, "the Bible is the Word of God," it may

be helpful to consider where the limits of theological error would lie. In other words, in the face of the current rise of fundamentalism and strong antiacademic trends in Christian communities, one may well ask, Which understandings of the Bible never found a prominent place in the tradition?

(1) The Bible was never seriously considered to be a sacrament, i.e., as a definitely privileged place marking either the unity of God and human creatures or the presence of God. Thus, if our understanding of the Bible moves into a space where it becomes something like a sacrament, a theological error has occurred.

(2) The Bible is not the subject of any ecumenical symbols of the Early Church. In contrast to the Roman Catholic Church of the time, the place of the Bible became disputed during the Reformation as a result of which this issue was picked up in the Lutheran Confessions. And yet, the place and dignity of the Bible are not fixed in the founding symbols of the church, even though the struggle with Marcion, Montanism and gnosticism provided sufficient occasion.

The classical evangelical confession is primarily concerned with assessing the efficacy of the gospel. It seems noteworthy that no Lutheran Confession prior to the Formula of Concord contains a formal statement on the authority of the Bible—and even then it was simply an affirmation of its superiority over and above all other texts. In addition, the Augsburg Confession is not interested in any form of the written word, but exclusively in the preached word. It is neither through revelation nor the inspiration of the Bible that humans obtain faith, but solely through the important office of preaching. This reflects an emphasis on oral proclamation as the most proper form of the gospel, which corresponds to the *viva vox evangelii*.

(3) God's work through the Bible was detached from any internal testimony of the Spirit to the recipient only at the "outer limits" of theological reasoning. Together with the Bible's "sufficiency" is the perception of an intrinsic "insufficiency" that keeps inadequate notions of magic and dangerous limitations of God's freedom at bay.

The theological interpretation of the Bible—a knot in a wide web

Is the Bible the Word of God?, is a distinctively theological question. The weight or significance of the Bible can be analyzed historically and the subject of cultural or literary studies. Media scholars might analyze the long-lasting impact of a written

document declared to be the "Word of God." Such questioning is interesting and significant, but does not reach the theological problem. Whoever questions or asserts that "the Bible is the Word of God" struggles with an unusual association: this material book is related to God in very specific ways. How can we conceive this relationship? Since all understanding of this relation is inescapably our own understanding, we have to analyze self-critically the main models of relating God and world. And yet, even these questions can be asked in an utterly reductionistic way.

My central thesis is that in terms of the Bible, the road to fundamentalism and destructive forms of biblicism is paved with two seemingly minor twists which turn out to be significant theological mistakes. First, the formal question, How is it that the Bible is the Word of God?, is asked before the material one, What or who is the Word of God? Second, the question regarding the relationship between God and Bible is raised without adequate dynamic theological framing. Both questions are intimately linked.

When the Reformers rediscovered the Word of God, they again found the dynamic Word of God in the Bible. They rediscovered who God is in a dynamic, world-changing process: God, the *logos*, the Word from eternity, who is in communion and conversation, is truly love, mercy, wisdom and saving power. In Jesus of Nazareth this Word became flesh, facing the conditions of creaturely life, becoming the object of human mistrust, hate, destruction and eventually divine glorification. A long historical and covenantal adventure of divine and human interaction culminated in him. All this had a distinct goal: to reconcile the world with God and to turn the world toward a new creation. This goal emerged in this history of interaction and yet corresponded to God's eternal faithfulness.

It was the Reformer's decisive insight that this does not happen as a miracle, but by means of historically, empirically concrete communication. God is astutely interested in the particular. Preaching is the event of a "dynamic and symmetrical divine/human concurrence" of the human activity of preaching and listening and God's act of including a sinner into the fields of love, faith and hope.

It is clearly within this dynamic divine move that the Bible has its distinct place and task. The election of the Bible serves God's purpose to reach the multiplicity of historical times and to enable and stabilize the communication of the gospel under conditions of creaturely existence. Any adequate and theologically sound way of thinking about the biblical Word of God needs to take into account this encompassing theological framing.

What is required in order to locate any theological understanding of the

Bible within a dynamic quadrangle? What are the "corners" and what is the "surface"? (1) God and the eternal Word in Godself; (2) Jesus Christ as the Word which became flesh and human; (3) the word of witness (Torah, prophets of the Old and New Testaments); and (4) the communication of the Word of God in preaching which brings and triggers faith [5] The "surface" connecting these four "corners" is the Spirit of God. Or, to apply a more contemporary metaphor, the Bible is just one knot in a dynamic divine web. If its interrelatedness is not taken into account, misconceptions can emerge.

Committed Lutherans have to keep another aspect in mind. Clearly Luther often regards the event of the Word of God as being intimately tied to the oral word of preaching. Since the Word of God implies the creation of faith *ex nihilo*, the preaching, or the effective transformation of literature into oral communication, is part of the true Word of God. This saving aspect, this soteriological dimension, is the very core of the Reformer's rediscovery of the Word of God. For this very reason, the paradigmatic event of divine disclosure is the preached word in the Christian community.[6]

Four perspectives on conceiving the Bible as the Word of God

As mentioned above, the confessions of the Early Church did not suggest one "master framework" for theological reasoning on the role and place of the Bible. In this situation, I propose the following methodological move. In order to conceive the "togetherness" of God and creatures in the Bible, one can apply theological insights from other places of the "web" as analogies to the problem of the Bible. This "cross reading" may open up new perspectives on the central issue, whether the Bible is the Word of God.

Admittedly, there is some circularity in this argument: the theological insights that can serve as models are derived from a Bible which is read as Scripture. Yet, there is no way out of this circularity. In doing so, I suggest a "methodological reading" of Luther's famous dictum: *sacra scriptura sui ipsius interpres.*

The Christological conception

The specific unity of God and human text in the Bible lends itself to a Christological interpretation. Much theological energy was invested in exploring God's identity

and presence in Jesus of Nazareth. In a Christological interpretation of the Bible, i.e., the twofold nature of Christ as it was expressed in the Creed of Chalcedon serves as key image or model.[7] In addition, the historically prominent heresies can illuminate theological mistakes in conceiving God's interaction with the Bible. For good reasons, it is often remarked that basically all Christological heresies can be found in the history of understanding the Bible.

When the Spirit becomes embodied in the text and the other way round, when the letters of the Bible become alive through the Spirit, this appears to be analogous to the Word becoming flesh, i.e., the incarnation. This is a move into history, into flesh and an utterly risky existence. If Christ is at risk, then so is the Bible. The way into history and the real existence in flesh and blood are not a triumph, but a history of rejection and misunderstanding.

Over against ongoing gnostic tendencies, and in spite of the Platonic and Neoplatonic inclinations in the history of Christian theology, the church has always understood the incarnation as a way into historical particularity. That Jesus was a Jew and part of the long covenantal history was not accidental, but central to the incarnation.

The pneumatological conception

The classical connection between God and the Bible is found in the Holy Spirit. All conceptions of divine inspiration take this road. It is not Jesus Christ but the Spirit who is God's "presence" in the power of the Bible. A number of biblical passages seem to provide sufficient theological ground for attributing this work to the Holy Spirit. It is the truth that is already laid down in Scripture. Thus, good theological reasons can be mobilized in favor of a pneumatological interpretation of the Bible. Taking this insight seriously, what then are some essential features of the work of the Spirit that further orientate us as to the interaction between the written book and the presence of the Spirit?

(1) It is the Spirit who comes after Jesus left his disciples and who is given to the church on its way through history. The work of the Spirit connects the Christ event to all places and times throughout history. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it, the Spirit is "actualizing" in time what was "realized" by Jesus for all times. For this reason, the Spirit is the Spirit of Jesus Christ, always referring back to the Christ event. This is why the Holy Spirit is the interrelational force or field connecting the elements in the square mentioned above. This pneumatological orientation deserves further elaboration.

(2) What seems to be crucial is the Spirit's inclination or "drive" for embodiment. There is a long tradition regarding embodiment and indwelling, ranging from temple theology to Paul, from the prophets to Jesus. Yet, the Spirit is still free to move, to turn away and to nourish in unexpected ways. In other words, the Spirit is never bound to the space and medium of its embodiment. In terms of time, the presence of the Spirit is unstable yet moving and working in a trustful and life-sustaining unpredictability. The intrinsic freedom and contingency of the Spirit need to be taken into account when dealing with the Bible.

(3) The work of the Spirit in understanding and communicating the gospel has very specific features. Using the event of Pentecost, the Spirit's work does not lead to a unified field of understanding, but to a process of understanding in spite of maintaining cultural and linguistic differences. In proclaiming the "great deeds of God," the "success" is not a unified field of understanding created by one language, but the fact that everyone can listen to the message in their own language. The particular conditions of understanding are not destroyed but preserved. And yet in an event of xenolalia the Apostles are able to speak in different languages. The problem seems to be which cultural differences are preserved, or even elevated, in the communication of the gospel, and which ones (Paul in Galatians) are taken away in the emergence of the new creation in Christ. And yet, the event of Pentecost escapes "objectivity": no human observer speaking all languages could possibly check the identity of all preaching. The pneumatologically created unity is the unity of accepted differences in the communion of shared life.

The sacramental conception

Looking back at the Reformation and the subsequent two centuries, the still unresolved disputes about the sacraments provided an enormous array of differentiated arguments concerning the type, shape, permanence, etc., of the divine presence in the elements of creaturely reality. The subtleties of these debates cannot be brought into the discussion of Scripture at this point. However, two aspects deserve to be taken up in the context of the question, Is the Bible the Word of God?

How permanent is the transformative copresence of God and world in the sacraments? Still today, the catholic position regarding transubstantiation assumes a permanent and irreversible change of the elements, including all subsequent problems concerning how to treat the remaining bread and wine. The change

of the essence is irreversible and permanent even though the appearance might change over time. Quite obviously, some conceptions of divine inspiration advocate for a similar permanence and irreversibility. The Reformers, even in cases were they adhered to some notion of transubstantiation, never lost sight of the dynamic character of the transforming Word. They always regarded the change as temporary and conditioned in complex ways.

Closely related is the second aspect. The key question here is, Does the change in some way depend on certain factors in the recipient? Does transubstantiation in some way depend on the recipient's faith? Is the body of Christ present in the believer only in the very act of eating? For those Reformers who stressed the moment *in actu*, the dynamic and transforming word happens to "be there" or to engage with the given elements only in the very act of creating and finding faith, not "on reserve." Hence the spiritual "non-permanence" is not just arbitrary, but tied to the creation of faith. The dynamic presence is grounded in life and faith, sustaining grace and contextualized in a community celebrating and listening to the gospel. In the case of the Bible, any search for permanence and irreversibility must be examined as to whether the driving force is a search for a kind of security which destroys the *promissio* character of the gospel.

Divine election as key

Given the long and complex development of the Bible and its unique place in the history of literature, the "self-imposition" of the Bible must also be read as an act of divine election. In light of the open and fuzzy borders of the canon, we must remember that the process of closure that established the distinction between "text" and "interpretation" took place in history. It depended not only on a whole cluster of historical forces, but also established a plurality of perspectives oriented toward the subject matter. And yet, the Bible is a well-proven and relatively reliable medium of divine self-communication. For this reason, one could interpret the privileged position of the Bible in analogy to the act of divine election. What is elected is not necessarily a perfect entity, but a suitable one—one that is guided and accompanied through history, since God's loyalty to and trust in the elect remain. What is elected becomes the medium of divine self-communication, regardless of its own characteristics. The weak, not the strong, are elected, the powerless and not the powerful. The fact that the Triune God realizes God's purposes in spite of the disobedience of the elect opens up

a vast space for historical contingency. While there is certainly a significant difference between the eternal election of Christ, the election of Israel and the election of the church, the point they share is the election of a creaturely entity, not the "inner-Trinitarian" and eternal election. What is elected is elected in all its weakness, in all its fragility and finitude.

Notes

[1] E.g., Steven L. McKenzie and Stephen R. Haynes, *To Each Its Own Meaning* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993).

[2] For the complexity of the problem, see James Barr, "The Authority of the Bible: A Study Outline," in *The Ecumenical Review* 21 (1969), pp. 135–150.

[3] Elen Flesseman-van Leer (ed.), *The Bible: Its Authority and Interpretation in the Ecumenical Movement. Faith and Order Paper No. 99* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1980), p. 53.

[4] Günther Wenz, "Das Schriftprinzip im gegenwärtigen ökumenischen Dialog zwischen den Reformationskirchen und der römisch-katholischen Kirche. Eine Problemskizze," in Hans Heinrich Schmid and Joachim Mehlhausen (eds), *Sola Scriptura. Das reformatorische Schriftprinzip in der säkularen Welt* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1991), pp. 313f.

[5] This quadrangle absorbs two models of a triangle. Dietrich Ritschl differentiates (1) God; (2) Jesus Christ; and (3) the Word of Witness in the Old and New Testaments. Karl Barth's famous differentiation of three forms of the Word of God consists of (1) Jesus Christ; (2) the Bible; and (3) the act of preaching.

[6] "Die Heilige Schrift verifiziert sich selbst, in dem sie Glauben weckt," in Oswald Bayer, "Was macht die Bibel zur Heiligen Schrift? Luthers Verständnis der Schriftautorität," in Michael Krug, Ruth Lödel und Johannes Rehm (eds), *Beim Wort nehmen. Die Schrift als Zentrum für kirchliches Reden und Gestalten. Friedrich Mildenberger zum 75. Geburtstag* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2004), pp. 24–41. Therefore, the *sola scriptura* is intrinsically connected to the *sola fide* and the *solus Christus*.

[7] Other models or metaphors can be used. Luther can say that as Jesus was lying in the crib, the Word of God is in the Bible.

The Authority, Inspiration and Power of the Bible

Alexander M. Priloutskii

Biblical revelation and prophecy

What exactly makes the Bible an immutable foundation of faith? Although there are countless books, there is only one which can boast a truly divine author. "Because no prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God" (2 Pet 1:21). However, since prophecies are not limited to the Bible, Peter's statement requires some hermeneutical study. Cicero was very skeptical about ancient prophetic experience and although ancient and biblical prophecies have certain formal similarities (for example, the vector of prophetic intention is aimed at the future in both Christian and pre-Christian traditions), Christian prophecy is related to an eschatological future. Prophecy is always grounded in a religious context and cannot exist outside of it. When considering the peculiarities of revelation, one may draw a demarcation line between Christian and ancient, pre-Christian discourses.[1] While both Christian and ancient discourses developed in historical and social contexts, those that are Christian include an eschatological perspective. Temporal and eternal aspects become commingled in Christian revelation since they imply the incomplete character of creation and at the same time are aimed at the future kingdom of God. When Martin Luther speaks about *oratio*, *meditatio* and *tentatio*, as ways of delving into the Word of Revelation, he unveils the mystery of the Christian discourse, in which faith is expressed with words and the Word creates faith. To quote Sandra M. Schneider:

> Because the text is engaged in experiential terms, the meditation gives rise to prayer (*oratio*) or response to God, who speaks in and through the text. Prayer of thanksgiving, adoration, praise, sorrow, repentance, resolve, petition, indeed all the kinds of prayer one experiences in the Psalm, are elicited as response to the Word.[2]

Revelation and prophecy are always definite and focused on the situation and cannot exist outside of this context since they are not acceptable in any other.

What does the author of 2 Peter mean when he says that no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will? Any author may freely choose words from a rich vocabulary. When discussing biblical authorship, there seems always to be a debate regarding the role played by the human authors and to what extent they influenced the biblical linguistic style. Biblical prophets, however, are not acting out of their own will but are moved by the Holy Spirit. We cannot prove the Holy Spirit's authorship. All attempts to do so are essentially para-scientific (if one understands science as the systematized generalization of nonreligious experience, built on the system of proofs which pretend to be objective). With regard to biblical authorship, the question arises to what extent human authors of biblical texts were free in their choice of linguistic (textual) forms and ways of interpretation.

Concepts of inspiration

All known conceptions of the divine revelation of Scripture are historically conditioned. One should separate "inspiration" from "conception of inspiration," conceiving "inspiration" as the relationship between God and the chosen author, and the "conception of inspiration" as theology's attempt to understand this process. Accordingly, all conceptions of inspiration are *a priori* limited religious and philosophical thoughts, determined by the context in which they are used. If the context changes they may easily become irrelevant. Then new questions appear. Each theological period appears to have specific questions requiring new consideration. The answers, provided during the period of Lutheran neoorthodoxy, are less relevant under the conditions of postmodernity on whose basis new social and philosophical paradigms have been developed. Probably there is no universally accepted understanding of "inspiration." Various concepts of "inspiration" that affirm the divine authorship of the Scriptures correspond to the principle of the analogy of faith and *tota scriptura*. They can exist as *theologumena* as long as they do not destroy the concord of faith.

Most theologians supporting confessional Protestantism consider the "instrumental theory" of biblical inspiration to be the only true understanding of revelation, while supporters of neo-Protestantism, however, prefer the theory of "integrated content." This theory is based on the teaching that the

instrument of inspiration is a community of believers and that in the process of inspiration God did not dictate words, but offered content which was to be written down by a prophet representing the community. Elements of this theory may be found in works of St Augustine and St Jerome.[3]

Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976) and his followers (supporters of the biblical "demythologization" program) claim that the true gospel is articulated in mythological form. Since the Bible is written in historical language, one should not forget basic semiotic conceptions regarding the unity of form and content of a symbol. The symbol itself (as an artificial sign) is constituted only through the dialectical combination of the object that is represented and the one that represents it. However, a sign's unity of form and content is subjective; it does not exist outside the human mind. The unity of form and content preserves the unity of the sign: separating form from content may lead either to the destruction of the sign or to a situation where the meaning of the text loses objective content.

In some radical Christian movements the Bible is cited out of context. Biblical texts often lack a detailed description of their historical and social contexts. Elements of this—often presupposed but sometimes not expressed verbally (depending on the level of discourse)—are undoubtedly necessary in order to read the text correctly. Nonetheless, within the framework of the solid model of verbal inspiration, one should not pay special attention to them since they are not expressed verbally.

There is also a theory of "moral inspiration" according to which the Bible is divinely inspired because its content can inspire us to pursue high moral standards. The various examples of moral exigencies we find in the Bible encourage us to improve our relations with our neighbors and teach us to love and respect God. However, such an understanding of biblical inspiration puts the Bible on the same level as other moral self-help books. There are many historical examples of exceptional moral conduct, of people displaying heroic behavior on the basis of nonbiblical and nonreligious motives.

According to the theory of moral inspiration the biblical message is divinely inspired. At the same time, its language is considered the product of human intellect. This theory is a variant of the theory of integrated content and stresses the biblical message, but not the form in which it is conveyed and verbalized.

However, when the Bible is considered in this way, it cannot remain a reliable basis for our faith. Imperfection is natural in human beings and no one can claim to verbalize their own ideas in a universal way. A psalmist wrote, "I have seen a limit to all perfection, but your commandment is exceedingly broad" (Ps 119:96). This concept

provides no answer to the question how confident we can be that the text, written by biblical writers, correctly conveys the divine message. If the biblical text is the result of human activity and God is only the author of some abstract content, how can we be sure that the biblical authors managed to convey the biblical revelation exactly and precisely? Where then is the frontier between divine and human? "All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness" (2 Tim 3:16). "The unfolding of your words gives light" (Ps 119:130). Human participation in the Bible, according to Luther, is related to *verbum cogitatum* (comprehended word), *verbum dictum* (oral word) and *verbum scriptum* (written word). However, in these three modes, human "activity" is not active, because man [sic] perceives and interprets the Word but has no power over the Word, which remains transcendent.

People frequently question the stylistic peculiarities of different biblical books. Since the "authors" apply different individual styles one might easily conclude that the theories of inspired intentions or integrated content are correct. In response, we could use the argument of providential conception, according to which God knew what kind of form the one or the other text would take and that therefore He [sic] used special people with certain stylistic tendencies for His [sic] own providential plan.

The Lutheran Confessions do not contain any explanations concerning the style of revelation. They only state that "the prophetic and apostolic books of Old and New Testament are only the rule and norm, according to which one should consider and evaluate everything, both teachings and teachers."[5]

Biblical attributes

What attributes give the Bible the highest and absolute authority in the Christian church? Traditionally these include its clarity, lack of contradiction, efficiency and exactness. All these qualities are determined by divine authorship.

Biblical clarity means that its content, *tota scriptura*, is understandable and does not require special intellectual gifts. In other words, on the basis of basic Christian teaching, every reader can comprehend biblical content and draw correct conclusions.

Nonetheless, the existence of certain difficult passages within the Holy Scriptures gave birth to a wide range of exegetical literature. These difficulties are partly due to the lack of modern, historical and philological knowledge. However, these passages

may be read, understood and interpreted on the basis of other clear biblical texts. The Holy Spirit does not darken but only enlighten.

All Christian confessions must deal with the question of whether or not there are contradictions in the Bible. In the theologies of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries we find many explanations ranging from the liberal to the fundamentalist. We do not need to enumerate them; suffice it to say that the question is related to "reading out of context," because in most modern congregations the typical layperson does not have the opportunity to undertake an historical and contextual reading of the Bible. While academics rather than the laity concentrate on exegesis, the temptation of a nonhistorical reading of the Bible cannot be avoided. This means that the question concerning biblical contradictions will continue to remain a stumbling block for many people. We should not forget that most "biblical contradictions" are not rooted in Scripture, but reflect conceptual contradictions between biblical and modern cultures, in other words, between traditional and contemporary perceptions and ways of thinking.

In the light of Lutheran confessional theology, the absence of contradictions in the Bible is the result of its divine origin. God, as its true author, is infallible and does not deceive us. The contradictions that seem to be present in the Bible have often been used for atheist propaganda and speculation. In order to "disprove" the Bible, contemporary scientific hypotheses and theories were used in order to prove that the Bible contradicts science. Such arguments should not confuse Christians.

We should remember that empirical science is the human attempt to comprehend the laws of the universe. The foundation of these laws as well as the entire created world were divinely created. Are these laws supposed to influence the One who has the power to change them? Many biblical examples show us that these laws work according to the will of the divine Creator. We find many of them in the gospel. Especially the resurrection of our Lord, Jesus Christ showed His sovereign power over all creation.

Scientific data cannot pretend to be true, since development is inherent in science; in other words, arguments and conceptions change. Mutability cannot be true, because truth is constant and objective. Truth does not depend on reception and exists independently.

People who know Greek may use another argument. They might claim that the Greek of the New Testament is partly of poor literary quality and that therefore the Bible is a not perfect book.

Language has no objective criteria of correctness. Grammar is based on exist-

ing norms, which in every living and developing language are prone to change. In order to study and describe linguistic norms, specialists usually study the language of educated native speakers: authoritative writers, journalists, scientists, etc. Very often they evaluate these norms on the basis of different and arbitrary criteria such as esthetic preferences of various schools, linguistic sense and tradition. Grammar and dictionaries are the result of these studies, but we should not forget that any dictionary is nothing without sources which are the result of human linguistic activity. Thus, when we evaluate the language of the Bible on the basis of linguistic norms and human science we evaluate the perfection of God, comparing Him [sic] to the imperfection of human language and science. Should God submit His [sic] Word to the changeable demands of human esthetics?

The authority of the Bible as the Word of God

On the basis of the concept of the divine authorship of Scripture, the famous Lutheran theologian David Hollaz (1648–1713) wrote about the causative and canonical authority of Holy Scripture. The first term is related to the power of the Holy Scripture to proclaim truth and guide man [sic] to true faith. The second is related to the special position of Scripture in comparison to other texts of faith. In both cases, the authority of Scripture is absolute and the teaching, which is based on it, normative. According to Hollaz, the Word of God and Scripture are equal. But let us further pursue this relation.

Even if in the Lutheran Confessions the term Word of God has various meanings, it means Holy Scripture every time it is used in the context of the immutable norm of faith. Henry Huth uses four arguments to defend this identification which may be summarized as follows:[6]

- The Lutheran confessional books, in particular the Formula of Concord (Epitome 1), claim that there is only one criterion for the truth in accordance with which all other doctrines and teachers are evaluated: the prophetic and apostolic books of the Old and New Testaments.

- In many passages of the Formula of Concord, the terms "Word of God" and "Holy Scripture" are used interchangeably when they refer to the norms and standards of the church's confession.

- Frequently, when the German text refers to the "Word of God," the Latin refers to the s*acra scriptura* or *sacrae litterae*.

- Finally, those passages of the Formula, which include argumentation on the basis of the Word of God (SD II 8–10, 48–51), refer to biblical texts.

Consequently, when the Lutheran Confessions refer to the absolute and immutable authority of the Word of God, they confess faith in the authority of Holy Scripture.

Methods of interpreting the Bible

In their exegetical studies, Martin Luther and other first-generation Reformers used well-known methods of literal exegesis derived from the works of the writers of the Early Church. By the beginning of the sixteenth century, the traditions of literalistic exegesis, formed in the late ancient period of church history, were used in the works of medieval church writers. The literal method of biblical study, derived from works of the school of Antioch and later influenced by St Augustine's and St Jerome's exegeses and the Middle Ages, was further developed by the school of St Victorin. Literal exegesis developed over a long period of time before becoming one of the interpretative principles of the Reformation. Consequently, it was not a product of the early Reformation, but of the intellectual pluralism of late scholasticism.

Luther thought that the correct interpretation of the Holy Scripture had to be based on the variable meaning of the analyzed text. Because of its unreliability and dimness, an allegorical understanding cannot be used in order to defend and strengthen faith.

In accordance with this principle, Luther rejected the extreme exegetic conclusions of the famous founder of the school in Alexandria, Origen, and his follower, Jerome, because he believed that their allegorical methods of interpretation destroyed the Bible's spiritual meaning.

> Luther and the first generation of Reformers were still deeply immersed in medieval categories of thought, and they tended to interpret Scripture alone in the traditional Christological way. In patristic terms, they had a certain Antiochian leaning in theology.[7]

The authority of the Bible challenged today

Prior to the Enlightenment, the Christian world acknowledged the authority of Scripture. When the Lutheran Confessions were being written in the sixteenth century their authority remained uncontested. The emphasis Luther placed on the principle of *sola scriptura* was included in the confessions as a theological statement, not intended as proof of the Bible's authority. The problem at issue was the extent to which the authority of the Bible depended on the authority of other texts such as canons of councils, patristic works, etc. Luther held that the authority of the Bible did not need the authoritative support of the ancient church fathers.

In the light of postmodern concepts, the issue of the attributes of Scripture becomes as important today as it was during Reformation. The postmodern concept of "truth" is the greatest challenge facing Christianity since it excludes any universal truth claim. A case in point are the charismatic movements that consider revelation outside the traditional ecclesial context. Such an approach changes the very notion of divine revelation.

Here we find an unexpected parallel to Pavel Florensky (1882–1937). He said that those communities or sects that proclaimed the inner experience of the Spirit as a norm inevitably resulted in *hlistovstvo* (a Russian para-orthodox charismatic sect) that broadly represented a false spiritual enthusiasm and brought about a crisis for all those involved. There are certain similarities between the charismatic sects of the Reformation and some contemporary religious movements.

Conclusion

The inspiration, authority and power of the Bible are closely related. They provide a theological basis for definitions of biblical attributes that define the Bible's position and role in the lives of believers. The opposition of biblical and individual revelations in charismatic movements and the reduction of inspiration to mere emotion in liberal theology cannot create a solid basis for contemporary Christian theology. They are unable to create conditions for the authoritative use of the Bible and for a solution to the spiritual collisions between modern man [sic] and society.

Notes

[1] In this material, the term "discourse" will be used to denote the unity of linguistic practice (linguistic activity) and extra-linguistic factors necessary to understand the text and its perception.

[2] Sandra M. Schneiders, "Biblical Spirituality," in *Interpretation. Journal of Bible and Theology 56*, no. 1 (2002), p. 140.

[3] See Miikka Ruokanen, *Doctrina divinitus inspirata: Martin Luther's Position in the Ecumenical Problem of Biblical Inspiration* (Helsinki: Luther-Agricola Society, 1985).

[4] *Formula Concordiae*, *De Compendiaria Regula atque norma*, 1. *Concordia Triglotta. Libri Symbolici Ecclesiae Lutheranae. Germanice-Latine-Anglice* (St Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921), 2nd reprint (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing), p. 776.

[5] H. Huth, *Rule and Norm of Doctrine in the Formula of Concord. A Contemporary Look at the Formula of Concord* (St Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1978), p. 96.

[6] Gerald Bray, *Biblical Interpretation. Past & Present* (Illinois/Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1996), p. 167.

Comments on Chapter I: The Bible and its Authority[1]

Since Alexander M. Priloutskii could not participate in the meeting, the group tried to understand and take into account his main concern. It was suggested that he was primarily concerned with identifying a reliable, unshakable basis for our faith and that he might fear that this basis could be eroded. The group summarized this position thus: the Bible is the immutable foundation of faith with a truly divine author.

Priloutskii's approach may well be informed by the Russian Orthodox context according to which the eternal hovers above the temporary. The question arises as to how the perfect reality enters our imperfect world. Priloutskii tends to answer the question of whether God should submit God's Word to the imperfect in the negative. To a certain extent, this approach is an expression of Platonic thinking, and the profound concern with atemporality is one shared with fundamentalism.

We are caught between different worlds: between the scholarly and the world of faith, the premodern and the postmodern. There are different strategies to solve these conflicts, but we share being divided. In this sense the group could identify with Priloutskii.

Each one of the articles involves presuppositions pertaining for instance to "God" or "truth." Once these presuppositions are identified communication might be easier.

Günter Thomas understands the Bible within the tension of the written text and the internal testimony of the (Holy) Spirit. The Bible has always been framed by further work of the Spirit. We do not comprehend the Word of God simply by reading the Bible. The Bible in itself is not enough, but further initiative by the Spirit is needed in order to create faith. This raises the question in how far the further work of the Spirit is "normed" which Wilfried John takes up in his article in chapter 3.

Since the Bible is always in human hands, the issue of power arises. If the Bible assumes authority, then we have to accept that we might lose authority. People use the Bible's authority for their own purposes.[2]

When it comes to predicating the relation between God and the Bible, Thomas is suspicious of a sacramental understanding of the latter. The Bible is

not "the place where God and the world meet" (Garrett Green). Rather, Thomas advocates for a divine election approach. What is elected is not perfect but suitable for God's purposes.

Notes

[1] The comments here and in the following chapters reflect some of the insights emerging from the discussions the study group had on their articles at their second meeting.

[2] This issue will be discussed in detail in chapter 5

Chapter II:
Unity and Diversity of the Bible

Reading Strategies in the Light of Biblical Diversity

Diane Jacobson

One of the most significant challenges that Christians face when dealing with the authority of Scripture is what to do with the complicated diversity of texts and ideas found in the Bible. Is this diversity a positive trait of Scripture? Does diversity present insoluble problems for interpretation? Does this diversity have limits? Is there an underlying unity to the diversity? Does the diversity have implications for interpretation? These and other related questions form the background for this essay. Before considering how we deal with such diversity, it is helpful to clarify the nature of this diversity.

Diversity of books and forms

The Bible exhibits diversity at many different levels.

The question arises as to whether the Bible itself also exhibits unity. This issue is taken up at the beginning of Márta's essay, "Finding the Keys: Unity and Diversity in the Bible."

We find a formal diversity, both on a large and a small scale. The Bible contains both an Old and a New Testament (as well as Apocrypha of various possible lengths whose presence or not in the canon presents its own challenge to scriptural authority). We find a great variety of books which include narratives, histories, prophetic writing, psalms and other extended poetry (such as Lamentations and the Song of Songs). We find wisdom books, legal books and a number of books containing mixed genres. We find gospels, epistles, and apocalyptic writing. This wide assortment of books and their underlying variety of forms is not a problem in and of itself except to indicate, in their multiplicity, that the Bible is more a collection of writings, a library if you will, rather than one unified book. We are also presented with two further challenges implicit within the variety:

First, many people had a hand in writing our Bible and secondly their writing comes from a period extending, minimally, over one thousand years. That is, we are faced with multiple authors and multiple historical contexts as well as multiple books and forms, a triple challenge. The authors, insofar as we can tell by reading their texts, were not of one mind. The historical circumstances in which various books or parts of books were written, insofar as these can be reconstructed,[1] led to a variety of emphases and even theologies. Thus, one of the initial implications of biblical diversity is that different books, forms, authors and historical periods call for different interpretive skills and methods, a subject to be taken up in other essays in this collection.

Diversity of content

Still, the most compelling and complicated challenges in the matter of biblical diversity stem not from variety of forms, but rather from the diversity of content among and within similar forms. Sometimes, it seems, we find tensions and even contradictions. Let us look at three sorts of tensions and contradictions that have had particularly important implications for the authority of Scripture.

Historical contradiction

The first sort of tension or contradiction is found within historical narratives. Often the same narrative is told a number of times. So, for example, Abraham twice passes off Sarah as his sister rather than his wife, once to Pharaoh (Gen 12:10–20) and once to Abimelech (Gen 20:1–18). Then Isaac told the same king Abimelech that his wife Rebekah was his sister (Gen 26:6–17). Did all three of these remarkably similar stories really happen? For those for whom the truth of the narrative depends upon its historicity, the answer must be yes, though our credulity is certainly strained. For others, this thrice-told tale belies the "saga" like nature of the stories of Genesis and their long oral history.[2] The truth of the stories might lie in their invitation to readers to examine the many ways in which we try to work out our own futures, even using deceit, and how God's promised future comes through the machinations of imperfect human beings such as ourselves. Or one might ask how many of each species of animal Noah brought onto the ark, two of each (Gen 7:9, 15) or seven of each (Gen 7:2–3)?

If history is the primary criterion of truth, the answer matters, and the seeming contradiction wrangles. But, if we see the story of Noah as having been developed by a number of different communities whose versions are brought together to illumine both God's primordial struggle with the depth of human sin and the complicated dance between God's judgment and God's grace, then the seeming contradiction adds texture and depth.

Such conflicting details found in biblical narratives grow in significance when we turn to the four gospels. Did Jesus die on the day of preparation for Passover (Jn 19) or the day after (Mt 26; Mk 14; Lk 22)? How many women witnessed the empty tomb? One (Jn 20:1–18), two (Mt 28:1–8), three (Mk 16:1–8), or even more (Lk 23:55–24:10)? Did Mary Magdalene tell any of the disciples about the tomb (Mt 28:8; Lk 24:9–10; Jn 20:2) or did she remain silent (Mk 16:8)?[3]

The discrepancies of historical detail point us to the much larger issue of the relationship between historical fact and the truth of Scripture. The lack of historical certainty can threaten Scripture's claim to the truth. For as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:14, "and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain." The stakes are high indeed. We must ask when and how historicity matters. Many feel that when we question the historicity of one text, we begin down a slippery slope that necessarily ends in questioning Jesus' death and resurrection. Others would say that the acid test of historicity and consistency itself undermines the miraculous way that truth is both hidden and revealed precisely through the complex mystery of a fourfold gospel. Such discussions were at the heart of Bultmann's "demythologizing" of the New Testament and Karth Barth's strong negative reaction to Bultmann. In any case, wanting history to matter does not make it easier for us to determine with any certainty the reality of history.

Diverse views of creation

The second sort of tension or contradiction arises when we consider the biblical view of creation. Many readers notice contradictions between Genesis 1 and Genesis 2. Many other texts also refer to the creation of the earth and everything in it, including the creation of human beings. Such texts include psalms (e.g., Ps 8, 24, 33, 74, 104 and 139), prophetic texts (e.g., Amos 4:13; 5:8; Jer 31:35–36, 33:19; Isa 40:25–26; 42:5), wisdom texts (e.g., Prov 8 and Job 38–41), as well as gospel (preeminently Jn 1) and epistle texts (e.g., Rom

8:18–25). The details of these texts certainly differ. The same issues of historicity mentioned above also enter into consideration of these texts. Some would read particularly Genesis 1-3 as the literal, historical account of creation, presumably reading the other texts (except perhaps Jn 1?) as poetic. Conflict then arises not only among texts and about history but also with modern science. In the US this conflict is creating tension about what should be taught in science classrooms and whether the theory of creation by "intelligent design" is legitimate science. The underlying logic is that if Genesis 1 is true, then it must be historically and scientifically true. Our modern scientific world has thus heightened the controversy. Such conflicts press us even further into considering the nature of biblical truth. Cannot Scripture be true in ways that differ from scientific truth?

Legal and moral contradictions

The third sort of tension or contradiction has to do with law and morals, an area which leads more than any other to consideration of the nature of the authority of Scripture. Consider scriptural views of slavery, divorce, the place of women, wealth and poverty, polygamy, homosexuality and war.[4] On each of these topics Scripture can and has been found to offer deeply conflicting thoughts, sometimes through conflicting laws and wisdom, sometimes through conflicting principles and examples. Exodus both glorifies God's deliverance of Israel from slavery as well as contains laws that deal with Israel's treatment of slaves (*cf*. Ex 2:23–25 and 20:2 with Ex 21:2–11 and 20–32). Paul both sends the slave Onesimus back to his master Philemon and commends slaves to remain slaves (albeit with added instructions in both cases) as well as proclaims that in Christ "there is no longer slave or free" (See Philem 1:12; 1 Cor 8:21; Gal 3:28). Monogamy is held up as the ideal in many places in Scripture, though clearly the patriarchs and many kings had multiple wives. Women are told to be silent in church and yet are celebrated as prophets, wise judges and congregational leaders. The prophets and many proverbs rail against the excesses of the wealthy, while the patriarchs' wealth is pictured as divine reward. Similarly, Jesus proclaims that "it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God," yet the patronage of the wealthy is welcomed in the Early Church's gatherings (*cf.* Mt 19:24 and parallels to the portrait of Lydia in Acts 16:11–15). How do we negotiate these

differences as we turn to Scripture in the midst of our moral deliberations, as we unpack Luther's principle of *sola scriptura*, and as we esteem Scripture as "the authoritative source and norm [for our] proclamation, faith, and life?"[5]

Strategies to deal with biblical diversity and contradiction

Believers, both in the past and in the present, have developed a variety of strategies to deal with the above described conflicts and contradictions. The variety is reflected in the answers given by members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) when asked in a survey, Are there tensions or even contradictions in the Bible? Why does this matter?[6]

A small number responded that the Bible contains no contradictions. This belief is most often rooted more philosophically in the nature of God than derived from the pages of Scripture. That is, God is perfect; the Bible is the Word of God; therefore the Bible is perfect and can contain no contradictions. These church members claim that contradictions come only through improper reading and interpretation or because the resolution of apparent contradictions is shrouded in the mystery of God's wisdom.[7]

Most of those interviewed responded that the Bible contains contradictions. For some this does not matter.[8] For others, the presence of contradictions points us to particular ways of interpreting the text.[9] And for still others, contradictions point us to the need to understand the core or center of the Scriptures.[10] John Collins comments on our need "to respect the fact that ancient authors did not necessarily see contradictions where we do, and that tensions and contradictions can be found in the writings of most authors, ancient and modern."[11]

Throughout most of church history, the presence of contradictions in the Scriptures has not been experienced as problematic. Often contradictions at the level of the "literal" meaning pointed to some greater truth at the "spiritual" level. Karlfried Froehlich illustrates this with the example of Origin (died 254), who believed that

> although every passage in the Bible has a spiritual sense, many do not also have a literal sense. Origin was not afraid of finding errors, impossibilities, contradictions, and even fictitious historical events on a literal level. He sought them with care; he exposed them with glee, for he was convinced that their presence

> had a purpose. Such stumbling blocks pointed unmistakable to the need of a deeper understanding.[12]

Origin and following him, theologians of the medieval church, developed a system of reading texts at four levels: literal, allegorical, tropological (or moral) and anagogical (or spiritual). They preserved the notion of Scripture as inspired word by seeing the spiritual level as the most inspired.

