

“Thinking it over...” Issue #2

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THE BIBLE: WORD OF GOD?

If asked, “Do you believe in the Bible?,” I would be inclined to say: no, I do not; at least I would hesitate. Let me explain what I mean.

WALKING ON A TIGHTROPE

We are caught in a quandary: while the Bible is central to our Christian faith, most of us no longer require women to cover their heads when praying in a worship service, although the apostle Paul demanded that this practice be followed (1 Cor 11:2ff.). And hardly anyone will use the instructions for so-called “Holy Wars” as a basis and model for dealing with “enemies” (Deut 20:10ff.).

What does it mean, then, to take the Bible seriously when at the same time we feel an instinctive need to treat particular passages with some reservation?

In which way have you come across this question in your life and in your church?

GOD IN HISTORY: THE BIBLE AS WITNESS

In the course of my own life as a Christian and theologian I have come to realize that human traditions, concepts and institutions emerge out of a sometimes long and complex history and are subject to and shaped by economic, political and other conditions. Religions and their holy scriptures are no exception to this. The Bible too is the result of a distinct human history.

If this is by and large correct, it becomes clear that in terms of finding guidance with regard to problems we face we cannot expect to draw results from the Bible that will remain valid universally and for all times. Rather, we are bound to reexamine our results ever anew in light of new experiences and new insights.

Our search for what it means to live as Christians today shares the "historicity" of human existence. At the same time this search boldly upholds the conviction of faith, based on experience of many generations, that there is indeed an ultimate point of reference—produced not by ourselves or by fellow-humans, but by the One the Bible calls the God of Israel, Jesus Christ, Holy Spirit, whom the universal church professes as the Triune God. And it is this God who has established his lasting covenant with his people Israel, who has disclosed himself in the history of Jesus of Nazareth, who has called all the people on

earth in the power of his Spirit—who is borne witness to in the Bible. In this sense I would say that the Bible is not itself the Word of God, but it is the human and historical witness to the Word that God has spoken in disclosing himself in history with Israel and in Jesus of Nazareth in the power of the Spirit. Conversely, it is not exclusively but decisively through the Bible that we gain access to God's love, faithfulness, saving work, promise and commandment, by means of which God gives himself to us, grabs hold of us, calls us to faith, hope and obedience in the power of his Spirit.

It is for these reasons that the Bible is so central to our faith. It is only the Bible which assures us that this God is a gracious God who remains faithful to Israel and to the church and to humankind, despite the presence of sin. God's never failing faithfulness has been exercised and assured in the cross of Jesus. It is this "historical connection" with God's own dealing with us, as well as the fact that the message based on this book bearing witness to that history, has led innumerable generations to faith, hope and obedience in the power of the Holy Spirit, which is the principal reason for appreciating the Bible over any other book.

It might be asked how this understanding is in line with our Lutheran tradition.

Martin Luther kept praising the Bible as the living voice of the liberating gospel, the source of our comfort and joy. But at the same time he dared to distinguish the value of its various books with breathtaking boldness and frankness, even raising the question if some of them were rightly part of the Bible. Evidently he had an acute sense of its humanness and of the fact that some of these books are closer to the Bible's christological center, thus weightier, than others.

How do you understand the relation between the book of the Bible and God's saving and revealing work?

GOING ASTRAY ...

If this is a responsible approach to dealing with the Bible, it calls into question two all too common approaches:

The first approach negates the distinction between the history of God's self-revelation on the one hand, and on the other hand how this is witnessed to in the Bible, which has been "produced" by human beings under specific identifiable historical conditions. It is our faith conviction that this human production was permeated and embraced by the work of God's Spirit. If we ignore this basic distinction we tend to make absolute biblical passages which were bound to certain historical circumstances and are no longer relevant (1 Cor 11:2ff.) or are incompatible with the core of Christian faith (see e.g., Deut 20:10ff.).

