

## How do we read the Bible?

When one of my colleagues rang to say that he was about to resign from his placement because of his strong opposition to Resolution 84, among other expressions of dismay I said: “The way the scriptures have been used by those opposing Resolution 84 is facile.” I thought I owed him a more considered expansion of this cryptic remark. This paper is the result.

This paper is not eirenical: it reflects the frustrations of forty years - not on the issue of homosexuality, but with the way that our churches and their members accept unquestioned and uncritically a way of using the Scriptures that, I believe, has long since been discredited.

While my language in what follows may sound definite and my arguments may sound as if they brook no debate, that is not actually the case at all. What I have written is tentative. Since I first started writing this, it has been significantly modified through several conversations, both group and individual.

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Tolerance is a characteristic that we value highly in the Uniting Church - but not tolerance for everything. There are some actions of which we are rightly intolerant. Bullying, manipulation, coercion within the congregation are not to be tolerated. When any person in a congregation - lay or ordained - attempts to push a particular interest at the cost of denying the Gospel values of inclusiveness, forgiveness and the search for healthy, life-enhancing community, then the only proper response is one of intolerance. “This we will not tolerate! It is contrary to the Gospel. It is destructive of community.”

How is it then, that we continue to tolerate the use of the Scriptures by those who have appropriated the text and its purported meaning for their own purposes? Is it not time for us to speak courageously and refute the arguments that use the Scriptures in a way that denies the validity of any other way of understanding the Gospel?

Who is it that is prepared to say: “God will not, indeed may not, invite a woman, a person of different skin colour, a person whose sexuality is more directed towards those of the same gender, a person who has a disability, to offer themselves in some leadership capacity?” And when it is said that it is incontrovertibly opposed by the tradition of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church and passages from the Scriptures are quoted purporting to support this point of view, many of us are left speechless by the sheer presumptuousness of this position.

That is not to say that good people may not come to the conclusion that one particular person in one of these categories is not an appropriate person to assume a position of leadership. A church gathered together searching for the wisdom of God may reach such a conclusion concerning a particular person. But who would be arrogant enough to say: “Under no circumstances will God call anyone in such and such category to a position of leadership”?

And I add and underscore this point, such arrogance can apply to any side of a particular complex issue.

Those who come with decisions already reached, before any conversation and prayer together takes place, are wounding deeply those who strive to be faithful. An *a priori* decision concerning the direction that we are being led by the Spirit of the Risen Christ can not be tolerated in a church that is serious about moving forward and remaining faithful to the Gospel.

*A priori* decisions about the meaning that is to be attributed to certain passages denies trust in God who is making all things new.

But, is it not true that there are clear prohibitions and unambiguous moral stances that the Scriptures support? The answer can be 'Yes' only if we were to return to the very style of using the sacred texts that Jesus battled against throughout his ministry. What difference is there between the old enemies of the Gospel of Jesus and those who, today, select passages of Scripture and tell is "This is what this passage means!"

That is not to say that good people may not come to a conclusion based on a careful reading of the Scriptures that might be different from the view that others, using the same careful process, might have reached. But when someone says "This is the only possible view", then how can we continue to tolerate such a standpoint? It is better we call it for what it is: "Breathtaking arrogance!"

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There is a process of using the Scriptures which needs to be challenged every time we come across it. The process is beguilingly simple. We search the Scriptures and find passages that support the point of view we want to promote. The Uniting Church in its official documents frequently appears to do this. It is as if a statement is held in regard according to the number of Scriptural references that are scattered through the text.

The time has come when we ought to say that this way of using the Scriptures is discredited and illegitimate. The reason? - because using the Scriptures in this way has so often - in the past and in the present - supported intolerable conclusions.

Slavery was supported for centuries by precisely this process.

The evil of apartheid was not only condoned, but actively promoted by the 'white' church in South Africa using this process.

It has been used to encourage and condone the abuse of power, exercised by men against women and children.

It led to the incarceration and persecution of those who opposed the traditions of the one, holy and catholic church when they claimed that the earth was not flat and not the centre of the universe - a teaching that was also 'clearly contrary' to the Scriptures.

Women have been denied leadership in the church - and still are - by those who use arguments buttressed by passages quoted from the Scriptures and the tradition of the Church.

It has led to the extraordinary situation in some states of the United States where 'Creationism' is declared a genuine scientific theory and so results in the mis-education of generations of young people - and I might add - mischievously diverts resources from the work of genuine science.

Using precisely this same process, and appealing to the Scriptures, some are able to claim categorically that no homosexual person may exercise any leadership in the church.

The process is discredited, because it continues to be used to justify actions that are abuses of power. The rationale for actions such as those listed above have nothing to do with the Gospel revealed to us in Jesus and communicated to us through the Scriptures and in the stories of the Church. To ferret out passages that support such positions may give a patina of theological respectability, but underneath the structure is fatally flawed.

That is not to say that individuals and even whole congregations won't, after searching the Scriptures, come to conclusions that are different, say, from those reached by other individuals and groups. Respect for the integrity of others is of the essence.