Though such a search for spiritual meaning which overrides literal meaning is appealing on a number of levels, such a search contains its own serious problems. By ignoring the "literal" meaning, many of the constraints on meaning are ignored. One's own theology, worldview, moral outlook and prejudices (or that of the dominant power) are given free rein. Luther broke away from such a system based primarily on his own experience of liberation through the literal meaning of the text. Being wary of reading the text only under the auspices of the traditional understanding imposed by church authority, he emphasized the literal meaning of the text.[13] Still, Luther did not end with any sort of notion that each word was inerrant, nor that the whole of Scripture was inspired. Far from it.

The Lutheran strategy: explore the literal, be led by the Spirit and find the gospel core

Luther understood that the literal, that is, the plain meaning of the text, required concentration on textual, grammatical and even historical analysis. Literal meaning is not to be confused with "literalistic" meaning. Discovering the "literal meaning" calls on the best tools of the mind and academia. More than this, ascertaining the true meaning of the text is possible only in faith and led by the Spirit, for God ultimately directs true meaning.[14] And most significantly for Luther, the true meaning wholly centered on the core of biblical truth, the gospel of Jesus Christ. As Luther put it:

> These are the Scriptures which make fools of all the wise and understanding, and are open only to the small and simple, as Christ says in Matthew 11:25. Therefore dismiss your own opinions and feelings, and think of the Scriptures as the loftiest and noblest of holy things, as the richest of mines which can never be sufficiently explored, in order that you may find divine wisdom which God here lays before

> you in such simple guise as to quench all pride. Here you will find the swaddling clothes and the manger in which Christ lies.[15]

Through this image of Scripture as the manger of Christ, Luther articulates his most basic principle for interpreting Scripture: that is, what is important and

This quotation and its central metaphor of Scripture as the cradle of Christ elicited much conversation at our meeting in Poland. Some of the most significant points were: (1) Dismissing one's own opinions and feelings is impossible and often not desirable, though approaching the text with humility is mandatory. (2) We are not always clear and certainly not always in agreement about which passages and ideas "show forth Christ." See Márta's important insight. (3) The notion of "showing forth Christ" needs to be tied to the theology of the cross and the principle of justification by grace through faith. (4) The Old Testament is an important and necessary part of this cradle of Christ. (5) The Old Testament points to Christ not only, or even primarily, through passages that point to the coming of Jesus, but also through passages that feed our understanding of God, the world and human nature. This description of Scripture as the "swaddling clothes" and "manger" is not a formula and does not resolve scriptural discrepancies, but rather lights our path as we find scriptural truth within biblical tensions.

central and true about Scripture is whatever shows forth Christ. For Luther, Christ is the living Word of God, and Scripture is the cradle which holds the living Word. That is, Scripture is the written Word that contains and cradles and shows forth the living Word and together with the Spirit of Christ forms and informs the third aspect of God's Word, that is, the proclaimed Word. In claiming that which shows forth Christ lies at Scripture's core, Luther offers us a critical principle for assessing texts, including passages that we deem contradictory. Principally, armed with this understanding we are never enslaved by a narrow biblicism that claims that every word of Scripture is true. This principle points to the core of God's truth that gives us a principle on which we can rightly take our stand, so long as we understand the cradle of Christ to contain all sorts of

straw. Both Testaments provide the structure of this cradle and its straw. That is, both are able to show forth Christ and both contain law and gospel. Both law and gospel point to Christ. Demands for justice and condemnation of sin can and do show forth Christ. The good news of God's compassion, love, forgiveness and mercy in both Testaments show forth Christ. And difficult passages are often necessary, if uncomfortable, bedding.

Others before and since Luther have resolved conflicts in Scripture by appealing to its core. For some this core is the truth that "God is love," or that God always shows a preferential option for the poor. Wilfried Joest, a Lutheran systematician, suggests that the core lies in God's power of unconditional love.[16] The core becomes the "canon within the canon," that is, the center to which all Scripture drives.[17] Appealing to a core most often carries with it the implication that one can judge some parts of Scripture using other parts of Scripture and that one is free to view some passages in the Bible as more central and other passages less helpful or even misleading.

Truthfully, everyone approaches the Bible with some sense of its core and judges some passages by using others. For some the core is more conscious and explicit than for others. All of us are capable of being blind to certain biblical insights because we come to the text with an understanding of what is core and what is not. All of us rush through texts we deem peripheral, sometimes missing transformative insights.

Thus Luther found many of the books of the Apocrypha very edifying while he questioned the value of Esther, James and Revelation. For Luther, the gospel as the core of Scripture leads to certain methods of reading using a law/gospel hermeneutic and underlies his notion of Scripture alone as our source and norm. If we were to begin our conversations about the authority of Scripture by discussing our various understandings of gospel and what stands at the core of Scripture, we could then address what we consider to be incompatible with our core understandings. We would not agree on the answer. Such conversations are not simple nor are all answers clear or obvious, but such an approach might help us to negotiate our differences in ways that are useful to us in our moral deliberations.

Once we accept Luther's premise that the gospel lies at the core of Scripture, we are freed to engage the Bible dynamically and with imagination. The diversity within Scripture is then not a problem to be overcome, but rather points to the essential variety of means used by God in communicating the gospel to us. Many of the ELCA respondents to the above mentioned question about contradictions indicated that tensions in the text added rather than detracted from the biblical truth.[18] Through the tensions and contradictions, the hidden God invites us into the gospel. The human variety of Scripture mirrors the incarnation itself. All three manifestations of the Word—Scripture, Jesus and proclamation—combine the human and the divine. Truth comes not through the perfection of the divine, but clothed in human form with all our complications and peculiarities. We are drawn back continually to the image of Scripture as the manger in which the Christ lies.

This notion of the Bible as incarnational indicates that this cradle of Christ is itself complex. Christ is not only born with one voice, with only one perspective. Christ is born through mystery and invitation. We might consider that Jesus himself spoke in parables. Should not his manner of speaking as well as the content of his speech make a difference to how we understand his authority?[19] Scripture teaches us with as many ambiguities and nuances and with as much authority as Jesus taught the crowds. We have four gospels. We have Leviticus and Deuteronomy.[20] We have the Books of Job, Qoheleth, Jonah and Ruth to keep us off center when reading Genesis or Proverbs or the Prophets. When we try to stand in only one place in Scripture, the ground shakes under our feet. And this is precisely how the authority of Scripture works. I am reminded of Ralph Waldo Emerson's frequently quoted words, "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines."[21] Terence Fretheim argues "that biblical differences have the capacity to spark the theological imagination. In the clash of differences, in combination with the continuing work of the Spirit, new and more profound knowledge of God can become available."[22] We become engaged and go deeper and wider within the deliciously beautiful and complex word. Our imaginations and our lives are transformed, and we understand things more truly. Biblical truth is found in the midst of all of this complexity. The Bible stands authoritatively in our lives not by answering all of our questions but by ever deepening our faith. We are driven to our knees in repentance; we are raised up through the word of forgiveness; we are pulled by the word into service and a passion for justice; and we are enlivened by and lifted into the divine promise. Any notion of au-

thority that overly simplifies this encounter is finally a betrayal of the gospel that stands at its core.

Appendix

The study group on "The Authority of the Bible in the Life of the Church" developed the following eight questions to be answered by church members in order that we might learn more about how Lutherans around the world think about issues surrounding the authority of Scripture.

(1) Why is the Bible important to Christians?

(2) People often speak of the Bible as the Word of God. Would you say the Bible is the Word of God, contains the Word of God, or witnesses to the Word of God? Or would you say it some other way?

(3) Are there tensions or even contradictions in the Bible? Why does this matter?

(4) Christians believe God speaks to us through the Bible. Are there other equally important ways in which God speaks to us today?

(5) Why do different people read the same texts in different ways?

(6) Are there some ways of studying the Bible that are better or worse than other ways?

(7) Can the Bible be misused? If so, how?

(8) Should the way that Christians behave in the world influence how people view the Bible?

Notes

[1] For issues related to reconstructing biblical history, see my essay, "Reading Strategies in the Light

of Biblical Diversity."

[2] Following Thomas L. Thompson's, *The Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives. ZAW Supplement 133* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1974), many contemporary scholars dealing with issues of Genesis and history would claim that none of the narratives of Genesis report actual historical events.

[3] The calculation also depends on where Mark's gospel ends.

[4] An excellent resource for dealing with moral questions in the light of scriptural diversity is Willard Swartley's, *Slavery, Sabbath, War, and Women* (Scottsdale: Herald, 1983). Swartley specifically addresses these issues as a Mennonite, leaving us with an open invitation to explore these same issues as Lutherans.

[5] ELCA Constitution, "Confession of Faith," 2/03.

[6] See appendix at the end of this article.

[7] A sample of these responses follows: (1) No. We do not possess full wisdom to understand that which appears to be contradictory. "In part we know now..." (2) No. Contradictions of people reading the Word. (3) People can make mistakes. God makes no mistakes. (4) No. God is consistently wise, sovereign and merciful. (5) Tensions, yes; contradictions, no. Our lack of understanding can cause us to misunderstand what God is telling us. (6) No. God's Word is perfect. We don't understand it all. It matters for consistency. (7) No. It is truth. (8) No. I found that there are two reasons for what people believe are mistakes: it may be a poor translation, or a poor or improper interpretation. Tensions, but not contradictions. Any contradictions arise from inaccurate translations or interpretations. (9) Since the Holy Spirit will teach us all things, all true understanding must come by revelation of the Holy Spirit and not some "wise" theologian/professor/leader, etc. (10) There appear to be contradictions at first glance, however, I believe that on deeper investigation those contradictions resolve themselves. A more subtle variation of this response is found in (11) Not in terms of what God is revealing to His people as to how to live (life's journey and faith formation). (12) No. If the Bible is interpreted through the lenses of law and gospel.

[8] (1) Yes. And it doesn't matter. (2) I believe there are what some would consider to be contradictions in the Bible. But it does not matter. It is all open to interpretation. (3) Yes. It does not matter because Christ is the final authority.

[9] (1) Yes. These point out the need to understand the context of the writings from the time and

place in which they were written, the lives of the people who wrote the various parts, as well as the time and place and skills of various translators. They serve as a reminder that the same passage read yesterday can have a different application today and tomorrow. This is why it makes it so important to interpret such passages by the overall themes of Scripture itself. Let Scripture interpret Scripture. (2) I personally consider such tensions due to progressive revelations, necessarily made progressive by the limits of understanding on the part of the listeners. (3) Yes. The Bible contains tensions and contradictions. These tensions and contradictions often reflect the human aspect of the Bible; the Bible was written over centuries by different people in different cultural situations holding different understandings of God. This means that Christians must constantly differentiate between the husk of the author's culture and the meat of the Word. (4) Yes, there are tensions and contradictions in the texts. That is as it should be. These texts come from a variety of times, under varying circumstances, with a variety of intents. The trajectories of the God human relationship are dependent upon the life situations of those telling the stories of the relationship. This matters because there are times when certain texts have little or no meaning to the hearer, and there are times when the texts address the circumstances of our age and situations. (5) Yes, there are too often many ways to the truth in God's Word. It means that the sources of God's truth through humans can be different. It is the whole witness of Scripture that leads us to the truth. It allows God's Spirit to help us and guide us to that truth. (6) Yes, there are tensions and contradictions within the Bible because it was written by different and particular people in and for particular times and places. We need to hear what God was saying first to the people of the times and places the particular biblical texts were written for and then prayerfully discern what God is saying to us now. But we do not do this by synthesizing all the tensions and contradictions.

[10] (1) There are tensions, contradictions and great mysteries in the Bible. They do not detract from the central themes and message—God's abiding and everlasting love for us through Christ. (2) Oh my, yes! It matters because it proves that the Bible was written by fallible humans—often with an agenda—to establish Yahweh as the supreme God, with Jesus as the Son, who along with the Holy Spirit comprise one God. (3) Yes. Christ is the center of Scripture. Scripture needs to be read through the lens of the gospel. (4) Yes. Scripture is neither infallible nor inerrant in matters of science and history. Yet, Scripture is not held up among us as a science or history textbook. It is held up among us as "the cradle of the Christ." Lutherans live in the tension of paradox.

[11] John J. Collins, *The Bible After Babel: Historical Criticism in a Postmodern Age* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), p. 22.

[12] Terence Fretheim and Karlfried Froehlich, *The Bible as Word of God in a Postmodern Age* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1998), p. 20. (Hereafter cited according to the author cited, either

Fretheim or Froehlich).

[13] "The Christian reader should make it his first task to seek out the literal sense, as they call it. For it alone is the whole substance of faith and Christian theology; it alone holds its ground in trouble and trial," in Jaroslav Pelikan (ed.), *Luther's Works*, vol. 9 (St Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1960), p. 24.

[14] "If God does not open and explain Holy Writ, no one can understand it; it will remain a closed book, enveloped in darkness," in Jaroslav Pelikan (ed.), *Luther's Works*, vol. 13 (St Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1956), p. 17.

[15] Helmut T. Lehmann (ed.), *Luther's Works*, vol. 35 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1960), p. 236.

[16] Wilfried Joest, *Fundamentaltheologie* (Stuttgart/Berlin/Köln/Mainz: Kohlhammer-Verlag, 1974). On page 132, Joest writes that God discloses himself "in Jesus Christ as the creative will of unconditional love" (Gott offenbart sich "in Jesus Christus als der schöpferische Wille unbedingter Liebe"). On page 204, Joest predicates "Christ as the liberating action of God" ("Christus als befreiende Gottestat") emphasizing that Christ as liberating action of God has been expounded throughout church history in different ways, but that they sort of converge in that conviction.

[17] Note Froehlich, in *op. cit.* (note 12), p. 31: "The concept of 'canon within the canon' …is often misunderstood. [It] does not refer to a formal criterion, a method of sorting out, prioritizing, and assigning grades to biblical books—central, marginal, important, not important; meat, straw. Like the doctrine of biblical inspiration, it is an hermeneutical device, the description of a necessary movement: You may read any book in the Bible and it will lead you to the center, the gospel."

[18] (1) Yes, the "tensions or contradictions" make us consider the words carefully and prayerfully interpret them. Struggling with these tensions is part of growing and maturing as a Christian. (2) What becomes important is not the day on which Jesus died, but what the Synoptics are trying to communicate with the Last Supper taking place on Passover and what John is trying to communicate with Jesus being crucified as the Passover lambs are slaughtered. In this sense, both are true. (3) Tension causes us to pause and think, to contemplate and search. It keeps us from being lazy and uninvolved. (4) Tensions and contradictions are great! They help us to know that God meets us all individually, where we are, and speaks to us as we are able to hear and try to understand. (5) Of course there are! This is a good thing, because it is what makes it a "living word." When that tension is denied or read out of the text, the Bible becomes an idol! (6) Yes; I like "tensions" or maybe

"paradox." Tensions or seeming paradoxes are good in that they keep us from becoming complacent or thinking we have all the answers on some subjects. It keeps us constantly challenged to consider our actions towards others for being Christ-like. (7) Yes. The different contexts, cultures and perspectives of the various writers resulted in different expressions and even contradictions. This matters because the differences make the Bible richer and more "trustworthy" since it is a compilation of many writers. It also speaks to the impossibility of expressing in words the essence of God.

[19] *Cf.* Mt 7:28-29: "Now when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes."

[20] See Fretheim, "A Dynamic Understanding of the Law," in *op. cit.* (note 12), pp. 147ff.

[21] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance" (1841), in Brooks Atkinson (ed.), *The Complete Essays and Other Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York: Very Good Modern Library, 1940), pp. 145–52.

[22] Fretheim, *op. cit.* (note 12), p. 125.

Finding the Keys: Unity and Diversity in the Bible

Márta Cserháti

Biblical interpretation is not only concerned with the analysis of particular passages, but also with leitmotifs, large patterns or root metaphors that connect the diverse material within the biblical books as well as the Bible as a whole. Earlier, the unity of the Bible was thought to be guaranteed by a single overarching message, be it a theological concept, a particular doctrine or conformity to a creed or philosophy. More recently, there has been a growing recognition that none of these unifying features does complete justice to the plurality and complexity of the biblical material. In some cases, this has resulted in an increasing fragmentation of biblical documents, either through the identification of different strands of tradition in them (such as the sources underlying the synoptic gospels), or by introducing diverse methods of interpretation. These developments have made it difficult to speak about a unified message of the Bible, or even a coherent theology of the New Testament. Instead, we have the theology of John, Pauline and Deutero-Pauline theology, Lukan, Matthean and Markan theology, and latterly, even a theology of Q, the hypothetical source behind many of Jesus' sayings in the synoptic gospels (to say nothing of a further division of Q into Q1, Q2 and Q3 in recent scholarship). In the face of this diversity—some would even say splintering of the biblical witness—there has been a growing sense of the need to restate or find unity in the Bible.

At the time of the Reformation, finding unity most often meant finding a doctrinal formulation that would encapsulate the essence of the biblical message. This was made possible by the fact that the text "functioned as a compendium of divine doctrine,"[1] a collection of doctrinal prooftexts, *dicta probantia*, where the biblical passages were in fact repositories from which this meaning could be extracted. Another possibility has been to use a church creed as the filter through which the diversity of perspectives within the Bible could be unified. Such approaches, however, mean that important aspects of the biblical message can be overlooked. For example, if we use the Apostles' Creed as such a

filter, then the two important lacunae within the creed (the fact that Israel is not mentioned in it, and the significance of Jesus' life is not expressed) mean that using the creed as a filter can only yield a truncated account of the central elements of the biblical witness.[2] Later, the search for a center concentrated on finding basic concepts or motifs that could link the different parts of the Bible. Ideas such as "covenant," "eschatology," "promise and fulfillment," "realized eschatology" and "salvation history" were advanced. While all these motifs play an important part in many of the biblical books, we cannot say that any one of them could serve as an overarching category that could account for all or even most of the material. It has been suggested that not the "what" but the "how" of the biblical voices is the factor that plays a unifying role: a particular mode of understanding history, a characteristic stance, an understanding of human events as taking place in relation to God. Stories of Israel's past or Jesus' life are told not primarily to convey information, but rather to evoke trust and obedience in the reader.[3]

Many interpreters draw attention to the essential narrativity of the Bible, the fact that instead of principles and schemata, the Bible basically contains a story: a story running from creation to new creation; the story of God and God's people; the story of redemption and salvation. As such, some of the tensions and contradictions in the Bible are simply the result of its storied nature: some subplots are in tension with the main story line, but are nevertheless important as a corrective to it. Also, as many scholars suggest, these tensions serve to draw the reader into the story, making him or her "indwell" the story

However, as Diane noted in Warsaw, much depends on who decides what the main story line is, and on who or what is left

more effectively than a more straightforward account would.

Even if we accept the primacy of narrative within the Bible, it is still necessary to employ some principle of selection among these stories, since not all of them carry the same weight. Some of them might even be offensive to us. In fact, every reader of the Bible reads it selectively (each reader has his or her own functional Scripture). What is important is to be as clear as possible about the motivations and principles behind our selection, or in other words, the hermeneutical key or keys we use to unlock the Bible. Furthermore, we

must always remain willing to be addressed by any part of the Bible, even those that we might consider outmoded or irrelevant.

The search for a center

In addition to the key concepts I have already mentioned, I briefly want to look at three (interrelated) hermeneutical keys employed in the search for the unity of the Bible: the "canon within the canon" approach, the centrality of Jesus as the Christ and justification by grace as unifying center.

Canon within the canon

This approach looks for a criterion of selection within the biblical canon: a motif, concept or person judged to represent the essence of the biblical message. This essentiality makes of this element the "measuring rod" (canon) by which the rest of the biblical material is judged. For Luther, "salvation by grace alone" might be said to have functioned as such a measuring rod. He considered the biblical books that contained this message as being central, while the others were only peripheral.[4] Others might consider Jesus' ethical teaching, the teaching about God's love for humankind, or perhaps the message of universal peace as such a canon. Francis Schüssler Fiorenza argues for the hermeneutical primacy of those texts in the New Testament that deal with the origins of the Christian community: the gospels that are the "primary source of our knowledge of the historical Jesus" and thus serve as paradigms of Christian identity. In contrast, texts such as Romans 13 or Revelation do not have the same sort of primacy concerning Christian positions on the relation between church and state, because people have had "two thousand years of experience of diverse states and cultures,"[5] while the documents that tell about Jesus and earliest Christianity cannot be supplemented by later teaching or experience.

By privileging one aspect of the biblical witness over others, practitioners of the "canon within the canon" approach acknowledge that "the Bible cannot be accorded equal authority in all its parts, and that everything contained in it cannot be regarded as equally binding upon the Christian."[6]

This strategy, useful as it seems, has some obvious dangers and draw-

backs. Our canon of texts might enable us to focus on texts in the Bible that are more central, but "with the implicit corollary that what turns out to be unusable or unsuitable can be jettisoned without any qualms."[7] For example, if we prioritize passages that speak of peace as our "canon within the canon," we are bound to neglect the numerous accounts of violence and war in the Bible.[8] The greatest danger of this approach is that our principle of selection will almost inevitably lead us to ignore those passages that are of secondary importance in our canon. "Ultimately, the method does not face up to the difficulties encountered in Scripture."[9]

Arguably, however, this selective approach has biblical precedents and thus biblical warrant. One need only think of the prioritizing of the Book of Isaiah and the Psalms,[10] or Paul's extensive use of the Genesis accounts in his letters.

One way to counter the difficulties caused by the "canon within the canon" approach is the so-called "canonical criticism" of Brevard Childs and others, which takes the whole canonical context of biblical passages as the norm of interpretation. The general drift of the message, or its dominant emphases, will then function as a basis for the interpretation of individual texts. For example, texts "that reflect an unfavorable attitude toward foreign nations (Deut 23:1–2,20) must be viewed against those that exhibit a concern for the needs of the stranger or the resident alien (Ex 22:21; 23:9)."[11] This "holistic" approach does not completely avoid the basic problem of selection and evaluation. It is not always easy to ascertain the "general drift" of the biblical message, and sometimes our choice may reflect our individual preferences just as much as in the previous case (the "canon within the canon" method).

Jesus Christ as the center

The person and work of Jesus Christ have often served as a principle against which to measure the rest of the canon. We need only think of Luther's principle, *Was Christum treibet*, to determine which books in the canon can be considered the main books "the true kernel and marrow of all the books."[12] By this Christological principle Luther determined the boundaries of the canon in such a way that some writings were relegated to the margins. He called the Letter of James "an epistle of straw," and expressed doubts as to whether Revelation was written with the aid of the Holy Spirit. Luther's insistence on

In Warsaw, Diane called our attention to the fact that it is not always easy to define the exact content of Luther's Was Christum treibet. At times it might refer to the forgiveness of sins, at others to the theology of the cross, etc.

Christ as the center explains the curious, almost paradoxical duality in his views of the Bible: his "total submission to the Bible as the 'oracles of God' before which human reason must 'doff its cap' combined with a bold critical freedom in assessing individual books and passages within the Bible."[13]

Luther's biblical interpretation can rightfully be called Christocentric. For him, Christ was the hermeneutical key to the whole Bible, the proper subject of the study of the Bible as opposed to authorial interpretation and all other aspects of inquiry: *urgemus Christum contra scripturam* (we urge Christ against Scripture).[14] This conviction allowed Luther to establish an hierarchy among biblical writings according to their content. His views of the Bible were always related to the *res* of Scripture and its existential import, and never a formal or external understanding of authority.[15]

Most theologians may share Luther's focus on the person of Christ as the unifying center of at least the New Testament witness. Differences may arise as to the exact content of this affirmation. Luther's Christological emphasis was, on the one hand, based on the classical, kerygmatic Christological formulations and, on the other, clearly related to his great theme of the justification of sinners (what Christ has done for us). There is no agreement among modern scholars who affirm that "the unifying factor is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth, revealed as Christ and Lord."[16] Before the Enlightenment, Jesus Christ, the God-human figure, was at the center, but with the advent of the so-called quest of the historical Jesus, the earthly life of Jesus, variously reconstructed by biblical scholars, is emphasized. Scholars associated with the three great waves in the history of the quest, the first from Reimarus to Albert Schweitzer, the so-called new quest of the 1950s and 1960s and the contemporary third quest, have made their own reconstructions of Jesus' life, which have always also been Christological affirmations as "every presentation of Jesus' life and thought creates a *de facto* Christ of faith."[17] This has meant a more or less radical modification of classical Christological formulae, so that instead of being the most stable element in interpretation, Christology has become the "most

variable factor."[18] Since what an interpreter means by affirming Jesus Christ as the center of the biblical witness can no longer be taken for granted, it is incumbent upon scholars to give an account of the meaning and significance of this term for their own interpretations.

Justification by grace through faith

In the Lutheran tradition, salvation by grace alone has always been considered the essence of the gospel and thus the standard by which questions of the relative importance of biblical writings could be decided. For Luther, this insight was not only an exegetical discovery, but also the solution to his existential problem. As such, it really functioned as gospel in his life, as something that happens *extra nos*, while at the same time being good news in the sense of providing an answer to our personal questions. For people in various historical situations the content of the gospel will in this way always contain a stable element, what already happened, and a variable, namely the hopes and fears that we bring to this existential encounter. Since our contemporary hopes and fears differ from those of either Paul or Luther, we must examine whether for us justification by grace has the same explanatory power and in a similar fashion can function as an hermeneutical key.

Luther's decisive experience while reading Romans was the realization that he did not need to strive for or create a relationship to God, because this (gracious) relationship was already a given. This insight is really liberating because it frees us from the constant desire and endeavor to "justify" ourselves, that is, to create and constantly prove our self-worth. At the same time, this recognition is also a radical critique of all religions based on a notion of merit. But, since this notion is a fundamental, ingrained aspect of human life, it is exceedingly difficult to get rid of it. Some interpreters find Luther's idea of salvation by grace

In this context, it is worth noting that time and again Diane emphasized the dangers of radical individualism as a controlling force of interpretation.

alone so radical that they reject any attempt to take it out of its original context of the relationship between God and the individual. One scholar, for example,

maintains that "to ask how this God-relation is in turn transformed into an ethical and political reality is absurd in view of the radicality of the theological question."[19] In other words, there is no obvious link between social reality and faith experience.

It could be argued that it is precisely these wider implications that invest this theological concept with contemporary relevance (not forgetting, of course, its original meaning). Walter Wink insists that in the contemporary situation, "the message of justification by grace was never more timely in the whole history of the church." Writing from an American perspective, but probably reflecting the experience of most of us in the modern world, Wink reflects on the deep unease people feel because their lives are governed by the performance principle. Society tells each of us that "he or she must validate the self in order to win the respect of others and of oneself."[20] In a society where opportunities are unequal, people are told that if they succeed it is by the grace of God and if they fail they have only themselves to blame. This causes anxiety, especially in people at the bottom or in the middle of the social ladder, because they are told that they do not deserve to be respected, unless they have earned it. The theological name for this condition, Wink says, is of course justification through works.[21] Yet, if justification by grace is preached to alleviate this anxiety, "apart from an unmasking of actual power relations," Wink insists, then "justification by faith becomes a mystification of the actual power relations," ultimately a "justification of the *status quo*."[22] If coupled with an awareness of its social implications, then it may have the same liberating potential it used to have for Luther.

If we do not isolate the individual significance of salvation by grace alone, it may become an hermeneutical key with considerable explanatory power. For example, Paul's emphasis on the unmerited love of all can be used to counter biblical patriarchy, because "it provides a profound theological rationale for egalitarianism."[23] Arguably, within the Deutero-Pauline writings, where to some extent patriarchalism regains control, "the theme of justification by grace is muted."[24]

Justification by grace as a basic emphasis coheres with a number of important gospel themes. One need only think of Jesus' inclusive practice of table fellowship, a symbol of undeserved acceptance by God, or the saying "…Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and

sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous" (Mt 5:44–45). Here righteous conduct is made possible by the realization of God's boundless goodness, just as the relinquishing of anxious thoughts in Mt 6:25–34.

As it is the case with other great biblical themes, justification by grace does not provide an hermeneutical key that would open the door to each biblical passage. Other motifs and concepts stand in tension with it and there are biblical books from which the idea is missing completely. Nevertheless, it is justified to emphasize it as a major principle of selection because of its importance as a religious notion, as well as its appearance in a number of important biblical writings.

"Problematic" texts

Texts in tension

Biblical interpretation is a complex enterprise not only because the individual texts can have multiple interpretations, but also because some texts stand in tension with each other. In such cases, different communities may employ different methods to find out which text or version should be privileged over the other. Since the Reformation, a widely used principle has been to explain "the more obscure passages … by other passages that are more clear."[25] The problem is not always the clarity or obscurity of certain passages, but rather that they represent different points of view. Such differences are sometimes due to the difference in the time the passages entered the tradition, and/or the different intentions behind them. It is remarkable though that the later text does not replace the earlier one. It is clearly intended to correct the previous text and there is no final editing (or at least the intervention is not too radical) to smooth over the discrepancies.[26] Biblical books (e.g., Genesis) that were written over long periods of time contain a number of such texts in tension. One example would be the variations on the story of Jacob. Genesis 27:41–5 and 28:10 tell of Jacob deceiving Esau and Isaac and his flight. This story was apparently troublesome for the tradition which then included another (Priestly) version in Genesis 27:46–28:9, an alternative account according to which Jacob is actually sent away by his father.[27] The promise made to Abraham is also interpreted in two different ways in Genesis. Genesis 12:2–3 describes the blessing as depending on nothing more than Abraham's willingness to trust

God and to go where he is asked to go. Another text which follows the narrative of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac (Gen 22:15–18), seems "to imply that God will pass the promise on to Isaac only because Abraham was so obedient as to offer his beloved son."[28] David Carr suggests that the latter text was probably added later to stress Abraham's obedience. This contrast between unconditional and conditional promise was utilized by later interpreters in different ways.

> Catholic opponents of the Protestant Reformers used such texts to argue against unearned grace and for the role of obedience in reception of God's promise. In response, Luther argued that the original promise of Genesis 12:1–3 is not preceded by any act of obedience.[29]

The perhaps best known examples are the differing creation accounts in Genesis 1–2 and the four gospels.

In all these cases, no attempt was made by the editor(s) to smooth over the differences and to resolve the tensions by eliminating one or the other conflicting account. Tatian's attempt to harmonize the four gospels was a fiasco in the long run. The four different perspectives on Jesus represented in the gospels stand in creative tension. Evidently, it proved to be more important to preserve these rather than to smooth over the problematic differences in the four writings.

The fact that conflicting accounts are not erased from the records means that these texts remained flexible enough to allow for multiple interpretations. For this reason Carr calls them untamable texts. In fact, in the Ancient Near

As Elelwani noted, we must always be aware that as a rule the presence of tensions and contradictions in the biblical texts is not an easy matter for "ordinary" readers, because they often expect existential answers to their own situations and would prefer a single reading to multiplicity and variation.

East, adapting treasured traditions by adding to them was a mark of the text's authority, since it was considered important enough to allow it to speak to new situations. "Within this context, a mark of Scripture was its multi-voiced character, not its alleged authorial unity."[30]

This "untamability" of biblical texts and, consequently, the impossibility of

having a single meaning are a virtue rather than a problem because "flexibility in reading is part of what enlivens the Bible for communities who cherish it."[31]

Texts of terror

Multivalent texts that allow for multiple interpretations, or passages that reflect an ancient worldview pose less of a problem for most readers than texts that are considered morally offensive. Among these are passages that reflect their author's patriarchalism, or appear to condone violence. In such cases it is not merely a question of the right interpretation, but the more fundamental problem of the unacceptability of the views promoted by the texts.

Some of these passages concern the problem of suffering. Deuteronomy and some Psalms and Proverbs seem to suggest that God rewards human righteousness with prosperity, while human evil is repaid by punishment. Yet, we know that in reality innocents often suffer, while criminals live in luxury. This idea has a cruel corollary, namely that misfortune, hunger and poverty are signs of divine dissatisfaction.

Other offensive passages speak about God as the God of holy war (e.g., Josh 6–11 and 1 Sam 15). In these stories, Israel is ordered to perform ethnic cleansing, that is to annihilate all its enemies, including women and children, and their properties. We need to attempt to understand such stories in their original historical setting. For example, holy war prevented the usual orgy of looting in tribal warfare by stating that there was to be no personal benefit. Also, as Leander Keck suggests, 1 Samuel 15 is about Saul's disobedience and Samuel's insistence that obedience is better than sacrifice.[32]

Some other methods have been devised to mitigate these offending passages. These include the evolutionary approach according to which these texts reflect an early stage in Israel's moral development; the approach of cultural relativists, who insist that these offensive texts reflect the context of the society in which they were written; and the "canon within the canon" approach which selects the central principles of the biblical message and disregards more peripheral texts.[33]

While each of these methods is unsatisfactory, all of them contain important insights. Eryl Davies argues that these difficult texts should not be explained away or quietly ignored. Instead, while recognizing their canonical status, readers should question them and wrestle with them. In this way they would remain engaged with the text while voicing their criticism of it. This is necessary because

At this point we must be wary of presenting Jesus' attitude to women as something totally unprecedented in Judaism, portraying him over against Judaism's "dark background," as many Jewish feminist scholars rightly warn, and as I was rightly warned by Diane in Warsaw.

"it is precisely when such passages go unchallenged that the Bible is in danger of being shamelessly exploited for political and ideological ends."[34] Moreover, ethical criticism of parts of the Bible is actually a tradition within the Bible itself. We might think of the corrective the Book of Job provides to traditional wisdom literature, or the modification by some of the classical prophets of the original holy war tradition, or the way parts of the Bible subvert the patriarchal worldview of other texts (one only need to think of the gospel accounts of Jesus' encounters with women).

The recognition that biblical passages can actually subvert the dominant worldview enshrined in other texts may perhaps be seen as a radical version of the Reformation principle of Scripture interpreting Scripture.

By honestly wrestling with these passages, we acknowledge that they have a place in the canon and that we cannot resolve tensions that the authors left standing. One reason is that by reading these "texts of terror," we can identify with the fear and anxiety that they engender, and we realize that our own anxieties are part of the common human lot. Moreover, by not excising untamable or offensive texts from the Bible, we also acknowledge that even the most distant or difficult passages can speak to people in unpredictable ways.

Old Testament and New Testament

When we talk about the unity of the Bible, one of the most difficult questions concerns the unity of its two major parts. Traditionally, Christians have considered the person of Jesus Christ, the fulfillment of the Hebrew Scriptures, as the main unifying factor. One way to express this conviction was finding predictions and prophecies which Jesus was claimed to have fulfilled. This method has precedents in the New Testament, because in the first century it

was "the accepted way of reading Scripture."[35] Nevertheless, in light of the growing awareness of its imperialistic nature and an acknowledgment of the independence of the Hebrew Bible as a religious document in its own right, this method has recently fallen into disrepute.

Still, it is natural for Christians to insist on seeing the two testaments together, with Jesus as the connecting figure. Leander Keck suggests that

> it is not nearly so important to find Christ in the Old Testament as it is to find the Old Testament in Christ. That is, what is decisive is not finding predictions of Jesus but locating ways in which Jesus gives concreteness to certain emphases of the Old Testament.[36]

Among these emphases, Keck mentions Jesus' intensifying some of the Old Testament injunctions, such as the concern for limiting retaliation (an eye for an eye) by deepening its concern for the guilty (by prohibiting retaliation). Another example might be Jesus' attitude toward suffering informed by the insight of the Servant Songs of Second Isaiah. Even the seriousness with which obedience is taken in the otherwise difficult passage of 1 Samuel 15 "is validated by Jesus' own career." (But, since Jesus did not fulfill the role of military Messiah, the concept of holy war itself is not validated by his career.)[37]

A measure of unity can also be found in some basic motifs connecting the two testaments. For example, a concern for the vulnerable members of society (the aliens, orphans and widows) found in the Old Testament (e.g., Ex 21), where God appears as the special patron of these people, is echoed by the widely attested practice of Jesus' table fellowship with the outcasts of his day, and in Paul's exhortation for his communities to show preference for the community's weakest members (e.g., 1 Cor 12; Rom 14–15).

Of course, finding unity between the two testaments is made difficult by the fact that it is not easy to find unifying themes within each. In the case of the New Testament, faith in Jesus as the Christ has been suggested as such a persistent motif[38] (see the problems I have mentioned earlier), but in the case of the Old Testament it is impossible easily to find an organizing center. Perhaps the most usable suggestions are those that emphasize the narrativity of both testaments and posit some overarching story (e.g., creation to new creation, or the story of God with his people) with several subplots that might harmonize with or contradict the main story line. It has been suggested that instead of a

Christocentric concept of unity, a more theocentric focus is necessary, because it would be "more hospitable to both Testaments."

> It is still true that some portions of the Hebrew Bible can be reread to make theological sense of the revelation of God through Jesus Christ. At the same time, we now know that neither Jesus Christ nor the Triune God is a focus of the scriptures inherited from Judaism. Any creative reading of those scriptures in relation to specifically Christian themes needs to be honest about its status as a counter-reading against the grain of the text…[39]

Conclusion

At the end of our investigations, we could say that the unity of the biblical witness in the sense of the biblical message still eludes us. Not only are biblical texts multivalent, allowing for different interpretations, but they are sometimes in definite tension, if not in conflict with each other. Nevertheless, it is sometimes precisely this diversity that makes it possible for people living in different historical and social contexts to rediscover those aspects of the Bible which speak to them in their particular situation. This also means that mistaken or dangerous interpretations cannot be excluded, and can only be effectively countered in a free and open dialogue among conflicting interpretations, taking care "not to read others too quickly out of the Kingdom of God."[40]

Notes

[1] Joel B. Green, *Scripture and Theology: Failed Experiments, Fresh Perspectives*, at **www.luthersem.edu/ctrf/Papers/2001_Green.htm**.

[2] *Ibid.*

[3] Leander Keck, *Taking the Bible Seriously*, at **www.religion-online.org/showchapter.asp?title=688&C=884**

[4] Robin Scroggs, "The Bible as Foundational Document," in *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology 49*, no. 1(1995), p. 20.

[5] Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, "The Crisis of Scriptural Authority," in *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology 44*, no. 4 (1990), p. 364.

[6] Eryl W. Davies, "The Morally Dubious Passages of the Hebrew Bible: An Examination of Some Proposed Solutions," in *Currents in Biblical Research* (2005), p. 209.

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 208.

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 210.

[9] *Ibid.*, p. 211.

[10] *Ibid.*, p. 210.

[11] *Ibid.*, p. 213.

[12] *LW* 35,361.62, quoted in David W. Lotz, "Sola Sriptura: Luther on Scriptural Authority," in *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology 35*, no. 3 (1981), p. 272.

[13] Lotz, *ibid.*, p. 260.

[14] *Disputatio de fidei*, 1535, *WA 39 I*, p. 47.

[15] Walter Mostert, *Az "önmagát értelmezo Szentírás"* [Scripture Interpreting Scripture] (Budapest: Hermeneutikai Kutatóközpont, 1996), p. 30.