The second questionable approach to the Bible is to declare this age-old book to be outdated. We find this notion particularly among secularized skeptics, but also among some fellow-Christians. When we came across unwieldy, less palatable

biblical texts, time and again some of my students would suggest: “Let’s at least at this point, forget about the Bible; let us turn to more topical resources.” Here I kept disagreeing, because this way of dealing with the Bible, now from the opposite side, again disregards the witnessing function of this book. It comes down to relinquishing eternal truth because it is contained “in jars of clay” (2 Cor 4:7).

Have you come across such tendencies in your community, in your church, in the development of your own faith? People might even have good reasons to think that way. Could you imagine which ones?

CONSEQUENCES: WALKING ON A TIGHTROPE AS JOY AND BURDEN

An appreciation of the Bible in the positive sense set forth above has consequences:

It helps us to discover our commonalities and differences with the Bible and its agents/ subjects in light of our different contexts: as we are struggling with life in hope and fear, in joy and frustration under particular historical and societal conditions, be it in Tanzania, in India or in Canada—so did they. This provides for similarities between us and them, as well for specific differences. This insight might be relevant, for example in viewing liberation struggles in light of Israel’s Exodus and Jesus’ resurrection.

It helps us to understand why the Bible relates to a specific question in a particular way: For example Paul and James, evidently presented the issue of justification and good works in seemingly opposing ways because they had to face up to much different challenges. This prompted them to set forth entirely differing emphases in order to struggle adequately with the same problem: being saved by God’s grace and yet called to live a life in response to that grace.

It helps us to relate the gospel creatively (not arbitrarily!) to our own challenges and concerns along this line: “What does it have to say to us today, for example regarding the relation between men and women, in light of what it had to say about this under conditions of Greco-Roman cultures?” Wilfried Joest, a German scholar, aptly captured this hermeneutical task in the following way: The challenge for us today in communicating the message of the Bible is to preach the same gospel in a different way without preaching a different gospel (see W. Joest, *Fundamentaltheologie*, Kohlhammer-Verlag: Stuttgart/Berlin/Köln/Mainz, 1974, p. 183).

This provides a basis for sharing our experiences with and perceptions of the biblically testified gospel from our different contexts, enabling us to enrich, challenge and critique each other in our respective understandings of the gospel and its meaning

for our lives. This is an opportunity to live out what it means to be a communion of churches.

This also empowers us to become aware that biblical texts can be misused ideologically, for example in order to legitimize wars in the name of fighting what we deem to be evil. We need to be sensitive to our own tendencies to harnessing biblical texts for our own purposes.

This (self-)critical understanding of the Bible, though, comes with a cost:

It prevents us from expecting clear-cut answers from these texts, which can be mechanically applied, because they speak to us out of a world that was in many ways different from our present one. But that requires continual rereading of the Bible in light of new questions and challenges and sharing our “re-search”- attempts within the communion of sisters and brothers. In addition, that requires being attentive to insights, that, for example, secular sciences provide with regard to the dynamics of human sexuality and other anthropological insights that are at our disposal today, but that Paul was totally unaware of, when he pronounced indiscriminately his devastating verdict on any sort of homosexuality in Romans 1. Under historical and societal conditions different from the ones prevailing at biblical times, and in light of new insights (i.e., into the dynamics of human sexuality), we may sometimes need to be critical of what a particular scriptural passage says (e.g., Lev 20:13) in order to concur with the core of the gospel. Conversely, ignoring these differences and sticking with the wording of a particular passage might violate the core and spirit of the gospel!

This does not mean setting ourselves over against the Bible. Neither does it mean manipulating biblical texts at will. But it does mean that we take seriously the fact that we are on our way (Heb 13:14). Moving along we are encouraged and bound to turn ever anew to the Bible for orientation for our lives, confident that through this human book we hear the voice of the Triune God, and that this voice will guide us into all truth (Jn 16:3). It is a truth that will never be at our disposal, which God will give us in his own freedom.

*What are your reactions to this approach? Frustration, fear, freedom, new hope?
What would you add or address differently?*

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