

Touchstone

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THE BIBLE

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Editorial

THE BOOK THAT READS US

The sixteenth century in Europe saw a flowering of learning and a paradigm shift in culture known as the Renaissance, literally, the Rebirth. Wearied by the abstruse and speculative nature of late medieval scholasticism and its Latin bondage, scholars and artists ushered in a new humanistic age. *Ad fontes!* Back to the sources! Scholars turned to classical antiquity for inspiration. Carried by the energy of the new learning, theological scholars and students began to approach the Scriptures in the original tongues, Hebrew and Greek. This encounter resulted in fresh understanding of the faith and provided an authoritative point of vantage from which to assess not only the existing Latin text of St. Jerome's Vulgate, but also the myriad doctrinal and liturgical accretions to the faith over time.

This heady point of vantage led reformers like Luther and Calvin to adopt the principle of *sola scriptura*: the Bible alone is the final arbiter in matters of Christian faith and practice. In turn, this principle led to the other *solas* of the Reformation: *sola gratia* (by grace alone are believers saved), *sola fides* (through faith alone), *solus Christus* (in Jesus Christ alone), and *sola Dei gloria* (all glory be to God alone).

Of course the encounter of scholars with the original texts was scarcely enough for a reformation of religion. The recovery of scriptural Christianity needed to be communicated to the general populace; what was needed was translating the Bible into the language of the people.

This year we celebrate the 400th anniversary of the publication of the King James Bible. Like other early English translations it was dependent on the work of William Tyndale, who produced the first English translation of the New Testament from the Greek (the translation of Wycliffe was from the Latin). The Tyndale-KJV has been called "the noblest monument of English prose" for its "simplicity, its dignity, its power, its happy turns of expression . . . the music of its cadences and the felicities of its rhythm." When the development of biblical scholarship and the discovery of manuscripts more ancient than those extant in the sixteenth century made a new translation of the Bible in English necessary, those responsible chose to revise the KJV rather than translate from scratch. So, for example, the English Revised Version of 1881-5 and

the American Standard Version of 1901 both were revisions of the KJV. So was the Bible on which many of us were schooled in the faith, the Revised Standard Version of 1946-51. While necessary corrections were made and substitute wording provided for archaic language and changed meanings, the RSV maintains the stately rhythms and arresting turns of phrase of the KJV, qualities that made it so satisfying to the ear in the public reading of Scripture. To a degree, the New Revised Standard Version attempts this also.

To speak of the excellence of language in a translation of Scripture is to acknowledge its cultural significance. Northrop Frye, Canadian literary icon and United Church minister, for many years taught a religion course at Victoria College on the Bible as a shaping cultural treasure. Frye regarded the Bible as belonging to the genus of mythology; he saw it “as an interlocking body of stories,” “telling a people about its religion, its history, its law and customs, its class structure . . . its environment.” Lest one think that “mythology” necessarily implies being factually untrue, it is important to note that Frye used the term in contrast to “ideology.” He defined ideologies as “primarily rationalizations of authority,” a matter of defending “our religious beliefs from heresies, our social loyalties from other nations . . . our class structure against revolution or counter-revolution.” For Frye, ideology is embedded in the thesis-language of law, philosophy and theology. Mythology, on the other hand, is carried by a people’s literature. “A story, unlike a proposition, cannot be refuted or argued about.”¹ Well, maybe a story can’t be refuted, strictly speaking, but we certainly do argue about stories, including biblical ones.

Frye no doubt understood that the Bible is a collection not only of stories but also of law, genealogies, poetry, sermons, prayers, laments, songs, and narratives of historical events, many intended to be understood as quite factual. Together, these elements constitute a constellation of meaning, a universe of meaning. The point to underscore with Frye is that the Bible, as a monumental literary artifact, has had a profound shaping influence on culture, and that its influence, despite the limitations of both aggressive secularism and religious indifference, continues independently

¹ *Northrop Frye on Religion*, ed. Alvin Lee and Jean O’Grady, *The Collected Works of Northrop Frye* (Toronto: Victoria University, 2000), 353.

of the witness of the church. Even were the faith of Christians to wither and die, the imprint of the Bible on Western culture, like that of the great cathedrals of Europe or the ravishing chorales of Bach, will remain. Whether possessing faith in God or not, people can find spiritual meaning and cultural identity in the pages of the Bible; they give purpose and coherence to the lives of those who open themselves to its message.

I have been intrigued to read an article by Gary Dorrien, professor at Union Seminary and author of an impressive three-volume study, *The Making of American Liberal Theology*. Dorrien defines theological liberalism as the view that “theology should be based on reason and critically interpreted religious experience, not external authority.” It arose in the early nineteenth century out of “the attempt to create a progressive Christian alternative to established orthodoxies and a rising tide of rationalistic deism and atheism.”²

After surveying the liberal scene today, including critical but largely favourable analyses of the contributions of (the “self-dramatizing”) John Spong and (the marketing master) Marcus Borg, Dorrien laments “the loss of the transcendental, biblical voice in liberal theology . . . Liberals often show more concern about the postmodern status of their perspective than about the relationship of their perspective to gospel faith.”³ This lament is interesting, since the Bible is frequently the target when a Protestant speaks about being free from “external authority.” I hunch that Dorrien, when pushed, actually imagines and lives a liberalism that accepts a critically interpreted Bible as authoritative in defining what it means to be Christian.

This brings us to a watershed. Whatever cultural significance the Bible may have for non-believers and a secular society, for believers and the church it has decisive authority. For in it God speaks. In the formula of prophetic utterance—“Thus saith the Lord”—the Bible records the expressed will of God for God’s people. The Bible also attests God’s acts in history, from the deliverance of slaves in Egypt to the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

² Gary Dorrien, “American Liberal Theology: Crisis, Irony, Decline, Renewal, Ambiguity,” www.crosscurrents.org/dorrien200506.htm, 1,2.

³ *Ibid.*, 12,13.

To be sure, the Bible was written by human authors addressing specific audiences and contexts. But God continues to speak and act through it. The Bible's authority in the lives of believers and in the church rests not only on the fact that it contains the record of God's dealing with people in history. It has authority also because through its witness, readers today may be led by God's Spirit to communion with the living God.

In the words of Hans-Rudi Weber, the Bible is "the book that reads me." We turn to it for a more profound interpretation of human nature, personal identity and ultimate destiny. We turn to it to be disabused of our self-deceptions and careful compromises. We turn to it to find hope when optimism has run its course or when we see tyrants grinding down the humble and innocent. We turn to it when we are weary of the Mammon-intoxicated deceptions of advertising and politics, and long for truth. We turn to it when we seek purifying and uplifting encounter with God. We turn to it in our frailty and failure in order to meet the central figure emerging from its pages, the loving Saviour, Jesus Christ.

In honour of the KJV anniversary, this number of *Touchstone* finds its theme in a celebration of the Bible. Two revelatory books about the KJV are reviewed in these pages. One is *Begat: the King James Bible and the English Language* (found in our book review section); it takes up the question of just how deeply the King James text has influenced the English language. The other, *God's Secretaries: the Making of the King James Bible*, is in article format and narrates the amazing story of how the venerable text came to be.

In other articles in this number, Susan Slater gives us an insight into the encounter of an Old Testament professor with the Book, Foster Freed explores the relationship between the critical study of Scripture and the Word of God, Paul Wilson gives us five reasons why biblical preaching is a matter of life and death, and Rob Fennell, who has written on the place of the Bible in authoritative United Church documents before, now considers its place in *A Song of Faith*. The Profile is on the almost-forgotten R. C. Chalmers, and Cheri Di Novo, currently a member of the Ontario Legislature, speaks from the heart about the heart of the matter.

I am heartened by the work of our authors and pleased to present it.

Peter Wyatt

SPEAKING BIBLICALLY

By Susan Slater

When I landed at Atlantic School of Theology some twenty years ago I figured that my job was to work, theologically, with the Bible. This means that I have spent regular time, year-about, with the First Testament of the Bible, not always on a “favourite text” basis! The prophetic corpus was especially difficult for me, with its harsh cadences and proclamations. But I taught it and still teach it, regularly working with others who also find it hard going, seeking to understand God’s word.

As years go by I find myself noticing—with something like a smile—the work that the Bible, it seems, may have been doing on me while I was busy about my labours with it. The Bible gets at us with frontal assaults, as you know, but also with slow capillary processes. Bit by bit we absorb its juices and then one day we may notice that we are being reconstituted, this way or that.

At one point I realized that I don’t think about knowledge and its associated discourses the way I once did. A while later I noticed that this might not accidentally be related to the wear-pattern of the Bible on my life. “*C’est le métier qui rentre,*” they say in my mother’s Québec. Our trades get under our skins.

Theology happens in more than one voice; in my case it happens in a biblical voice. It may sound naïvely traditional to some, or more homiletical than theological. Nevertheless, this is the theological voice I can offer: I think with Scripture. Before I get started thinking, it seems, Scripture frames some perceptions while mortally undermining others! The Bible presents some questions as key, discerns and weighs responses. It provisions the language I need to name the work it does in us, the work of knowing and living to which God calls us through its witness.

I don’t ask if the Bible is relevant to our lives anymore and can’t remember if I ever did. Somehow the question is much more: How can we respond faithfully to God’s great promise, spoken there? How do we hear and live into that promise in ever more lively, faithful ways? Biblical theology, as I desire to practise it, works in response to such questions. I would say this matters: it matters to keep faithfulness to our creature calling at the center of our practice—our intellectual practice and the rest of our life-practice. Of course, no one of us is sufficient to this, and even all of us together appear regularly to fall short or go seriously

off-road. This is discouraging; we might even give up if not for God, who feeds us and sets us on the road again—even when we think we’re done or done-for. “*Get up and eat, else the journey will be too much for you*” (1Kgs 19:7).

If it sounds like I’m preaching again, that’s because the biblical text does not present “FYI,” but makes claims on us in response to God’s great faithfulness.

The Bible cares a lot about the practice of knowing, cultivating some knowing practices quite insistently while being strongly critical of others. Human knowing is not presented in the Bible as all-encompassing. It is more about finding ourselves situated—humbly, compassionately, kindly, and committedly on our mortal trajectory within the earth community. Knowledge offers not mastery but a yoke of life based on trust in God. Curiously, perhaps, this is what the prophets call “knowledge of God.”

Knowledge of God

. . . These people draw near with their mouths and honour me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me . . . (Is. 29:13; Mark 7:6–13)

You can tell where the heart is by following the hands and feet, according to this biblical tradition: practice is a kind of spiritual GPS, displaying our true coordinates. In this sense the prophetic books of the Bible could be thought of as books of practical theology. We might say that they remember street-corner “workshops” in practical theology, reflected on from a bit farther down the road (or what was left of it). The prophets were communicating God’s covenant word in relation to the urgent demands of shifting times: “People get ready, there’s a train a-comin’ . . .” The knowledge of God in these books is a consciousness, the possession of which finds expression in faithful living under current conditions. Knowledge here has strong practical resonance:

For my people are foolish, they do not know me . . . They are wise/skilled in doing evil, but they do not know how to do good. (Jer. 4:22)

The prophetic literature, it must be admitted, has a strong sadness to it, with anger and lament alongside. It is mostly formed afterwards: after most people did not listen, would not know, after disaster (after all) befell them. This, too, is offered as knowledge of God, in the aftermath. Every prophetic book also includes, remarkably, a horizon of hope. This rough literature is preserved for the sake of hope, for the sake of those who come after. Might we be tutored by their harsh experience? For the biblical tradition, that would be when you could say we knew something worth knowing or, by extension, practised a theology that mattered: knowledge of God.

Consider these words, found in Isaiah 6 and taken up in the Synoptic Gospels:

Hear and hear, but do not understand; see and see, but do not perceive. Make the heart of this people fat, and their ears heavy, and shut their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed. (Is. 6:9–10; also Mark 4:12 and parallels)

We might almost read these verses backwards, as a kind of mirror-writing, if we wanted to see the deep desire that animates the prophetic word: that we, with listening heart and mind, with ears alert and eyes wide open, would see, hear, understand and—yes—“turn and be healed.” Instead, the prophet experiences a people apparently blocked in all their faculties, not able to be “tuned up” by what they have not heard. These words testify to bitter grief about understanding that just can’t get started, and the tragic consequences that follow when folks cannot turn, cannot be healed. And, it turns out, those who lead are not always in better shape.

There are always specialists, always handlers of the tradition: priests and other ministers, kings and other leaders, scribes and other teachers. It seems that these are just as susceptible to denial as any, only with worse effect when others look to them for guidance. What do you think happens when one believes a physician who “*treat[s] the wound of my people carelessly, saying ‘Peace, peace,’ but there is no peace?*” (Jer. 6:14; 8:11)

What are the chances for healing a grievous wound when we are told that we are just fine, already? This is a deep indictment of some

practices of expert knowledge. It applies to some of what passes for theology as well. Our facility or expertise with tradition and times can easily become a source of self-delusion and abandonment of others—the desert monastics of the third and fourth centuries CE were well aware of this as are, for instance, many theologians of liberation. The Bible is in many places critical of business as usual, and of the accompanying discourses of false consolation.

Aren't we, too, living in times of rapid and fundamental changes? Are we not also called to hear, see, repent and respond? It can seem overwhelming; it is easy to feel unequal to the shifting prospects before us. What is the difference between wishful thinking and the practice of hope in such shifting times? The knowledge of God, biblically speaking, is the quality that enables us to respond with vitality and faithfulness. Practiced from here, theology could matter.

Theology, when it articulates and enacts this “knowledge of God” and refuses easy accommodation, offers a resource for living into the requirements of our times—for good, with others, sustained by God's most trustworthy hand. This involves, the Bible tells us, a kind of permeability to God's vision, life as a tunable instrument, life lived as a sacrament of mercy and doxology and, every day, repentance and gratitude.

“... for the Bible tells me so”—Listening *ab initio*

The prophet Isaiah and theologian Monika Hellwig seem to be on the same page as regards the proper posture for knowing God. See these words from her fine small book, *The Eucharist and the Hunger of the World*:

We have to try and understand [the Eucharist], not as one tries to understand a theorem in geometry by mastering it, totally grasping and comprehending it, knowing it exhaustively. We have to try to understand it as one tries to understand a person, by being present and attentive and respectful and receiving what the person shows of herself or himself, knowing that a person is always transcendent, mysterious, never really possessed or totally known.¹

¹ Monika Hellwig, *The Eucharist and the Hunger of the World*, 2nd ed. (Sheed & Ward, 1992).

“We have to try and understand” with ears and eyes and heart/mind wide open, becoming reverently present to a transcendence we can never contain or properly comprehend, but one that is vital and necessary to our right orientation. This, for Hellwig, is the posture of such theological inquiry—“faith seeking understanding,” as Anselm of Canterbury put it, back in the eleventh century.

