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## Foreword

We are pleased to present this special issue on teaching the Bible. Some months ago we invited a number of scholars who identify themselves as Anabaptist or Mennonite and are teaching in various institutional settings to consider submitting material for this issue. At the time, we said we were “seeking to take a fresh look at a subject that is of perennial interest but, somewhat surprisingly, has not been covered in CGR before.”

We invited traditional academic essays as well as personal reflections. Invitees were not given strict guidelines, but they were asked to consider such matters as pedagogical challenges and opportunities, the relation of faith to critical methodologies, the question of an “Anabaptist agenda,” and the criteria for success in teaching the Bible.

We are delighted with the response we received, and we heartily thank everyone who made a submission. Our hope is that the papers chosen for publication will provide a stimulating cross-section of views, engender a lively conversation, suggest directions for the future, and offer helpful guidance for practitioners. We are grateful to Dr. Nadine Pence, Director of the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion, for providing the insightful Afterword.

Also included in this issue are book reviews on a wide range of subjects. New reviews are posted regularly on [www.grebel.uwaterloo.ca/academic/cgreview/reviews.shtml](http://www.grebel.uwaterloo.ca/academic/cgreview/reviews.shtml).

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Upcoming are an issue on the theme of “International Justice and Reconciliation: Challenges and Opportunities for the Peace Church Tradition”; an issue devoted to a discussion of the book *Nonviolence – A Brief History: The Warsaw Lectures* (lectures given by John Howard Yoder in 1983, never before published); and omnibus issues featuring articles on diverse topics.

We draw readers’ attention again to CGR’s new cohort of Consulting Editors – see inside front cover – who are actively engaged in shaping CGR’s overall direction. We encourage readers to submit Articles and Reflections for consideration, and of course we are always happy to welcome new subscribers.

Jeremy M. Bergen, *Academic Editor*      Stephen A. Jones, *Managing Editor*

# **The Power of the Spoken Word: Performance-Based Pedagogy**

*Jo-Ann A. Brant*

## **Looking Back**

When I stepped into my own classroom for the first time in 1991, I faced a collection of Gen-Xers who were ready to argue with me on any point and demanded an account of the benefits of any task that I assigned. Nevertheless, for the most part the pedagogy with which I taught looked very much like the pedagogy by which I was taught. Reading required flipping pages of a book. Tiling was what one did to floors. Research began in card catalogs and periodical indexes. My task was to guide my students to a level of sophistication in their reading of the Bible and to a broad canonical approach tempered by a historical consciousness. Students arrived with a substantial collection of biblical stories in their heads that I helped them articulate into a coherent narrative. I then invited them to see the patterns and themes that comprise biblical theologies. I presented the Bible as an invitation to live into their futures in continuity with past generations who had joined the cloud of witnesses found in biblical narratives.

Nearly twenty years later, my teaching preparation has begun to look like event planning. What would my dignified Jesuit doctoral advisor think if he were to see me perform my rap version of Jeremiah, complete with a rhythm beat downloaded from the internet and gestures taught to me by my teenage nephews? I have added a set of desirable outcomes to my earlier list of objectives that have much more to do with experiencing scripture rather than with interpreting it. The following essay is my response to an anticipated accusation: Are you not pandering to the millennial generation's desire to be entertained? I hope to persuade readers that my pedagogical techniques based upon performance of scripture are appropriate to my students, many of whom consider post-biblical Christianity a viable option.

## **Taking Stock**

Members of the church and the academy bewail growing biblical illiteracy. Diagnosing the factors that have led both to students' lack of familiarity with

what is in the Bible and to their difficulty in retaining what they read has led me to my pedagogic turn. I, therefore, begin with what I have observed about my students' knowledge and attitudes toward the Bible. Rather than a dirge, please read the following as an overture.

At the beginning of each Introduction to the Bible course at Goshen College, my colleague Paul Keim and I set two tasks for our classes of 60–80 students, the majority of whom are 18 years old. Students write a short essay entitled “My Journey with Scripture” in which they relate their memories of encounters with Bibles and scripture. They also take the supply-answer parts of their final exam: identifying 40 key people from the biblical story, organizing 40 events in chronological order, and matching the titles of 40 books with descriptions of distinctive content. Several patterns prevail (we regret that we did not organize these activities and collect data with a view to publication). The following observations are general impressions.

