Week One:

How to think well... about thinking well, the Bible, and each other

GRACE
MILLS RIVER

A Youth Camp Where No Issue Is Off Limits

By Audra D. S. Burch Aug. 29, 2019

They went to the Heritage Foundation, the conservative think tank in Washington, to learn about income inequality. They went to Birmingham, Ala., where they sang hymns and talked about the civil rights movement. In Salt Lake City, they met a gun lobbyist who discussed the sanctity of the Second Amendment.

Each stop was designed to reveal something about the country and how the students, all between the ages of 14 and 18, form their opinions on the great social and political issues of our time.

Etgar 36 is a summer camp meets road trip, and campers are exposed to opposing arguments about hotly debated issues at a time when many Americans are not used to talking to people with whom they disagree. The arts and crafts, sports and roaring bonfires of traditional sleepaway summer camps have been replaced by cultural journeys and exercises in critical thinking and civic engagement.

For Billy Planer, the camp's founder, arming young people with information and ideas is the best way to prepare them for the emerging challenges of the world. Perhaps more quickly than ever before, teenagers are pressured to take a side and have an opinion amid an unending sea of status updates on social media.

Billy Planer, the camp's founder, during a meeting at the Greenpeace office in Washington. The roots of Camp Etgar are from his experiences at traditional Jewish sleepaway camps in the 1980s.Andrew Mangum for The New York Times

Ryder Rosenthal during the camp's meeting with J Street, a pro-Israel lobbying group. One camper said he changed his mind about the possibility of a two-state solution.Andrew Mangum for The New York Times

Campers were presented with ideas about women's reproductive rights and gun control, the West Bank and marijuana legalization, immigration and race.Andrew Mangum for The New York Times

"Success for us is finding humanity in discussions with people who have opposing views," Mr. Planer, 52, said. "We want our kids to ask questions" and "gut-check their own positions," he said.

On a bus that resembled the rolling digs of a rock band, the campers crisscrossed the country for several summer weeks to hear about women's reproductive rights and gun control, the West Bank and marijuana legalization.

This year, Etgar included stops in 26 cities. The teenagers, carrying cellphones, pillows, backpacks and the occasional stuffed animal, first loaded onto the bus in Atlanta. In addition to nights in hotels, they slept on the bus during long drives, like the stretches from Boulder, Colo., to Salt Lake City or Los Angeles to San Francisco.

A map on the bus, which stopped in 26 cities ranging from Birmingham, Ala., to Colorado Springs.Andrew Mangum for The New York Times

Leah Kaster sharing a question with other campers during their meeting with the Heritage Foundation in Washington.Andrew Mangum for The New York Times

Noah Lenkin and Rachel Rubins looked through an anti-abortion booklet while outside Planned Parenthood offices.Andrew Mangum for The New York Times

The campers entertained themselves with silly inside jokes and played on Snapchat. Between attending presentations on abortion and race, they celebrated birthdays, gossiped about school and munched on Twizzlers. Before their trip to the Heritage Foundation, they visited United for a Fair Economy, a nonpartisan advocacy group in Boston.

"My world is essentially liberal so I wanted to do this camp so I could see the other side," said Jesse Eick, 15, who is from Manhattan and wants to work on political campaigns or become a journalist. "In my normal life, I might not ever interact with people who think differently. That is not a productive perspective — you have to understand the whole picture."

Jim Pfaff, the chief of staff of the Colorado House Republicans, has been speaking to the young people of Etgar for 13 years. Mr. Pfaff opposes gay marriage and said he knew that many of the campers disagreed with his views. But that was not the point.

"A free exchange of ideas is crucial for a free society. One of the things that makes our country great is that people with disparate viewpoints could be

friends," said Mr. Pfaff, who hosted this year's conversation in a Colorado Springs park. "That is rapidly changing. From a political perspective, we are seeing people shut down ideas because they don't agree."

In Birmingham, the campers gathered at a park near 16th Street Baptist Church, where four girls were killed by white supremacists in a 1963 bombing. Bishop Calvin Woods Sr. spoke about the importance of music during the civil rights movement, and it was not long before "We Shall Overcome" and "This Little Light of Mine" filled the air.

Rachel Rubins, 17, of Lansdale, Pa., wrote a journal entry about that afternoon that was shared on the camp's website. "Mr. Woods showed us how to use love and singing to express our emotions in the fight for justice," she wrote.

"It was definitely the most powerful moment in my life," she added.

The roots of Etgar are from Mr. Planer's experiences in the mid-1980s, when he spent summers at traditional Jewish sleepaway camps in western Massachusetts. In high school, he traveled to Israel with a camp, and the concept of learning through experience and travel stuck.

"My world is essentially liberal so I wanted to do this camp so I could see the other side," Jesse Eick said. She is from Manhattan and wants to work on political campaigns or become a journalist.Andrew Mangum for The New York Times

In Sterling, Va., Daryl Davis spoke about his experience of befriending Ku Klux Klan members.Andrew Mangum for The New York Times

Mr. Planer was working as a youth director at a synagogue in Atlanta before he started Etgar in 2003. About 475 teenagers have participated in the summer camp, which is open to all faiths, although most who participate are Jewish. The name, he said, means "challenge" in Hebrew.

This year's campers came from states including Tennessee, Oklahoma, New York, Georgia and Illinois. Most were able to afford the $5,000 or $7,000 fee for the three- and five-week camps; those who could not were aided by private donations or a reduced fee. Many of the campers said they were liberal, and a few said they were libertarians or socialists.

As part of their experience, the campers are encouraged to confront issues rather than people. They are taught to defend their ground while leaving room for different ways of thinking.

After hearing from representatives at J Street, a pro-Israel lobbying group, Max Orston, 15, said he changed his mind about the possibility of a two-state solution.

"Our conversations prompted me to do more research and I ended up leaning toward one-state," Max explained.

The bus headed toward Capitol Hill before a stop in Washington. Many of the campers said they were liberal, and a few said they were libertarians or socialists.Andrew Mangum for The New York Times

Jamie Schneider and Leah Kaster relaxing. On the trip, campers celebrated birthdays, gossiped about school and munched on Twizzlers.Andrew Mangum for The New York Times

A camper holding on to a "Star Wars" pillow. In addition to nights in hotels, the teenagers slept on the bus during long drives.Andrew Mangum for The New York Times

Max's father, Todd Orston, said he partly chose Etgar to give his son the opportunity to learn about issues from different perspectives before coming to his own conclusions.

"I wanted my son's eyes to be open and for him to be exposed to real-world issues that people face on a daily basis so he can grow intellectually," said Mr. Orston, a family lawyer in Sandy Spring, Ga., who attended traditional Jewish camps through high school.

In Maryland, the campers gathered in a suburban hotel room to hear the story of Daryl Davis, a blues musician who befriended members of the Ku Klux Klan, including Scott Shepherd, a former Grand Dragon. Mr. Davis described attending Klan rallies and forming friendships with K.K.K. members, some of whom have turned their robes over to him and denounced white supremacy.

The next morning, Jesse, the teenager from Manhattan, stared out a bus window, still thinking about Mr. Davis's talk and the power of forgiveness. "It was eye-opening to think someone in this terrible group can be turned around," she said.

On the ride to the nation's capital toward the end of this year's journey, Matt Levine, a 15-year-old from Scotch Plains, N.J., pored over a newspaper article about debt and the middle class.

Campers toured the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial in Washington.Andrew Mangum for The New York Times

He was reading to prepare for a discussion at the Heritage Foundation. There had been other presentations on the tour and Matt said he regretted not following up with a question or two. This time would be different, he said.

At the end of the presentation, he raised his hand and asked about the shrinking middle class. The moment was a personal breakthrough.

"I found my voice!" Matt said as he headed back to the bus.

For Mr. Planer, the purpose of the camp is not about moving someone along the political spectrum, but about teaching young people to listen to arguments and to be better prepared to defend their own.

"Maybe they change their minds" he said. "Maybe they don't."

'How to Think': A Summary

January 18, 2018

The goal of the book is to help us learn to interrogate our instincts and intuitions by examining the social, emotional, linguistic, and (necessarily) reductionistic way our intuitive thinking works.

Introduction

Takeaway: How we are incentivized not to think.

Using psychologist Daniel Kahneman's terms from Thinking, Fast and Slow, Jacobs outlines two 'systems' of thinking: 'System 1' is 'intuitive thinking, the fast kind (p. 16). 'System 2' is 'conscious reflection', the slow kind of thinking (p. 16). 'We go through life basically running System 1; System 2 kicks in only when we perceive a problem, an inconsistency, an anomaly that needs to be addressed' (pp. 16-17). Psychologist Jonathan Haidt compares 'intuitive thinking' to an elephant, and 'conscious decision-making' to a 'rider'; 'intuitive thinking is immensely powerful and has a mind of its own, but can be gently steered— by a rider who is truly skillful and understands the elephant's inclinations' (p. 17). The aim of the book is to help us understand the way 'System 1' works, the inclinations of our intuitive thinking, so that we can employ System 2 properly to evaluate it.

Why we don't want to think (exact words from p. 17):

- Thinking troubles us
- Thinking tires us
- Thinking can force us out of familiar, comforting habits
- Thinking can complicate our lives
- Thinking can set us at odds, or at least complicate our relationships,

with those qw admire or love or follow
- Thinking is slow

Marilyn Robinson, writing on why Puritans are almost always referenced in a negative light, suggests that we have a 'collective eagerness to disparage without knowledge or information' 'when the reward is the pleasure of sharing an attitude one knows is socially approved' (pp. 20-21).

T. S. Elliot wrote that '..."when we do not know, or when we do not know enough, we tend always to substitute emotions for thoughts" ' (p. 22).

'The person who wants to think will have to practice patience and master fear' (p. 23).

Chapter 1: Beginning to Think
Takeaway: How thinking is social and emotional, not just analytical.

Thinking is necessarily social.

Thinking is not simply analytical.

Thinking is emotional.
'...one must have a certain kind of character: one must be a certain kind of person, a person who has both the ability and the inclination to take the products of analysis and re-assemble them into a positive account, a structure not just of thought but also of feelings that, when joined to thought, can produce meaningful action' (p. 43).

'...when your feelings are properly cultivated, when that part of your life is strong and healthy, then your responses to the world will be adequate to what the world is really life' (p. 44).

Chapter 2: Attractions

Takeaway: How the desire to belong makes us lazy or evil.

Haidt argues that 'moral intuitions' bind and blind. ' "People bind themselves into political teams that share moral narratives. Once they accept a particular narrative, they become blind to alternative moral worlds." "Moral matrices bind people together and blind them to the coherence, or even existence, of other matrices" ' (p. 55).

C. S. Lewis' 'Inner Ring' is a helpful way of describing how the terror of being excluded from a desired group makes a person ' "who is not yet very bad...do very bad things" '(p. 56).

Friendships are different than an 'Inner Ring' because they are not formed for the purpose of being exclusive; the exclusion is a by-product. They do not view their bond as making them superior.

Friendships matter, especially in formative seasons.

'The genuine community is open to thinking and questioning...' (p. 59).

'The only remedy for the dangers of false belonging is the true belonging to, true membership in, a fellowship of people who are not so much like-minded as like-hearted' (p. 62).

Chapter 3: Repulsions

Takeaway: How the will to survive leads to the hatred of others and closes our minds.

Sometimes we are pushed to a way of thinking because of a repulsion to a particular group. The 'desire to punish the outgrip is significant stronger' than 'the desire support the in-group' (p. 73).

Avoid what C. S. Lewis calls 'Bulverism': ' "Assume that your opponent is wrong, and then explain his error, and the world will be at your feet. Attempt to prove he is wrong or (worse still) try to find out whether he is wrong or right, and the national dynamism of our age will thrust you to the wall" ' (p. 78).

The cure is to see a person not as an 'other' (who *must* be wrong), but as a 'neighbor' (p. 83).

The answer is not to eliminate attractions and repulsions and to be 'purely rational'. Antonio Damasio argues in Descartes' Error that 'when people have limited or nonexistent emotional responses to situations, whether through injury or congenital defect, their decision-making is seriously compromised' (p. 84).

Biases 'reduce the decision-making load on our conscious brains' (p. 86).

Chapter 4: The Money of Fools
Takeaway: How the power of words (keywords, metaphors, and myths) keeps us from seeing different worlds.

Don't let words carry too heavy of a load. They can provide helpful shortcuts, but be aware of the work you're asking them to do.

Use your opponent's own words instead of restating it in "other words".

Jacobs highlights two metaphors from Robin Sloan to help with this. The first is 'method acting', where you realize that 'in different circumstances you could be that person' (p. 111). The other metaphor is that of 'dual booting', where a computer can run two different operating systems. Jacobs writes, 'Something similar happens when you try out someone else's vocabulary: you experience the world from within that mode of describing it,

with a new set of "terministic screens", and some things you're used to seeing disappear from view while new and different ones suddenly become visible' (p. 112).

Chapter 5: The Age of Lumping
Takeaway: How taxonomies prevent information overload and create solidarity, but can lead to oppression if we don't remember that taxonomies are provisional and if we fail to see the individual.

Taxonomies– the sorting of things into categories– is part of ordering the world. But the creation of social taxonomies is 'a form of myth making', so 'we absolutely must remember what those taxonomies are: temporary, provisional intellectual structures whose relevant will not always be what it is, or seems to be, today' (p. 119).

We must also practice 'splitting'— the 'disciplined, principled preference for rejecting categories whenever we discern them at work' (p. 121). Be careful when you are tempted to explain something in someone as being because they are a member of a particular group and not because that is who they are as an individual.

Chapter 6: Open and Shut
Takeaway: How keeping an open mind is not possible, but closing it is dangerous.

One cannot have a perpetually open mind. The object of opening one's mind is not simply to have it open, but rather, as Chesterton noted, it is like ' "the opening of the mouth" '— the object is ' "to shut it again on something solid" ' (p. 126).

The goal is to be neither indifferent nor indecisive, but to have 'the mental flexibility and honesty to adjust our views when the facts change' (p. 127).

One of the biggest obstacles to being open to alternative views and narratives is the 'sunk cost' bias. 'The more people have invested in a particular project, the more reluctant they are to abandon it, no matter how strong the evidence indicating that it's a lost cause' (p. 129). This eventually leads to doubling down, what scholars call ' "escalation of commitment" ' in the face of sunk costs (p. 129).

A fanatic is someone who avoids 'considering any alternative to their preferred views'; 'no matter happens, it proves [their] point' (p. 136).

Look for signs of this in your group of friends. One giveaway that they are an unhealthy group (perhaps an 'Inner Ring') is if they have closed attitudes toward 'ideas from the outgroup' (p.138).

Chapter 7: A Person, Thinking

Learn fluency in another 'dialect'. Imagine yourself in a different set of plausibility structures to see that your views are not necessarily inevitable.

Nevertheless, one cannot thrive in a constant state of evaluating the 'truth-condusiveness of your social world'. Instead, follow the advice of W. H. Auden: ' "The same rules apply to self-examination as apply to auricular confession: Be brief, be blunt be gone." '

The Thinking Person's Checklist (pp. 155-156):

1. When faced with provocation to respond to what someone has said, give it five minutes...
2. Value learning over debating...
3. ...avoid the people who fan the flames.
4. Remember that you don't have to respond to what everyone else is responding to in order to signal your future and right-mindedness.
5. If you *do* have to respond to what everyone else is responding to in

order to signal your virtue and right-mindedness, or else lose your status in your community, then you should realize that it's not a community but rather an Inner Ring.

6. Gravitate...toward people who seem to value genuine community and can handle disagreement with equanimity.
7. Seek out the best and fairest-minded of people whose views you disagree with...
8. Patiently, and as honestly as you can, assess your repugnances.
9. Sometimes the 'ick factor' is telling; sometime's it's a distraction from what matters.
10. Beware of metaphors and myths that do too much heavy cognitive lifting...
11. Try to describe others' positions in the language that *they* use...
12. Be brave.

Straw Men and Viewpoint Manicheanism

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The fallacy of special pleading—also known as the double standard—occurs when one offers a special excuse for one's own violation of a standard that one continues to apply to others. At a buffet, one person says to another, "Let's stock up before all the hoarders get here," as if preemptive hoarding is different from hoarding. This move resembles the fundamental attribution error, which occurs when one attributes the negative behaviors of others to fundamental features of their character, while attributing one's own negative behaviors to circumstantial factors.

When opposing parties adopt these attitudes toward one another's views, a vicious cycle results: Each "side" sees the other's behavior as evidence of evil, and their own behavior as justified on the ground that we good folks must defend ourselves against *them*. This suboptimal and highly contagious cognitive condition, which unfortunately characterizes much of our contemporary political landscape, is what I'll call "Viewpoint Manicheanism."

People on the collectivist Left often discount the evils historically associated with socialism, attributing them to totalitarianism or dictatorship, while attributing the evils historically associated with capitalism to its very nature, which they identify as the selfish profit motive. People on the libertarian Right, meanwhile, often dismiss the evils historically associated with capitalism, attributing them to corruption or government interference, while describing the historical evils associated with socialism as the inherent features of an evil ideology that tramples over individual rights.

Just as the sight of preemptive hoarding encourages others to hoard, the sight of special pleading by a group's opponents encourages members of that group to avail themselves of the same tactic. Since *they* are employing a double standard, *we have to*, just to be on an even keel.

This tendency gets support from another cognitive bias for which we are hard-wired, which is to be more likely to notice anything negative, and to treat it as more salient, a tendency evolution fostered because being injured, attacked, or eaten matters much more to the transmission of genes than pleasant experiences do. These dispositions combined virtually guarantee a downward spiral into a sort of metastasized version of Viewpoint Manicheanism. The radicals on both ends of the political spectrum insist that ethics no longer apply to them, given the blatant, inexcusable evils of the other side.

After enough back and forth along these lines it seems to both sides that *the other side* is the one relying upon intellectual dishonesty. Nobody wants to lose face, and the exchange quickly degenerates to a clash of fallacies, sophistries, accusations of fallacies and sophistries, and eventually outright insults. It's hard to remain neutral when one sees intellectual comrades and opponents duking it out. But, however understandable, such behavior only contributes to polarization.

Is it really plausible that half the country—the *other* half—has really become that evil, that stupid? No. A more likely explanation is that too many of us are falling for Viewpoint Manicheanism, a socio-cognitive pathology that inflames emotion, eclipses reason, and encourages demonization on both sides.

One possible strategy for inoculating oneself against this contagion is by discarding the straw man. A straw man is an expedient mischaracterization of an opponent's position—it is not only logically fallacious, since a mischaracterization of X is irrelevant to the assessment of X, but it serves no good purpose. It annoys one's opponent, encourages divisiveness and defensiveness, and threatens social cohesion. A straw man exposed also reflects poorly on its author, revealing either that they are not a good reasoner or that they are acting in bad faith. One can always come back and correct the mischaracterization, defeating it, in which case the straw man backfires on the person using it. That's like beating up a poster of Mike Tyson, only to then have to invite the real Mike Tyson into the ring.

Conversely, the principle of charitable interpretation, or the steel man, requires us to be charitable when interpreting others' views. A steel man not only honors the principle of charitable interpretation, but presents a *stronger* version of the interlocutor's position, if not the strongest. Then, if there are objections, they are at least to a decent version of the opponent's

position. It also shows the opponent you fully understand what they consider good and right about their position. It is superior to the straw man, because if you then have a solid objection to the steel man, you've defeated the best version of the argument, like knocking out Tyson himself in the ring.

The point is not to win, though. It is to figure out which view makes the most sense, because, as a rational being, you (ought to) want to know whatever is most likely to be true. In a cooperative inquiry, uncovering the truth is the primary goal. There are competitive contexts, however, in which you ought not to help your opponent make their best case, such as when you and your opponent are in a zero-sum game, such as in a legal battle, or when competing for sales, votes, dates, and the like.

It is not clear whether we should view the political arena as zero-sum, given its competitive nature. But if we want to find the best moral reasons for accepting one political ideology over another, then we should view such inquiry as a cooperative, non-zero-sum game, in which finding the moral truth is the guiding value. We should therefore give our opponents the benefit of the doubt, and steel man their views. If someone mischaracterizes your view in such a context, instead of accusing them of sophistry, assume it was unintentional. Without proof of evil intent, accusations of evil intent only make matters worse, inviting the slippery slope to Viewpoint Manicheanism.