All through its pages we find the Bible working to orient our practice of the knowledge of God in just this way. The very first gesture of Scripture is doxology, and it is in this resonance that we are introduced to ourselves as God’s doing, in Genesis 1 and 2. Here creation and vocation come together, our origins and our destiny. “I love you and I have a job for you,” is one of the constant refrains of Scripture and we meet it first here, where we are set in place as the Creator’s image or, in another rendering, as those who care for the garden. That’s our job. In case we miss the significance of it, Genesis 1 presents us with a tableau impossible for human eyes, ears, heart, ever to comprehend, of the whole cosmos coming into being, as a sacrament of God’s life and love. We come from this and for this. God sees it good; we are not meant to forget it. Indeed a sabbath rest and return is built into the very order of it.

The biblical curriculum with knowing also works closely with the knowledge that everything sacred is prone to co-optation and desecration. In Exodus and elsewhere, we find matters of labour and food articulating all the ways we are not free, the ways we walk in captivity to our fears, the ways we simply do not believe God will sustain. We find, too, a school for that problem in the desert where a big lesson is: God feeds. God’s care is most trustworthy. This is a slippery lesson, it seems, or we are persons of “very little brain” and poor memory.

The knowing practice of covenant seeks continually to renew this knowledge in the community by processes of memorialization and re-actualization of founding experiences, and by solemn agreement to keep certain practices for the sake of God’s faithfulness. Recurrently, the path of knowledge is a school of trust, a school of trust that involves a closer knowledge of God who is trustworthy: “*The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want . . .*” (Ps 23:1).

Of course, some do want; the Pentateuch and prophetic books and

other parts of the Bible denounce this—not as God’s failing but as human desecration of God’s life shared out. False weights and measures, other forms of exploitation, are spoken of with anguish in the prophetic books. In Micah the powerful are shown making a stew of “my people.”

You . . . who tear the skin off my people, and the flesh off their bones; who eat the flesh of my people, flay their skin off them, break their bones in pieces, and chop them up like meat in a kettle, like flesh in a caldron.
(Mic. 3:1-3)

We are to understand from the heart that this is an abomination, an unspeakable desecration; we are to understand that God’s judgment comes as hope for those whose vitality is spent, forcibly, on fattening others. If we go back to the opening pages of the Bible, we have to see that in such judgment, in that desert school, in the acts and binding promises of covenant, resides hope for life on this earth in communion with God.

By the very quality of its discourse, the Bible invites its every reader to join in. You can see this if you pay attention to how it communicates. In diametric contrast to a sickbed *Chicken Soup for the Soul* spirituality, the Bible plunks us down with the others—at the break of first light in a world about to be, in the desert, falling over the edge, or stirring up stews with unspeakable ingredients and sucking them down. In the words of Rilke and Frost, but with another voice entirely, it says, “You come too.”² The Bible can help us, by its curriculum of immersion, to a more powerful practice of the knowledge of God. Biblically speaking, this is theology that matters.

Reprinted from the AST Magazine in its series "Theology That Matters."

² Rainer Maria Rilke, from *Advent* (Leipzig: P. Friesenhahn, 1898). Robert Frost, “The Pasture,” from *North of Boston*, 2nd ed. (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1915).

CRITICAL STUDY AND THE WORD OF GOD

by Foster Freed

The present era in the life of the church is hardly the first to confront a wide variety of questions related to the critical study of the Christian Scriptures. I refer in part to the fact that specifically *historical*-critical approaches to the Bible (though foreshadowed by earlier thinkers like Benedict Spinoza) began their decisive entry into Protestant circles roughly 250 years ago. However, I am also referring to the variety of “critical” questions about scripture which the church has needed to address from the outset, questions that have never entirely disappeared from the church’s agenda, including the most challenging (and most perennial) question of all: the shape of the Christian canon.¹ Given the peculiar nature and history of that canon—a canon that draws together an impressive body of Jewish literature (all of which *predates* the formation of the church!) with a smaller, but no less impressive, body of specifically Christian writings—how could “critical” questions *not* have played a role from the church’s earliest beginnings? In short, even those most eager to see the church remain a place in which the faithful are equipped “to engage the Bible to experience the liberating and transforming word of God,” are not entitled to indulge in nostalgia.² Scripture has always offered the church a remarkable resource even as it has always posed for the church a sea of vexing questions. Critical study, including *historical* critical study, is but one facet of the church’s ongoing encounter with its book.

Indeed, any discussion of “scripture,” “critical study” and the “Word of God” ought to name the significant ways in which historical-critical study of the Bible has made a positive contribution to the church’s ability to appropriate scripture’s witness in a fitting way. Lest we forget, the church’s tendency—prior to the introduction of historical-critical methodologies in the 18th century—was to “subordinate” biblical exegesis to dogmatic theology, resulting in scripture losing “its critical function.”³

¹ To cite but one facet of the contemporary scene, the extensive use of the *Gospel of Thomas* in much New Testament scholarship suggests that canonical questions remain open questions in at least some segments of the Christian Church!

² *The Authority and Interpretation of Scripture: A Statement of The United Church of Canada* (Toronto: UCPH, 1992), 30.

³ Bernard C. Latagan, “Hermeneutics,” *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman *et al.* (Toronto: Doubleday, 1992), Vol. 3, 150.

That this was no less true during the era of Protestant Orthodoxy in the 17th century than it had been during the medieval period forms the essential background for responsible reflection on the role historical-critical methods play in the life of the contemporary church. As Karl Paul Donfried reminds us, “It is impossible to effectively preach or practise theology without first attempting to understand the original audience to which the biblical books were addressed . . . It would be naïve to think that a modern person can, without effort, understand the intention of authors writing in other languages and with different worldviews some nineteen hundred years ago . . . The critical task remains foundational for the entire theological enterprise.”⁴

With that affirmation firmly in place, it is possible to turn to the considerable set of challenges historical-critical methodologies currently pose for the church. Bernard Lategan notes that “biblical texts are historical in a double sense . . . They are historical documents in their own right, with their own history of composition, tradition, and preservation. But they also refer to specific historical events, for example, in the history of Israel, the life of Jesus, or in the life of Paul.”⁵ While there is considerable overlap between those two meanings of “historical,” it is useful to address each meaning and each attendant set of challenges in a distinct way.

In terms of the historical nature of the documents themselves, the first great contribution of historical-criticism was, in fact, its insistence that the biblical documents are human documents that could and should be studied like other ancient documents. J.C. O’Neill rightly reminds us that “each of the books of the Bible has a history, and it is unlikely that the history of any but the shortest of them is as simple as that they were written by one man at one time to one recipient or set of recipients.” He further insists: “Even those expounders of the Bible who claim to be indifferent to theories about the history of the sacred texts . . . have their own hidden historical explanations . . . We do well to be conscious of the historical theories we in fact hold, to know something of their history, and

⁴ Karl Paul Donfried, “Alien Hermeneutics and the Misappropriation of Scripture,” in *Reclaiming the Bible for the Church*, ed. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1995), 23.

⁵ Lategan, *op. cit.*, 153.

to work to make them more adequate to the evidence.”⁶ One of the main goals of historical-critical research over the past 250 years has been to make clear, to church and academy alike, the complex historical origins of each of the biblical books.

That this important endeavour has come at a cost is not to be denied. Throughout the 19th century and for much of the 20th, biblical criticism has been heavily influenced by the “genetic principle: the idea that insight into the origins and development of a phenomenon contains the key to its understanding.”⁷ Thus most of the “classic” historical-critical methodologies—text criticism, form criticism, historical background studies, history of tradition research, redaction criticism—have taken as their stated goal the recovery of the most ancient version of a Biblical text or story, and has aimed to do so with the presumption that the most ancient version also will be the most revelatory.

The first stirrings of the challenge to that presumption are generally credited to Karl Barth who, in the aftermath of the First World War—without denying the importance of historical criticism—sought to return the canonical text (i.e. the text in its final form) to its rightful centrality as a theological witness. That trend has been considerably strengthened over the past 35 years in a number of critical paradigms—canonical criticism, narrative criticism, rhetorical criticism, reader response criticism, and structuralism—that take as their primary focus the canonical text. As Robert Alter and Frank Kermode rightly insist:

What has happened now is that the interpretation of the texts as they actually exist has been revalidated. This development has not been simple or single, and it has not been merely a reaction against the modern tradition of professional biblical scholarship. It comes of a need, felt by clerical and secular students alike, to achieve a new accommodation with the Bible as it is, which is to say, as literature of high importance and power.⁸

⁶ J.C. O’Neill, “Biblical Criticism: History of Biblical Criticism,” *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. 1, 729.

⁷ Lategan, *op. cit.*, Vol. 3, 151.

⁸ Robert Alter & Frank Kermode, *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1987), 4.

In light of Scripture's importance and power, one can only hope that these "synchronic" methodologies (i.e. critical paradigms that focus on the text in its canonical form) will continue to play an active role, side by side with "diachronic" methodologies (i.e. those which emphasize the historical process by which a text reached its canonical form) in the church's scholarly appropriation of Scripture. Would it be out of place to suggest that there ought to be a "preferential option" in the life of the church for those approaches to scripture that focus on the canonical form and function of any given biblical text?

Be that as it may, it is the other dimension of historical research that is likely of more pressing concern in the contemporary context. In addition to possessing a unique history as documents shaped over time, most biblical books also can be investigated in terms of the "history" they appear to depict. Facets of this enterprise ought to be regarded as entirely routine. Those methods, for instance, that simply attempt to provide historical background to the language, culture and thought-forms that shape a given text are almost universally regarded as among the most helpful fruits of historical research. More controversial are those efforts that employ a given biblical text or set of texts as one element (often used in conjunction with a wide range of artefacts and non-biblical texts) to reconstruct the historical events narrated by those biblical texts.

Over the past 20 years, such efforts have been especially plentiful—and especially controversial—in the field of research into the historical Jesus. That ought to come as no surprise. Surely there are very few readers of this journal who will be unsettled by the possibility that there is no historical basis whatsoever for biblical narratives found in such books as *Jonah* or *Job*. Nor will many readers take umbrage at the suggestion that the life of an Old Testament figure such as David is greatly embroidered by legend. (That at least some readers will, however, be saddened by current trends in Old Testament research where many scholars now regard David as an *entirely* legendary figure—along the lines of King Arthur—is also not to be doubted!). Where many readers *are* likely to draw their own personal line-in-the-sand, however, is with the figure of Jesus of Nazareth, almost universally regarded by Christians as an historical figure, one whose words and deeds can best be encountered in the pages of the four Gospels, especially the three synoptic Gospels.

The quest for the historical Jesus is a far from new quest and its methods and findings have been repeatedly challenged over the past 200 years. Yet the quest continues to exert a powerful influence both inside and outside the Church. Writing in 1993, Walter Brueggemann suggested that many of the historical-critical concerns of an earlier generation had “become somewhat obsolete because our present-day culture no longer excessively trusts nor fears such scientific methods.”⁹ From today’s perspective, Robert Jenson appears to have been far more prescient when he argued, in 1995, against those who maintained that because we are “now in postmodern times . . . we may simply leave modernity’s exegesis behind, together with the problems it caused. This will not, in my judgment, suffice, anymore than it sufficed when modernists simply left exegesis in the patristic style behind.”¹⁰

The overriding question this seemingly inextinguishable quest raises is the role such historical research *ought* to play in the life of the church, in distinction from that of the academy, or for that matter, in popular culture! As someone whose own understanding of Jesus has been deeply influenced by the reading of scholarly works by N.T. Wright (not only *Jesus and the Victory of God* but also the important volume that preceded it, *The New Testament and the People of God*), it would be disingenuous for me to maintain that research into the historical Jesus (or, for that matter, any other facet of the Bible’s “historical” narrative) is irrelevant to the life of the contemporary church. Nevertheless, it would be even more wrongheaded were I to suggest that volumes by N.T. Wright (or those from Crossan, Funk or Borg) ought to carry more weight within the life of the church than the canonical texts themselves. While there is no entirely straight-forward answer to these complex questions, a few suggestions are in order.

In the first place it is important—especially for clergy—to cultivate a degree of caution when accessing contemporary biblical scholarship. A generation that has learned to read the Bible with at least a measured hermeneutic of suspicion is to be encouraged to become equally adept at reading contemporary biblical scholarship with no less a degree of

⁹ Walter Brueggemann, “Biblical Authority in the Post-Critical Period,” *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. 5, 1050.

¹⁰ Robert W. Jenson, “Hermeneutics and the Life of the Church,” in Carl E. Braaten & Robert W. Jenson, eds., *Reclaiming the Bible for the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 102-3.

suspicion. Perhaps the easiest way in which to acquire a suitable mindset in this regard is to become familiar with more than one critical perspective. And so, for example, as a “devotee” of Wright, I owe it to myself *and* to my congregation to familiarize myself with alternative historical-critical perspectives, above all, those of Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan. For that matter, those who follow with interest the “historical-Jesus” conversation in *any* of its contemporary manifestations owe it to themselves and their congregations to become familiar with the more thorough-going dissent of those, such as Luke Timothy Johnson, who see the quest for the historical Jesus as an area of research inherently fraught with danger. Without denying the important insights historical research can yield, Johnson warns that “when historians push past the limits imposed by the sources . . . both the subject of inquiry and the methods of proper historiography become distorted.”¹¹

Writing from a contemporary North American Catholic perspective, Johnson here echoes concerns Karl Barth voiced more than half a century ago from within the European world of liberal Protestantism. Insisting that the Bible must always be read and studied as a thoroughly human word—“human speech uttered by specific men at specific times in a specific situation, in a specific language and with a specific intention”¹²—Barth nevertheless cautioned against the dangers awaiting those who attempt to employ scripture for a purpose for which it was never intended.

The idea against which we have to safeguard ourselves at this point is one which has tacitly developed in connexion with modern theological historicism. It is to the effect that in the reading and understanding and expounding of the Bible the main concern can and must be to penetrate past the biblical texts to the facts which lie behind the texts. Revelation is then found in these facts as such (which in their factuality are independent of the texts). Thus a history of Israel and of Old Testament religion is found behind the canonical Old Testament, a history of the life of Jesus, and later of course a Christ-myth, behind the canonical

¹¹ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament* (London: SCM Press, 2010), 554.

¹² Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I.2, trans. G.T. Thompson and Harold Knight (London: T&T Clark, 1956), 464.

Gospels, a history of the apostolic age, i.e. of primitive Christianity behind the canonical Acts and Epistles. The intention is to subject the biblical Canon to the question of truth as formulated in the sense of modern historicism. The Bible is to be read as a collection of sources.¹³

By contrast, Barth urged an approach to Scripture that makes use of the full array of available critical tools (including *historical-critical* tools), but in a way that respects the essentially *kerygmatic* (rather than *historical*) nature of the biblical witness.¹⁴

No less relevant in this context is Barth's insistence that "the statement that the Bible is the Word of God is an analytical statement, a statement grounded only in its repetition, description and interpretation, and not in its derivation from any major propositions."¹⁵ Freely recognizing the countless difficulties contemporary readers are almost bound to encounter in the pages of the Bible—difficulties not only *historical-critical* but also, and perhaps more importantly, *theological* in nature—Barth, rather than offer an apology for scripture (in either sense of apology), offers the simple reminder that the community of faith has regularly encountered in the words of the Bible, the reality of the Word of God.¹⁶

Of the book as we have it, we can only say: We recollect that we have heard in this book the Word of God; we recollect, in and with the Church, that the Word of God has been heard in all this book and in all parts of it; therefore we expect that we shall hear

¹³ Ibid., 492.