The students that we now face are those raised by our own generation who, on the whole, did not read the Bible to their children. We seem to have presented them with children's Bibles with the intention that they would read them for themselves. Most of my students report having read them; however, the receipt of the Bible seems to be more memorable than the content that they read.

Students who received standard translations of the Bible from their congregation report feeling at the time that the gift marked an important stage in their progress toward adulthood, but the minority who actually tried reading it tend to report feelings of frustration with both the styles of writing and the content. Many found it difficult to reconcile what they read with the theology that they had learned in Sunday school. Students who attended church regularly are able to articulate the basic creeds and doctrines of their tradition, but they tend not to be able to locate material in the Bible that supports their convictions. While there continue to be one or two students in every 50 who have read the entire Bible and can quote extensively from scripture in a way resembling the ability of our grandparents' generation, these students do not stand at one end of a continuum but rather in their own category.

Those who report that the Bible is very important to their faith are often those who also report that they have seldom read it. They are confident

that what they have been taught about God, Jesus, and salvation is in the Bible. In the last few years, we have seen an increasing number of students in this category report that they have been given passages to read to which they turn frequently for guidance. Most of these verses are key texts in the “Prosperity Gospel.” Paraphrased passages, such as “For I can do everything through Christ who gives me strength” (Phil. 4:13 NLV), adopted by parachurch organizations such as the Fellowship of Christian Athletes, appear with startling frequency. Divorced from their context, these passages affirm that prayer will produce victory for athletes and financial success for entrepreneurs. For most students, reading an entire biblical chapter, let alone book, is a new experience. Last year, one student objected. “That’s not the way one reads scripture,” he proclaimed. “You read it a verse at a time.” Verses are placed on the heart by a friend, or the Holy Spirit guides a hand as it rifles through pages and a finger as it lands upon the one verse that proves to be just what is needed.

At the beginning of the course, very few students are able to identify more than 20 percent of the biblical personalities correctly. They tend to know the people in the Hebrew Bible better than those in the New Testament. Familiarity with characters tends to be grounded in viewing movies such as *The Prince of Egypt* or participating in productions like *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*. The one character from the New Testament whom virtually every student identifies correctly – for many it is the only person they know with certainty – is Judas Iscariot. The name Judas has become synonymous with his presumed role as betrayer. Their knowledge of the contents of the Bible can be described as a kaleidoscope of cultural references composed of lines from Veggie Tales and lyrics from popular songs.

Both the students who want to move on to a post-biblical faith and those who wish to place the physical book in a shrine are frustrated by doctrinal debates about the meaning of scripture. When I began teaching, students tended to mine scripture to shore up their positions. Now, both sides seem more content to leave the text unread. Liberal students seek a community of like-minded friends as their church. Conservative students put their trust in an authoritative pastor’s mediation and interpretation of scripture. They often dismiss the study of the Bible because people cannot

agree upon what it means.

There are aspects of the current youth culture that facilitate engaging in performance-based pedagogy. Students love to work in groups. They tend to trust that learning outcomes will be achieved by doing assigned activities; therefore, they are willing to invest their energy. Knowing that the product of their labor will be a performance adjudicated by their peers with applause rather than a grade provides a strong incentive to strive for good results.

### **Performance-Based Pedagogy**

These observations have led me to focus upon the role that my students will take in the transmission of scripture. I no longer seek to train them to do what I do but rather to be what the church needs them to be: good story-tellers. Rather than their becoming squinty-eyed readers, I am gradually shifting the focus to their being engaged listeners. I have sought a pedagogy that opens up space for shared experiences of scripture and that allows for differences without falling into divisive doctrinal debates or accusations about the lack of faith or reason. My pedagogy has been informed by insights about oral traditions in books by Walter Ong and Werner Kelber, and the work of members of the Bible in Ancient and Modern Media section of the Society of Biblical Literature who have come to call what they do “performance criticism.”<sup>1</sup>

In my introductory Bible course, each student prepares one episode in a cycle of stories for retelling in a small group. They conduct the same sort of research required to prepare a thesis paper, but the goal is to seek information and insights from historical studies, narrative, form, genre, social science, and rhetorical criticism which allow them to amplify their retelling so that their audience can make good sense of what they hear. Commentaries, journals devoted to biblical studies, concordances, specialized dictionaries, and encyclopedias become helpful reference works for the laity and not just specialists. They discover that they must situate their story within the broader narrative and fit it into patterns such as covenantal promise and fulfillment. They find themselves making decisions about where they will put emphasis and what interpretation their retelling will promote. The recognition that there are multiple possibilities becomes less alarming when students locate them in their reading rather than seeing them as a problem with the indeterminacy of the text.