The difference between uttering a false statement one believes is true and uttering a statement one knows to be false is crucial; only the latter is lying. Likewise, the difference between engaging in faulty reasoning one thinks is rational, and using reasoning one knows is fallacious is crucial; only the latter is sophistry. Absent good evidence that someone is lying or engaging in bad faith, it is better to explain why one doubts the veracity of a

statement or the validity of its reasoning.

If, however, all you care about is promoting the narrative of your political tribe, then you have already chosen to treat the matter as a zero-sum game; you're likely already infected with Viewpoint Manicheanism. Consequently, honesty, truth, and fair debate are seen as naive in the grab for power, persuasion, and minds. *All is fair in love and war. We're the good guys, they're the bad guys. The ends justify the means.*

If you're interested in furthering honest political inquiry, consider playing the steel man game: "Can we steel man each other's view, to make sure we understand them?" This is part of another game one of my graduate school mentors encouraged us to play, the "belief game": First try to completely understand the other person's philosophy, occupy it from the inside, see the world through that philosopher's eyes. Only then are you in a legitimate position to speak to its flaws, if any survive that exercise in cognitive empathy. Playing the steel man game is a smaller version of that larger endeavor.

I would encourage everyone to consider playing the belief game with the broadest political perspective of one's opponents. For the individualists, for example, I'd recommend John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice*, and for the collectivists Robert Nozick's *Anarchy State and Utopia*, or any of Ayn Rand's works. You might see some value in an opponent's views. You might find you have more in common than you previously thought, something Viewpoint Manicheanism prevents.

So, next time you feel the desire to criticize an ideological opponent, consider whether you both might be willing to play the steel man game instead. "I'm curious. What's your best argument for that view?" It's not really risky, because if your opponent just keeps your steel men and their

straw men, everyone will see your goodwill and their lack thereof, incentivizing a race to the top, rather than the bottom. It's at least worth a try.

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Op-Ed: The best way to evaluate your beliefs? Engage with people who disagree with you

The Danish philosopherSoren Kierkegaard famously observed that if everyone is a Lutheran then no one is a Lutheran. What he meant is that if you're born into a culture in which everybody has a similar worldview, you don't have an opportunity to develop *genuine* belief because your convictions are not subject to scrutiny.

Put another way, if you don't talk to people who hold different views, you will not know what they believe, and you won't even know what *you* believe. Having conversations with people who hold beliefs different from yours affords you the opportunity to reflect — and only then can you evaluate whether your beliefs hold true.

Immigration.Abortion. Gun control. The seemingly impossible issue du jour is irrelevant. What is relevant: To justify your confidence you must sincerely engage people who have solid arguments against your position.

Over the last few years, Americans seem to have convinced themselves that not speaking to people who hold different moral and political beliefs makes us better people — even on college campuses where intellectual sparring has historically been part of the curricula. It does not. However, it does make us less likely to revise our beliefs and more likely to convince ourselves that others should believe as we do.

Over time, failure to have conversations across divides cultivates a belief myopia that strengthens our views and deepens our divisions.

Forget about healing political divides, overcoming polarization or the dangers of mischaracterizing people who hold different beliefs. Reaching out and speaking with someone who has different ideas is beneficial, not for utopian social reasons, but for your own good — for your "belief hygiene." You engage in dental hygiene not to bring insurance costs down for the masses, but because you don't want cavities, pain and gum disease.

You should engage in belief hygiene for similarly selfish reasons: It's an opportunity to reflect upon what you believe and why you believe it. If other social goods happen to occur as a byproduct — friendships, increased understanding, changed minds — that's great.

Having conversations across divides isn't particularly complicated.

Figure out why someone believes what they believe. The best way to do this is simply to ask, "Why do you believe that?" and then listen. Don't tell them why they're wrong or "parallel talk" and explain what you believe. Figure out their reasons for their belief by asking questions. Then ask yourself if their conclusions are justified by the rationale they provided.

Call out extremists on *your* side. Identify the authoritarians and fundamentalists who claim to represent your views and speak bluntly about how they take things too far. This is a way to build trust and signal that you're not an extremist. (If you can't figure out how your side goes too far, that may be a sign that you are part of the problem and need to moderate your beliefs.)

Let people be wrong. It's OK if someone doesn't believe what you believe. Far more often than not, their beliefs don't present an existential threat — they're just one person — and you'll be just fine. Don't even bother to push back or point out holes in their arguments. Listen, learn and let them be wrong. Conclude by thanking them for the conversation. (As a good rule of

thumb, the more strongly you disagree with someone's position, the more important it is to thank them for the discussion and end on a high note.)

In our highly polarized environment, talking to those who hold different beliefs isn't easy, but it's easier than you think. Fewer people talking across divides creates a hunger for honest, sincere conversation. But what there should really be is a hunger for truth. And the best way to achieve that is to subject your beliefs to scrutiny.

Peter Boghossian and James Lindsay are the authors of the forthcoming book "How to Have Impossible Conversations."
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The Stories That Divide Us

By Ross Douthat July 27, 2019

The latest issue of New York magazine features a long, bizarre, amazing story by Kera Bolonik about a hapless Harvard Law professor, Bruce Hay, who managed to get duped by two apparent grifters, Maria-Pia Shuman and Mischa Haider, one a lesbian and one a transgender woman, into believing that he had fathered a child with Shuman — a con that they allegedly ran on multiple men at once.

From this paternity-trap beginning, Hay found himself emotionally entangled, ideologically bullied and effectively extorted. At one point, Shuman and Haider somehow tricked him into letting them "house-nap" his Cambridge home, until a court order evicted them. Finally, as the grift ran dry, Haider filed a sexual harassment complaint against Hay that's still being adjudicated by Harvard.

When this story — far more byzantine even than my summary — dropped into the internet, the second-most-interesting thing, after the wild tale itself, was to watch how it was read by people who lean right versus people who lean left. The leftward-leaners were more likely to focus on Hay as a uniquely gullible or lust-addled individual, and to draw strictly personal lessons from his disastrous arc. (For instance, to quote the Atlantic's Adam Serwer, that "men need meaningful and supportive friendships with people they are not married to, especially into middle age.")

The rightward-leaners, on the other hand, read the story politically, as a vivid allegory for the relationship between the old liberalism and the new — between a well-meaning liberal establishment that's desperate to act enlightened and a woke progressivism that ruthlessly exploits the

establishment's ideological subservience. ("Not only did [Hay] trust Shuman," Bolonik writes, but "he felt it would have been insulting for a heterosexual cisgender man to question a professed lesbian as to whether she'd had sex with other men.") In this reading the Hay-Shuman-Haider story is a real-life version of a Michel Houellebecq novel, a tale of liberal culture that wears reactionary implications on its sleeve.

Since I am a right-leaner you can easily imagine to which reading I was instinctively inclined. But step back a bit, and the contrasting responses to this one bonkers story offer a way to think about our political polarization, which is shaped by a recurring version of the Hay story's reception.

By this I mean the heart of polarization is often not a disagreement about the facts of a particular narrative, but about whether that story is somehow *representative* — or whether it's just one tale among many in our teeming society, and doesn't stand for anything larger than itself.

When conservatives talk about liberal media bias, for instance, their complaint isn't necessarily that mainstream outlets fail to report stories that might confirm a conservative worldview. Rather, it's that they report on them in ways that make them sound dry and dull or just random and unrepresentative, without ever acknowledging their wider interest or significance.

Likewise, when liberals damn conservative megaphones for reporting "alternative facts" instead of real ones, what they often really mean is that

the right-wing media reports on real facts and real stories — crimes committed by illegal immigrants, say, or the violent edge to the Antifa protests — but then overstates or misreads their significance.

All this suggests that breaking out of polarization, thinking for yourself instead of as a partisan, is ultimately more about imagination than information, and not something achieved by becoming better educated in the facts of issue X or Y or Z. (Indeed, studies suggest that the most factually informed voters are also reliably the *most* partisan.)

If I were trying to de-polarize someone, in the way that you de-program members of cults or revolutionary cells, I might hand them a copy of their favorite magazine or newspaper, and ask them to construct a version in which the exact same set of stories were edited and headlined and prioritized by an editor from the opposite political persuasion. (I promise you my own guest-editing stint at New York would be fantastic.) Or to program an opinion show for Rachel Maddow using only stories that Chris Wallace and Bret Baier report, or a show for Laura Ingraham using only the stories that lead MSNBC.

It's not that full de-polarization is ever possible; basic moral and philosophical commitments inevitably divide us. But seeing our disagreements through the lens of narrative might get us closer to a crucial insight — which is that in a big, diverse and complicated society, multiple narratives can all be true at once.

Maybe Bruce Hay's strange odyssey isn't actually a heightened example of what's gone wrong with academic liberalism or the sexual revolution as a whole. But it could be such an example, and the mistreatment of a particular migrant family at the border could *also* be a heightened example of what's gone wrong with Trumpian conservatism ... because choosing a

side, as we all tend to do, doesn't have to mean taking only that side's narratives as truth.

And nothing should temper partisanship more than an awareness that somewhere, on some issue, people with whom you disagree are telling a story that you really need to hear.

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EXCERPT | DISCIPLESHIP

Why Niceness Weakens Our Witness

I can't follow Christ and also succeed at being nice.

SHARON HODDE MILLER

Image: Illustration by Rick Szuecs / Source image: Getty

od did not call you to be nice. This statement has been rattling around in my head

God for well over a year now, and I haven't been able to shake it. It has reemerged at crucial moments, not as an excuse to be snarky, angry, or rude, but because I have noticed something going on in my heart, and in the church, for a while now: A competing allegiance. A warm and inviting idolatry that has managed to wedge itself between us and true obedience to Christ.

For as long as I can remember, I have loved to be nice—not just loved but needed—and it is an identity I have struggled to leave behind. I want to be accepted, and I want to be embraced. As a lifelong nice girl, I have not only felt this pressure but I have also caved in to it often. The need to be nice has influenced my ministry as well as my relationships. I have backed away from hard conversations or softened my convictions, opting instead for the wide gate of niceness.

"Niceness" is a form of superficial kindness that's used as a means to a selfish end. I identify it as an idol in my life because I have served it tirelessly, and it has served me well in return. My devotion to it has won me a lot of acceptance and praise, but it has also inhibited my courage, fed my self-righteousness, encouraged my inauthenticity, and produced in me a flimsy sweetness that easily gives way to disdain.

As I look beyond my own heart, I see this same phenomenon everywhere. Niceness has become a social currency in our culture, one that we value highly without ever really realizing it. I once discussed this topic with Christina Edmondson, dean of intercultural student development at Calvin College and cohost of the podcast *Truth's Table*, and she remarked that "we are wooed by superficial niceness. Satiated by it." We will forgive all manner of ills in a person we deem to be nice. We use niceness to grease the wheels of our social interactions. We employ it like a ladder, helping us to scale the heights of our career. And for many Christians, following Jesus means we are just really, really nice.

The friend who says a hard thing that we need to hear, the pastor who holds us accountable, the leader who disrupts the status quo—these not-nice behaviors are

frequently met with swift rejection and even rage. Friendships end. Church members leave. Social media burns with outrage. These kinds of reactions tell us something about the role of niceness in our culture. It isn't just a social expectation—it's a sacred cow.

When we turn to it for promotions in our workplace, preference in our community, and power in our ministry, niceness is no longer a harmless social default but an alternative god whose promises compete with Christ. In sum, it stands between us and obedience.

So, how did we get here? And what does niceness mean for our Christian witness?

Going back to ancient times, virtue has traditionally referred to a particular moral good. In Plato's *Republic*, the philosopher names four classical virtues: wisdom, temperance, courage, and justice. These virtues are not merely about doing the right thing—they're about doing it for the right reason. Plato describes virtue as "the desire of things honorable," which means we are motivated by a greater good outside ourselves.

Niceness, on the other hand, aims small. In her book *American Niceness*, author Carrie Tirado Bramen describes niceness as a virtue of "surfaces rather than depths," while Philip Ryken, president of Wheaton College, calls it "a trivial virtue

that is easy to fake." Niceness is concerned with the appearance of goodness and not the reality of it. It gives the facade of serving others but exists primarily to serve ourselves. In the end, niceness only makes us into "whitewashed tombs" (Matt. 23:27)—pristine on the outside but empty within.

In addition to being a false virtue, niceness radically diminishes our Christian witness. Author Randy Alcorn describes it this way: "We've been schooled that it's inappropriate to say anything negative. Being a good witness once meant faithfully representing Christ, even when it meant being unpopular. Now it means 'making people like us.' We've redefined Christlike to mean 'nice.'"

Not surprisingly, this false idol has shaped the reputation of Christians throughout the world. Alcorn goes on to say, "Many non-believers know only two kinds of Christians: those who speak truth without grace and those who are very nice but never share the truth." In other words, niceness is one of the reasons our gospel message is uncompelling and our witness limp. Niceness is a false form of spiritual formation that has crept into the church, seduced Jesus' followers, and taken much of the power out of our lives. It is one of our generation's favorite idols, and it is high past time to name it.

After observing the fruit of this false idol in my own life, here's what I have concluded: I cannot follow Jesus and be nice. Not equally. Because following Jesus

means following someone who spoke hard and confusing truths, who was honest with his disciples—even when it hurt—who condemned the hypocrisy of the Pharisees and turned over tables in the temple. Jesus was a man who went face-to-face with the devil himself and died on a cross rather than succumb to the status quo.

We exist in a world that swings between sweetness and outrage, two behaviors that seem to be at odds with one another. In reality, they are two sides of the same coin: a lack of spiritual formation. When our civility isn't rooted in something sturdy and deep, when our good behavior isn't springing from the core of who we are but is instead merely a mask we put on, it is only a matter of time before the façade crumbles away and our true state is revealed: an entire generation of people who are really good at looking good.

The solution, however, is not to trade in our appearance of niceness for an appearance of boldness. We have to go deeper into Christ.

Jesus was loving. He was gracious. He was forgiving. He was kind. But he was not nice. He was a man who would leave the 99 sheep to rescue the one, but he was also totally unafraid of offending people. Jesus understood the difference between graciousness and personal compromise, between speaking truth and needlessly alienating people. Rather than wear a shiny veneer, he became the embodiment of

rugged love. This, not niceness, is what we are called to.

Sharon Hodde Miller, PhD, is a writer, pastor's wife, and mother of two. She is the author of Free of Me: Why Life Is Better When It's Not About You *and* Nice: Why We Love to Be Liked and How God Calls Us to More, *from which this essay was adapted.*

TAGS: Discipleship | Fellowship and Community | Jesus | Virtues and Vices

POSTED: August 5, 2019

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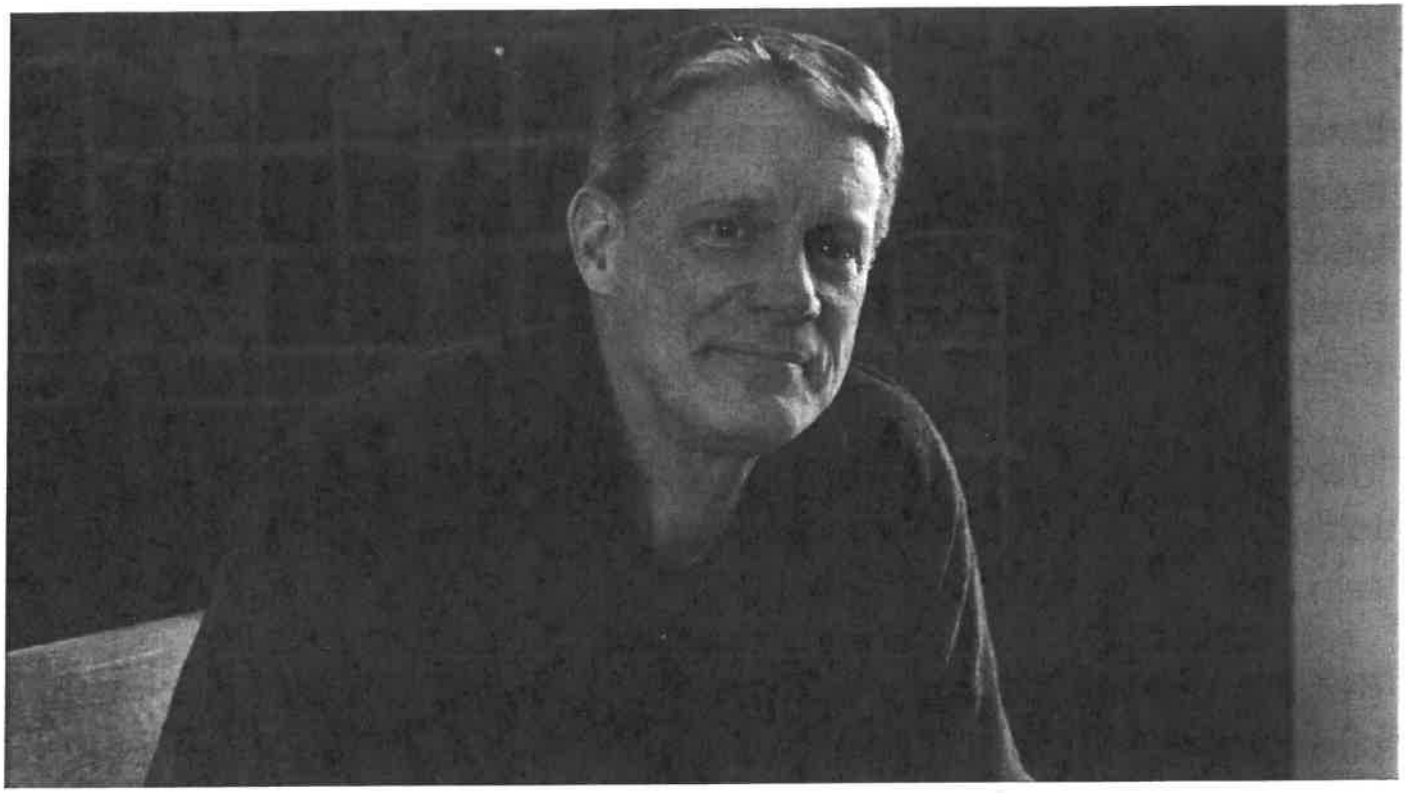
KAREN SWALLOW PRIOR

You May Be Reading the Bible Wrong. Pete Enns Says the Bible Itself Shows a Better Way



Biblical scholar Peter Enns. Photo credit: Shelby Kuchenbrod.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: The Bible isn't a rule book, an instruction manual, or a road map, says Peter Enns, a Hebrew Bible scholar and the host of the popular podcast The Bible for Normal People.

So what is it?

Something more complicated but infinitely better, as he explains in his thought-provoking new book How the Bible Actually Works: In Which I Explain How an Ancient, Ambiguous, and Diverse Book Leads Us to Wisdom Rather Than Answers—and Why That's Great News, a book I thought was

fascinating (not to mention quite funny) — JKR

RNS: I loved this book, which seems to be about the importance of honest wrestling with the Bible. You focus here on the Bible as a model of situational wisdom: what it teaches is not always consistent from one situation to another, and our job is to figure out how to navigate that.

Enns: In this book I take a more constructive approach than in my other books, which focused on deconstructing some points of view about the Bible that are very problematic. I'm trying show what the Bible's antiquity, ambiguity, and diversity tell us *positively* how the life of faith is more like a quest for wisdom than following a road map or book of instructions.

The Bible doesn't work well as an owner's manual that lays out for us what to do or think at every turn. It is holding out to us the invitation to accept the sacred responsibility going forward and working things out.

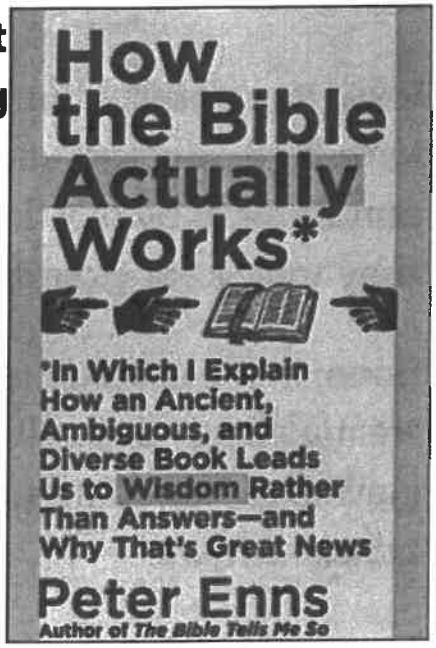
RNS: Early in the book you look at an example of how the laws about slavery change from one part of the Torah/Pentateuch to another. Slavery was a given in that world, but the specifics changed quite a lot.