¹⁴ Readers may wish to ponder literary critic Northrop Frye's suggestion that the Bible's "essential idiom . . . is clearly oratorical," citing "oracle, exhortation, *kerygma*" as representative of "oratory on the highest level." Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible And Literature* (Toronto: Academic Press Canada, 1982), 28-29.

¹⁵ Barth, *op. cit.*, 535.

¹⁶ Twenty years of pastoral experience convince me that the "theological" obstacles posed by Scripture—especially but not exclusively the books of the Old Testament—present a far more persistent stumbling block to United Church folk interested in experiencing the Word of God in the pages of the Bible than any of the "historical-critical" issues that concern us here.

the Word of God in this book again, and hear it even in those places where we ourselves have not heard it before.¹⁷

The practical implications of Barth's approach to Scripture are not entirely unlike the practical implications of David Tracy's treatment of the Bible as a literary "classic." According to Tracy, "Every classic lives as a classic only if it finds readers willing to be provoked by its claim to attention. If, even once, a person has experienced a text, a gesture, an image, an event, a person with the force of the recognition, 'This is important! This does make and demand a difference!' then one has experienced a candidate for classic status."¹⁸ Building on Tracy's insights, Walter Brueggemann comments: "For Jews and Christians this tentativeness has ceased concerning the Bible. The decision that the Bible is a classic which mediates power and truth is a settled question for those communities. The church and the synagogue have found here "a certain kind of timelessness" which "demands constant interpretation."¹⁹

Might it not, then, be the case that the one indispensable step in contemporary encounter with the Bible (for the critically and post-critically informed, no less than for the "naive" reader) continues to be found in a singular decision to approach the Bible both in memory and in hope? Surely those who seek to hear in Scripture the "liberating and transforming word of God," are well advised to turn to Scripture in *remembrance*: in remembrance of the Bible's "classic status" in the life of the Christian community.²⁰ And surely those who so remember will also be inclined to open the pages of the Bible in *expectation*: anticipating that the Scriptures can still (even in an age of critical and post-critical sophistication!) mediate an encounter not only with the words of an ancient text, but with the "liberating and transforming" Word, of a "liberating and transforming" God.

¹⁷ Barth, *op. cit.*, 530.

¹⁸ Quoted in Brueggemann, *op. cit.*, 1052.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ See note 2.

HOW DOES THE UNITED CHURCH INTERPRET THE BIBLE? PART III: A SONG OF FAITH

By Robert C. Fennell

In two articles that appeared in previous *Touchstone* numbers, we explored how The United Church of Canada has approached Scripture in the past.¹ This article reviews that past very briefly, then looks at the present-day approach to the Bible taken by the denomination.

Throughout its history, the United Church has regarded the Protestant canon of 66 books to be “the Bible” that the denomination reads, studies, preaches, and teaches.² In the first forty or so years of its life, three theological movements in the United Church challenged traditional methods of interpretation: Evangelical Liberalism, the Social Gospel, and the effort to “Christianize the social order.” Each of these movements upheld liberal or modernist tools of Biblical exegesis, and (especially in the second and third movement) elevated the importance of social justice as an end goal of Biblical engagement. A fourth movement, crystallized in the 1940 *Statement of Faith* and 1944’s *Catechism*, resisted these challenges and reasserted more traditional perspectives concerning the Bible.

During the next several decades, up to the 1990s, the United Church held tradition and liberal-modernist tendencies in creative tension (as seen, for example, in the *New Curriculum* of the 1960s, or 1974’s *The Lordship of Jesus*). In the 1970s and 1980s, an important new emphasis emerged: liberation. Persons and societies and ultimately the earth itself need to be freed from various forms of bondage and oppression, and, the United Church said, our interpretive work must reflect this priority.³

¹ See the two-part series called “How Does the United Church Interpret the Bible?” Part I appeared in *Touchstone* 26, no.2 (May 2008), and Part II appeared in *Touchstone* 26, no.3 (Sept 2008).

² Other writings may be interesting and noteworthy, but the United Church does not regard them as equally authoritative.

³ This priority is captured, for example, in the following statement within *Sexual Orientation and Eligibility for the Order of Ministry* ([Toronto]: The United Church of Canada, 1984, pages 11 and 12): “We [in the United Church] believe in a God of justice, a God who throughout the history of the Israelites was constantly siding with the poor, the marginalized, the outcast—the ones who were oppressed by the powerful . . . The Word proclaimed [in the Bible] is liberation—freedom from all that oppresses . . . We believe that God is always calling the powerful to acknowledge their role in oppression and to heed the cries of those being ground under . . . We believe that the Bible favours the oppressed . . .”

Tradition was not abandoned, however. Right up to and including the turn of the 21st century, the United Church continued to claim and engage traditional understandings of the Bible and interpretation, now in dynamic interaction with other emphases, such as liberal theology, social justice, and liberation. In short, the matrix of interpretive frames in the first 80 or so years of the United Church's life was indeed rich and layered.

As the 21st century begins, Scripture continues to be a high priority for the denomination. The issues of interpretation remain urgent and have significant implications for faith, service, and witness. The United Church of Canada's most recent faith statement, *A Song of Faith* (2006), reveals a number of convictions and perspectives concerning Scripture that stand in clear continuity with the denomination's previous understandings of the Bible (as highlighted briefly above and as explored in more depth in the previous two articles). The balance of this article will explore thematically the convictions that *A Song of Faith* expresses about Scripture, and conclude with a preview of what may be ahead for the denomination's encounter with the Bible.

From *A Song of Faith*:

*Scripture is our song for the journey, the living word
passed on from generation to generation
to guide and inspire,
that we might wrestle a holy revelation for our time and place
from the human experiences
and cultural assumptions of another era.*

God calls us to be doers of the word and not hearers only.

*The Spirit breathes revelatory power into scripture,
bestowing upon it a unique and normative place
in the life of the community.*

*The Spirit judges us critically when we abuse scripture
by interpreting it narrow-mindedly,
using it as a tool of oppression, exclusion, or hatred.*

*The wholeness of scripture testifies
to the oneness and faithfulness of God.*

*The multiplicity of scripture testifies to its depth:
two testaments, four gospels,
contrasting points of view held in tension—*

*all a faithful witness to the One and Triune God,
the Holy Mystery that is Wholly Love.*

*We find God made known in Jesus of Nazareth,
and so we sing of God the Christ, the Holy One embodied.*

*Jesus . . . healed the sick and fed the hungry.
He forgave sins and freed those held captive
by all manner of demonic powers.
He crossed barriers of race, class, culture, and gender.
He preached and practised unconditional love . . .
and he commanded his followers to love one another
as he had loved them.
. . . He suffered abandonment and betrayal,
state-sanctioned torture and execution.
He was crucified.*

*But death was not the last word.
God raised Jesus from death,
turning sorrow into joy,
despair into hope.
We sing of Jesus raised from the dead.
We sing hallelujah.*

*. . . We sing of a church
seeking to continue the story of Jesus
by embodying Christ's presence in the world.
. . . Our living of the gospel makes us a part of this communion of saints,
experiencing the fulfillment of God's reign
even as we actively anticipate a new heaven and a new earth.⁴*

The Bible as the Word

The first thing to notice about the approach to the Bible in *A Song of Faith* is the use of the age-old expression “the Word.” Drawing from the New Testament witness to Jesus as “the Word” (*logos*) of God, Christians for centuries have looked upon the biblical text as uniquely capable of conveying God’s “word”—God’s heart, mind, Spirit, intention, purpose, and passion—to humankind.⁵ It’s important of course to notice at the

⁴ Excerpts from *A Song of Faith* (Toronto: The United Church of Canada, 2006). Available online.

⁵ Consider also Paul’s first letter to the church in Thessaloniki, perhaps the oldest of all his letters:

same time that we are not speaking of the Bible as though it contained God's *words*, in some sort of dictated form. Scripture remains a thoroughly human document (see below).

A Song speaks of the Bible as "the living word passed on from generation to generation." Scripture is a dynamic collection of documents that communicate life and vitality, energy and hope to God's people. In calling the Bible the "living word," the terminology in *A Song* differs from more traditional views of the Bible as the *written* word and *Jesus Christ* as the living Word. In any case, the depth of meaning here lies in the understanding of the text as something that effectively conveys, bears, and attests divine revelation, God's self-disclosure. The Bible speaks in a variety of ways about that self-disclosure: as the *Shekinah* (God's presence among the people); through the Torah; at the burning bush; by means of the prophets' witness; in Jesus the Christ; and in and through the Church's life. *A Song* calls the Bible "a faithful witness" to this self-disclosure. In sum, the presence, power, purpose, nature, and love of God is discernible through the Bible, which is available "to guide and inspire" faithful living today. For this reason the United Church continues to express its confidence in the Bible as "the word"—not because God dictated it, but because through it God still speaks, gives life, and transforms.

The Bible as human document and divine instrument

The reality that this divine self-disclosure takes place through a thoroughly human document leaves us with a curious dilemma, even a paradox. It is essential to recognize the fallibility and limitations of the Bible, that is, its humanness. We acknowledge even its errors and inaccuracies that arise from the "human experiences" that generated the reflections and writings we have today. Clearly, the writings that comprise the Bible were written within specific contexts of time and place ("the cultural assumptions of another era"). However, Scripture doesn't

"We also constantly give thanks to God for this, that when you received the word of God [*logon ... tou theou*] that you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word but as what it really is, God's word, which is also at work in you believers" (1 Thess. 2:13). Paul speaks here of "the word" as something that is not only written down, but also the living reality of Jesus Christ and his work in the lives of God's people.

remain context-bound, or merely a quaint artefact from a bygone era. Rather, God chooses to take up that human witness and use it instrumentally to share the divine self with us, in all ages. That *choosing* is the work of the Holy Spirit, who accompanied (without controlling) the process of composition and transmission of the holy text as it was “passed on from generation to generation.” God’s choosing of the Bible over and over as an instrument of self-disclosure takes place as “the Spirit breathes revelatory power into Scripture.” John Calvin, one of the United Church’s spiritual ancestors, was emphatic about the role of the Holy Spirit in the reading process itself, saying that it was essential for the Holy Spirit to be at work in readers if we are to understand truly what the text seeks to communicate. As Calvin said in the 16th century, “the testimony of the Spirit is more excellent than all reason . . . the Word will not find acceptance in [human] hearts before it is sealed by the inward testimony of the Spirit.”⁶ Calvin’s emphasis on the Holy Spirit’s work in our reception of the Bible has been a deeply-held conviction of the United Church throughout its history, and today remains a central United Church conviction about how Biblical interpretation ought to be approached.

The Bible’s many genres

Anyone who reads a significant portion of the Bible will quickly realize that it is made up of a wide range of styles of writing. It has many authors, many voices, many points of view, each of which emerged in a distinct time and place. The last two or three centuries of biblical scholarship have helped us to see those distinctive elements with greater clarity. And yet, as did our ancient Christian ancestors, we have come to think of the Bible as one book. It is published and referred to, as a matter of course, as a single volume. *A Song* speaks of this dynamic in terms of the “multiplicity of scripture” and its “wholeness.” Such expressions resonate deeply with the broad Christian understanding of the Bible as one volume containing many genres of writing—story, law, legend, instruction, proverb, history, myth, gospel, letter, poetry, apocalypse, and

⁶ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, The Library of Christian Classics, Vol. 1 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960/1967), 1.7.4. All the United Church’s founding traditions—Presbyterians (deeply influenced by Calvin), Methodists, and Congregationalists—considered the Holy Spirit to be essential to the “right reading” of the Bible.

more. We embrace this multiplicity, this “manyness,” in part because we believe that God speaks through and across them all, just as God is present in and communicates through the many-dimensional reality of the one created order.

It would be a mistake, therefore, to suggest that the Bible can be reduced to one genre (for example, “myth”). The writers and editors of the various books of the Bible clearly take seriously what they are writing, even when allegories and symbols are being used. Throughout the biblical witness, the authors never say or imply, “Of course, we’re just making all this up to entertain you.” The narrators of the stories never “wink” at the reader to suggest in some way that their writing is “merely” a story. And the writers of the histories and laws and gospels and epistles adopt a voice that, if we are to honour our spiritual ancestors, we must recognize as authentic and intensely earnest, not fictional or fanciful.

Thus Appendix ‘D,’ which followed *A Song of Faith* in its original publication in 2006, speaks of taking the Bible “seriously, but not literally.” Yes, there needs to be a seriousness, a sincerity to our approach. We regard the Bible as vital, central, and absolutely essential to us as Christian people, individually and communally. While there is justifiable hesitation about “literalism” when it comes to the Bible, at the same time we need to admit that some things in the Bible really must be taken literally. For example, statements like “do not kill,” “love the Lord your God,” and “love one another” are not myths or ambiguous symbols. The death of Jesus on a cross is not an ancient campfire story about a pretend dead hero, something that may or may not have happened. Some portions of the Bible would be badly distorted if we treated them as anything less than “a faithful witness to the One and Triune God,” as *Song* puts it. So we undoubtedly need to guard against naïve biblicism, but we also need to take an appreciative stance. Much discernment, study, prayer, and discovery in community is needed. It is a difficult balancing act, but worth every ounce of the energy, faith, and commitment it takes.

The Bible and interpretation

A Song of Faith also says that what the Bible communicates is not always immediately transparent or self-evident. Interpretation is necessary, as we consider the horizon of the ancient world in light of our own, and vice

versa. *A Song* calls on us to “wrestle a holy revelation for our time and place.” That wrestling is the work of interpretation, the art and science of discovery, discernment, and application of the Bible and of the divine revelation to which it points.

In that work of interpretation, we always look through “lenses”—the structures of our assumptions, commitments, and beliefs that shape and condition how we approach the text. Sometimes those lenses are not obvious to us (such as the norms of our own culture, or the assumptions we make in relation to our ethnicity or gender). At other times we *choose* which lenses we will use for understanding the text (for instance, a liberationist or Christ-centered approach, or one committed to upholding the norms and findings of scientific inquiry). In whatever way we engage such lenses, and whether we are aware of them or not, they are always operative. They always influence the work of interpretation. *A Song of Faith* similarly uses “lenses,” giving priority, for example, to the United Church’s commitments to ecumenism and liberation. Thus, *Song* specifically rejects interpretation that is “narrow-minded,” and rejects readings that result in using the Bible as “a tool of oppression, exclusion, or hatred.” Stated positively, this means that our interpretation is more faithful when we lift up the Bible as a tool for liberation, inclusion, and love. Such convictions come with us when we approach the biblical text and very much influence our reading of it: they become the lenses through which we look at Scripture. As we become more alert to them, we become more self-aware interpreters. As we share reflections on them in community, our communal practices of interpretation grow and mature.