As they rehearse and perform, they begin to experience what David M. Rhoads calls the emotive and kinetic dimensions of the text.<sup>2</sup> They begin to see the meaning and significance of a story in its reception rather than in abstract ideas encoded in the ink on the page.

Some students begin the process fearful that they will not be able to complete the assignment because they cannot understand the story they have read. I encourage them to paraphrase the story but not to abridge it. Students frequently find that when it comes time to tell the story they revert to the actual wording of the translation they have studied, but they now speak as the knowing narrator rather than from rote memory without comprehension. With only a cue card in hand, students may forget a few details, but with very few exceptions their audience reports listening to lively and coherent stories.

I require the introductory class to memorize the promises to Abraham (Gen. 12:1-3), the Shema (Deut. 6:4-9), Psalm 23, the Lord's Prayer, and the Christ Hymn (Phil. 2:5-11). When scripture becomes passages to recite, students come to understand that the Bible is not a source for doctrine so much as a worship resource book. With a clip from the film *X-Men United* (Bryan Singer, 2003) I illustrate how reciting Psalm 23 can help us find words of comfort when emotions leave us speechless. I tell them that I habitually recite the Lord's Prayer when I feel anxious when flying, because I want the last words from my lips to be a confession of faith rather than some expletive that expresses anger or fear or doubt in God's faithfulness.

Performing scripture helps students recognize that different genres must be read in different ways. In my course on Jesus and the Gospels, students recite parts or all of the Sermon on the Mount. As they listen to each other, they recognize where they are being indicted, cajoled, and invited. At the end of the introductory course, we read an abbreviated version of the Revelation of John together, with individuals or groups reading the various voices. In the discussion that follows, students make observations about the importance of worship within the book, how the various voices praise God for what he has done and will do. They recognize refrains from familiar hymns and praise songs. They note how they as the audience receive divine blessings and words of comfort within the context of trials and tribulations. Each reading provokes different observations based upon the strengths of



individual readers and the dynamic arising between different voices.

While I cannot prescribe what students will learn from these activities in the same way that lecture notes identify what I consider most important, I find that exam results indicate greater familiarity with the content and significance of the biblical books that have been the focus of performance-based activities rather than silent readings or lectures. Not only does the performance create a space for discussion and observation, the text becomes much more memorable and meaningful.

Having students perform scripture or receiving it through audition rather than silent reading may strike those raised in the 20th century as a second-best way of receiving the text. In a recent National Public Radio piece in which novelist Neil Gaiman sang the praises of audio books, he quoted the dissenting voice of Harold Bloom, who argued that deep reading demands that one have the text in front of one and noted that people when asked if they have read a book will apologetically say, “Well, I’ve listened to it.”<sup>3</sup> Such comments suggest that silent reading is the intended way of receiving a book.

With over a billion print runs, most Christians either own a copy of the Bible or have easy access to one. As a result, we have come to see private devotional reading as a principal means by which the Bible is received. Moreover, with paper and pens or keyboards ready at hand, we have come to see writing as a substitute for memory. In antiquity, writing served as a substitute for speech. Silent reading was not normative. When the literate passers-by read the sign on the cross, “Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews” (John 19:19), the largely illiterate crowd were the audience to oration. The reading of the sign became a proclamation, hence the high priests’ objection. Given the expense of reproducing a gospel and the low literacy rate in the first century – perhaps as low as 1.5 percent in Judea and the Galilee – the vast majority of Christians heard, rather than read, a gospel.<sup>4</sup>

Understanding that the Bible was written for oral transmission and then listening to it can invigorate my students’ reception. Read silently, the repetitive material in the prophets or the Gospel of John strikes them as superfluous and tedious. But when scripture becomes a performance text, the repetition becomes a refrain that the audience can anticipate and speak. Silent readers of the story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego tend to skip

over lines like “when you hear the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, drum, and entire musical ensemble, you are to fall down and worship the golden statue that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up” (Dan. 3:5, 7, 10, 15), but in oration the one who speaks them and those who hear them participate in the ridicule of idolatry.