Any process of using the Scriptures is illegitimate if it purports to support conclusions obviously contrary to the values of the Gospel.

It is a process not to be tolerated!

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We do have to take the scriptures seriously, but much more seriously than those who quote Scripture passages to support their position.

To take the Scriptures seriously rather than to conscript them for our purposes requires a degree of maturity that is still rare. It requires a degree of maturity that does not flee the tension of different conclusions reached by those who have genuinely 'searched the Scriptures'. It requires a level of maturity that enables people to have their attitudes changed by being immersed in the Word in the context of a faith community.

No one who has been confronted by the life-changing power of the living Word as communicated through the Bible can say: “What I say this passage means is the only possible way of reading it”. Those who have opened themselves to the Spirit and who come to the Scriptures with an open heart know better than anyone

that old meanings do give way to new understandings;

that old attitudes die in order to be replaced by new visions;

that words in a book - even a book as valued as the Bible - are no substitute for an encounter with the living God who surprises us beyond our expectations.

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How then do we read the Bible?

In our desire to give a creditable account of the hope within us, many of us have sought to speak about the faith tradition in the language of some of the modern disciplines - of science, literature, psychology, art and so on. In doing this we have tended to ignore those passages of the Bible that do not fit with the modern world view, choosing only those bits that support our case. The uncomfortable bits, the downright impossible bits, we ignore, or dismiss with a superficial gloss such as: “that’s culturally determined” or “we don’t think like that anymore”. From now on I shall refer to this group as ‘liberals’.

‘Literalists’, as I shall use this term, are those who require the actual words of the Scriptures to be believed and obeyed without question even if they have to be weighed selectively. Most literalists do ignore some sections of the Bible - on the grounds that some parts of the Scriptures that have been superseded by the Gospel. Whether the Scriptures are ‘believed and obeyed without question’ or are ‘weighed selectively’, such readings will often result in tortuous rationalisations and/or hopeless contradictions.

Liberals often have less creditable criteria than the literalists for rejecting some passages as normative. To tell you the truth, my hunch is, that, in general, when you scratch a liberal, you will find a closet fundamentalist underneath. While our intelligent, liberal Christian is hardly likely to subscribe to a Creationist view of biology or a legalistic use of scripture passages to support some moral stance, the problem appears to me to be that he or she does not actually have any coherent way of reading the texts.

What we need is a way of reading the texts that is more serious and scholarly and accessible than those methods employed by literalists. We need an effective counter-method to that which predominates at present.

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The last part of this paper is a plea for a coherent and acceptable way of reading the Scriptures in which I propose some basic principles and tell a story about how we might do it.

Principle 1 is this: We start - always - with a real context. This means we don't use the Scriptures to answer hypothetical questions.

Indeed we don't expect the Scriptures to answer our questions. Rather we anticipate being 'questioned by the Scriptures'. Principle 2 becomes: When we read the sacred texts we expect our values and attitudes and prejudices to be questioned.

The context in which this questioning takes place is the faith community -  
where people bring different perspectives,

where people are open to listen to one another,

where decisions are not taken by majority vote following lobbying and procedural manipulations, but where consensus is sought openly.

[I say some of this because our church assemblies still display vestiges of the smoke-filled back-rooms where strategies are cooked up and where catching the opposition out is cunningly planned.]

Any coherent philosophy on how I read the texts of the Bible needs to answer for me three questions:

- a. How do we recover our voice and our responsibility to 'do theology'? [rather than letting others do it for us. This means we employ a listening and questioning process rather than a didactic process.]
- b. How can we allow the Biblical story to 'tell itself' without killing it with explanations? [The first rule of any good story teller is this; "Don't explain the meaning of the story. If you do, it will sink out of sight like a stone.]
- c. How can we frame the big issues - in our community, in our nation, in our world - so that they become part of our real context? [These issues are so complex and painful and frightening, we use the psychological ploy of displacement - and push them 'out there' so they no longer affect our lives, or our feelings, or our cherished attitudes.]

Principle 3 is this: The Bible is a treasure house of stories - stories about real people dealing with real issues.

The Scriptures are, in the main,  
stories about faithful women and men,  
faced with real questions and issues,  
who in their day responded faithfully.

Example:

Paul's letters are written to faith communities where there were real struggles to resolve conflicting attitudes, moral stances and religious requirements. With help

from those who have studied the background of the communities, and reading ‘between the lines’ of the text, we can tell a lively story concerning the people who form the subject of these epistles.

The same principle applies to the Gospels: each one was written from within the context of a real faith community faced with oppositions, struggling to work out together what it might mean to be faithful, disagreeing with one another, worshipping together, sharing in each other’s crises, supporting each other. What kind of community was it for whom Matthew or Mark, Luke or John wrote? What were the important issues they were addressing and struggling to respond to faithfully?

None of the Bible was written from the disinterested perspective of an observer on the outside. Every text we have is written from within the context of a real faith community struggling with real life issues.