[16] John Reumann, *Variety and Unity in New Testament Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 28.

[17] Barry W. Henau, "Is the 'Historical Jesus' a Christological Construct?," in William E. Arnal and Michel Desjardins (eds), *Whose Historical Jesus?* (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfried Laurier University Press, 1997), p. 241.

[18] Reumann, *op. cit.* (note 16), p. 29.

[19] Mostert, *op. cit.* (note 15), p. 42.

[20]Walter Wink, "How I Have Been Snagged by the Seat of My Pants While Reading the Bible," at **www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=1895**

[21] Wink quotes a study of Boston blue collar workers, Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb, *The Hidden Injuries of Class* (New York: Vintage, 1972).

[22] Wink, *op. cit.* (note 20).

[23] Scroggs, *op. cit.* (note 4), p. 26.

[24]*Ibid.*

[25] David Carr, "Untamable Text of an Untamable God," in *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology 54*, no. 4 (2000), p. 348.

[26] *Ibid.*, p. 349.

[27] *Ibid.*, p. 350.

[28] *Ibid.*

[29] *Ibid.*, p. 351.

[30] *Ibid.*, p. 352.

[31] *Ibid.*, p. 355.

[32] Keck, *op. cit.* (note 3).

[33] See the article by E. Davies, *op. cit.* (note 6), *passim.*

[34] *Ibid.*, p. 221.

[35] Keck, *op. cit.* (note 3).

[36] *Ibid.*

[37] *Ibid.*

[38] E.g., Reumann, *op. cit.* (note 16).

[39] Carr, *op. cit.* (note 25), p. 358.

[40] Scroggs, *op. cit.* (note 4), p. 25.

Comments on Chapter II: Unity and Diversity of the Bible

The group discussed the temptation to overlook texts that do not resonate with what we consider central. A case in point is our preoccupation with Genesis 22 (Abraham tested). Just prior to it there is the story of Hagar and Ishmael, both of whom and the way God dealt with them tend to get sidelined. Interestingly, in Islam they are center stage (as well as in much of feminist and especially womanist biblical scholarship). We do not read the details, but instead we read the texts "in our image," subject to our assumptions. Therefore we need to be attentive to the "odd" texts. Details can protect us against our projections.

The group more or less unanimously appreciated the differences and contradictions within and between biblical texts. No universal remedy was offered to "solve" these "inconsistencies" (see the two essays struggling with this issue). Rather, the question was how we can persuade readers further to reflect on these. How can we help the reader realize that it is worth walking into uncharted territories and trying to find out what this means with regard to one's personal faith? One possibility might be to establish a dialogue between different interpretations and to encourage people to live on God's promise in the midst of chaos. This will certainly vary according to personality and context. The powerful should be shaken, while the powerless may need to be reassured. It was noted that in South Africa for instance while some people at the grass roots recognize the contradictions, many do not, because by openly identifying them they would appear to be questioning the Word of God. In practical terms it is important that pastors approach this matter interactively so that people feel at liberty to respond.

The group realized that even Priloutskii concedes to contradictions. For him, these problems relate to our limited human recognition, not the Bible, the true and infallible Word of God. If we were truly wise, then we would recognize that in God there are no paradoxes. Our inability to see through these contradictions is due to our being unable to understand what God is saying to us, poor translation, questionable interpretation, etc. The other members of the group believe that problems arise when the Bible is regarded as the ***only***

Word of God, when its incarnational character is denied, and when God's Word is equated with the Bible.[1]

Reference was made to the interesting fact that throughout church history the core of the Bible has revolved around Jesus Christ. However, this has been spelled out in different ways. For instance, large parts of the Early Church regarded Jesus Christ as the basis for the transition from mortality to immortality; according to Roman Catholic teaching, Jesus is the source of our sanctification; in the Lutheran Reformation, Jesus is the center of God's grace and basis for our justification; the Enlightenment appreciated Jesus as the supreme moral teacher; Barth saw in him the one in whom God reconciled the world with himself; and in liberation theology Jesus (along with the Exodus story) has been understood as the paradigm for liberation and justice.[2] These various ways of identifying the "core" of the Bible may warn us against the prejudice that there is a normative interpretation of the Bible. Rather, it is always shaped by our context. It is therefore important to remain open to ever-new ways of rediscovering what the Bible is all about in a given situation. It is no coincidence that the South African representative insists that a Christ-centered interpretation needs to be upheld in order to counter oppression.

Notes

[1] This refers to Thomas' distinctions in his article in chapter 1 and will be taken up in Boettcher's article in chapter 3.

[2] For further details, see Wilfried Joest, *Fundamentaltheologie* (Stuttgart-Berlin-Köln: Kohlhammer, 1974), p. 204.

Chapter III:
The Bible and the History of God's Revelation

The Biblical Canon in the History of God's Revelation

Reinhard Boettcher

The issue and its context

When we talk about the Bible we inevitably talk about the sixty-six books contained in it. In other words, Scripture consists of sixty-six Scriptures[1] whose vast variety, diversity and plurality need to be taken into consideration carefully. In the previous chapter, Diane Jacobson and Márta Csehárti pursued the question of how this diversity can be understood and dealt with in light of what holds the Scriptures together.

What then constitutes the authority of this "library"? Throughout the history of the church this authority has been characterized as "canonical." What does this actually mean? I will refer to the history of the canon only in passing and focus on the dogmatic question, What reasons can be provided for the canonical authority of the Bible?

The weight of this issue relates to the fact that it is closely associated with the interpretation of the Bible as the canonical body of Scriptures which bind the church's proclamation. This will be addressed in the next chapter of this book.

Alexander M. Priloutskii: The other aspect of interpreting the canon is related to the principle of authority. That is why in Eastern-Slavonic culture the so-called synod translation of the Bible (approved by the Holy Synod of Russian Orthodox Church) is called a "canonical translation." I may refer to an authoritative author as a "canonical and classical scholar" (it may sound strange in English, however in Russian and

other Slavonic languages it means that everyone agrees on the opinion of this author and if anyone denies it then s/he is heretical). Canon is related to authority. It is a norm accepted by everyone without dispute or discussion. We are used to thinking in terms of an hierarchy which sets the rules. This is why church tradition refers to "canon law" as "sacred law," although in the Lutheran tradition the situation is different.

The Bible: Witnessing to God's self-disclosure

I concur with Günter Thomas' metaphor of the Bible as a "knot in a wide web," extending between the Triune God and human beings.[2] The God of Israel has decisively disclosed Godself in the person and history of Jesus Christ at a particular time and place in history. The Bible as the witness of God's history with Israel and of God's self-disclosure in Jesus Christ is the means by which, through the power of the Holy Spirit, humans are able to encounter God in the midst of their lives here and now. In what sense is this means indispensable and to what extent is it authoritative, binding and for whom?

Alexander M. Priloutskii: God discloses Himself [sic] to humanity in different ways. However, there is a danger when the Bible becomes only one of many knots in this web and loses its authority. There is a danger when one cannot define how many knots exist and what this or that knot is. For example, everyone knows the saying vox populi–vox Dei, but we may easily find numerous instances when the voice of the crowd is in opposition to the voice of God. This "theory of knots" may put the Bible and the voice of the crowd onto one level of authority. Christ represented in the Bible and Christ as God-human (historical Christ) are not opposed to one another. We believe that the Bible transfers the pure doctrine of Christ, Christ's words and deeds, in a very precise way.

God's self-disclosure occurred in terms of the historical interaction between God and a human community, in particular Israel, and then the church, and

opened up a new understanding of their reality. Those witnessing God's self-disclosure would share this experience with others, communicate it first and foremost orally and establish "tradition" (literally: what is passed on to others). This rootedness of the Christian witness in oral communication is reflected in Luther's conviction that the Word of God is in the first instance preached. One might even say that recording the witness in writing was an expedient. Since the expected Kingdom of God did not come about and the original witnesses had died, it became necessary to record the witness for the sake of continuing to share the gospel and to correct possible distortions.

We can leave aside the details of this complex history of appreciating, examining, collecting and assembling stories, letters, gospel accounts, etc.[3] By around 100 CE, Judaism had more or less closed its canon (the Old or First Testament), which the Early Church adopted as its Holy Scriptures, although with part of the Apocrypha included and presented in a different order than in the Jewish Bible.[4] The debates about the New or Second Testament came to a close in the second half of the fourth century.

Thus, the Bible served to preserve the identity of the Christian faith and that of the church. Throughout the ages, the Bible has remained the indispensable means to encounter God's self-disclosure in Israel and in Jesus Christ. This is the basis of our faith. Whether the Bible is the sole means has been frequently debated throughout the history of the church. As captured by the formula *sola scriptura*, the Lutheran Reformers held that true and salvific encounter with God hinges on listening to the Word of God through the Bible and responding to it in faith.

Distinguishing between the Bible and the Word of God

We must deliberately and emphatically draw an important distinction between the "Word of God" and the Bible. According to John 1, the Word of God is identical with Jesus of Nazareth, confessed by the church as Jesus, the Christ (Heb. Messiah). The Bible bears witness to him (thus the overall title of this book), and enables us to see what the God of Israel has done in Jesus for us and for God's whole creation. God calls us to receive God's Word as the truth of our lives in faith. Thereby we do not reduce the Bible to a merely "human" document of little relevance to us today. On the other hand, it does not have authority within and of itself, but derives such from its witness to God's self-

disclosure in history. Therefore, the Bible is not the basis of Christian faith, that is Christ himself, but the means for encountering him.

The biblical canon: What kind of authority?

What kind of authority does the biblical canon exercise? The Lutheran tradition qualifies biblical authority in a twofold way. The Bible commands a "causative authority" insofar as through the Bible faith is generated in confrontation with the living Word of God. Faith is not a human product, but the trust in God's promise that we hear through the Scriptures. Tradition has repeatedly emphasized that it is the Holy Spirit who creates faith. Here again, the Bible is a knot in the web of the Triune God's dealings with us into which we are drawn by Godself for the sake of encountering God in a meaningful way.

The Bible also exercises a "normative authority" insofar as it regulates the way in which the church preaches the gospel so that it may be responded to in faith. The church must proclaim the gospel in such a way that its preaching is an authentic expression of Jesus Christ as the Word of God rather than a distortion of it (Gal 1:6–10). The biblical canon sets limits to the preaching of the gospel, the church's teaching as well as the way Christian faith is lived out in everyday life. Thus the Bible aims to preserve the integrity of the church's witness and mission and to prevent aberrations. It is evident that this can only be achieved in careful reflection and sometimes untiring discussion within the believing community. God does not intervene in a direct and tangible way, as a *deus ex machina*. The Bible does not "speak" to us from beyond, but only through its sometimes very diverse, even conflicting texts. In the Lutheran tradition there is no central and hierarchical teaching authority. The church is a believing community, called to wrestle with the biblical texts and their meaning, to find appropriate ways to communicate the gospel in faithfulness to Jesus Christ and to discuss how the gospel relates to the pressing issues we face. Throughout all this we pray that the Holy Spirit guide us in all our deliberations, discussions and decisions. Thus the term "pure proclamation of the gospel," used in the Lutheran confessional writings,[5] can be open to misunderstanding, if it suggests that we can establish and ensure this purity on our own. This was not the Reformers' intention. Ultimately it is a gift of the Holy Spirit beyond our control.

Alexander M. Priloutskii: In spite of the fact that in the Lutheran tradition there is no central and hierarchical teaching authority which might provide dogmatic concord, Lutherans are a community of people consolidated by unity of faith. What in Lutheranism provides this unity of confession (although one cannot see this unity as a strict limitation of views)? It is provided by: theological tradition based on the Bible and expressed in the confessional books; collection of hermeneutical principles for interpreting the Scriptures; hierarchy of authoritative aspects expressed in the Formula of Concord.

The authority of the biblical canon

What then actually constitutes the causative and normative authority of the Bible as the authentic, reliable and "true" witness to God's self-disclosure? If we distinguish (not disconnect) the Bible from the Word of God, much depends on a conclusive answer since the very basis of Christian faith seems to be at stake.

The German scholar Wilfried Härle refers to three reasons for the Bible's authority: the authors; the content; divine inspiration.[6]

As Judaism adopted those scriptures as canonical that it understood as having been written by key figures such as Moses and the prophets, so the Early Church considered as canonical those it attributed to the apostles and their students. Härle assumes that the decisive reason for doing so was the apostles' proximity to Jesus Christ as the event of God's self-disclosure. It reflected the church's determination to hold on to the oldest and most original witnesses, Jesus Christ.[7]

From a modern perspective this raises a number of questions. Historical-critical research has clearly shown that a number of attributions of biblical books to particular authors (such as David, the composer of many Psalms, or Paul, the author of the letters to Timothy) are historically incorrect.[8] This does not invalidate their significance as witnesses to the Christ-event, but warns us not to misunderstand the biblical Scriptures as a mirror image of the events they refer to. The relation between them is much more complex.

Identifying the content of the Bible with its authority uncovers an important

Alexander M. Priloutskii: When we use scientific data in order to explain the witness of Revelation, or aspects related to it, we should be rather careful. Nobody can prove scientifically that what is considered to be correct today will not be refuted tomorrow. It is true that the Bible is not a mirror image of events, but this does not mean that it does not contain some content which is important for our salvation. In other words, even if we had heard a sermon by our Savior with our own ears, we would not have learned anything of new soteriological importance that we cannot find in the Bible.

ambiguity. On the one hand, the biblical canon is not in itself God's self-disclosure. Rather, it exercises "only" a derived, secondary authority by way of its character of witnessing to Jesus Christ, pointing to this event, giving an account of it, drawing from it and utterly depending on it. As we stated above, this clearly "relativizes" its authority. On the other, by way of this character of witnessing it participates in the authority of the Christ-event. This is especially the case because we are not aware of any other documents that surpass these Scriptures' proximity to Christ.[9]

Inspiration in contest

We come to Härle's third reason for the authority of the biblical canon. In how far is the Bible inspired by God's Spirit and what might this mean? In many churches this is a thorny issue touching on some deep-seated fears. Doesn't the reliability of the Bible as God's Word hinge on its being inspired by the Holy Spirit, with God ultimately having written the biblical texts? Since salvation hinges on our faith, and faith springs from the Bible, isn't even our salvation in jeopardy? In pluralistic contexts, doesn't the church need a compass, i.e., the Bible as the infallible Word of God? As we respond to other faiths, don't we need a rock-solid foundation for our Christian faith?

These questions open up a wide range of important issues with which we need to come to terms in our churches. While these go beyond the scope of this book, they point to the very crucial question as to how we understand the Bible and its canonical authority. Alexander M. Priloutskii's approach to

this topic (*cf.* chapter 1 in this book) might resonate with many Christians, Lutherans included. I take a different approach.

Only few biblical passages, namely 2 Timothy 3:16 and 2 Peter 1:21, suggest "inspiration." Apart from the fact that these verses refer only to the authors of the First Testament, Härle points to the circularity of the argument: the thesis of inspiration is being elaborated by reference to verses which support this very thesis. But this structure is only indicative of the fact that this argument is plausible from "within" not from outside.[10]

This theory raises more fundamental questions.[11] If inspiration means an act of God's self-disclosure independently of Jesus Christ it not only establishes this self-disclosure on a par with the Christ event, but ultimately replaces it as the only one that is accessible here and now. Moreover, a number of theories of verbal inspiration claim that the Bible is perfect and infallible. Although understandable from a human point of view, is this not driven by the desire to make the witness of God's self-disclosure unassailable, rather than to rely on faith and trust in God's promise?

This calls for further clarification rather than a dismissal of inspiration as such. Theological tradition has distinguished between personal, real and

Alexander M. Priloutskii: Christ's incarnation and inspiration of Scripture are real knots, but knots which, first of all, cannot be equal. This is so because we are saved by Christ not the Bible. Texts imply perception (hearing, reading), but we are not saved by reading but by faith. At the same time, we should not oppose Christ to the Bible. Contrary to some mystic theologians, we should always remember that a text does not have an "extraordinary life" independent of its author. These knots are not equal because Christ's death gives meaning to the content of the other knots. In other words, salvation is possible even without the Bible. However, without Christ there is and can be

verbal inspiration. The corresponding Latin terms are *impulsus ad scribendum* (impulse to write), *suggestio rerum* (given, by God, is the content) and *suggestio verborum* (given, by God, are the words). While the first concept is rarely debated, the second and third are more problematic. Härle suggests

an understanding that comprehends inspiration as God's act of mediating the content of God's self-disclosure in Jesus Christ by means of the Holy Spirit. Thus, in both cases, the content of what is disclosed is identical. The act of inspiration is the event of God's self-disclosure to us here and now. At the same time, this understanding respects the distinct relation as well as the historical difference between the Christ event itself and the Bible as witness to it, and respects the biblical canon as an assembly of documents of that witness to the Christ-event. It also reaffirms the indispensability of the Holy Spirit's work in establishing the authority of the Bible. The Bible is a knot in the web of God's self-disclosure reaching out to us as well as our response in faith and trust.

Wilfried Joest suggests two reasons for the Bible's canonical authority:[12] the historical one (appreciating its relative proximity to the Christ-event) and what he calls its effect throughout church history which it owes to the work and power of the Holy Spirit. Time and again, biblical Scriptures have proven themselves as instances through which God has made Godself present here and now as the one who has disclosed Godself in Jesus Christ. Likewise, they create and renew faith and correct distortions and deformations of the church and its witness. Using the term inspiration only hesitantly, Joest applies it in two ways. It refers to the biblical authors' faith that enabled them faithfully to witness to God's self-disclosure in Jesus Christ, as well as to those who by way of encountering Jesus Christ through these biblical Scriptures respond in faith.

Thus divine inspiration is God's activity throughout God's history with humankind. It is not restricted to the biblical authors, but embraces all who attain to the certainty of faith. It does not annihilate and replace human creativity and reason as extreme versions of verbal inspiration theory tend to do, but rather dignifies them to serve God's purpose without exempting them from possible error. Paul was acutely aware that our recognition of our faith in Christ is "in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us" (2 Cor 4:7). Reverting to Joest's argument we could say that although the biblical authors were not exempt from error, they are, by way of their power to lead people to respond in faith, vindicated as faithful witnesses to the Christ event. As attested to in his critical references, Luther was clearly aware of this reality.

The authority of the First Testament

So far we have always referred to Jesus Christ as the God of Israel's self-disclosure. In how far do the above considerations also apply to the First Testament?

Jesus was a Jew who understood himself as standing in the tradition of the people of Israel. In the synagogue he read from the Holy Scriptures which Christians call Old or First Testament (Luke 4:16ff.). In the Sermon on the Mount he refers to passages of the Torah and its interpretation. The Early Church, initially consisting of Jews, read and preached portions of the First Testament as their Holy Scriptures. In these they recognized a sort of prefiguration of the history of their Lord and Savior, and in the crucified and risen Jesus the fulfillment of the promises God had made to Israel.[13] Eventually the church and the Jews parted ways because they differed in their stance regarding Jesus and on how they read and understood the (Hebrew) Bible. This does not imply that, for the church, the latter has lost its meaning as Holy Scriptures. But the church reads the (Hebrew) Bible as the movement of the God of Israel toward God's decisive self-disclosure in Jesus Christ and, vice versa, it reads the (Hebrew) Bible from the perspective of the Christ event as its "prehistory." This is why we as Christians distinguish between the Old and the New, or the First and the Second Testaments.[14] Thus the First Testament is part and parcel of the history of God's self-disclosure in Jesus Christ. Within this overarching nexus, Jesus Christ provides a critical criterion or canon for reading and appropriating the First and Second Testaments.

Fundamental continuities need to be noted:[15] Jesus' father is no other than the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; God's promises to Israel are not canceled but remain valid in Jesus Christ;[16] the decalogue and God's commandment of love remain in force; the recurring dual formula of the First Testament, "I will be your God and you will be my people," remains valid but is extended beyond Israel to include Jews and Gentiles.[17]

From this Christological-critical perspective, the First Testament remains an integral part of the biblical canon, nurturing, determining and correcting the church's witness to the Triune God.

A choice between two alternatives?

Attempts to provide conclusive reasons for the authority of the biblical canon can be distinguished in two ways: either the authority is grounded in the texts them-

selves, or it is sought in a reality or "power" outside that nonetheless permeate the texts. Joest's clear pattern of referring to an historical and a *wirkungsgeschichtliche* reason for the Bible's authority reflects this duality. While these are not alternatives between which we have to choose, the significance they assume might be different. Both of them seem to provide valuable substance to the issue at stake.

In the following, I will present two positions that are not mutually exclusive: one emphasizes the texts themselves while the second moves somewhat beyond them.

The authority of the biblical canon under conditions of plurality

As we have seen in the previous chapters, the church and theology have always been challenged to demonstrate that the authority of the Bible is not in itself the basis of Christian faith, but the foundational witness to the self-revelation of the God of Israel in Jesus Christ. This challenge becomes even more pressing when the church and the Christian faith find themselves in a minority position, either under conditions of growing secularism or multifaith conditions.

Michael Welker suggests an approach which nuances the classical attempts at establishing biblical authority, by assuming that a number of attributes that theological tradition has taken for granted are no longer valid for people today.[18] These include the "principle of Scripture," "*sola scriptura*," "self-interpretation of Scripture," "infallability," and "inner and outer clarity."[19] The plural biblical traditions are not only in tension with each other, but also with modern and postmodern experiences.

An alternative would be to care less about these details, but rather to focus on the personal encounter with God which the Bible opens up. This would mean introducing a dogmatic principle into the reading of the texts at the risk of filtering and domesticating them. Welker raises the provocative question whether therefore the *sola scriptura* formula is a one-sided perspective badly in need of correction?[20] He refers to Luther's insistence that only the Bible shall reign. At the same time, the Bible is not a "pope made of paper" but, rather, a multifaceted witness to God.[21]

Welker proposes replacing the questionable formula of "principle of Scripture" with the more cautious term "weights of the Bible." He identifies

four of them:

The first is the Bible's historical weight. The Bible is the result of an impressive and complex process of growth spanning many centuries. It is true that time and again we become aware of the enormous rift dividing us from the biblical texts (Lessing called it *der garstige Graben*, the nasty ditch). We sense the distance between the texts and our reality. And yet, this observation cannot deny the fact that throughout history experiences have converged: human beings ask questions regarding the meaning of life and God. From this perspective the biblical texts can be very close to us.

Second, the Bible is weighty in terms of its effects, its *Wirkungsgeschichte*. Even if people's faith has become "tired," they are nevertheless imbued with the Bible's cultural substance. It attests to a slave society in antiquity, but also questions such. It expresses patriarchalism, but also contains voices challenging it.

Third, the Bible has a distinct canonical authority. Welker refers to Jan Assmann, who suggests that the desire to canonize texts arises in times of radical crisis.[22] For the First Testament this included the Babylonic exile, for the Second, Jesus' crucifixion.[23] The experience of radical discontinuity may, at least partly, account for the plurality and diversity of the biblical canon. The multiperspectivity of the experience itself is reflected in the multiperspectivity of its attempts to come to terms with the experience and its meaning.

Ultimately and decisively the Bible has theological weight. At its center it is a multifaceted witness to God and God's dealings with human beings. This constitutes its historical and canonical weight. From here it becomes a living source of ever-new remembrance and anticipation.

Holy Scripture with the power of the Holy Spirit

In his article with the provocative title "The Center is Outside,"[24] Ingolf U. Dalferth leaves no doubt about the significance of the Bible. "Without Scripture there is no church […] (as the community of faith) […]. But there is no faith without the Word of God, no church without faith and no cognizance of God's Word which generates faith in the church without Scripture."[25] Then he continues, "Scripture is not the basis of faith, but the tool for understanding and communicating faith:[26] it does not effect salvation, but helps us to understand God's salvific will."[27] It is this function that is decisive, not its origin, and this is based

not on what the Bible says, but on the insight that what it says is true.[28] Unlike the Qur'an, which Islam considers to be the truth itself revealed by God,

> in the church the authority of Scripture, unlike its content, is not based exclusively on past events, but on present experience which can only be validated by having it ever anew: the experience that in dealing with Scripture we attain insights … about what God's Word means for us and that it decides on the truth of our lives and world.[29]

In a similar vein Dalferth states,

> Scripture is adequately used when it is read and interpreted with regard to Jesus Christ–not as a reality of the past, of which it reminds us, but as the effective presence of God in our present world.[30]

Alexander M. Priloutskii: I think it would be reasonable to divide the question into two parts: What is the authority of Scripture based upon? What supports the authority of Scripture? I suppose that the authority of Scripture is based on its divine authorship. All the attributes of Scripture, clarity, infallibility, efficiency etc., are consequences of the Bible's divine origin. Since God, the author of Scripture, is perfect, so is His [sic] work, the Bible. A few words concerning "past events." Past events are important in order to support the authority of the Scriptures; the fulfillment of prophecies under historical conditions confirms biblical validity. Present experience is very subjective and can hardly be a reliable basis for the theology of the Bible. The living Christ is present not only in the present, but also in the past and future (He is the same yesterday and today). Time does not have any limitation for Him. If it did, then we would have to admit that God has no control over the universe and creation, since time is related to

In this specific sense, Jesus Christ is the center of Scripture, not identical with the texts but their outer side.[31]

Surprisingly, Dalferth only sparingly refers explicitly to the Holy Spirit. The Bible as well as theological tradition point to the Holy Spirit through whom God makes present what God has achieved and revealed in Jesus Christ. Since it has proven difficult conclusively to derive Luther's principle, *was Christum treibet* (what shows forth Christ), from the biblical texts themselves, Rochus Leonhardt suggests that the instance which *quasi* "synthesizes" the biblical canon in its diversity beyond the canon itself be relocated in the work of the Holy Spirit. Thus, the center of Scripture and its authority lie in the understanding of the Bible which is brought about by the Holy Spirit.[32]

This pneumatological understanding of the authority of the Bible is vividly set forth by Gunda Schneider-Flume who appropriates Luther's central conviction that theology is not a speculative discipline providing knowledge about God. Rather, its thrust is to serve the proclamation of the gospel as the living Word of God which creates faith, not in terms of accepting an array of truths, but in opening up new experiences by integrating us into God's gracious history. It does not force us into experiences that others had in the past. The Word of God does not mean religious self-affirmation and at times runs counter to what we have experienced so far. "In other words, the space that Scripture opens up, changes experiences, restructures, reorients and reformulates them and promises us quite new experiences."[33] Experience here is not free floating, independent of the biblical texts. Rather, it is prompted, stimulated, guided and regulated by the Word of God as we hear it through the biblical canon. This correlation of external Word and personal experience is captured in Schneider-Flume's attempt to summarize the fourfold *sola* of the Lutheran Reformation in relation to the issue of the authority of the Bible.

> Scripture alone has authority because it contains the Word of God. Scripture can be grasped only if one recognizes its truth and unity solely in Jesus Christ and God's grace reaching out to humans. Through faith, Scripture opens up new experiences that are based on the liberation by Christ.[34]

We could add, it is God's Spirit who makes this experience become a living reality.

Summary: The Triune God and the Bible

Jesus Christ is the Word of God incarnated (Jn 1). In him, the God of Israel is self-disclosed in a decisive way.[35] The Bible witnesses to the Word of God reflecting and communicating the gospel as *viva vox* (living voice). Its authority ultimately derives from this witnessing function. The Holy Spirit as God's own power beyond our control renders present what Scripture bears witness to as the truth for us here and now. This circularity—God the Holy Spirit authenticating God the Word—is reflected in the fact that the authority of the Bible is acknowledged as binding only within the community of the church. The church is never in control of the Bible, neither in terms of "securing" its authority (that is what God does) nor of appropriately interpreting it. We can receive the Word of God (Jesus Christ) through the Bible as well as our experience in faith through the Holy Spirit as God's sovereign gift, trusting that it proves ever anew to be the way in which we can gladly move ahead toward God.

Experiencing the Bible's authority

Theology is intended to help clarify faith. This chapter has tried to do so with regard to the authority of the biblical canon. Ultimately it is experienced as truth (and authority) for us in our daily lives. Where people come together, read the Bible or listen to it being read, discover themselves in the biblical texts and God as active in their lives, where people find new hope in despair, consolation in mourning, strength in uncertainty, direction in confusion, soli-

darity in isolation, liberation from oppression, there the Bible proves to be the living Word of God and as such the basis in which people can trust and on which to build their lives.

Notes

[1] Having said that, it is noteworthy that neither Luther nor the Lutheran confessional writings formally defined the circumference of the biblical canon. According to their view, doing so was not a prerequisite for predicating its authority. The center and basis of this authority rests on something else. We will come back to this later. The sixty-six books comprise only those considered canonical by basically all the Christian churches. Insofar as the First Testament is concerned, a number of books, the Apocrypha, are included in the Roman Catholic editions of the Bible but not in Reformed editions. Lutheran editions sometimes include them, but they are set apart. Luther appreciated them as useful and edifying, but not on a par with the canonical parts of the Bible. For the complex history of the Apocrypha, see Robert Hanhart and Hermann Lichtenberger, "Apokryphen," in *Evangelisches Kirchenlexikon*, vol. 1 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1986), 3rd edition, col. 203–211; Hans-Josef Klauck, David Satran and Francois Bovon, "Apokryphen/Pseudepigraphien I-III," in *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, vol. 1 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1998), 4th edition, col. 600–603.

[2] See his article, "The Bible and the Word(s) of God," in chapter 1 of this book.

[3] See e.g., the following succinct accounts: Alfred Schindler, "Kanon, II. Kirchengeschichtlich," in *Evangelisches Kirchenlexikon (EKL)*, vol. 1 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1986), 3rd edition, col. 767–770; Walter Künneth, "Kanon," in *Theologische Realenzyklopädie (TRE)*, vol. 17 (Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1998), pp. 562–570; Rudolf Smend and Otto Merk, "Bibelkanon," in *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, vol. 4 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001), 4th edition, col. 468–474.

[4] For further information, see the articles referred to in *ibid.*

[5] For example, in *Confessio Augustana VII.*

[6] Wilfried Härle, *Dogmatik* (Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1995), pp. 117ff.

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 118

[8] Any First and Second Testaments textbook informed by the historical-critical method which deals with the history of the biblical Scriptures will demonstrate this. At the same time, historical assessments of details can vary considerably. The methods of biblical interpretation will be dealt with in chapter 4 of this book.

[9] *Ibid.*, p. 119.

[10] *Ibid.*, pp. 119ff.

[11] At least at this stage, Härle leaves aside differentiations and nuances among the proponents of (verbal) inspiration. See Rowan D. Williams, "Inspiration," in *Evangelisches Kirchenlexikon*, vol. 2 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1989), col. 690–694.

[12] Wilfried Joest, *Fundamentaltheologie* (Stuttgart-Berlin-Köln: Kohlhammer, 1974), pp. 167ff.

[13] One of the most prominent examples is Peter's speech in the Pentecost story in Acts 2.

[14] I refrain from discussing these semantic problems. The substitutes First and Second Testaments, Hebrew (or Jewish) and Christian Bible, are attempts to balance the Christological reading of the Bible with the determination to desist from a devaluing of the Jewish reading of the Holy Scriptures without providing a universally satisfying remedy. Christian-Jewish dialogue after WWII, in particular in Germany and the USA, has considerably increased sensitivity in this area.

[15] Härle, *op. cit.* (note 6), p. 126

[16] The church has taken a long time to realize and appropriate this insight. It is one of the fruits of Christian—Jewish dialogue. For significant documents of this process in Germany, see Kirchenamt der EKD (ed.), *Christen und Juden I–III* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2002).

[17] It is to be noted that through dialogue with the Jews, including joint Bible study, the church has gained the insight that this extension leaves the status of Israel as God's first-elected people intact rather than disputing it in the context of a long history of Christian anti-Judaism.

[18] Michael Welker, "Das vierfache Gewicht der Schrift," in Doris Hiller und Christine Kress (eds), *Dass Gott eine grosse Barmherzigkeit habe. Konkrete Theologie in der Verschränkung von Glaube und Leben. Festschrift für Gunda Schneider-Flume zum 60. Geburtstag* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2001), pp. 9–27.

[19] *Ibid.*, p. 9.

[20] *Ibid.*, p. 11, author's own translation.

[21] *Ibid.*, p. 12.

[22] *Ibid.*, p. 15.

[23] Even though the question remains if the catastrophe of Jesus' death triggered the canonization of the Second Testament, Assmann's/Welker's hypothesis remains an interesting idea.

[24] Ingo U. Dalferth, "Die Mitte ist aussen. Anmerkungen zum Wirklichkeitsbezug evangelischer Schriftauslegung," in Christof Landmesser, Hans-Joachim Eckstein and Hermann Lichtenberger (eds), *Jesus Christus als die Mitte der Schrift. Studien zur Hermeneutik des Evangeliums. Festschrift für O. Hofius* (Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1997), pp. 173–198.

[25] *Ibid.*, p. 175, author's own translation.

[26] In German: Sprachschule des Glaubens.

[27] Dalferth, *op. cit.* (note 24), pp. 175f.

[28] *Ibid.*, p. 176.

[29] *Ibid.*, p. 177.

[30] *Ibid.*, p. 179.

[31] *Ibid.*, p. 191.

[32] Rochus Leonhardt, "Lutherisches Schriftprinzip und biblischer Kanon. Ueberlegungen zum Verhältnis von Bibel und Kirche," in Matthias Petzold in collaboration with Heiko Franke und Wolfgang Pfüller (eds), *Autorität der Schrift und Lehrvollmacht der Kirche. Symposium zum 70. Geburtstag von Ulrich Kühn* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2003), pp. 59–90.

[33] Gunda Schneider-Flume, "Reformatorische Schriftauslegung in ihrer Bedeutung für Lehre und Leben unserer Kirche," in *PastTheol 84* (1995), pp. 97–113, author's own translation. Chapters 4 and 5 of this publication will further explore the importance of these insights.

[34] *Ibid.*, p. 107.

[35] I hesitate to say definitive, let alone exclusive, because I want to remain open to possibilities of God disclosing Godself in other faith traditions in God's own mysterious ways. But this issue moves beyond the scope of this book. But "decisive" implies that any other insights about God need to measure up to God's self-disclosure in Jesus Christ as witnessed to in the Bible. In other words, Christ is the criterion for any further claim to knowledge about God.

Confessing Faith in the Word of God: The Bible and the Confessions of the Church from a Lutheran Perspective

Reinhard Boettcher

The Bible and the confession of faith

Giving an account of the authority of the biblical canon inevitably leads to the question how the confessions, in particular the Lutheran confessional writings of the sixteenth century, relate to the Bible in terms of their authority.

I would like to situate "confession" within a wider framework. God speaks to us through the Bible, to which, through the power of the Holy Spirit, we respond in various ways:[1] prayer, doxology (praise and adoration), witness, teaching and confession directed to God and our fellow human beings. Confession might be understood as the succinct expression of the gospel of Jesus Christ in a particular historical context. It embraces elements of prayer, doxology, witness and doctrine. Its original *Sitz im Leben* (setting in life) was baptism: here people who had adopted faith in Christ confessed this faith. The shortest confession was probably the formula *Kyrios Jesus* (Jesus is Lord) which developed into Trinitarian structures and was further elaborated to creedal texts, of which the Apostolic Creed, the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed and the Athanasian Creed are among the most prominent. Prompted by the need to give an account of their understanding of the gospel, in particular before the Diet of Augsburg in 1530, the Lutheran Reformers continued the tradition of expressing the Christian faith in terms of confession, the most prominent being the *Confessio Augustana* which was presented to the German Emperor. However, within the Lutheran tradition, how confessions are to be understood underwent a significant transformation.[2] For Luther, confession was an act of articulating the Christian faith, witnessing to Christ and guiding the proclamation of the gospel. Melanchthon, in contrast, introduced an understanding of

confession as normative doctrine, thus gradually paving the way for a confessionalist misunderstanding, namely that the confessions have a doctrinal authority of their own. This shift raises fundamental questions about how the authority of the Lutheran confessional writings relates to the authority of the biblical canon.

Norma normans–norma normata?

After the (Roman Catholic) Council of Trent (1545–1563) had dogmatized the equal authority of Scripture and tradition over against the *sola sciptura* principle of the Lutheran Reformers, the Lutheran tradition tended in turn to equate the Bible with the Word of God.[3] In light of the growing recognition of the Bible's historical character, it became more complicated adequately to relate Scripture and confession since they differed only with regard to their historical proximity to God's self-disclosure in Jesus Christ. The distinction between the traditional formulae, *norma normans* (the authority which sets the norm, i.e., the Bible) and *norma normata* (the authority which is set, i.e., the confessions) has become blurred. While the Bible turns out to be set by the Christ event, *norma normata* needs to be understood in such a way that it is not exempt from ever new scrutiny regarding its conformity with the gospel. Otherwise the Bible's superior authority can be subverted on the basis of the doctrinaire variant of the claim that the (Lutheran) confessions are a true exposition of the gospel as being borne witness to in the Bible. In order to reflect this relative openness and fluidity of the confessions' authority, Härle suggests critically to appreciate them as *norma normata et normanda* (the authority that is set and in need of being set ever anew).[4]

While the confession witnesses to and elaborates on the Christian faith as set forth in the Bible, it also serves as a guide to a faithful and appropriate understanding of the Bible. This has to occur in conformity with the Lutheran principle of Scripture, according to which the Bible interprets itself without external authority. This insight was originally set forth over against the Roman Catholic concept of papal magisterium. At the same time, it has to prove its validity also in relation to the church's confessions. Apparently this dilemma can only be resolved by patiently following this circle ever anew: listening to the Word of God as we hear it through the Bible, carefully taking into account the voices of our parents in faith, i.e., the confessions, but vice versa, always being open to the possibility that the

Word of God might provide us with insights of faith which reach beyond what the confessions of the past have to say.

New confessions?

Since the confessions' authority is relative, in how far might we have to reckon with the possibility of the church producing new confessions? Generally speaking, the Lutheran tradition has ceased to do so with the conclusion of the Book of Concord in 1580. There is, however, one prominent example of the Lutheran church having been confronted by this delicate question. In 1934, the Confessing Church in Germany (of which some Lutheran regional churches were a part) formulated the Barmen Declaration which was intended to profess the Christian faith as shared by the Protestant churches in face of the so-called "German Christians" who were loyal to the Nazi-regime. There have been reservations on the part of Lutheran churches and theologians about accepting new confessions which might be added to the body of the sixteenth-century confessional writings. To my knowledge, hardly any Lutheran churches (in Germany and beyond) have adopted "Barmen" in their constitution.[5] If the self-relativization of the Lutheran Confessions themselves[6] is taken seriously, why not be open to the need of and opportunity for the church to come up with a new confession which responds to a particular situation? This need not deny the validity of the confessions of the past, but means confessing the Christian faith under conditions that are qualitatively different from those of our faith forbears.

This leads us to a question that is highly pertinent for the LWF as a communion of (mostly) Lutheran churches. If confession means a condensed and focused expression of faith in the God of Israel as disclosed in Jesus Christ and witnessed to in the Bible through the Holy Spirit within a particular context, and if it is to be relevant in a given situation, then this suggests the possibility of different churches within this communion expressing the faith in different ways. If the "existential questions" arising today in different contexts are qualitatively new and differ from those that emerged in sixteenth-century Europe, faith might have to be confessed differently today. This would not mean that the relative authority of the Lutheran confessional writings of the sixteenth century is dismissed. Rather, listening to the Word of God through the Bible and taking into account how our parents in the faith expressed their faith may entail articulating and confessing the Christian faith in new ways.