Living in an oral culture no doubt sharpened the listening skills of the Bible’s first audiences, and they retained far more of what they heard than a modern audience does. But when we consider how quickly youth learn the lyrics to songs and recall the plots and names of characters from films, we have reason to suppose they will remember scripture heard more than scripture read. This, in part, is why I encourage translation of various biblical genres into more familiar forms. When students translate the minor prophets into rap, they begin to find the ancient forms more accessible. They begin to look for the distinctive language and messages that run through a book and to find the rhetorical features that must be replicated in their transposed versions so their audience can respond appropriately.

There is a debate among those who study orality and the publication of the gospels in antiquity about whether texts were memorized and then recited or whether they were read. Given my own experience of reading scripture from the pulpit and sitting in the congregation, as well as what I know about public readings of Greco-Roman literature in private homes, I suspect that the latter was often the case. By encouraging my students to perform scripture with the use of a cue card rather than reading the text aloud, I seek to prepare future worship leaders and teachers to preserve the place of the Bible within the church. In congregations where scripture is recited or read more effectively, perhaps more of it will be read and homiletic preaching may once more gain popularity. (An aside: if I were to identify factors accounting for the decline in biblical literacy, I would place the reduction of scripture heard from the pulpit or lectern at the top of the list.)

### **Assessment**

When the final product of an activity is a performance or presentation, I examine the process of preparing. In the first-year course, I evaluate the documentation of the students’ research and a written version of their

amplified story rather than the performance, although I do recognize outstanding story-telling with comical awards. The purpose of the oration is to build confidence in their capacity to perform the text. In upper-level courses, students submit an account of their avenues of research, including blind alleys. I have them provide their own assessment prior to receiving mine, so that I do not stress what they already recognize and can instead suggest ways of improving what they are most self-conscious about, because this is where they are most likely to grow. I allow them to learn from performances rather than to demonstrate their learning in performances. I use a grading rubric to expedite the feedback process. I invest more time in hanging around the reference room of the library and in e-mail exchanges to lend assistance while a project is in process than in writing comments on the finished product. My role is that of director or producer rather than that of a critic.

Assessment of the effectiveness of these pedagogies is not limited to graded assignments and tests. In April 2009 I had the opportunity to listen to a performance of “Seeds – The Kingdom of Heaven,” a song composed by senior Jesse Miles Landis-Eigsti for the Goshen College baccalaureate service. In the fall of 2008 Jesse was a student in *Jesus and the Gospels*. In the study of parables, students created short dramas or pieces of performance art to capture Jesus’ subversion of ancient social structures, such as honor and shame, that served the interests of the powerful and maintained the status quo. Discussion of the fact that in antiquity mustard was an uncontrollable weed rather than the source for a tasty condiment was part of the preparatory introduction to the activity. What Jesse learned found its way into his composition. The choir sings that Jesus taught “the kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that grows into the tallest tree,” and then a solo voice leads the response “but some people say we know these seeds, they only produce vile unwanted weeds. Give us things we grow like potted ferns, bonsai trees, and chita pets. Things where we can predict how they will grow.” Then another voice responds, “But Jesus said...”<sup>5</sup> Jesse made the transition from one who receives the gospel to one who proclaims the gospel.

When I asked Jesse to reconstruct some of the influences (authors, sermons, classroom experiences etc.) that went into his composition, he sent a lengthy reply. It confirmed the role of principles informing many

pedagogies employed by my colleagues at Goshen and other Mennonite schools: emphasis upon learning from other cultures (Jesse named the chorus of Greek drama and the Soweto Gospel Choir); articulating the narrative structure of thought, particularly theology; finding the most effective forms for communicating one's ideas; and encouraging transformation that honors what is good and true about the past while not being a slave to it.

As I continue to refine my use of performance, I will ask students to conduct similar reflections as a way of assessing the effectiveness of activities and of adding writing to the process. While Cicero stresses the importance of speech, he reminds us that when one turns away from the practice of writing one ends up with an unchanging style (*De or.* 33.152).

