

Radical Reconciler

Reading the Bible as the Word of God

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Biblical “Authority”

- Would you say the Bible has “authority”? What is the nature of its authority? How do you understand it?

Getting at “authority”

rank the following statements in terms of how “authoritative” you’d say they are:

- _____ "In life and in death we belong to God"
- _____ "By the way of Mount Seir it takes eleven days to reach Kadesh-barnea from Horeb."
- _____ "One contrary cannot be the cause of another. But evil is the contrary to good. Therefore good cannot be the cause of evil."
- _____ "I have accepted Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior"
- _____ "The earth revolves around the sun once every 365.25 days"

What if this were the list?

- _____ *A Brief Statement of Faith* (PC USA), line 1
- _____ Deuteronomy 1:2
- _____ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*
- _____ your friend Mark, testifying to a personal religious experience
- _____ Dr. Evelyn Browning, Professor of Astronomy at an esteemed university.

Or this?

- _____ tradition/confessions of the church
- _____ Bible
- _____ reason (based in philosophy/logic)
- _____ experience
- _____ reason (based in empirical evidence)

So . . .

- What *do* we mean when we say the Bible has authority?
- . . . We are people of the book?
- . . . The B-I-B-L-E, yes! That's the book for me?

Is it?

Naming our Ambivalence

- Examples:
 - Who *is* that God of the Old Testament?
 - Why is (Gen. 22; a lot of passages in judges) in there?
 - How does the cross help? Doesn't it justify violence?

And the big one for today:

How can we begin to think of the Bible as “Reconciler,” in relation to our rifts in the PCUSA today, given that we have been using it as a weapon against each other . . .

Part 1: That “radical” book

- In what sense is the Bible “radical”?

“The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.”

- Hebrews 4:12

(NRSV)

And we thought it was a doorstop

- The claims the Bible makes for itself are different than the stereotypes about it, stereotypes that we ourselves buy into (I think)
 - If we thought the Bible was “living,” wouldn’t we read it more?
 - There is a huge problem with biblical literacy. As my friend Jack Haberer has been known to say, “Maybe instead of spending all this time arguing about the Bible’s authority we should actually spend some time reading it!”

UNLESS

- We are afraid of the Bible’s “radicality.”
 - What might it do to us if we actually read it, creating sacred space to reflect on it?

Surely it is safer to domesticate it

e.g., we reduce the parables to “earthly stories with heavenly meanings.”

e.g., we read the Bible through in a year, in three months, in a week. We can do it! (We can conquer it!?)

This is the kind of thing we do with God, too

- Thinking of God as “either” down here with us (“Our Father who *aren’t* in heaven) OR
- So far removed from us that s/he is at a “safe” distant. (again: easier that way - we can worship at a distance and thereby remain safe from transformation . . .)

Letting radical be radical

- No question about it: as the Word meddles with us by becoming flesh, so the Word of God touches our core . . . And changes us.
- E.g., via the Word: let there be light! And there is (dramatic!)
- The Word: “I will be your God, and you will be my people” (possessive!)
- The Word: “The Holy Spirit will come upon you” (invasive!)

What if . . .

- Instead of reading five chapters of the Bible a day, we read one (often brief) passage a day and spent 15 minutes waiting for that radical Word to “hit” us, keeping a journal about what happens.

Aim small and quiet

- How is Bible reading – including space to meditate on passages – itself radical activity, in the context of our “crazybusy” world?

a gift, for preachers

- In order to “get” a sermon, you kind of have to sit with a text for awhile until you see the surprise in it
- It can take you apart, but you learn, after awhile, that it will put you back together, again.

An example

- One text that has undone me for years is Luke 15.
- How, O how, can we be expected to live this way?

More examples

- Some texts keep undoing us, reminding us to STOP domesticating God
 - Example: Job
 - Example: Genesis 22
 - Example: Jonah
 - Example: Advent passages
 - Example: parables

Mini-summary, so far

- We are talking about being positioning ourselves to be *changed* by the *radical* Word of God,
- *Submitting* (!?) to God's living Word?
- Reading the Bible while humming a chorus we often sing:

Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me!

Melt me, mold me, fill me use me . . .

But what about the communion of saints?

- What I've said, so far, could be understood as applying to the individual:

Read the Bible

Create space to ponder what it is saying.

Be open to being changed by the Spirit by way of the radical, living Word.

All well and good, but how do we get from here to reconciled relationship with one another?

Remember where we've come from

- *Sola scriptura!* of the Reformation didn't mean we all kept our privately-discovered biblical revelations to ourselves.
- Luther *risked his life* to translate the Bible into the vernacular so that *every one* could read it. But every one was to read it in the context of Mother church!