This would raise serious ecumenical questions for the cohesion of the

Lutheran communion itself and call for reexamining our relationship to our sister churches with regard to their confessing of the faith.[7] Coming to terms with these issues will be part of what lies ahead of the ecumenical movement in the near future.

Notes

[1] See Edmund Schlink, *Oekumenische Dogmatik. Grundzüge* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1983), pp. 33–41.

[2] See Johannes Wirsching, "Bekenntnisschriften," in *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*, vol. 5 (Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1980), pp. 487–511, here pp. 496–499.

[3] See Wilfried Härle, "Bekenntnis, IV. Systematisch," in *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, vol. 1 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1998), 4th edition, col. 1257–1262, here col. 1261.

[4] *Ibid.*, col. 1261

[5] Apart from this general reservation on the part of Lutheran churches and theologians, Barmen has been viewed critically for another reason, namely its strong Barthian leaning.

[6] Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (eds), *The Book of Concord. The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), p. 486.

[7] It is interesting to note that sometimes churches of different confessional backgrounds, which find themselves in one and the same context, might feel closer to each other than to churches with which they share a confessional heritage but not a context. Particularly under conditions of oppression there have been interesting realignments. Confession and confessional heritage are defined differently in the different church traditions. A recent case in point is the Accra Confession discussed and adopted at the general council meeting of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches in 2004, in Accra, Ghana. See, Odair Pedroso Mateus (ed.), *Reformed World*, vol. 54, no 3–4 (Geneva: World Alliance of Reformed Churches, 2004), pp. 169–174. The Accra Confession intends to be a church response to the gospel in which the integrity of faith and witness is seen as deeply challenged by recent forms of globalization and environmental destruction.

The Biblical Cannon: Closed Forever or Open to Extension?

Wilfried John

Introduction

The Bible means different things to different people. As God's revealed Word, it is, for some, a source of inspiration guiding their daily lives. For others, it is an historical document marked by controversies and contradictions. And then there are those for whom it is merely a collection of rules and stories related to bygone eras and largely irrelevant to modern human beings and civilization.

Throughout history, the Bible has been subject to much debate and criticism largely centered on three crucial issues: (1) In what sense is the Bible the Word of God?; (2) What are appropriate models to be applied when interpreting the Bible? This gives rise to questions of contextualization, indigenization, inculturation etc.; and (3) Is the Bible a "closed canon" or part of an ongoing and open process of revelation and thus open to expansion?

In light of the twentieth-century Pentecostal revival and the need for mainline churches to face up to the rapid growth of Pentecostal churches and charismatic movements in their midst, the third issue has recently become more prominent. Underlying is the tension between the normativity and relativity of the biblical Scriptures within the history of God's revelation to humankind. In this essay, I hope to formulate and analyze principles and directions to help pastors, church workers and congregation or grassroots members to develop and deepen an understanding of what it means to appreciate the Bible as the Word of God and to encourage dialogue. The positions expressed in this essay have emerged from an Asian context.

Prophecy and the Pentecostal claim to continued revelation

In the following, I shall take a closer look at the tendency in certain churches and church movements to reinstate the notion that basically the Bible is con-

stantly being "rewritten" through contemporary revelations and continued inspiration. Contrary to this claim is the cessation theory that emphasizes that revelatory gifts ceased with the end of apostolic times. Two basic guiding principles support this: first, the Bible itself predicts that these gifts would cease; second, the purpose of these gifts was to validate the apostles' witness and to supplement their revelation until the completion of the canon of the New Testament.

> Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. For we know only in part, and we prophecy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end (1 Cor 13:8–10).

Next to the cessation theory there is also the theory of subjective revelation that allows room for contemporary prophecy on a subjective basis without having any authority over the Bible. We need to look at these claims more closely.

What is prophecy?

Generally speaking, contemporary prophecy[1] is the foreknowledge of future events (though it may sometimes apply to past events). It is beyond reason. There are four categories of prophecies, all of which, if true, reveal something about God and God's will. Prophecies (a) expound God's "objective truths" or canonical prophecies contained in the Bible; (b) reveal future events; (c) bring foreknowledge of God's impending plans; and (d) reveal God's wonders or mysteries.

Biblical prophecies include: direct verbal communication; theophanies; dreams; visions; gifts of healing with a revelatory purpose; prophetic and apostolic writings; tongues and their interpretation; and any other "supernatural" methods used to reveal God and declare God's will to the church before the close of the canon. Looking at biblical prophecies we can conclude the following: first, a reasonably large portion of the Bible is based on prophetic utterances; second, futuristic utterances were intertwined with ethical and religious ones in order to address contextual problems and how to relate to God; and third, prophecies had a messianic overtone, in other words, they pointed to Christ and the coming of the new kingdom (Lk 24:27 and Acts 10:43). The

final point concerning the messianic overtone is a vital feature, because the actual meaning of the Old Testament prophecies only became truly manifest when Christ came.

The purpose of prophecy is not to offer (predictive) foreknowledge in order to help us map out our future and gratify our curiosities but, rather, in the biblical sense to offer assurance of divine power, wisdom and triumphant love. They help us to understand how God sees the end even at the beginning.

The Pentecostals and neo-Pentecostals consider modern prophecies to convey objective revelations that bind the church. Lutherans, by way of the principle of *sola scriptura*, only cautiously use the term revelation/prophecy in terms of the Holy Spirit's work to illuminate and help apply God's Word as codified in the Scriptures. The *sola scriptura* position certainly denies that the Spirit offers new objective revelations apart from and on a par with the canonized Scriptures. It is in this context that modern prophecy needs to be carefully assessed.

Revelatory gifts as claimed by the Pentecostal churches and charismatic movements may be tested in the following ways: Is this message consonant with the teachings of biblical Scripture? Is there duplication? Often the Spirit may give a similar message to more than one person. Corporate deception is possible, but rare. Is it fulfilled? If a prophetic message finds no takers, or a word of knowledge results in no response, this may indicate that it was not true, or that someone is too scared or embarrassed to respond. Does the message/revelation have the capacity to build up the body of Christ? Is it going to bear good fruit?

As the Lutheran Confessions affirm, the Holy Scripture is sufficient for salvation, is certain and the rule of all saving knowledge, faith and obedience. God's will was prophesied and revealed to the church through the written Word. Hence, claiming and practicing revelatory gifts in worship, such as speaking in tongues, prophecy and words of wisdom, can easily undermine the Scripture's authority and finality and would allow for revising the Bible according to human presuppositions.

Revelatory gifts and the "modern church"

Continued revelation?

The gift of prophecy is a reality, even today. We need to differentiate between public prophecy, which can claim authority over the whole church and qualify as objective revelation, and private prophecy, which is authoritative for the individual concerned and qualifies as subjective revelation. Accordingly, I maintain that modern prophecies may be called Word of God only by and with regard to the individual who received the prophecy. It cannot be turned into the objective Word of God and accorded canonical status or authority. If that were the case, it would seem as if the Bible were constantly being rewritten.

Proponents of contemporary revelatory prophecy support the claim of continued revelation. Some do so from the vantage point of Christianity, others from the standpoint of the social sciences. From the perspective of the social sciences, the Bible is culturally conditioned, in other words, certain issues and practices are by-products of particular cultures and therefore not applicable to modern contexts.

> It is also asserted that through the knowledge gained in the social sciences God is speaking a new word in our time that fulfills and even supersedes his revelation to peoples in another era and in a supposedly more primitive culture. Could this deny the divine authority and normativity of biblical teaching?[2]

Prophecy in this context is understood as a product of the social sciences.

From the Christian perspective, continued revelation hinges on the modern charismatic definition of prophetic utterances and prophetic ministry. Here God is understood to make new revelations directly and apart from the Bible for the sake of experiencing God personally and individually.

> The Bible has become a fellow witness to God's present activity […]. If someone today perhaps has a vision of God, of Christ, it is good to know that it has happened before […]. The Spirit of God as the living God moves through and beyond the records of past witness, however valuable such records are as a model for what happens today.[3]

Hence, both the Christian charismatic and Christian social scientist would ap-

prove of continued revelation. However, the former would consider revelation as the work of the Spirit, while the latter would enlist the help of the social sciences and its resources.

I contend that prophecies, dreams, visions, speaking in tongues, inspired writings and any other revelatory gifts that bring objective revelation from God have ceased. This does not mean that such gifts are no longer operative in our times. I agree that contemporary revelatory gifts can offer illumination and subjective revelation, but they are not on a par with the biblical Scripture and binding only for those Christians who receive them. Otherwise, "if we stretch too far and open the canon, we move toward universalism, relativism, and in fact violate the heart of Scripture as truth."[4]

Shaw's argument concerning Scripture's finality and authority helps us to evaluate claims made by churches as well as certain offshoots of Christianity such as sects. Believing that the Bible is incomplete and insufficient, they have introduced books that are supposed to complement the New Testament. A case in point would be the Watchtower Movement, the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints (Mormonism), Christian Science and also Islam and Baha'i.

The Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints (LDS)/Mormons and continued revelation

According to the Mormons, the Book of Mormon is another witness that Jesus Christ really existed and that he is the son of God. It is said to contain the writings of ancient prophets, one of whom is Lehi, who lived in Jerusalem around 600 BCE. God had commanded Lehi to lead a small group of people to the American continent where they became a great civilization. God continued to call prophets from among these people. The Book of Mormon is a collection of their prophets' and record keepers' writings and named after Mormon, one of the last of these ancient prophets. It is believed that these prophets knew about the heavenly Father's plan for his children and Jesus' mission and that after his resurrection, Christ appeared to the people in America, taught them his gospel and formed his church among them. The book contains Jesus' teachings, testifying to his atonement and love. It supports and verifies the Bible but makes further additions. The Book of Mormon concludes with a great promise, namely that "by the power of the Holy Ghost ye may know the truth of all things." [5]

People's most common apprehension regarding the LDS is its position on revelations as well as its understanding of the biblical Scriptures as "new Scripture." Their understanding of revelation and inspiration is far removed from

the Lutheran understanding. The LDS understands modern prophecy as divine instructions given to the church or the world in an objective way.

The Scripture passage frequently used to condemn the Book of Mormon is the famous passage from Revelation 22:18-19 which is interpreted as referring to the whole of Scripture.

> I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to that person the plagues described in this book; if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away that person's share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book.

But the LDS objects to this interpretation, claiming that the Bible is a collection of sacred writings that were compiled into book format long after the demise of the original scriptwriters. Hence, they claim John's words in Revelation should not be applied to the entire collection of writings known to us as the Bible. The following are some of their theological and logical projections in support of the Mormon Bible and against the exclusive validity of the biblical canon:

- The passage does not claim God would never speak again
- It warns potential editors that no additions or deletions may be made to this book
- Adding is a lesser mistake (only one warning) compared to expunging (three warnings)
- If Deuteronomy 4:2 reads: "You must neither add anything to what I command you nor take away anything from it," should we reject the entire Bible after this chapter? We find similar passages in Deuteronomy 12:32, "You must diligently observe everything that I command you; do not add to it or take anything from it, " and Proverbs 30:5–6, "Every word of God proves true; he is a shield to those who take refuge in him. Do not add to his words, or else he will rebuke you, and you will be found a liar."

What about the books which the Bible refers to as other Scriptures? For example:

- "The records of the prophet Nathan" (1 Chr 29:29)
- "Is this not written in the Book of Jashar?" (Josh 10:13)
- Manasseh's dealings with God "are written in the records of the seers" (2 Chr 33:19)
- "… are they not written in the history of the prophet Nathan, and in the prophecy of Ahijah" (2 Chr 9:29)
- An earlier Pauline epistle to Corinth, "I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral persons" (1 Cor 5:9)
- "… in the records of the seer Gad" (1 Chr 29:29)
- "… the Book of the Wars of the Lord" (Num 21:14)
- God has always communicated through revelation. "Surely the Lord God does nothing, without revealing his secret to his servants the prophets" (Amos 3:7). To say God has stopped revealing would imply that God has stopped speaking. Human depravity continually requires that God speaks in order to direct us.

The LDS believes these warnings to condemn potential editors, particularly uninspired ones. It asserts that God retains the right to speak beyond what God has already spoken as God certainly did in Jesus' person, message and work. Accordingly, they claim that it is not up to us to set limits and obstacles to God's revelations. They insist further that it is mentioned nowhere in the Bible that God will no longer speak directly to God's children or add to past Scriptures. Such arguments and concepts are the basis for the Book of Mormon and two other books containing further revelations called the modern Scriptures ("The Doctrine and Covenants" and "The Pearl of Great Price"). Mormons believe that these additional books of Scripture show that through God's chosen prophets, God continues to make revelations in order to guide God's children.

We need to ask ourselves whether Scriptures, such as the Book of Mormon, the Qur'an, the Bhagavad Gita and many other Scriptures appreciated as holy by their respective faith communities, also be considered as a part of God's

revelation and hence a part of the (extended) Bible.

We could conclude that dependency on continuous revelation is due to two reasons. First, the inability to have faith in the biblical truth and that therefore the proponents of continuous revelation determine the truth by way of subjective attempts to recognize God. Second, because the authority of Scripture is not believed to be in the written Word but in personal testimony and experience. Lutherans assert that faith is the medium through which truth and error are established. Faith is understood as being based on, responding to and trusting in God's promises and power over and compassion for us. Faith grasps God's powerful Word in obedience. Thus, according to Asian evangelical spirituality there is no rejection of or doubt about the necessity for personal testimony. But it must never be equated with the Word of God. This would shift the authority of the Bible to human subjectivity. It is obvious therefore that the LDS as well as the Pentecostal churches and charismatic groups tend, in their very distinctive ways, to regard the sayings of their current president or of a prophet as the authoritative Word of God. But how do we determine if the sayings are truly God's Word? In order to accomplish this task, we are left with two human resources: conscience and experience, both of which are fallible and speculative. Therefore we must not replace the authority of the Word with subjectivism.

The Lutheran Confessions as ongoing revelation

Could the Lutheran Confessions also fall under the category of continued revelation? In his *Church Postil* Luther was adamant that the Bible cannot be replaced by any other Scriptures:

> Therefore into the Bible, into the Bible, dear Christians, and let my and all teachers' interpretations serve as a scaffolding for the real structure, that we may grasp and taste the simple, pure Word of God and stay with it […].[6]

Referring to the *Confessio Augustana*, the Formula of Concord states:

> We consider this Confession a genuinely Christian symbol which all true Christians ought to accept next to the Word of God, just as in ancient times Christian symbols and confessions were formulated in the church of God when controversies broke out […].[7]

The Epitome asserts even more accurately that

> the distinction between the Holy Scripture of the Old Testament and New Testament and all other writings is maintained, and Holy Scripture remains the only judge, rule, and norm according to which as the only touchstone all doctrines should and must be understood and judged […].[8]

The authority of the Lutheran Confessions was debated whenever there was a revival of confessionalism. The position adopted against confessionalism was that the Bible is the primary witness to God's revelation and that the confessions remain a secondary witness. The notion of the Bible as the primary witness reflects the conviction, "that all the words are selected by the Spirit of God through guidance of the human authors; and that the truth of God is enshrined in and mediated through these words."[9]

The Lutheran Confessions affirm that God's truth concerning all things necessary for God's own glory, humankind's salvation, faith and life have been revealed in the Holy Scriptures for our common benefit. Nothing may be added by way of a new revelation of the Spirit, traditions, or creeds. Luther affirmed the same in his preface to the first section of his German works published in 1539, where he states:

> Although it is useful and necessary that the writings of some of the fathers and councils should be kept as witnesses and histories, nevertheless, I think … they [the books of the fathers or creeds] would have presented nothing better than we find in Holy Scriptures.[10]

In his writings, Luther contends that there can be no further revelations of God in relation to saving knowledge, faith and obedience other than those already delivered by the Spirit in the Holy Scriptures, the supreme judge by which religious controversies, council decrees, theological opinions, doctrines of men [sic] and private spirits are to be measured. Hence the Lutheran Confessions insist that Scripture should be allowed to speak for itself and stand on its own.

> We believe, teach, and confess that the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and New Testaments are the only rule and norm according to which all doctrines and teachers alike must be appraised and judged, as it is written in Ps 119:105, "Thy word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path." And St Paul

> says in Gal 1:8, "Even if an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we preached to you, let him be accursed.
>
> Other writings of ancient or modern teachers, whatever their names, should not be on a par with Holy Scripture. Every single one of them should be subordinated to the Scriptures and should be received in no other way and no further than as witnesses to the fashion in which the doctrine of the prophets and apostles was preserved in post-apostolic times.[11]

Placing the confessions under the authority of the Bible, does not mean disregarding the necessity of the creeds and confessions, but makes a clear distinction between God's objective and subjective revelation or, more accurately in this case, between the biblical Scriptures themselves and a secondary exposition and interpretation thereof. Thus we acknowledge that by providing subjective revelations on the basis of the objective revelation in biblical Scripture, the Holy Spirit works in a dynamic way in the life of the church as a whole. Subjective revelations may also be understood as illuminations provided to enlighten minds to comprehend God's abundance, "so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints" (Eph 1:17–18). In this distinct sense, the creeds and confessions of the church can also be understood as subjective revelation.

In a nutshell

The Bible is a reliable revelation, ready to transmit life to us if we understand and interpret it appropriately. Therefore, we need actively to reinforce one another's confidence in the Bible. Since objective revelation grounds our faith, the church was established and has been upheld on the basis of faith and not subjective revelations. Faith is the reality that connects us with God and provides us with the power to obey. Therefore, we cannot accept that all revelations (objective and subjective) are essentially of equal weight as contemporary prophetic movements would have us believe.

Conclusion

While fundamentalists base their authority claim on the infallibility of the

original manuscripts, and liberals on the infallibility of reason and conscience, I would like to affirm the Reformation position, which asserts infallibility in terms of trustworthiness of the Word and Spirit. In doing so, I would like to differentiate between objective and subjective revelation. Objective revelation is considered to have ceased while subjective revelation is continuous and ongoing. The purpose of subjective revelation is the edification, exhortation and consolation of the church on the basis of Scripture, not to bring extra-biblical revelations. Just like the Holy Spirit's other spiritual gifts, all revelatory gifts serve to enable every member to become and remain an important and useful part of the body of Christ.

> We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love (Eph 4:14–16).

Hence, Asian evangelicals have no problem with contemporary subjective revelation and respond with sorrow to attempts to see the Bible, which contains the living Word of God, as a mere witness to it or as containing laws of a bygone age no longer applicable to our times. In our interpretation of the Word, we must take time and context into account, whilst remembering that the Word is alive for all times and in all contexts. The Bible is also a source of canonical authority by which all other revelation claims, including the church's creeds and confessions, may be rightly tested.

Furthermore, in Asia, where Christianity is a minority faith, we cannot afford to be lax in our attitude toward Scripture. People of other faiths are constantly watching us both sympathetically and critically. Our lives are shaped by what we believe to be the authoritative Word and therefore we need to let God's Word remain God's Word and hear God speak through the Bible in our daily lives.

Notes

[1] The three themes of modern or contemporary prophecy are: to announce impending great calamities; triumph of the church; renovation of the world.

[2] Donald G. Bloesch, *The Essentials of Evangelical Theology*, vol. 2 (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979), p. 269.

[3] John MacArthur, *The Charismatics* (Michigan: Zondervan, 1978), p. 16.

[4] Daniel R. Shaw and Charles E. Engen, *Communicating God's Word in a Complex World* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), p. 52.

[5] *Cf.* The Book of Moroni 10:4–5, at **www.sacred-texts.com/mor/book14.htm.**

[6] Ewald Plass, *What Luther Says* (St Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), p. 111.

[7] Theodore Tappert (ed.), *The Book of Concord* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), p. 502.

[8] *Ibid.*, pp. 465–466.

[9] Bloesch, *op. cit.* (note 2), p. 272.

[10] Plass, *op. cit.* (note 6), p. 115.

[11] Tappert, *op. cit.* (note 7), pp. 464–465.

Comments on Chapter III: The Bible and the History of God's Revelation

When the group discussed Wilfried John's paper (he could not be present at the meeting), the group felt that his main concern might be that continuing revelation could undermine the finality of Scripture. He advocates the Lutheran principle of the Bible's sufficiency and wrestles with the question how appropriately to deal with potential additions. Addressing this, he develops a whole system, the backbone of which is the Bible as objective revelation over against subjective or private revelations. The latter is only binding for the individual concerned and to be judged according to the Bible.

The group raised a number of critical questions. Doesn't the problem begin with equating the Bible with revelation? On the basis of this assumption it is difficult to exclude further revelation. Is the distinction between objective and subjective or private revelation really conclusive? What is the difference between ongoing contextualization of the biblical message and an ongoing rewriting of the book? Can't a contextual interpretation of the Bible be done in faithfulness to it?

Questions were also raised regarding the way in which John refers to key terms such as knowledge, faith and obedience. They appear static and unchangeable and relate to the infallible and inspired Scripture. Yet, the Spirit works through interpretation as John assumes. The group surmised that one major factor is that John belongs to a small Christian minority in the multifaith context of Malaysia. To ascribe infallibility to the Bible is to put it on a par with other Holy Scriptures in order for the church to hold its own or attract those of other faiths.

Chapter IV:
Interpreting the Bible as a Creative Process

Tools for Biblical Interpretation: Imagination and Critical Reflection

Diane Jacobson

Introductory remarks

The following essay highlights some of the significant differences we bring to the enterprise of biblical interpretation from our different backgrounds. I come from a culture steeped in North American postmodern sensibilities as well as in deep piety centering around the Bible. Preaching is highly valued as is Bible study which goes on in various places in our culture: among the women of the church, at men's breakfast meetings and within youth groups in congregations, schools and camps. I also teach in a seminary that values both its deep scholarly tradition and its deep confessional Lutheran heritage. Mine is a seminary rather than a university setting. As such, we teach for the purpose of leadership in congregations and the wider church, for the end of preaching, Bible study, the deepening of faith, living of daily life and understanding our mission as Christians within God's world.

Interpretation in the context of proclamation and biblical imagination

My task in this essay is to speak about the interpretation of Scripture in the context of the issues of biblical authority, particularly as interpretation relates to imagination, contexts and methods.

I am immediately presented with an obstacle: talking about biblical interpretation (as I am bidden to do in writing this essay) can be uninspiring and tedious. Yet, the actual reading, hearing and interpreting of Scripture, particularly in the context of a faithful community, often inspires us. Within the church, the best interpretation (the fuller sound if you will) comes when

theory undergirds (takes second chair to) honest and deep interaction with the texts. Something of this perspective can be found in how Lutherans understand the threefold nature of the Word of God: Jesus as incarnate Word, the Bible as written Word and proclamation as the Word spoken and received. That is, the Word is not finally enlivened within us without proclamation. And if we understand proclamation to include within its purview study, discussion and contemplation as well as (or in preparation for) the more formal aspect of proclamation in preaching and teaching, then interpretation lives properly in the realm of God's Word for and with us.

Our discussions in Warsaw gave rise to much debate around the issue of whether Bible study is rightly considered to be part of proclamation. Given the reality of the experience of so many in the church that the Spirit in fact enlivens faith through such communal study, I would argue that proclamation does indeed take place in this way and so would theologically house such study within this third part of God's Word. More scholarly attention to this question would certainly be helpful.

The truth of Scripture is highly interactive with the interpreter as listener, reader, student, teacher and preacher. The thrill of Scripture—its images, insights, engagement, demand and promise—takes shape in this interaction at the level of what one might term biblical imagination.

Two examples of biblical interpretation

To stave off the discomfort of never addressing the text directly, permit me two examples of the work of biblical interpretation that works with biblical imagination in the context of community.

Consider the familiar texts of Genesis 2: 8–9; 15–17:

> And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed. Out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil … The Lord God

> took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. And the Lord God commanded the man, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die."

Frequently when teaching this text I ask students, What do you think of God in this story? I invite the reader to pause and consider how he or she might respond to such a query.

Invariably, my students bypass (or more accurately, suspend) any questions about the historicity or original purview of the text and center directly on why God put the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the garden. Was it a divine test? If a test, do we like such a test or do we not? What sort of God tests us? Why such commandments? Why the law? And the deeply theological and personal discussion continues from there, with some folks expressing anger at God and others defending God. Finally, someone reads the text again and notices not verse 17, but verse 16. God is actually described primarily as a God who gives freely. But we readers most often cannot see the gift because we are so concentrating on the one restricted tree. We are trapped in our own propensity towards sin by our inevitable reading of the text. We are Adam and Eve reaching toward that single tree, and the "truth" of the text becomes evident.

My second example comes from a weekly Bible study of Matthew held some years ago among some faculty and graduate students at the seminary where I teach. We were educated readers with knowledge of Greek and secondary material, but we just started at the beginning to see what we would see. And as we read carefully, noticing details, even the genealogy came alive. We noticed the five women and asked why Matthew would have included them and what they had in common. (They are all foreigners and they all have interesting sexual pasts. They are all subject to the accusation of harlotry, but they all end up being heroines of the faith. Nice.) We noticed that the genealogy is divided up by groups of fourteen. (Why fourteen? Seven is a good number; it is important. And, someone noted, if you add up the letters of David's name in Hebrew, it equals fourteen) But then, someone else noticed, the numbers do not really match. There are not fourteen names on each list.

We observed that the Greek of Matthew 1 ("An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah") ties these verses to Genesis 2:4 ("These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created"), thus linking Matthew's

genealogy to creation. This text is about important beginnings. Throughout the discussion we all knew that we were avoiding talking about what was really bothering us. We knew from other biblical, historical and anthropological studies that traditionally a genealogy shows who is related to whom; tying father, and occasionally mother, to son. The genealogy in Matthew appears to prove that Jesus is the son of David, a true heir from the house of David. But something even more important than the numbers was not quite matching up. In Matthew 1:16 ("and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah"), the genealogy goes to Joseph. But Joseph is only the husband of Mary. Mary is the mother of Jesus. Joseph is not really related to Jesus. So how does this genealogy work? What does it prove?

We were uncomfortable, so we worked harder with the text. We concentrated on Joseph. Matthew states in verse 19 that Joseph was a righteous man. What constitutes his righteousness? We knew from reading the whole of Matthew that "righteousness" is an important word in Matthew. Joseph wants to do the right thing. In this case, the right thing is not following the law. He does not put Mary away as the law would have him do. Righteousness is the opposite of holding on to what is lawful and honorable. Joseph embraces Mary's disgrace. True righteousness is often hidden under what seem to be shameful actions. And then what? Joseph takes the child and names him. This reminded us of Pharaoh's daughter taking the child and naming him Moses. Naming here is an act of adoption. A light goes on ... all around the room. Joseph adopts Jesus. Jesus in the genealogy does not have a father; he is the only male who does not. But in the end, he does have a father, an adopted one. Jesus is the son of David by adoption. Jesus is not David's son by blood, but he is by adoption. Are we able to accept that as legitimate, as real? What constitutes family? Who is a legitimate heir to David? Who is a legitimate heir to the promise?

Suddenly, the whole text lies open before us. Here is one of the central issues of Matthew's gospel. Does one have to be related by blood to be part of God's family? Who does Jesus come for? Jews and Gentiles alike. Gentiles are adopted into the family and adoption counts. If we do not believe this about Jesus and Joseph, how can we come to believe this of Jesus and the Gentiles? Matthew turns the traditional use of genealogy on its head. He uses genealogy to include outsiders. The clue was there already with the foreign women, and it is there at the end with Joseph. Jesus was truly son of David; we are all truly heirs of the promise.

Five primary principles of biblical interpretation

I offer these two examples for a purpose. Hopefully they illustrate biblical imagination at work. Such interpretations are catching and possibly transformative. Several aspects of these examples point toward five primary principles of biblical interpretation.

- The Bible is best understood when read carefully and closely, attentive to detail and nuance.[1] Scripture has its own integrity and its own voices. Reading and listening carefully is not as easy as one might imagine. Hence one misses Genesis 2:16 in the rush to consider verse 17. Or one does not notice that the generations in Matthew do not add up. Additionally, we all come with certain preconceived notions that prevent such listening.

- Expansive study of the Bible helps to bring more depth to one's interpretation. A biblical imagination springs from knowing all of Scripture well, owning it as foundational to our thought. Passages do not stand then in isolation from each other. Knowing all of the Bible helps in the interpretation of individual portions of the Bible.[2] In looking at the text of Matthew 1, the group called on numerous texts from the Old Testament, including the texts about the women, Genesis 1:1, and the whole of Matthew's gospel, to aid their reading.

- Biblical interpretation does not happen in a theological or cultural void. Though our reading is not bound by tradition, we are nonetheless invited in our reading of Scripture to respect and learn from the insights of tradition.[3] My own Lutheran theological perspective is apparent in both of the above studies in the observations about sin, law and righteousness and in my leaning towards a law/gospel hermeneutic. The presence of several of us in the group who lean toward Christian feminist interpretation led to the observations about the women. Notably, I am more able to identify the insights that arose from of our strengths than to recognize the blind spots born of our interpreting the texts in a North American, academic context.

- Biblical imagination involves readers in an open-ended process of interpretation. We bring our own experience and expertise to the table to aid

the process. Insights lead not so much to an answered as to a deepened text that opens us up to further questions and renewed study. This process touches our lives in unexpected ways as illustrated above. Terry Fretheim, in addressing the issue of biblical authority, suggests that "the Bible exercises its authority in and through its genuine engagement with the lives of people."[4]

- Biblical interpretation is best practiced in the context of a faithful community.[5] The insights gleaned from Genesis and Matthew were born of interaction. Generally, the broader and more diverse the base of this faithful community, the more likely it is to engage in faithful reading. Clearly, communities, like individuals, are subject to sin and error. Certainly any community can simply pool ignorance or be subject to the will of the powerful. The consensus voice needs the prophetic voice of the outsider. Community is thus not a guarantee for insight, but frequently we learn from others or we come to an insight of our own in fruitful conversation with others. Radical individualism, so prevalent in contemporary North America, is rarely a helpful corollary to the principle of *sola scriptura*.

These five principles provide general guidance, helping us to interpret the Bible faithfully and imaginatively. What we often yearn for in all of this is some method or combination of methods that will help to ensure that we interpret Scripture correctly. Such an insurance is, alas, impossible. Nonetheless, we have learned something from various methods over the years.

Methods of critical reflection

I stated earlier that methods work best when they take second chair. And though the sound they produce is often dissonant, they still provide texture and often depth. In reading Scripture we are often helped by the use of scholarly tools, such as understanding texts in their original language, applying the rules of logical thinking or the insights of science, and using principles of historical inquiry. We were aided in our study of Matthew by many such tools. We are all called upon to be good and reasoned readers, using our own gifts from the scholarly community or at least making use of the insights of those who bring such tools to the table. At best, such tools keep us at a critical distance, help-

ing us to recognize that the Bible was written in an ancient culture unlike any present culture or time.[6]

Modern critical biblical interpretation is a child of the Reformation and the Enlightenment. The Reformation began the process by putting the Bible into the hands of all and encouraging educated study not bound by the theological restrictions of the magisterium, that is, the official interpreters of the church. The Enlightenment expanded the process of rational, critical reflection. John Collins briefly describes this development and suggests three principles that define modern historical biblical criticism: the autonomy of the historian; the principle of analogy; and the principle of criticism.[7] Autonomy means that each critical thinker is able to bring to the interpretive task his or her own rational and studied insights which can and often do overturn convictions of the past. Analogy, based on the assumption that human nature remains consistent over time, provides the critical link of past to present. And criticism, with its dependence on never-ending new insights, suggests that scholarship is "an ongoing process" whose "results are always provisional and never final."[8] Within the process of historical-critical reflection on the text, a whole raft of modern tools developed including source, form, redaction, rhetorical and sociological criticisms. At some levels, the learning has been extraordinary, greatly aiding the interpretation of the Bible. I think of how the discovery of other Ancient Near Eastern texts has set the rhetoric of the Psalms and the prophets in their context and opened up their meaning. I think of how understanding the culture of ancient Corinth aids us in understanding Paul's letters to the Corinthians. Examples of deepened learning abound, and remembering the ancient contexts keeps us from collapsing the texts into modernity.

For all the differences among the historical-critical methods, each begins with the basic assumption that all texts are best understood as products of particular cultures from particular historical periods. These methods build on the assumption that given enough time and good work, we can come to these cultures and their histories with greater accuracy and in more depth and thus will be more likely to provide better interpretations. Mark Powell and others speak of these methods as "author-oriented,"[9] insofar as these interpretations are constructed around the original meaning that the author intended.

Yet, for all of the insights that have resulted from these methods, an equal number of questions about the methods have arisen as well. Some questions have arisen from within the church. Some folks have suggested that "critical" study of Scripture implies that one is undermining the authority of Scripture.

Proponents of historical-critical methods suggest that the tools themselves are theologically neutral, able to be used faithfully by faithful readers just as Luther and other Reformers down through the ages used the tools of their own time to interpret the text. The crucial theological test is not whether certain tools are used or not. The crucial test is whether the tools are used to further truthful and honest reading that frees the text to deepen faith and understanding, to spark faithful questions, to inspire works of justice and mercy, to speak law and gospel and to drive toward Christ.

Other questions about the historical-critical methods have arisen from within academic circles. Most recently, some scholars have emphasized the fact that we can never be certain about any biblical text's author, history, or culture. Historical-critical insights are always based on conjecture, which, depending upon one's perspective, can be considered anywhere from excellent approximations to pure fantasy to dangerous projection. Often, historical-critical methods can even bypass the details of the biblical text and concentrate solely on the assumed situation behind the text. One is then always dependent on reconstruction for interpretation. And, perhaps most destructively, historical criticism always masks the particular cultural, theological and personal biases of the individual interpreter, presenting his or her results as objective and unbiased fact.

Such scholarly critiques of the historical-critical methods come from our new situation in what some identify as a post-Enlightenment or postmodern world. The presumed tendencies of this world are described by Terry Eagleton:

> By "postmodern," I mean, roughly speaking, the contemporary movement of thought which rejects totalities, universal values, grand historical narratives, solid foundations to human existence and the possibilities of objective knowledge. Postmodernism is skeptical of truth, unity and progress, opposes what it sees as elitism in culture, tends toward cultural relativism, and celebrates pluralism, discontinuity and heterogeneity.[10]

Postmodern interpreters have certainly identified and articulated many of the problems of the historical-critical approach. The types of postmodern criticisms are as varied as historical-critical methods. This variation is illustrated by the chapter titles in a book of essays collected under the title, *The Postmodern Bible*: reader-response criticism; structuralist and narratological criticism; poststructuralist criticism; rhetorical criticism; psychoanalytic criticism; feminist and womanist criticism and ideological criticism.[11] Postmodern interpreters tend

to deconstruct the biblical text rather than construct a conjectured reading. They tend to own their own perspective at the outset, rather than assume an omnipotent reader position.

They would agree with A. K. M. Adam's judgment that "meaning is what we

Beginning this essay with a description of my own context is thus identifiable as a very "postmodern" way to begin. I present myself as a culturally, situationally bound reader, rather than an omnipotent reader who can explain all things. We are all subject, of course, to slipping into the omnipotent role, and equally subject to seeing absolutely everything as only

make of texts, not an ingredient in texts."[12]

Postmodern interpreters are often more persuasive in their critiques of historical-critical interpretations than in their own positive insights. However, I personally have found two of these approaches to be most helpful. The first approach of Mark Allan Powell is helpful in organizing the "postmodern" insights in such a way as to help us own what we as readers bring to the interpretation of texts. The second approach helps all readers to read a text more clearly, regardless of historical or present context.

Mark Allan Powell speaks of his own approach as "reader-oriented,"[13] suggesting with other postmodern interpreters that the person or persons doing the interpreting of the text have an important role in constructing the meaning of the text. Powell asks us to consider what makes different readers and suggests four different categories: (1) social location; (2) reading strategies; (3) choice of empathy; and (4) conceptions of meaning.[14] In category one, Powell reminds us that readers are of various ages, races, genders, nationalities, social classes, income and education levels, personalities, etc. That is, readers come from different social locations, and such locations influence reading. For example, wealthy individuals from North America read texts about justice and judgment differently from a gathered group of villagers in central America. (Interestingly, in Hebrew, the word *mishpat* can be translated as either justice of judgment, so even the translation of texts is influenced by social location.) Or a group of Korean women who experience the relationships between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law as crucial to how families run read the Book of Ruth

through the lens of their experience and thus hear the book differently than an African male reader might. In his second category, Powell notes that not all readers approach the task of reading in the same way; some read from beginning to end, some browse, etc., thus approaching the text with a different reading strategy. His third category emphasizes that not all readers identify with the same character. Think, for example, of the Parable of the Prodigal Son. If we entitle this parable "The Parable of the Rejected Elder Brother," or more provocatively, "The Parable of the Overlooked Servants," the very title betrays a different choice of empathy. And finally, in category four, Powell suggests that readers also have different ways of appropriating meaning. Some speak more cognitively, while others attend to how the text affects them or makes them feel.[15] Powell suggests that all of these factors have an effect on how individuals read texts, and such things cannot help but influence or even determine the meaning of the text. If we attend to these four categories we are greatly helped in understanding why we read certain texts so differently from other readers. What I find most helpful about this approach is the insistence that we cannot step outside of our own skins, our own contexts, our own locations and prejudices. If we try to do this, we simply peel off layers of the onion until nothing is left. We are better served in our interpretations and in the church if we acknowledge our necessary multiplicity and find meaning within it rather than pretend that we can escape our own particularity. Such pretence invariably leads to the very tendency to accept one imperial reading that Luther fought so hard to overturn.

The other approach I have found helpful is rhetorical criticism. Interestingly this approach is claimed by both modern and postmodern readers. And, indeed, depending on how this method is used, it can fall into either world. One can think of this approach as "reader centered" (centering on what we see in the text and thus postmodern) or "author centered" (centering on the rhetoric of the historical author and thus modern). Many rhetorical critics would prefer to identify this approach as "text centered" (and thus not falling neatly into either world). I most appreciate rhetorical criticism when it helps both professional scholars and nonprofessional readers to look at the text slowly and carefully, mindful of the details and the artistry. Rhetorical criticism invites readers: to set a passage in its broad context; to describe the major movements and structure of the text; to identify major and minor characters by noticing who has a name, voice, action, etc.; to recognize the points of view of the narrator, characters, God, as well as the reader; to be attentive to special and temporal settings in

the text; and to note important themes and theological movements.[16] One of the strengths of the rhetorical approach is that we are invited to read the texts that are before us to find meaning rather than search for meaning "behind" the text. Another strength is that such tools for careful reading are available to expert and nonexpert readers alike. While I invariably find such practices to be helpful in clarifying the details, logic, artistry and depth of the texts, they never finally settle the matter of interpretation once and for all.

Conclusions

Finally, the search for the perfect interpretive method is futile. Still, certain things are clear. No text comes to us "uninterpreted." We cannot escape from our own situation as readers nor can we clearly understand the original situation of the texts. We are always in the business of seeing through a glass darkly, as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13:12. And we are misguided when we look for one "objective" meaning. As suggested in quite different ways and for very different reasons by both postmodern observation and the Lutheran theology of the Word, our interactions with the biblical text influence the meaning of the text. But we are not necessarily left with the notion that one interpretation is as good as any other or that none of the methods, modern or postmodern, are of any interpretive value. Nihilism and despair are as culturally conditioned a response as positivism. To quote Terence Fretheim, "the text cannot mean anything just because it can mean many things."[17]

The various methods can aid interpretation. While we may not be able to reconstruct histories, our knowledge of history, culture and language places constraints or parameters on meaning, ruling some potential interpretations out of order. That is, we are able to say, for example, that the preexilic religion of Judah differed considerably from the preexilic religion of northern Israel or the postexilic faith of fourth-century Judaism or, even more, from post-second temple Judaism. Knowing such history places constrains on certain interpretations of various Old Testament and New Testament texts.