### **Looking Ahead**

While performing scripture has become one of the central pedagogies in my classroom and I am constantly looking for ways to improve preparation activities, skill development, and assessment rubrics, I have not ignored the importance of written communication skills. When I have a class of fewer than 20 students, I often focus on process writing and composition of persuasive arguments substantiated with solid evidence and based on sound reasoning. Recently, I have begun to attend to the role that writing plays within our contemporary culture as a substitute for speech, and the subcultures and media for which my students write. The generation dubbed the Millennials writes far more casual prose compositions than my generation did in their undergraduate years: they blog, they twitter, they chat, they post. Writing has become essential to relationships maintained and sometimes formed on web-based social platforms such as Facebook.

While leading a study and service term last summer, I fell into the habit of following the very public written discourse of my students on the web. I began to notice several aspects of compositions that are both disturbing and exciting. The subculture of much of this discourse encourages complaining and cynical voices, and I have begun to call my students' attention to this fact. There is a difference between thought or speech and writing. The former are ephemeral; the latter is fixed. Writing is a way of working out our thoughts and giving them a form. It is as if my ideas come into being or at least full expression as I write them out. I only know what I think when

I revisit what I have written. As I read my students' blogs, it became clear that they were compositing identities for themselves. They were writing themselves into being.

This generation has been accused of being chameleons without stable identities. I do not stand in judgment of this. But if these forms of writing shape who students are, my pedagogies ought to tap into the potential of their writing to shape their faith and to enhance their capacity to communicate their faith identity to their reading audience, an audience much broader than they suspect. The people with whom they are connected through the web will not necessarily worship with them or go to Sunday school or be in class with them. As the social patterns that have sustained the centrality of the Bible to Christianity are becoming less important to many of my students, my pedagogies must strive to inform how and what they write, so that the scripture finds its way into these new forms of discourse.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Werner Kelber, *The Oral and the Written Gospel: The Hermeneutics of Speaking and Writing in the Synoptic Tradition, Mark, Paul, and Q* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983); Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Routledge, 1988). The Lutheran School of Theology of Chicago hosts a Biblical Performance Criticism web site at [www.biblicalperformancecriticism.org](http://www.biblicalperformancecriticism.org).

<sup>2</sup> David M. Rhoads, "Performance Criticism: An Emerging Methodology in Biblical Studies," *Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005): [www.sbl-site.org/Meetings/AMseminarpapers.aspx](http://www.sbl-site.org/Meetings/AMseminarpapers.aspx).

<sup>3</sup> Neil Gaiman, "Neil Gaiman Asks: Heard Any Good Books Lately?" NPR Morning Edition (November 30, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> Meir Bar-Ilan, "Illiteracy in the Land of Israel in the First Centuries C.E." in *Essays in the Social Scientific Study of Judaism and Jewish Society Vol. 2*, edited by S. Fishbane, S. Schoenfeld, and A. Goldschlaeger (New York: Ktav, 1992), 46–61.

<sup>5</sup> The entire performance can be heard and seen on YouTube: "Seeds: The Kingdom of Heaven - Goshen College Baccalaureate Service 2009" [www.youtube.com/watch?v=vsp6\\_Pg62qc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vsp6_Pg62qc)

*Jo-Ann A. Brant is Professor of Bible, Religion and Philosophy at Goshen College in Goshen, Indiana.*

# **Teaching the Bible: Bridging Ancient and Modern Worlds**

*Dietmar Neufeld*

## **Introduction**

I teach courses and conduct seminars in the New Testament at both the undergraduate and graduate levels (MA and PhD) in the Department of Classical, Near Eastern and Religious Studies at the University of British Columbia – a large, research-intensive university. Some of my courses are Origins of Christianity; The Synoptic Gospels and the Historical Jesus; The Life and Literature of Paul; Gods, Goddesses, Heroes, Heroines, and Divine Humans in Graeco-Roman Antiquity; When Time Shall be no More: Ancient Apocalypses, and Approaches to the Ancient City. My classes are made up of a wide variety of students, some majoring in Religious Studies, others taking my courses as electives out of interest and coming from Geography, Forestry, Nursing, Psychology, Education, Classical Studies, Near Eastern Studies, and so on. Some are religiously predisposed and deeply committed to a particular religious orientation, while others are not.

What these students have in common is a genuine curiosity about Jesus, Paul, gospels, epistles, and apocalypses. I do not and will not make assumptions about what religious sensibilities might drive them. Nor do I imagine them expecting me to reveal my personal religious commitments in a classroom setting. If they are curious, they can see me during office hours. I let them know that I approach the material from a non-party line; I have no interest in presenting an Anabaptist point of view in my teaching. Indeed, it would be inappropriate. Great ethnic diversity is another mark of my classes. With such a diverse student clientele, what approach do I take to the New Testament in my pedagogy?

