

Neither Authoritarian nor Diffident: Conversing About Biblical Differences

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*Published in Uniting Church Studies (Melbourne, Australia;
http://ucs.uca.org.au/about_us.htm), 4:2, August, 1998.*

Over the past several years Australian and North American Protestants have witnessed widespread denominational deliberations concerning matters of Christian living--particularly regarding what constitutes faithful sexuality. Sadly, much of this churchly discourse has conformed predictably to the polarized ideological battle lines of the wider culture wars. Thoughtful people are beginning to sense that the church may well lose no matter who wins the ecclesial plebiscites. They suspect that it is the adversarial discourse itself that is dysfunctional – including how the Bible is being employed. I believe they are right. The following reflections on how Christians can preserve community when they read the Bible so differently are offered against the backdrop of this struggle. I will try to summarize the problem, suggests two avenues for exploration if we would move toward genuine “conversation,” and conclude with a brief consideration of how the apostle Paul advised his churches in similar disputes.

I. The Reality of Biblical Differences

It is a platitude that the Bible can be and has been invoked to justify a myriad of doctrinal and ethical positions (though not, as the common critic’s barb asserts, *any* and *all* positions). Indeed, scripture is often used in both church and society to bolster both sides of a disputed issue (as is the case currently regarding the rights of sexual minorities).

This should not surprise us. Any important cultural text – for example, beloved literature, legal documents, treaties, or national anthems – can be used either to unite or to divide the community. Moreover, it is inevitable that in the church believers will employ different texts, different readings of the same texts, and/or simply read the Bible differently. The exclusive and allegedly unifying claims of “official” or “orthodox” or “scientific” readings have traditionally been generated by state, church or academic hierarchies; the grassroots, global reality has always been pluralistic. African slaves in early nineteenth century America, for example, always interpreted the Bible differently than their Protestant masters; similarly, late twentieth century Latin American Catholic base communities read differently than do seminary-trained members of the Roman magisterium (see Cormie, 1991). In fact, every major epoch of reform and renewal in the history of the church has been animated by fresh, challenging and conflictual interpretations of the Bible, from the early monastic movement to the Protestant Reformation. Since the Enlightenment, biblical differences have continued to both polarize churches and to fuel social change: witness the 19th century struggle over slavery and this century’s turmoil

over women's rights, war, education (the Scopes trial!) and most recently over liberation theology.

These biblical differences have often fractured churches, particularly in the Protestant tradition, where the Bible was (at least theoretically) elevated to a status above ecclesial adjudicatories. This phenomenon has driven modern Protestant hermeneutics in two divergent directions. Theological conservatives tend to have a high degree of confidence that the Bible itself can adjudicate all doctrinal and ethical issues -- when "properly" interpreted. This logic, unfortunately, is rather circular, since correct interpretation is usually equated with the conservatives' own positions (see Barr, 1980:65ff). The Bible becomes a means to an end, backing up an agenda, such that a commitment to "biblical authority" too often ends up looking more like a kind of biblical *authoritarianism*. Theological liberals, on the other hand, tend to see so many problems with the Bible and so much distance between the ancient texts and the complex realities of modernity that they exhibit little confidence in scripture's relevance to current debates, and end up scrambling for alternative theological or moral rationales. For them, biblical differences have led to biblical *diffidence*.

James McClendon points out that "in this struggle, Modernists accused Fundamentalists of idolatry, and Fundamentalists accused Modernists of unbelief—each being partially right in its harsh judgment of the other" (1986:25). It seems to me that we ought to recognize that neither the strategies of conservative authoritarianism nor of liberal diffidence have resolved the real problem of different readings for the church. Suppressing differences doesn't make them disappear, it only drives them elsewhere. Similarly, abandoning the Bible only means that some other text or tradition will be appealed to – and then people will read *that* differently!

In light of this dilemma, we might simply resign ourselves to the fact that churches have and will continue to split over biblical differences, and perhaps leave it up to history to sort out which interpretive faction(s) prevail. Thus for example those who believed that the Bible condoned slavery in the 19th century lost the political struggle, so their interpretive position faded away (for the most part). On the other hand, the early capitalists who insisted that the biblical prohibition on usury was irrelevant have clearly prevailed historically. But this is not a solution to the problem either, because the Bible itself cautions us not to assume that historical "winners" necessarily were interpreting the tradition faithfully (an obvious example is the Israelites insisting on a king in I Sam 8).