And while we can no longer assume the role of omnipotent, impartial reader, we can be aware of some of our own biases and be open to the insights of those read with a different set of lenses.[18] We can learn from both tradition and experience while maintaining a perspective that both experience and tradition can be misleading. Fretheim suggests that "if we are freed from searching for a single or

original or intended meaning of the text, this will enhance the authority of the Bible."[19] Such is my own experience. If we look back at the two examples I gave at the beginning of this essay, the authority arises from within the encounter with the living Word, is given free rein within the conversation of the gathered community, and constrained by certain knowledge and careful attention to the text itself. I expect a different faithful reading would occur within a different gathering and that, conversing with each other, the text would be deepened ever further. The "authority" is organic rather than imposed. The interpretation and encounter with one text are constantly put in the context of the whole of Scripture and the whole of our lives lived in Christ. Within this larger context, lead by the Spirit, centered on the gospel of forgiveness, love, hope, justice and mercy, one learns together to see some interpretations as inspired, some as outrageous and many as intriguing and needing to be tested. This whole enterprise is an art rather than a science, and thus is well expressed as an invitation to engage a biblical imagination. Such an imagination influences and deepens both our engagement with the text and our engagement with the world. So, for example, we read the genealogy of Matthew, and in the reading, we are drawn into the biblical teachings about righteousness and family and foreigners, and we regard everyone as a potential sister or brother in Christ. The last word on interpretation should perhaps go to Luther who said, "The Holy Scriptures require a humble reader who shows reverence and fear toward the Word of God, and constantly says, 'Teach me, teach me, teach me… .' The Spirit resists the proud."[20]

Notes

[1]As noted in my essay "Reading Strategies in the Light of Biblical Diversity," Luther said, "The Christian reader should make it his first task to seek out the literal sense, as they call it. For it alone holds its ground in trouble and trial." Jaroslav Pelikan (ed), *Luther's Works*, vol. 9 (St Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1960), p. 24. Note that what is meant by "literal" presents its own complications.

[2] Luther said "One passage of Scripture must be clarified by other passages." Helmut T. Lehmann (ed.), *Luther's Works*, vol. 37 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1961), p. 177. As mentioned in my previous essay, members of the ELCA submitted answers to a survey developed by the study group. One of the questions was, Are there some ways of studying the Bible that are better or worse than

others? Periodically throughout this essay, I will share some of these responses where pertinent following a notation, "Note Responses." Note Responses: (1) The Scriptures should be used to interpret Scripture. Any interpretation of a particular passage should have consistency with the overall message of the Bible, as well as the context in which it was written. (2) Let the Bible interpret the Bible. Commentaries should only be used as supplementary material, after we have done our own study. (3) Let the whole of Scripture guide your interpretation of any part of it. (4) Using cross-references seems to be a good way to study.

[3] Note Responses: (1) We should read it in the tension of gospel and law, applying law to ourselves and gospel to our neighbors. (2) We must always bear in mind the theology of the cross and the tension in the law and gospel. (3) The best is to read through the lens of the gospel. Luther: *Was Christum treibet*.

[4] Terence Fretheim and Karlfried Froehlich, *The Bible as Word of God in a Postmodern Age* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1998), p. 86.

[5] Note Responses: (1) The best way to study the Bible is within a Christian community. A group context for study allows each individual to have their thoughts tested, plus gain the wisdom of others. (2) Studying in a group that is prayerful, honest and accepting is a great way to study. (3) To me, the worst way is by yourself. (4) It is more helpful to study the Bible with other people and not just by oneself. Studying the Bible with one's mind closed as to what it is going to say to you can be a problem. We need to be open to hearing a new Word from Scripture which may open our minds and spirits to new possibilities for personal life in Christ and for our life in the world.

[6] Note Responses: (1) I have great appreciation for the historical-critical methods of study that attempt to understand the language and story in the context of its time and context, then to see what it might mean for us today. Just studying the Bible itself can be like navel gazing—you miss so much! (2) Yes, studying the Bible in its original context can help understand how the Bible can speak to us today. (3) Yes! Each story (book, letter, etc.) is about or addressed to a people living in a particular time and place...original language, social custom, etc., are very important. (4) Use a variety of means, literary, historical, critical, etc.

[7] John J. Collins, *The Bible after Babel: Historical Criticism in a Postmodern Age* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), pp. 4–11.

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 6.

[9] Mark Allan Powell, *Chasing the Eastern Star: Adventures in Biblical Reader-Response Criticism* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), pp. 1ff.

[10] Terry Eagleton, *After Theory* (New York, Basic Books, 2003), p. 13, as quoted in Collins, *op. cit.* (note 7), p. 12.

[11] Elizabeth A Castelli *et al.* (eds), *The Postmodern Bible* (New Haven: Yale, 1995).

[12] A. K. M. Adam, *What is Postmodern Biblical Criticism?* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), p. 5.

[13] Powell, *op. cit.* (note 9), pp. 1ff.

[14] *Ibid.*, pp. 17–27.

[15] Some would tend toward "T" and others toward "F" on the Myers-Briggs scale.

[16] This list comes from my "Narrative Tips" found on my web page, at **www.luthersem.edu/djacobso** The tips are compiled largely from three sources: Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic, 1981); Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1994); and Mark Allan Powell, *What is Narrative Criticism?* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990).

[17] Fretheim, *op. cit.* (note 4), p. 90.

[18] Note Responses: (1) Yes, measured against the boundary crossing compassion of Jesus is the best way. Including voice of diverse experience, with particular attention to voices and experience that come from the margins. (2) First, the Bible should be studied prayerfully. Second, it is best to try to shed our own cultural ideas and worldviews when we read the Bible so that we are able to let the Bible speak for itself. If we are not careful to do this we may end up construing the Bible to say something it does not say.

[19] Fretheim, *op. cit.* (note 4), p. 93.

[20] Helmut T. Lehmann (ed.), *Luther's Works*, vol. 54 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), p. 378.

Why Historical Work is Necessary

Günter Thomas

The key question with respect to so-called critical methods is: Why are historical work and methodological sophistication helpful, indeed necessary, for theological and not just for institutional (university related) or pedagogical reasons? It is important to show that applying such methods does not mean that Western Christianity is surrendering to the destructive claims of modernity.

When understood from within a Christological framework, historical investigation takes seriously the event of the incarnation: the Word became flesh. In Christ (Jn 1; Phil 2) the Word entered a world of vulnerability, contingency, risk and error. God continues to come into the world while at the same time being distinguished from it.[1]

When understood from within a pneumatological framework, historical investigation takes seriously the Spirit's willingness to be embodied and opens up pathways to understanding unity in difference (Pentecost) and the process of communal truth seeking.

Historical work distances the religious reader from the text and works against a "naive usurpation" of the text—a merging of the reader's opinion and the Word of God. In this sense, historical or other methodological work *quasi* safeguard the freedom of God's own work. In hermeneutical terms, it is self-evident that the rejection of methodologically rich interpretations results in a poor and simple, but nonetheless rigid and destructive, dictatorship of a spiritual "common sense." An insight of the anthropology of knowledge is that a culture's symbolic system of "common sense" makes its own contingency and historical situatedness invisible. Historical research reveals that also the spiritual, commonsense realism of naive readers can err, spread destruction and distort the image of God. Many so-called fundamentalist movements hide their authoritarian posture behind the certainty and realism of spiritual commonsense symbolizations.

Recognizing a text's historical embeddedness encourages us to acknowledge our own historical position and relativity. Historical work forces us to differentiate between the text of the Bible and systematic theology, thereby

reinforcing theological probity.

Only by means of a methodologically rich dialogue with the biblical texts can we be the "inner-biblical" community of witness and interpretation. Uncovering the diverging streams of traditions and reconstructing the many heterogeneous clusters of theological reasoning enable us to be creative and truth-seeking theologians active "inside" the biblical text.

Historical work, including the history of biblical interpretation itself, increases our sensitivity with regard to errors, mistakes and human sinfulness when using the Bible. Recognizing instances of disastrous misreading helps us to see the contingency of our own reading. As a theological and spiritual recognition this does not lead to a cynical relativism, but to a double movement. It helps us to listen more astutely to others who read the Bible, and it strengthens the self-critical search for truth.

Careful historical work is necessary to delineate the subtle complexity of the biblical witnesses. Such work is able to show how varied such witness is. This signals a willingness to listen to the internal complexity of the biblical witness to the living God.

Notes

[1] The beginning of this process is already a key feature of creation: the Creator of heaven and earth is locating him/herself in heaven as a peculiar creaturely realm clearly separated from the earth as the sphere of human control.

Comments on Chapter IV: Interpreting the Bible as a Creative Process

One key purpose of any interpretation is to allow us to experience the strangeness of the biblical texts. Rather than merely mirroring our own desires and expectations, the Bible communicates a message that speaks to us from beyond ourselves. Many modern methods of interpretation, first and foremost the historical-critical method, aim at safeguarding this strangeness. Luther's insistence on the preeminence of the literal understanding of biblical texts over against other understandings developed by the Early Church and the Medieval Church points in the same direction. His intention was to tone down imaginative readings.

While in Luther's context this made sense, what about today? Related to this is the question how scholarly approaches relate to creative and imaginative methodologies such as Bible studies. In how far do the latter open up new horizons in terms of understanding and meaningfully experiencing biblical texts? How do scholarly approaches help to discipline arbitrary interpretations? To what extend may we expect the Holy Spirit to authenticate the gospel message in both approaches? Does scholarly research occur under the guidance of the Holy Spirit at all?

Günter Thomas, teaching at a German university claimed that fusing different forms of communication constitutes a problem. We engage in scholarly, secular, methodological research, which is not spiritual work, since we cannot trigger the work of the Holy Spirit. Diane Jacobson, teaching at a seminary in the USA and an advocate of women's Bible studies, objected, claiming that Bible studies constitute an holistic effort to engage with the gospel. When we struggle intellectually with the text, the Spirit is also there. By helping people distance themselves from the text they, in turn, help one to come closer to it. Both movements are necessary and need to be in dialogue.

Within a faithful community, how does reading the Bible, which the Pietists took very seriously, provide checks and balances against an unlimited plurality of interpretation? Or, can a group's naive common sense also become a trap? What role might trained readers assume in this situation?[1]

Traditionally, the Lutheran understanding of communicating the gospel has focused on preaching. Does this approach not have to be expanded so that such approaches as imaginative Bible studies can be welcomed and appreciated as legitimate and powerful means of sharing the gospel? This is particularly important in light of the fact that especially in some churches of the North, only few people can be reached by sermons, but that they would be willing to participate in more communal ways of engaging with the Bible.

Notes

[1] This issue will be dealt with in chapter 6.

Chapter V: Interpreting the Bible as a Critical Process: The Role of Power

Biblical Interpretation and Issues of Power. A Latin American Feminist Perspective

Mercedes García Bachmann

Introduction

If it is true that human existence and communication take place within a system of power relations, then the biblical texts are no exception. What does that mean with regard to the interpretation of the Bible? This is one of the most difficult questions confronting any person who takes this book as his or hers.

Let us start by recognizing that human beings exist within a system of asymmetrical power relationships. There may be exceptions to this unfortunate phenomenon, but these are no more than that, exceptions. People experience gender asymmetries; economic (personal, social, national, regional and continental) asymmetries; trade asymmetries; cultural asymmetries; racial/ethnic asymmetries; class asymmetries; religious asymmetries; etc. Within human relationships, these are not merely minor details. As long as we live in this world and are incarnated in these bodies, as long as we are subject to the social dynamics that rule the world there will be tensions since existing power structures will try to ensure their continuity. Thus, the asymmetrical power relations people have had to endure for centuries will not be erased easily.

The challenge we face is to dismantle those structures and to put into action Paul's godly insight, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28). The question is, How do we learn again and again to live in Christ Jesus and leave aside those ways that are contrary to the gospel?

The answer seems obvious: Of course, any Christian would want to live in Christ Jesus and leave aside those ways of living that are contrary to the

gospel. Yet, even within the same denomination, we are unable to agree on what this means in concrete terms. What is contrary to the gospel? Which ways are customary and which sinful? To what extent should one impose one's own ways on others, who have different ways of believing and of acting? James, Paul, Mark, Mary, Martha, John and other great New Testament names did not agree either, not to mention of differences with other sects of first-century Judaism. Debates got heated at certain times (i.e., Acts 15; Gal 2:1-14; 1 Jn and 2 Jn). Thus, not even the Bible itself provides a unique model for dealing with conflicting views on what it means to live in Christ Jesus. Conflict is unavoidable which, in itself, is not bad as it opens up possibilities for change. What may be appropriate or not, good or bad, is not conflict, but how conflict is addressed and solved.

In order to discuss biblical interpretation in relation to power issues, some definitions are necessary.

Power

In what sense is the word power used here? My dictionary states that power is "the ability to do or act. ... political and social ascendancy or control."[1] Among other things, this definition means that, to a greater or lesser extent, power is shared by many agents. It is not only in the hands of those whom the world deems to be "great," such as media stars, sports champions, politicians, presidents and monarchs, archbishops and bishops, millionaires, businessmen (some businesswomen) and bosses of any kind. Power is shared by men and women all the way down the social ladder. Certain groups exercise power over others: men over women, white people over people of color, educated people over illiterate people, the rich over the poor, adults over so-called minors such as the elderly and people unable to make their own decisions, etc.

Power is exercised not only at a personal level (i.e., husband who takes money away from his wife so that she cannot do anything on her own). It has to do with economic, political and social organizations by which a group has attained, maintains and often increases control over other people and material resources (including spiritual ones, such as culture and religion). In order for power to keep working, symbolic systems that would justify their (and not others') "ascendancy or control" have to be created or recreated, as the case may be.

Ideology/ies

The Oxford Dictionary and Thesaurus defines ideology as "1. The system of ideas at the basis of an economic or political theory... ; 2. The manner of thinking characteristic of a class or individual ... ."[2] The first definition is broader than the second. Both are political in that they define how the world is perceived, what lies at its center, what is peripheral, what is news and what is not, who is expendable and who is important, etc. Ideology defines the way we, as belonging to a certain social class, interpret reality.

While each person writes from a certain location, some of us are more conscious of some characteristics and more oblivious to others. Our concerns differ. Elelwani shows a strong concern for ethnicity; Diane and Márta for increasing anti-Semitism; John for witnessing in a minority setting; Alexander for the unshakable basis for our faith vis-à-vis changing conditions in society and church; Günter for increasing fundamentalism; and I for the abuse of power, especially with regard to women. What is your main concern?

It is obvious that our ideology conditions our perception, thinking, writing, talking and reading.

Are texts ideological? They are indeed. They are the result of what someone who subscribes to a certain ideology has chosen to write. This also applies to biblical texts. We need to qualify that since the Bible comprises a number of books written, edited and collected at different times, in different places and under different circumstances, there is not one uniform ideology, but several. This is its richness, not its fault.[3] After all, human life is also rich, varied and often challenging and contradictory.[4]

Biblical interpretation

In order to discuss biblical interpretation and power issues, I will focus on a text, a "case study" rather than engage in a more theoretical discussion.

In the book of Numbers, two stories involve five young women, Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah. They are presented as the daughters of Zelophehad, the son of Hepher, the son of Gilead, the son of Makir, the son of Manasseh, of the families of Manasseh, the son of Joseph. Impressive lineage, considering that Joseph was the one to save the family from starvation and to come to power in Egypt. So much lineage for a man who had died leaving five young daughters but no son to inherit his land (Num 26:33).

Speaking up for their rights

Together with the deliverance from slavery in Egypt, Yahweh had promised possession of land according to the number of men in each tribe (Heb. *nahalah*, inheritance, Num 26:52–56). This was indeed revolutionary, because the distribution and tenure of land are not determined by money (How much can I accumulate?), but by productivity or need (How much land is needed for how many people?). This is still revolutionary, because it put families on an equal footing regardless of such factors as family ascendancy, alliances, money, political influence, etc.

Yet, as revolutionary as it was, this system did not take into account the situation of men who died sonless. All others—daughters, slaves, children raised by the family, foreigners—inherited no land.[5] This situation is addressed in Numbers 27. Here, the five young women (still unmarried and probably teenagers) come before Moses, Eleazar the chief priest, the leaders and all the congregation and bring before them their request to be given land among their father's kin, so that their father's name would not be unduly lost among the tribes.

The daughters come together and with one voice claim what is their right. This is also a power issue. Women may come together, organize themselves and pursue their own interests, even though according to certain stereotypes women are always nagging, fighting each other, competing with one another and always jealous and envious of other women. Contrary to certain stereotypes in the biblical as well as in our world, women organize themselves when the occasion merits it and can also work against each other, just like men.[6]

I suspect that the women were as concerned with their father's memory as with their own survival in an agrarian society in which land ownership was fundamental.[7] In front of the whole people assembled in the presence of Yahweh (at the tent of meeting), they express that there is no reason for their father to be punished with erasure from Israel's memory by not having an heir (Num 27:3–4).

One of the most interesting facts here is the setting in which the case was solved. First, the matter is presented to the people, the authorities and to Yahweh. The daughters are courageous enough to come to the fore in the presence of the chief leader and legislator (Moses), the chief priest (Eleazar), the chiefs of the tribes (the princes or leaders) and the whole congregation. They must have felt that they had a right to claim their inheritance, and they were right.

Second, although it is not explicitly stated, it clearly required new legislation. Thus Moses brought their case directly before God as is explicitly mentioned in verse 5, "And Moses brought their case (Heb. *mishpat*, justice, judgment, case, etc.) before Yahweh" (Num 27:5, author's own translation).

Third, Yahweh's answer gives them what they asked for: "...you shall indeed let them possess an inheritance among their father's brothers and pass the inheritance of their father on to them" (Num 27:7). The verdict also establishes a man's line of descent: son/s, daughter/s, brother/s, father's brother/s and so on, for generations to come.

Fourth, the beginning of Yahweh's verdict is indeed unique in that it starts by praising the daughters' claim: "Right are speaking Zelophehad's daughters."[8] This is very important, since the women's action could have been seen as challenging God's laws. Because of this challenge to Yahweh's legislation it was important to point out that neither their father nor they themselves belonged to Koreh's rebellious faction.[9]

In terms of power, this is the closest one could get to a participatory decision: a person or group has a request that they deem fair, present their case to the authorities and receive a fair answer: you are right, let us modify the legislation.

Making sure that their rights are honored

Zelophehad's daughters have been granted a portion among their father's kin by no less a legislator than Yahweh. The story does not end here however. When Joshua puts in practice the land distribution, the daughters have to stand up again and make sure that their rightful due is honored (Josh 17:1-6). Otherwise, even with the law on their side, they would end up with no property. Here Moses is no longer alive, so they come before Joshua, his successor, Eleazar, the same priest as when they made their initial request and before the chiefs

or princes who were probably also the same as in the earlier story. Here there is no discussion as to their right, only their request that it be accorded, and it is recorded that Manasseh's tribe received ten portions because both its men and daughters were allotted land (Josh 17:6).

The drawback

There is another text that deals with the same issue:

> The heads of the ancestral houses of the clans of the descendants of Gilead son of Machir son of Manasseh, of the Josephite clans, came forward and spoke in the presence of Moses and the leaders, the heads of the ancestral houses of the Israelites; …"The Lord commanded my lord to give the land for inheritance by lot to the Israelites; and my lord was commanded by the Lord to give the inheritance of our brother Zelophehad to his daughters. But if they are married into another Israelite tribe, then their inheritance will be taken from the inheritance of our ancestors and added to the inheritance of the tribe into which they marry; …. And when the Jubilee of the Israelites comes, then their inheritance will be added to the inheritance of the tribe into which they have married; and their inheritance will be taken from the inheritance of our ancestral tribe (Num 36:1–4).[10]

Loss of productive land is a very serious concern for any agrarian society. In this sense, one can be sympathetic to their concern. Still, the bottom line is that this is a society that does not want its daughters to inherit. Had there been an interest in daughters inheriting, provisions would have been made for redistribution. Perhaps the Jubilee would have taken such a shape as to provide for women inheriting or at least for redistribution. Indeed, with the marriage system reflected in these laws, the tribe's daughters (not the land, but the daughters) are given away to other tribes, without any further ado.

What I find most significant in this text is that, unlike the five young women, these men (their kin) do not proceed in the same manner. They approach only the male authorities: Moses and the heads of the families, in other words, those interested in maintaining the land in their own hands. Neither the people, the chief priest, nor Zelophehad's daughters are approached, much less Yahweh.

The other noteworthy difference with the procedure in chapter 27 is that it is not stated that Moses brought the issue before Yahweh, although Moses' answer

is said to be "according to Yahweh's mouth" (author's own translation, NRSV: "according to the word of the LORD"). Moses' answer to them (perhaps to the whole assembly or at least the whole tribe, we may surmise) is, "Right/well are speaking the tribe of Joseph's sons" (author's own translation, Numbers 36:5). This failure to mention Yahweh's answer (thus, also endorsement) may be due to the fact that there was no need to create new legislation and therefore, no need to bring it to Yahweh. Or, it might be the writer's subtle way of calling the audience's attention to the lower status of this decision (Moses' and not Yahweh's) *vis-à-vis* the women's request.

Note the parallel between Yahweh's answer to the five women and Moses' answer to the men:

The issue of literal over against (or alongside) literary readings of the Bible may well be illustrated with this text. While a literal reading would take at face value that "Moses did not bring the issue to Yahweh," "Yahweh said," or "Moses said," a literary reading would try to hint at why the editors would choose such expressions and what they would be trying to convey, especially in subtle ways. It also matters whether or not the reader believes in a Deity that can speak to a person or a people.

- Well (*ken*) are speaking (*doberot*, fem. pl. part.) Zelophehad's daughters (Num 27:7)

- Well (*ken*) are speaking (*doberim*, masc. pl. part.) the tribe of *bene-yosep* (Num 36:5).

The difference is how the people involved are characterized (a) who asks (five women/the men of their own tribe); (b) who answers (Yahweh? Moses?); and (c) who is addressed (Zelophehad's daughters/the tribe of *bene-yosep*).

The expression, "Joseph's sons," (Heb. *bene-yosep*) may be translated inclusively as "children" or "sons." How should it be translated here? Perhaps it is used ambiguously: are not Zelophehad's daughters (and any other daughter) *bene-yosep*, Joseph's children, as well? Why would Moses refer to the first ancestor here instead of Gilead, as in Numbers 36:1? Could he not be saying

in Numbers 36:5 that both the women (chapter 27) and the men (chapter 36) were right and that the tribe's concern (Joseph's sons, *bene-yosep*) must include its own women's rights (Zelophehad's daughters)? Thus, *bene-yosep* becomes Joseph's children rather than Joseph's sons (the ones intending to keep control of the land). This way of looking at the tribe accords with Joshua 17:6.[11]

Issues of power

What do we find if we take Numbers 36 as a (biblical) interpretation of the earlier story (Num 27 and Josh 17:1–6)?

Building on the event narrated in Numbers 27, chapter 36 takes up some of the main characters of the first story (the daughters, Moses and the leaders) and leaves out other characters, most notably the religious ones (including direct consultation of the Deity). It thus retains certain elements but modifies the scenario. While suggesting continuity by using the same characters, issue and scenario, in this reinterpretation power is concentrated in the hands of the few landowning families. And these are all male and senior.

This restriction seriously affects women, starting with the five women who would be most affected by the decision. The fact that this is a strife within the same tribe is not of minor importance, but is totally ignored in the men's argument. Rather than talking about the women, their kinsmen could have talked to them about an agreed upon procedure. After all, why do they suppose the women were not interested in the land being kept within the family?

Furthermore, while the women require something that affects their present life (their father's memory and their survival), the men invoke a hypothetical, vague, future and quite inaccurate case in order to provoke unrest.[12] Thus, they move the other men who happen to be most interested in maintaining the *status quo*, the heads of families, to take action.

It is unclear whether the men acted out of fear of the women themselves, the "democratic" procedure, or of Yahweh's changing the people's legislation in favor of women. Whatever the reason, men and women alike who have had to fight for their rights know very well that there are such drawbacks in their struggles.

The main characters in these two stories use power quite differently. Behind them stand the biblical writers/editors, who created or adapted this story. We must examine what ideology/ies are supported by this story. In fact, it is the

writers who fear the issues raised in the Gileadites' speech: the loss of land; women's rights; Moses' compliance with these; and Yahweh (the Eternal) changing Revelation.

The message at the very end of the book is that

> according to what Yahweh had commanded Moses, thus (*ken* again, earlier translated as "well/right") Zelophehad's daughters did. And Mahlah, Tirzah, and Hoglah, and Milcah, and Noah, Zelophehad's daughters, married their uncle's sons.[13]

They were married into the families of the sons of Manasseh, the son of Joseph, and their inheritance was upon the tribe of the family of their father. Still in the same breath, verse 13 closes the whole chapter:

> These are the commandments and the judgments (*mishpatim*), which Yahweh commanded by the hand of Moses unto the sons (children?) of Israel in the plains of Moab ...(Num 36:10–13, author's own translation).[14]

That is to say, ideologically the message is this: daughters may bring their concerns to the highest possible instances (Yahweh, the chief priest, the chief legislator, the whole assembly) and they might even get what they want. But (we? they?) the landholders are not going to let it out of our/their hands so easily. Thus, it is in the whole clan's best interests that women marry as closely to their immediate family as possible, as Yahweh commanded Moses.

Concluding remarks

I have dealt with this very complicated issue from my area of specialization, biblical studies. I have chosen one (of many) examples of biblical interpretation and I have looked at it with the question of power in mind.[15]

While mine is not the only possible interpretation, it is faithful to the texts and to this interpreter's context and story. These are the first two conditions that any biblical interpretation must take into account in order to be credible. Faithfulness to the text means, in my view, to make every possible effort to understand a text in (a) its original context by recourse to the historical-critical method; (b) to understand it from a literary point of view by trying to envision and appreciating its internal structure, its connections to the rest of the same

biblical book as well as the overall structure and to other texts; and (c) to glean as much as possible from the history of that text's interpretation as possible.

Faithfulness to my own context implies making explicit to myself and my readers where I stand and what the socioeconomic, political, gender, educational and other locations ("lenses") that determine my reading are.[16]

No interpretation is ever neutral, value free and universally valid as the smallest interpretive exercise within a group would already prove. Yet, it is very hard for most believers to accept that there is no such thing as the (Bible's) message, but one possible message, one historically most accurate message (time and geography will also determine what is "accurate"), one most meaningful message for me, at this time, etc.

When my reading meets my neighbor's reading, and then your reading, his reading and hers and so forth, something wonderful occurs. A multiplicity of meanings appear, some of them more readily apparent to me than others, depending on my "lenses." The texts themselves and their multiple interpretations enhance our understanding of them, affirm or dilute our opinions and create meanings previously unseen. The text becomes God's Word, for God always speaks to us mediated by human instruments. (Whether we read or not and the fact that we read the Bible in a particular language and culture are already human mediations conditioning our reading).

I advocate multiple meanings of a text. The above exercise with the three texts about Zelophehad's daughters has shown one reading, not the reading. It takes into account the concern for women's dignity and is aware that political and economic power, which in this text rests in the hands of landholders, manages to counteract even God's designs. Even worse, the interests of those in power can be presented as being God's will. It is a reading that recognizes signs of internal opposition (such as the hint that Moses' answer to the men was not Yahweh's).

In the light of this exercise, it should be clear that multiple (possible) readings do not mean that anything goes, although even the godliest of biblical texts can be used to support oppressive ideologies. It is the reading's effect that would validate it or not, but not for everyone, at all times.

Yet, why do we need to offer a universal, once and for all, immovable reading? After all, incarnation means that God chose to be present (and speak and act) at a certain time and place, subject to certain socioeconomic, political, religious, sexual and educational conditions. Incarnation, with all its limitations in terms of universality, proved to be the most effective way God chose to meet us. As

stated in the introduction, the question is how to learn again and again to live in Christ Jesus and leave aside those ways contrary to the gospel.

Notes

[1] *The Oxford Dictionary and Thesaurus*, American edition (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 1167.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 727.

[3] By this I do not mean that certain messages, such as God's love for creation, God's self-gift in Jesus Christ and God's rule over history, to name but a few, are denied or contradicted in the Bible. On the other hand, if we compare and contrast books such as Deuteronomy and Job, Ecclesiastes, Jonah or Ruth, or Paul's epistles and James or Hebrews, it is clear that they are different and challenge each other in significant ways.

[4] José Severino Croatto, "Las estructuras de poder en la Biblia. La recontextualización hermenéutica," in *Revista Bíblica* 37.2 (1975), pp. 115–128, here pp. 118–119.

[5] To say that daughters were left out of inheritance is to say that about half the population were left out. The idea upon which this system is based is that families exchange daughters, so that these move to their new location, their husband's family; the sons, in turn, take wives (= daughters) from other families and remain in and with the father's land. The control of economic means (the land and the sons' and daughters' labor) is an issue of power.

[6] In the Bible, I think of Lot's daughters (Gen 19), Shiphrah, Puah and the other midwives (Ex 1), the women who saved baby Moses (Ex 2), Mary visiting Elizabeth, both pregnant (Lk 1:39–56). In our times, Mothers and Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo (Argentina), Women Say No to War (USA). Most social movements are started and run by women, until men take over.

[7] Both would go together. The father's name would be lost without land, since there would be no children to carry on his name and keep his memory. But it is also the girls' guarantee, since being without a father and without property, they would not be able to bring anything into their marriage.

[8] The term used is *ken*, which has an affirmative meaning and is generally translated as "yes," "thus," "true," etc.

[9] Ulrike Bechmann in her Bible study on Zelophehad's daughters for the assembly of the International Council for the World Prayer Day (Swanwick, England, 2003).

[10] This chapter seems to be an addition, later than Numbers 27 and Joshua 17. If Joshua were later than Numbers 36, it would take into account the daughters' marriage and would probably have dealt with the land issue differently. For instance, their husbands would have been the ones claiming the land for them. Usually, public matters as this were dealt with among men. Trent C. Butler, *Word Biblical Commentary. Joshua* (Dallas: Word Inc., 1983, electronic version) on 17:3–4 (commentary) notes: "The Zelophehad tradition (17:3–4) has its roots in Numbers 27:l–7. Joshua has not preserved a true narrative structure. Rather, it represents a literary creation, taking the information from Numbers 27 and using it to demonstrate the faithful obedience of Joshua to the commandments of Moses, the theme which we have seen to be dominant in the book."

Conversely, Joshua does not contemplate Numbers 36 either. Discussing Numbers 36, Philip J. Budd, *Word Biblical Commentary. Numbers* (Dallas: Word Inc., 1998, electronic version) considers this chapter a later addition to the whole book: "It seems best to assume that the section is indeed a supplement or appendix to the completed book of Numbers (with the exception of v 13 which may have been the priestly author's own conclusion). Had the priestly author himself been responsible for vv 1–12 it is hard to see why he should have added it at the end of his book. Had the problem raised by the section been in his mind he would simply have worked the content of vv. 1–12 into Num 27:1–11." Note that chapter 36, a narrative, interrupts the laws started in 33:50. Also Bechmann deals with the three stories in this same order.

[11] Bechmann proposes a similar interpretation in terms of mediation between both parties, seeing Moses' answer to the men as a compromise between marrying into the family and marrying freely. They might marry whomever they choose, not from the immediate family (a compromise which the women, however, do not take, marrying their first cousins), but also not from any other tribe (a compromise in terms of the men's request).

[12] The Gileadites' argument (Num 36:4), that with the Jubilee they would lose their land definitely to other tribes, makes no sense at all in light of what we know of this redistribution mechanism.

[13] Dennis T. Olson, "Negotiating Boundaries. The Old and New Generations and the Theology of Numbers," in *Interpretation* 51 (1997), p. 236, sees in these chapters "a literary frame that holds together the texts related to the new generation"; a generation that will find itself between "respect for tradition coupled with the continued need for negotiation."

[14] There might, of course, have been also such practical reason as the end of the manuscript, where it would have been easier to make "corrections" by adding texts. This possibility notwithstanding, the writers have succeeded in closing the text with the daughters' compliance to a "safer" course of action.

[15] Other examples in Alice Bach, "With a Song in Her Heart: Listening to Scholars Listening for Miriam," in Athalya Brenner, *A Feminist Companion from Exodus to Deuteronomy* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), pp. 243–254; Norman K. Gottwald, "Social Class as an Analytic and Hermeneutical Category in Biblical Studies," in *Journal of Biblical Literature* 112/1 (1993), pp. 3–22.

[16] I have not used much space on this, but at least I have made explicit my understanding of power and ideologies.

Interpreting the Bible in the Context of Apartheid and Beyond: An African Perspective

Elelwani B. Farisani

Introduction

This article will examine in three stages the role of biblical interpretation in the light of certain power relations. First, we will discuss how uncritical and literal interpretations of Scripture have been used by the powerful further to exclude, oppress and sideline the powerless in South Africa. Second, a biblical interpretation, which may serve as a safeguard against our ambitious ideological needs will be presented. Finally, we will suggest ways to interpret the Bible that are less likely to lend themselves to abuse by the powerful.

The abuse of power in the interpretation of Scripture

The Bible is open to abuse by the powerful and we have allowed the powers and principalities of both secular and spiritual oppression to usurp its spirit and to use it to legitimize such issues as economic and environmental exploitation, racism, sexism, etc.[1] In the following, we will show to what extent the authority of the Bible can be undermined, eroded and even hijacked.

Ethnicity: an abuse of Scripture

In Africa, Scripture has been abused to justify ethnicity. While this article does not offer an exhaustive and detailed analysis of how this has occurred, a few instances of such abuse will be highlighted.

First, Scripture has been abused to justify the slave trade. It is common knowledge that the centuries-long slave trade has contributed to the various

ethnic separations on the African continent. Nambala explains, that

> Here I refer to both imposition of plantation slavery in Africa and commercial overseas slaving by Europeans, Americans and Arabs. The effect of the slave trade was devastating to Africa with regard to its population as well as to its social mobility and development.[2]

Biblical texts such as Philemon and 1 Corinthians 7:21–24 have been used to justify slavery in Africa and the USA. The literal use of these texts to justify slavery and its negative consequences is unfair since it fails to take into consideration the religious, economic and political conditions out of which these two biblical texts emerged.

Second, ethnicity has been used to sow division and conflict. Maimela argues that in Africa, ethnic diversity has been used by "politicians to destructive ends."[3] These include "tribal or ethnic conflicts which have given rise to civil wars, conflict, refugees and destruction of African society."[4] Maimela reminds us that the advocates of apartheid used Scripture to justify their ideology:

> Their favored text was the story of the Tower of Babel [Gen 11:1–8] which tells us of the confusion of tongues. It was deduced from the story that it is God's will that different races and nations should be separated to live far from each other. As the will of God, this separation was not revoked in Christ's reconciliating work. Hence the Acts of Apostles [Acts 2:4] narrates the speaking of different tongues at the Pentecost the difference being only that the spirit enabled different races to hear one another.[5]

Here, we see Scripture (Gen 11:1–8; Acts 2:4) being abused in order to justify the separation of people according to their ethnic or racial origins. Maimela explains that in South Africa, "the political ideology of apartheid was implemented precisely to exploit the reality of ethnic diversity to further the socio-economic and political interests of the dominant Whites."[6]

Sadly, certain independent governments in Africa (e.g., Rwanda, Sudan, etc.) have continued the ethnic power games started by colonialism. These parties, argues de Jong,[7] rely on an ethnic power base and exploit and encourage interethnic conflicts.

The oppression of women

Texts such as 1 Corinthians 7, 11:2–6; 14:33b–36; Colossians 3:18; Ephesians 5:22–23 and 1 Timothy 2:11–15 have been used to oppress women in church and society.

Throughout history, Ayanga reminds us, religion has sanctioned and sanctified the oppression of women as a God-given doctrine that must not be challenged through the interpretation of Scripture. Thus, certain biblical interpretation confined women to a particular social status.[8]

Culture and religion play a role in the oppression of women. One could argue that they impinge on women's participation in church and political leadership. In other words, biblical interpretation can be used as a tool either to enhance or to curtail women's participation in religious or political processes. Religious beliefs restrict leadership to men thereby legitimizing male domination in religious and political leadership roles.[9] Islam and Christianity could be cited as religions whose doctrinal imperatives legitimize male domination (Qur'an, 4:34; Eph 5:22–23; 1 Tim 2:11–12; 1 Cor 14:34–35; Col 3:18).[10] Culture and religion have supported male dominance which has obviously contributed to the abuse of women.

Prosperity gospel

In Africa, some churches have propagated a theology of prosperity. Biblical texts that display Deuteronomistic inclinations advocating retribution are employed here. Given that many factors contribute to the material conditions of Christians in Africa, the continual use of biblical texts to explain conditions of poverty and affluence is far too simplistic. Moreover, Jesus Christ rejected the retributive explanations for the physical conditions of those he healed (Jn 9:1–3).

The Dutch Reformed Church's use of Scripture to support apartheid ideology

The Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) in South Africa has played a significant role in providing a theological backing for apartheid policies. Their initial problem was "to recognize black people as equals--and here you have a false superiority complex which relegated white people to a higher class and black people to a

lower class."[11] In fact, what used to be discussed by Whites during the time of the so-called Great Trek was whether or not Blacks had a soul. The following two examples illustrate this point. First, after his baptism, Bentura Visser, the so-called first black convert to Christianity in South Africa, was not allowed to partake in Holy Communion with white people. In other words, although Bentura Visser had been baptized into the Christian faith, the DRF sought theological justification for excluding him from partaking in Holy Communion with white Christians. Second, at the time of the Great Trek, Anna Steenkamp opposed the repealing of the slave laws because she felt that this would be contrary to "God's will and God's intentions for humankind."[12]

Needless to mention, the DRC helped the Nationalist Party to win the 1948 elections and contributed toward the coming into force of such laws as the Separate Amenities Act,[13] Population Registration Act[14] and the Land Acts.[15] Moreover, it played a key role in the Broederbond and its moderator cooperated with the apartheid government for many years. Even the church was divided into Colored, African, Asiatic and White.

Theology was used to divide people into lower and upper classes. As they moved from the Cape into the interior, Afrikaners regarded themselves as the chosen people. They identified with the children of Israel moving from Egypt into Canaan and misinterpreted the Bible by claiming that if they killed black people is was just like when the Israelites were supposedly killing the Canaanites.

Furthermore, the DRC misinterpreted several biblical texts, such as the story of creation and the Tower of Babel (Gen 11:1–8), to support racial oppression and segregation. They argued that when creating human beings, God created Whites first, then the devil and later on Blacks. Although there was no biblical basis for such an order of creation, Scripture was deliberately misinterpreted to justify an ideology, i.e., apartheid.

Although the DRC was the main driving force behind apartheid, certain churches chose to remain neutral. There were those that actively supported apartheid ideology while others actively opposed it. While certain individuals within the Lutheran churches in South Africa were at the forefront of the struggle against apartheid, the churches on the whole remained neutral or engaged in passive resistance.