The Bible’s normative role in the Church

Finally, *A Song of Faith* helps us to recall the firm Christian conviction of the last two millennia that the Bible is a reliable source and guide not only for our theological work, but also for our personal conduct and our life together. The holy text has a “unique and normative place in the life of the community.” Because it has distinctive revelatory power to show us God and God’s heart and purpose, the Bible informs our practices (of prayer, worship, discipleship, service, preaching, pastoral care, ethical living, decision making and so on) as we seek to “embody Christ’s presence in the world.” *Our work together as a community is informed in*

a significant and irreplaceable way by the Bible, for it shows us, as nothing else can, the depth of the gospel good news of God's great and transformative love for the world. Choosing to live in this way, in close contact and engagement with the Bible, assists us as we “actively anticipate a new heaven and a new earth”—that is, the fullness and consummation of God's realm of justice, joy, peace, and bread. Close contact and engagement with the Bible (as we honour its “normative place” for us as the gathered body of Christ) strengthens, encourages, and guides us toward living out God's purposes, God's dream.

A Song of Faith intensifies the importance of the Bible's normative role by turning our attention to Jesus, who “healed . . . fed . . . forgave . . . and freed.” This Jesus is the “Holy One embodied” who “crossed barriers” that kept people apart, “preached and practised unconditional love . . . [and] commanded his followers to love one another.” This same Jesus “suffered . . . was crucified” and “raised from the dead.” Clearly, the source of this information and these affirmations is the testimony of the Bible itself. In other words, these witnesses (despite the fact that they come from contexts separated from us by two millennia and more) are reliable in sharing with us that which we need to know about Jesus, the person who is at the centre of the Christian Way. Again, the Bible functions normatively in the Christian community, *especially* because it is capable of showing us this person. The testimony of Scripture, in short, is a reliable record of at least some dimensions of Jesus' life and significance. If it were “merely myth,” it would be absurd to treat it with any authority. It would be just one more curious document in the smorgasbord of spirituality. After all, consider the status of the ancient Greek myths in our modern/postmodern world: they are fun and strange and interesting, but hardly the sort of thing around which one organizes one's faith and ethical life, let alone a whole community's. Yet the United Church in *A Song of Faith* confesses that this is exactly what the denomination does with the Bible. It is central for us. The Bible's normative place is essential to how we have decided to live as a community of “Christ-ians,” that is, Jesus-followers, in our time.

Prospects

So where next? What is the destiny of the Bible in the United Church? We know that in some congregations and among some persons, the Bible is less highly regarded than it once was. The reasons for this are sometimes complex. Still, the United Church as a whole continues to hold the Bible in high esteem. It is not just one among many “good books”: it has a special and unique place in the heart and life of the denomination.

A Song of Faith calls the Bible “our song for the journey.” This is an evocative phrase, suggesting that we would do well to learn “our song,” to see how we can learn to sing it in harmony with one another (and in tune!). We could, of course, sing another song (something outside the canon), but eventually that would undoubtedly result in setting ourselves outside the Christian community. *A Song of Faith* speaks of “our living of the gospel [that] makes us a part of this communion of saints.” If we choose a different gospel, set to a different tune, we will surely find in time that we are walking along quite a different path.

Taking the commentary in Appendix ‘D’ of *A Song of Faith* to heart, the United Church would do well to “take the Bible seriously,” even as we acknowledge its human character in concert with its divine chosenness. To recognize the Bible’s profound, irreplaceable value, and to engage its living witness as we “wrestle a holy revelation for our time and place,” is to bring ourselves into transformative contact with both our ancestors in faith and also the living presence of God in our midst, today. This is the One God whose “Spirit breathes revelatory power into scripture.”

The Bible remains for us the best of all pointers to God’s self-disclosure in Israel’s covenant and the coming of the Christ. It is the book that brings life and hope to God’s people by witnessing to us of God’s great love for all creation. It provides us with a song we can learn to sing as a community. It is a great treasure, waiting only to be opened and discovered—critically, carefully, and appreciatively—by each new generation.

BIBLICAL PREACHING AS A MATTER OF LIFE AND DEATH

by Paul Scott Wilson

The production of the King James Version of the Bible was begun in 1604, one year after the Black Plague killed 38,000 people in London, and was completed in 1611, three years after another outbreak in 1608. Behind the vitality and beauty of the KJV language, the scholars who laboured on the task were acutely aware that life is tenuous and their task momentous. They wrote in a style deliberately antique, preferring words like thou and thee to you, and using word endings that were already disappearing, like -est and -eth endings (e.g., spakest, spareth), the effect of which was intended to convey a sense of majesty and permanence. John Donne was among the new breed of preachers to use the KJV. He also kept a coffin in his study to remind him of his own mortality. He wrote about the bell on the death carts below him in the streets: “Never send to know for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee.”¹ Biblical preaching in that age was never far from matters of life and death. It seems fitting as we honour the contribution of the KJV to the church, that we consider in what ways biblical preaching might still be a matter of life and death in our times.

Ask people on the street, “What are matters of life and death today?” and they might say, “murder, war, cancer.” Chances are they will not say, “murder, war, biblical preaching.” Matters of life and death tend to imply hospitals and nursing homes, and decisions about life support. Most folk in our cultures tend not to think of church in urgent terms of life and death, though they may think of weddings and funerals. Emergency 911 numbers do not link to the church. People associate church with Sunday morning, religion, Christianity, and God. Still, there may be some relevance to the audacious idea that biblical preaching is a life and death matter. Here are five ways that might have merit:

1) Biblical preaching can be conceived as a matter of life and death because it is ostensibly concerned with the life and death of Jesus Christ. In other words, preaching expresses something of the church’s understanding of its central story. Each of the gospels retraces the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ. Paul reflects on it, the

¹ John Donne, *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions* (Oxford University Press, 1987), Devotion XVII.

Apostle's creed summarizes it, the church celebrates it, the Lord's Supper re-enacts it, scholars document it, and sermons proclaim it. Every Sunday is a celebration of the resurrection. Therefore, preaching is a matter of life and death and new life.

Preaching Jesus Christ in itself can be lively. John Buchanan reflects on how his own denomination now welcomes children to the Lord's Table and to confirmation, reducing the intellectual focus on Jesus, the Trinity, and doctrines of justification, redemption and sanctification:

I thought about all of that as I laid my hands on the heads of members of this year's confirmation class, particularly when I came to my granddaughter, Rachel. I don't think Rachel could have memorized enough of the catechism to pass the test in the old days. Rachel has Down syndrome and is part of a group of young persons who talked a lot together during the year, served meals to the homeless, stayed overnight in a homeless shelter and experienced church as a place of service and celebration in Jesus' name. They each wrote a statement of faith, and they brought tears to my eyes when I read them, particularly Rachel's. "Jesus means church for me," she wrote. "Church is faith. I feel church all the time. I go to church to learn about God, to worship, and to be thankful for Jesus."²

2) Biblical preaching may be a matter of life and death because it is concerned with salvation. Through much of the history of preaching, salvation was perceived as the sole purpose of preaching, and this was the case in the era of the KJV. *The Larger Catechism of the Westminster Standards* (1647) says this:

The Spirit of God maketh . . . the preaching of the Word, an effectual means of enlightening, convincing, and humbling sinners, of driving them out of themselves, and drawing them unto Christ, of conforming them to his image, and subduing them to his will; of strengthening them against temptations and corruptions; of building them up in grace, and establishing their

² John Buchanan, *The Christian Century*, Editor's Desk, June 1, 2010, 3.

hearts in holiness and comfort through faith unto salvation.³

Thirty years ago, Elizabeth Achtemeier urged preachers to be very clear in what they say, “The eternal life or death of our people may depend on their knowing what we mean.”⁴ Someone’s life might depend upon the preached Word!

One need not think of salvation narrowly or in times of crisis. Salvation extends to all aspects of baptized life. Every Sunday Christians are invited by the presence of the baptismal font to remember their baptism; the font is in plain view, as is the cross, a reminder to all of the death and new life they have entered. Paul reminds his people that when they were “baptized into Christ Jesus [they] were baptized into his death” (Romans 6:3). Similarly, they were “buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life” (v. 4). Luther spoke in *The Freedom of a Christian* of being Christs to one another, and C.S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity* spoke of making people “little Christs.” Acts of justice and mercy, and of love of God and neighbour, are part of that new life.

Salvation also is concerned with putting to death the old creation and proclaiming the new. Jesus said, “I am making all things new” (Rev 21: 5). Paul spoke of anyone in Christ as “a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” (2 Corinthians 5:17). Paul extended the image of new creation to “the whole creation groaning in labour pains until now” (Romans 8:22). He also spoke of new life now: “the Spirit helps us in our weakness,” (26) and “all things work together for good” (28). Where Paul spoke of preaching “in demonstration of the Spirit and of power” (1 Corinthians 2:4), Calvin spoke of preaching as a sacrament, a giving of Christ: “Therefore, let it be regarded as a settled principle that the sacraments have the same office as the Word of God: to offer and set forth Christ to us, and in him the treasures of heavenly grace.”⁵ In this lively sense, preaching is not mere

³ *The Larger Catechism*, in *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Part I, Book of Confessions* (Louisville, Kentucky: The Office of the General Assembly, 1996), 229 (7.265).

⁴ Elizabeth Achtemeier, *Creative Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1980), 31.

⁵ *Institutes*, 4.14.17.

talk about Christ; it offers Christ: in the preaching moment he comes to us in the Spirit and puts to death our old ways of being and begins the new creation.

Even individual sermons can move from conviction of wrongdoing and death to celebration of new life. The great science fiction writer, Isaac Asimov said, “Life is pleasant. Death is peaceful. It’s the transition that is troublesome.” From a homiletical perspective, it’s the transition from death to life in the sermon that is troublesome, because God’s grace is so easily overtaken by our human works; yet, when people experience being cast on God’s resources, they typically feel like celebrating.

3) Biblical preaching is a matter of life and death also because in and through it, the preacher to some extent dies to self, as John Donne’s study-coffin reminded him. Many preachers feel vulnerable and spent after preaching, and there is good theological warrant for this. Paul says, “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me” (Galatians 2:19-20). These words, true for every Christian, have particular relevance for preachers when the gospel comes to the fore. The gospel can sound like foolishness even to the preacher, and yet momentary embarrassment or concern for the self ought not to silence the words. Karl Barth’s advice that the preacher get out of the way of the Word seems naïve today, as though it is possible or desirable for a preacher’s self and context to be eliminated. Feminist and black scholars in particular have highlighted the dangers of denying the self. Nonetheless, in proclaiming the gospel, the preacher’s witness should aim at glorifying Christ and not one’s own experience.⁶

Søren Kierkegaard said that we should not think of worship as we often do, the minister an actor on the stage, the congregation an audience, and God the prompter. Rather, he said, the minister should be conceived as being off-stage, God as the audience, and the congregation as actors.⁷ His alternative in fact can describe a two-step process, for many people do come into church thinking of themselves as the audience, listen to the preacher with a kind of “show me” attitude, and conceive of God as

⁶ See Paul Scott Wilson, “Preaching, Performance, and the Life and Death of ‘Now,’” in Jana Childers and Clayton J. Schmidt, *Performance in Preaching: Bringing the Sermon to Life* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 37-52.

⁷ Søren Kierkegaard, *Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing*, trans. Douglas V. Steere (New York: Harper and Row, 1956), 181.

prompting the minister. However, in the actual course of preaching at its best, something happens to undermine such assumptions. The congregation recognizes that the sermon is not just about history, and in that present moment, God in Christ encounters them. They discover themselves to be in the spotlight of God's love. *They* are on stage, the minister is off stage as the prompter, and God is the audience. When that shift is real, a similar shift may take place in the preacher. He or she dies to self yet again, as every Christian repeatedly must do, but in this instance, the faithful preacher loses any sense of worthiness, or nervousness, or self-consciousness and proclaims the foolishness of the gospel. In this kind of death, the preacher becomes John the Baptist at the presence of Jesus, he "rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice," and says, "my joy has been fulfilled. He must increase but I must decrease" (John 3:30). The act of service that marks all ministry distinctly marks the preacher in that moment.

4) Biblical preaching is a matter of life and death because in our age we face a remarkable contradiction: in spite of attempts to be faithful, the mainline church in Canada may be dying. We seem far from accomplishing the apparent intent of Jesus' commission to "make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19) or to "proclaim the good news to the whole creation" (Mark 16:15). All grave predictions concerning the future of the church need to be treated with circumspection, however, for as Mark Twain said, "the reports of my death have been greatly exaggerated." The death or life of the church is not solely up to us. Jesus said, "If these [disciples] were silent, the stones would shout out" (Luke 19:40). Stewardship of our inheritance is important for it unites faith and justice and financial assets. Many denominations have seen a drop in numbers and do not know how to stem the flow. I have been told by Lutherans at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, Missouri, that they look to what is happening with their churches in Ontario as an indicator of what will happen to them in ten years. Many congregations in the United Church of Canada are thriving, but many are not and their energies are going to building maintenance. Hugh Reid puts the matter in stark perspective, and points for help in the direction of biblical preaching and individual testimony:

If we saddle ourselves with the task of perpetuating an institution, if our burden is to fill empty seats, attract the youth, or balance the budget, then we are pouring our time and energy, and stripping our stomach linings and nerve endings, in a cause not worthy of even our weak efforts. But if we set about sharing which is “the serious business of heaven” (C.S. Lewis) then we might begin to tap the energy that is not borne on our shoulders but is the ground we dance on as announcers of peace and heralds of good news.⁸

Part of that business of heaven is prayer. In all things Christians are to pray, and especially in this current crisis one might imagine an entire denomination launching national prayer campaigns, such that in every church on every Sunday for a year, congregations might pray for the guidance and strength of the Holy Spirit.

Preaching can also make a difference. In our yard at home an eighty-year-old silver maple tree is dying. Last spring its leaves were sparse; it no longer has the magnificent canopy that would shade the street from the sun’s heat. As a sign of its approaching death, it produced huge quantities of seeds, those helicopters that fall spinning to the ground, hoping to find fertile soil on which to sprout new growth. What if in these times, our witness to God’s loving actions in the world could joyfully increase like the seeding tree? What if in our decline such seeds of testimony and acts of justice and love are what God intends us to offer?

5) Finally, Biblical preaching is a matter of life and death because ideas of biblical preaching necessarily live and die. Biblical preaching in one era is not necessarily adequate for a new age. Already by the 1200s, three-point sermons were a standard for biblical preaching. Metaphysical preachers at the time of the King James Version employed elaborate biblical and other conceits in a style that was ornate, sophisticated, and obscure (to our contemporary ears). Puritan plain-style preaching, by contrast, took a verse of Scripture, identified within it a moral or doctrine, and used proof-texts from various places in the Bible, often without further reference to the original verse. Expository preachers throughout the ages have expounded the meaning of a biblical text and then applied it

⁸ Hugh D. Reid, “That My Joy May Be In You,” *Touchstone* 29:1 (January, 2011), 19.

to today. In the last hundred years or so, historical criticism helped the church to understand and appreciate the historical background and context of texts. In the last fifty years, principles of narrative and metaphor have identified biblical preaching as imagistic and conversational.

Biblical preaching might be due for renewal. People in the pews today largely do not know the Bible and cannot be assumed to know the larger “Christian story.” The postmodern age eschews unquestioned assumptions. Preachers might ask: How may preaching on an individual biblical text actually communicate the gospel? What is the gospel? How does God feature in a sermon if texts do not seem to centre there? How is the identity of Jesus Christ communicated through preaching if specific texts do not do so? Does it matter? Some might say it does not.