But what about congregations or denominations that would struggle to preserve both truth *and* unity? Is there an alternative to authoritarianism or diffidence, to fracture or winners-take-all? I believe we can begin constructing such an alternative by acknowledging and affirming two things as *defining characteristics* of the Christian community:

1. because the Bible is our foundational story, the church cannot do without it, and so must continue to wrestle with the task of interpreting it; and
2. the Bible *will* be read differently within the community of faith.

To affirm both means that *each cannot be understood to cancel the other out*. Christians must earnestly seek guidance from scripture *and* must learn how to talk about different readings in constructive and respectful ways.

How can differences be so discussed? A given interpretation must necessarily be argued (from the Latin *arguere*, to make clear). The problem arises when our discourse deteriorates into reiterations of the same argument without dialogue or listening (significantly, the frequentive form of *arguere* means to babble or chatter). What is needed instead is the discipline of conversation (from the Middle English *conversen* meaning to associate with; also from the Latin *conversus*, meaning to turn around). Conversation is a discourse that holds within it the possibility of mutual conversion.

Such conversation about biblical difference requires, I will argue, that each partner in the discussion commit themselves to two disciplines. First, each community of faith must be willing to articulate and to examine honestly the interests and values that underlie its reading of scripture. Second, each community must allow scripture to question, as well as to support, its position on an issue. Let us look at each commitment in turn.

II. Reading in Communion: Examining Interpretive Interests

In the last twenty years the field of mediation theory and practice has grown exponentially. Dispute resolution endeavors to facilitate a process in which each party in a conflict focuses not on its stated position but rather upon the interests that lay behind that position. The task is then to get the parties to search for common ground among their respective interests and to move toward a compromise position that honors as many of these interests as possible.¹

Interestingly, something of a parallel development has taken place in the field of biblical studies and ethics. Here I will draw on the work of Stephen Fowl and Greg Jones, in their excellent *Reading in Communion: Scripture and Ethics in Christian Life* (1991), whose emphasis on the importance of acknowledging "interpretive interests" in the reading of the Bible follows the path forged by theologians such as James McClendon, Alasdair MacIntyre and Stanley Hauerwas. Fowl and Jones contend that ethics is not so much a rational analysis of moral rules and cases by autonomous individual agents as the practice of discernment by "communities of character."

Character is formed in and through socially-embodied traditions. Such traditions provide particular conceptions of the Good toward which we are striving, through which we form our character, and against which we assess the correctness of particular judgments. (1991:10)

¹ A simple example illustrates. One person in a room wants the door open, another wants it closed. Instead of arguing their positions, which leads to a stalemate, they articulate their respective underlying interests: one person feels that leaving the door open will allow too many bugs in the room; the other feels it will be too hot and stuffy with it closed. By revealing their interests, the possibility of a compromise is opened: for example, a window with a screen can be left open. For an excellent primer on mediation theory and practice, see Stutzman and Schrock-Shenk, 1997.

For the church, this socially-embodied tradition is the Bible, which "is primarily addressed not to individuals but to specific communities called into being by God" (ibid:1). But this Bible is read differently by different communities: for example, academic historians, street evangelists or hospital chaplains. "As a social activity, interpretation is confirmed, constrained and determined by the political constitution of those contexts in which interpretation takes place" (ibid:17).

The reality of interpretive interests seems to be recognized in scripture itself. In Luke's gospel Jesus is approached by a lawyer with what we might call an archetypal ethical query:

A lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus answered him, "In the Law, what is written? How do you read it?" (Lk 10:26)

Jesus' double counter-question seeks to investigate not only the text, but the community or tradition of interpretation as well. In this case, the lawyer indeed cites a text (10:27), but it is his reading of it that is at issue (i.e., his agnosticism on the matter of who constitutes a neighbor, 10:29).²

Mediation theory would invite us to step back and look at the interests behind conflicting interpretive positions. Take for example Christian communities who use scripture to justify opposite positions regarding the appropriateness of participation in military service. Behind the endorsement of military service may lay interests regarding citizen obligations for the common defense and a desire to take seriously Jesus' command to love one's neighbor. Behind the pacifist position may lay interests regarding the sanctity of all life and a desire to take seriously Jesus' injunction to love one's enemy. Is it possible that common ground could be found in a joint commitment to serve in a disciplined *nonviolent* national or community defense force?