Enns: Torah has diversity in its laws, and that's been a fact of life for people of faith from the beginning, so we shouldn't be surprised when we run into them. One example concerns Hebrew slaves. In Exodus, a male Hebrew slave, if he wishes to, can go free in the seventh year. Hebrew slaves who are women, however, are not given the option of going free.

In Deuteronomy, which clearly mirrors this law in Exodus, both male and female Hebrew slaves have the option to go free in the seventh year. One way to explain this change in this later version of the law is that Israelites thought it more consistent with God's nature. But whatever the reason, it is

clearly different and more humane. Leviticus contains probably the most recent version of the law, and now no Hebrew slaves are allowed at all. They can work for you for hire, and you can own non-Hebrew slaves, but you can't own Hebrew slaves.

RNS: You say that this kind of contradiction is not a mistake but a model: the Bible itself is modeling for us how people need to reinterpret the law with every passing generation in a changing society.



Enns: Right. These changes in laws—all believed to have been given by God on Mt. Sinai, mind you—demonstrate that obeying God isn't simply a matter of "obeying the law" but of thinking through what it means to obey God as circumstances change. More than simply being about changing views on slavery, we are seeing here different ways of thinking about what God is like, and what God expects from us in treating others.

These laws are not meant to be awkwardly reconciled, as if deep down they are actually saying the same thing, but respected as telling us something about how the Bible works. These laws contradict, and saying so is not an attack on the Bible but an acknowledgment of what is there. These contradictions are characteristics I embrace, and I actually think they are what make the Bible worth reading because they push us to think for ourselves, "Okay, what does it mean to obey God here and now?"

RNS: Is that idea threatening for conservative Christians? That the contradictions in the Bible are a feature, not a bug?

Enns: It is, and I get it. Many Christians are taught to think from the outset,

before they really have a chance to read the Bible carefully as adults, that the Bible by definition *cannot* contain contradictions. That is a hard position to maintain even within the first five books of the Bible. Rather than avoid the contradictions or explain them away, we should listen to what they are telling us.

RNS: You spend a lot of the book trying to help readers understand historical context, especially that our understanding of God is conditioned by our time and place. In the Old Testament, for example, they took it for granted that of course other gods really existed.

Enns: In the second half of the book I use the language of "imagining" and "reimagining" God. All of our God-talk, all of our conceptions of God, are inevitably filtered through our humanity—and that is no less true of the biblical writers.

For instance, in 2 Kings 3 we meet King Mesha who ruled Moab in the ninth century, which borders Israel across the Jordan river. Moab has been subject to Israelite rule, and Mesha decides to rebel, prompting the king of Israel Jehoram to put Mesha in his place. So Mesha is outnumbered, and in an act of desperation, he sacrifices his own son on the city wall.

What many of us might expect the Bible to do with this story is to show that the child sacrifice doesn't work because that other god doesn't exist (and because child sacrifice is wrong and barbaric). But that's not what happens. The story ends, "And a great wrath came upon Israel, so they withdrew from [Mesha] and returned to their own land" (v. 27). In other words, it worked.

I like using the word "imagination" with God. We all image God in our minds in ways that make sense to us culturally, and the Bible itself models that. In the Bible YHWH is not the only God in existence; he's one of many, but what makes him worthy of worship is that he's the best one. In the Exodus plague

narratives Yahweh does battle with the gods of Egypt (see Exodus 12:12). Psalm 95 claims that Yahweh is the "great king above all gods." These stories show us that people will articulate God in ways that make sense to them culturally. And back in the day, it was that there were lots of gods, and they were being worshiped all over the place.

I don't personally believe that many gods exist. But that's irrelevant because the Israelites clearly did. Judaism and Christianity are now monotheistic religions, but they didn't start out that way. Jews and Christians have reimagined God, and we see that process happening in the Bible itself.

RNS: You said that people will articulate God through the lens of what makes sense to them culturally. How are we articulating God in America today, based on our culture? In what ways does that reflect—or not reflect—the Bible?

Enns: A common and true criticism of conservative Christianity in America is that we've forgotten the prophetic call, in both Testaments, to call power to account rather than align the Gospel with any political regime.

This is a place where Americans have a deaf ear to the way the biblical tradition has already reimagined something that is very important, something that sticks. The non-alignment of the kingdom of heaven with empire is a vital message we should be sending. The role of people who try to follow Jesus, and who follow the prophetic tradition of the Old Testament, is to critique power, not to seek after it.

RNS: Is there anything else you want readers to know about *How the Bible Actually Works*?

Enns: I would just want to stress that the punch line of the book is that the Bible is designed for us to seek wisdom, and to ask ourselves what this faith

we are a part of requires of us in this moment. The answers to those questions are rarely simply written out for us. And we are all in the same boat on that. I think that's actually what God wants: to raise us to be thoughtful, mature followers rather than young children always looking for a parent to tell them what to do. The Bible, simply by being what it is, points—or even pushes—us in that direction. And that is good news.

Reviewing Pete Enns: Is the Bible Just Humans Updating God as it Goes?

Scot McKnight

Part 1: On Wisdom

By Geoff Holsclaw, a pastor and professor. See his free *How Did We Get the Bible?*

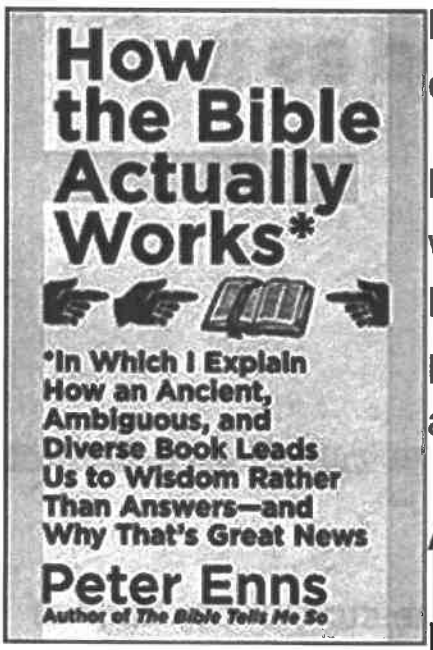
At some point in my childhood I remember hearing the story in the Bible of King Solomon's asking God for wisdom (1 Kings 3). I really wanted wisdom —but probably not for the right reasons.

God comes to Solomon in a dream and says that he can ask for whatever he wants and God will do it. Because he is a young and inexperienced king, Solomon asks for a wise and discerning heart. God was so pleased with this humble request that God also granted him riches and honor.

For years after hearing this story I remember praying every night for wisdom, asking God to give me a wise and discerning heart, just like Solomon. Early on I'm sure this was more pragmatic than pious. I really just wanted the riches and the honor, and thought wisdom would be the divine shortcut. But by my teenage years I started to realize the value of wisdom, and how it didn't always make life easier. In fact, wisdom sometimes makes life harder.

Peter Enns' new book, ***How the Bible Actually Works***, at its best seeks to place us on the hard, but rewarding, path of wisdom. Enns seeks to grow us

in maturity so that we might take up wisdom as our "sacred responsibility."



But in the end, it is unclear whether it is God's path of wisdom or our own that Enns is leading us on.

In this two part review of his book I want to start with what I appreciate about Enns' approach the Bible (and there is much appreciation). In the next post I'll raise my criticisms (about equal to my appreciation).

A Diverse Book of Wisdom

Enns is writing for the barely or formerly Christian who are trying to hang on to some semblance of faith in God and trying their hardest to give the Bible a second chance. By writing a popular book, rather than an academic treatise, Enns seeks to pastor those who feel duped by a church that preached a simplistic understanding of the Bible.

Enns starts from two foundational assumptions.

The **first** is that God is not a helicopter parent, micro-managing our lives. Instead, God is like a wise parent who wants us to grow in maturity and gain the skills necessary for life. God is not hovering over us offering moment by moment direction and meting out real time punishments for infractions. Rather, for Enns, God is like a wise parent who gives freedom and responsibility so that we can learn to handle life like "mature, well-functioning adults" (13).

The **second** assumption—based on the first—is that the Bible is not a rulebook or instruction manual for life. A helicopter parent would spell everything thing out in detail and make sure nothing goes wrong. And a

helicopter God would give us a sacred book "full of clear, consistent, unambiguous information" to follow (14). But God didn't give us a Bible like this.

The way the Bible actually works, according to Enns, is that it "leads us to wisdom rather than answers" (to quote the book's subtitle). And it does this leaving by ample room for pondering, debating, and thinking amid its ancient, ambiguous, and diverse covers.

Don't Answer A Fool, Except When You Should

Enns turns to the book of Proverbs—the wisdom book par excellence—as a guide for understanding the whole Bible.

Near the end of the book is one of my favorite pair of proverbs.

Do not answer a fool according to his folly, or you will be a fool yourself.

Answer a fool according to his folly, or he will be wise in his own eyes. (Prov. 26:4-5)

In back to back proverbs we get contradictory rules. If we read Proverbs like a clear cut rule book, then which one of these do we follow? Knowing which rule to follow requiring understanding the situation (*Should I correct that foolish answer or ignore it*). And understanding a situation and knowing how to response properly is what wisdom is all about. That's why the book of Proverbs placed these right next to each other, so that we would start learning how to discern different situations and learn how to responded to them.

Reading individual proverbs as if they were just rules to be followed would ruin your life. But instead of rules they are more like building blocks—the

raw materials—from which we build wise lives.

And this isn't just how the book of Proverb help us become wise.

Enns claims that this is how the entire Bible works. The whole Bible cultivates wisdom in us by offering diverse situations and different perspectives on God, humanity, and the world.

What About the 10 Commandments?

It might be objected, however, that there are plenty of rules in the Bible. And rather than cultivating wisdom, these rules demand obedience. There are the big ten commandments, for instance.

But Enns notes that severals of these commandments are not really that straightforward. What does it really mean not to have any other gods "before" Yahweh. Does that mean none at all? Or just make sure Yahweh is first?

And how do you know when you've taken God's name in vain and when you haven't?

Jesus ran afoul of those who thought he wasn't keeping the Sabbath holy in the right way.

And what about honoring your father and mother? How do you really know when you've do it or not?

Not stealing and not murdering seem easy enough to understand. But how do you know when you've cross the line from admiring to coveting?

Enns claims these laws are ambiguous because their goal is to cultivate wisdom in us, the ability to know how to apply them creatively in the

complex situations that come up in our complicated lives.

And in this I think Enns is on to something. If we just think of the Bible as full of rules and answers then we are going to be disappointed and disillusioned.

But if we see the Bible as the long and complicated story of a relational God interacting wisely with humanity, and longing for humanity to gain the wisdom that leads to life, then the twists and turns of the Bible become an opportunity to grow in our love and knowledge of God—and ourselves.

Updating For A New Context

For Enns, it's not just that our lives require wisdom because they are complex. But wisdom is required because our lives are complex, and they are *changing*. Because of this we need to exercise wisdom in updating faith for new circumstances.

The Bible, for Enns, models this kind of updating, adapting, or "reimagining" as he most often calls it (I'm not sure why Enns didn't call it contextualizing, which is the term that would have clearer I think—perhaps he thought it too jargon for a popular book).

Exodus and Deuteronomy

One example of reimagine God's laws are found in Exodus and Deuteronomy.

The book of Exodus talks about the treatment and release of slaves. But the book of Deuteronomy has more humane laws concerning slaves.

Another example concerns the rules about Passover. In Exodus the lamb is to be roasted, not boiled. And the Israelites prepare the lamb in their own

homes. In Deuteronomy the lamb can be roasted or boiled. And the celebration must be in Jerusalem.

In this and many other ways Enns claims that "Deuteronomy *reimagines* God for a new time and place. Deuteronomy is, in other words, an act of wisdom. For the past to have any spiritual vitality *in* the present, it had to be reshaped *for* the present" (87).

Samuel/Kings and Chronicles

Enns also turns the two long histories of the Old Testament of 1-2 Samuel and 1-2 Kings, and 1-2 Chronicles. Why two histories that retell much of the same material? What is going on here?

Enns sees Samuel-Kings as written just before or during the Babylonian exile as an attempt to answer the question, "How did we get into this mess? What did we do to deserve exile?" (108). The answer is that the kings and leaders had led Israel astray into idolatry. Israel is being punished because of the sins of the kings, which is why it spends so much time telling the stories of the various kings, and whether they were evil or not.

The history in Chronicles, written well after the return from exile, is not answering the question of why the Exile, but the question, "Is God still with us?" (108). Enns points out that rather than pinning the exile on sinful leaders, that the Chronicler places responsibility on all the people—it is much more collective in handing out blame. The moral of the story is that God is with Israel to the degree that the entire people stay faithful to God.

This retelling of Israel's history is "*nothing less than one big act of reimagining God*, of accepting the sacred responsibility to creatively retell the past in order to bridge that past to a difficult present" (109).

For, or Against, Nineveh?

Lastly, is God's word, delivered by the prophets, a word of condemnation or compassion?

The prophet Nahum received a message of condemnation. Speaking of Nineveh, Nahum 3 begins with "Woe to you city of blood..." (v. 1) and ends with "Nothing can heal you; your wound is fatal" (v. 19), and everything in between is destruction.

But the prophet Jonah, who seems to concur with Nahum, is forced to watch God show compassion to Nineveh amid their mass repentance (Jonah 4).

On the one hand, God is punishing those who punish Israel, making God especially concerned about Israel (Nahum). On the other hand, God seems concerned about extending mercy and compassion to all people, if they would only repent (Jonah).

The presence of both Nahum and Jonah in the Bible forces us to wrestle with who God really is and to grow in wisdom about how to live accordingly.

Cultivating Wisdom, and Love

In the next post I will critically engage with Enns' idea of the Bible update, adapting, or reimagining God as it goes along. But for now I want to express appreciation that Enns connects wisdom, maturity, and the Bible.

Any careful reader of the New Testament knows that maturity is the goal of discipleship, of being conformed to the image of Christ.

This is the reason that diverse gifts are given to the church, "so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the

knowledge of the Son of God and become **mature**, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ" (Eph. 4:12-15).

Indeed, this maturity comes through the wisdom of God in Christ, the "one we proclaim, admonishing and teaching everyone with all **wisdom**, so that we may present everyone fully **mature** in Christ. To this end I strenuously contend with all the energy Christ so powerfully works in me" (Col. 1:28-29). This wisdom that works maturity in us the wisdom of God hidden in Christ (1 Cor. 2:6-7).

This wisdom and maturity comes not through the Bible not as a rule book, but as something that cultivates wisdom in us as we grapple with its meaning.

Enns is aligned with the ancient wisdom of Augustine who claimed that "the Bible was composed in such a way that as beginners mature, its meaning grows with them." (*Confession*, 3.1). **The difficulties in the text are there to turn our pride into humility as our hearts and minds are trained in wisdom.**

Augustine puts it even more strongly. For him, reading the Bible is no longer necessary once God had fully cultivated faith, hope, and love in us (*On Christian Doctrine*, 1.39). In other words, once we are mature in Christ, the Bible is no longer necessary. In this way, the difficulties in this ancient text are not first off problems to be solved, but opportunities to grow.

Likewise, Enns invites us into a biblical complexity that cultivate wisdom, a complexity that is both more honest that we get from literal, fundamentalist approaches, and more helpful.

Next Time

In the next post I'll engage with Enns' larger claim that the "entire history of the Christian church is defined by moments of reimagining God to speak here and now...*Reimagining the God of the Bible is what Christians do*" (156).

My concern is that this reimagining of God all too focused on humanity—how humanity ***thinks***, ***feels***, ***imagines*** God to be—and leaves almost no room for how God has ***reveal***God to be.

Indeed, Enns seems to have turned the Bible into what humans ***reimagine*** God to be, and has totally lefts aside whether the Bible ***reveals*** God in anyway. But that is for next time.

And for why I think we should still read the ancient document called the Bible, check out my free—and brief—ebook on *How Did We Get the Bible?*

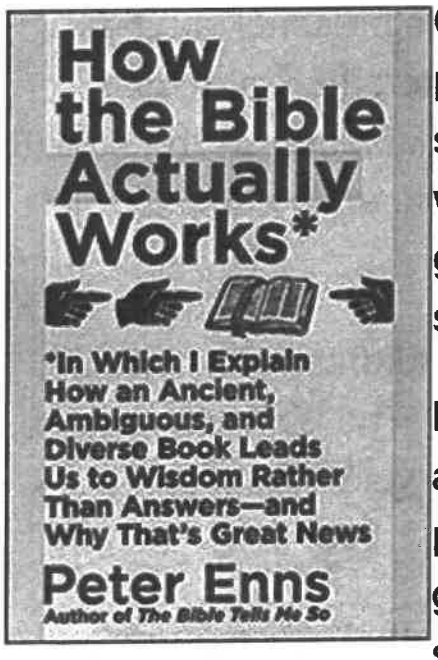
Reviewing Pete Enns: Saving the Bible, but Losing God

Scot McKnight

Part Two: On Revelation (Part One: On Wisdom), a two-part review Peter Enns' new book, ***How the Bible Actually Works***

By Geoff Holsclaw, a pastor-theologian. Get his free *How Did We Get the Bible?*

A Bad Reviewer?



Cards on the table: I'm a pastor and a theologian by profession. I occupy two positions that make me suspicious to someone like Peter Enns, especially when reviewing a book. Not withstanding the gracious host of Jesus Creed, but many biblical scholars get antsy around pastors and theologians.

Pastors and theologians are perceived to have an agenda when it comes to the Bible. They have a party line promote, a system to fortify, an ax to grind. Pastors and theologians are thought to stretch, bend, or bury the truth of the Bible in order to keep their systems and churches in order.

But biblical scholars just want everyone to read the Bible and be honest about what they find. Biblical scholars position themselves as more truthful and less biased than pastors and theologians.

And to an extent this is true, unfortunately.

But I'm all for reading the Bible! Too many people just don't know what's in the Bible, and are then scandalized when people start showing them what's really there.

Surprise! There really are tensions and contradictions, there really are acts of violence and ancient cosmologies. And when pop culture Christian leaders find this out they lose their faith (see Joshua Harris or Marty Sampson) and act like no one has noticed this before, that no one is talking about, that everyone is either a fool or a liar—everyone but them.

The Church HAS Noticed Before

Hello! The Church has noticed the difficulties the Bible presents and has been writing about them for like 1850 years. Enns is not the first to call attention to the sprawling, rambling, and tension filled aspects of the Bible (I know he knows this, but some of his readers might not, and he doesn't tell them).

Augustine hated the Bible at first—exactly because it didn't make sense, it wasn't well organized, it wasn't eloquent or beautiful. The Bible was coarse, confusing, and contradictory. For Augustine the Bible was a disgrace, a blight on landscape of truly great literature.

But Augustine eventually saw that his disdain came from his own pride, and that the Bible was composed in such a way to confront and convert our pride into humility, and to move us from immaturity to maturity, from foolishness to wisdom, from self-love to love of God and love of others.

So as a pastor and a theologian, I want to say, "Welcome to all you tired and weary, and you who need rest from a disappointing, constrictive, and

confusing view of the Bible. Come out of your narrow fundamentalism, not into a loss of faith, but into a wider faith, a broad Church tradition that has honestly grappled with these issues for two millennia."

Not About The Bible, but About God

But, after showing my appreciation for how Enns directs us toward wisdom, at the end of the previous post I noted by concern with his larger project (which comes to a head in the second half of the book).

I said, "Enns seems to have turned the Bible into what humans ***reimagine*** God to be, and has totally left aside whether the Bible ***reveals*** God in anyway."

Not only does Enns invite us into a view of biblical complexity that cultivates wisdom (***which is good***), but he also invites us into what he repeatedly calls a "sacred responsibility" to reimagine God (update or adapt) for the here and now (***which could be good if it wasn't so one-sided***).

In his own words, Enns says,

> *"The God I read about in the Bible is not what God is like—in some timeless abstraction, and that's that—but how God was imagined and then reimagined by ancient people of faith living in real times and places"* (124-25, italics in original).

> *"The sacred responsibility I've been talking about is really a call to follow this biblical lead by reimagining God in our time and place"* (125, italics in original).