## **The Social World of the New Testament**

A question with which I have grappled over the years is how best to make sense of the New Testament, a book of great significance to western culture yet often baffling to students. I thought that what was needed is an interpretive framework that enables students to understand the world in which the texts

of the NT were written. After all, a text read out of context often results in misunderstanding. Worse, a text taken out of context is easily distorted and manipulated, which is often of the fate of the NT today. This is also true for the lives of Paul and Jesus. They lived, moved, breathed, ate, slept, agonized, travelled, and taught, and each died in a particular social milieu very different from the modern one.

I discovered that students were frequently perplexed by what they found in the NT about Jesus and Paul, mainly because the modern world differed significantly from the ancient Mediterranean one in which the NT originated. Because the lives of Jesus and Paul found their mooring in the values of ancient Mediterranean society, I believe students should develop a cross-cultural sensitivity to those values. Pedagogically, therefore, I direct their attention to the cultural values of the Roman world in which the NT documents and the communities that they represented found germination.

Understanding the issues of women and Jesus, for example, requires intimate knowledge of kinship and family patterns, how gendered space (masculinity and femininity) was constructed, and how the values of honor and shame functioned in the courts of men and women. Understanding Romans chapter 13 requires familiarity with how ancient political systems worked; how patronage, clientage, and benefaction structured relationships; and how ancient economies and limited good functioned within that system. When Paul in Galatians 1:3 accuses his addressees that they have been evil-eyed (bewitched), he explicitly appeals to the evil eye system of belief: they have fallen victims to the gaze of the malevolent eye. In order to grasp the power of Paul's accusation, students must appreciate the dynamics of evil-eye belief systems and envy, and how they worked in tandem to negatively influence his community.

Coming to grips with the identity and mission of the historical Jesus requires knowledge of meals, eating, food, and feasting as the venue for debates on issues of purity and impurity, insider and outsider, and gendered spaces of men and women. Indeed, knowledge of identity, ethnicity, religion, associations, time, purity, illness, disease, health care systems, ritual space, collective memory, and homoeroticism in Paul's world helps students interrogate the texts in socially useful ways. Without such knowledge, they are left open to imposing unexamined pre-judgements and preconceptions

on the NT that may be dangerously ethnocentric and anachronistic.<sup>1</sup>

As Paul and the synoptics communicated in epistolary and gospel format, they encoded and transmitted information from the social system that enveloped them. These forms of communication included consumption, cohabitation, collaboration, command, and conversation.<sup>2</sup> Listening, speaking, reading, and writing are inescapably social acts. The gospel writers' record of Jesus and Paul's letters communicated in the Greek language with its words, concepts, and worldviews that reflected the shared assumptions of those living in that world – assumptions often alien to our modern world. To interpret what Paul wrote and what the gospel writers recorded entails understanding their surrounding social system. Social systems impart meaning.<sup>3</sup>

In my mind, therefore, it was imperative to provide a cultural context for the NT that would offer students tools for an informed reading and an interpretive framework that would help them become knowledgeable about the ancient Mediterranean world. I rely on interpretive models from the social sciences – particularly cultural anthropology and ethnographical studies of non-western, traditional cultures – to bridge the gap between the two worlds, the ancient Greek and Roman one of the NT and the postmodern one of the students.

Inculcating within students a cultural sensitivity and a cross-cultural perspective were to be my guiding stars. The aim was to familiarize them with the relevant interpretive models of the social sciences as essential aids for understanding the NT. Thus I strategically select models and texts that provide excellent guides and illuminate the NT in its cultural context.<sup>4</sup>

How did I come to embrace this pedagogical approach to understanding and interpreting the NT? I will sketch an answer below. As much as the authors of the NT and the other key players in its narrative were deeply embedded in their social-cultural milieu, so also are we products of our social-cultural milieu.