Here it becomes important that parties focus on their own actual convictions, instead of debating abstract opinions:

Opinions are the stuff of debate and discussion. We acquire opinions quickly and shed them just as quickly. They may require thought, but they require no commitment. Conviction, on the other hand, are less readily expressed but more tenaciously held... They are our persuasions, the beliefs we embody with some reason, guiding all our thought, shaping our lives (McClendon, 1986:22f).

This means we should agree to limit the conversation to how our understanding of biblical teachings affects our *actual* practices and what *we* are willing to live by, and steer away from theoretical standards or imperatives addressed to other people. In mediation and counseling this is known as the discipline of speaking in "I" statements.

Acknowledging our own interpretive interests (as well as those of other communities) will help us, contend Fowl and Jones, to become "wise" readers of

² It is germane that the "text" cited in Luke is already a reinterpreted one. The conflation of Dt 6:5 and Lev 19:18, is a midrash possibly deriving from Jesus himself (Luke is inverting Mark 12:29-31 here).

scripture (1991:30ff). They offer several important cautions, however.

Remain open to other perspectives. First, we should never hold absolutely to an interpretive position. After all, scripture itself is multi-faceted, and further reflection or different perspectives may yield a more compelling reading. It is also the case that our contexts as readers change through time and place. The biblical tradition was itself in formation for a millennium, and has engendered a rich and diverse interpretive legacy for another two millennia. One need only to study the history of interpretation of any biblical passage down through church history to see how contingent our readings are.

The church has not been particularly well-served by the long hermeneutic tradition that assumes there is only one true meaning to a text. This presumption has made our interpretive practices combative by definition, and has characterized not only authoritarian fundamentalism, but often the liberal academy as well. Much of the historical-critical tradition of scholarship has been captive to the thoroughly modernist hubris that scientific methods, exegetical technologies and/or hermeneutical sophistication places the scholar in a superior and objective position to adjudicate the meaning of the texts (see the now-classic critique of Wink, 1972). In the last twenty years, however, women, ethnic communities and churches of the poor have offered readings that not only reveal facets of scripture that white male academics and clerics could never see, but have revealed the hidden interpretive interests of those professional classes as well (see e.g. Sugirtharajah, 1991, Vaage 1997)!

Questing after (or insisting upon) the "one true reading" is neither the only nor the best way to honor the authority of scripture. Indeed it concedes too much power to the interpreter and takes too much away from the Story itself. We Christians might do better to rediscover a more Jewish approach. The rabbinic tradition, broadly speaking, has seemed more comfortable with the notion that only a multiplicity of approaches can do justice to the marvelously deep and wide spectrum of meaning(s) in the sacred texts. This both preserves the text as the center of the community *and* allows us to offer our various interpretive efforts to the body for discernment. (Such a practice is ritualized by Jews on the feast of *Simchat Torah*, when the scrolls are taken by synagogue elders into the middle of the congregation and held lovingly while everyone dances in celebration around it.)

Similarly, Christians can learn from the attitude of many native peoples, who consider the sacred stories to be older, wiser and deeper than the community, and thus worthy of being listened to time and time again (see McKenna and Cowan, 1997). As an elder in a novel by contemporary Native American writer Leslie Silko puts it: "I will tell you something about stories...They aren't just entertainment. Don't be fooled. They are all we have, you see...to fight off illness and death... Their evil is mighty but it can't stand up to our stories" (1977:1f).

Engage texts and their interpretation critically. Second, reverence and humility do not preclude critical engagement with the scriptural texts, nor critical interaction with other interpretive positions. There are matters of integrity and justice at stake, and not all readings are benign, respectful or "wise." Frederic

Jameson rightly points out that "interpretation is not an isolated act, but takes place within a Homeric battlefield, on which a host of interpretive options are either openly or implicitly in conflict... As the Chinese proverb has it, you use one ax handle to hew another: in our context, only another, stronger interpretation can overthrow and practically refute an interpretation already in place" (1981:13).