> "The Bible does not leave us with one consistent portrait of God, but a collection of ancient and diverse portraits of how the various biblical

> writers understood God for their times" (153).

> "The entire history of the Christian church is defined by moments of reimagining God to speak here and now...*Reimagining the God of the Bible is what Christians do*" (156, italics in original).

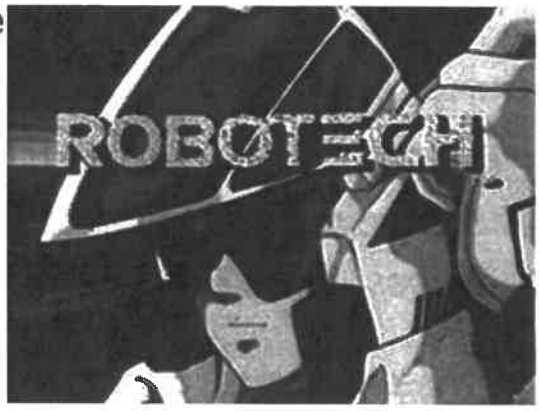
One the one hand, I don't necessarily disagree with these statements. Except that they don't say enough.

Certainly humans have always, in all cultures and traditions, ***reimagined*** and adapted what they think and believe about God.

But what exactly has God ***revealed*** to us (to ask a theologian's question) and what does it mean for us (to ask a pastor's question)?

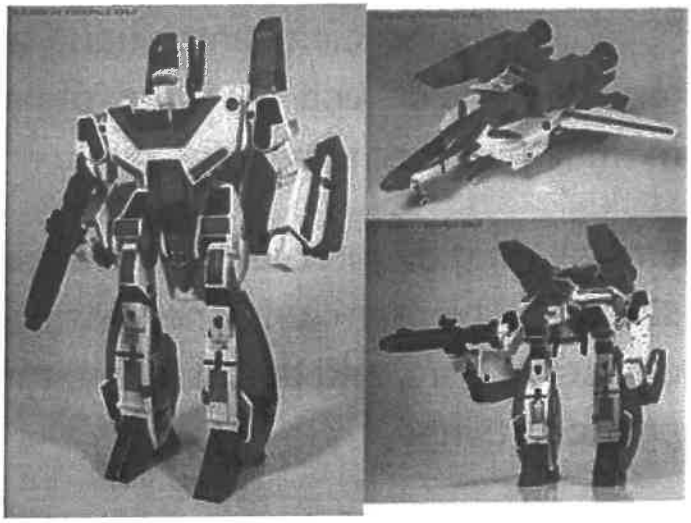
My Childhood was a Lie

Let me illustrate the problem with Enns approach with a story from my childhood.



The best, and I mean THE BEST, cartoon in the mid-80s was *Robotech*. Better than He-Man, Transformers, or G.I. Joe, and those were good too.

Robotech was an earth-space-alien-robot adventure where humans pilot giant, transforming robotic vehicles (mecha). The story follows the heroes through three successive "Robotech Wars" against various alien invaders. Revell made Robotech model kits and Hasbro created the Jetfire transformer as a tie in to the Robotech universe (which was my treasured Christmas gift in 1985).



In a nostalgic moment last year I decided to revisit the bedrock of my childhood. The second sentence on Wikipedia goes like this: "Robotech was adapted from ***three original and unrelated***, though visually similar, Japanese anime television series to make a series suitable for syndication."

WHAT THE WHAT?

Robotech was a LIE!

The one season of Robotech that ran in 1985, covering the three different "Robotech Wars/Invasion" was **really three different** Japanese animated series (totally different writers and illustrators) that America broadcasters and toy makers strung together in order to ***make money***. To make money off poor suckers like me.

Through a couple well placed narrative voiceovers, a little tweaking of the overall storyline, and a couple changes of character names, three different stories became one big story.

Is this any different than the Bible?

Just a Library (of wisdom)?

Enns' view of the Bible—in the end—in not much different than Robotech.

Enns' view is that the Bible is essentially a human collection(s) of different stories (by different authors/editors) that have a common reference to

"God". These "ancient, ambiguous, and diverse" stories, for Enns, represent the collective wisdom of people attempting to "reimagine" God for their here and how.

Emphasizing the process of "reimagining God" might sound like a way to save the Bible from fundamentalism, to loosen the strangle hold of literalism and absolutism, and to appreciate the diversity within the Bible. And those are good things.

But without a doctrine of scripture/revelation (a theologian's question) we haven't really saved our connection with God (a pastor's question).

The producers of Robotech "reimagined" three unrelated Japanese anime television series to make them consumable "here and now" for an American audience. It seems hard to understand how seeing the Bible as a similar "reimagining of God's story" is any less of a lie in the big picture.

At most the Bible is a library of somewhat successful and sometimes failed attempts at adapting God to the realities the here and now of the author.

Enns seems to save the Bible while losing God (says the pastor and theologian).

Staking a Claim, not Reimagining One

But while written and composed by humans, the Bible drives some stakes in the ground beyond the here and now of culturally engaged, wisdom informed, reimaginings.

Let's look briefly at John 1 and Hebrews 1.

> *"In the beginning was the Word...and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us." (John 1:1, 14)*

The author of John certainly is reimagining the beginning of Genesis 1:1 and applying it to Jesus, who is the Word of God—the Word with God from the beginning. And the author is appropriating tabernacle imagery (the very place of God's presence) and applying it to Jesus.

Certainly these claims are made in history (the here and now of a contingently cultural moment). But they are claims that transcend history, that put Jesus in a different relationship to history and culture. They can't easily be swept aside as "And that is just how John reimagined God to be."

> *"In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, 2 but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. 3 The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word." (Hebrews 1: 1-3a)*

The author of Hebrews claims that God ***spoke***—not just humans reimagining things about God. But God spoke—in various ways, through people. But now God has spoken by his Son—who has more authority than the prophets because he is both the creator and inheritor of all things. Not only this, but in his speaking (his powerful word) the Son radiates God's glory and represents God very being.

Again, these claims are made in and about history, and are wise appropriations of previous elements from the Bible. But they also make trans-historical claims about Jesus, claims that transcend a merely human process of re-imagining God.

These passages claim that God came down and did, said, and revealed something. And our "sacred responsibility" isn't just to continue the *reimagining process*, but to *faithfully witness* to these realities as if they are

true for the whole world, all of reality.

Has God Spoken?

The question that Enns refuses to answer is, "Has God really spoken? Through his Son or in the Bible?"

He refuses to answer this as a theological question and as a pastoral question.

Theologically, if God has spoken then we can and should engage in theology, the task of asking who God is, what God is like, and how all this connects with all that is. If God has not spoken then all we have is cultural anthropology, an ancient text, university research projects, and the projection of human values onto divine fantasies.

Pastorally, if God has spoken then we are not alone, abandoned within the angst of a life where all meaning, purpose, and significance is really just up to us. If God has spoken then there really is something stable and reliable in the world. If God has spoken that life isn't just *up to me* to figure out. If God hasn't spoken, then pastorally my advice is to sleep in and skip my next sermon and don't worry about that daily devotion time anymore.

We Need Revelation, Not Just Reimagining

To end, I want to offer the rudiments of a theology of God's Word, of God speaking in and through the Word, the Son, and in and through the Bible (this is all filled out in section 3 of my "How Did We Get the Bible?").

God's Powerful Word: When God speaks, *realities* are created (Gen. 1:1; Ps. 29, 33; John 1:1-3; Heb. 1:1-3a).

God's Promising Word: When God speaks, *relationship* are made that endure and overcome. This is "blessing" and "covenant" language (Gen. 1:28-30; 12: 1-3; Ex. 19).

God's Prosecuting Word: The flip side of establishing relationships (promising) is naming when relationships are broken (and this goes both ways...that humans have a right to prosecute God when it seems God isn't upholding his side of the relationship) (see Deuteronomy and all the prophetic books).

God's Personal Word: Because *deliverance* is for God *dwelling* among us (Ex. 29:44-46; Ez. 37:26-28), God's powerful word of promise always facilitates a personal relationship of presence between God and God's people. This personal word, we come to find in the Son, was always a Word that was/is a Person.

God's Pneumatological Word: God's personal Word (the Son) is always spoken through the Breath of God (the Spirit) (2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Pet. 1:20–21). This is true of both scripture and the incarnation.

God's Professing Word: While the pneumatological aspect of God's word focuses on God speaking authoritatively through humans by the Spirit, the *professing word* is the word spoken by the Spirit through humans as a **witness** to God's activity in history.

Yes, Wisdom! And Revelation.

Enns might have told us how the Bible actually works, but he has yet to tell us how God's Word works. He has given us wisdom, but foreclosed on revelation.

Conservatives focus too much on revelation. And Progressives focus too

much on wisdom (and/or love). What we need is both.

Only then will the church grow up into all maturity in Christ by the power of the Spirit to the glory of the Father.

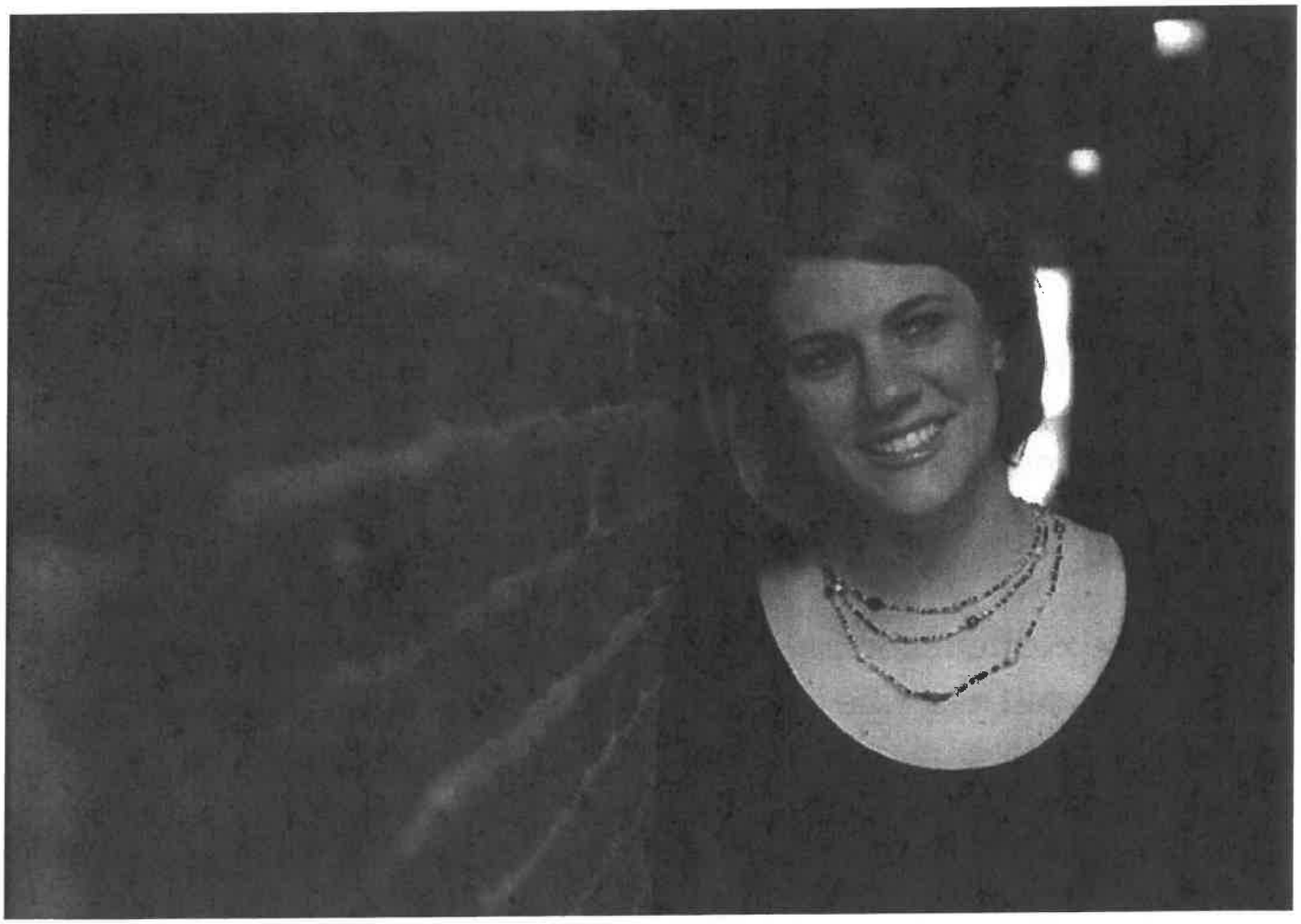
And for why I think we should still read the ancient document called the Bible, check out my free—and brief—ebook on *How Did We Get the Bible?*

You're Using It Wrong: Rachel Held Evans Returns to the Bible

Jul 6, 2018, 2:16pm

Eric C. Miller

One critic was like, "Rachel Held Evans bases her Biblical interpretation on all the feels"... So I took a picture of my endnotes, which are lengthy, and sent them to him with the note, "All the feels, page 1," "All the feels, page 2"...



Rachel Held Evans
rachelheldevans.com

It's been over 3 years since "the most polarizing woman in evangelicalism" became an *ex*-vangelical and joined the Episcopal Church. Rachel Held Evans earned that title through her very public questioning of the treatment of women and LGBTQ people in the church, along with the issues she'd come to have with evangelical bible interpretation more broadly through her books, blog, and tweets.

As a result, she, like millions of evangelical adolescents who have matured into an *ex*vangelical adults, took a step back from the Bible that had been so omnipresent in her life. Now, in her fourth book, *Inspired: Slaying Giants, Walking on Water, and Loving the Bible Again,* Evans finds her way back to the Bible, even if her relationship to it has changed significantly.

RD's Eric Miller spoke with Rachel Held Evans about the book, the Bible, the political climate, and how the scriptures might inspire resistance to the president.

This interview has been edited and condensed.

This is a book about coming back to the Bible after being alienated from it. Can you describe how your faith has developed throughout your adulthood?

I grew up a conservative evangelical, so I was pretty into the Bible. I had memorized large portions of the book of Romans before I was eleven. As I became a young adult, I started to question some of the things that I had

learned within that conservative evangelical culture, including some things about how I was supposed to read the Bible.

I encountered stories in scripture that troubled me, like the ones where God commands the people of Israel to commit genocide against their enemies, stories about women that were squarely rooted in a patriarchal culture, and these weighed on my mind to the point that I started to question everything about my faith. I've written a lot about that—it's been the main story that I have shared throughout different iterations in my writing career.

For this book, I wanted to focus on the Bible because I feel like it's only been in the last few years that I've been able to get back to the Bible and really to love it again—not just tolerate it or deal with a faith crisis every time I open it up. And that's thanks to the work of some scholars that have really resonated with me and introduced me to some different perspectives. I wanted to share that with people in a way that they might find entertaining and intriguing and fun. Biblical scholarship is not everyone's cup of tea, so I wanted to show people why it brings me so much joy.

That's not to say that I don't still have hang-ups, because I do. There are still stories that I haven't made sense of and that still bother me. But I hope that this book helps people navigate that experience and be honest about it and recognize that they don't have to check their brains or their hearts at the door when they read the Bible.

Are you still an evangelical?

No. I think that ship has sailed! There are a lot of people who want to stick around and reclaim the evangelical label, and I support them in that. But I think the election of Donald Trump was a final nail in the coffin for me. Plus, now that I attend an Episcopal church, it feels a little disingenuous for me to say that I identify as an evangelical. My views are now so far afield from the

typical political—and sometimes theological—views of most evangelicals that I guess I would say I am squarely Episcopalian now.

Do you give much thought to the—invariably male—pastors and seminarians who will be on Twitter criticizing your hermeneutics or your exegesis?

What?! Do you think that will happen?

Actually they don't criticize my hermeneutics or my exegesis. They just say, "This woman has no authority to write about the Bible." They don't even attempt to engage the arguments that I make, and that's what irritates me. The other day one guy was like, "Rachel Held Evans bases her Biblical interpretation on all the feels," which is like the most gendered criticism, it's so obvious. So I took a picture of my endnotes, which are lengthy, and sent them to him with the note, "All the feels, page 1," "All the feels, page 2."

Because here's the thing—I know I'm not a biblical scholar. I'm aware of that. I think it's important that writers know what they don't know. But I am a voracious reader and I cited my sources. I also had two biblical scholars look over it and give me feedback. I've never had a book reviewed as thoroughly as this one was before it went to press. I sent it to *everybody* to make sure that I was on the right track.

My thinking is that reading and engaging the Bible is not left to the scholars. As a writer, I'm going to approach the text with a different set of questions than a scholar would ask, and I think that's a good thing. I'm asking, for instance, in an early house church, what would they be eating? What would the floor be made of? What would they be sitting on? Who would be there? What would it smell like? These are the questions that I'm asking that scholars might not think to ask.

But every page of this book was significantly informed by the work of biblical scholars. People like Walter Brueggemann and N.T. Wright, of course, and significant portions were informed by womanist scholars. When I wrote about Hagar, I was influenced by Delores Williams and Wil Gafney, black women who read the story of Hagar in a way that I would never think to read it. Also some feminist theology, some liberation theology—I did my research for this book and I stand by it.

You advocate a *midrash* approach to Biblical interpretation. What is that, and why is it preferable to literalist or inerrancy approaches?

Midrash is a Jewish rabbinical interpretation of scripture. In the Jewish community, there is this appreciation for differences and contradictions and questions that are left in the text. If you encounter a difficult passage, it's like, "oh, let's talk about this!" The Bible is treated like a conversation starter, not a conversation ender.

This is very different from how Christians tend to approach the Bible. We treat it like a zero-sum game. This text has *one* correct meaning, so we take sides on what that meaning is and then we fight to the death over who's right. There's a lot of insecurity in that. It clings to a single, narrow, vulnerable view that has to be defended at all costs.

You are very sensitive to certain concepts from the progressive vocabulary—like *privilege* and *marginalization*—and to the influence they have on Biblical interpretation. So how do you react when someone like Franklin Graham says that progressive is another word for godless?

I don't even know how to react to that because it's so off base. It's just not true. I think there are some people who think that white, male interpretations of the Bible are the default, and that if women are doing

interpretation, if black people are doing interpretation, if people from South America or Asia are doing interpretation, then that's *contextual* biblical interpretation. They think this while remaining unaware that *all of us* are interpreting the Bible in a context. A white man at an evangelical seminary is also in a context.

I mean, at this moment I'm watching friends get arrested for protesting the fact that the Trump administration is taking children away from their parents and putting them in concentration camps, essentially. Is that protest *godless*? It seems like the righteous thing to be doing.

So given your approach to scripture, how do you react when Jeff Sessions quotes Romans 13 to justify that policy?

Well, he's wrong. And I think it's a classic example of lifting one phrase or one line from scripture and saying, "this is biblical," instead of doing the harder work of examining the broader, over-arching themes of scripture and then placing the particular text within the broader theme or story. Sessions seems to have forgotten that Jesus was executed by the state for subversion, as was the Apostle Paul, who *wrote Romans 13*. At minimum, it was a misuse of scripture. It was a *blasphemous* use of scripture, as far as I'm concerned.

As I note in the book, if you go the Bible looking for a weapon, you can find or make one. People have looked to scripture to justify slavery, genocide, atrocities against indigenous people. You can twist the Bible to say just about anything you want. Shakespeare said it well—even the Devil can quote scripture to his own purposes. And I think that's what Sessions has done here.

When Jesus was asked to distill all of scripture down to its essence, he said, "Love the Lord your God with all of heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love

your neighbor as yourself." All of the law, all the prophets, and all of the Bible hangs on those two demands. The point of scripture is to teach us to love God and to love our neighbors. So if you are using the Bible to harm your neighbor, you are using it wrong.

Most white evangelicals now use the Bible to justify their marriage to Donald Trump. How should the Bible be used by the Resistance?

I didn't want to write too much about Trump because I knew it would date the book. But I think his election is significant to the story of American religion. One thing I've done is to compare his presidency to the reign of Xerxes in the story of Esther. Xerxes was a misogynistic, fragile, pathetic racist who had been entrusted with this huge empire and relied on his advisors to tell him what to do, who took the smallest personal slight and blew it up into a huge crisis—there are so many parallels between his reign and the Trump administration. And ultimately, Xerxes was bested by a Jewish orphan and a few eunuchs.