If it matters, there are fresh possibilities. Preachers might venture beyond current levels of exegetical engagement of the biblical text. Let the text be the text, say what it meant and what it means, but let that not be the end. Let the text also be a viewpoint on a mountain that offers a perspective on the larger Christian story. In other words, make an intentional link between the text at hand, whether it is Old or New Testament, and the narratives or symbols that are at the heart of the Christian story and worship. The practice is similar to the ancient practice of finding types (e.g., Jonah swallowed by the whale was a type of Christ in the tomb for three days), except that that former practice claimed to represent the actual meaning of the text. This does not. It merely claims to make a legitimate inter-canonical link. Pursue what David Bartlett calls “echoes” between any text and the larger story.⁹ Look for a link to any aspect of the Christ event (incarnation, earthly ministry, death and resurrection, ascension, second coming, the fulfillment of all of God’s promises). That link ideally will help listeners to locate insights from a particular text within the larger framework of their identity as disciples of Christ.

Biblical texts often contain an image, word, or phrase that is an echo of the larger gospel. For example, in the parable of the two sons (Luke 15:11-32), the father says in effect to the prodigal: “You were dead

⁹ David Bartlett, *Between the Bible and the Church: New Methods for Biblical Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 64-72. For more on this matter see also Paul Scott Wilson, *The Practice of Preaching*, revised ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), 247-262.

and have come to life; you were lost and now are found.” Does God in Christ not say those same words to each of us in our baptism, when we die to our old self and rise to our new? “*You* were dead and have come to life; *you* were lost and now are found.” To the elder son, the father says, “My child, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.” Does God not say those same words to each of us? Paul knows it, when he says that nothing can “separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:39).

In Jesus’ sermon on the mountain, he tells the disciples to offer the other cheek, give also one’s cloak, go the extra mile, and love one’s enemies (Matthew 5:38-48), all of which is condemnation to us. As Paul says, “For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do” (Romans 7:19). However, Jesus’ words echo or prefigure his journey to the cross where he offers the other cheek, gives of his clothing, goes the extra mile to the cross itself, and all for the love of his enemies. In other words in the cross and resurrection he accomplished the fulfillment of his command to us, and thus in him, through faith, we can be counted as perfect: “Be perfect, therefore, even as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matthew 5:48).

One further sermon example from Luke 19:1-10 may help to make the point. The first paragraph below develops good news from the text, the second connects to the larger faith story through the echo of “tree” in the text and “cross,” and the echo between what Jesus says to Zacchaeus and what he says to us in his resurrection:

We have seen Zacchaeus climb a tree, as the text says, “to see who Jesus is.” No man of wealth and dignity would deign to run, much less climb a tree. Zacchaeus was short of stature in more ways than one: he came up short in the eyes of his neighbours—he had wealth but little dignity. By climbing that sycamore he could see Jesus; he could see the One who called his name, without ever having met him. He could see the One who would invite himself to his house. He could see the One who would make him want to make amends to his neighbours. There in full view was the One who would make him want to give away half of his goods to the poor and restore any ill-gotten wealth to its owners. Up there he could see the One who would bring salvation to his home.

No matter how high in that tree Zacchaeus climbed, he would not be able to see the hill outside Jerusalem, nor the tree upon that hill that Jesus would climb. Jesus climbed it so that the whole world would be able to see who he is. Jesus says to us from the cross, "If you want to see who I am, look here. I climbed this tree so that you would not have to. I love you and I die your death for you." From that cross he says to us, "I must stay at your house today. Your wrongs I give you the power to right, your quarrels I give you the power to resolve, your relationships I mend, your tears I wipe away, your blindness I heal, your deafness I unstop, your loneliness I visit and your hunger I feed. Today I bring salvation to your house."

Some of the assumptions here may be simply listed: 1) Both Old and New Testaments witness to the gospel, to God who saves. 2) The nature of this saving God is clearly stated in the Christ event. 3) The purpose of preaching is to communicate the God who not least equips and empowers. 4) Even the majority of New Testament texts, taken in isolation, do not give witness to the heart of the faith. 5) Any text can be used as a viewpoint from which to look in the direction of the central symbols and narratives of the faith, and because each viewpoint is different, each offers a fresh perspective. Of course this present discussion is based on a pivotal assumption: biblical preaching will live and die with passing ages.

Review Article

***GOD'S SECRETARIES: THE MAKING OF THE KING JAMES BIBLE.* Adam Nicolson (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 2003).**

By Christine Smaller

Surrounded by various medical machines emitting mesmerizing flashing lights and droning beeps and pings, I hold a woman's hand and ask if her husband has a favourite Psalm. She looks toward the man lying in the ICU bed and replies wearily, "we always enjoyed reading Psalm 23 together." I pick up my beloved NRSV and begin reading: "My Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." As I continue with the words, "he makes me lie down in green pastures," my congregant's eyebrows furrow slightly and she looks up at me quizzically and then back to her unexpectedly and gravely ill husband. Her shoulders droop even lower than they have been for days. I know immediately what is wrong. The Psalm does not seem right to her, or familiar, or comforting, because it doesn't sound the way it "should." She wants the familiar words that ring with God's majesty and power in this time of caustic grief, but I have not brought the King James Version and so we must both muddle through with what we have at hand.

Adam Nicolson would not have made my mistake. He claims, in *God's Secretaries: The Making of the King James Bible*, that this version is the only one that truly brings the immediacy, the dignity and the grandeur of God's word to God's people. This translation, despite being produced by fifty or so almost anonymous religious scholars living and working in a particular time and place, is "not the product of a single moment, but the child of an entire culture stretching back to the great Jewish poets and storytellers of the Near Eastern Bronze Age" and one that passionately reaches forward to touch the heart of a 21st century Canadian woman keeping vigil over her dying husband.¹

As we celebrate the 400th anniversary of the KJV Bible, it seems only fitting to take another look at Nicolson's engaging love letter to the only translation that has produced an astonishing 5 billion copies during

¹Adam Nicolson, *God's Secretaries: The Making of the King James Bible* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 2003), xii.

its 400 years in continual publication. It is after all, he contends, the single biggest influence on the English language worldwide. Nicolson, a member of British nobility who chooses not to use his rightful title of 5th Baron of Carnock, quickly draws the reader into a world full of intrigue and contradiction. He provides the reader with a window on the people, places and events that enveloped the seven year long translation process.

The Fertile Soil

Nicolson deftly sets the stage for the birth of the King James Bible: an England that, at the turn of the 17th century, is hungering for change and growth. The once beloved Virgin Queen has aged and now represents a tired past with which her citizens wish to dispense. Elizabeth's elderly and dwindling nobility is squandering its waning power on enforcing the queen's motto, *semper eadem*: always the same. But her earlier reputation as peaceful and tolerant of diversity is being transformed into one of ill-tempered brutality as she suppresses any religious debate that might arise. Nonetheless, underneath this dusty and antique veneer, something fresh and new is bubbling up, a swell of sentiment insisting that war come to an end, business be allowed to flourish and religious tolerance be once again the norm.

While we may look back and see the dying days of the Renaissance corresponding with Elizabeth's death, Nicolson wants us to appreciate that a glorious new age was dawning in England, one that King James would ably usher in. James was exactly what England needed—a leader who was the opposite of Elizabeth: a man “with wife and children (Anne was pregnant with their sixth child), an heir (for goodness' sake!), a passionate huntsman, full of vigour, a poet, an intellectual of European standing, a new king, a new reign and a new way of looking at the world.”² London (the biggest city in Europe with a population of 140,000, although the plague would kill 30,000 during James' first year as king) was experiencing exotic new fruits brought from the edges of the earth, gentlemen were coaxing strange tropical flowers to grow in their English gardens, more and more brilliant young men were flocking to Oxford and Cambridge eager to learn, and a new king was on the horizon who would join in the exuberance of simply being alive in England in the

² Ibid., 3.

early 17th century. Nicolson ardently invites us to marvel at the near miraculous convergence of the forces required to produce a Bible translation "in which the light of understanding and the majesty of God could be united in a text to which the nation as a whole, Puritan and prelate, court and country, simple and educated, could subscribe."³

Planting the Seed

Mere days after Elizabeth's death, as James travelled from Scotland to England to claim the English crown, Puritan forces took their opportunity and presented him with the "Millenary Petition."⁴ James' strong interest and considerable expertise in theology, politics and the divinity of kings, along with his penchant for lively discussion, meant he was willing to enter into the very same debate Elizabeth made a point of avoiding for decades. James called for a conference to be held at Hampton Court to resolve the obstacles preventing internal church reconciliation, and although it was delayed by the deadliest outbreaks of plague in England, the meeting commenced on January 12, 1604. Both sides campaigned vigorously prior to the conference; Nicolson likens it to "a modern, single-issue campaign, dragooning the media, whipping up local excitement, lobbying in private, agitating in public."⁵ The bishops seemed to have had a significant edge, and James issued a proclamation in October 1603 stating that God's church was rightly structured as episcopal. James did concede that there were some elements in need of change and assured the parties that he would find a way to resolve them.

Against the backdrop of a frigid Thames, the Church of England representatives (the Archbishop of Canterbury, eight Bishops, eight Deans and one Archdeacon), all dressed in the flowing robes and surplices so loathed by the Nonconformists and Separatists, were granted the first

³ Ibid., 63.

⁴ A list of Puritan demands for the reformation of the Church of England, commonly known as the "Millenary Petition," because of its supposed 1000 signatories. Evidence suggests there were actually no signatures whatever, but some 750 ministers likely assented by letter. Their demands included: no questioning of infants at baptism, abolishment of confirmation, nurses and other women to be forbidden from baptizing dying infants, ministers to be barred from ordination unless they could effectively and engagingly preach, communion never to be administered without a sermon preceding it and wedding rings banned from being used in marriage ceremonies.

⁵ Nicolson, *God's Secretaries*, 40.

audience with James. He was unequivocal in his desire for religious accord: "Religion," he told them, "was the soul of a kingdom, and unity the life of religion."⁶ While he was clear about his antipathy toward any type of presbyterian order, he admonished the bishops for suggesting that there was nothing in the Church's current structure or practice that could be improved. James then met with the four "plaintiffs," each of whom had been carefully selected so as to exclude any radical Puritanism from the conference.⁷ He let loose his scorn on this small group with a ferocious intensity that Nicolson ascribes to the psychological consequences of a "troubled upbringing" at the hands of numerous scheming, abusive and heartless Presbyterian guardians. James concluded his attack on the Puritans with the unambiguous statement that without bishops, there could be no king. "Bishops were the *sine qua non* of the kind of monarchy and church James needed, wanted and believed in."⁸ Nonetheless, the Puritans persisted with their pleas, and picking up on James' desire for unity, petitioned for a Bible that was "non-episcopal, the naked word of God, truly transmitted. And to that request James had said, in effect, 'Yes: I will give you the very opposite of what you ask.'"⁹ So there would be a new "official" Bible, one that would improve on the scholarly weaknesses of the Bishops Bible and yet continue to firmly establish the godliness of kings and the kingliness of God.

The Labour

Given that we live in an age obsessed with business and management practice (156,000 MBAs are granted each year in the U.S. alone), it is not surprising that Nicolson gives considerable attention to the remarkable administrative story of this project. It is a surprisingly modern enterprise: James is presented as shrewd CEO continuing to micro-manage the translation throughout the process. The structure of the project was

⁶ Ibid., 52.

⁷ Moderate Puritans were considered to be those who accepted that the King was the head of the church and that the church held authority over the religious life of the people. Nicolson rightly reminds the reader that competing visions of authority were at stake for the parties. This should not be mistaken for contemporary conflict between freedom and authority or the struggle for freedom of individual conscience.

⁸ Nicolson, *God's Secretaries*, 57.

⁹ Ibid., 60.

extensive: six "companies" (a title that conveyed both creative and military weight), each comprising eight men and led by a director, would translate designated portions of the Bible. The comprehensive written instructions for translation did not offer much in the way of theological or literary direction, but instead laid the framework for the massive production to roll out efficiently and with the necessary propriety. Translation of secular works at this time was considered akin to co-authorship and any erudite Jacobean "would despise the literalist as a plodding, and scarcely civilised pedant".¹⁰ It was also the norm, however, to undertake the task of translating religious works as a "secretary" and the Directors were to ensure no liberties were taken with the text.¹¹

James' instructions were clear: translation would be carried out in Oxford and Cambridge based primarily on the Bishops Bible but drawing also on earlier sources in order to remedy the translation weaknesses of the Bishop's Bible itself. The resulting work would be revised by the Bishops, and then given to the Privy Council to weed out any possible subversion that could have survived the earlier processes, thereby ensuring the production of a pro-royal, bishop-affirming Bible that would be required reading in all churches across the land. But Nicolson suggests that the structure and pace of Jacobean England itself balanced these less than noble motivations to allow the KJV to come into its own. (Dare we suggest the Holy Spirit might have had a hand?) Those of us in the United Church may take heart: although Nicolson condemns most committee work as "fudge and muddle," he argues that the KJV is a work of genius, not despite its communal providence, but likely because of it.

The Labourers

While the stated purpose of Nicolson's book is to investigate and reveal how such a beautiful translation of the Bible came about, this may be just his excuse to offer the reader dozens of biographies of the men involved in this large scale project. There were a significant number of Puritans

¹⁰ Ibid., 184.

¹¹ Surprisingly, Luther took the former attitude and translated with the purpose of making the language of scripture that of the men, women and children of the "street" and "market." The goal was "to make Moses so German that no one would suspect he was a Jew" (185). In opposition to this, the KJV enterprise was structured so that Calvin's "secretarial strictness" would prevail.

involved in order that it could be proclaimed a Bible for all England. Translators were selected based on their knowledge and expertise in diverse areas such as language, theology and biblical scholarship, but "part of their qualifications for being chosen was their ability to work the systems of deference and power on which society relied."¹² When asked about the character of these secretaries in an interview with PBS, Nicolson observed that their personal lives were sometimes wanting: "A lot of them are rather obscure scholars from Oxford and Cambridge—some of them, notably drunk pornographers, among them."¹³ (In fact, Nicolson, who never offers a substantial reason for why this translation is so powerful, asks: "Is the King James Bible so alive precisely because the Translators weren't entirely good?")¹⁴ Along with the carefully detailed yet breezily vibrant character sketches, the reader is treated to sixteen pages of lush illustrations, most of which depict the men pivotal to the project.

The Fruit

Nicolson argues that despite the fact that the New Testament in the KJV is ninety-four per cent identical to Tyndale's translation, the three hundred and fifty scholar-years of work put into it produced a translation better than any other before or since. It was not, however, an immediate hit. After the slow and tightly managed translation process, the final copy was turned over to Robert Barker, the king's printer, where it landed in anarchic bedlam from which it did not emerge until after the Restoration, when people were looking back at the Jacobean era with nostalgic yearning after the Civil Wars. There were an astonishing 24,000 different versions of the KJV many of which were riddled with mistakes, including the so-called "Wicked Bible" which exhorted its readers to commit adultery. Nicolson reports sadly that even some of the central figures in the translation project, like Lancelot Andrewes and William Laud, failed to adopt the KJV in their everyday use. But the translation eventually became lord over all other English versions.