Fowl and Jones rightly recognize that scripture itself reflects the interests of the communities that produced the texts. The critical exercise of identifying and analyzing those interests has assumed prominent place in postmodern biblical studies, using what is called a "hermeneutics of suspicion." In an important article, feminist New Testament scholar Katherine Grieb has pointed out that while the tradition of suspicion can be traced to the influence of Marx, Nietzsche and Freud, in fact scripture itself demonstrates a critical engagement with itself (1998). We struggle with scripture today because scripture wrestles with itself.

For example, the Bible knows of no protagonist who is immune to being wrong, from Moses (Dt 3:23ff) and David (II Sam 11) to Peter (Mk 8:27ff) and even Jesus himself (Mk 7:24-30). Scripture is particularly skeptical of the ability of those in power to read scripture (I Kings 22; Mk 12:24-27). Scriptural traditions sometimes directly contest each other: Grieb notes that the book of Job challenges many of the beliefs associated with other parts of the Torah, such as the expectation that the righteous will prosper (ibid:271). The examples of scripture reinterpreting scripture through midrash are myriad, including additions (Mk 2:25f), deletions (Lk 4:19), changes (Mk 10:19) or conflation (Mk 1:2f). And perhaps most tellingly, scripture acknowledges that even the Devil can cite scripture (Lk 4:9-12). Grieb also notes that biblical narrative often reflects the narrator's suspicion of the characters in the story, as in the case of Luke's report of the male disciples' skepticism regarding the women disciple's witness to the empty tomb (Lk 24:1ff). "By expansion, omission, recharacterization, and act redescription, these later writers guide the community's reading of narratives, events and legislation in earlier texts that are found problematic" (ibid:273).

Be vigilant against self-deception. Even as we enter into struggle over interpretation, however, Fowl and Jones offer a third caution: "wise readings" must be guard against self-deception. Paul Ricoeur reminds us that a text is vulnerable, without a voice until the interpreter restores one to it (1977:320). The term hermeneutics, after all, derives from the god Hermes, who in classical antiquity was the patron saint of both interpreters and thieves! An interpreter can restore voice to a text—or hijack it. It is the responsibility of readerly communities to guard first and foremost against our natural tendency to use texts to justify ourselves—the hallmark of self-deception. As Ricoeur puts it, hermeneutics must animated not only by a willingness to suspect, but a willingness to listen as well: "vow or rigor, vow of obedience" (1970:27). Fowl and Jones, alluding to the famous phrase of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, state the matter even more sharply: "We Christians will need to learn to read the Scriptures 'over against ourselves' rather than simply 'for ourselves'" (1991:40-42).

Being mindful of our context and interests, and practicing openness, critique and self-critique, are all elements of what Fowl and Jones call "reading in

communion." Let us turn now to how the scripture itself can be a critical partner in the conversation about biblical differences.

III. Allowing Scripture to Read Us

Scripture need not be a silent partner in our conversation about it. If we listen, we will hear it challenge our interests and interpretations. It can do this in two ways. First, scripture challenges us to demonstrate our interpretations through *practice*. A classic statement of this "epistemology of embodiment" is found in the Lukan vignette of the exchange between Jesus and the lawyer referred to earlier. Twice the scribe gives Jesus the "right" answer (Lk 10:27,37a); twice Jesus responds with an invitation to *practice*: "You have answered correctly; do this and you will live" (10:28); "Go and do likewise" (10:37b). The Bible is all about Word becoming Flesh (Jn 1:1ff); it thus challenges its readers to move from opinions to convictions. As Fowl and Jones put it: "Unless Christian communities are committed to embodying their Scriptural interpretation, the Bible loses its character as Scripture" (1991:20). Our true interests are revealed by how we actually live, not by what we say, and these should be the focus of conversation about biblical differences. We would do well to heed Paul's stern warning: "You are without excuse, whoever you are who would judge, for in passing judgment on the other, you condemn yourself, because you are practicing the very same things!" (Rom 2:1).