There are stories in the Bible that can inform how we think about what's happening now. This one reminds me that beneath all the bluster, the emperor has no clothes. They're a bunch of bumbling, incompetent, frail people, and the Bible gives us permission to laugh at that.

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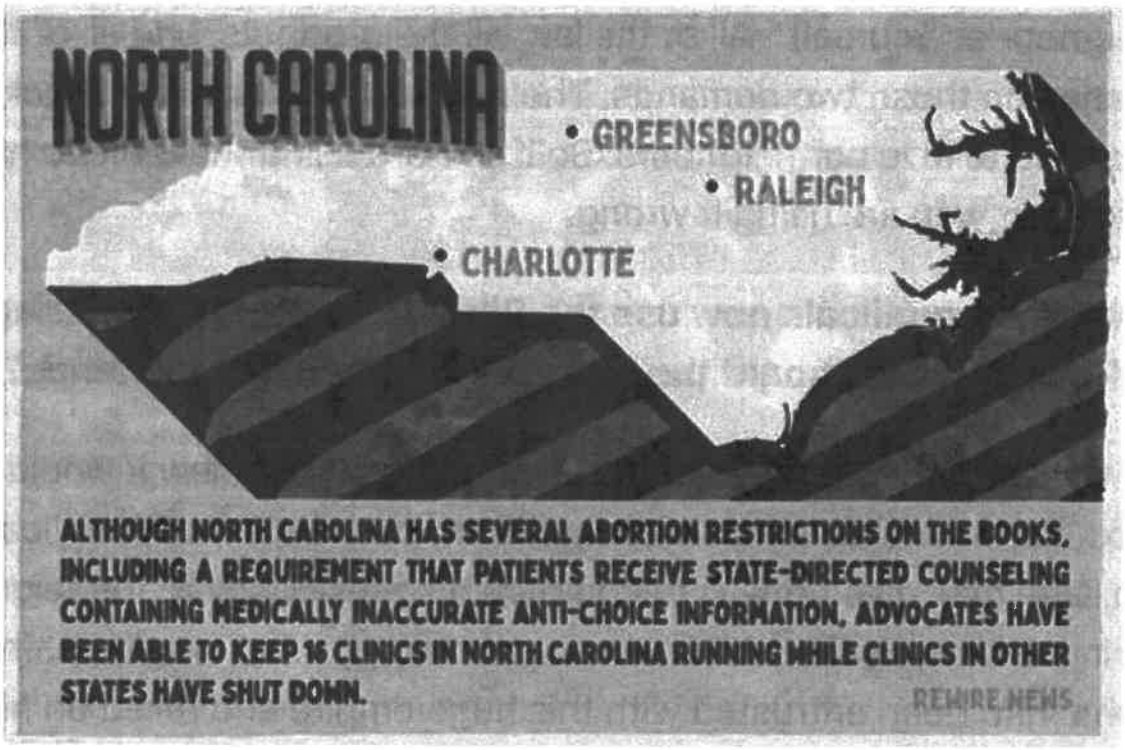

News Abortion

Abortion Patients Across the South Are Traveling to North Carolina for Care

Sep 16, 2:52pm Erin Heger

Controversy and Interpretation: A Review of *Biblical Womanhood*

Matthew Lee Anderson on November 5, 2012

Rachel Held Evans' new book, A Year of Biblical Womanhood, presses evangelicals on the right spot. But what she doesn't do is as important as what she does, and therein lies a tale.

I'm going to skip the backstory, as intriguing as it is, and go straight to the substance. Don't thank me–it's a long review. That said, Rachel has written a book meant to demonstrate how people "pick and choose" their verses when reading the Bible. As she puts it:

> For those who count the Bible as sacred, interpretation is not a matter of *whether* to pick and choose, but *how* to pick and choose. We are all selective. We all wrestle with how to interpret and apply the Bible to our lives. We all go to the text looking for something, and we all have a tendency to find it. So the question we have to ask ourselves is this: Are we reading with the prejudice of love or are we reading with the prejudices of judgment and power, self-interest and greed?

It's "biblical" she's worried about as an adjective, so she sets out to spend a year living as a "biblical woman." Again, I'll quote:

> This quest of mine required that I study every passage of Scripture that relates to women and learn how women around the world interpret and apply these passages to their lives. In addition, I would attempt to follow as many of the Bible's teachings regarding women as possible in my day-to-day life, sometimes taking them to their literal extreme.

Rachel Held Evans (Photo credit: Wikipedia)

The results? Well, if you really like earnest and authentic writing about a manufactured year, then this is the book for you. I can't wade through all the layers of meta at work in all this, honestly. I've spent the past week trying to figure out what it means, culturally, that we've reached the point where we're paying people to spend a year doing what amounts to performance art, so that they can write about our normal lives. I'm still not sure, but that Mayan prophesy thing makes a lot of sense to me these days.

Still, there is much more good here than Rachel's critics have allowed. For instance, her defense of singleness needs a broad audience. It had me cheering, but then these days any defense of singleness will. What's more, I was happy to see that she took down the deeply problematic idea that women owe men sex (even if she does reach Driscoll territory by tacitly sanctioning strip poles in the bedroom). Her writing about her husband, Dan, is really quite lovely. And this bit, well, it's *spot on*:

> The writers of ancient Scripture seemed to acknowledge what all women instinctively know— that our bodies change as we get older, as we bear children, when we get sick, and as we experience joy, pain, life, death, victory, heartache, and time. And frankly, the suggestion that men are too weak to handle these realities is as emasculating as it is unbiblical.

Precisely. I have been stunned by the willingness of Christian men and women to consider plastic surgery as they age in order to stay up with the young folks. It's a scandal, I hate it, and I am thrilled that Rachel has said it. I hope she says it again, louder and with even more passion.

I realize that right now you're waiting for the "And yet." And it's coming, I suppose. But the fact that it feels inevitable makes me sad. I don't want to pass off my praise as cursory or simply prefatory. The thing is, I mean it when I say there's more good than her critics make room for. In fact, while Rachel made the idea that women should be homemakers one of her central points of critique, I walked away impressed by how much work *home*making can be. It's not easy to make a place and then to keep it, and Rachel's efforts and acknowledged failures made me all the more grateful for those women who do.

One other point of concord, actually, that sets up the critique. I think Rachel has the right target in mind by challening our use of "biblical."

Take the issue of women working outside the home. The question of whether women are "permitted" actually presupposes a structure of the household that Rachel ably points out did not drop out of heaven. Were the home the center of economic gravity for a city, the question would be meaningless.

And lo and behold, so it once was. But I didn't learn that from Rachel, but from Nancy Pearcy, who makes a similar point. I wish, as a complementarian, that complementarians had a little more fear and trembling before enscribing current household realities with the authority of "biblical." In doing so, we potentially cut ourselves off from reimagining households and economics together, and how marriage might provide a more stable basis for both. And now I'm going to stop, because I might start sounding like Wendell Berry.

That to say, Rachel wants to put the difficulty of interpreting the Bible before us, to remind us of how hard it is. I remain uncertain of her view of

the Bible's authority—she says she loves it, and I believe her, but then I love Shakespeare and he's not the rule for faith and practice. But I continue to think that the question of interpretation that Rachel highlights needs to be disambiguated from the question of authority. Allow me to drag my own intellectual hero, Oliver O'Donovan, into all this:

> Behind the crisis of authority there lurks a crisis of Biblical interpretation, which means that even those who proclaim their respect for the Bible still cannot decide how it should be used in moral discussion. How may we induce the waters of Shiloah to flow gently to quench the thirst of Zion? Could it be that if we are ready to pay disciplined attention to the logic and meaning of moral language, its nuances, its varieties of function, its modes of expression, its implications, we might at last succeed in building a channel? I leave the question with you.

What of Rachel's solution? I'm tempted to say it might be worse than the disease she identifies. For instance, she says that she takes some texts to the "literal extreme." I know what she's getting at here—because I've read the book—but still find myself frustrated. Her "extremes" suffer from the problem of not being literal *at all*. The literal reading of a text isn't whatever happens to come to mind when your eyes cross the page. It's the *meaning* of the text set within the genre. One can read a metaphor literally, but that just means reading it...*as a metaphor*. To do otherwise to it is simply to read it badly or not read it at all.

In that way, her use of these terms actually sets evangelicals back a long ways. Seven or eight years ago, evangelicals—led by Kevin Vanhoozer—spent all sorts of time working out what they meant by Scripture and how to do theological interpretation. Most of that conversation went on outside the

context of the gender debates. And what happens at the theological level doesn't always make it to the churches. But it's as though none of that went on for Rachel's project, which gives the book an almost exclusively critical feel.

What's more, I understand her worry that we are smashing texts together to find a unity when one isn't apparent. Biblical exegetes have warned against that for years, so it's not exactly new. And frankly, her point about all looking for something in the text and wanting to find it there is a basic hermeneutical problem, too. I'm not so sure she's commending eisegeses so much as arguing for what the church fathers would have called a "rule of faith" for biblical interpretation. Augustine thought texts had to conform to charity, after all, which I take her to be (unintentionally) echoing when she says:

> Are we reading with the prejudice of love or are we reading with the prejudices of judgment and power, self-interest and greed?

My problem, though, is that the "prejudice of love" can end up being sentimentalized to the point of unhelpfulness and that it leaves the *how* of our "picking and choosing" arbitrary and capricious. The language of "pick and choose" even points in that direction, which is precisely why folks like me are going to resist it. She makes biblical arguments throughout the text —but are those arguments for a *biblical position* or are they merely *about the Bible*? It's hard to say, really, since once Rachel's deconstructive work is done whether we can say "biblical" at all anymore. And it really matters, because it is possible that we would adopt a biblical nihilism that allows the "prejudices of love" to be determined by our experience, primarily, which we then read back into the text.

Which is to say, even if we *do* read our experience back into the text, the

question is whether we *should*—or whether in doing so, our reading into is challenged and corrected by the text itself. At what point, in other words, is the standard of finding love and justice determined and decided by the text itself? Rachel points to the double-commandment to love God and neighbor, and that was Augustine's move too. But Augustine thought love needed ordering if it's to be any good, and Scripture was at every point a correction on us for doing so. But I think all this is ambiguous in Rachel's book, which is why interpreters have come away with the impression she's hollowed out the Bible despite her protestations to the contrary.

This is the longest review ever, but let me make two more points.

First, for someone who has staged a "Rally to Restore Unity," this is clearly not a book that is intended to pursue that. And that strikes me as tragic, for a lot of different reasons. I think Rachel Marie Stone's point about Rachel's conservative critics not practicing a charitable reading of the book is probably right. But that's a buzzsaw that destroys everything in its path, and Rachel's own project shows very little hermeneutical sympathy with the targets of her critique.

She didn't set out on her journey attempting to find out what her intellectual foes thought, or why they thought it. She set out from the conclusion that they were wrong and then read their texts accordingly. I mean, after she notes that Proverbs 31 is recorded by King Lemuel "as an oracle his mother taught him," she comments that this "totally upset my plan to cast the Proverbs 31 woman as an unrealistic archetype of the misogynistic imagination." That may be sarcasm, and I might have missed it. I was born in Canada, which means I don't *do* sarcasm. But it sure seems like she set out on her reading with her conclusions predetermined, which isn't exactly

modeling the sort of hermeneutical sympathy that we might admire.

I'll go one step further down this road. Rachel tends to lump "patriarchalists" together, such that John Piper is treated as equivalent to the Vision Forum. I realize distinctions don't sell well, but I am also aware—having read a number of feminists and feminist theologians—that painting intellectual movements with a broad brush can be a way of unfairly marginalizing people we might otherwise be impelled to listen to. And feminists have resisted having that done to them for years (I noted, for the record, that I described feminism with an overly broad brush in my own treatment on the subject). If I was to put Mary Daly and Rachel Held Evans next to each other and go on about "feminists" and what they think, you might think that I'm being uncharitable to one or both. It may be the case that John Piper and the Vision Forum have more in common than it seems (though I am skeptical), but from reading Rachel's book no one will be able to tell. And we all wonder why the Reformed community is so frustrated by how they've been treated?

All that to say, it saddens me that Rachel approached this subject as she did, in part because these are such weighty issues for all evangelicals to wrestle with and I worry that her approach has taken us backward on them, rather than forward. These questions deserve the care and labor that comes with making distinctions, weighing arguments, and reading very closely. I realize none of that sells well. It's *boring,* which is very near to death. But it seems obvious that this sort of project is liable to easy misinterpretation, and Rachel's hope of retreating into "irony" and protestations seems totally tone deaf. It feels–and I am happy to be wrong–as though her desire to provide levity has crossed into the flippant. (I was struck by how she included "deal with a crisis of faith" in a brief list of otherwise disconnected chores, as though such a profound moment could be one thing among many.) Rachel's readers can blame the critics for not

getting the irony—and I may have missed it too. If anyone's still reading, I'm sure they'll happily point it out. But at what point does knowing that a way of approaching an issue has a likelihood of causing a major controversy actually make the author culpable? Given the state of the evangelical world, this book is the equivalent of carrying a torch through a forest that hasn't seen rain in years. The odds of a fire are somewhere in the neighborhood of one.

Still, a word to those who I find myself in agreement with, my friends in the conservative evangelical world. The responsibility to pursue unity is on us all, and when I read the reviews it strikes me that the first and clearest impulse has been to make the boundaries of interpretation clear first and foremost. I understand the reasons why, I think, and the pastoral sense of responsibility to hold firm to sound doctrine and challenge those who seem to undercut it. I write at a blog named *Mere Orthodoxy,* after all, which I'm pretty sure makes me anathema to most people my age.

But such a duty should be conducted, I think, with something of a heavy heart and sorrow at the tragedy of a divided church. And maybe it could be done the day after a book comes out, or two days after, or three. It seems unfair to accuse writers of creating controversy in order to grab attention, a charge that I've seen here and there, when our most prominent outlets seem quick to press publish on their rebuttals. I understand the responsibility to respond and the freedom because these are public matters. But when such responses happen quickly as quickly as this one did, they only fuel the controversy. And that is something that I am increasingly wary of.

I really have gone on too long. It's late, and I am tired. Which means I have

officially reached "rant" mode. But I really will be done with this: I am increasingly saddened by the state of our Christian discourse online, including my own involvement in it.

I'm no Roman history expert, but I take it that it was their love of entertainment that led them to the Coliseum. It's a bloodthirsty idol, entertainment, for it knows no boundaries nor respects no persons. Over the past two years, Christians have engaged in a variety of controversies—which they have been doing for a long time, but which seem to be coming and going with a greater rapidity while being discussed at a significantly more shallow level. I think of Rob Bell's book, Jesus>Religion, Mark Driscoll's book, the Wilson dustup, and now this conflaguration. And there are, I think, others I am forgetting.

In each, the form of arguments have rarely been commendable and the level of discourse ennobling. We have increasingly, it seems to me, been taken by these controversies and fought for pageviews in the midst of them. And that has meant mostly fighting each other, clashing verbal swords and letting the digital blood flow in the streets. I know well that there is a time to disagree and to draw lines. And I also know that when the controversy is upon us, the drumbeats of war always beat the loudest, and it is usually in such moments that we should speak of peace. Perhaps we would all do well to wield our intellectual swords with a good deal more care.

Eight years ago, I thought that blogging held promise for the church to improve its dialogue and help minds think more Christianly. I now wonder whether that is true, or whether the intrinsically shallow nature actually induces an entertainment-oriented mindset that prefers the action of a controversy to silence or to the boring, mundane work of saying the same old thing. I see the tendency toward degrading speech in myself and have watched it come to the fore over the past year. And I am not at all certain it

should continue, either in me or in the rest of this small corner of the internet. Because if evangelicalism continues to be a movement that lives on controversy, then it is certain that it will someday die by it.

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Modern Theology and Biblical Criticism

C. S. Lewis

Modern Theology and Biblical Criticism*

C. S. Lewis**

This paper arose out of a conversation I had with the Principal[1] one night last term. A book of Alec Vidler's happened to be lying on the table and I expressed my reaction to the sort of theology it contained. My reaction was a hasty and ignorant one, produced with the freedom that comes after dinner.[2] One thing led to another and before we were done I was saying a good deal more than I had meant about the type of thought which, so far as I could gather, is now dominant in many theological colleges. He then said, 'I wish you would come and say all this to my young men.' He knew of course that I was extremely ignorant of the whole thing. But I think his idea was that you ought to know how a certain sort of theology strikes the outsider. Though I may have nothing but

*From C. S. Lewis, *Christian Reflections,* ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publisher, 1967). Used by permission of the publisher. We have retained the British spelling and punctuation of the original.

**Probably best known throughout the world as the author of *The Screw Tape Letters* or the equally famous *Allegory of Love,* C. S. Lewis is accepted as an authority in both religious and literary circles. Having served first Oxford and then Cambridge universities as professor of literature and having published over forty books on religious and literary subjects, Professor Lewis is eminently prepared to write an essay like this one commenting on some of the basic assumptions and judgments of manuscript historicity. The Editorial Board of *BYU Studies* is delighted to be able to print this essay with the gracious permission of the publisher. It is one of fourteen essays contained in *Christian Reflections,* a book well worth reading.

[1]The Principal of Westcott House, Cambridge, now the Bishop of Edinburgh (The Rt Rev Kenneth Carey).

[2]While the Bishop was out of the room, Lewis read 'The Sign at Cana' in Alec Vidler's *Windsor Sermons* (S.C.M. Press, 1958). The Bishop recalls that when he asked him what he thought about it, Lewis 'expressed himself very freely about the sermon and said that he thought that it was quite incredible that we should have had to wait nearly 2,000 years to be told by a theologian called Vidler that what the Church has always regarded as a miracle was, in fact, a parable!'

misunderstandings to lay before you, you ought to know that such misunderstandings exist. That sort of thing is easy to overlook inside one's own circle. The minds you daily meet have been conditioned by the same studies and prevalent opinions as your own. That may mislead you. For of course as priests it is the outsiders you will have to cope with. You exist in the long run for no other purpose. The proper study of shepherds is sheep, not (save accidentally) other shepherds. And woe to you if you do not evangelize. I am not trying to teach my grandmother. I am a sheep, telling shepherds what only a sheep can tell them. And now I start my bleating.

There are two sorts of outsiders: the uneducated, and those who are educated in some way but not in your way. How you are to deal with the first class, if you hold views like Loisy's or Schweitzer's or Bultmann's or Tillich's or even Alec Vidler's, I simply don't know. I see—and I'm told that you see—that it would hardly do to tell them what you really believe. A theology which denies the historicity of nearly everything in the Gospels to which Christian life and affections and thought have been fastened for nearly two millennia—which either denies the miraculous altogether or, more strangely, after swallowing the camel of the Resurrection strains at such gnats as the feeding of the multitudes—if offered to the uneducated man can produce only one or other of two effects. It will make him a Roman Catholic or an atheist. What you offer him he will not recognize as Christianity. If he holds to what he calls Christianity he will leave a church in which it is no longer taught and look for one where it is. If he agrees with your version he will no longer call himself a Christian and no longer come to church. In his crude, coarse way, he would respect you much more if you did the same. An experienced clergyman told me that most liberal priests, faced with this problem, have recalled from its grave the late medieval conception of two truths; a picture-truth which can be preached to the people, and an esoteric truth for use among the clergy. I shouldn't think you will enjoy this conception much when you have to put it into practice. I'm sure if I had to produce picture-truths to a parishioner in great anguish or under fierce temptation, and produce them with that seriousness and fervour which his condition demanded, while knowing all the time that I didn't exactly—only in some Pickwickian sense—believe them my-

self, I'd find my forehead getting red and damp and my collar getting tight. But that is your headache, not mine. You have, after all, a different sort of collar. I claim to belong to the second group of outsiders: educated, but not theologically educated. How one member of that group feels I must now try to tell you.

The undermining of the old orthodoxy has been mainly the work of divines engaged in New Testament criticism. The authority of experts in that discipline is the authority in deference to whom we are asked to give up a huge mass of beliefs shared in common by the early Church, the Fathers, the Middle Ages, the Reformers, and even the nineteenth century. I want to explain what it is that makes me sceptical about this authority. Ignorantly sceptical, as you will all too easily see. But the scepticism is the father of the ignorance. It is hard to persevere in a close study when you can work up no *prima facie* confidence in your teachers.

