

October 30, 2022

How the Bible Actually Works ... Kind Of

Galatians 2: 1-10

¹Then after fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along with me. ²I went up in response to a revelation. Then I laid before them (though only in a private meeting with the acknowledged leaders) the gospel that I proclaim among the Gentiles, in order to make sure that I was not running, or had not run, in vain. ³But even Titus, who was with me, was not compelled to be circumcised, though he was a Greek. ⁴But because of false believers secretly brought in, who slipped in to spy on the freedom we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might enslave us— ⁵we did not submit to them even for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might always remain with you. ⁶And from those who were supposed to be acknowledged leaders (what they actually were makes no difference to me; God shows no partiality)—those leaders contributed nothing to me. ⁷On the contrary, when they saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel for the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel for the circumcised ⁸(for he who worked through Peter making him an apostle to the circumcised also worked through me in sending me to the Gentiles), ⁹and when James and Cephas and John, who were acknowledged pillars, recognized the grace that had been given to me, they gave to Barnabas and me the right hand of fellowship, agreeing that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised. ¹⁰They asked only one thing, that we remember the poor, which was actually what I was eager to do.

1 Corinthians 14: 33-36

³³(As in all the churches of the saints, ³⁴women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says. ³⁵If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church. ³⁶Or did the word of God originate with you? Or are you the only ones it has reached?)

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The first time I spoke in this church a few years ago, my topic was on doubt and faith. I described how I was satisfied there was a rational basis for belief in God and Jesus, but that as an analytical person I still have lots of questions that challenge my faith. The Bible plays a pretty prominent role in some of those questions. While it has much in it that reflects beauty, profound wisdom, and the story of God's love for us and creation, I have to admit it is not always a source of comfort and strength. Like many, I have often struggled with some of what I read in those pages, and with how it is we are supposed to approach interpreting the Bible.

Peter Enns is one of the writers I have found very helpful in unpacking questions about the Bible. As Patrick and Susanne have been describing the past few weeks, in his book "How the Bible Actually Works", Enns describes our task in interpreting the Bible as a sacred responsibility. In short, he says we must take this series of writings that are ancient, ambiguous and diverse and faithfully and seriously engage the stories to ask "What is God like" and how to be a Christian here and now. He begins with the starting point that we cannot approach reading the Bible as a rule book or instruction manual through which God tells us exactly what to do. If we approach reading the Bible from this perspective, our foundation will be shaken when we inevitably encounter passages with contradictions or that suggest this God we worship is pretty bloodthirsty. Rather, Enns says if we want to get some spiritual benefit from reading the Bible we have to do a little work, by engaging with the text and trying to discern what he calls "wisdom" – basically how to be more like Jesus. This involves some reimagining of the Scriptures to apply them to the circumstances we face today, which as Susanne related is something that has been happening as long as there have been Jews and Christians.

This approach appeals to me. The view that the Bible contains the literal inerrant word of God as final pronouncements intended for all times and places has never been palatable to me. Consider for example that the books of the Bible were written over several hundred years, by around 40 different authors, were copied and re-copied by ancient scribes, have been translated and re-translated many times over, and were debated extensively over what should be included resulting in different canons depending on your denomination. If God intended for the Bible to be the final authoritative word, it sure feels like there are a lot of ways that could have gone wrong. Rather than making the specific words of the Bible into a god, we need to try to discern how God is revealed in them. That will not be a one-and-done process. It is often said that God is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow, but this does not mean that our understanding of God does not change.

As much as I am partial to this approach of reading the Bible with an openness to reshaping our ideas of God, it does in its own way leave me with more questions:

- How do we keep this from becoming "everyone believe what you want and no one is wrong"
- At what point does the continued reimagining of Scripture take us so far from the source it is no longer authentic?
- At what point do we cross the line from adapting a tradition so it can survive, to compromising the tradition beyond recognition?

These or similar questions were not unfamiliar to the early Anabaptists. In my uncle Walter Klaassen's book "Anabaptism: Neither Catholic Nor Protestant" he described the early Anabaptists response to how the Bible should be correctly interpreted as a twofold approach:

"First of all they took an historical view of the Bible. ... They saw [Jesus] coming as the event in which God revealed himself more clearly and with greater authority than anywhere else. ... The first principle of interpreting the Bible therefore was "the life and doctrine of Christ and the apostles". Whatever in the Bible was contrary to these lost its claim to authority. Jesus was thus moved unquestionably into the centre; particularly Jesus living a human life upon this earth."