Second, the Bible is critical of those who are too sure of themselves, and relentless in its questioning of our commitments and biases:

It requires that we be hearers of the Word, listening for what it asks us, not bringing our questions for find the Bible's answers, but prepared to have our current questions discredited or revised by its own. Scripture confronts its readers with another world and asks if it will not become our world (McClendon, 1986:38).

We see this "interrogatory" character of scripture articulated dramatically in the gospel of Mark. The first evangelist presents Jesus not as a sage whom explains life's mysteries, but as the great interlocutor of our reality (Myers, 1994). Jesus' queries lay bare the "inner conflicts" of disciples and opponents alike (Gk *dialogizesthai*; Mk 2:8; 8:16f; 9:33f; 11:31). Sometimes they are sharply rhetorical: "Can Satan exorcise Satan?" (3:23); "What will the owner of the vineyard do?" (12:9). Other times they are wrapped in a metaphor: "Is a lamp brought indoors to be put under a basket?" (4:21); "Should weddings guests fast while the bridegroom is with them?" (2:19). But always they challenge both the ideology of the dominant culture ("How can the scribes say...? 12:35) and the theology of the disciples ("Do you not yet understand?" 8:21). And they call into question our biblical literacy: "Have you never read...? Is it not written...?" (2:25; 9:12; 11:17; 12:10).

In the tradition of the Hebrew prophets, Mark's Jesus is an incisive interrogator of those in power in the world. He exposes the duplicity behind their official piety (8:12; 10:3; 12:35), challenges their ideological agenda (2:9; 12:16), and cross-examines their most inured institutions before the bar of biblical justice

(13:2). Even when they attack him he turns quickly from defendant to prosecutor (3:4,24f): "I will ask *you* a question...! (11:29).

This Jesus is not the answer to our private questions, but the question to our public answers! But he also forces his own disciples to examine their own assumptions:

Who is my mother and my brother? (3:33)
What is the Kingdom of God like? (4:30)
Why are you afraid? (4:40)
Who do you say that I am? (8:29)
Why do you bother arguing with the scribes? (9:16)
Can you be baptized with my baptism? (10:38)
Why do you bother this woman's good deed? (14:6)
Could you not keep watch with me? (14:37)

The Master's questions open up painful and awkward uncertainties for disciples-- "Do you have eyes and fail to see..." (8:18)--while his teaching and practice provoke the incredulity of his followers (10:24,32).

Jesus' pedagogical strategy intends to break the spell of credulity spun by the dominant order and to force a crisis of faith. Such an approach reminds one of the popular education tradition of Paulo Freire: "The educator's role is to propose problems about the codified existential situation in order to help the learners arrive at a more and more critical view of their reality" (1971:264). By engaging the reader with disturbing and disrupting quandaries that animate rather than with logically satisfying answers that pacify, Mark's gospel represents an example of how the Bible can, if listened to, help us move beyond rigid interpretive positions and toward creative self-examination.

IV. Conclusion: "That by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope"

In the concluding chapters of Romans, Paul offers pastoral advice to a church that apparently was in danger of fragmenting over multiple differences regarding how one ought to live as a Christian (Rom 14:1ff). At least one of the disputes, significantly, concerns an issue on which the apostle himself has clearly taken a position (14:14,20). Yet Paul refuses to adjudicate the dispute by declaring one side right. Instead, he challenges the adversaries to recognize and honor each other's integrity and value as part of the body of Christ.

Paul begins and concludes his comments with a disarming refrain, exhorting the adversaries to "welcome" each other, since both have been welcomed by Christ into the new community (14:1,3; 15:7). He next urges the parties to cease their polarizing posturing, in which Group I is "despising" Group II, which in turn is "judging" Group I (14:3). Paul reminds the second group that God is the true Judge, and Christ is quite able to make those He loves "stand" (14:4-12); "therefore let us no more pass judgment on one another" (14:13). The apostle then turns to Group I (who he happens to agree with) and argues that the point is not to be right, but

rather to refrain from exercising freedom in a way that is going to cause the "weaker" party to stumble (14:14-21).