Curse theology on Blacks

Certain biblical texts (Gen 3:16, 9:18–27) have been used to justify the oppres-

sion of women and Blacks by arguing that they have been cursed since biblical times. It has been argued that in Genesis 3:16, women are "cursed" because they are blamed for having caused sin to enter into the world. According to racist ideology, Blacks are subject to the "curse" of Ham (actually, the curse of Canaan, Ham's progeny) placed on them because of Ham's sin against Noah, for which Noah cursed him (Gen. 9:25–27).

In both cases, in terms of the religious and ideological justification of racial and sexist oppression, Blacks and women are cursed from birth based on the "original sin" of some ancestor of the same sex or race. In both cases, the curse is continuous, affecting all those of the same gender or race. It is used to justify the subordination of women and Blacks. In the case of women, "your husband…shall rule over you"; in the case of Blacks, "lowest of slaves shall he be to his brothers…let Canaan be his slave."[16]

From this racist and sexist perspective, black women have to bear a particular burden since they have upon them both the "curse of women" and the "curse of Ham."[17]

Romans 13 and apartheid

Romans 13:1–7 is one of the famous passages that was abused during the heyday of apartheid rule in South Africa.

> Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Do you wish to have no fear of the authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive its approval; for it is God's servant for your good. But if you do what is wrong, you should be afraid, for the authority does not bear the sword in vain! It is the servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore one must be subject, not only because of wrath but also because of conscience. For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, busy with this very thing. Pay to all what is due them—taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due (Rom 13:1–7).

Romans 13 urges citizens to be subject to the government of the day as instituted

by God and was used during the days of apartheid to silence black people into accepting the apartheid government's policy of racial oppression and segregation as being ordained and sanctioned by God. It was argued that opposing the South African government was tantamount to opposing God who gave the government authority to rule over all South Africans. All those who opposed the government were branded Communists and terrorists wanting to wage a total onslaught on the Christian government and to substitute it with a Communist dictatorship. This interpretation led to torture, detention without trial and the loss of many innocent lives. The text was not only used by politicians to silence those who opposed racial segregation, but also by certain church leaders and theologians who urged Christians not to be involved in politics that opposed government policies.

Biblical interpretation through safeguarding the authority of the Bible

We have seen how biblical interpretation has been used or abused by the powerful in order to oppress the less powerful. We will show how such abuse could be avoided, and will highlight how Scripture can be used in an inclusive way in matters of women's liberation and ethnicity.

The role of the text in strengthening ethnicity

Within a community, biblical texts can and should be critically appropriated to affirm cultural diversity as a positive sign of God's creation. Thus, in order effectively to avoid the trap of abusing Scripture to foment ethnic conflicts, the context in which a particular Scripture is situated has to be critically analyzed. A straightforward reading of any biblical text, without critical analysis of the world that produced or shaped the ideology prevalent in the text, is dangerous in that it perpetuates rather than solves conflict between the powerful and the powerless in any community.[18]

Jonathan Dyck underscores this contention in arguing that

> There is a danger, however, in taking ideologies of identity at face value without considering the social complexity of the concept of identity, without taking into consideration that ideologies of identity are the point at which the beliefs of the

> people are taken hold of for the purpose of power.[19]

Bearing in mind that ethnic categories within Scripture have been used by certain scholars and politicians to "manipulate and to rule," careful biblical interpretation should also encourage the use of Scripture as a "mode of resistance" to ethnic conflict.[20]

I have argued elsewhere for a critical analysis of this particular ideology.[21] Careful biblical interpretation will have to take seriously the fact that each and every text in the Bible is the product of its sociohistorical context. In order effectively to use any text in a non-oppressive/inclusive way in Africa, without it further oppressing and silencing the already silenced and marginalized poor, the text's ideology has to be subjected to rigorous critical analysis, in order to de-ideologize it.

Whereas certain individuals have fuelled ethnicity in Africa through their careless interpretation of Scripture, the hope remains that the church and theologians use biblical texts critically, namely in a way that will highlight the strengths of ethnicity and encourage unity in diversity within the community.

The role of the church in ethnic issues

According to Nambala,[22] the fact that many people affected by ethnic conflict are church members demands that the church play a pivotal role in encouraging coexistence and harmony among different ethnic groups. Thus, the church will have to insist that there is nothing wrong with ethnicity *per se*, but that the "polarizing and destructive forms of ethnicity"[23] constitute the problem.

Accordingly, Birri[24] argues that we have to fight against any form of ethnic conflict with the "gospel of love both in the church and in the society."[25] At the same time, Birri elaborates that ethnicity could become a means through which the gospel is witnessed and culture serves the cause of Christ:

> The variety of spiritual gifts, opportunities, backgrounds, convictions, as well as the various languages and cultures, are by virtue of the reconciliation in Christ, opportunities for mutual service and enrichment.[26]

We can identify seven steps that the church should take in order to address

ethnicity:

1) Balcomb[27] suggests that ethnicity should be made a subject of teaching and preaching. The church should teach that through baptism all members receive a new identity, one that is totally different from that of their ethnic group or family.[28] In this regard, the church should teach that Christians belong to the universal "family of God"—the church—that transcends tribal and family allegiances.

> Ordination places priests and bishops at the service of all families and all ethnic groups, and … must be ready to welcome the growing number of ethnic outsiders who are appointed as bishops and parish priests.[29]

2) The church should promote occasions where different ethnic groups meet through celebration.

> Activities of this kind will offer each ethnic group a chance of presenting their own customs, jokes, music and wisdom to enhance mutual knowledge, appreciation and tolerance.[30]

3) Lanigan[31] suggests that the church should encourage both multi- and monocultural liturgies in its worship services.

4) The church will have to review its relations with other faiths. Rather than demonstrating passive tolerance, it will have to engage in "constant, critical and creative dialogue with" other faiths, especially in situations where "religion is used in ethnic conflicts."[32]

5) According to Balcomb, the "stereotypes that exist in society between people of different groups"[33] need to be undermined. He further proposes that this could be effected through prayer, teaching, worship, drama, story telling and deliberate confrontation in the spirit of unconditional acceptance.

6) Balcomb infers that an atmosphere needs to be created in the church where the members feel a sense of belonging and self-esteem. He argues that, "If the church itself can provide these things then there will be no need for people to be seeking them in their ethnic identities."[34]

7) Maimela argues that God's gifts of racial and cultural diversity should be seen as a source of strength and enrichment. He cites the post-1994 situation in South Africa as a way of accommodating all ethnic groups, arguing that

> it was precisely the acceptance of diversity which forced politicians to seek a compromise by creating a federal constitution which promotes the desolution of power to the nine regions. Therefore, diversity which has resulted in a federal constitution has provided a check on the central government and should be seen as supportive to the democratic change in South Africa.[35]

Galatians 3:27–28 as a basis for gender equality

In Galatians 3:27–28, Paul argues convincingly for equality in the Galatian Christian community. Membership in this new community does not depend on one's gender, social status or ethnic ties and effectively eliminates all discrimination based on gender and ethnicity. This text can be used to counter gender, ethnic and race stereotypes within a believing community.[36] Mercy Oduyoye contends persuasively that just as Galatians 3:27–28 has been used to counter slavery and racism in the past, it should also be used to combat sexism today. She states that

> we are baptized into Christ as persons, irrespective of our social status, so that just as the humanity of the male is taken into the Christ so is the humanity of the female. There is no sexual distinction in the Trinity, but qualities labeled feminine and masculine are all manifested in Christ Jesus who is the image par excellence of God.[37]

Following Schüssler Fiorenza, Sue Rakoczy has argued convincingly that Galatians 3:28

> denied all male religious prerogatives in the Christian community based on gender roles and since this egalitarian Christian self-understanding did away with all male privileges of religion, class and caste, it allowed not only gentiles and slaves but also women to exercise leadership functions within the missionary movement.[38]

Demetrius Williams also maintains that Galatians 3:28 be used as a basis for

gender equality. In this book, Williams challenges the sexist practices of the African American churches, and argues that Galatians 3:28 can serve as a liberative paradigm for interpreting sexism in the African American context. Thus he states that

> this book seeks to recover Gal 3:28 as a model of liberation that can meet the challenges of the historical quest for freedom in the African American religious tradition, especially sexism, which continues to prevail in many African American churches and religious institutions, restricting women's opportunities for leadership.[39]

He examines sexism from the exegetical, historical and theological perspectives. Part one of his book, covering the first two chapters, explores the early Christian experience and Scripture. In chapter 1, Williams examines Jesus' and Paul's gospel messages using current feminist-critical hermeneutics and sociohistorical analyses of biblical culture and texts. Thus he explores how Jesus' and Paul's teachings are counter-hegemonic and entail not only what he calls the "salvation of souls," but also a critique of their followers'—Jews and Gentiles—current social and political conditions under Roman hegemony. Chapter 2 applies traditional historical literary analysis to engage exegetically the prohibitions in 1 Corinthians 14:33b–36 (a first-century Pauline letter) and to trace their connection to 1 Timothy 2:11–15 (a second-century Deutero-Pauline letter written a generation later in the Pauline tradition). Thus, he traces the effective role of Galatians 3:28 in early church history and shows how, toward the end of the first century CE, this egalitarian vision was curtailed a generation later within the Early Church.

Part two focuses on the African American religious experience and the appropriation of Scripture. Chapter 3 assesses how Galatians 3:28 and other passages were used to support the principle of "equality of all people before God," which functioned not only as an impetus to found independent black congregations, but also as a prophetic principle to critique American slavery and racism. Chapter 4 recognizes that African American religious tradition did not use the same courage and vigor seen during the days of slavery and racism when it came to addressing contemporary issues related to gender. Williams maintains that the principle of "the equality of all people before God" can and must be turned inward by African American churches in order self-critically to evaluate their own attitudes and practices with respect to leadership roles for women.

The third part deals with African American women's religious experience and the witness of Scripture. Chapter 5 focuses on current feminist, womanist and black theological perspectives and posits that all forms of oppression—race, class, and gender—are interrelated. As Williams puts it, "If the African American religious tradition has argued against race and class oppression, it must also challenge gender oppression and discrimination."[40]

Chapter 6 explores how several early and contemporary African American women have argued for the right of women to preach, act as pastors and hold leadership roles according to their particular calling.

Williams' book is highly relevant with regard to the biblical interpretation of power relations. While it points out the disadvantages of exclusive/oppressive biblical interpretation, it offers an alternative to an abusive interpretation of the Bible. Moreover, it challenges Christians to use their experience and traditions to fight against the oppression of women.

Inclusive interpretation of Scripture

Careful biblical interpretation must seek to reinstate women, as Jesus Christ did, to their full status as "total persons," whole and worthy, being created in the image of God, and as fully accepted members of the body of Christ.[41]

Our interpretation of Scripture will have to draw on such theological resources as the incarnation of Jesus Christ if it is to impact the quest for women's liberation. It will have to declare that God's love for humanity was revealed in Jesus Christ, and that Jesus Christ came to the world as a human being to restore humanity to new life. This includes male, female and the whole of creation.

Thus, a non-abusive biblical interpretation should declare that

> Through Jesus an intimate relationship was established between God and humanity (Eph 5). By Jesus's incarnation, women and men were freed from servitude to sin and death, and human life was fully divinized.[42]

In addition, Scripture should be interpreted in such a way that it equips women to liberate themselves from merely accepting the status society attributes to them. In this regard, attitudes must be changed in accordance with the message of Christ, that new wine cannot be put in old wineskins. The church should be a living example of a free community of women and men, a community truly

set free in Christ.

Finally, certain texts (Gal 3:28; Neh 6:1–14) could be used to undermine typical stereotypes of women prevalent in Africa today. These texts could serve as a theological inspiration against the abuse of women, especially if read "against the grain." If carefully read, Noadiah (Neh 6:1-14) could serve as a source of inspiration for many women who are abused, marginalized and silenced. Noadiah refused to be silenced by Nehemiah's oppressive ideology, one which excluded the *am haaretz* from the renewal and reconstruction of the postexilic community. We heard that Noadiah, a prophetess from among the *am haaretz* protested against Nehemiah's exclusive measures against the *am haaretz*. Noadiah refused to be silenced or co-opted into structures which aimed further to oppress and marginalize her. Careful biblical interpretation should draw on sociological analysis in order to equip women to challenge and dismantle structures, be they theological or otherwise, aimed at perpetuating their subjugation and oppression.[43]

Way forward

Biblical interpretation

The purpose of biblical interpretation is to render the meaning and message of biblical writings to the reader.[44] The challenge today is to ensure that our interpretation is not aimed at sidelining, excluding or suppressing the views and aspirations of those less powerful than we are.

In order to avoid biblical interpretation that fuels ethnic conflicts, oppresses women and the less powerful, we will need to ensure that each part of the Bible is interpreted in its context. That means not only its immediate verbal context, but the wider context of time, place and human situation to which it belongs.[45] This will ensure that a literal reading of the text is avoided.

Biblical interpretation takes into account how each part of the Bible contributes to the purpose of the Bible as a whole. Since the Bible records God's Word to human beings and their response to God, contains "all things necessary for salvation" and constitutes the church's "rule of faith and life," we look for a unity throughout the volume so that each part can be interpreted in the light of the whole.[46]

We may look for some unifying theme or principle of interpretation.[47] This

can safeguard against the abuse of Scripture for our selfish ideological power games.

In traditional Jewish interpretation of the Hebrew Scriptures, this unifying principle was found in the Law, understood in accordance with the teaching of the great rabbinical schools. The prophets and writings were treated largely as commentaries on the Law.[48]

Christ is the unifying principle in the biblical interpretation of the New Testament. This principle is not applied mechanically, but in such a way that it underlines the historical and progressive nature of biblical revelation. The apostolic church derived this creative principle of interpretation from Christ himself.

A unifying theme, based on solid exegetical study taking into account the sociohistorical context of the text will go a long way toward avoiding the literal use of the text, which has caused untold harm and inflicted suffering on the less powerful.

Concluding remarks

Life sustaining Bible reading involves several considerations in addition to the study of the historical and literary aspects of the texts. These include:

- ***Drawing upon personal experience.*** We should always be aware that biblical texts can either be abused to oppress, or used to liberate and empower the oppressed or less powerful. We, in South Africa, have experienced this personally.

- ***Reading in light of social context.*** Several challenges, including poverty, reconciliation, transformation, HIV/AIDS, women's oppression, etc., face the post-apartheid South African context today. My interpretation of the biblical text would certainly have a bearing on how to address these and similar challenges in my context.

- ***Responding to an interpretative community.*** Theology should not be done in a vacuum, detached from one's faith community. It is an important aspect of my ministry that my theology is practiced, implemented or shaped by my faith community. This happens when I preach, conduct

Bible studies or workshops in the local congregation, parish, diocese or at church level. In most of these encounters my biblical interpretation is challenged, shaped or renewed by the community I interact with.

I have suggested a critical, sociohistorically and ideologically aware reading of the Bible as a resource for biblical interpretation, and have warned against an uncritical reading that does not engage profoundly with the text. An uncritical reading tends further to oppress and sideline the poor and marginalized by appropriating the biblical text as the revealed Word of God without taking into consideration its religious, political and socioeconomic contexts. Instead of empowering the poor and marginalized, an uncritical reading disempowers and weakens them. Such an uncritical reading is dangerous, and should not be left unchallenged.[49] Moreover, I have proposed that certain exclusive and oppressive texts be interpreted "against the grain."

Notes

[1] John A. Buehrens, *Understanding the Bible: An Introduction for Skeptics, Seekers and Religious Liberals* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003), pp. 3–4; Gerald O. West, "Mapping African Biblical Interpretation: a Tentative Sketch," in Gerald O. West, and Musa Dube (eds), *The Bible in Africa: Transactions, Trajectories and Trends* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2000), pp. 29–53.

[2] S. V. V. Nambala, "Ethnicity and the Church in Africa," in I. Gobena (ed.), *Church, Culture and Ethnicity in Present Ethiopia* (Addis Ababa: Mekane Yesus, 1997), p. 30; See also Albert de Jong, *Ethnicity: Blessing or Culture* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications, 1999), p. 4.

[3] *Cf.* O. Oddland, "Revisiting the Cultural Anthropological Concepts of Culture and Ethnicity: An Introduction to the Present Cultural Diversities in EECMY," in Gobena, *op. cit.* (note 2), p. 63; de Jong, *op. cit.* (note 2), p. 5; E. B. Farisani, "Ethnicity in Ezra-Nehemiah," in *Theologia Viatorum 28/1* (2004), p. 44.

[4] Simon Maimela, "Cultural and Ethnic Diversity in Promotion of Democratic Change," in J. N. K. Mugambi (ed.), *Democracy and Development in Africa. The Role of the Churches* (Nairobi: All Africa Conference of Churches, 1997), p. 118; see also F. Pierli *et al*., "Ethnicity and Human Development. The Missing Link," in Gobena, *op. cit.* (note 2), p. 36.

[5] Maimela, *ibid.*

[6] *Ibid.*

[7] de Jong, *op. cit.* (note 2), p. 28.

[8] H. O. Ayanga, "Liberation of the African Woman," in Mary N. Getui and Emmanuel A. Obeng, *Theology of Reconstruction* (Nairobi: Acton, 1999), p. 91; Anne Nasimiyu-Wasike, "Polygamy: A Feminist Critique," in Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro (eds), *The Will to Arise: Women, Tradition, and the Church in Africa* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992), p. 103; see R. Ammah, "Paradise Lies at the Feet of Muslim Women," in Oduyoye and Kanyoro, *ibid.*, pp. 83–84.

[9] N. K. Maina, "Muslim Women and Politics in Kenya," in Getui and Obeng, *ibid.*, p. 136; Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa: African Women & Patriarchy* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995), p. 15.

[10] Maina, *ibid.*, p. 137; Oduyoye, *op. cit.* (note 8), p. 101; Kanyoro and Oduyoye, *op. cit.* (note 8), pp.

2ff; Ammah, *op. cit.* (note 8), pp. 83–4; Lloyda Fanusie, "Sexuality and Women in African Culture," in Oduyoye and Kanyoro, *op. cit.* (note 8), pp. 140ff.

[11] T. S. Farisani, *Who are the Poor and the Wicked in our Context Today? An Interview with Farisani* (1990), unpublished manuscript.

[12] *Ibid.*, p. 6.

[13] This act separated the use of public facilities such as toilets, swimming pools, beaches, buses, parks, etc., on a racial basis.

[14] This act provided for a separate census, registration, etc., based on race.

[15] The Land Acts of 1913 and 1956 allocated eighty percent of the land to twenty percent of the population (Whites) and only twenty percent of the land was left for eighty percent of the population (Blacks).

[16] Demetrius K. Williams, *The End to this Strife. The Politics of Gender in African American Churches* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), p. 155.

[17] *Ibid.*

[18] Farisani, *op. cit.* (note 3), p. 44.

[19] Jonathan Dyck, "The Ideology of Identity in Chronicles," in Mark G. Brett, *Ethnicity and the Bible. Biblical Interpretation Series 19* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1996), p. 116.

[20] Brett, *op. cit.* (note 19), p. 8.

[21] Farisani, *op. cit.* (note 3), p. 44.

[22] Nambala, *op. cit.* (note 2), p. 33.

[23] See also Mary N. Getui, "At Variance but in Harmony," in de Jong, *op. cit.* (note 2), pp. 10ff; P. Gichure, "Ethnicity and Enculturation: Challenges and Promises," in *ibid.*, pp. 25ff.

[24] Debella Birri, "EECMY and Cultural Diversities: Gifts to Enrich the Witness of the Church," in

Gobena, *op. cit.* (note 2), p. 80.

[25] Aylward Shorter, "The Curse of Ethnocentricism and the African Church," in de Jong, *op. cit.* (note 2), pp. 28ff.

[26] Birri, *op. cit.* (note 24).

[27] Anthony Balcomb, *Ethnicity, the Bible and the African Church: The Problems and some Possible Solutions.* Unpublished paper presented at a conference on ethnicity and the church in Africa, Kinshasa, September 1996.

[28] Shorter, *op. cit.* (note 25), p. 28.

[29] *Ibid.*, p. 29.

[30] Pierli, *op. cit.* (note 4), p. 51.

[31] P. Lanigan, "Abba/Baba/Ete/Father/Nne …: The Challenges of Inculturation in Multicultural Parish Liturgies," in de Jong, *op. cit.* (note 2), p. 59.

[32] de Jong, *op. cit.* (note 2), p. 6.

[33] Balcomb, *op. cit.* (note 27).

[34] *Ibid.*

[35] Maimela, *op. cit.* (note 4), p. 118.

[36] Elelwani B. Farisani, "The Use of Galatians 3:28 in Promoting Gender Equality," in *Journal of Constructive Theology* (July 2006).

[37] Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Hearing and Knowing: Theological Reflections on Christianity in Africa* (Acton: Nairobi, 2000), p. 137.

[38] Susan Rakoczy, *In Her Name: Women Doing Theology* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster, 2004), p. 202.

[39] Williams, *op. cit.* (note 16), pp. 5ff.

[40] *Ibid.* p. 8.

[41] Daisy N. Nwachuku, "The Christian Widow in African Culture," in Oduyoye and Kanyoro, *op. cit.* (note 8), p. 73.

[42] Anne Nasimiyu-Wasike, "Polygamy: A Feminist Critique," in Oduyoye and Kanyoro, *op. cit.* (note 8), p. 115.

[43] Elelwani B. Farisani, "The Use of Ezra-Nehemiah in a Quest for an African Theology of Reconstruction," in *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 116 (July 2003), pp. 27–50.

[44] F. F. Bruce "Interpretation, Biblical," in D. R. W. Wood, A. R. Millard, J. I. Packer, D. J. Wiseman, I. Howard Marshall (eds), *New Bible Dictionary* (Downers Grove/Leicester: InterVarsity, 1996), pp. 509–510.

[45] *Ibid.*

[46] *Ibid*

[47] Bruce, *op. cit.* (note 44); Ellen Rowse Spero, "Unitarian Universalism and the Bible." A sermon by the Reverend Ellen Rowse Spero. First Parish Unitarian Universalist Church, Chelmsford, Massachusetts, October 17, 2004, unpublished manuscript.

[48] Bruce, *op. cit.* (note 47), 1996.

[49] Farisani, *op. cit.* (note 43).

Comments on Chapter V: Interpreting the Bible as a Critical Process: The Role of Power

It is no coincidence that the Latin American and South African participants chose to address this topic. Their contexts have a long history of biblical texts having been misused to legitimize oppressive power. How can this be prevented? The interpretative challenge is compounded by the fact that texts are not only misused in such contexts as apartheid, but in themselves reflect power dynamics and may provide a basis for buttressing and supporting a pervasive system of oppressive non-egalitarian relations. Romans 13 is a case in point. On the other hand, it sometimes is difficult clearly to ascertain the extent to which a biblical text is in itself oppressive. In his exposition of Nehemiah 6:1–14, Elelwani Farisani characterizes Nehemiah's ideology as oppressive. Diane Jacobson, a Hebrew Bible scholar, agrees with the qualification that it was indeed exclusive, but that other aspects of it were not.

This raises the question of how and on what basis to critique such texts. In terms of gender relations, for instance, one may use Galatians 3:28 over against texts which lend support to the inferiority and subjugation of women. Yet, given the disparity of biblical texts, what allows us to consider Galatians 3:28 as the hermeneutical criterion? Don't our contexts, interests and "ideologies" shape our perception of the Scripture we claim to interpret rather than to manipulate for our own ends? One may argue that radical love shows forth Christ, and that texts need to be viewed in this light. Nonetheless, within the Lutheran tradition, such a criterion tends to be blunted from a two-kingdoms perspective, according to which radical love would apply within the Christian faith community, but not within the worldly community subject to the rule of law (Rom 13).

The group also addressed the sensitive question in how far also the powerless might misuse biblical texts. Or, in principle, do the self-serving interests of the powerless have to be principally recognized in the process of biblical interpretation? What does meaningful interpretation mean? Is it meaningful

to the extent that it supports our own ideology? Or, is the text allowed to go against the grain? In how far can biblical texts prove to be critical of the liberation struggle itself? These and similar questions need to be kept in mind lest the quest for liberation lay claim to legitimacy and exempt itself from the Bible's critical potential.

An interesting hermeneutical rule was formulated: If our reading of a text supports our own power, then read it again. This can provide an antidote to a kind of prooftexting that simply reinforces our own biases.

Chapter VI:
Listening to the Bible in Different Ways

Experience and Expertise in Understanding the Bible: Responsive and Responsible Readings

Márta Cserháti

> Man's [sic] ontological vocation is to be a subject who acts upon and transforms his world, and in so doing moves toward ever new possibilities of fuller and richer life individually and collectively.
>
> Every human being, no matter how "ignorant" or submerged in the culture of silence he or she may be, is capable of looking critically at the world in a dialogical encounter with others.
>
> Provided with proper tools for this encounter, the individual can gradually perceive personal and social reality as well as the contradictions in it, become conscious of his or her own perception of that reality, and deal critically with it.[1]

In their book, *Telling the Truth About History*, Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt and Margaret Jacob ponder the question how historians can best serve their community with their specialized knowledge by "pitting the demands for stories that build solidarity against open-ended scholarly inquiry that can trample on cherished illusions." They argue that a deep-seated tension exists between two basic human needs: the yearning "for a self-affirming past, even if distortive, or the liberation, however painful, that comes from grappling with a more complex, accurate account."[2]

The same dilemma characterizes the work of biblical scholars and theologians, who desire to help communities responsibly to interpret biblical texts. While the very identity and self-definition of communities are at stake, scholars are also accountable to the generally accepted standards of scholarly inquiry, viz. a suspension of personal or communal interests when assessing the evidence and reconstructing the biblical past. In a sense, critical exegetes are also accountable to others outside the religious community, namely all those who have been directly or indirectly affected, or even harmed by one-sided or

irresponsible interpretations of the Bible.[3]

These brief introductory remarks suffice to show that the relationship between lay and scholarly readings of the Bible is fraught with tensions. Churchgoers frequently read their Bible without reference to scholarly interpretations. The reasons for this may vary and include: wariness of unnecessary complications; past experience of outrageous interpretations; alienation from certain scholarly methods because of their perceived irrelevance; suspicion of modernist approaches to sacred texts and traditions; and isolation of the church and academia.

Sometimes, lay and scholarly readers may even be at cross-purposes. The nonexpert's interest is primarily existential. They want to draw usable and sustaining information from the Bible that can be directly related to their everyday lives. Expert interpreters are trained to strive for objectivity and detachment in their analysis of texts. They might sometimes even entertain illusions of complete neutrality. If they are practitioners of the historical-critical method, they are also trained to emphasize the distance separating the historical world of the Bible from our contemporary reality. As a result of this impasse, neither side can appropriate the advantages of the other's point of view and there is no corrective to the one-sidedness of either lay or scholarly readings.

In what follows, I shall try to list what I think are the most important ways the two communities could mutually challenge and enrich their respective interpretations.

Engagement

Elelwani's article and our discussion in Warsaw made it clear how much work has been done in Africa with respect to the involvement of the "ordinary" reader (i.e., contextual Bible studies; reflecting critically on the (hidden) agenda that "trained" readers might bring to the process; de-ideologizing oppressive texts). In Hungary, this level of attention to people's needs has traditionally characterized Bible reading only within the context of small, often unorthodox, circles or youth groups. As a rule, the agenda has been set by spiritual or official leaders, who similarly have provided authoritative answers. We decided to put "ordinary" in quotation marks, because in our view there are in fact only "extraordinary"

Direct and personal engagement with biblical texts and a willingness to enter the biblical world usually characterize the lay reader's approach to the Bible. This is vividly illustrated by the story of a young Hungarian Roma woman, the only educated person in her original community, who took the difficult decision to return to her own village as a teacher. She likened here decision to that of Moses who, despite being among the most privileged in Egypt, accepted the challenge to lead a slave people out of bondage.

While such direct identification with a biblical story might be quite rare, all nonexpert readers of the Bible (unless they are told otherwise)[4] read the texts in order to some extent to make sense of their own experiences. Instead of looking at the Bible as a collection of doctrinal prooftexts, "ordinary" people regard it as their spiritual ancestors' record of past experience of and with God. Since reading the Bible usually takes place in the context of a faith community, it is essential that figures of authority respect the believer's actual experience and provide the space and opportunity for voicing questions, problems and even dissent to traditional or official interpretations of the Bible.

Elelwani observed that the agenda the "ordinary reader" brings to the Bible is survival. Most people turn to the Bible for existential guidance, even if survival might mean different things in different contexts.

I recall a conversation between a young Lutheran pastor, newly arrived in Budapest, and an old lady in a small ethnic German village concerning what the Bible teaches about life after death. Even in a community that respects learning, the old lady, who had experienced war, the deportation of most of the village people after the war and three years in a Soviet forced labor camp, could say with conviction, No, Reverend, you are wrong. (This, incidentally, signaled the start of a beautiful friendship between the two of them.)

Scholars typically try to avoid subjectivity or the intrusion of personal interest in their research. Their training sensitizes them to the historicity of the documents they study as well as the distance, even chasm (Lessing's "ugly ditch") separating biblical times from ours. Sometimes the necessary objectivity and self-discipline of scholarly work are confused with neutrality and disinterestedness, as if the scholar were not historically and socially conditioned, and could observe the Bible from a universally valid vantage point, unaffected

by everyday concerns. This "scientific" neutrality may even be viewed as the hallmark of genuine scholarship, while approaches that openly advocate the cause of certain groups (e.g., liberation and feminist theologies) are disparaged for their ideological nature. The sometimes clearly partisan nature of much academic scholarship shows that the real question is not "whether theology is neutral or the theologian is uncommitted, but *to* ***which cause*** theology is partisan and the theologian engaged."[5] The problem of personal interest is only a problem if the interpreter claims to have no interest at all. The more honest and precise scholars are about their own engagement, "the better chance there is that our conversation ... will produce not just scholarly smoke, but intellectual fire and human warmth."[6]

In addition, it is arguably the nature of the biblical texts themselves that resists disinterested study, because they themselves are committed to a certain vision. "Can a text that articulates the importance of care for the alien, the orphan and the widow be effectively engaged by persons who adopt a neutral or disengaged position with regard to society's marginal?"[7] Biblical texts are primarily concerned with such relational issues as the relationships between God and humans and interpersonal relationships. Therefore, "in historical and religious matters, truth is social in character, and the apprehension of it is similarly social."[8]

Objectivity

Admitting engagement does not mean that scholars should give up their commitment to scientific objectivity in the sense of carefully shifting the data and weighing the arguments. It is their duty to warn communities of the dangers of misrepresenting biblical themes and motifs, especially when they judge them to be harmful to certain groups in society. When deciding about the potential dangers of certain interpretations, scholars need to take into account not only the original sociohistorical circumstances of biblical texts, but also their reception history (*Wirkungsgeschichte*), namely the effects of the texts and the exegetical tradition surrounding them. Sometimes it is necessary to accentuate the historical distance separating us from the world of the text. An example might be the caricatures drawn in the gospels, especially in Matthew, of the Pharisees as hypocritical, greedy religious leaders, and the later identification of these character traits with the Jewish people in general. Or, we might think of Paul's advice to the Corinthian congregation in 1 Corinthians 7–11 concerning marriage

and sexual relations, which he illustrates by using the examples of circumcision and slavery and can be summarized as "do not seek a change in status." Paul's contextual concern here is to advise the members of the congregation with respect to family status—importantly, with a view to the imminence of the *parousia*. Yet, his illustrations also became part of a system of rules of Christian conduct, and could later be used to equate a person's *klesis* (calling) with their social position. Thus, these texts became "open to the interpretation that each person's social position is a 'calling' given to them by God and in which, therefore, they are called to remain."[9] Thus, unintended by Paul, the texts became the basis for an ideological position "offering (illusory) comfort and consolation to the underclass, thereby encouraging them to tolerate and accept, rather than protest against and resist, the inequalities of life."[10] By reconstructing the original social context of Paul's advice, scholarship can demonstrate the distance and differences between this original situation and later developments and contemporary situations, thus preventing the further ideological use of these texts.

Setting limits

An important contribution of scholarly research to understanding the Bible is drawing distinctions between permissible and impermissible interpretations. This cannot be done by way of command; all that scholars can do is draw attention to the dangers of certain interpretive traditions. For example, Darrel Jodock draws our attention to the fact that the secularization of society might have the same effect as the earlier belief in a traditional, distant concept of God. Because of the distance from or absence of God penultimate values such as race, self, family, class, nation or party may attain ultimate significance. They require ultimate loyalty from people, because they may become the basis for their decision making.[11] Responsible biblical interpretation thus needs to point out that this is what the Bible identifies as idolatry, no matter how sacred and noble these penultimate realities may be.

In my context, a small post-Communist country with a difficult history, where globalization and secularization coexist with widespread antimodernist sentiments, it is perhaps nationalism that presents the greatest danger as a penultimate value aspiring to be the ultimate one. This is especially so within the churches, who are traditionally allied to the so-called national middle class in

defending the values of nation, family and religion. An ideological justification of this position has already appeared on the fringes of religious thinking in the form of books that present syncretistic and esoteric pictures of Jesus and Christian origins. These books deny Jesus' Jewish origin, identifying him as a Parthian prince (the Parthians are further brought into relation with the alleged ancestors of the Hungarians) whose real story was distorted by Jewish interpreters such as the apostle Paul.[12] Making use of the postmodern climate, these ideas revive the romantic mythologies of nineteenth-century "national" paganism, this time with a Christian veneer. They exemplify and reinforce premodern and postmodern ideas about human history which, in the words of Austrian historian Siegfried Mattl, are the result of trauma, amnesia and nostalgia,[13] and treat human history as the collection of motifs and characters that can be combined at will, in the service of national (or any other) ideology.

Needless to say, these books do not represent the official position of any of the churches in Hungary, but they do exert some influence in congregations, especially there where they can ally themselves with anti-Semitic sentiments. These books quite clearly present a full-blown anti-Semitic argument, where the Jewish "corruption" of Jesus' original message is merely one manifestation of an ancient and worldwide Jewish plot to destroy non-Jewish culture and peoples. In such a situation, the roots of anti-Judaism should be much more clearly exposed by theologians and biblical scholars, squarely facing the fact that they originate in some of the statements of the New Testament itself (e.g., presenting the figure of Judas and later "the Jews" as a group as mediators of satanic influence, especially in the gospels of Luke and John,[14] i.e., John 8:44: " You are from your father the devil, and you choose to do your father's desires …"). This would also mean reevaluating an exegetical tradition and popular religiosity where "the Jews" appear mostly as the dark background over against Christianity. This tradition has a long, well-documented history, regardless of the question whether it is a continuation or misunderstanding of New Testament anti-Jewish polemics. While being a universal phenomenon, demonizing the "other" has always been the greatest temptation of religious thinking, and one that has come into sharp focus since the Holocaust. Biblical scholars, especially those working in Central Eastern Europe, do their communities a disservice if they avoid stating this problem in very clear terms, for fear of resistance from some religious groups.[15] The "golden rule" formulated by a Canadian French exegete can serve as a guideline here: "never disregard a text that may contribute to the awakening of Christian anti-Semitism, and always take the opportunity to encourage clear

and straightforward thinking about these issues."[16]

This and other difficulties such as the manifestations of partiarchalism in biblical texts make it clear that responsible biblical interpretation cannot be confined to an exegesis of the original documents without paying regard to the reception history of the texts.

> When we look at the consequences of historic and religious truth claims, what have been the social and human consequences that have followed from them? Can we discern any consequences? If so, how have these claims played themselves out over time? Are the consequences morally laudable or morally reprehensible? At a minimum, we should ask ourselves if these claims can be true when we see what they have done. When Matthew in his gospel implies that the blood of Christ is not only on the hands of the Jews in Jesus' day, but also on the hands of their descendants, can this statement have any claim to religious truth, given the way this has contributed to the horrible reality of anti-Semitism?[17]

Another task of biblical interpretation, closely related to this one, is developing a more nuanced view of Jesus' messiahship, instead of the traditional distinction in New Testament exegesis between Jewish nationalistic messianic expectations and Jesus' messiahship as a purely transcendent, universal role (thus distancing Jesus from his own people). Recent historical Jesus scholarship has emphasized Jesus' mission in terms of his vision of what it means to be Israel.[18] Far from disregarding his concrete, historical community, Jesus was concerned to promote an open, inclusive Israel whose boundaries would now include those previously excluded from it: sinners, the marginal, the poor. Understanding Jesus' messiahship as a redefinition of membership in the house of Israel, rather than discarding or completely redrawing it, as in the case of supersessionist arguments (a reinterpretation of "Israel" so that the church becomes the sole heir to the promises given in the Old Testament), could also help contemporary communities to distinguish responsible, inclusive patriotism from xenophobic nationalism.

Problematizing

Biblical interpretation does not take place in a vacuum. Both lay and scholarly readers read the Bible from the standpoint of their personal lives as well as

the society they live in. The fabric of our own society is especially influential in forming our readings because, for the most part, we regard its structure as organic, natural and at times God given, without noticing its historicity and contingency. It follows then that we regard elements of the biblical world with which our own social world is continuous as natural and immutable. Therefore, it sometimes becomes mandatory for scholars to sensitize readers of the Bible to the questionable and mutable nature of these structures.

Exactly which parts of the biblical as well as the contemporary worldviews should be thus problematized always depends on the particular context in which the reading takes place. In my context, the pervasive nature of patron-client relationships in biblical, especially New Testament , times could perhaps be one such aspect. First-century Roman Palestine (as in fact the whole empire) was organized according to a system of patronage, with socially fixed reciprocal relations "between social unequals in which a lower-status person in need (the client) has his needs met by having recourse for favors to a higher-status, well-situated person (called a patron)."[19] In return, clients were expected to render public praise or other duties to the patron. Since resources were scarce and unequally distributed, having good connections meant everything. Consequently, social relations were also unequal and organized in terms of domination and subordination and, among the elite, characterized by fierce competition over political power. The "benefactions" provided by wealthy and influential patrons were repaid by public honor (the supreme value of society), increase of status and power. The imbalance of power between those living at the center and those at the periphery (either geographically or economically) was enormous, with people at the periphery usually in need of a broker (mediator) between themselves and the centers of power.

While the gospels obviously assume this system as the natural state of affairs, there is a very strong anti-hierarchical tradition (especially in the gospel of Luke) which subverts and redefines the usual patron-client relations.[20] The parable of the rich fool shows a patron who refuses to share his resources and uses them only to secure his own future, and the parable of the rich man and Lazarus shows the rich as failing in their role as benefactors. Pharisees, scribes and other community leaders also fail the people as patrons or mediators of either material goods or religious traditions. In Luke, the only real benefactor of the poor is God himself, who "performs a reversal of existing situations"[21] and sends the mighty away (Lk 1:53). Jesus is a mediator (but, strangely, not one who comes from the center and hence the conflict with other mediators)

who gives people direct access to God, making tax collectors and sinners his "friends" (that is, clients with whom he enters into alliance, assuming responsibility for them).[22]

Jesus also gives new meaning to the concept of patronage, when he identifies leadership roles with concrete service (at table) of the community (Lk 22:27). When he disengages a service, favor or invitation[23] from any expectation of repayment (*cf.* Lk 14:13–14) he furthermore breaks with the most crucial aspect of the patron-client system. Parables such as the one of the "Great Supper" challenge "the exclusivism and status-consciousness sustained by the prevailing cultural values and social codes."[24] No wonder that the greatest anger and opposition were provoked by Jesus' inclusive, status leveling practice of fellowship at table. The perhaps clearest example of this anti-hierarchical tradition is Mark 10:35-45 (which, interestingly, Luke places within the setting of a meal)[25] in which Jesus contrasts the way power relations usually operate to the way in which he expects his own community to function. This new world of human relationships is made possible by the fact that God, the ultimate patron, offers unlimited honor to people, so they, in turn, are enabled to give honor "freely to others, without fear of diminishing their own."[26]

This "problematizing" of informal patron-client relationships is an important contribution of biblical scholarship in communities where these are still regarded as the most basic ways in which human relationships function, and where structures based on domination and subordination are perceived as more fundamental than more egalitarian ones. It is especially important that in such communities leadership roles are filled by persons who are empowered to practice the kind of leadership as redefined by Jesus.