¹² Ibid., 94.

¹³ Adam Nicolson, in an interview with PBS: http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/entertainment/july-dec03/nicolson_12-24.html.

¹⁴ Nicolson, *God's Secretaries*, 155.

The text of the KJV, which was already significantly dated at the time of its first printing, has had lasting influence over the English language. Idioms such as “giving up the ghost,” “scapegoat” and many others remain in our everyday speech. The poetry of Coleridge and T.S. Eliot, as well as speeches such as the Gettysburg address, Kennedy’s inaugural address and Martin Luther King Jr.’s sermons, all owe a debt to the translation. In addition to enriching the English language through four centuries, the KJV contributed to its establishment as a world language, not the least because it was used in most missionary efforts. Although the original pilgrims to America brought their bishop-bashing Geneva Bibles with them, as the maturing country became more interested in affirming the power of the state, the King James Version became *status quo* and played a part in shaping the nation it has become.

The KJV still plays a significant role in the Christian world. This translation continues to represent ten to fifteen percent of Bibles printed, and people continue to hold it in their deepest affections. One can even buy a t-shirt or a mug emblazoned with, “Real men read and believe the King James Bible.”¹⁵ But, starting in the late 19th century, new translations began to emerge. Nicolson attributes the first ones to advances in biblical scholarship and the inevitable revelations of inaccuracy in earlier translations. As the decades passed, clergy and others also began to look for more accessible translations. Nicolson is not enamoured of this development: “During World War II, military chaplains in the British army had been unable to make their soldiers understand the words of the Bible, or so it was claimed, and in 1946 the idea of another new translation was raised.”¹⁶ He believes that these versions are devoid of majesty, and grieves that they are signs that “religion, or at least the conventional religion of ordinary people, has been drained of its passion.”¹⁷ The KJV is a universal translation balanced elegantly between the ancient and the modern, vigour and elegance, vulnerability and power, symbol and plain preaching; it does not choose among any of these sensibilities but instead “absorbs and includes.” Nicolson reports that he no longer attends church because such virtues of

¹⁵ <http://www.zazzle.ca/real+men+read+king+james+gifts>.

¹⁶ Nicolson, *God's Secretaries*, 234.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 239.

the spoken word are no longer voiced in worship services.

Reading this very worthwhile book, I found myself responding with what Nicolson would likely label a Puritanical mindset. I found myself recoiling at Nicolson's virtual idolatry—not just of the Bible, but of a specific translation. As a minister, I have the privilege of walking with congregants as they deepen their relationship with God through Jesus Christ. The Bible is essential to this journey. But to suggest that only one translation can open the gate to the path seems to be missing the point entirely. *God's Secretaries*, however, is not meant to be a religious treatise and Nicolson does not promise the reader insight into the theological implications of the KJV. He is more interested in the politics of the time. Politics and religion, he argues, were conflated in the minds of all Jacobean, with the possible exception of the extreme Puritans. He seems completely uninterested in the question of why or how a biblical translation might impact an individual's relationship with God and God's word.

His project is to flesh out the personalities and the complex circumstances involved in the making of the book and he is very successful in this endeavour. *God's Secretaries* is no lightweight offering, but the lack of footnotes and Nicolson's tendency to psychologize his subjects, make it seem less than scholarly. For those who would like something with more academic depth, Gordon Campbell's *Bible: The Story of the King James Version 1611-2011* might be of interest. Campbell's book is also extremely readable and offers more attention to the actual translation process of the KJV. For example, while Nicolson does present some thought-provoking paragraphs on comparative translations, Campbell's volume includes an entire chapter on punctuation.

Nonetheless, for someone who is a recent seminary graduate and who spent little or no time with the KJV, Nicolson's work has been a wonderful boon. It not only provides a rich introduction to the history of the translation and the time and people that produced it, but also underscores the majesty and the power of this particular translation. It provides insight into the respect many of our own congregants give to the KJV as the only Bible that matters. Which is why I now carry a copy of the KJV whenever I make pastoral visits—especially, to the hospital.

FROM THE HEART—ABOUT THE HEART OF THE MATTER

LEAVING MY BRAIN AT THE DOOR

by Cheri DiNovo

It's always a joy to be asked to witness to one's faith and writing this piece was a welcome respite from fighting for affordable housing, living wages, the environment and any number of priorities I might have as a politician. Politics is a very different ministry. It's an honour and privilege to be a Member of Provincial Parliament and not one I, nor God I warrant, take lightly—but witnessing to one's faith isn't a regular part of my day. My thoughts as I sat at the keyboard circled around an interview a constituent of mine, Mary Wiens, did with Bishop John Spong on CBC recently. My first introduction to theology was Spong and a little later Matthew Fox, and truly I may not have walked into a church without them. I was raised an atheist for all intents and purposes, conceiving Christ as “cosmic” rather than flesh and blood, and the church as misinformed on the matter of “sin.” Social issues like same-sex marriage made sense to the atheist in me. Maybe if I could find a church that ordained LBGT folk (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered people) and a church where, as I said back then, “I didn't have to leave my brains at the door,” I might try it out.

Of course there were other factors that preceded my first stroll into the United Church of Canada in my thirties (I'm ignoring a few unfortunate Bible school experiences at the behest of an aunt when I was too little to know better). There was the evangelical neon cross that my small son asked me about: “What's the lighted ‘T’ for, Mom?” Perhaps our children needed to become more literate about the “stories” so as to be able to read Shakespeare, my husband and I mused. My husband who was a lapsed Roman Catholic said he didn't believe in God, but did believe that Mary was the mother of God!

Then there was the Rolling Stone song based on the story of the Prodigal Son, one of my favourites. Also that passage that I had heard somewhere—the one where Jesus says to the thief at his side on Calvary “Today you will be with me in Paradise.” I couldn't shake the sense that although I knew that statement to be untrue, there was something uncanny about the ability to extend comfort to someone like that during one's own

torture. If none of it actually happened at all, who had the ability to invent it?

Who really can pinpoint—as we are asked to do at ordination interviews—the moment when one becomes a follower of Christ? I would have said all manner of moments depending on who asked me but truly the one factual utterance I could make about my conversion now, decades later, is that my conversion had absolutely nothing to do with me. It had nothing to do with any theologian either, although by the time I left seminary I had moved far, far from Fox and Spong and had embraced Barth and Bonhoeffer. My conversion, and it was completely “con” my former being, began and ended as do all manner of things, with God.

Wild that I can write this now! My younger self, questioning, reading, experiencing younger self, would see that statement, “All things originate with God,” as reactionary, right wing and, most of all, nonsensical. My young Christian self would want to unpack it and deconstruct it and explain “God” so that my brain could fathom it. There’s that “brain” again! Truly now I see the gift of the United Church of Canada and all that it has meant in my life to be the exact opposite of what I originally imagined it to be. I thank the United Church for allowing me to “leave my brain at the door.”

You see, my brain, our brain, is an obstacle to faith. Before you freak out, let me say also that our brain is, of course, a gift of God. It has its uses and they are legion. Once we are Christian it allows us to decipher the process, investigate theology, study scripture, become apologists of the faith to others. Our brain can do almost anything. Yet the one thing it cannot do is bring God and or Christ into our lives. It cannot and must not “explain” God and Christ because if it attempts this—as happens with popular theology in every generation—it serves up only ourselves to ourselves. Only God is God and I am not God. Only Christ is Christ and I am not Christ.

Christ became incarnate in our image, but we are not Christ. When Jesus Christ walked from his tomb I’m sure he realized that not only his own disciples of the day, but also generations of disciples following, would try to march him right back to the tomb again. If our faith has no room for miracles, the unexplainable and outrageous acts for which we have no explanation—God—then it is not faith. It is science, usually poor

science. Occasionally it is philosophy, although today philosophers are ready at least to suspend their belief in dis-belief. I love philosophy. I also love what science provides. Without faith, however, I will be quite literally, some day, dead.

As I find myself seconded (by God no doubt who, as we all know, has a wild sense of humour) to the halls of the temporal, I am shaken daily by how much the gift of faith is a gift. I also take no mean comfort in my own knowledge of myself as a “sinful” person—something that the younger version of myself would be equally shocked by. Thank God I’m not God! Thank God I am a human creature in the Barthian sense, as frail and funny as my loved dog. Like Oscar Wilde, I know myself to be lying in the gutter but am happily one of those who gazes at the stars—not through anything I’ve done or know, simply and only through grace.

Every morning that we are able, my husband and I pray that all those who wish us harm will have joy and blessing throughout their day. We do this because we are equally aware that our own “stinkin’ thinkin’” will cause harm to others. Buddhists would call this karma. The clothes on my back are the result of sweatshops and I enjoy my standard of living because the environment is suffering. The least we can do is check our ego before we leave the house and remind ourselves of what we truly are. I don’t like saintly folk much myself. I prefer those who err and are cognizant that they err.

I’ll always remember as a young clergy intern the visit I had with an elderly wise woman who asked me: “Can you or someone please give me a straight answer. What will happen to me when I die? More precisely will I see my beloved husband again?” Armed at the time with all manner of smart analysis, coupled with new age spirituality, I started swimming in words, trying to give her what I believed was an honest answer. Honestly, had I answered honestly I should have said, “No.” What I found myself saying instead and now believe in my better moments, was, “Yes, yes you will.” That was another moment of conversion.

The importance of Christian community as imperfect model of perfection is that church forces one to learn to love one’s actual neighbour. That’s the true purpose of all committees. Church also forces those who would be clergy to answer real questions and to question answers. If church is simply another charitable club where one receives

encouraging or motivational messages—let’s sleep in. Unfortunately, more people sleep in these days than attend. Then again it’s never about the numbers; by that measure Jesus was the worst evangelist of all time. He took a church of 5000 (Sermon on the Mount) and whittled it down to a few women in three years! But it’s also not, I warrant, about complacency.

I remind myself that the powerful “Christian Right” is neither Christian nor right! Importantly, the United Church of Canada can stand as a witness to Christ and Christ’s message of love for one’s neighbour whether that neighbour is in my image or not. There is no place in scripture for prejudice. We need constantly to reclaim the veracity of the scriptural testament from those who would craft scripture and, flowing from scripture, a Christ in their own image. This is as true of the “fundamentalist” as it is of the “liberal.” It is truly a return to the fundamentals to attempt an inclusive, loving kairoic community. Scripture finally is our best bulwark against homophobia, sexism, racism and hatred of all varieties. Biblical literacy is crucial.

How as a congregant I long for church! Often called away for conferences and such, I miss it more than I attend—and I do miss it. If I were a Roman Catholic, other options would be available for me. I also miss Bible study. I love being asked to guest preach, something that happens about once a month. That allows me to engage with scripture the way I used to. There are many like me and many more who aren’t lucky enough to guest preach who miss loving community—a community of sinners desirous of heaven. Too many toil at jobs that sap their souls and need to hear the Word of God. Sitting in the congregation again has allowed me to see this even more clearly.

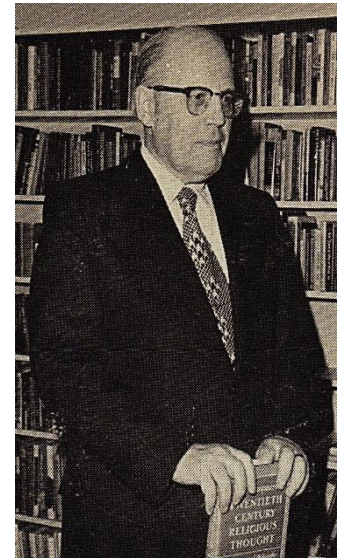
If anything, I find myself becoming more radical as I age. I still fight for, and can now give parliamentary expression to LBGT rights, among other issues. I still am appalled at the state of our earth. I still am a social justice activist and yes, I still value my brain. But the most radical notion I hold—one so revolutionary that I still believe it will bring about a new heaven and earth—is that Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, is our judge and our hope, and that God so loved this world that God came as Christ for us. There is nothing more beautiful, truthful, miraculous and awesome to this joyously sinful ex-atheist.

PROFILE

ALMOST FORGOTTEN: RC CHALMERS AND THE LIBERAL-EVANGELICAL HERITAGE OF THE UNITED CHURCH OF CANADA

by William Haughton

Randolph Carleton Chalmers is one of the more compelling and significant figures in the brief history of the United Church. Yet, chances are, most people in the church today have never heard of him or, at least, know little about him. Known as “RC Chalmers” to his readers and “Ralph” to his friends, his is a name one stumbles across often in libraries and archives when doing research on the United Church. Because he is someone who has given me a lot of insight into the Church’s past, I would like to offer others a brief portrait of his life and work. I suggest that Chalmers’ virtual disappearance from our collective conscience signals an evolution in the church’s theology which has rendered him either unhelpful or simply too uninteresting for most.



Life Story

Early Life

Ralph Chalmers was born on January 31, 1908, in Bathurst, New Brunswick. His mother, Frances, was a 22 year old single mother. According to the baptismal records of St. Luke’s Presbyterian Church (a forerunner of First United Church), he was considered a member of the extended family of his grandparents, Ann (Scott) and Hugh Chalmers, who farmed in the area. As a boy, he attended West Bathurst Superior School and Bathurst Grammar School.¹ Not much is known about Chalmers’ early years. The various obituaries and other biographical sketches skip over his youth, due perhaps to the remnant of a taboo surrounding his family situation. A clue to this is found in a note next to his name in the baptismal register where the minister wrote

¹ W. Chalmers Hatcher, *Dwelling Together in Unity: History of First United Church (Trinity-St. Luke’s)* (Bathurst, NB: First United Church, 1969), 46.

“Illegitimate”—a value-laden alternative to the father’s name.² It is regrettable that we do not know more about Chalmers’ background.

Pastoral Ministry

Chalmers was recommended for ministry by his local church as a very young man and began his preparation at Mount Allison University, where he graduated with a B.A. in philosophy. From there, he attended Pine Hill Divinity Hall, where he received a B.D. in the spring of 1934. Ordained by Maritime Conference shortly after graduation, he was settled at Trinity United Church, Canning, Nova Scotia. At the end of three years there, he accepted a call to Brunswick Street United Church in Halifax.

Chalmers’ years in Halifax were ambitious ones both personally and professionally. He and his wife Evelyn (Burgess) had their first and only child, Douglas, in 1939. At Brunswick Street, Chalmers was known as a compelling preacher as well as an effective church and community leader. The Brunswick Street Mission was initiated during his tenure as a useful outreach among the city’s poor. He also was a leading figure in the local branch of the Sons of Temperance. In addition to these demands on his time, he also began working towards a doctorate in systematic theology through Emmanuel College, Toronto, and was the secretary of Halifax Presbytery.³

In 1942, Chalmers moved to Sherbourne United Church in Toronto, where he remained until 1945. During this pastorate he finished his doctoral dissertation, under the supervision of John Line, receiving Emmanuel’s third Th.D. in 1944. His thesis was later published by Ryerson Press as *See the Christ Stand: A Study in Doctrine in The United Church of Canada*.⁴

Board of Evangelism and Social Service

In 1944, Chalmers accepted an appointment from the 11th General

² Baptismal Record, St. Luke’s Presbyterian Church (Bathurst, NB), Maritime Conference Archives, Sackville, New Brunswick. Chalmers was baptized on March 26, 1910.