Questions Literary Judgment

First then, whatever these men may be as Biblical critics, I distrust them as critics. They seem to me to lack literary judgement, to be imperceptive about the very quality of the text they are reading. It sounds a strange charge to bring against men who have been steeped in those books all their lives. But that might be just the trouble. A man who has spent his youth and manhood in the minute study of New Testament texts and of other people's studies of them, whose literary experiences of those texts lacks any standard of comparison such as can only grow from a wide and deep and genial experience of literature in general, is, I should think, very likely to miss the obvious things about them. If he tells me that something in a Gospel is legend or romance, I want to know how many legends and romances he has read, how well his palate is trained in detecting them by the flavour; not how many years he has spent on that Gospel. But I had better turn to examples.

In what is already a very old commentary I read that the Fourth Gospel is regarded by one school as a 'spiritual romance', ' a poem not a history', to be judged by the same canons as Nathan's parable, the Book of Jonah, *Paradise Lost* 'or, more

exactly, *Pilgrim's Progress*'.[3] After a man has said that, why need one attend to anything else he says about any book in the world? Note that he regards *Pilgrim's Progress,* a story which professes to be a dream and flaunts its allegorical nature by every single proper name it uses, as the closest parallel. Note that the whole epic panoply of Milton goes for nothing. But even if we leave out the grosser absurdities and keep to *Jonah* the insensitiveness is crass—*Jonah*, a tale with as few even pretended historical attachments as *Job*, grotesque in incident and surely not without a distinct, though of course edifying, vein of typically Jewish humour. Then turn to John. Read the dialogues: that with the Samaritan woman at the well, or that which follows the healing of the man born blind. Look at its pictures: Jesus (if I may use the word) doodling with his finger in the dust; the unforgettable ην δε νυξ (xiii, 30). I have been reading poems, romances, vision-literature, legends, myths all my life. I know what they are like. I know that not one of them is like this. Of this text there are only two possible views. Either this is reportage—though it may no doubt contain errors—pretty close up to the facts; nearly as close as Boswell. Or else, some unknown writer in the second century, without known predecessors or successors, suddenly anticipated the whole technique of modern, novelistic, realistic narrative. If it is untrue, it must be narrative of that kind. The reader who doesn't see this has simply not learned to read. I would recommend him to read Auerbach.[4]

Here, from Bultmann's *Theology of the New Testament* (p. 30) is another: 'Observe in what unassimilated fashion the prediction of the parousia (Mk. viii, 38) follows upon the prediction of the passion (viii, 31).'[5] What can he mean? Unassimilated? Bultmann believes that predictions of the parousia are older than those of the passion. He therefore wants to believe—and no doubt does believe—that when they occur

[3]Lewis is quoting from an article, 'The Gospel According to St. John', by Walter Lock in *A New Commentary on Holy Scripture, including the Apocrypha,* ed. by Charles Gore, Henry Leighton Goudge, Alfred Guillaume (S.P.C.K., 1928), p. 241. Lock, in turn, is quoting from James Drummond's *An Inquiry into the Character and Authorship of the Fourth Gospel* (Williams and Norgate, 1903).

[4]Lewis means, I think, Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis*: *The Representation of Reality in Western Literature,* translated by Williard R. Trask (Princeton, 1953).

[5]Rudolph Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament,* translated by Kendrick Grobel, vol. I (S.C.M. Press, 1952), p. 30.

in the same passage some discrepancy or 'unassimilation' must be perceptible between them. But surely he foists this on the text with shocking lack of perception. Peter has confessed Jesus to be the Anointed One. That flash of glory is hardly over before the dark prophecy begins—that the Son of Man must suffer and die. Then this contrast is repeated. Peter, raised for a moment by his confession, makes his false step; the crushing rebuff 'Get thee behind me' follows. Then, across that momentary ruin which Peter (as so often) becomes, the voice of the Master, turning to the crowd, generalizes the moral. All His followers must take up the cross. This avoidance of suffering, this self-preservation, is not what life is really about. Then, more definitely still, the summons to martyrdom. You must stand to your tackling. If you disown Christ here and now, he will disown you later. Logically, emotionally, imaginatively, the sequence is perfect. Only a Bultmann could think otherwise.

Finally, from the same Bultmann: 'The personality of Jesus has no importance for the kerygma either of Paul or of John . . . Indeed the tradition of the earliest Church did not even unconsciously preserve a picture of his personality. Every attempt to reconstruct one remains a play of subjective imagination.'[6]

So there is no personality of Our Lord presented in the New Testament. Through what strange process has this learned German gone in order to make himself blind to what all men except him see? What evidence have we that he would recognize a personality if it were there? For it is Bultmann *contra mundum*. If anything whatever is common to all believers, and even to many unbelievers, it is the sense that in the Gospels they have met a personality. There are characters whom we know to be historical but of whom we do not feel that we have any personal knowledge—knowledge by acquaintance; such are Alexander, Attila, or William of Orange. There are others who make no claim to historical reality but whom, none the less, we know as we know real people: Falstaff, Uncle Toby, Mr. Pickwick. But there are only three characters who, claiming the first sort of reality, also actually have the second. And surely everyone knows who they are: Plato's Socrates, the Jesus of the Gospels, and Boswell's Johnson. Our acquaintance with

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 35.

them shows itself in a dozen ways. When we look into the Apocryphal gospels, we find ourselves constantly saying of this or that *logion*, 'No. It's a fine saying, but not His. That wasn't how He talked.'—just as we do with all pseudo-Johnsoniana. We are not in the least perturbed by the contrasts within each character: the union in Socrates of silly and scabrous titters about Greek pederasty with the highest mystical fervour and the homeliest good sense; in Johnson, of profound gravity and melancholy with that love of fun and nonsense which Boswell never understood though Fanny Burney did; in Jesus of peasant shrewdness, intolerable severity, and irresistible tenderness. So strong is the flavour of the personality that, even while He says things which, on any other assumption than that of Divine Incarnation in the fullest sense, would be appallingly arrogant, yet we—and many unbelievers too—accept Him at His own valuation when He says 'I am meek and lowly of heart.' Even those passages in the New Testament which superficially, and in intention, are most concerned with the Divine, and least with the Human Nature, bring us face to face with the personality. I am not sure that they don't do this more than any others. 'We beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of graciousness and reality . . . which we have looked upon and our hands have handled.' What is gained by trying to evade or dissipate this shattering immediacy of personal contact by talk about 'that significance which the early church found that it was impelled to attribute to the Master'? This hits us in the face. Not what they were impelled to do but what impelled them. I begin to fear that by *personality* Dr. Bultmann means what I should call impersonality: what you'd get in a D.N.B. article or an obituary or a Victorian *Life and Letters of Yeshua Bar-Yosef* in three volumes with photographs.

Reading Between the Lines?

That then is my first bleat. These men ask me to believe they can read between the lines of the old texts; the evidence is their obvious inability to read (in any sense worth discussing) the lines themselves. They claim to see fern-seed and can't see an elephant ten yards away in broad daylight.

Now for my second bleat. All theology of the liberal type involves at some point—and often involves throughout—the

claim that the real behaviour and purpose and teaching of Christ came very rapidly to be misunderstood and misrepresented by His followers, and has been recovered or exhumed only by modern scholars. Now long before I became interested in theology I had met this kind of theory elsewhere. The tradition of Jowett still dominated the study of ancient philosophy when I was reading Greats. One was brought up to believe that the real meaning of Plato had been misunderstood by Aristotle and wildly travestied by the neo-Platonists, only to be recovered by the moderns. When recovered, it turned out (most fortunately) that Plato had really all along been an English Hegelian, rather like T.H. Green. I have met it a third time in my own professional studies; every week a clever undergraduate, every quarter a dull American don, discovers for the first time what some Shakespearean play really meant. But in this third instance I am a privileged person. The revolution in thought and sentiment which has occurred in my own lifetime is so great that I belong, mentally, to Shakespeare's world far more than to that of these recent interpreters. I see—I feel it in my bones—I know beyond argument—that most of their interpretations are merely impossible; they involve a way of looking at things which was not known in 1914, much less in the Jacobean period. This daily confirms my suspicion of the same approach to Plato or the New Testament. The idea that any man or writer should be opaque to those who lived in the same culture, spoke the same language, shared the same habitual imagery and unconscious assumptions, and yet be transparent to those who have none of these advantages, is in my opinion preposterous. There is an *a priori* improbability in it which almost no argument and no evidence could counterbalance.

Thirdly, I find in these theologians a constant use of the principle that the miraculous does not occur. Thus any statement put into Our Lord's mouth by the old texts, which, if He had really made it, would constitute a prediction of the future, is taken to have been put in after the occurrence which it seemed to predict. This is very sensible if we start by knowing that inspired prediction can never occur. Similarly in general, the rejection as unhistorical of all passages which narrate miracles is sensible if we start by knowing that the miraculous in general never occurs. Now I do not here want to discuss

whether the miraculous is possible. I only want to point out that this is a purely philosophical question. Scholars, as scholars, speak on it with no more authority than anyone else. The canon 'If miraculous, unhistorical' is one they bring to their study of the texts, not one they have learned from it. If one is speaking of authority, the united authority of all the Biblical critics in the world counts here for nothing. On this they speak simply as men; men obviously influenced by, and perhaps insufficiently critical of, the spirit of the age they grew up in.

But my fourth bleat—which is also my loudest and longest —is still to come.

The Value of Theoretical Reconstruction

All this sort of criticism attempts to reconstruct the genesis of the texts it studies; what vanished documents each author used, when and where he wrote, with what purposes, under what influences—the whole *Sitz im Leben* of the text. This is done with immense erudition and great ingenuity. And at first sight it is very convincing. I think I should be convinced by it myself, but that I carry about with me a charm—the herb *moly* —against it. You must excuse me if I now speak for a while of myself. The value of what I say depends on its being first-hand evidence.

What forearms me against all these Reconstructions is the fact that I have seen it all from the other end of the stick. I have watched reviewers reconstructing the genesis of my own books in just this way.

Until you come to be reviewed yourself you would never believe how little of an ordinary review is taken up by criticism in the strict sense: by evaluation, praise, or censure, of the book actually written. Most of it is taken up with imaginary histories of the process by which you wrote it. The very terms which the reviewers use in praising or dispraising often imply such a history. They praise a passage as 'spontaneous' and censure another as 'laboured'; that is, they think they know that you wrote the one *currente calamo* and the other *invita Minerva*.

What the value of such reconstructions is I learned very early in my career. I had published a book of essays; and the one into which I had put most of my heart, the one I really cared about and in which I discharged a keen enthusiasm, was

on William Morris.[7] And in almost the first review I was told that this was obviously the only one in the book in which I had felt no interest. Now don't mistake. The critic was, I now believe, quite right in thinking it the worst essay in the book; at least everyone agreed with him. Where he was totally wrong was in his imaginary history of the causes which produced its dullness.

Well, this made me prick up my ears. Since then I have watched with some care similar imaginary histories both of my own books and of books by friends whose real history I knew. Reviewers, both friendly and hostile, will dash you off such histories with great confidence; will tell you what public events had directed the author's mind to this or that, what other authors had influenced him, what his over-all intention was, what sort of audience he principally addressed, why—and when—he did everything.

Now I must first record my impression; then, distinct from it, what I can say with certainty. My impression is that in the whole of my experience not one of these guesses has on any one point been right; that the method shows a record of 100 per cent failure. You would expect that by mere chance they would hit as often as they miss. But it is my impression that they do no such thing. I can't remember a single hit. But as I have not kept a careful record my mere impression may be mistaken. What I think I can say with certainty is that they are usually wrong.

And yet they would often sound—if you didn't know the truth—extremely convincing. Many reviewers said that the Ring in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* was suggested by the atom bomb. What could be more plausible? Here is a book published when everyone was preoccupied by that sinister invention; here in the center of the book is a weapon which it seems madness to throw away yet fatal to use. Yet in fact, the chronology of the book's composition makes the theory impossible. Only the other week a reviewer said that a fairy tale by my friend Roger Lancelyn Green was influenced by fairy tales of mine. Nothing could be more probable. I have an imaginary country with a beneficent lion in it: Green, one with a beneficent tiger. Green and I can be proved to read one another's

[7]Lewis's essay on 'William Morris' appears in *Rehabilitations and Other Essays* (Oxford, 1939).

works, to be indeed in various ways closely associated. The case for an affiliation is far stronger than many which we accept as conclusive when dead authors are concerned. But it's all untrue nevertheless. I know the genesis of that Tiger and that Lion and they are quite independent.[8]

Now this surely ought to give us pause. The reconstruction of the history of a text, when the text is ancient, sounds very convincing. But one is after all sailing by dead reckoning; the results cannot be checked by fact. In order to decide how reliable the method is, what more could you ask for than to be shown an instance where the same method is at work and we have facts to check it by? Well, that is what I have done. And we find, that when this check is available, the results are either always, or else nearly always, wrong. The 'assured results of modern scholarship', as to the way in which an old book was written, are 'assured', we may conclude, only because the men who knew the facts are dead and can't blow the gaff. The huge essays in my own field which reconstruct the history of *Piers Plowman* or *The Faerie Queen* are most unlikely to be anything but sheer illusions.[9]

Am I then venturing to compare every whipster who writes a review in a modern weekly with these great scholars who have devoted their whole lives to the detailed study of the New Testament? If the former are always wrong, does it follow that the latter must fare no better?

There are two answers to this. First, while I respect the learning of the great Biblical critics, I am not yet persuaded that their judgement is equally to be respected. But, secondly, consider with what overwhelming advantages the mere reviewers start. They reconstruct the history of a book written by someone whose mother-tongue is the same as theirs; a con-

[8]Lewis corrected this error in the following letter, 'Books for Children', in *The Times Literary Supplement* (28 November 1958), p. 689: 'Sir,—A review of Mr. R. L. Green's *Land of the Lord High Tiger* in your issue of 21 November spoke of myself (in passing) with so much kindness that I am reluctant to cavil at anything it contained: but in justice to Mr Green I must. The critic suggested that Mr Green's Tiger owed something to my fairy-tales. In reality this is not so and is chronologically impossible. The Tiger was an old inhabitant, and his land a familiar haunt, of Mr Green's imagination long before I began writing. There is a moral here for all of us as critics. I wonder how much *Quellenforschung* in our studies of older literature seems solid only because those who knew the facts are dead and cannot contradict it?'

[9]For a fuller treatment on book-reviewing, see Lewis's essay 'On Criticism' in his *Of Other Worlds: Essays and Stories*, ed. Walter Hooper, (Bles, 1966), pp. 43-58.

temporary, educated like themselves, living in something like the same mental and spiritual climate. They have everything to help them. The superiority in judgement and diligence which you are going to attribute to the Biblical critics will have to be almost superhuman if it is to offset the fact that they are everywhere faced with customs, language, race-characteristics, class-characteristics, a religious background, habits of composition, and basic assumptions, which no scholarship will ever enable any man now alive to know as surely and intimately and instinctively as the reviewer can know mine. And for the very same reason, remember, the Biblical critics, whatever reconstructions they devise, can never be crudely proved wrong. St Mark is dead. When they meet St Peter there will be more pressing matters to discuss.

You may say, of course, that such reviewers are foolish in so far as they guess how a sort of book they never wrote themselves was written by another. They assume that you wrote a story as they would try to write a story; the fact that they would so try, explains why they have not produced any stories. But are the Biblical critics in this way much better off. Dr Bultmann never wrote a gospel. Has the experience of his learned, specialized, and no doubt meritorious, life really given him any power of seeing into the minds of those long dead men who were caught up into what, on any view, must be regarded as the central religious experience of the whole human race? It is no incivility to say—he himself would admit—that he must in every way be divided from the evangelists by far more formidable barriers—spiritual as well as intellectual—than any that could exist between my reviewers and me.

Transitoriness of Results of Modern Scholarship

My picture of one layman's reaction—and I think it is not a rare one—would be incomplete without some account of the hopes he secretly cherishes and the naïve reflections with which he sometimes keeps his spirits up.

You must face the fact he does not expect the present school of theological thought to be everlasting. He thinks, perhaps wishfully thinks, that the whole thing may blow over. I have learned in other fields of study how transitory the 'assured results of modern scholarship' may be, how soon schol-

arship ceases to be modern. The confident treatment to which the New Testament is subjected is no longer applied to profane texts. There used to be English scholars who were prepared to cut up *Henry VI* between half a dozen authors and assign his share to each. We don't do that now. When I was a boy one would have been laughed at for supposing there had been a real Homer: the disintegrators seemed to have triumphed forever. But Homer seems to be creeping back. Even the belief of the ancient Greeks that the Mycenaeans were their ancestors and spoke Greek has been surprisingly supported. We may without disgrace believe in a historical Arthur. Everywhere, except in theology, there has been a vigorous growth of scepticism about scepticism itself. We can't keep ourselves from murmuring *multa renascentur quae jam cecidere.*

Nor can a man of my age ever forget how suddenly and completely the idealist philosophy of his youth fell. McTaggart, Green, Bosanquet, Bradley seemed enthroned forever; they went down as suddenly as the Bastille. And the interesting thing is that while I lived under that dynasty I felt various difficulties and objections which I never dared to express. They were so frightfully obvious that I felt sure they must be mere misunderstandings: the great men could not have made such very elementary mistakes as those which my objections implied. But very similar objections—though put, no doubt, far more cogently than I could have put them—were among the criticisms which finally prevailed. They would now be the stock answers to English Hegelianism. If anyone present tonight has felt the same shy and tentative doubts about the great Biblical critics, perhaps he need not feel quite certain that they are only his stupidity. They may have a future he little dreams of.

We derive a little comfort, too, from our mathematical colleagues. When a critic reconstructs the genesis of a text he usually has to use what may be called linked hypotheses. Thus Bultmann says that Peter's confession is 'an Easter-story projected backward into Jesus' life-time' (p. 26, *op. cit.*). The first hypothesis is that Peter made no such confession. Then, granting that, there is a second hypothesis as to how the false story of his having done so might have grown up. Now let us suppose—what I am far from granting—that the first hypothesis

has a probability of 90 per cent. Let us assume that the second hypothesis also has a probability of 90 per cent. But the two together don't still have 90 per cent, for the second comes in only on the assumption of the first. You have not A plus B; you have a complex AB. And the mathematicians tell me that AB has only an 81 per cent probability. I'm not good enough at arithmetic to work it out, but you see that if, in a complex reconstruction, you go on thus superinducing hypothesis, you will in the end get a complex in which, though each hypothesis by itself has in a sense a high probability, the whole has almost none.

You must not, however, paint the picture too black. We are not fundamentalists. We think that different elements in this sort of theology have different degrees of strength. The nearer it sticks to mere textual criticism, of the old sort, Lachmann's sort, the more we are disposed to believe in it. And of course we agree that passages almost verbally identical cannot be independent. It is as we glide away from this into reconstructions of a subtler and more ambitious kind that our faith in the method wavers; and our faith in Christianity is proportionately corroborated. The sort of statement that arouses our deepest scepticism is the statement that something in a Gospel cannot be historical because it shows a theology or an ecclesiology too developed for so early a date. For this implies that we know, first of all, that there was any development in the matter, and secondly, how quickly it proceeded. It even implies an extraordinary homogeneity and continuity of development: implicitly denies that anyone could greatly have anticipated anyone else. This seems to involve knowing about a number of long dead people—for the early Christians were, after all, people—things of which I believe few of us could have given an accurate account if we had lived among them; all the forward and backward surge of discussion, preaching, and individual religious experience. I could not speak with similar confidence about the circle I have chiefly lived in myself. I could not describe the history even of my own thought as confidently as these men describe the history of the early Church's mind. And I am perfectly certain no one else could. Suppose a future scholar knew that I abandoned Christianity in my teens, and that, also in my teens, I went to an atheist tutor. Would not they seem far better evidence than most of what we

have about the development of Christian theology in the first two centuries? Would he not conclude that my apostasy was due to the tutor? And then reject as 'backward projection' any story which represented me as an atheist before I went to that tutor? Yet he would be wrong. I am sorry to have become once more autobiographical. But reflection on the extreme improbability of his own life—by historical standards—seems to me a profitable exercise for everyone. It encourages a due agnosticism.

For agnosticism is, in a sense, what I am preaching. I do not wish to reduce the sceptical element in your minds. I am only suggesting that it need not be reserved exclusively for the New Testament and the Creeds. Try doubting something else.