In my context, the system of patronage, historically the result of political and economic instability and the experience of foreign occupation in the twentieth century (with the Hungarian state as client first of Nazi Germany and then of the Soviet Union) has always been the only constant and trustworthy channel of the distribution of power, influence and material goods. In a situation of general fear and distrust there has never been a real possibility for the people "below" to take responsible, independent initiatives. People are used to the fact that all initiatives come from above, and the only possibility for the unprivileged is to join in these. In this way, people who desire to take their lives in their own hands also lack encouraging examples. Following the democratic changes in 1989, mostly political parties serve as patrons also for Christian churches.

Being a fledgling democracy, Hungarian society does not have a strong, self-sustain-

> ing economy, independent cultural centers or a well-developed civil society. The state is still the most significant player in the country's financial affairs. Because in practice the distribution of wealth is controlled by the political winners, power comes mostly from party politics.[27]

In these circumstances, an analysis of the gospel tradition that draws attention to its criticism of patronage might enable small communities within the church to question existing power relations.

Bridging the gap

At the beginning of this essay I suggested that frequently lay readers regard scholarly analyses of biblical texts as irrelevant to their own concerns. Sometimes detailed linguistic and historical exegeses do not yield results that faith communities or other interested readers might find illuminating.

In this section I shall summarize two interesting interpretations that I believe succeed in bridging the gap between historical reconstruction and contemporary interests.

The Good Samaritan and reducing intergroup conflict

Philip Esler analyzes this parable in an exegetical framework that is also intended to be of relevance to contemporary interethnic conflicts, which are "among the most troubling problems of our time."[28]

Discussing first-century Judean-Samaritan relations, Esler notes that in situations of interethnic tension, stereotyping (treating all members of the other group as if they were the same) and projecting negative attitudes are usual. The lawyer's question to Jesus concerns the people Judeans must treat as neighbors in terms of Leviticus 19:18 and thus love as themselves. In other words, he asks Jesus to determine who is in the "in group." In the parable, Jesus fails to specify the ethnicity of the attacked person ("a certain man"). Because he had been stripped of his clothes, his ethnicity could not be determined by his attire, but since he was naked, one could see whether or not he was circumcised. If he was, he was probably an Israelite or a Samaritan. The behavior of the priest and the Levite highlighted the problem of whether these two Israelites, both associated with

the cult, were justified in not treating the man as a neighbor, that is, someone entitled to assistance. At this point, the lawyer would have expected an ordinary Israelite to come along. Instead, Jesus introduced the Samaritan, thereby changing the discussion from a dispute over halakic law into a question of social identity. Since Samaritans accepted the Torah, he could also have started the same legal calculation as the others but instead, since he was faced with real human need, he "was moved with compassion." Jesus thus redefines neighbor not as the passive recipient of help, but "as someone who ignores group boundaries of the sort erected by the law of Moses to assist one in need."[29] The parable thus undermines the warring parties' stereotypical attitudes as well as the traditional concern of defining the boundaries of the group. Research into social identity shows that "the best way to reduce tension and hostility between groups is to have them come into contact with one another under appropriate conditions."[30] A Jewish audience had basically two options when interpreting the story: they could either identify with the wounded man, in which case they were confronted with a situation of helplessness where help came from a member of a hated or despised group, or with the Samaritan, whereby they were confronted with the idea that being a neighbor (i.e., one who actively helps a person in need) overrides ethnic classifications. In both cases intergroup conflict recedes into the background. The intention of the parable then is to effect a more general change using the Samaritan's example.

Jesus' third way: active nonviolent resistance

In the chapter "Jesus' Third Way: Nonviolent Engagement" of his seminal *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination*,[31] Walter Wink provides an exegesis of Matthew 5:38–42, the classic text of nonresistance to evil, offering the other cheek, giving the "cloak as well," going the extra mile. Far from advocating masochism, cowardice, or a passive acquiescence to evil, Wink argues, this text actually contains some practical advice for practicing nonviolent resistance to violence.

Turn the other cheek*:* In a culture where the use of the left hand was restricted for purity reasons, striking the right cheek would be done with the back of the hand (striking a social equal with the back of the hand was punished by a heavy fine). This would be construed as a humiliating insult usually employed to put

one's social inferiors in place. Jesus' audience would probably have been at the receiving end of such an insult. The reason why Jesus counsels them to turn the other cheek is that by doing so, their action would rob the oppressor of his power to humiliate. Since he can no longer backhand his inferior's cheek with his right hand, the only option open to him would be to use his fist, thus acknowledging the other as an equal, as a peer.

Give the "cloak as well": The second example is set in a court of law, where someone is being sued for his outer garment. This person must have been very poor with only his clothes to offer as collateral for a loan. As indebtedness was endemic in Roman Palestine, this situation must have been quite common. If this person followed Jesus' advice, he would strip off all his clothing (since his outer garment has already been taken away) and march out of the court stark naked. Yet, in fact, it is the creditor who would be shamed in such a situation, because nakedness was taboo in Judaism, and shame fell not so much on the naked party but on the person viewing or causing the nakedness (Gen 9:20–27). By this very public and unusual protest, the debtor unmasks the oppressive system by which people are deprived of their land, their belongings and finally even their clothing. Again, the powerless person was given an opportunity to take the initiative and refuse to be shamed by his creditor.

Go the second mile: The third example is drawn from the custom of limiting the amount of forced labor a member of the occupying Roman army was entitled to expect from his subjects to carrying the soldiers' packs for one mile. This forced labor was bitterly resented by the inhabitants of the Roman colonies and many soldiers abused their privileges. Jesus neither counsels armed resistance against the Roman occupation nor suggests that civilians should collaborate with the occupying forces. Instead, the oppressed can take the initiative and offer to carry the soldier's pack for another mile thus taking back the power of choice. This would obviously put a soldier into an impossible situation. He could either plead with the civilian to return his pack, or allow him to do him a favor. In either case his assumed superiority would vanish. By thus exposing him to uncertainty and anxiety the civilian would make it possible for the soldier to think about their relationship in a totally new light.

In all three examples, Wink suggests, Jesus offers his hearers a way to liberate themselves from servile actions and a servile mentality by recovering their hu-

man dignity and freedom. Far from advocating passive submission to evil, Jesus provides an alternative to violent resistance, namely acts of nonviolent resistance that are neither submission nor assault, neither flight nor fight, and thus to break the spiral of violence.

Unleashing the reader's creativity

Joel B. Green argues that the classical method used in biblical studies—linguistic and historical analyses followed by historical reconstruction, with interpretation as the third step—which he calls linear hermeneutics, is essentially a failed experiment, because texts are not "self-interpreting, meaning-making machines" or containers of meanings or propositions that need to be excavated from them.[32] Instead, biblical interpretation should offer "a range of possible, valid meanings,"[33] with readers themselves taking part in the creation of meaning by using their real life experiences and asking their own questions of the Bible.

Some might fear that in this way the texts would fall prey to the reader's subjectivity and irresponsible interpretations. In a sense, the danger of distortion or misunderstanding cannot be eliminated. Still, if there is an ongoing conversation between professional exegetes and theologians and lay readers, some filters (of the kind that I have suggested in this paper) can be introduced into the process.

It has been suggested that the task of biblical scholarship is to provide methodologically underdetermined readings of biblical texts, namely readings that contain enough information to prevent harmful or dangerous interpretations, while at the same time flexible and open-ended enough not to stifle the creativity of nonexpert readers.

Indeterminacy can fire people's imagination. I have vivid memories of a discussion about the parable of the dishonest steward in Luke 16 that I had years ago at a youth camp of the Lutheran Church in Hungary. This parable can be interpreted in many different ways and the young people were so intrigued that, quite unusually, they offered to sacrifice their free time to stay indoors and discuss the parable.

Without an ongoing conversation between different groups reading the same Bible with different aims and perspectives—such as lay readers and biblical scholars—there is a danger that group interests will stifle the voices of responsible

interpretation. As the historians quoted earlier insist, the most potent defense against reducing the truth to ideology is open debate in a democratic society where equal access to evidence is not blocked by those in power.[34] Sharing our best understanding of biblical truth with others is the best way to preserve the Bible as a living, authoritative voice amid the complexities of our world.

Notes

[1] Paolo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1998), p. 14.

[2] Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth About History* (New York and London: W.W. Norton and Company, 1995), p. 289.

[3] Daniel Patte, *Ethics of Biblical Interpretation: A Reevaluation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), p. 21.

[4] Theologian D. Jodock argues that laity should not allow "traditional belief systems to summarize the Bible instead of thinking biblically and theologically about their lives today." Darrel Jodock, "The Reciprocity Between Scripture and Theology," in *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology 44*, no. 4 (1990), p. 369.

[5] Peter C. Phan, "Method in Liberation Theologies," in *Theological Studies* vol. 61, issue 1 (2000), p. 49, author's own emphasis.

[6] Leif E. Vaage, "Recent Concerns: The Scholar as Engagé," in William E. Arnal and Michel Desjardins (eds), *Whose Historical Jesus?* (Ontario: Wilfried Laurier University Press, 1997), p. 182.

[7] Joel B. Green, "Scripture and Theology: Failed Experiments, Fresh Perspectives," at **www.luthersem.edu/ctrf/Papers/2001_Green.htm.**

[8] James W. Aageson, "Reading Biblical Texts: Truth, Facts and Myth," at **www.bibleinterpr.com/articles/aageson_biblicaltext.htm.**

[9] David G. Horrel, "The Development of Theological Identity in Pauline Christianity," in Philip F. Esler, *Modeling Early Christianity: Social-Scientific Studies of the New Testament in Context* (New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 229.

[10] *Ibid.*

[11] Jodock, *op. cit.* (note 4), p. 371.

[12] Ferenc Badiny Jós, *Jézus Király, a pártus herceg* [King Jesus, the Parthian Prince] (Budapest: Osi Örökségünk, 1998); Attila Bakos, *A Duna Evangéliuma* [The Gospel of the Danube)] (Budapest: Mandala-Geva, 2004). It is quite ironic that Paul, criticized elsewhere for his anti-Judaism, appears here as the chief "Judaizer" distorting Jesus' original, non-Jewish message.

[13] Quoted in J. A. Tilmann, "Vallás, irodalom, nemzeti pogányság," [Religion, Literature, National Paganism] in *Mérleg* (2005/3), p. 335.

[14] Leaving aside the difficult question of the identity of the group designated as "the Jews" in John.

[15] A pioneering work by a young Lutheran theologian has recently been published, András Szabó, *Auschwitz – katarzis a teológában* [Auschwitz – Catharsis in Theology] (Budapest: Luther Kiadó, 2005).

[16] G. Caron, "Az Újszövetség ellenségképe," [Demonizing the Other] in *Mérleg* (2005/3), p. 279.

[17] Aageson, *op. cit.* (note 8).

[18] E.g., E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (London: SCM, 1985); J. P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew* (New York: Doubleday, 1991).

[19] Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh (eds), *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), p. 388.

[20] Halvor Moxnes, "Patron-Client Relations and the New Community in Luke-Acts," in Jerome H. Neyrey, *The Social World of Luke-Acts* (Peabody: Hendricksons, 1991), pp. 241–269, *passim.*

[21] *Ibid.*, p. 257.

[22] Friendship in the patronage system means not so much an emotional tie but an obligation, responsibility, mutual assistance. In this sense Pilate can be called a "friend of Caesar."

[23] Moxnes, *op. cit.* (note 29), p. 264

[24] S. Scott Bartchy, "The Historical Jesus and Honor Reversal at Table," in Wolfgang Stegemann, Bruce J. Malina, Gerd Theissen (eds), *The Social Setting of Jesus and the Gospels* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), p. 175.

[25] *Ibid.*, p. 181

[26] *Ibid.*

[27] András Csepregi, "Transition to Democracy in a Post-Communist Society: Can Fear be Overcome?" in, Karen L. Bloomquist (ed.), *Lutheran Ethics at the Intersections of God's One World. LWF Studies 02/2005* (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 2005), p. 130.

[28] Philip F. Esler "Jesus and the Reduction of Intergroup Conflict," in Bruce J. Malina, Wolfgang Stegemann and Gerd Theissen (eds), *The Social Setting of Jesus and the Gospels* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2002), p. 185.

[29] *Ibid.*, p. 186

[30] *Ibid.*, p. 199

[31] Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), pp. 175–194

[32] Green, *op. cit.* (note 7).

[33] *Ibid.*

[34] Appleby *et al.*, *op. cit.* (note 2).

Reading the Bible Within the Believing Community: Experts and Ordinary Readers

Elelwani B. Farisani

Introduction

This paper explores in four stages the interface between the trained and ordinary reader of the Bible within the context of Bible studies in Africa. First, we will define the terms ordinary and trained reader and explore their agendas in the reading process. Second, we shall analyze both their contributions to the reading process, discuss how the actual reading process takes place and then offer some critique of the "reading with" process. [1] Third, we shall explore the significance of this process with regard to Lutheran hermeneutics. In the fourth section, we shall offer some practical steps on how the interface between ordinary and trained reader might be strengthened.

The ordinary reader

According to Ukpong,[2] "ordinary reader" denotes nonprofessionals who have not been trained in biblical interpretation even though they may be well trained in other fields.

> In a specific sense, it refers to a social class, the common people, in contradistinction to the elite. Though both groups read the Bible without the use of the scholar's critical tools, their social conditioning affects their reading in a significant manner.[3]

In some cases, the ordinary reader is not literate, or only barely so. Furthermore, Ukpong points out that the ordinary reader's reading of the Bible is frequently popular and uncritical in the academic sense, as is illustrated by their greater

interest in the theological significance of a particular text to their context than in sociohistorical detail. Ordinary readers generally do not interrogate the Bible's truth claims. They believe the Bible to contain the unquestionable truth. Their biblical interpretation mainly comprises of their experiences and intuition, the insights of the fellow ordinary readers and their church's or denomination's teaching and the faith in which they were brought up.[4]

According to West,[5] ordinary African readers of the Bible are part of African biblical scholarship. First, because African biblical scholarship concentrates on the correspondence between African experience and the Bible, it locates itself "within the social, political, and ecclesiastical contexts of Africa."[6] Second, certain impulses in biblical scholarship—such as postmodernism, reader response criticism and liberation hermeneutics—have provided both impetus and theoretical support for the inclusion of the ordinary reader. Third, most African biblical scholars recognize that there are elements of ordinary readings in their own scholarly reading processes. Fourth, to remain connected to the various forms of contextual theology in Africa, including the theology of African women, black theology, African theology etc., requires that socially engaged African biblical scholars recognize the foundational resources of ordinary readers of the Bible from which their working theologies—theologies of survival, liberation and life—are constructed.[7]

The ordinary readers' agendas in the reading with process vary. Anum,[8] who has researched this issue, argues that survival—health, employment, fertility, etc.—is high on the ordinary reader's agenda. There are those who are more concerned about exorcism, or spiritual and physical deliverance, or who use the Bible as a moral code for regulating life. Some see the Bible as a vehicle for reinforcing certain cultural values, while others see it as a way of transcending cultural heritage and as a means for influencing the development of their contemporary context.

The trained reader

Ukpong explains that among ordinary readers, trained readers facilitate

> [a] critical consciousness and analysis of themselves, their situation, the context out of which they read, and the Bible itself. They do not direct or control the reading process or seek to impose on the community their own readings.[9]

Rather, Ukpong explains that the trained reader's role in the reading with process is to facilitate a reading process which will ultimately result in ordinary readers critically reading the text from their own perspectives and worldviews.[10] This process "implies the recognition and affirmation of the otherness and personal worth of the ordinary readers."[11]

Anum[12] identifies African scholarly readers as theologians in postcolonial and post-missionary Africa with diverse denominational backgrounds and missionary and traditional cultural heritages, who are middle class, urbanized and part of a global network of theologians. Scholars are equipped with academic critical skills. One of the characteristics of scholarly readers in Africa is their detachment from the ordinary readers.

> [This] implies that his\her active interaction and dialogue with ordinary readers is necessary if the theologian wants to be involved in effective theological reflection and reconstruction in his or her context.[13]

Through the reading with process,

> the academic readers access the resources of popular readings of the Bible, and academic scholarship is thus informed and enriched by resources outside its own circle, while the ordinary readers are introduced into the processes and perspectives of academic critical reading.[14]

Ukpong mentions that the reading with involves reading from the ordinary reader's perspective. This has several implications. First, the community reflects on its own context as it relates to the text and its context. Second, the trained readers situate themselves within the community, share its perspectives and can thus use its cultural resources. Third, both trained and ordinary readers should identify with and read from the perspective of those characters in the text who are marginalized, namely those who are passive or whose voices are not heard.

Agenda of trained readers

According to Anum, the agenda of African theologians in the postcolonial and post-missionary era is to reconstruct African theologies in their own contexts. In order to implement this

> scholarly readers are of the opinion that there is the need for them to interact closely with ordinary readers, whom they regard as the ones who possess the contextual inputs, (specifically in terms of agenda: resources, ability to create new readings, subvert official readings), which is needful for the reconstruction of forms of African theology. For most African theologians believe that there are gaps in their contextual experience and exposure that can be adequately filled only by ordinary readers.[15]

Anum observes that although scholarly readers would like to read with ordinary readers and give due consideration to their agendas, in most cases they tend to fulfill their own.

His research into the reading with process shows that ordinary readers want to be involved in every aspect of the reading process and feel that the trained readers are either imposing their own agendas or have a hidden one. He correctly observes that ordinary readers are not looking merely to make use of scholarly readers, but want to be equal partners in the reading process. Anum argues that untrained readers need to participate equally, not merely to be there at the reading practice.

Critique of terminology

Maluleke[16] has offered a serious critique of the use of the terms ordinary and trained reader.

First, he argues that the adjective "ordinary" in the phrase "ordinary people" does not communicate key or decisive information. Anybody can be ordinary depending on what we are talking about or doing.

Second, while "ordinary" and "trained" are categories related to power relations, the tentative, evasive and "innocuous" nature of the terms tend to obscure, trivialize or palliate the economic, race and gender (especially as it relates to women) bases of the power discrepancy concerned.

Third, an unmasking of the essential basis of the power discrepancy between so-called "ordinary" and "trained" people in South Africa will lead us back to race, gender and class as "allocators" of privilege, wealth and opportunity. Maluleke argues that this begs the question of why categories that highlight race, gender and class issues are deliberately avoided in favor of the obscure phrase "ordinary people."

Fourth, the real question is how and why people are "trained" while others are "ordinaried."

Fifth, it is not good enough for an hermeneutic of liberation simply to posit and accept the existence of trained and ordinary readers as a starting point as if these categories were ordained from above. Here Maluleke questions the training process of the trained readers and is obviously concerned that certain trained readers' interpretations of the Bible have been used further to oppress and silence the powerless in South Africa.

Sixth, the formulation "ordinary vs trained" when used as an hermeneutical starting point, is probably based on the (uncritical) acceptance of ideologies, choices and commitments inherent in the training of the so-called trained. It is hoped, in my opinion simplistically, that a commitment to the ordinary reader demonstrated by being socially engaged will, on its own, alleviate the more malign aspects of the training of trained readers. There is no fundamental questioning of the training itself beyond urging the trained to read with the ordinary reader.[17]

The reading process: contextual Bible studies

According to Ukpong, the reading with process involves academically trained readers reading the Bible with a community of ordinary readers, within a specific African context, employing a conceptual framework informed by African culture. As already stated, this reading with process involves the interaction between ordinary readers and ordinary ways of reading the Bible on the one hand, and academic readers and academic ways of reading on the other. Ukpong explains that

> it is an interactive, participatory and dialogical process that seeks to facilitate critical reading among ordinary readers and put academic readers in touch with the perspectives, concerns and insights of ordinary readers. In this process, a community, not an individual, sets the agenda for the reading and does the reading.[18]

The ordinary reader's contribution to the reading process

Most ordinary readers are black, often illiterate, African women. According to West,[19] the ordinary reader brings to the reading process descriptions of social justice

and injustice, characters that represent the underdog, stories of liberation and God's identification with the forgotten and weak and "gaps in the text." These usually occur around characters who do not speak in the narrative or are kept in the background while powerful figures dominate the plot. The poor raise important theological questions and insights about the roles of these peripheral figures. The ordinary reader is also suspicious of dominant, received readings, especially when the texts have been used by the powerful to dominate. This hermeneutic of suspicion can lead to powerful and more faithful insights. Finally, the ordinary readers are able to remember the text,[20] and even if they are illiterate they often know the biblical messages and hymns as well, if not better, than literate readers.

Textuality and orality in the reading process

West reminds us that in an African context, ordinary readers/interpreters work with a remembered as well as a read Bible. Mosala reminds us that ordinary Africans have "an oral knowledge of the Bible."[21] "Most of their information about the Bible comes from socialization in the churches themselves as they listen to prayers and sermons."[22] West notes that this reality does not imply the absence of the Bible as a text, for although as a text the Bible is not central to the reading practices of most ordinary Africans, it does have a presence. "Even those who are illiterate have considerable exposure to biblical texts being read."[23] Writing from a Kenyan context, Ndung notes that "even the illiterate members take pains to master some verses which they readily quote when they give their testimonies." [24] These same members often carry copies of the Bible so that "if need arises they can always request a literate member to read for them."[25] West observes that the remembered and the read Bible reside side by side.

The trained reader's contribution to the reading process

Advocates of the reading with process claim that scholarly interpreters of the Bible bring with them a "critical consciousness"[26] normally brought about by critical questions about the following components of the reading process: the text; the reader's context; providing some insight into the sociohistorical context. In addition, the trained reader ensures that the reading process is focused and not sidetracked by unnecessary issues.

Furthermore, trained readers help the group make connections in the following manner. First, they trace connections between biblical and other ancient texts. Second, they also trace connections between biblical texts and the worlds that produced them. Third, they go further by overtly tracing connections between biblical texts and contexts and the texts and contexts of poor and marginalized communities.[27]

The actual reading process between trained and ordinary reader

West[28] envisages the reading with process as being accountable to the "critical resources of biblical scholarship and the contextual (and critical) resources of various communities of the poor and marginalized." In this regard, the scholar is a facilitator who has several tasks. First, s/he asks questions pertaining to "community consciousness" that probe the readers' connections to the text in their own life experiences. Second, the facilitator asks questions pertaining to "critical consciousness," i.e., about the text as a literary and sociohistorical object. These questions help probe the gaps in the texts and allow for connections between other biblical texts and historical and contemporary contexts. Bible studies might end with the group making a large poster that records their most important conclusions, further questions and plans for action. West cautions facilitators that in order to uncover faithful readings they will need to avoid a naive, "uncritical listening to" that idealizes the interpretations of the poor and abandons critical inquiry, as well as an "arrogant speaking for" that dominates discussions and holds predetermined conclusions about the ultimate meaning of a text. West summarizes that

> the primary role of facilitator is to enable a group process to take place, to manage group dynamics, to promote turn taking, to keep time, to summarize and systematize the reading results, to find creative and empowering ways of reporting back to plenary the findings of the group, and to move the group from reflection into action.[29]

West[30] highlights several commitments which underlie the reading with process. First, a commitment to begin the reading process from the experienced reality of the organized poor and marginalized, including their language, categories, concepts, needs, questions, interests and resources. Second, a commitment

to read the Bible communally with each other, where power relations are acknowledged and as far as possible equalized. Third, a commitment to read the Bible critically, using whatever critical resources are available, including local critical resources and those of biblical scholarship. And, fourth, a commitment to social transformation through the process of reading the Bible.

Critique of the reading with process

Draper[31] has seriously challenged the reading with process. First, how do textually orientated and orally orientated readers work together with the Bible? How do trained and untrained readers of the Bible read the Bible together in a respectful manner? Although the reading with process is not an easy one, it is not impossible to forge some common approaches that will enrich each other's reading. Second, when we read the Bible are we dealing with the same thing? Trained readers approach the text from a critical perspective that tries to raise important questions about the author of the biblical text and its religious and sociohistorical contexts, while untrained readers approach the biblical text as the revealed, infallible Word of God. These two approaches have to be kept in balance. Third, what implications do textual biblical and theological training have pedagogically for preparing people to minister to predominantly oral communities? Theological training institutions should prepare their students well enough for the future encounter between themselves as trained readers and the ordinary/lay reader in their congregations.

Reading with process and Lutheran hermeneutics

Stewart's comparison between the reading with process and Lutheran hermeneutics is helpful here.

The reading with process includes people's stories.

> In West's method the Bible is never to be interpreted simply in the privacy of one's study. Reading the Bible is always a communal venture. This accords well with the Lutheran insistence that Christian Scriptures are the church's book—the people's story—rather than the privileged textbook of the professional clergy. Along with gathering the voices of present-day readers, part of the trained reader's job is to bring to the interpretive

process the voices of those who have gone before us, recognizing our communion (and continued conversations) with those separated from us by time and space. Worship preparation and Bible studies should be marked by practices that allow for communal reading of the Scriptures. Canon within the Canon: the Crucified and Risen Christ. The Lutheran understanding that all of Scripture (the canon) must be measured against the crucified and risen Christ (the canon within the canon) leads to a practice of Scripture reading and interpretation in which readers seek out the crucified and risen Christ within the text. As West demonstrates, the poor and marginalized have unique hermeneutical tools forged in their struggles that help them carry out this search. Luther wrote in his Heidelberg Disputation of 1518:

> [one] deserves to be called a theologian… who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross…. The manifest and visible things of God are placed in opposition to the invisible, namely, his [sic] human nature, weakness, foolishness… Because men [sic] misused the knowledge of God through works, God wished again to be recognized in suffering, and to condemn 'wisdom concerning invisible things' by means of 'wisdom concerning visible things', so that those who did not honor God as manifested in his works should honor him as he is hidden in his suffering (absconditum in passionibus)… [whoever] does not know Christ does not know God hidden in suffering… God can be found only in suffering and the cross… (Thesis 20 and Proofs 20 and 21).
>
> Hence, according to Luther, the suffering and poor hold unique qualifications for being theologians. Reading for Transformation: the Living Word of God. Gordon Lathrop recently wrote "Draw a line to exclude the others, and Jesus Christ is always on the other side of the line." If those of us trained in the interpretation of Scripture draw a line at the door of our study, or even around most of our usual bible studies, then Jesus Christ will be found on the other side of the line. Collaborating in our study of Scripture with the poor and marginalized, allowing ourselves to be drawn into their readings and even being "partially constituted" by them is a "transforming experience" [Gordon Lathrop writes on "Baptismal Practice and the Global Map" in a chapter of his forthcoming book, Holy Ground: a Liturgical Cosmology. A version can be found at the Web site of the Lutheran Theological School at Philadelphia: **www.ltsp.edu/index.html**]—which, by definition, is what we should expect when we encounter the living word of God (Heb. 4.12).[32]

Moreover, there is a relation between the reading with process and the Lutheran understanding of the priesthood of all believers *vis-à-vis* the special (pastoral)

ministry. The reading with process envisages the interpretation of the Bible on an equal basis. In other words, although the two are not equal in terms of theological knowledge they have to be equal as far as their contribution to the reading process is concerned. In other words, the trained reader's interpretation is not superior because it is that of a trained scholar. Interpretation of the Bible is a collaborative venture between the trained and the ordinary reader.

The implication of the reading with process for the relationship between the priesthood of all believers and the ordained ministry is clear. Pastors are theologically trained, they are scholars, while lay people are not. However, both lay and ordained contribute to the interpretation of the Bible in different ways. In my context, for example, the lay preachers assist the pastors by preaching on regular Sundays, conducting Bible studies, teaching confirmation classes, Sunday schools, etc. This calls for the proper training of lay people so that lay preachers, who have no theological training, can be equally involved. Although we need trained scholars such as pastors, we value the services and contributions of lay people.

The way forward

Power dynamics

Anum[33] points out that there are always unequal power relations between the ordinary and the scholarly reader. How then can we achieve a dialogical situation that will enable the dialogue partners in such a situation to achieve a dominance free discourse?

The following possibilities may be considered.

- Scholarly and ordinary readers should respect each other's views
- The medium of communication should be one that ordinary readers are comfortable with. It must not be a foreign language as most ordinary readers feel most comfortable in their mother tongues
- Language loaded with theological jargon ought to be avoided as it distorts the process of communication

- Scholarly readers should embark on a confidence building exercise between themselves and the ordinary readers.[34]

Generating, collecting and analyzing popular readings

Annum has identified several ways by which both scholarly and ordinary readers could interact meaningfully.

> Firstly, scholarly readers should encourage ordinary readers to produce their own materials and readings. This can be in the form of music, poems, art. In some cases, scholarly readers can read "with" ordinary readers, utilizing the mediums of communication of ordinary readers as aids to the reading process. For instance, poems, role plays, mission statements can be composed by ordinary readers as aids to Bible study with scholarly readers which can be sources of theological reflection by scholarly readers.[35]

Second, scholarly readers can collect ordinary readings as expressed in music, art and drama.

> Also popular reflections on biblical concepts or texts can be collected by scholarly readers. These popular readings are to be vigorously analyzed, using cultural anthropological skills in order to give account of how they generate faith.[36]

These popular readings can be reflected upon by scholarly readers, by setting them alongside official readings and seeing how they help to reshape the official discourse of the church and how they are drawn from the Bible.[37] Popular readings of Psalms and proverbs could also be collected and analyzed by scholarly readers in their respective contexts as was done by Zephania Kameeta.[38] Collecting, generating and analyzing materials from ordinary readers provides the opportunity for deep reflection. An example are the role plays by the Kenosis women's group in South Africa from their reading of 2 Samuel 11:2–4, which led to deep reflection on the text and its being read by the Ujaama (formerly, the Institute of the Study of the Bible) trained reader as a rape related text.[39]

Notes

[1] This reading of the Bible involves two parties: the trained (scholar) and the untrained (lay) reader. The two parties read the Bible together within the context of the Bible study.

[2] Justin Ukpong, "Bible Reading with a Community of Ordinary Readers," in Mary N. Getui, Tinyiko S. Maluleke and Justin Ukpong (eds), *Interpreting the New Testament in Africa* (Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 2001), p. 189.

[3] Ukpong, *ibid.*, p. 90.

[4] Ukpong, *op. cit.* (note 2). See also Ferdinand E. Deist, *The Material Culture of the Bible. An Introduction* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), p. 20.

[5] Gerald O. West, "Mapping African Biblical Interpretation," in Getui *et al.*, *op. cit.* (note 2), p. 88.

[6] See Knut Holter, "It's not Only a Question of Money. African Old Testament Scholarship Between the Myths and Meanings of the South and the Money and Methods of the North," in *Old Testament Essays* 11 (1998), p. 245.

[7] West, *op. cit.* (note 5), p. 88.

[8] Eric Anum, "Effective Scholarly Readings of the Bible in Africa," in Getui *et al.*, *op. cit.* (note 2), p. 108.

[9] Upkong, *op. cit.* (note 2), p. 188.

[10] *Ibid.*, p. 189. See also Gerald O. West and Musa W. Dube, in "'Reading With': An Exploration of the Interface between Critical and Ordinary Readers of the Bible. African Overtures," in *Semeia*, no. 73 (1996), p. 7.

[11] Ukpong, *op. cit.* (note 2), p. 189.

[12] Anum, *op. cit.* (note 8), p. 108.

[13] *Ibid.*, p. 109.

[14] Ukpong, *op. cit.* (note 2), p. 189.

[15] Anum, *op. cit.* (note 8), p. 110.

[16] Tinyiko S. Maluleke, "The Bible and African Theologies," in Getui *et al.*, *op. cit.* (note 2), p. 175.

[17] *Ibid.*, p. 175.

[18] Ukpong, *op. cit.* (note 2), p. 88.

[19] Gerald O. West, *The Academy of the Poor. Towards a Dialogical Reading of the Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), p. 155.

[20] *Ibid.*, p. 95; From Ben Steward, Holden Village, **www.ewaidsynod.org/bishop02.htm.**

[21] Itumeleng J. Mosala, "Race, Class, and Gender as Hermeneutical Factors in the African Independent Churches' Appropriation of the Bible," in *Semeia*, no. 73 (1996), pp. 43–57; West, *op. cit.* (note 19), p. 89.

[22] Mosala, *ibid.*, pp. 43ff; *cf.* Jonathan A. Draper, "Confessional Western Text-Centered Biblical Interpretation and an Oral or Residual-Oral Context," in *Semeia*, *no.* 73, (1996), pp. 61–80; West, *op. cit.* (note 4), p. 89.

[23] West, *ibid.*, p. 89.

[24] *Ibid.*

[25] West, *op. cit.* (note 4), p. 89.

[26] West, *op. cit.* (note 19), p. 63.

[27] *Ibid.*, p. 77.

[28] *Ibid.*, pp. 124ff.

[29] *Ibid.*, p. 133; Stewart, *op. cit.* (note 20).

[30] West, *ibid.*, pp. 25–26.

[31] Draper, *op. cit.* (note 22), pp. 243–255.

[32] Stewart, *op. cit.* (note 20).

[33] Anum, *op. cit.* (note 8), p. 113.

[34] *Ibid.*, p. 113.

[35] *Ibid.*, p. 119.

[36] *Ibid.*

[37] *Ibid.*

[38] *Ibid.*; Zephania Kameeta, *Why, O Lord? Psalms and Sermons from Namibia* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1986).

[39] Anum, *ibid.*

Comments on Chapter VI: Listening to the Bible in Different Ways

The group discussion centered on an issue which had emerged already in chapter four. How is the gospel message, testified to in the Bible, communicated to the people? Who has the authority to do so? At the time of the Lutheran Reformation, the transition from the biblical context to the people occurred through preaching. Shortly afterwards, it was linked to the office of the ordained ministry. The issue of ordinary and trained readers emerges only beyond the sermon. Bible study, where both types of readers interact, is a case in point. Can Bible study be regarded as an equivalent to preaching? In how far is it reflective of the concept of the priesthood of all believers?

At the time of the Second Testament, the Bible was probably more centered on the synagogue than the temple. To a certain extent, the sermon can be seen in continuity of the exposition of the Bible in the synagogue. Today, sermons need to be complemented by more effective means of communicating the gospel such as Bible studies. The Willow Creek church community picks up on both the temple and the synagogue traditions by way of mega-gatherings and work in small groups.

Chapter VII: "We are the Bible People Read": Living the Bible within God's Mission

On Being Credible Followers of an Incredible Master

Mercedes García Bachmann

The context

Once upon a time, in Argentina, there was a Lutheran parish. It was quite similar to the other parishes in the area, and most people were nice to the pastor and to one another. They regularly attended church activities such as Sunday worship, Sunday school, participated in women or youth groups and many were engaged in community-oriented activities such as diaconal and educational work. Many were European immigrants working in small-scale farming.

The parsonage and parish premises were right next door to one another. The pastor's two children were too small to know where their home ended and the "sacred space" began. Thus, they would attempt to play ball during worship while their mother played the organ (in an honorary capacity) and their father conducted the service. Somebody would always take them aside and try to make them understand that although the room was only one door away from their home they should not play in this space. That was easier said than done.

Pastor John and his wife Mary were accepted, respected and appreciated by the congregation. Nonetheless, people asked themselves why Mary, who had a full-time job elsewhere, did not attend the women's meeting on Saturday afternoon and they questioned the way in which their small children behaved in church. Remarks such as, How come the pastor's wife doesn't bring a cake? or, They are the pastor's children! were heard frequently as if a toddler and a three-year-old can be made to understand why they have to behave differently from the way other kids behave in their courtyards.

Behind these remarks lies the assumption that the pastor's children must behave differently from other children. Many such families can probably tell similar stories. In this particular case, the pastor's credibility was linked to his family's behavior. Since he was a good enough man, his work, his theology, his moral life and even his moods were accepted. Furthermore, his wife's morality, mood or musical gifts were not questioned either. But people expected some-

thing more, something that seen from outside and in relative terms was totally aleatory. It is the underlying reasons for these comments that concern us here. Before continuing our story, we need to clarify what we mean by credibility.

When suggesting principles for interpretation to Christians living in contexts as diverse as the Lutheran constituency, the issue of credibility is perhaps among the most difficult ones to tackle. Credibility, in fact, works as a kind of mirror: it depends on how people see those in front of them and, in turn, how those see them. It depends on how others see and evaluate us, combined with a certain amount of guessing regarding our intentions, thoughts, etc., as well as on ourselves, our conformity to prevailing social rules and on how we perceive others. We all know that social rules change with time and location. Different contexts determine different "canons" of credibility. Thus, it is important to make explicit the context from which one writes and offers one's insight.

My context is one of religious pluralism: a large Jewish population; Islamic communities in certain areas of the country; a conservative Roman Catholicism that nominally comprises the majority of the population (and until relatively recently was the only church recognized by the state); an evangelical population very much divided into several mainline Protestant denominations; and hundreds of small independent Pentecostal and neo-Pentecostal churches that usually ignore one another. In other words, the religious background is diverse and peaceful, and in terms of its orientation, rather conservative, moralist and legalist.

Credibility

In my context, several models or "canons" of credibility coexist. I will review some of them.

Holiness

Whether theologically supported or not, many people hold two different canons. One for clergy (ministers) and one for "common people," the laity. The idea behind this double standard is that clergy (of whichever confession) are "holier" than "ordinary" people, closer to the Godhead. It is common to hear people say, "Since you are closer to God and he [sic] hears you more than me, please ask him [sic] for ... (a need is expressed)."

Such closeness to the Divine means being a holy person and therefore living a holy life. Even in churches in which ordination is not a sacrament, this special quality is ascribed to the professionals in the service of the church. I have not been able to figure out what it is that makes such persons holy. Vocation? The kind of work they do? Sacramental life? Prayer? Physical closeness to the altar, supposedly God's place? Authoritatively interpreting the Bible? Ordination? Roman Catholic influence?

Whatever the reasons, little can be done to change that. As the above story shows, a certain holiness is ascribed to the pastoral family, in the sense that certain behavior is expected of them beyond what the members of the congregation expect of themselves. Children are expected to behave like adults and wives are expected to lead women's gatherings and bake cakes for the occasion. Furthermore, they are expected to carry out diaconal work and, until recently, to play the organ during Sunday service—all for free and regardless of whether they have been called to work in the church or not.[1]

In this model, credibility is related to closeness to the Divine and applies to the person directly involved in sacred tasks (clergy) and his (and to a lesser degree, her) immediate family.