³ Helpful summaries of Chalmers’ Halifax years are found in two articles: “Minister will leave August 1 – Accepts Call as Pastor of large Toronto church,” *Halifax Mail*, 23 May 1942 and “Halifax Pastor Accepts Call to Toronto, Ont.,” *Halifax Star*, 23 May 1942.

⁴ RC Chalmers, *See the Christ Stand: A Study in Doctrine in The United Church of Canada* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1945), xiii.

Council to serve as the Associate Secretary of the Board of Evangelism and Social Service, a position he assumed early in 1945. He used this office to emphasize to the national church the need for each of its members, both clergy and lay, to re-commit to evangelism and social outreach. His article, "What about Evangelism?" which appeared in *The Observer* in November, 1946 offers a telling insight into his thinking during this period. In it, he noted that one-third of pastoral charges saw no professions of faith made in 1945. Alerting readers to the consequences for church and society if such a trend continued, he urged the whole United Church to take up the work of evangelism, perhaps through the "Crusade for Christ and His Kingdom," a home-visitation program.⁵ Yet, Chalmers did not believe that evangelism-as-soul-winning could be in any way separated from an outreach concerned with social justice. We read in another *Observer* article that the "task of world evangelization should be considered along with the very practical issues facing our world, such as food needs, displaced people, educational necessities, racial and economic justice and other matters of universal concern."⁶

Writing was Chalmers' main method of communication as Associate Secretary, as seen in his many *Observer* articles as well as in the various pamphlets he produced for the Board of Evangelism and Social Service. Yet he also travelled extensively across Canada, including a train trip taken to the West in early 1946, undertaken largely to promote the "Crusade for Christ and His Kingdom." In 1949, he made an extended visit to Newfoundland, shortly following its entry into Confederation, travelling from Corner Brook to St. John's to promote and encourage the work of the United Church in the new province. A very creative and enterprising individual, he also took an opportunity sometimes given to clergy in those days to broadcast over the CBC radio network on Sunday afternoons. During his five years at the General Council Offices, he also served as Secretary to the Commission on the Christian Faith, on which his old teacher John Line served.

⁵ RC Chalmers, "What About Evangelism?" *The United Church Observer*, 15 November 1946, 7.

⁶ RC Chalmers, "World Wide Communion Sunday, October 5th," *The United Church Observer*, 1 October 1947, 28.

Theological Professor

In the fall of 1950, Chalmers left Church House to take up a chair in systematic theology at St. Andrew's College, Saskatoon. Having written a second book, *Pure Celestial Fire: An Evangelical Interpretation of Christianity*, while at the Board of Evangelism and Social Service, Chalmers now began the work of seminary teaching and scholarly writing which was to occupy the rest of his working career. In addition to his significant role as theology teacher to prairie pastors, he produced another monograph while in Saskatoon, *The Protestant Spirit*. He also began a literary partnership with Toronto's John Irving that led to a series of essay collections which related Christian life and thought to pressing intellectual issues. During these years, an ongoing interest in the ecumenical movement developed after his attendance at the second Assembly of the World Council of Churches, in 1954.

In 1957, Chalmers moved from St. Andrew's College to take up a similar position at his *alma mater*, Pine Hill Divinity Hall. There he taught theology to many future pastors over the next 17 years, some of whom are still in ministry today. He is remembered fondly for his enthusiasm for his subject matter and also for his remarkable, photographic memory—two things which are hardly surprising given his literary output. One former student recalls how helpful Chalmers was in encouraging his students to see ministry in all aspects of life and to reflect deeply on the relationship of theology to science.⁷ In 1971, he was instrumental in the founding of the Atlantic School of Theology, of which Pine Hill was a founding member. His tenure at Pine Hill/AST also included a six month teaching stint at the United Theological College in Bangalore, India, in 1969.

While at Pine Hill/AST, Chalmers added to his impressive publishing record through the production of another monograph, *A Gospel to Proclaim*, and two more volumes edited with John Irving. Also of interest is his contribution to the New Curriculum, *Project World*. Though aimed at teenagers of the 1960s, this primer on Christianity would be challenging and helpful for many educated adults today.⁸

⁷ Personal conversation with Rev. Blair Lewis, 17 November 2010.

⁸ RC Chalmers, *Project World: a student's research and reading book for seniors (15-17 years of age, grades 10, 11, and 12)* (Toronto: United Church Publishing House, 1966).

During this stage of his career, Chalmers maintained a tremendous level of church involvement both within the United Church and beyond. As a corresponding member of the Committee on the Christian Faith in the 1960s, he was critical of early drafts of what became *A New Creed* and was influential in seeing that its final text made reference to Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection.⁹ At the 23rd General Council, 1968, he was nominated for moderator, but the election was won by Robert McClure. In 1970-71, Chalmers was the president of Maritime Conference and in 1973-74, he was the chair of Halifax Presbytery.

In relation to the wider church, Chalmers was a delegate to the third Assembly of the World Council of Churches, in 1961, and served as a member of that body's Faith and Order Commission from 1961-68. He also sat on the committee that was negotiating issues of doctrine between the United Church and the Anglican Church of Canada with a view to organic union. He was chosen, in fact, by the joint union committee to prepare the doctrinal study guide for the memberships of the two churches.¹⁰ Near the end of his career he also served as a member and then co-chair of the Theological Committee of the North American Area Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches.

Retirement

On June 30, 1974, Chalmers retired from the Atlantic School of Theology; he and his wife, Evelyn, settled in his hometown of Bathurst, New Brunswick. Even in retirement, however, he was active in the work of the church. In March 1975, for example, he preached to over 1,000 people at a Week of Prayer for Christian Unity Service held at Bathurst's Sacred Heart Cathedral. His compelling sermon that day led the *Bathurst Northern Light* to compare him to the late convenor of Vatican II, Pope John XXIII.¹¹ His first year of retirement also saw the publication of a final book, *The Happy Science*, which offers a helpful survey of modern

⁹ See, for instance, "The New Creed" (submitted by RC Chalmers), Standing Committee on the Christian Faith funds, 82.204c, 3-41, United Church of Canada Archives and *Record of Proceedings, 23rd General Council* (Toronto: United Church of Canada, 1968), 56.

¹⁰ RC Chalmers, *The Study Guide to the Principles of Union between the Anglican Church of Canada and the United Church of Canada* (Toronto: Anglican Church of Canada, 1965).

¹¹ "Church Leader is Commended," *Bathurst Northern Light*, 4 March 1975 [n.p.], RC Chalmers Biographical File, United Church of Canada Archives.

schools of theological thought. Regrettably, Chalmers died of a heart attack after only a brief retirement, on July 16, 1977. Evelyn survived him by seventeen years, dying in Halifax, in 1994, at the age of 83.

Written Legacy

There is no doubt that RC Chalmers had a broad and impressive career in the United Church. Yet, for a fuller sense of him as a person, we have to look beyond his *curriculum vitae* to get a glimpse of the way he expressed himself through theological reflection and writing. He was a thoroughgoing intellectual, and theology—studying, teaching and writing—was his life. In fact, it is more in his books than anything else that Chalmers’ lasting legacy for the United Church might be found. To gain an appreciation of his thinking, it is especially helpful to consider his first and last books: *See the Christ Stand* and *The Happy Science*.

See the Christ Stand

Chalmers’ first book is a historical and theological study of the doctrine found in the Basis of Union. In it, we find a clear expression of his liberal-evangelicalism and catch a glimpse of how common such a perspective was in his era. In our day, when liberalism and evangelicalism are sometimes seen as polar opposites—especially due to the political situation in the USA—it is vital to grasp how many in Chalmers’ time, not least in the United Church, saw the social progress of society and the growth of the church through evangelism as two sides of the same coin. The combined efforts of social advocacy and winning individuals for Christ were seen by people like him as essential for the sanctification of Canadian society and the advancement of God’s kingdom.

In this light, we see that Chalmers is extremely critical of the Basis of Union’s traditional theology and language, while he insists that the church open itself to the progress in theology being made elsewhere. He writes, for example: “The author confesses that . . . he is and will probably always remain a liberal in religion. He believes that truth is not static but dynamic.”¹² His only real criticism of the United Church’s liberalism—already pronounced in its early years—is that it had led many

¹² See *the Christ Stand*, 151.

people too far, to a costly disinterest in theology.¹³ Yet, on the flip side, Chalmers devoted a great deal of energy—intellectual, emotional and spiritual—to commending theological reflection to the people of the United Church and promoting the practical outgrowth of that reflection: evangelism. He writes elsewhere that “Christianity is primarily a religion of salvation” and that “evangelism is the chief task of the church.”¹⁴

One of the interesting features of *See the Christ Stand*, like many of Chalmers’ other works, is the way he demonstrates and encourages a way of thinking about the liberal-evangelical mission of the church that is both systematic and creative. Acknowledging the immense challenge of a secular age in which radical social change was afoot, he pleaded with the church to abandon its attachment to the past and embrace whatever technological means necessary, through any and all media, to spread the good news and promote the kingdom. “The automobile,” he writes tellingly, “has taken people away from the homes for weekends to beaches and recreational resorts but we have not yet put ‘religion on wheels’ to follow them.”¹⁵

The Happy Science

Completed and published early in Chalmers’ brief retirement, *The Happy Science* is a book unlike any of his others. In contrast to his previous works, which were mostly devoted to the dialectical relationship of theological reflection with evangelism and social outreach, this last offering was the fruit of his career as a theological professor. In it, he offers a brief survey of more than a dozen schools of current theological thought, from liberal theology to neo-orthodoxy, the Death-of-God and the theology of liberation. Here, we find the reiteration of Chalmers’ distaste for anything resembling conservative evangelicalism or the neo-orthodoxy of Barth. In contrast, he commends theological liberalism for its interest in the historical Jesus, for its affirmation of science, for its open-mindedness and, finally, because it has “freed the church from obscurantist beliefs and crude superstitions which often follow in the footsteps of religious faith.”¹⁶

¹³ *See the Christ Stand*, 211-213.

¹⁴ *See the Christ Stand*, 216ff.

¹⁵ *See the Christ Stand*, 218.

¹⁶ *The Happy Science* (Toronto: United Church Observer, 1975), 34.

Interestingly, Chalmers seems to have developed his greatest affinity for a theological new kid on the block: liberation theology, or “theology of revolution.” From his view, it takes account of the global reality of humankind in a way that nothing else does. Liberation theology also goes beyond mere social analysis, calling both individuals and communities to constructive action. What is most appealing for Chalmers, however, is the way the early liberation theologians, like Gutierrez, had grounded their thinking in an encounter with Christ and an urgency about God’s kingdom. He writes, in closing, “Perhaps in this area what we need is not comment on the theology of liberation or revolution as much as to heed the biblical injunction ‘Go and do likewise.’”¹⁷

Overall, *The Happy Science* remains a helpful book for its broad survey of twentieth century theology. In each chapter, he provides a good description of each school and concludes with a very measured evaluation of both its positive and negative attributes. One gets a real sense from this presentation of how he must have taught theology over the years.

Conclusion: Chalmers’ Significance for the United Church Today

In *The Church in the Canadian Era*, John Webster Grant describes Chalmers’ *See the Christ Stand* as “an almost forgotten book that sheds much light on the formative years of the [United] church.”¹⁸ I would add that the same thing could be said about Ralph Chalmers himself. His career and publishing record remain outstanding in the history of the United Church, yet both the person and his books have become “almost forgotten” by recent generations. Why is this? It seems that though he was clearly a theological liberal, his liberalism remains too akin to classical Protestantism and too closely tied to something called “evangelism” to receive a serious hearing in today’s United Church. This is unfortunate, because Chalmers tells us a great deal about our earlier history as a church and even gives us some good ideas about what we might still do and be.

¹⁷ *The Happy Science*, 197.

¹⁸ John Webster Grant, *The Church in the Canadian Era*, 2nd Edition (Burlington, ON: Welch, 1988), 250.

BOOK REVIEWS

Encountering Paul: Understanding the Man and His Message.

Tatha Wiley (Come & See Series. Lanham, Md.: Sheed & Ward Books, 2010) Pp. 214.

Many readers of the Bible, this one included, prefer Jesus to Paul. The apostle Paul was probably not the most likeable person. His writings are difficult to understand, and at times offensive. Tatha Wiley's *Encountering Paul* serves as a valiant effort to defend Paul. She notes some of the main problems modern readers have with Paul: the hierarchical roles of men and women, his apparent acceptance of the institution of slavery, and his religious exclusivism (particularly as it relates to anti-Judaism). Wiley states: "For Paul's voice to authorize these three positions radically marginalizes his moral significance. How can his worldview be a moral source for Christians if it incorporates immoral positions within it" (xvi-xvii)?

Wiley's treatment divides into eight main chapters: "Paul's World," "Expectations and Hopes," "Theological Perspective," "The Truth of the Gospel," "Paul's Letters," "Disputed Letters," "The *Adversus Judaeos* Tradition" and "Finding Paul." Each chapter ends with three or four discussion questions aimed at helping the reader or study group to reflect more closely on Wiley's argument. In the first four chapters, Wiley helpfully contextualizes Paul's letters in light of modern scholarship on early Judaism. She outlines some of the diversity of Jewish thinking and praxis in Paul's day, demonstrating that early followers of Jesus did not exist as a religious entity separate from Judaism. Wiley rightly notes that one particular question drives the majority of Paul's letters: How is this Jesus movement to incorporate gentile women and men (xi)? The question was internal to the nascent movement; that is, it was not a dispute between Judaism and Christianity, but a dispute between followers of Jesus. Only later, when one could talk about Christianity and Judaism as two distinct religions, were Paul's letters interpreted as criticisms of Judaism per se (see chapter seven). Here Wiley relies not only on the seminal work of E.P. Sanders, but also her recent book on Galatians, *Paul and the Gentile Women: Reframing Galatians* (London: T&T Clark, 2005).

In light of recent scholarship on Paul, imperialism, and post-

colonialism, Wiley makes a concerted effort to read Paul's letters within the context of the Roman Empire. How would Paul's readers hear his statements about the gospel of the Lord Jesus within the context of imperial claims of the gospel of Caesar's lordship? The God of Israel had resurrected the one crucified by Roman authorities, demonstrating the injustice and violence of the Empire, while also demonstrating its lack of power. "The reign Jesus initiates is without the violence of the existing empire. In identifying with the lowest of low, as the Philippians' hymn shows, the cosmic rule of Jesus is to be very different from that of the present rulers" (22). Paul's gospel undermined the death-dealing oppression of Rome. Wiley's emphasis on Paul's Jewishness and the anti-imperial implications of his gospel are connected. She argues that Paul's anti-imperial sentiments are fuelled by Jewish hopes and expectations of God's people being liberated from foreign rule (24-26). While my own thoughts resonate with her treatment of Paul within an imperial context, I was left wishing that her brief treatment of the specifics of Paul's letters would address the troublesome statements of Romans 13, in which Paul appears to advise submission to imperial authorities. How does this chapter fit with Wiley's anti-imperial reading of Paul?