Enns (who is not from a Mennonite background despite the last name) has a similar view. He describes how the New Testament writers used creativity in reimagining the Jewish tradition in light of the unexpected nature of Jesus, and that Christians today continue to face this challenge of bridging our circumstances now with the character of Jesus. Or as Patrick put it last week, Jesus serves as our interpretive lens as we seek to understand how the Bible works.

The second approach of the early Anabaptists spoke to the question of process. "Anabaptists took Luther seriously when he insisted that every believer, no matter how humble, have the Holy Spirit, and could therefore legitimately interpret Scripture. But they went a step further and held to the old principle that ultimately it is the church that interprets Scripture. ... This community struggles with the meaning of Scripture and reaches, where possible, a common understanding of its intent."

This point was also made by Patrick in his sermon on October 2. We discern how to apply the Scriptures to our lives by doing it together. Of course, the struggle to find a common understanding is not always successful. Differences in the interpretation of Scripture has led to fracturing along denominational lines, and further separations within denominations and individual church bodies. The fallout from these divisions can be painful, and at times has been violent. This wisdom approach – trying to figure out how to live like Jesus – can be messy. I don't pretend to have an answer for how to prevent that. As Enns identifies, disagreement is itself biblical, pointing to the example of the differences between Paul and the other apostles around the issue of circumcision recounted in Galatians 2.

Notice that in this passage, Paul is engaged in precisely the kind of reimagining that Enns is talking about. The position Paul put forward was essentially that the requirement in the law for circumcision needed to be reconsidered in light of the revelation of Jesus. Others were not yet prepared to take the step to break from tradition. The two groups essentially agreed to disagree, with Paul and Barnabas moving on to minister to the Gentiles and the other apostles to the Jewish community, while at the same time maintaining focus on what they had in common which was the focus on the poor. Perhaps this is not a bad model to follow. Now if Anita had read further than verse 10 you would have heard Paul use some less than charitable language about Cephas, which kind of unties that nice little bow I just tied. But maybe that is part of the point too: that the writers of and characters in the books of the Bible were flawed like us and we are all trying to figure this out. And as much as we might like things to always be wrapped up in a nice package, sometimes the Bible just doesn't do that and we need to let go of that expectation.

It is not difficult to think of more contemporary debates over which Christians have interpreted Scripture differently. To many people through the years and still today, the words of Paul in 1 Corinthians have been used to justify the exclusion of women from positions of church leadership. When my grandfather and great-grandfather were lay ministers in the Eigenheim Mennonite Church they likely would have subscribed to this view. During their tenures in the first half of the 1900s the church was a patriarchal system where men elected other men to ministry and the suggestion that women were equally qualified for such a position would have been foreign to them. I am very thankful that this Scripture and concept has been reimagined within the Mennonite church. It is appropriate that we have discerned together that these words of Paul were not a directive from God intended to apply in all times and places. If we consider this passage in the context of Jesus' ministry, his interactions with women were radically inclusive in the context of that time. There are also a number of examples in the Bible of female leaders including Miriam the Prophetess, Queen Esther, Mary Magdalene, and Phoebe who Paul himself refers to as a deacon. The current pastor at Eigenheim is a woman,, and this congregation at NPMC has benefited tremendously from the pastoral leadership of Susanne and Anita, and from the many other women who are not silent in church and share their spiritual gifts. This is a good thing.

My point is not to suggest we are better than those who have in the past or continue to view this issue differently, or that we will always get things right in our search for wisdom. There is danger in remaking God to fit our own ideas and biases, and we must be careful that we are not departing from biblical tradition just for the sake of going along with trends in secular culture.

Despite the challenges, if we take the Bible and following Jesus seriously, there is forgiveness available. Enns puts it this way: "in the midst of all that sometimes exhilarating, sometimes anxiety provoking but never dull work of wisdom, I have come to believe that this God we speak of, if this God is worthy of the name love, is not surprised or put off by our human limitations, even if some around us are. This God is not shocked when we don't get it, but understands who we are and what we are and is fine with it." In other words, there is grace available to us if we engage in the work with humility, with the intention of reimagining the scriptures in a manner that is consistent with what we know about Jesus, and in the context of our community of faith. May God be with us in this endeavour.

- Don Klaassen