Calvin knew we would mess up

- The Reformers clearly knew they were “playing with fire,” encouraging people to read the Bible on their own (talk about radical)
- Calvin knew people couldn’t sit down in a corner and figure out what the Bible was saying for themselves, so he wrote the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* to help them out!

From Calvin's preface (1559)

- “. . . [I]t has been my purpose in this labor to prepare and instruct candidates in sacred theology for the reading of the divine Word, in order that they may be able both to have easy access to it and to advance in it without stumbling. For I believe I have so embraced the sum of religion in all its parts, and have arranged it in such an order, that if anyone rightly grasps it, it will not be difficult for him to determine what he ought especially to see in Scripture, and to what end he ought to relate its contents.

Calvin was no biblical literalist

- Biblical literalism is found in our Reformed tradition (in the 19th c writings, for example, of Charles Hodge)
- A book great at explaining how the concepts of biblical literalism and inerrancy emerged later, in the context of modernity, is George Marsden's *Fundamentalism and American Culture*.
- Calvin's non-literal but still-powerful metaphor for thinking of Scripture is . . .

Spectacles!



The Bible as aid to seeing the Word of God

- Calvin: “Just as old or bleary-eyed men and those with weak vision, if you thrust before them a most beautiful volume, even if they recognize it to be some sort of writing, yet can scarcely construe two words, but with the aid of spectacles will begin to read distinctly; so Scripture, gathering up the otherwise confused knowledge of God in our minds, having dispersed our dullness, clearly shows us the true God.”

If I can be picky, for a moment

- One reason we do not see the Bible as a “reconciler” is because we haven’t thought of it as an aid to overcoming our “dullness.”
- We have used it to notarize our own views.
- When we use the Bible as a weapon or as “supporting evidence,” it does not reconcile, it divides.

In the NY Times yesterday . . .



When **Scripture** Is the Rule of Law

through a mediation or arbitration process that would be bound not by state or federal law, but by the Bible. "The Holy **Scripture** shall be the supreme authority," the rules of the proceedings state. For generations, religious

November 03, 2015 - By MICHAEL CORKERY and JESSICA SILVER-GREENBERG - Business Day - Print Headline: "When Scripture Is the Rule of Law"

The purpose of the Bible

- Not to be a blueprint, a playbook, a lawbook, a Fodors
- Not to mediate our disputes.
- Again, to undo and remake and reorient us.

But doesn't the Bible provide answers to our questions?

- A quote from Karl Barth:

“When we come to the Bible with our questions - How shall I think of God and the universe? How arrive at the divine? How present myself? - it answers us, as it were, 'My dear sir, these are *your* problems: you must not ask *me!* Whether it is better to hear mass or hear a sermon, whether the proper form of Christianity is to be discovered in the Salvation Army or in 'Christian Science,' whether the better belief is that of old Reverend Doctor Smith or young Reverend Mr. Jones. . . you can and must decide for yourself. . . “

Sound familiar?

“ . . . If you do not care to enter upon *my* questions, you may, to be sure, find in me all sorts of arguments and quasi-arguments for one or another standpoint, but you will not then find what is really here.' We shall find ourselves only in the midst of a vast human controversy and far, far away from reality, or what might become reality in our lives. . . .”

The capper

“It is not the right human thoughts about God which form the content of the Bible, but the right divine thoughts about [human beings]. The Bible tells us not how we should talk with God but what [God] says to us; not the right relation in which we must place ourselves to [God], but the covenant which [God] has made with all who are Abraham's spiritual children and which he has sealed once and for all in Jesus Christ.” [Karl Barth, “The Strange New World Within the Bible.”]

The rub, of course

- What happens when people seem to be wearing different glasses?
- When we sincerely understand God to be saying different – even contradictory – things?

Ordering authorities

- As Calvin thought good theology could help with right interpretation, so we – in our tradition – have made provision for more than an “I think it’s this way/you think it’s that way” approach.

The Confession of 1967

2. The Bible

9.27 The one sufficient revelation of God is Jesus Christ, the Word of God incarnate, to whom the Holy Spirit bears unique and authoritative witness through the Holy Scriptures, which are received and obeyed as the word of God written. The Scriptures are not a witness among others, but the witness without parallel.

- trans. Cynthia Jarvis

Part 2: The Bible as reconciler

- **9.29** The Bible is to be interpreted in the light of its witness to God's work of reconciliation in Christ.
- Reconciliation is the interpretive "key."