Mediation

Since 1492, the beginning of the Spanish and Portuguese colonization of South America, the Roman Catholic Church, allied to the military and political powers, has been very influential. A Roman Catholic cultural background pervades people's lives, regardless of whether they are practicing Roman Catholics or not. The above example, where clergy are one step above "common mortals" is one case in point. This example brings us to the next issue, which is that of mediation and mediators between the human and the Divine.

Many people have left the church because they cannot accept an intermediary between God and themselves who tells them how to behave and whether they are forgiven or not. Some feel that they do not need to go to worship because God is everywhere and that they can read the Bible and pray on their own. These sentiments reflect a disregard for any mediation between the Divine and the individual and are expressed by those who believe in God but disregard membership in a church (perceived as oppressive and money grabbing), worship (boring), and sacramental life (unnecessary). The individual chooses not

to have his or her personal relation to the Deity disturbed by any mediator.

In my context, many people disregard any mediation between the Sacred and themselves. This is expressed in their lack of participation in institutional expressions (such as church membership or worship) and in their preference for an individual relation to God or, in some cases, participation in non-formal worship. Reasons for this are several, including the church's representatives (discussed above), people's disappointment with institutions and their frequently corrupt maneuverings, and a lack of theological education on the meaning of rituals, sacraments and—even more important in my opinion—community.[2]

The church and "evildoers"

When we speak about evildoers we may refer to clergy (and some other people, mostly men) who, using their privileged position within the church and as God's representatives, abuse others. Evildoers are also the churches that protect these people rather than facing the evil within and cleansing themselves. Although sexual abuse is the best known example, it is not the only way in which people are abused. There is abuse of power and authority, psychological and theological abuse, mostly directed against laity within our own churches, but also sometimes against other groups outside our constituency.[3]

I am also referring to another, more external component, namely to the fact that people often perceive the church as supporting contradictions or hypocrisy. In small villages, where everyone knows one another, we often come across comments such as, if so-and-so, who is such a fool, regularly goes to church and even receives communion, I do not want to be part of such a church.

While such a comment merits a thorough discussion on what is the right understanding of the church, its mission and role, it also raises a harsh critique in the best tradition of the "classical" prophets. The church is only too often in cohorts with notorious evildoers. In fact, large parts of this world, including the Americas, were colonized in such a way, and ever since then traces of this sick marriage remain.

In order not to appear prejudiced against any particular church I shall cite an example from a large Lutheran congregation in a small town in Argentina. The mayor and some of the local government officials belong to the congregation. Half of them voted in the city's council in favor of a garbage dump which might potentially pollute the region with toxic garbage. The other half are fighting as

hard as they can against this project. How is the congregation to deal with this tension? What should the congregation's role be? What stance should it take? Should it say something or should it leave it to the political arena, since raising the issue would divide the congregation? Where is the evil in all this? Is it only outside the church or is it also inside? Where is the church's credibility and how can the Bible foster or hinder credibility on this issue?

At our second meeting, four categories of credibility were mentioned, viz.: the lives of the saints; repented sinners; works of hope and love out of faith; and the "institutional." According to a German study, the further removed a person is from the church, the more s/he expects from its clergy, and the closer s/he is, the more s/he expects from the whole community.

Credibility is largely determined by issues of personal and family holiness, the perceived need of specialized mediation between the person and God, and the relation of church and evildoers, and amongst these, especially misconduct of the clergy.[4] I notice that for most people, including clergy from several denominations, credibility has nothing to do with their church's documents or doctrine.

The following joke illustrates this point well: when the Vatican issues a controversial document, people in certain areas of the world discuss it and respond to it, others obey it and in Latin America they file it without reading it and go on working. Of course, implying that the Latin American church wholly identifies with the poor and is careless of its authority's teachings is a generalization. Nevertheless, in Latin America, far away from the administrative and/or power centers of the world, getting on with our own business without being bothered is the way forward.

Issues of sexuality

One very strong canon relates to sexual issues. Opinions differ on how "church people," especially clergy, should live. In a predominantly Roman Catholic environment, celibacy and birth control are controversial issues. Most people believe priests do not practice what they promised the church. Whether this is regarded as

scandalous, healthy or simply as being irrelevant depends very much on the person's views on vows, hypocrisy and sex. Furthermore, many people wonder with what authority somebody who is (supposedly) celibate, tells a family how to conduct their sex life, in particular how to regulate the size of their family.

Contraception may be a moot issue in certain areas of the world and raise an eyebrow among Lutherans (Why does it concern us?). Yet, it is a very touchy issue where the private and the social intersect. In how far can physicians and judges impose their church's teaching on the people?

Furthermore, there are cultural dimensions with a strong gender component to what constitutes family and what new models of family are acceptable—including same-sex families, one-parent families, extended families and others—and in the social and professional roles parents play. What happens to women in terms of employment, education, dreams, etc.? What happens to men whose honor is at stake when they can no longer support their families in a social environment that expects them to be the family's sole breadwinner? What happens to children who are deprived of one of their parents? What happens to people (some men, millions of women and children) subject to family violence and sexual abuse?

These issues need to be debated publicly, including within churches. If we are to discuss sex and credibility, we must speak up against sexual misconduct, including sexual harassment, abuse of any type—particularly child abuse—and rape. These acts are not only criminal, but when performed by clergy they are performed in the name of the Divinity the minister proclaims. Our God becomes a rapist, and not only that, he becomes a rapist father. Those who have not personally experienced such abuse, cannot imagine the effect on the victims' lives. This tragedy affects all churches. The blinder the churches are to it, the greater the damage and the more the church's credibility is seriously challenged. This brings me to my last point.

As I reviewed how credibility is being assessed by the common people in my context, it became clear that speaking up in the name of God and mediating between people and God are closely linked to the church's moral authority. Credibility is not tied to producing elaborate documents, but rather to addressing people's concrete concerns. The question is how the church responds to moral, ethical, economic and other burning issues.

People expect the church to:

- Have a prophetic message against all forms of injustice and violence,

including its own evildoers

- Not be allied to power groups, neither from in- nor outside
- Know from direct experience what it is speaking about (if its ministers are to speak of family, to have one; if they are to speak about poverty, to walk with the poor; etc.) and not to speak about what it does not practice in its own life
- Be coherent in its teaching and practices
- Live a moral life (beware: definitions of moral vary)
- Have a clergy (and other representatives) who live a non-damaging sexuality.

This list is not exhaustive and is based on my recollections of conversations with common people. It gives the reader some idea as to where I stand in terms of my context.

Seeking credibility when our Lord was not credible

In order to proceed, I shall turn to the question we must ask in the first place. How can we be credible. Or, are we to assume that we all want to be credible in the same way? With so many matters affecting what is credible, perhaps we would all agree on our desire to be credible—not necessarily on what that means in practice.

In the gospels' portrayals of Jesus, beyond dogmatic affirmations such as "fully human and fully divine," we encounter a man with a wonderful way of relating to people. One thing that characterizes Jesus' portrayal in the gospels is his openness to people, their needs, concerns, expectations, joys and questions. Of the different ways of living out God's reality, the gospels emphasize Jesus being "God with us," to the point that they recognize that Jesus had to hide when he needed some privacy.[5] Several of the encounters in which Jesus came to people in their need to proclaim to them God's grace are with those despised by society: lepers and others thought to be impure; prostitutes; poor

workers; tax-collectors; women unattached to households; slaves; those possessed by demons; foreigners. Without any doubt, his willingness to engage with them was one reason for his popularity in Galilee as was the fact that he taught with authority.

Wherein lay Jesus' authority? I think that the four evangelists answer this question differently in the four gospels. They concur in that he was the long-expected Messiah of God, Son of God and Redeemer. From the many traditions available to them, they chose those that better conveyed to their audience what these titles meant and how they had come true in Jesus Christ. Here I am especially thinking of the casting out of demons, restoring life to the dead, improving the quality of life of the blind, the deaf and lepers and of the multiplying of bread. While none of these would be unequivocal signs of Jesus' identity as Messiah, they affirmed a long-standing expectation in line with Isaiah's vision for the future: "The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, … to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners" (Isa 61:1).[6]

The gospels are also filled with stories that show Jesus' radical positions in terms of doing and proclaiming the kingdom of God. In this, Jesus stands in a long tradition of prophetic figures who were anything but popular in their environment. It was not only a matter of whether the king or the priests liked what the prophets had to say. Their words had to be measured against other words also proclaimed in the name of the same God and, fundamentally, they could only be assessed in retrospect, i.e., whether or not they had been fulfilled. Issues of credibility are debated in particular in Jeremiah. This is perhaps one reason why, according to Matthew, when Jesus questioned his disciples about the rumors concerning his identity, they told him that he was thought possibly to be John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.

Jesus' association with these prophets is telling. Elijah had been Yahweh's champion at a time when the Israelite kings relied on prophets to tell them what they wanted to hear—not what Yahweh wanted them to do. Elijah was involved in courtly politics (1 Kings 17–21). At times, Elijah was ready to give up for he felt totally alone in his calling (to which he, nevertheless, was faithful); at other times, he received strong support from others.

Jeremiah was prophet at a very critical time. Judea vacillated between loyalty to its overlord Babylonia and Egypt, Babylon's old-age enemy. There were prophets for and against Babylon, for and against Egypt, for and against the local king. There were siege, destruction, famine, war, thirst and the many illnesses that come with these. It

was certainly hard to know where God's Word lay. Yet, hard as it was, Jeremiah (and his opponent Hananiah and others) did not withdraw from his calling.[7]

Like Jesus, John the Baptist had a strong credibility among those who sought God's ways in the desert. He had his disciples and, until his execution, commanded great respect. Even soldiers went to inquire how to live God's Word in those final days, but the political and religious leaders in Jerusalem feared him and therefore got rid of him.

This reference to men of God suffices to show Jesus as a man with strong credibility among poor people and some religious leaders (e.g., Nicodemus or Joseph of Arimateah), and who met with much resistance from other quarters, notably the religious and political authorities—Jewish and Roman.

His being depicted in the company of Elijah, Jeremiah and John also indicates that his credibility had to do with his faithfulness to his calling and with Israel's prophetic tradition.

Jesus was a constant source of scandal because of his attachment to "nobodies" and his fearlessness to speak up. The earliest NT writings already recognize this: "For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles" (1 Cor 1:22–23).

Conclusion

What remains to be explored is the relationship between a Christian confessional community trying to be credible, and its Lord who was not credible to many, especially not to the system. Is this possible? No single answer, no matter how illuminated, would suffice here. Thus, what I suggest is just the beginning of a dialogue where other voices can be heard, and where each (Lutheran) community seeks its own answers.

As I see it, there will always be a tension between these two poles. At one extreme there is Jesus, made servant of all to bring to us salvation. Jesus the one who confronted the merchants, Zachaeus and the Pharisees with equal strength. Jesus, who obeyed to death on the cross, is also the risen Lord of heaven and earth. Yet, the model he brought to us is both that of peace and the sword, of service in love and confrontation with the world's powers, of joy and tears.

At the other extreme, there is today's world in which our churches seek to

witness to Jesus, while at the same time seeking to be accepted and acceptable. Only frequently they are too much "of the world."

There also remains the task of further explaining the relationship between credibility—and lack thereof—and mission. The church's credibility has an internal dimension that pertains to its own current and former membership. But, above all, it has an external dimension that affects the world. In this witnessing dimension, the church's theoretical and practical stance on dictatorial regimes, the economic exploitation of the poor by the richest countries and people,

Examples of corruption abound. In some churches, corruption has had more to do with power mismanagement (including clientelism and monetary mishandling); in others, with political alliances with dictatorial regimes. Then there are those churches where corruption has taken the shape of sexual misconduct and the denial of such by its authorities.

ecological crises, war, undocumented and other migrants and issues related to sexuality, etc., is of utmost importance.

Of course, there is no way to "be on good terms both with God and the Devil." The church needs to opt for the poor or the rich, for those seeking economic advantage or those caring for the environment, for alternative economies or the neoliberal system, and so on. Consequently, as part of its missionary strategy, each church has to plan its policies on worldly matters.

I shall conclude my reflections on this issue here, for I do not expect to be able to provide what the New Testament and the history of the church have not managed to provide: a solution to this dilemma. The New Testament witnesses to the tension between these (and other) trends, that of speaking the prophetic word to the world even to death and that of seeking to give to the world an acceptable witness. I do not expect the church to find such a solution until the church and this world come to an end and Jesus comes back.

Meanwhile, the balance between these trends will be, at best, a very delicate one. It will be checked by our self-examination helped by the Bible and our own confessions, and by the mutual challenge as communities that are part of social, religious, political, military and economic configurations. Configurations that vary with time and location and which, therefore, cannot afford only one, uniform "recipe" as to how to live out Christ's witness.

Notes

[1] My church is a small one, with about thirty clergy (1/3 female and 2/3 male). Most of the female pastors are married to a pastor or are single.

[2] People who express this kind of view believe that God never questions them, never challenges their behavior, attitudes or commitments, nor asks them to share their material, spiritual and social resources with others.

[3] I would rather not list our own misdemeanors of which there are plenty of examples, especially if we listen to our weakest brothers and sisters and those who have left the churches.

[4] Throughout I have used the concept of the church's credibility rather than the Bible's or the interpreting community's credibility. Although in some of my affirmations it is the institution that is involved (often against its own people's desires or intentions), in "the church" a number of elements are often involved: an interpreting community; its recognized authorities; Jesus' tool for mission in the world; the communion of saints; the community gathered around the table; etc. That the Bible can be used for supporting opposing views is not new. This does not require further comment as the Bible itself holds opposing views on the same issue.

[5] Mark even depicts Jesus getting annoyed or at least burdened by so many requirements from people, many of which came out of their everyday needs (Mk 3:7–10, 19b–20; 4:35; 7:24).

[6] The fact that John the Baptist would send his disciples to Jesus to ask whether he was the expected one or not (Mt 11:2–6) shows that Jesus' messianism was not immediately obvious even to prophets such as John. But it also shows that Isaiah's programmatic oracle was seen as relating at least to this text and its parallel in Lk 4:16–30. On the other hand, there were other messianic expectations, some of which (but not all) were also taken up by Jesus.

[7] Even for prophets like Jeremiah and Hananiah it was hard to know for sure how God was acting. Perhaps the most important point to make in relation to the strife between Hananiah and Jeremiah is that neither of them could know for sure whether they were right or wrong in their appreciation and readings of reality and thus, we cannot accuse Hananiah of lying.

"We are the only Bible some People Ever get to Read."

Authority of the Bible and the Credibility of the Witnessing Community in Asia

Wilfried John

"We are the only Bible some people ever get to read." This is particularly true in the Asian context where religious pluralism is a reality and every religion is trying to make known its religious identity and ideals through various missionary efforts. In a context of interreligious communication and dialogue, the worth of the Christian Scriptures and professed religious ideals are measured not only by the credibility of the scripted text, which is faithfully read and revered, but also by the credibility of its adherents or witnessing community. The same is true for other religions. Hence, adherents of any living religion are also its ambassadors. In other words, in a multireligious context, knowledge of another religion is based on what one sees being practiced. Asians very much believe that actions speak louder than words.

In Southeast Asia, particularly Malaysia, Christians are "the only Bible some people ever get to read." The way in which Christ's teachings are practiced bears direct witness to the content, the gospel message witnessed to in the Scriptures. The biblical message has to be performed for the world to see. Such a theatrical requirement places God's written words on a "stage" rather than in a "library." This kind of performance is required to communicate the truth in a simple and credible manner.

In the case of Malaysia, the importance of credibility (of the witnessing and preaching community) is placed in the context of mission. Thus it differs from Mercedes García Bachmann's perceived understanding, according to which credibility is viewed in relational terms: clergy and laity. In the Malaysian context, the following emphases are necessary.

- A credible witness is one who is competent to give account and is worthy of belief. In deciding on a witness' credibility, it is always pertinent to consider whether s/he is capable of knowing thoroughly that to which

s/he testifies.

- Whether s/he honestly carries out her/his witness, without the purpose or desire to deceive, suppress or add to the truth.

- The church is called to be a pilgrim, a stranger and sojourner in the world. One of the church's functions is to "blow the whistle" and to reveal the farce, the falsity, the charade, the whole deceptive mechanism that constitutes the world. God is in complete opposition to conventional worldly wisdom and does not want God's church to follow suit; trivialize those things that are ultimate and absolute and make absolute and ultimate those that are trivial. On the contrary, the church must follow the way of the cross.

The nexus between the authority of the Word and the credibility of the preaching community

In Asia, the interconnection between these two aspects cannot be overlooked or taken lightly. Bearing witness to the gospel of Christ and preaching the Word complement each other. The authority of the Word is understood as the fundamental basis for Christian action and preaching. The Scripture's finality is presupposed without denying that the Bible is culturally conditioned, expresses human experiences and struggles and is a down-to-earth book.

True biblical preaching aims at communicating the divine perspective in a way that impacts people's lives and understanding. The Word serves like a plumb line from above, and church and world are called to make the necessary adjustments in order to follow the spiritual requirements and values of the kingdom of God. Therefore, if the Word that is preached makes no spiritual demands, such preaching is defective. God's Word was not sent into the world for the purpose of amusing and entertaining its listeners. One of my great complaints about the modern church is how little it requires of its members. A church that does not adhere to true biblical preaching is essentially a passive "pay-the-bill," and "come-for-our-Sunday-fix" kind of organization. I call this the Sunday-Monday fallout, where my Sunday experiences have nothing to do with my Monday experiences. If biblical preaching is taken seriously, it invites us to act against the powers of oppression and abuse, and can attract the animosity and opposition

of corrupt powers.

The nexus between the authority of the Word and the credibility of the witnessing community: radical love and being a good neighbor

The Bible is about preaching and practicing radical love. What was radical in Christ's incarnation was love. Whether in a situation of minority or majority, the Bible demands the same radical attitude and quality of Christian witness. Hence, it leaves the church no other option, but to evolve so as to become a community of love. As Isaiah 53 notes, Jesus was presented to the world as a suffering servant, without pomp and glory. Although this may seem an unconvincing portrayal of love, the imagery speaks of God's radical and incomprehensible love for God's creation. As Young rightly notes, this passage does not just describe Christ's physical appearance, but rather "the appearance of the servant was such that man [sic], judging from wrong perspectives, would completely misjudge him."[1]

- People were looking for a king in the Messiah, but he came as a loving servant
- People were looking for a warrior in the Messiah, but he willingly became a loving prisoner
- People were looking for a deliverer in the Messiah, but he offered Himself as a loving sacrifice.

Despite this misjudgment, Isaiah notes that the servant intentionally dwelt among the people to fulfill God's will and mission. He preached the values of God's kingdom and the message of reconciliation in word and deed. The church in Malaysia, representing the Body of Christ, needs to see its presence and purpose within the community in a similar light. John 3:16 testifies to that radical love ("For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life"). By being real and present, God responded to human predicament and plight. There are numerous examples in the Scriptures of this love-based servant leadership (Mt 8:3; 20:34; 26:50; 26:52; Lk 19:5–7).

Similarly, the church must reflect this difference in its existence, so that the message and mission of the incarnate Christ make a difference to the nature and

lives of the people. In the pluralistic and multiethnic society of Malaysia, the church has the moral, social and spiritual responsibility to be a good neighbor and to extend neighborly love to the other (Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, etc.). In a pluralistic context, mission is primarily about living out Christ's radical love, both individually and collectively as a church. This involves exercising a spirit of tolerance, *muhibbah* (unity among people), nonviolence, avoiding religious extremism, joining the struggle for peace and the active participation in the country's development agenda.

> Church is not only apostolic but it is also prophetic. The prophet as God's and the people's spokesperson (as an intercessor) just learns how to speak. Our concern in Malaysia is about the proclamation, a prophetic understanding of the Gospel and the love of God and our neighbors. Our method is a Christological method–the way Christ lived in solidarity with his people. Hence, the way of the cross.[2]

The way of the cross is the way of radical love. This enables us to recognize our neighbors outside the institutional church and provides us with a purpose to embark on a friendship mission and enter into a loving relationship. Our faithfulness ought to be characterized by obedience, humility and service to the Malaysian community. Although technically the authority of the Word cannot be discredited by false attitudes and actions, practically it could, especially in situations where Christians are in a minority. This is so because non-Christians do not get to see Christ or to read the Bible, but they do get to see the church and read the Christian lifestyle. In this sense, Christians could be the only Bible some people get to read.

The authority of the Word and credibility of the Christian witness in an Islamic state

As Malaysia moves speedily along the road of development, religion continues to remain a dominant factor. For want of a better expression we could even refer to a religious patriotism, where the love of God is being translated into love of the nation. The church ought to see itself as a key player in promoting faith and, as 1 Timothy 2:1–3 reminds us, pray for the nation and its leaders, because such intercession epitomizes the message of the cross.

In Asia, where and whenever religious groups enter into conflict, the root cause can more often than not be linked to some form of religious fundamentalism. It is in such a context that the church should pray for sanity and tolerance to prevail. Religious fundamentalism is based on strong notions of religious and spiritual elitism and promotes alienation and oppression. The church needs carefully to avoid such tendencies because religion is meant to bring out the best in humanity. Positive witness includes the willingness to take the other's perspective seriously, even though it may differ from one's own. Christ became incarnate in order to create an opportunity for people to know and understand God (Jn 14:9). Christ brought heaven to earth.

An equally important element in relationship building is sensitivity (Eph 3:14). Racial harmony and religious tolerance, which contribute greatly toward the eradication of violence and religious fundamentalism, are positively nurtured when people are taught to be sensitive to one another's needs. The church should witness to this. Christ was patient and kind even to those who led him to the cross. I believe that the task of creating heaven on earth (let Thy kingdom come) is a corporate responsibility and can best be achieved in Malaysia when churches come together in order with one voice to affirm and proclaim the need for sensitivity, racial harmony and religious tolerance. Although Malaysia is an Islamic state, the church's witness to these incarnational ideals would make the Word credible and Christ acceptable.

Authority of the Word and credibility through ecumenical witness

In the Asian context, enhancing ecumenical unity and church cooperation are vital. In seeking to fulfill the Great Commission and Great Commandment, churches need to transcend denominational boundaries and constantly aim toward overcoming ecumenical challenges that hamper a credible witness. In Asia, denominationalism, which some see as the legacy of the foreign mission agencies, has developed in both positive and negative directions. Its negative elements such as polarization and sharp distinctions have led to rivalry and the fragmentation of the church. The church needs to reinforce the biblical understanding of the church as a community of believers, a fellowship in the risen Christ, catholic and universal. Therefore, Paul is able to speak of the church as one entity confessing "one Lord, one faith and one baptism" (Eph 4:5). The Christian community is rooted in the incarnated Christ, constantly

bearing witness to the shared unity and received grace. "The ecumenical mandate is a quest for healing among Christians and their churches, and that we do this both to be faithful to the gospel and for the sake of the whole creation."[3] Christ has made us his own and he is not divided. As we seek him, we find one another.[4]

Ecumenical unity and church cooperation,

- Draw Christians away from an egocentric ecclesiology and spirituality into an empathetic Christocentric *koinonia*

- Provide for a common witness in obedience to the worldwide missionary commission by avoiding wasteful and scandalous rivalries and duplication

- Provide a consolidated platform for fulfilling the diaconal task

- Allow the church to become inclusive. Because they "celebrate the variety of gifts coming from the different cultures as a way of affirming generosity and goodness of God, strengthening the mission of the church, and enriching life in the world."[5]

- Help to reaffirm the marks of the church: one, holy, catholic and apostolic. Therefore "Ecumenism is not one agenda among other agendas of the local church, but rather it is the way of being the church."[6]

Credibility of the Word and the diaconal witness

Any rapidly modernizing and economically developing society has to face the challenges arising from paradigm shifts and changing ethical norms.

> Urbanization commonly brings with it a host of sociological and behavioral changes and problems, as well as different modes of socioeconomic organizations peculiar to cities. Among these are impersonalization of relationships and breakdown of family values—two main pillars of the society.[7]

In Malaysia these complex social and economic processes have left behind an ailing community that is unable to keep pace with the rest of the world. Here the

role of the church in proclaiming the whole gospel must be understood as one with an inalienable commitment to healing body, spirit and soul.

All living faiths in Malaysia teach their adherents to seek and administer justice as part of their call to spiritual living. The church must see justice as a spiritual issue that requires a religious response, contrary to what some spiritualistic traditions, which are ambivalent toward involvement in issues of social justice, may teach. The church's involvement in issues of social justice is not an option but a mandate,

> because human development and liberation are intrinsic to human wholeness and salvation, essential to the incarnate Person of Jesus Christ and his risen life, to the love that lies at the heart of the Christian reality, to the rights and dignity of every human person and the human community.[8]

The Christian proclamation of salvation must embody involvement in struggles, aspirations and hope. As the World Council of Churches' Commission on World Mission and Evangelism noted,

> As sin is both individual and corporate so God's liberating power changes both persons and structures. We have to overcome the dichotomies in our thinking between soul and body, person and society, humankind and creation.[9]

Credibility of the Word and the church's critical solidarity with society

The church has to be wary of the influence of separatist theological ethics as this would hamper its ethical witness. Separatist theological ethics are based on a dualistic notion that draws a sharp contrast between church and world. Clearly this is a weak and narrow interpretation of texts such as 1 Peter 2:11 and 1 John 2:15 and implies that if the church wants to sojourn unpolluted and undefiled it should keep withdrawn. As Pannenberg states,

> [it] was the negative attitude of dialectical theology over against the natural world that tended to deny the present society whatever elements of peace and justice it might incorporate, in order to comfort it with the ideal of the eschatological future.[10]

As an alternative and appropriate response we suggest that the church continuously seek ways of being involved in the struggle for justice and peace. This does not suggest conforming to the standards of the world, but seeks to facilitate a transformational process, whereby the gospel would serve as an agent of transformation.

In my opinion, the following are some common ethical and moral concerns of modern Malaysian society that require our attention and intercession:

- Corruption and corrupt practices
- Exploitation of foreign labor by unscrupulous employers (neo-slavery)
- Entrepreneurial dishonesty in pricing and malpractice in marketing defective products
- Rape, incest, prostitution and homosexuality
- Child abuse, illegal abortion and child abandonment
- Drug abuse and related crimes
- Domestic violence against women and children, gender bias
- Land abuse.

Credibility of the Word and cross religio-cultural witness

How do local Christians (Chinese, Indian and indigenous tribes in Malaysia such as Rungus, Kadazan, Dusun, Murut, Iban) continue to maintain their indigenous cultural identity while engaging in interreligious and cross-cultural conversations? This demands a multidimensional and creative appreciation of local cultures. Culture is not just about traditional etiquette and practices which order a particular group's social life, but encompasses a much deeper worth and relevance for communities. It too provides identity, enhances spirituality and forges unity. Culture can be a tool for witnessing to Christ's liberative gospel and the church can help overcome hostilities when cultures clash. Such an appreciative approach would enable the

church meaningfully and credibly to engage in interreligious and cross-cultural conversations.

Credibility of the Word and sola scriptura witness

The principle of the Lutheran Reformation, Scripture alone, means that the church must uphold the finality and authority of the Scriptures and remain Christocentric in its theology, approaches and conclusions. For the Reformers, the "Scriptures and the whole tradition in its various ways have this legal authority in the church only because of their liberating authority."[11]

In the same way, the Reformation emphasis on "Christ Alone" is an important theme for the church in the context of a pluralistic society. Although this may seem a rather exclusive theological claim, it is an important biblical one. This affirmation is vital to the existence of the church, both in terms of intra Christian doctrinal formulations and the communication of the gospel to people "outside." This claim is not made arrogantly, but by taking into consideration Christ's cross. The Malaysian church should incarnationally affirm Christ's supremacy through actions of love, hope and peace.

We tend to overlook these vital precepts in our daily lives. We are overwhelmed by secularism, which results in weakened spirituality and moral insensitivity. In view of that, the church must continuously confess that Christ and the Word remain at the center of Christian theology, spirituality, life and witness. The Malaysian church must remember that Christ is the head and the Word remains the final authority. Based on this acceptance, the church needs to reach out to the people; such reaching out is incarnational. It is characterized by an attitude, which strives to help people to learn to love Jesus, commit themselves to the knowledge of the Word and live in peace and hope.

Conclusion

According to Isaiah 53:12, Christ emerges as victor only because of his vicarious suffering and death. The radical way of the cross sets the standard for the church, which like its master ought to display similar values and character, regardless of whether it is loved or rejected. This suggests that the church needs to be sensitive and alert to the community's needs, challenges and struggles.

The way of the cross is people oriented.

Notes

[1]Edward J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1972), p. 342.

[2] S. S. Batumalai, "Malaysian Neighborology–A Prophetic Christology for Neighborology," in *Asian Journal of Theology*, vol. 5:1 (1991), p. 346.

[3] Diane C. Kessler, "Ecumenism Defined," in *The Ecumenical Review* (1998), p. 278.

[4] W. A. Vissert'T Hooft (ed.), *The First Assembly of the World Council of Churches. Official Report* (London: SCM Press, 1949).

[5] Romeo D. Rosario, *Christian Reflection within an Emerging Industrialized Society—Image of Ecumenicity at Sabah Theological Seminary* (Kota Kinabalu: Sabah Theological Seminary, 1998), p. 100.

[6] Henriette T. Hutabarat-Lebang, "Journeying Together," in *The Ecumenical Review* (1998), p. 285.

[7] Thu En Yu, *Christian Reflection within an Emerging Industrialized Society—Religious Pluralism as a Challenge to Theology and Theological Education* (Kota Kinabalu: Sabah Theological Seminary, 1998), p. 148.

[8] Robert Hardowirjono, *Serving the Faith by Promoting Justice—Living Theology in Asia* (London: SCM Press, 1981), p. 148.

[9] Salvation Today Conference, Bangkok, 1973, cited in Gerald Anderson, Thomas, Stransky (eds), *Mission Trends*, no. 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing House, 1975), p. 236.

[10] Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Christian Spirituality* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983), p. 51.

[11] Eric W. Gritsch and Robert W. Jenson (eds), *Lutheranism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), p. 13.

Comments on Chapter VII: "We are the Bible People Read": Living the Bible within God's Mission

The relevance of the credibility of the church as the community that interprets the gospel varies from context to context. Following the collapse of the apartheid regime in South Africa, some churches cooperated with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, while others did not. After the demise of communism in Hungary, only some of those in the church who had collaborated with the regime came forward, while others were caught by surprise when the relevant information was uncovered. In Malaysia, where the church has to carry out its mission in a minority situation, the authority of the Bible is either corroborated or disregarded depending on how Christians live out their faith, particularly *vis-à-vis* their Muslim neighbors. Sacred texts may compete. The major traditional religions in Asia can boast ancient sacred texts written in old languages, some of which predate the Bible. In this context, the way in which Christians practice their faith based on their foundational text might be of the utmost importance.

Linking the credibility of the Bible to that of the church or Christian ethos raises a number of critical questions. How does this conviction relate to the tenet of the self-imposition of the Bible and the sovereign work of the Holy Spirit? How can we guard against the misunderstanding that it is we who authenticate the authority of the Bible? Furthermore, this linkage might lapse into legalism where particular moral requirements are established that are expected to provide the sort of cohesion in the believing community which in turn will attract others. Is there not a kind of "incredibility" that corresponds to the Christian faith itself and springs from its prophetic calling? Uncritical compliance with outside expectations can compromise the witness of the church. The ordination of women might be a case in point. Some will insist that the church needs to resist the temptation of yielding to the pressure of modernity to ordain women. Others will argue that the full inclusion of women in the ministry of the church and the doing away of patterns of discrimination and exclusion reflect the

prophetic calling of the church. To what extent, in what circumstances and to whom was Jesus credible–or not?

The issue of credibility might expose a weakness in Lutheran ecclesiology according to which the marks of the church, the *notae ecclesiae*, are the Word and the sacraments (*Confession Augustana VII*). In its third thesis, the Barmen Theological Declaration, which was adopted by the Confessing Church in Germany in 1934 during the Nazi-regime, professes that the church is called to bear witness to its belonging to the God who justifies sinners not only by way of its faith and message, but also by its obedience as well as its structures and orders. In light of that, many are proposing that diakonia be added to the two classical Lutheran marks of the church.

Viewed from a missionary perspective, there is apparently a close link between the church's credibility and that of the Bible. And yet, for the sake of God's sovereignty and of the freedom of the Spirit, they need to be distinguished.

Appendix

Once again: The Bible– "Word of God?"

After the second meeting of the study team in Warsaw, February 2006, the editor sent an e-mail to Alexander Priloutskii and Wilfried John, both of whom had been unable to attend the meeting, copying the whole group. This gave rise to an impassioned debate between Boettcher and other study team members on the question whether the Bible should be called "Word of God." Once more fundamental issues were raised. Excerpts of this e-mail exchange as well as Priloutskii's clarification of his position have been included here.

Reinhard: I would encourage you to respond to the outcome of Warsaw. This would be all the more important as I assume that the two of you [Alexander and Wilfried], each in his own distinctive ways, might not agree with all of the positions arrived at, e.g., the conviction that the Bible is not as such the Word of God, but rather witnesses to Jesus Christ. What do you think of the title ("Witnessing to God's Faithfulness. Issues of Biblical Authority") which was deliberately chosen in order to reflect this distinction?

Diane: I would object to saying that I do not consider the Bible to be the Word of God. I have spoken and would continue to speak of the Word of God as threefold: Jesus as the incarnate Word, Scripture as the written Word and proclamation as the Word spoken and received under the guidance of the Spirit.

Reinhard: With some qualification I would agree. But this way of putting it might give rise to the notion that all three of them are on a par, with which I would vigorously take issue. Rather, there is a very distinct "nexus of determination," a clear "hierarchy" in terms of an incarnational process: Jesus Christ determines the Bible which in turn is the basis of the preached Word. And, conversely: the preached Word hinges on and is grounded in the Bible which testifies to and refers us to the God of Israel in Christ. I would agree with the threefold juxtaposition of the "Word" only on the basis of this structure.

Márta: Thanks for the clarification. I agree with what Reinhard very clearly set out in terms of the hierarchy of the three "participants" of the definition. I understand

that the claim should precede the problems, but I would argue for a much closer and more immediate connection between the two. My fear is that in our "sound-bite culture" only the claim would be heard and then (mis)interpreted. Infallibility would certainly come in at this point. We should be much more explicit about what we mean. This could perhaps also make it easier for those in the group who don't quite agree to voice their criticism of our position.

Reinhard: I wonder if we really are that far apart from each other. Responding to the question, Is the Bible Word of God? I would personally respond: No, ultimately it is not, because it "only" bears witness to the Word of God which is Jesus Christ himself (Jn 1). But I would also dare to say: Yes, it is, but with the proviso that it is so in a different way than Jesus Christ. In hindsight, I realize that in Warsaw we circumvented this thorny issue by omitting the term "Word of God" altogether, thus leaving room for different interpretations, or at least nuances.

Diane: Ok, the final word from me on this. For me, this is not about sound bites and the need to explain ourselves. It is about faith claims and communication. I must begin with a simple statement that the Bible is the Word of God. My best way to protect against a knee-jerk reaction to this is to say at the outset that the Word of God manifests itself in three ways: Jesus, Bible, proclamation. We begin there and then map out the implications. If I were to begin by qualifying what I mean, I have lost from the outset. I much prefer to say, OK, this is our starting point. Now how do we unpack this? How is this true?

Alexander: I would like to make some comments concerning the disputes about the Word of God.

I consider this topic to belong to the sphere of faith, not rational speculation. Moreover, I think (paraphrasing Luther) it is a rock, on which the church stands or falls. Otherwise, we would not have any differences in the field of hermeneutic conclusions made on the basis of studies of the Bible and works of Homer, since they both are ancient texts of religious content. But then, what do we mean by *sola scriptura*? Rejecting the thesis that the Bible is Word of God, we deprive this *sola scriptura* notion of its meaning. This leads to the revision of all faith, including Lutheran confessional books. I consider such a development of the discussion to be too bold and unacceptable.

Claims such as that the Bible is only a stage in the development of forms of divine revelation or one knot in this chain (web), frighten me. I think such

approaches might shake the borders of faith and deprive believers of their immutable and reliable guidelines.

If we know that we have the Word of God, but that it has various forms and contents, in sources which strive to reach infinity or, in case when none really knows how many of them exit, then this means that we do not have the Word of God. If one considers Revelation in this way then the content of faith loses its kerygmatic basis and the subject of faith falls apart into eclectic fragments. If nobody knows borders and the number of these knots or what constitutes such a knot then anyone may prove or refute anything. Luther seems to have written about the same (lectures on Galatians) in his dispute with "enthusiasts," who emphasized having a special calling or revelation.

At the same time, I am ready to agree that if the question about the Bible as Word of God was positively resolved by traditional Lutheran theology then we still do not know what conclusions might be made concerning this by the church today. What does it mean to us, modern Christians, who live in various geopolitical realities, to have Holy Scripture in the textual form, which has its historical, geographical and political contexts? How can and must we use this Scripture in our life? Do our understanding and reception of Scripture correspond to the intention of the divine author?

I think that these questions can only be stated correctly once we have defined that the subject of the question cannot be included in the framework of the usual rational paradigm. The divine author of Scripture has absolute eternal existence and the text of biblical revelation, verbally formed, exits within a created, dimensional and temporary paradigm. Since the content of Scripture is related to the realization of divine providence in the world (creation, redemption, sanctification) then mystical construction (refraction) of the eternal in temporary categories is present in Scripture. Without taking into account the fact that Scripture is not only a text with linguistic categories, but also an instrument of divine providence present in God from eternity and relevant in human history, one cannot answer all these questions.

The Bible is the Word of God because (1) it has a divine author and (2) its focus is Christ (Christocentrism of Scripture).

One aspect does not exclude the other one. I will allow myself to paraphrase the creed: Christ was born but not written; God incarnated, but not in a book; the Bible is a book, but not God, Word of God written, but not born.

Reinhard: I read your response with much excitement because I see some

common ground, particularly the remark which brings to light the relation as well as the difference between Christ and the Bible.

Let me just clarify a possible misunderstanding. In terms of the necessity and relevance of the Bible, I consider myself a staunch Lutheran anti-enthusiast. Since the Bible bears witness to God in a way which no other document matches nor claims to be on a par with, I do consider the Bible as indispensable for Christian faith. Since faith responds to God, God's saving actions or promise, and since it is through the Bible that I can know about God as saving and justifying us I can never envision doing away with the Bible or even relativizing it in its central and crucial role.

Contributors

Reinhard Boettcher, The Lutheran World Federation, Geneva, Switzerland.

Márta Cserháti, Evangelical Lutheran Theological University, Budapest, Hungary.

Mercedes García Bachmann, Instituto Universitario ISEDET, Buenos Aires, Argentina.

Elelwani Bethuel Farisani, University of Kwazulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa.

Diane Jacobson, Luther Seminary, St Paul MN, USA.

Wilfried John, Sabah Theological Seminary, Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia.

Alexander Priloutskii, Evangelical Lutheran Church of Ingria in Russia, Petersburg, Russia.

Günter Thomas, Ruhr-University, Bochum, Germany.

In what sense is the Bible the Word of God? In what sense is it authoritative for Lutheran Christians and the life of the church? How does this affect our interpretation? In interaction with one another, theologians from different parts of the world explore these and other key questions, and identify some common ground amid their differences.

The Lutheran World Federation
150, rte de Ferney
CH-1211 Geneva 2
Switzerland

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