With the help of scholars and a reading of these passages as story - a story about a real group of people - it becomes possible to tell and re-tell the story about this faithful community of women and men. How did they, when faced with the big issues of their time, remain faithful to their experience of their encounter with the Divine?

The Scriptures are stories - archetypal stories. They are about heroes and heroines, encounters with ‘the mystery’, birth, family life, death, encounters with outsiders, fate - in short - all of the experiences shared by people throughout time and across all cultural boundaries.

Principle 4: The Scriptures are all derived from the real experiences of people like you and me.

The experience always precedes the story.

The story always precedes the theological reflection.

And theological reflection always precedes the codification and canonisation of some of these reflections as ‘scripture’.

Our scriptures have been through this kind of process.

If we are to connect with these passages in a way  
that touches the heart,  
that actually changes the way we look at things,  
that actually puts us in touch with the Divine,  
that leads us to our own experience of God,

then we need, at the least, to get back to the archetypal experience. It is at the level of experience that we are able to make the most telling connections with those women and men of faith who lived centuries ago. It is also at the level of experience that we make the most telling and valuable connections with our contemporary fellow human beings.

Experience is the essence.

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Let me tell you a story to illustrate how a faith community could put this kind of philosophy into practice.

*Once upon a time, not so long ago, there was a congregation of the Uniting Church somewhere in Australia. One of the younger, trusted members, who had already shown signs of having a vocation of leadership, openly confessed that [he or she] was homosexual. Half the congregation no longer wanted this person to have any leadership responsibility - in fact several wanted the person eased out of the congregation altogether. Others were not fazed. They were quite content to allow this person to continue in the leadership positions already filled. Several people on one side of this divide turn to the Scriptures and started quoting passages that appeared to condemn homosexuality. How would this congregation respond to the conflict?*

*They took it seriously. This was not an issue about which they could shrug their shoulders and say 'I can't see anything wrong with this person remaining a leader'. Conflict like this required serious struggle -  
struggle with their own prejudices and values,  
struggle with the traditional values of society,  
struggle with the tradition of the church,  
struggle with the Scriptures.*

*This was the question the people addressed:  
where in the Scriptures do we find stories of people,  
not unlike ourselves,  
struggling with issues  
that are not all that dissimilar to those we now struggle with,  
who, through it all remained faithful?*

*They turned to the Gospels, and the Epistles, and the Old Testament. They imagined the day to day life of the communities of faith from within which these texts were forged. They looked at similarities to their own struggle. They discovered how those communities found ways to deal with the complex questions with which they were being faced that threatened traditional values and cultural mores.*

*They began to realise that the issue they were struggling with was not the issue of homosexuality. The real question was how faith communities whose stories they were discovering in the Bible dealt with 'difference'. How did faith communities in the past react to difference -*

*differences in behaviour  
differences in cultural attitudes, and  
differences in their approach to issues relating to sexuality.*

[In parenthesis: in the UCA we have been trapped into debating homosexuality, when perhaps the real issue is, for instance:

how does the faith community handle difference?]

*They asked themselves: where in the scriptures have communities of faith had to wrestle with issues relating to difference? They remembered many stories from both the Old Testament and the New and they found ways of re-telling these stories.*

*In particular, they found that Paul in his letters often dealt with this issue: difference of attitudes, of status, of wealth, of moral values, of eating habits, of attitudes to marriage and celibacy and association with those outside the faith community. With help from Biblical scholars they were able to get behind the rhetoric of Paul's letters and piece together stories about the real experiences of the people in these communities. They discovered that these stories were about themes with which they could make a strong connection - they were timeless.*

*They wrote the stories down so that they could be read again and again. They got the good story tellers in their group to tell the stories to an audience. They created rôle plays and simulation games. They discussed the issues - not as outsiders from a different age and culture - but as participants, caught up in the drama of the conflicts.*

*They found that good stories that touch archetypal themes had the power to draw them into the action so that by the time they had finished the story, it was as if they had actually been there as full participants.*

*By now they were coming to a common mind on the presenting issue...*

At this point you are going to have to take my word for what is likely to have happened in this congregation. It is based on my own experience of having accompanied several groups who have learnt to do their theology this way. To the extent that each person was able to enter the world of the story, they will have been changed. Attitudes shifted. Concepts were modified. Rigidity was dissolved. The world now looked different.

This process doesn't reach any predicted end point. The end can't be foreseen. We can have no idea at the beginning where this will end up. It is a dangerous process because the end may not please us;

our own mind may be changed;  
our heart may be touched;  
we may even have a conversion experience.

This is the way I see the challenge we face:

we have to be serious in our searching of the scriptures, in order to tell and retell the life-giving stories that put us in touch with the source of hope, joy and peace that lies hidden in the very heart of conflicts within the community of faith;

and we need to be courageous in order to sustain an undeviating focus on the real issue lest we be distracted by those who want to quote bits and pieces of the story in order to prove their point.

I can see no way forward other than that which puts us in touch with the archetypal experiences of those who have gone before and where we risk opening ourselves to changes in the way we see things.

Brian Phillips  
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