In an extraordinary rhetorical move, Paul concludes his exhortation by saying: "We who are strong ought to bear the weakness of those who are not strong" (15:1). This is the same verb used by Luke in Jesus' call to "bear the cross" (Lk 14:27; see Gal 6:2). Paul has the same intent here, as is clear from the fact that he proceeds to appeal to the example of Jesus' sufferings (citing Ps 69:9 in Rom 15:3). The apostle is, in other words, interpreting Jesus' call to a discipleship of the cross to mean in this concrete instance that those who are "right" should place solidarity with their adversaries before their "rights."

Finally, Paul includes a word about the role of scripture in the community—suggesting that both sides in the debate may have been citing texts to support their respective positions.

Whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that by endurance and the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope. May the God of endurance and encouragement grant that you live in harmony with each other (Rom 15:4f).

The reasoning here is syllogistic: the community is to be instructed by scripture; scripture reflects the character of God; God desires that the community live in harmony; therefore *a community instructed by scripture should be struggling to live in harmony*.

We know of course that Paul was capable of insisting that his churches see things his way when he believed the issue at stake was fundamental to Christian identity (as in, for example, most of his epistle to the Galatians). The Romans exhortation, however offers a dramatic example of how he was equally capable of stipulating that ethical and scriptural discernment must serve to "build up" the community (14:19; 15:2). This latter tendency in Paul may be instructive (it is, after all, scripture) to the partisan politics and posturing of our contemporary church debates, in which "despising" and "judging" seem to be the order of the day.

James Barr rightly reminds us that the Bible is "the instrument of faith and the expression of faith, rather than the object of faith" (1980:55). Those parties in our current ecclesial disputes that would use the Bible to "excommunicate" (literally or figuratively) their positional opponents, rather than to build up the whole community, should pause and listen to the pastoral advice of Paul. His contention that solidarity is of greater value than "winning" puts the modern Protestant tendency to split along ideological and/or interpretive lines in a cold light. And his exhortation to those who are "stronger" in the community to defer to those who are "weaker" means we must be aware of who in the church holds privilege and power in any given context.

To summarize: Because the Bible is authoritative *and* because it will be interpreted differently by various communities of faith, Christians need to learn to converse about differences. We can do so by practicing a few disciplines of "wise reading." First, we should be willing to examine our interpretive interests, in order

to discover how we might hold values in common with those who read differently. This involves commitment to listening to other interpretations, to critical engagement with texts and their interpreters, and to being careful not to deceive ourselves.

Second, we should be willing to submit our point of view, and the interests behind it, to being questioned by scripture. Is our interpretation an embodied one, or simply an opinionated one? How is our practice reflecting and correcting our reading of scripture? Do we hear the hard questions of scripture as addressed to us, or merely to our adversaries? If we all stood together under biblical queries, I suspect we would discover that the scriptures, like Jesus himself (Mk 16:7), are more often *ahead* of us than behind us. We too might, like the Sadducees, hear Jesus ask: "Is this not the reason you are wrong, that you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God?" (Mk 12:24).

I wonder what would happen if the polarized parties involved in the current debate over sexual standards and mores in our churches, for example, decided to have a real conversation, and followed some of the disciplines outlined above? What would it mean for the "strong" (heterosexuals hold majority power and regularly exercise it to exclude sexual minorities) to defer to the "weak"? What would interests behind positions look like (are concerns for inclusion and justice on one hand, and standards of fidelity and concern for the family on the other *really* incompatible)? What if, as a modest spiritual discipline, everyone spoke only of *their own* struggles around sexuality, while discourse about *other* people's sexuality was abdicated? What if we all stood under Jesus' invitation to first examine our own sins before picking up stones of judgment (Jn 8:7)?

If in fact these issues are really so important to our churches, we dare not talk about them in any other way. The environment in which people of faith must try to discover integrity and wholeness today is difficult enough: predatory, deluded, and compulsive. The Bible, written for our instruction, invites us to encounter the God of endurance and encouragement in order that we might live in harmony. Let us therefore set about "welcoming one another" in order to read in communion, free of both authoritarianism and diffidence. And let us learn how to talk together about our common struggles for healing and forgiveness. *That* would be a conversation worth having.

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