Such scepticism might, I think, begin at the very beginning with the thought which underlies the whole demythology of our time. It was put long ago by Tyrrell. As man progresses he revolts against 'earlier and inadequate expressions of the religious idea . . . Taken literally, and not symbolically, they do not meet his need. And as long as he demands to picture to himself distinctly the term and satisfaction of that need he is doomed to doubt, for his picturings will necessarily be drawn from the world of his present experience.'[10]

In one way of course Tyrrell was saying nothing new. The Negative Theology of Pseudo-Dionysius had said as much, but it drew no such conclusions as Tyrrell. Perhaps this is because the older tradition found our conceptions inadequate to God whereas Tyrrell finds it inadequate to 'the religious idea'. He doesn't say whose idea. But I am afraid he means Man's idea. We, being men, know what we think: and we find the doctrines of the Resurrection, the Ascension, and the Second Coming inadequate to our thoughts. But supposing these things were the expressions of God's thought?

It might still be true that 'taken literally and not symbolically' they are inadequate. From which the conclusion commonly drawn is that they must be taken symbolically, not literally; that is, wholly symbolically. All the details are equally symbolical and analogical.

But surely there is a flaw here. The argument runs like this. All the details are derived from our present experience; but the reality transcends our experience: therefore all the de-

[10]George Tyrrell, 'The Apocalyptic Vision of Christ' in *Christianity at the Cross-Roads* (Longmans, Green & Co., 1909), p. 125.

tails are wholly and equally symbolical. But suppose a dog were trying to form a conception of human life. All the details in its picture would be derived from canine experience. Therefore all that the dog imagined could, at best, be only analogically true of human life. The conclusion is false. If the dog visualized our scientific researchers in terms of ratting, this would be analogical; but if it thought that eating could be predicated of humans only in an analogical sense, the dog would be wrong. In fact if a dog could, *per impossible,* be plunged for a day into human life, it would be hardly more surprised by hitherto unimagined differences than by hitherto unsuspected similarities. A reverent dog would be shocked. A modernist dog, distrusting the whole experience, would ask to be taken to the vet.

But the dog can't get into human life. Consequently, though it can be sure that its best ideas of human life are full of analogy and symbol, it could never point to any one detail and say, 'This is entirely symbolic.' You cannot know that everything in the representation of a thing is symbolical unless you have independent access to the thing and can compare it with the representation. Dr. Tyrrell can tell that the story of the Ascension is inadequate to his religious idea, because he knows his own ideas and can compare it with the story. But how if we are asking about a transcendent, objective reality to which the story is our sole access? 'We know not—oh we know not.' But then we must take our ignorance seriously.

Of course if 'taken literally and not symbolically' means 'taken in terms of mere physics', then this story is not even a religious story. Motion away from the earth—which is what Ascension physically means—would not in itself be an event of spiritual significance. Therefore, you argue, the spiritual reality can have nothing but an analogical connection with the story of an ascent. For the union of God with God and of Man with God—man can have nothing to do with space. Who told you this? What you really mean is that we can't see how it could possibly have anything to do with it. That is a quite different proposition. When I know as I am known I shall be able to tell which parts of the story were purely symbolical and which, if any, were not; shall see how the transcendent reality either excludes and repels locality, or how unimaginably

it assimilates and loads it with significance. Had we not better wait?

Such are the reactions of one bleating layman to Modern Theology. It is right you should hear them. You will not perhaps hear them very often again. Your parishioners will not often speak to you quite frankly. Once the layman was anxious to hide the fact that he believed so much less than the Vicar: he now tends to hide the fact that he believes so much more. Missionary to the priests of one's own church is an embarrassing rôle; though I have a horrid feeling that if such mission work is not soon undertaken the future history of the Church of England is likely to be short.

Approaching the Bible

Posted on August 27, 2019

How can a two to three thousand year old book (with some portions likely older) speak to a 21st century Western audience?

Where is the relevance?

While some things remain constant (e.g. the draws of selfish desires, money, sex, and power), many of our challenges and cultural norms are quite different. Among other things, animal sacrifice is not a going concern.

Many in the church strive to make the stories relevant to draw in the unchurched. I recall a sermon many years ago where we were "taught" that one value of the story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego was to help us with marital and relationship issues ... yes really. No mention of the lesson to be faithful to God, even when your society punishes this loyalty (definitely relevant today) nor the lesson to be faithful even if there is no miraculous intervention. The response of the three men to the king is worth pondering.

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to him, "King Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it, and he will deliver us from Your Majesty's hand. But even if he does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or

worship the image of gold you have set up." Dan 3:16-18 NIV

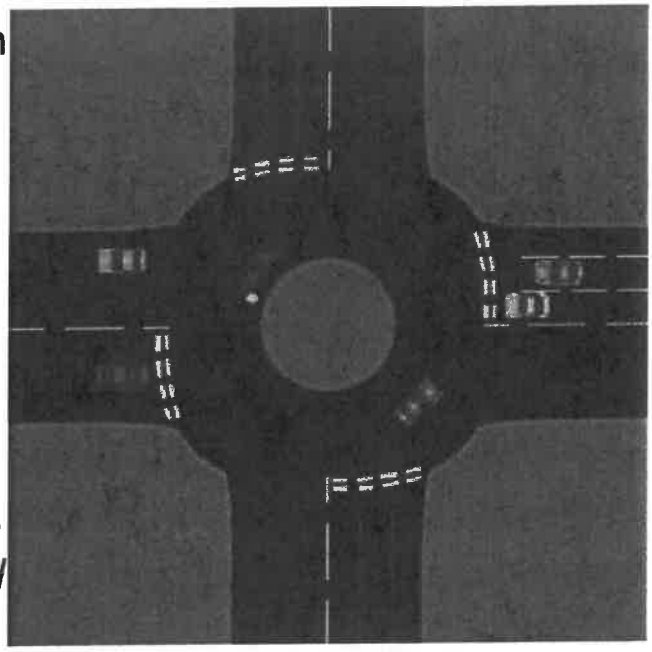
God is able ... but even in the Bible, such miraculous intervention is not the rule. After all, faithful prophets were killed, and many of the early apostles and disciples of Jesus as well. There are many relevant lessons for us today, but a connection to marital fidelity and relationship is rather a stretch.

There are many wrong ways to seek relevance. What are healthier approaches?

Creation care provides a case study. Douglas and Jonathan Moo' recent book ***Creation Care: A Biblical Theology of the Natural World*** is not a science book, it is a Bible book and a theology book. But what does the Bible have to do with creation care? This was not an issue of concern when the various texts were written, the books compiled, and the preserved. In the second chapter of the book (and first video episode) Doug and Jonathan look at thinking biblically and theologically about creation. The first episode, by the way, is available on YouTube – see the link at the end of this post. Doug Moo begins to address the "How" question – How do we use Scripture to address creation care? – about 13 minutes into the episode. The link below starts at this point because it is the focus of today's post, although the entire episode is worth watching.

Biblical theology uses four pillars to build a bridge to connect the world of the texts to our world today. I paraphrase these according to my understanding from the Moo's discussion. First, it accurately and carefully describes the teaching of the bible within its own categories. Careful biblical study is foundational. Second, it must be prescriptive – thinking about what the text means not only what it meant. Third, it must be inclusive of all of scripture, not picking and choosing favored books or worse yet verses to proof-text a result. Finally, it must be canonical – appropriately realizing, for

example, that the theology of creation in the Old Testament is presupposed in the New.



In the video and book Doug Moo uses an example of a roundabout to illustrate a healthy approach to scripture (image to the right from Wikipedia). Our approach to scripture is not a one lane, one way bridge with information flowing from the text to us. Rather we bring our concerns from our world to the text – and this includes both questions and information. *"The road from the text to our own world is not an uninterrupted superhighway. In reality our reading of the text is influenced by factors from our own world. Traffic from several secondary roads deeds into the highway leading from text to application. We may identify three general kinds of traffic that will influence our biblical theology of creation care: historical and systematic theology, culture, and science."* (p. 37)

We should not easily dismiss the work of our predecessors in the church. This is where historical and systematic theology comes into the picture. It should not define the end result, our ultimate conclusions, but it must be wrestled with and considered. Doug concludes: *"Of course, we must not allow the categories of historical or systematic theology to dictate how we read the Bible – the Bible must have the last word. Sometimes our study of the Bible will force us to revise historical or systematic categories, but our work is nevertheless influenced by them and would be impoverished and less helpful without them."* (p. 38) It is refreshing to see this stated explicitly. Historical and systematic theology arose with the context of a time and culture. Sometimes assumptions are made and conclusions drawn

that arise from that culture rather than from the message of scripture. For example, and one I've been thinking about quite a lot over the years, the concept of the Fall may well be influenced by the culture in which it was articulated (e.g. Augustine's and Calvin's). It is not unfaithful to or dismissive of scripture to revisit the topic.

Each day and age brings at least some different concerns and question. Racial reconciliation, the nature of personhood, the role of women, and creation care are all questions that we bring to the text from our 21st century Western culture. It is important that cultural input does not overwhelm and reshape the gospel and the biblical message. But it is important to realize that there is no such thing as objective neutrality. Cultural issues provide important new input that can enhance our understanding, among other things, by causing us to focus more carefully on the questions they raise. As Doug writes: *"Shifts in culture can illuminate assumptions that we have unconsciously adopted and that do not, in fact, align with a genuinely biblical worldview. To borrow from language we used earlier, biblical theologians will sometimes need to resist cultural developments, while at other times these developments may help us to recover a biblical perspective that has be lost or unduly minimized."* (p. 39-40) The change in abortion laws have cause much deeper theological thinking about the beginning of personhood – raising questions that were not commonly raised before the 70's (a personal example Doug raises in the video). It has also caused many to consider the role that culture rather than divine precept plays in the assumed roles (and presumed abilities) of men and women.

Science in particular is a valid contributor to many (but not all) discussions in our day and age. Scientists study God's creation whether they acknowledge this or not. *"Truth discovered by scientists in the natural world has some bearing on the truth we find in Scripture. Science in this sense is*

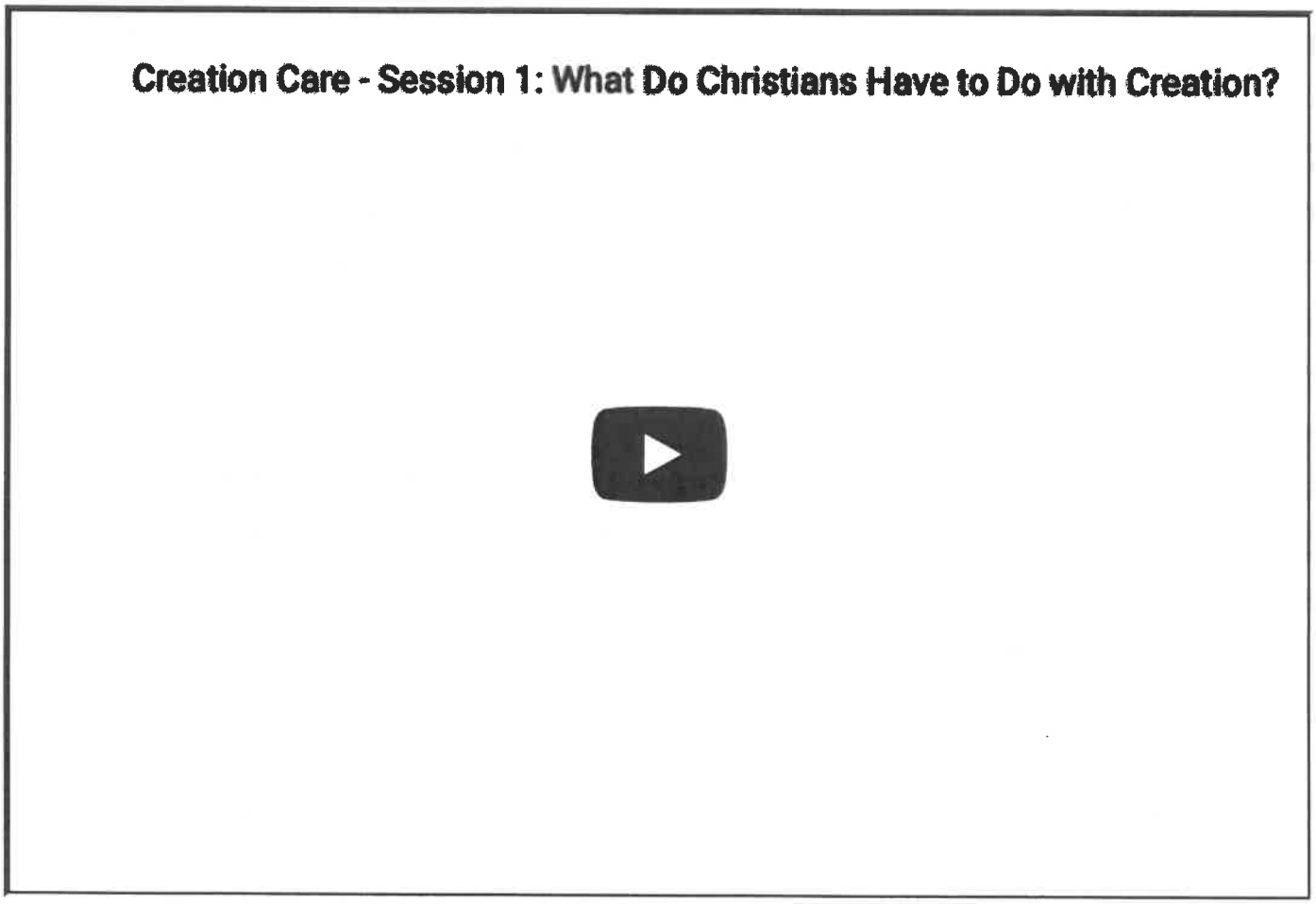
no alien dialogue partner, since the scientist studies the very world that God has made intelligible in the first place. Of course, the matter is complicated by the inevitable uncertainties and sometimes sharp debates about just what "science" is currently telling us. The issue, however, is not scientific theory vs. biblical fact, but, rather, the interpretations of scientists with the interpretations of biblical scholars and theologians." (p. 40-41) I expect that there will be some places where Doug and I would disagree when it comes to science and Christian faith – but I have long held and continue to hold the opinion that the church needs open dialogue and interaction between Christians who are scientist and Christians who are biblical scholars and theologians. Only then will we reach robust and faithful conclusions. When it comes to creation care the potential consequences of a head-in-the-sand approach are too great.

How should we approach questions that are not directly addressed in Scripture?

What is the appropriate relationship between culture and biblical theology?

If you wish to contact me directly you may do so at rjs4mail[at]att.net.

You may also comment on ***Approaching the Bible*** at ***Jesus Creed***.


Creation Care - Session 1: What Do Christians Have to Do with Creation?

The Weight of Glory

by C.S. Lewis

Preached originally as a sermon in the Church of St Mary the Virgin, Oxford, on June 8, 1942: published in THEOLOGY, *November, 1941, and by the S.P.C.K, 1942*

If you asked twenty good men to-day what they thought the highest of the virtues, nineteen of them would reply, Unselfishness. But if you asked almost any of the great Christians of old he would have replied, Love. You see what has happened? A negative term has been substituted for a positive, and this is of more than philological importance. The negative ideal of Unselfishness carries with it the suggestion not primarily of securing good things for others, but of going without them ourselves, as if our abstinence and not their happiness was the important point. I do not think this is the Christian virtue of Love. The New Testament has lots to say about self-denial, but not about self-denial as an end in itself. We are told to deny ourselves and to take up our crosses in order that we may follow Christ; and nearly every description of what we shall ultimately find if we do so contains an appeal to desire. If there lurks in most modern minds the notion that to desire our own good and earnestly to hope for the enjoyment of it is a bad thing, I submit that this notion has crept in from Kant and the Stoics and is no part of the Christian faith. Indeed, if we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that Our Lord finds our desires, not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.

We must not be troubled by unbelievers when they say that this promise of reward makes the Christian life a mercenary affair. There are different kinds of reward. There is the reward which has no *natural connexion* with the things you do to earn it, and is quite foreign to the desires that ought to accompany those things. Money is not the natural reward of love; that is why we call a man mercenary if he marries a woman for the sake of her money. But marriage is the proper reward for a real lover, and he is not mercenary for desiring it. A general who fights well in order to get a peerage is mercenary; a general who fights for victory is not, victory being the

proper reward of battle as marriage is the proper reward of love. The proper rewards are not simply tacked on to the activity for which they are given, but are the activity itself in consummation. There is also a third case, which is more complicated. An enjoyment of Greek poetry is certainly a proper, and not a mercenary, reward for learning Greek; but only those who have reached the stage of enjoying Greek poetry can tell from their own experience that this is so. The schoolboy beginning Greek grammar cannot look forward to his adult enjoyment of Sophocles as a lover looks forward to marriage or a general to victory. He has to begin by working for marks, or to escape punishment, or to please his parents, or, at best, in the hope of a future good which he cannot at present imagine or desire. His position, therefore, bears a certain resemblance to that of the mercenary; the reward he is going to get will, in actual fact, be a natural or proper reward, but he will not know that till he has got it. Of course, he gets it gradually; enjoyment creeps in upon the mere drudgery, and nobody could point to a day or an hour when the one ceased and the other began. But it is just in so far as he approaches the reward that be becomes able to desire it for its own sake; indeed, the power of so desiring it is itself a preliminary reward.

The Christian, in relation to heaven, is in much the same position as this schoolboy. Those who have attained everlasting life in the vision of God doubtless know very well that it is no mere bribe, but the very consummation of their earthly discipleship; but we who have not yet attained it cannot know this in the same way, and cannot even begin to know it at all except by continuing to obey and finding the first reward of our obedience in our increasing power to desire the ultimate reward. Just in proportion as the desire grows, our fear lest it should be a mercenary desire will die away and finally be recognized as an absurdity. But probably this will not, for most of us, happen in a day; poetry replaces grammar, gospel replaces law, longing transforms obedience, as gradually as the tide lifts a grounded ship.

But there is one other important similarity between the schoolboy and ourselves. If he is an imaginative boy he will, quite probably, be revelling in the English poets and romancers suitable to his age some time before he begins to suspect that Greek grammar is going to lead him to more and more enjoyments of this same sort. He may even be neglecting his Greek to read Shelley and Swinburne in secret. In other words, the desire which Greek is really going to gratify already exists in him and is attached to objects which seem to him quite unconnected with Xenophon and the verbs in μι. Now, if we are made for heaven, the desire for our proper place will be already in us, but not yet attached to the true object, and will even appear as the rival of that object. And this, I think, is just what we find. No doubt there is one point in which my analogy of the schoolboy breaks down. The English poetry which he reads when he ought to be doing Greek exercises may be just as good as the Greek poetry to which the exercises are leading him, so that in fixing on Milton instead of journeying on to Aeschylus his desire is not embracing a

false object. But our case is very different. If a transtemporal, transfinite good is our real destiny, then any other good on which our desire fixes must be in some degree fallacious, must bear at best only a symbolical relation to what will truly satisfy.

In speaking of this desire for our own far-off country, which we find in ourselves even now, I feel a certain shyness. I am almost committing an indecency. I am trying to rip open the inconsolable secret in each one of you—the secret which hurts so much that you take your revenge on it by calling it names like Nostalgia and Romanticism and Adolescence; the secret also which pierces with such sweetness that when, in very intimate conversation, the mention of it becomes imminent, we grow awkward and affect to laugh at ourselves; the secret we cannot hide and cannot tell, though we desire to do both. We cannot tell it because it is a desire for something that has never actually appeared in our experience. We cannot hide it because our experience is constantly suggesting it, and we betray ourselves like lovers at the mention of a name. Our commonest expedient is to call it beauty and behave as if that had settled the matter. Wordsworth's expedient was to identify it with certain moments in his own past. But all this is a cheat. If Wordsworth had gone back to those moments in the past, he would not have found the thing itself, but only the reminder of it; what he remembered would turn out to be itself a remembering. The books or the music in which we thought the beauty was located will betray us if we trust to them; it was not *in* them, it only came *through* them, and what came through them was longing. These things—the beauty, the memory of our own past—are good images of what we really desire; but if they are mistaken for the thing itself they turn into dumb idols, breaking the hearts of their worshippers. For they are not the thing itself; they are only the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have never yet visited. Do you think I am trying to weave a spell? Perhaps I am; but remember your fairy tales. Spells are used for breaking enchantments as well as for inducing them. And you and I have need of the strongest spell that can be found to wake us from the evil enchantment of worldliness which has been laid upon us for nearly a hundred years. Almost our whole education has been directed to silencing this shy, persistent, inner voice; almost all our modem philosophies have been devised to convince us that the good of man is to be found on this earth. And yet it is a remarkable thing that such philosophies of Progress or Creative Evolution themselves bear reluctant witness to the truth that our real goal is elsewhere. When they want to convince you that earth is your home, notice how they set about it. They begin by trying to persuade you that earth can be made into heaven, thus giving a sop to your sense of exile in earth as it is. Next, they tell you that this fortunate event is still a good way off in the future, thus giving a sop to your knowledge that the fatherland is not here and now. Finally, lest your longing for the transtemporal should awake and spoil the whole affair, they use any rhetoric that comes to hand to keep out of your mind the recollection that even if all the happiness they promised

could come to man on earth, yet still each generation would lose it by death, including the last generation of all, and the whole story would be nothing, not even a story, for ever and ever. Hence all the nonsense that Mr. Shaw puts into the final speech of Lilith, and Bergson's remark that the *élan vital* is capable of surmounting all obstacles, perhaps even death—as if we could believe that any social or biological development on this planet will delay the senility of the sun or reverse the second law of thermodynamics.