Further to her anti-imperial interpretation of Paul, Wiley also dismisses the charge that Paul advocated male rule and authorized slavery by noting that most scholars believe the letters in which one finds these positions were not written by Paul (xvii). She fleshes these claims out in Chapters 5 and 6 where she discusses the authentic and inauthentic Pauline letters. Wiley may be right that Paul did not advocate these positions himself, yet does dismissing these letters as non-Pauline truly solve the problem? Attributing these letters to someone else may help absolve Paul, but the letters remain in the church's canon. Isn't the problem really less about Paul than it is about the church's scripture? How are Christians to appropriate scripture when it contains such problematic passages?

For those looking for a brief and up-to-date introduction to Paul, Wiley's book will admirably meet their needs, while leaving them wrestling anew with the difficulties of appropriating Paul today.

Matthew Thiessen, College of Emmanuel and St. Chad, Saskatoon.

The Crucified Nation: A Motif in Modern Nationalism.

Alan Davies (Eastbourne, Great Britain: Sussex Academic Press, 2008) Pp.vii +123.

Professor Alan Davies is Professor Emeritus at Victoria College, University of Toronto. He is an ordained United Church minister who has spent most of his career as a teacher and lecturer. Professor Davies is noteworthy for emphasizing Jewish-Christian relations in most of his writings, and in fact his doctoral thesis in 1966 explored anti-Semitism and the Christian churches' involvement in it. He is the editor of *Anti-Semitism in Canada*, published in 1992, and he has written a number of articles and books, most of which are on the topic of Jewish-Christian relations.

The Crucified Nation is a rare contribution from Professor Davies in that it does not have Christian-Jewish relations as its focus. The book is a case study of five nations whose national identities include a crucifixion mentality. This is then mixed with nationalism and revenge motives, leading to a potentially toxic mix. Professor Davies argues that this crucifixion mentality is very damaging, and an incorrect interpretation of the meaning of the Passion.

The five countries studied are Poland, France, Germany, Ireland, and Palestine. The inclusion of Poland fits with his thesis statement but is rather remote from the consciousness of most potential readers. The study of France may be the strongest in the group, and Professor Davies aptly includes modern French attitudes towards the increasing Muslim population in France. The review of Germany is apt because the psychological wounds suffered as a result of the defeat in World War One and the Treaty of Versailles were exploited decisively by Hitler. Professor Davies does point out that those wounds were genuine and unwisely inflicted by the victors, though the analogy of the German people as a crucified nation does not accord with Luther's teachings, as Davies notes.

One curious aspect of the study of Germany is the emphasis that Lutheran thinkers placed upon the use of the idea of a crucified nation to rally a nation. Germany has a very substantial Roman Catholic minority centered in Munich, where Hitler first rose to notoriety. Catholic Germans

seemed to be as enthusiastic to rally to the alarms of war as their Protestant brethren, and so emphasizing the thought process as Protestant in its entirety may be incomplete.

The study of Ireland is a good choice, though he chooses to discuss both the Irish (South) question and the Northern Irish (Ulster) viewpoints as one chapter, perhaps at some loss to each. The final inclusion, Palestine, seems to be an odd one. Though Professor Davies highlights the themes of crucifixion which he discerns in the Palestinian literature of an oppressed people, this writer struggles to find all of the parallels he suggests. However, it can be argued that the analogy of crucifixion need not be specifically linked to Christ.

The different case studies and their nuances are not as important as their collective point. The mixture of a psyche of crucifixion and nationalistic calls for revenge is a toxic one. One may say that this assertion is intuitive and hardly worth repeating, but important matters such as these should not be left to merely intuitive reasoning. Professor Davies explores the matter with examples, and also points out that in many cases the “crucified nations” carried a great deal of the responsibility for their own misfortune. He also correctly notes that the use of the figure of a crucified Christ as a metaphor for a nationalistic and “moral” crusade is not what Christ was about. It is in fact a blasphemy of the first order. When nations and people begin to place themselves in the position of the crucified Christ, Christ is demeaned.

Professor Davies also notes the effect that a crucifixion mentality might have on a nation like the United States, which is already strongly infected by a unique form of bellicose fundamental Protestantism, and has always had a strong self-identity as chosen and aided by God. Without being in any way flippant, it is one thing if 19th century Poland strikes out in anger as a martyred nation with a chip on its shoulder. It is entirely a different situation if the nuclear colossus of 21st century America does the same.

Professor Davies has provided a useful study, and his conclusions and concerns are both apt and timely.

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Provost/ Macklin Charge, Alberta.*

Begat: the King James Bible and the English Language**David Crystal (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) Pp. 327.**

David Crystal in his 2004 *The Stories of English* wrote “the King James Bible—either directly from its own translators, or indirectly, as a glass through which we can see its predecessors—has contributed far more to English in the way of idiomatic, or quasi-proverbial expressions than any other literary source.” Six years later in *Begat* he sets out to test his own assertion by combing through the 1611 version of the English Bible to isolate those phrases that he considers to “have become a daily part of the English language” (89). He rejects as part of his count the use of phrases such as “by the rivers of Babylon” in common parlance (such as the title of a 1978 musical, *Rivers of Babylon*), arguing that such a use is a “quotation” consciously borrowed to have a deliberate reference to Psalm 137:1. Crystal’s purpose in this book is to identify those phrases that have taken on a life of their own within the language, freed from their Biblical roots and religious connotations, and so to assess the truth of his own assertion that the King James Bible has had the most influence of any written work on the English language in the 21st century.

He leads his readers through his examination of the text in a series of very short chapters. Each “bite” is a delight to read, displaying the author’s broad knowledge of the language, the many earlier translations of the English Bible, the English literary tradition since 1611, and an astonishing grasp and understanding of 21st century pop culture and political discourse. Chapter 6, “A coat of many colours,” for example, moves from the reference in Genesis 37:1 to the musical, *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*, to the ways in which the phrase is playfully altered to suit different circumstances, including a headline in the *Guardian* in 1999, referring to the impending elections in South Africa and Thabo Mbeki’s “vote of many colours” (38). The New Testament chapter, “Sowing seeds,” looks at the many occurrences of metaphors and parables of seed time and harvest, and spends some time on the phrase, “fall by the wayside” (Matthew 13:4), citing headlines such as this, in reference to a tennis tournament: “Top seeds fall by the wayside” (233).

One of the most interesting aspects of this book is the way the author sets the King James Bible in the context of its English predecessors. Often the common phrase that has stuck in the idiom of the language is not from the King James version. Take, for example, the phrase “by the rivers of Babylon,” cited above: the most common version is “by the *waters* of Babylon,” the wording of which comes from Miles Coverdale’s translation of the Psalms, a translation that became part of the Psalter used in Matins and Evensong after 1535. The compilers of the King James Bible incorporated Coverdale’s Psalter into their text with only a few changes like this one. In many phrases that come from the Psalter it is impossible to know when they found their way into the common idiom of the language—after 1611 when the Authorized Version became the standard text read in churches or during the previous eighty years when generations of English speakers heard the services and sang the psalms in Coverdale’s version?

Crystal carefully makes reference to six English translations of the Bible before the King James Bible—the 1388 version of Wycliffe’s Bible (the first full translation), William Tyndale’s early sixteenth century version for which he was burned (the greatest influence on the compilers of the King James version), the Geneva Bible (1560) used by Shakespeare (and so all Shakespearean references are mediated through that text), the Bishop’s Bible (1568) and the later Catholic English translation of the New Testament at Douai/Rheims (1582 and 1609-10). Each of these earlier translations was used as a source by the King’s compilers.

One of the most pleasing aspects of this book is the way in which the author recognizes that again and again phrases that have achieved idiomatic status have done so because they have special features of word order, rhythm, alliteration and cadence that set them apart from other translations of the same phrase. For example, the assonance of the vowels in the translation “by the waters of Babylon” creates a far more pleasing cadence than “by the rivers of Babylon.”

The author set out to test his own assertion of the great influence the King James Bible and after 256 lively pages he comes to the conclusion that his assertion was correct. However, only 257 phrases can be identified as having moved out of the realm of religion into the idiom of everyday speech, and, of these, only 18 are unique to the King James

version. All the others are shared in varying ways by the earlier translations. Crystal provides a carefully tabulated appendix identifying which phrases come from which sources.

This is a book about language, not a rich narrative like that of Adam Nicholson's *God's Secretaries*. But if you love the Bible and love words and word play, this is a great read.

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Jesus in the Hispanic Community: Images of Christ from Theology to Popular Religion.

Edited by Harold Recinos and Hugo Magallanes (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2009) Pp. xxii + 225.

This collection of beautifully written, informative, thought-provoking essays focuses on how Jesus Christ is understood in American Hispanic communities. As Harold Recinos notes, "Latinos/as are the nation's largest community of color, and in about two decades the United States will be the second-largest Spanish-speaking nation in the world"(ix). Many Latinos/as experience marginalization, poverty and lack of political power. Christianity is a deeply ingrained and significant factor in their culture. The first nine essays develop critical understandings of Jesus Christ in this context. The last three look at how Jesus is understood in popular Latino/a culture.

Virgilio Elizondo's essay argues that the Galilean Jesus can be seen as a mestizo, a person denigrated because of mixed ethnic and cultural heritage, a nobody through whom God acted to create a new human unity (8). Michael Lee examines criticisms of Elizondo's influential book, *Galilean Journey*, noting its significant contribution to Hispanic theology. Prolific theologian Ada María Isasi-Díaz draws on the importance of *familia* in Latina communities to present Jesus as a paradigmatic figure who accompanies Latinos/as in their daily struggles and whose work for the kin-dom of God can be carried on by others today. She notes that many Latinos/as connect with Jesus' suffering on the cross. Through his suffering he understands theirs and is present with them in their sufferings (53). Miguel de la Torre argues that in keeping with the Biblical witness

to God's preferential option for the poor, in America Jesus should be seen as Hispanic (60). He then examines divisions between Cuban Christians living in Cuba and those in exile over how Jesus is understood in relation to Castro's revolution and lists several aspects essential to a liberative Cuban Christology. Loida Martell-Otero, a Puerto Rican woman, writes as an *evangelica*, a member of the popular Protestantism that developed from the intermingling of Western Protestantism with *mestizo* popular Catholicism. She describes Jesus as a *sata*, a morally dubious person of mixed racial ancestry, an outcast, and argues that Jesus is to be found on the peripheries of society, accompanying and encountering people there in their daily lives (83-84).

Arlene Sánchez-Walsh studies how Latino/a Pentecostals' understanding of Jesus has tended to be a privatized affair, directing people away from struggles for social justice. Hugo Magallanes links Peter's attempt to suppress aspects of Jesus' identity as the crucified Christ (Mark 8:32) to the way the dominant American culture attempts to define and suppress the identities of Hispanics. Zaida Maldonado Pérez, exploring various titles for Jesus, notes how for Latino/a evangelicals, Jesus is the Son of God who chose to become incarnate and dwell amongst the marginalized and insignificant, and "who sees the scandal of difference as divinely ordained" (129). Luis Rivera focuses on the experience of migration, the vulnerability of immigrants, and how Christ is present with and to them. The migrant Jesus is both a host who welcomes the despised and a marginalized person standing in their midst who is welcomed when they are.

Carlos Cardoz-Orlandi examines how the erotic language of Latino/a hymns and *coritos*, short Christian songs, depict tender and intimate relationships with Jesus that bring peace and hope, and strengthen the believer to follow Jesus amidst the trials and turmoil of life. Eduardo Fernández examines three popular images of Jesus in Latino/a Catholic culture; the child Jesus, Jesus on the cross and the sacred heart of Jesus, and then how these visual representations reflect and influence popular piety. Timothy Matovina examines the portrayal and worship of Christ at the shrine of *la Capillas de los Milagros*. Here there is a stress on relationship to Jesus, on accompanying him through prayer and worship while he accompanies one through life's sorrows and

joys. The christological assertion central to this piety is that the vulnerable, suffering, innocent Jesus portrayed as a child or hanging on the cross is also the Christ who can save from all evil and sin (200).

Reading these essays as a white, Anglo-Saxon Protestant I gained new insights into another community's characteristics, struggles and understanding of Jesus Christ, and a new appreciation of what Bonhoeffer called the sociality of Christ, how Christ takes shape in history through a community's appropriation and following of him. This is an excellent book for clergy, academics or educated lay people seeking to increase their understanding of Jesus.

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The Acceptable Year of the Lord

Karen A. Hamilton (Toronto, ON: Novalis, 2008) Pp. 470.

While anyone may find this book interesting to read, it is really designed for preachers. How often do you preach the scripture passages from the Old Testament? Although the Revised Common Lectionary includes weekly passages from the Old Testament, the majority of resources designed to help preachers plan their messages are focused on the New Testament passages. In this book, Karen Hamilton offers us a comprehensive and well laid out resource for preachers who want to highlight the wonderful messages of the Old Testament. She has made it very easy to use and covers the Old Testament lectionary readings for all three years.

She begins with an introduction that outlines the contextual significance of Old Testament readings. It isn't required reading, but is only ten pages and well worth taking the time to read. She makes some interesting points about how the Old Testament is perceived and how it should be appreciated. As she points out, our lectionary readings contain almost one hundred and fifty Old Testament texts in the three-year cycle, and yet preaching resources generally emphasize the gospels, viewing the Old Testament texts as a "kind of sidebar" (13). Her discussion of the theology of the two covenants reminds us of the deep connection between

Jesus and his Jewish roots.

After the introduction there are two pages devoted to “How to Use This Book.” Here she points out that the book is not meant to be an in-depth commentary on each lectionary reading. Rather, each entry provides the impetus to explore the issues raised by each scripture passage.

There are three main chapters, Year A, Year B and Year C, followed by an appendix which covers the Roman Catholic readings for all three years, where they differ from the Revised Common Lectionary. Each Year is laid out beginning with the Old Testament scripture for Advent 1 and working through the liturgical year week by week to Reign of Christ Sunday. Each biblical passage is referenced at the top of the page along with the liturgical week. She then gives that entry a thematic title that provides focus for your reflection. Most entries are just a page or two of information for you to consider. Her reflections help you to delve more deeply into the text. She is very good at setting the context and providing the link between the biblical era and today’s situations. There are times when she points out a connection between the Old Testament passage and the New Testament passage for a particular date that helps clarify why they were chosen to be together; something that quite frankly I have at times had difficulty seeing. Often lectionary readings are disconnected from their narrative context. In these cases she does a great job of encouraging the preacher to reflect not just on the brief disjointed scripture passage, but on the importance of the narrative in its entirety.

This book is a useful resource for preaching. Often resources designed to be used with the Lectionary are set out in three different volumes, one for each Lectionary year. This book combines it all in one volume, making it particularly convenient. It encourages you to make better use of scripture as you preach the revelation of the Word of God through the Old Testament. Not only is this a resource that will be well used throughout the years, the dedication informs us that “proceeds realized from the sale of this book will go towards HIV/AIDS relief in Africa.”

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