In context of the community

- **9.30** God's word is spoken to the church today where the Scriptures are faithfully preached and attentively read in dependence on the illumination of the Holy Spirit and with readiness to receive their truth and direction (C67, trans. Jarvis).
- David Kelsey pushes this, a bit: ". . .scripture has authority to the extent that it functions in the church to shape new human identities and transform individual and communal life."

This is in continuity with the historical “rule of faith”

- The rule of faith is the idea that we interpret particular verses of Scripture in light of the central story of Scripture – God reconciling the world in Jesus Christ, through the power of the Spirit.
- Interpretations of particular verses or texts that are inconsistent with this central story must be rejected.

discussion

- What do you think of Kelsey's point? Does it take the "rule of faith" too far?
- Again: ". . . scripture has authority to the extent that it functions in the church to shape new human identities and transform individual and communal life."

Reconciliation as radical re-making

- Scripture reconciles us when we are open, together, to the Word radically re-making us.
- We are reconciled to one another as we work together to remember the “central story” of the Bible, and to apply it both to interpretations of particular passages and to our life together.

The Threat

- The “central story” of Scripture does not feature those we might nominate (or self-nominate) as the “central players.”
- The central story seeks out the glory of God found in the margins. A nation of slaves, claimed as God’s own. A Savior born in the corner of a barn. Disciples who did not have strong resumés.

- This does not mean that every person who claims to be victimized is, by virtue of this claim, a prophet
- It does mean that, while it is always difficult and even dangerous to say exactly what God's Word is apart from the context it is received (Barth), the central story of the Bible always leads us to identify it with "counter-movements against injustice" (also Barth)

From Barth

“The command of God . . . is self-evidently and in all circumstances a call for counter-movements on behalf of humanity and against its denial in any form, and therefore a call for the championing of the weak against every kind of encroachment on the part of the strong. . .” (K. Barth)

Are we back to the double-edged sword?

Here we had finally moved to talking about the Bible as reconciler, and we're using the language of "countermovements."

The thing is, the story of the Bible is *not* that we work at accomplishing justice and *then* "kiss and make up." It is that which unmakes and remakes us, and that which unmakes and remakes the systems of this world, *is* the work of reconciliation.

What's radical is reconciling

The Bible demonstrates that the Word that is radical and the Word that is reconciling are one and the same.

In its radicality, the Word breaks down barriers, wrecking havoc at times. But the momentum of this is inclusive and uniting. Reconciliation is not about reaching out to the contender, after the battle has been won, and working, now, for peace. It is accomplished by the “countermovement” itself, as painful as the mess caused by said countermovement might be.

Being united

Being united, as a denomination, will not be accomplished by “agreeing to disagree,” by “realizing we need a diversity of opinions,” or by “listening to the other person’s story” (as important as this might be, in certain contexts)

Our theology of Scripture argues that it will come by re-membering our common story together, and working together to interpret recent changes and events in relation to God’s reconciliatory work in Jesus Christ.

Very important

- When we approach the Bible with the “central story” of God’s reconciliatory work in Jesus Christ in mind, this will also affect *how* we go about our interpretive work.
- Our readings of the Word written will mirror our confession that the Word revealed is “fully human and fully divine”
- We will read the Bible, then, not as “only human” or “only divine,” but as both, appreciating the mystery and looking for the ah-has! that come with honoring the tension between these two.

How do we re-member our story?

- By reading the Bible more, individually, in Bible studies, and together.

Yes, all of it.

- By re-claiming the idea the connection between *sola scriptura* and *tota scriptura* – how will be able to interpret particular passages consistently with the “rule of faith” if we haven’t even read the whole thing?

Use some imagination!

- By telling the old, old story in new new ways.

Gasp, Growl, Cheer

- We are joined not only by the common story, but by sharing together in the moods, insights, and questions of particular stories.
- Texts of terror unite by everyone gasping in horror!
- Psalms unite by giving us a way to join our complaints and our praise.

Ask, Hope, Lean

- Gospels unite by way of us sharing in the questions: who is this guy? And: are we disciples?
- Law unites by helping us imagine what is possible.
- Wisdom literature unites by helping us know we are not alone (cross).

Welcome all manner of responses

- We need include in the conversation interpreters who are more literalistic, more relativistic, significantly skeptical, completely baffled, mainly angry, and overly joyful.
- If we are looking at the Bible together and agree that it is about God so loving the world and arguing about particular texts in relation to this central theme, we will be united even when we disagree.

Focus on faithful

How is it that radical and reconciliatory come together? I would say it happens when we focus on being faithful. It is the character of God's living Word both to transform and to bring together, so if that's where our focus is, the rest should take care of itself!

Thanks!

- Thanks for being part of this and for taking time out to be here.
- Best wishes for the conference and for your continued ministry!