Do what they will, then, we remain conscious of a desire which no natural happiness will satisfy. But is there any reason to suppose that reality offers any satisfaction to it? "Nor does the being hungry prove that we have bread." But I think it may be urged that this misses the point. A man's physical hunger does not prove that that man will get any bread; he may die of starvation on a raft in the Atlantic. But surely a man's hunger does prove that he comes of a race which repairs its body by eating and inhabits a world where eatable substances exist. In the same way, though I do not believe (I wish I did) that my desire for Paradise proves that I shall enjoy it, I think it a pretty good indication that such a thing exists and that some men will. A man may love a woman and not win her; but it would be very odd if the phenomenon called "falling in love" occurred in a sexless world.

Here, then, is the desire, still wandering and uncertain of its object and still largely unable to see that object in the direction where it really lies. Our sacred books give us some account of the object. It is, of course, a symbolical account. Heaven is, by definition, outside our experience, but all intelligible descriptions must be of things within our experience. The scriptural picture of heaven is therefore just as symbolical as the picture which our desire, unaided, invents for itself; heaven is not really full of jewelry any more than it is really the beauty of Nature, or a fine piece of music. The difference is that the scriptural imagery has authority. It comes to us from writers who were closer to God than we, and it has stood the test of Christian experience down the centuries. The natural appeal of this authoritative imagery is to me, at first, very small. At first sight it chills, rather than awakes, my desire. And that is just what I ought to expect. If Christianity could tell me no more of the far-off land than my own temperament led me to surmise already, then Christianity would be no higher than myself. If it has more to give me, I must expect it to be less immediately attractive than "my own stuff." Sophocles at first seems dull and cold to the boy who has only reached Shelley. If our religion is something objective, then we must never avert our eyes from those elements in it which seem puzzling or repellent; for it will be precisely the puzzling or the repellent which conceals what we do not yet know and need to know.

The promises of Scripture may very roughly be reduced to five heads. It is promised, firstly, that we shall be with Christ; secondly, that we shall be like Him; thirdly, with an enormous wealth of imagery, that we shall have "glory"; fourthly, that we shall, in some sense, be fed or feasted or entertained; and, finally,

that we shall have some sort of official position in the universe—ruling cities, judging angels, being pillars of God's temple. The first question I ask about these promises is: "Why any of them except the first?" Can anything be added to the conception of being with Christ? For it must be true, as an old writer says, that he who has God and everything else has no more than he who has God only. I think the answer turns again on the nature of symbols. For though it may escape our notice at first glance, yet it is true that any conception of being with Christ which most of us can now form will be not very much less symbolical than the other promises; for it will smuggle in ideas of proximity in space and loving conversation as we now understand conversation, and it will probably concentrate on the humanity of Christ to the exclusion of His deity. And, in fact, we find that those Christians who attend solely to this first promise always do fill it up with very earthly imagery indeed—in fact, with hymeneal or erotic imagery. I am not for a moment condemning such imagery. I heartily wish I could enter into it more deeply than I do, and pray that I yet shall. But my point is that this also is only a symbol, like the reality in some respects, but unlike it in others, and therefore needs correction from the different symbols in the other promises. The variation of the promises does not mean that anything other than God will be our ultimate bliss; but because God is more than a Person, and lest we should imagine the joy of His presence too exclusively in terms of our present poor experience of personal love, with all its narrowness and strain and monotony, a dozen changing images, correcting and relieving each other, are supplied.

I turn next to the idea of glory. There is no getting away from the fact that this idea is very prominent in the New Testament and in early Christian writings. Salvation is constantly associated with palms, crowns, white robes, thrones, and splendour like the sun and stars. All this makes no immediate appeal to me at all, and in that respect I fancy I am a typical modern. Glory suggests two ideas to me, of which one seems wicked and the other ridiculous. Either glory means to me fame, or it means luminosity. As for the first, since to be famous means to be better known than other people, the desire for fame appears to me as a competitive passion and therefore of hell rather than heaven. As for the second, who wishes to become a kind of living electric light bulb?

When I began to look into this matter I was stocked to find such different Christians as Milton, Johnson and Thomas Aquinas taking heavenly glory quite frankly in the sense of fame or good report. But not fame conferred by our fellow creatures—fame with God, approval or (I might say) "appreciation' by God. And then, when I had thought it over, I saw that this view was scriptural; nothing can eliminate from the parable the divine *accolade,* "Well done, thou good and faithful servant." With that, a good deal of what I had been thinking all my life fell down like a house of cards. I suddenly remembered that no one can enter heaven except as a child; and nothing is so obvious in a child—not in a conceited child, but in a good child—as its great and undisguised

pleasure in being praised. Not only in a child, either, but even in a dog or a horse. Apparently what I had mistaken for humility had, all these years. prevented me from understanding what is in fact the humblest, the most childlike, the most creaturely of pleasures—nay, the specific pleasure of the inferior: the pleasure a beast before men, a child before its father, a pupil before his teacher, a creature before its Creator. I am not forgetting how horribly this most innocent desire is parodied in our human ambitions, or how very quickly, in my own experience, the lawful pleasure of praise from those whom it was my duty to please turns into the deadly poison of self-admiration. But I thought I could detect a moment—a very, very short moment—before this happened, during which the satisfaction of having pleased those whom I rightly loved and rightly feared was pure. And that is enough to raise our thoughts to what may happen when the redeemed soul, beyond all hope and nearly beyond belief, learns at last that she has pleased Him whom she was created to please. There will be no room for vanity then. She will be free from the miserable illusion that it is her doing. With no taint of what we should now call self-approval she will most innocently rejoice in the thing that God has made her to be, and the moment which heals her old inferiority complex for ever will also drown her pride deeper than Prospero's book. Perfect humility dispenses with modesty. If God is satisfied with the work, the work may be satisfied with itself; "it is not for her to bandy compliments with her Sovereign." I can imagine someone saying that he dislikes my idea of heaven as a place where we are patted on the back. But proud misunderstanding is behind that dislike. In the end that Face which is the delight or the terror of the universe must be turned upon each of us either with one expression or with the other, either conferring glory inexpressible or inflicting shame that can never be cured or disguised. I read in a periodical the other day that the fundamental thing is how we think of God. By God Himself, it is not! How God thinks of us is not only more important, but infinitely more important. Indeed, how we think of Him is of no importance except in so far as it is related to how He thinks of us. It is written that we shall "stand before" Him, shall appear, shall be inspected. The promise of glory is the promise, almost incredible and only possible by the work of Christ, that some of us, that any of us who really chooses, shall actually survive that examination, shall find approval, shall please God. To please God...to be a real ingredient in the divine happiness...to be loved by God, not merely pitied, but delighted in as an artist delights in his work or a father in a son—it seems impossible, a weight or burden of glory which our thoughts can hardly sustain. But so it is.

And now notice what is happening. If I had rejected the authoritative and scriptural image of glory and stuck obstinately to the vague desire which was, at the outset, my only pointer to heaven, I could have seen no connexion at all between that desire and the Christian promise. But now, having followed up what seemed puzzling and repellent in the sacred books, I find, to my great surprise, looking back, that the connexion is perfectly clear. Glory, as Christianity

teaches me to hope for it, turns out to satisfy my original desire and indeed to reveal an element in that desire which I had not noticed. By ceasing for a moment to consider my own wants I have begun to learn better what I really wanted. When I attempted, a few minutes ago, to describe our spiritual longings, I was omitting one of their most curious characteristics. We usually notice it just as the moment of vision dies away, as the music ends or as the landscape loses the celestial light. What we feel then has been well described by Keats as "the journey homeward to habitual self." You know what I mean. For a few minutes we have had the illusion of belonging to that world. Now we wake to find that it is no such thing. We have been mere spectators. Beauty has smiled, but not to welcome us; her face was turned in our direction, but not to see us. We have not been accepted, welcomed, or taken into the dance. We may go when we please, we may stay if we can: "Nobody marks us." A scientist may reply that since most of the things we call beautiful are inanimate, it is not very surprising that they take no notice of us. That, of course, is true. It is not the physical objects that I am speaking of, but that indescribable something of which they become for a moment the messengers. And part of the bitterness which mixes with the sweetness of that message is due to the fact that it so seldom seems to be a message intended for us but rather something we have overheard. By bitterness I mean pain, not resentment. We should hardly dare to ask that any notice be taken of ourselves. But we pine. The sense that in this universe we are treated as strangers, the longing to be acknowledged, to meet with some response, to bridge some chasm that yawns between us and reality, is part of our inconsolable secret. And surely, from this point of view, the promise of glory, in the sense described, becomes highly relevant to our deep desire. For glory meant good report with God, acceptance by God, response, acknowledgment, and welcome into the heart of things. The door on which we have been knocking all our lives will open at last.

Perhaps it seems rather crude to describe glory as the fact of being "noticed" by God. But this is almost the language of the New Testament. St. Paul promises to those who love God not, as we should expect, that they will know Him, but that they will be known by Him (I Cor. viii. 3). It is a strange promise. Does not God know all things at all times? But it is dreadfully re-echoed in another passage of the New Testament. There we are warned that it may happen to any one of us to appear at last before the face of God and hear only the appalling words: "I never knew you. Depart from Me." In some sense, as dark to the intellect as it is unendurable to the feelings, we can be both banished from the presence of Him who is present everywhere and erased from the knowledge of Him who knows all. We can be left utterly and absolutely *outside*—repelled, exiled, estranged, finally and unspeakably ignored. On the other hand, we can be called in, welcomed, received, acknowledged. We walk every day on the razor edge between these two incredible possibilities. Apparently, then, our lifelong nostalgia, our longing to be reunited with something in the universe from which we now feel cut off, to be on the inside of

some door which we have always seen from the outside, is no mere neurotic fancy, but the truest index of our real situation. And to be at last summoned inside would be both glory and honour beyond all our merits and also the healing of that old ache.

And this brings me to the other sense of glory—glory as brightness, splendour, luminosity. We are to shine as the sun, we are to be given the Morning Star. I think I begin to see what it means. In one way, of course, God has given us the Morning Star already: you can go and enjoy the gift on many fine mornings if you get up early enough. What more, you may ask, do we want? Ah, but we want so much more—something the books on aesthetics take little notice of. But the poets and the mythologies know all about it. We do not want merely to *see* beauty, though, God knows, even that is bounty enough. We want something else which can hardly be put into words—to be united with the beauty we see, to pass into it, to receive it into ourselves, to bathe in it, to become part of it. That is why we have peopled air and earth and water with gods and goddesses and nymphs and elves—that, though we cannot, yet these projections can, enjoy in themselves that beauty grace, and power of which Nature is the image. That is why the poets tell us such lovely falsehoods. They talk as if the west wind could really sweep into a human soul; but it can't. They tell us that "beauty born of murmuring sound" will pass into a human face; but it won't. Or not yet. For if we take the imagery of Scripture seriously, if we believe that God will one day *give* us the Morning Star and cause us to *put on* the splendour of the sun, then we may surmise that both the ancient myths and the modern poetry, so false as history, may be very near the truth as prophecy. At present we are on the outside of the world, the wrong side of the door. We discern the freshness and purity of morning, but they do not make us fresh and pure. We cannot mingle with the splendours we see. But all the leaves of the New Testament are rustling with the rumour that it will not always be so. Some day, God willing, we shall get *in*. When human souls have become as perfect in voluntary obedience as the inanimate creation is in its lifeless obedience, then they will put on its glory, or rather that greater glory of which Nature is only the first sketch. For you must not think that I am putting forward any heathen fancy of being absorbed into Nature. Nature is mortal; we shall outlive her. When all the suns and nebulae have passed away, each one of you will still be alive. Nature is only the image, the symbol; but it is the symbol Scripture invites me to use. We are summoned to pass in through Nature, beyond her, into that splendour which she fitfully reflects.

And in there, in beyond Nature, we shall eat of the tree of life. At present, if we are reborn in Christ, the spirit in us lives directly on God; but the mind, and still more the body, receives life from Him at a thousand removes—through our ancestors, through our food, through the elements. The faint, far-off results of those energies which God's creative rapture implanted in matter when He made the worlds are what we now call physical pleasures; and even thus filtered, they are too much for our present management. What would it be to

taste at the fountain-head that stream of which even these lower reaches prove so intoxicating? Yet that, I believe, is what lies before us. The whole man is to drink joy from the fountain of joy. As St. Augustine said, the rapture of the saved soul will "flow over" into the glorified body. In the light of our present specialized and depraved appetites we cannot imagine this *torrens voluptatis,* and I warn everyone seriously not to try. But it must be mentioned, to drive out thoughts even more misleading—thoughts that what is saved is a mere ghost, or that the risen body lives in numb insensibility. The body was made for the Lord, and these dismal fancies are wide of the mark.

Meanwhile the cross comes before the crown and tomorrow is a Monday morning. A cleft has opened in the pitiless walls of the world, and we are invited to follow our great Captain inside. The following Him is, of course, the essential point. That being so, it may be asked what practical use there is in the speculations which I have been indulging. I can think of at least one such use. It may be possible for each to think too much of his own potential glory hereafter; it is hardly possible for him to think too often or too deeply about that of his neighbour. The load, or weight, or burden of my neighbour's glory should be laid daily on my back, a load so heavy that only humility can carry it, and the backs of the proud will be broken. It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or other of these destinations. It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and the circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics. There are no *ordinary* people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilization—these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit—immortal horrors or everlasting splendours. This does not mean that we are to be perpetually solemn. We must play. But our merriment must be of that kind (and it is, in fact, the merriest kind) which exists between people who have, from the outset, taken each other seriously—no flippancy, no superiority, no presumption. And our charity must be a real and costly love, with deep feeling for the sins in spite of which we love the sinner—no mere tolerance or indulgence which parodies love as flippancy parodies merriment. Next to the Blessed Sacrament itself, your neighbour is the holiest object presented to your senses. If he is your Christian neighbour he is holy in almost the same way, for in him also Christ *vere latitat*—the glorifier and the glorified, Glory Himself, is truly hidden.

Why Every Single Person Matters

There are few things that make me more proud to be the pastor of Christ Presbyterian Church in Nashville than Christ Pres's unique emphasis on children with special needs. Once a year, our children's staff has an amazing "vacation Bible school" for kids with special needs and their siblings. There is also a monthly expression of this called "Special Saturdays" which does several things. Weekly, a team of men, women, and students serve as "buddies" to kids with special needs, accompanying them all morning long to support their parents in freeing them to worship and interact with others.

At a recent benefit for Joni and Friends, a global ministry to people with disabilities and special needs founded by a friend and personal hero of mine, Joni Eareckson Tada, I shared at length why the special needs community is such a significant part of my journey as a follower of Christ and as a human being (That audio is available here if you would like). Some of the reasons I also share here...

First, an emphasis on people with special needs pulls a community together to participate in something that Jesus is pleased with. After all, Jesus, always gave special attention to the weak, the underdog, and the disadvantaged.

Second, it affirms that every person has dignity or, as Martin Luther King, Jr. said, 'there are no gradations in the image of God.'

Third, it reminds us that, sometimes to our surprise, people with special needs have more to teach us about the kingdom of God than we have to teach them.

King David understood this. After his best friend Jonathan died in battle, his first order to his staff was to tell him if there was anyone to whom he could show favor for Jonathan's sake.

Enters Mephibosheth, Jonathan's orphaned son who is crippled in both feet.

Rather than saying, 'On second thought...' or assuming a retail approach to relationships (a retail approach runs from sacrifice and prioritizes being relationship with people who are more useful than they are costly), David assures Mephibosheth that his future will be bright. David promises to restore the entire fortune of his predecessor King Saul, also Mephibosheth's grandfather, to the young man. Second, David adopts him as his own son, assuring him that he will always have a seat at the king's table. You can read the full story in 2 Samuel 9.

In this instance, David demonstrates what a heart that's been transformed by the gospel is capable of—an extreme other-orientation. His first order to his staff as king sends a message. 'My kingliness will not be marked by domineering. It will be marked by love and sacrifice.' David starts his reign by actively looking for an opportunity to lay down his life for someone who needs him to do this. He is actively looking, in other words, to limit his own options, to shut his own freedoms down, in order to strengthen an orphan who is weak.

Eugene Peterson said that *hesed* love—the word used to describe the love that David has for Jonathan and Mephibosheth, the son of Jonathan—sees behind or beneath whatever society designates a person to be (disabled, option limiting, costly, etc.) and instead *acts to affirm* a God-created identity in the person. In other words, Peterson is saying that to be human is to carry intrinsic value and dignity.

To make the point, Henri Nouwen shared these words in a biography he wrote of a friend of his named Adam, who lived with a disability:

"Adam was sent to bring good news to the world. It was his mission, as it was the mission of Jesus. Adam was—very simply, quietly, and uniquely—there! He was a person, who by his very life announced the marvelous mystery of our God: I am precious, beloved, whole, and born of God. Adam bore silent witness to this mystery, which has nothing to do with whether or not he could speak, walk, or express himself, whether or not he made money, had a job, was fashionable, famous, married or single. It had to do with his being. He was and is a beloved child of God. It is the same news that Jesus came to announce, and it is the news that all those who are poor keep proclaiming in and through their very weakness. Life is a gift. Each one of us is unique, known by name, and loved by the One who fashioned us."

Similarly, my friend Gabe Lyons wrote a beautiful essay about his son Cade, who has Down Syndrome. In the essay Gabe points out that over 92% of children in utero with Down Syndrome are aborted. Gabe offers a refreshing, counter-culture perspective from the parents of the other 8%. His essay is a celebration of Cade's dignity, as well as the remarkable contribution Cade makes in the lives of people around him. He demonstrates an uncanny ability to live in the moment, a remarkable empathy for others, a refreshing boldness, and a commitment to complete honesty.

Gabe, along with the many parents who grace our church with the presence of their children who have special needs, are simply practicing good theology. Because the neighbor love part of the Kingdom of God is, at its core, a resistance movement against social Darwinism. Social Darwinism —'survival of the fittest' in the human community—tells us that it is those who are powerful, privileged, handsome, rich and wise who command our

special attention, while those who are weak, physically or mentally challenged, and poor are ignorable at best, and disposable at worst

But no person is ignorable.

No person is disposable.

No person is a mistake.

Every person, whether an expert or a child with special needs, is a carrier of an everlasting soul.

There are no gradations in the image of God.

In terms of gifting, resources, and opportunity, everyone is different. In terms of dignity and value, everyone is the same. As Francis Schaeffer once said, 'There are no little people.'

How do we know this? Because of how Jesus chose to take on his humanity. He, the Creator of everything that is, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, the Alpha and the Omega, the Seed who crushed the serpent's head, the Beginning and the End, became weak, disabled, and disposed of.

There was nothing about him that caused us to desire him...he was despised and rejected by men. He came to his own, but his own did not receive him.

He chose that.

Jesus became poor so we could become rich in God. He was orphaned so we could become daughters and sons of God. He was brutally executed so we could live abundantly in his Kingdom. He was made invisible so we could be seen. He became weak so we could become strong. He became crippled

in both feet...and in both hands also...so we could walk and not grow weary, so we could run and not grow faint.

If this isn't enough to convince you that every person matters...

...what will?

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