### **Life's Social Context and Legacy**

Family legacy, for good or bad, leaves its mark. Sometimes this mark is immediately visible, while at other times it is invisible, leaving only a trace to be revealed years later. Moving from one culture and language to another



because of dictatorship, war, loss of religious freedom, and hardship, was one of the marks of my own family's legacy. My parents, of German/Dutch extraction historically and whose ancestors had wandered Europe looking for places of religious refuge, were born and spent their early lives in Russia and the Ukraine under favorable conditions. While their mother tongue was German, they nevertheless eventually came to understand the vicissitudes of cultural variation of their respective countries. Although they never assimilated into Russian and Ukrainian culture, they did have an appreciation of how Russians and Ukrainians formulated worldviews and truths on the basis of language, practice, historical narrative, and societal system. Cultural context, societal systems, and the language of communication produced values and meanings – not only for the Russian people but also for the German/Dutch people – which, while not mutually inclusive, nevertheless did not clash. Early on, my parents garnered a culturally sensitive understanding of the ways Russian and Ukrainian people thought, felt, and behaved in a social world not their own.

When Joseph Stalin came to power, language and culture were no longer benign entities that simply defined one's social location; they became weapons of war, discrimination, and prejudice. Brigandage and war forced my parents to escape Stalinist Russia and eventually end up in Germany for a time. Language made much of everyday life comprehensible to them, but socially they were part of an alien landscape that sensitized them to the harsh realities of values and behaviors characteristic of their new surroundings. My parents recognized that understanding the meaning and values of a foreign culture did not come simply by superimposing one's own culture upon it. Rather, it came through a critical self-awareness of one's own cultural context along with an open-minded desire to comprehend the foreigner's.

While their chosen destination was Canada, my parents ended up in the Paraguayan Chaco, in what was called "die gruene holle." They were transported to an alien landscape and a cultural context comprising jungle, heat and disease; a local indigenous dialect they did not understand; the language of the Spanish ruling class they did not speak; and values that had slight correspondence to what had once provided a stable system of meaning.

This experience instilled within them not only a tremendous survivalist attitude but a recognition of “enclosed meaning worlds” that cannot be understood from the outside but can be understood from within. This move from one cultural context to another, rather than making them rigid and causing them to seeking solace in the familiar, created a remarkable resilience, tolerance, and openness about content and context in religion, politics, economics, truth, and other matters. A home environment that resisted conventional definitions of truth, values, and meaning from a critically self-aware perspective, while at the same time promoting an understanding of the social institutions, cultural values, and norms of the hosting cultures (Russian, German, indigenous Paraguayan, ruling-class Paraguayan) created in me – unconsciously at first – a sensitivity to cultural contexts and social institutions different from my own.

I was born in Paraguay and lived there in harsh conditions until the age of eight. The land we worked often did not produce enough because of a lack of rain. Thus my father became a jack-of-all-trades, a very good carpenter, inventor, and builder. He was a truck driver as well, delivering goods to Bolivia, and was often gone for weeks at a time. This left my mother to fend for herself and four children in difficult circumstances. Yet optimism prevailed, and the experience instilled in me a fierce sense of determination and independence, and a survivalist mentality (the real thing, and not what we are fed on TV!).

Close proximity to the indigenous populations of Paraguay exposed me to their music, language, customs, institutions, worldview, and behavior. This experience continued to fine-tune my cultural awareness and sensitivity. I could hear the people sing, dance, drink, and make music at night. They often frequented our yard – if not to beg, then to seek employment. I heard their stories; they heard ours. The attempt to convert them by the local Mennonite population was never far away; conversion would mean abandoning culturally conditioned stories, social practices, and the habits of generations, as well as giving up the world of spirits and demons. In my nascent awareness, conversion smacked of theological and cultural imperialism, though of course I did not call it that. Conversion did not ask questions about meaning and matrix or context and content but simply superimposed upon indigenous people an alien religious system (white,

Dutch/German/Russian Mennonite) with its own meanings and values.

What I saw, heard, and experienced from my people, and the damage often inflicted upon indigenous populations through a certain understanding of the Bible, left me with questions about context and content. As much as we superimposed an alien interpretation upon the Bible, an ancient and often mysterious book culturally and socially, so too we were superimposing upon these populations a Dutch/German cultural mix that was thought to be Bible-centered. To some extent, my parents resisted theological imperialism by being cultural accommodationists, and this also shaped my attitude to the biblical text. Content and context were inextricably intertwined.

Our moving to Canada in 1957 is something I shall never forget. It shaped me in many ways. I can still vividly remember the feelings of loneliness, helplessness, and alienation in this new land. Muted, because I could not speak the language or understand idiomatic expressions (“long bomb wins the game”; “parking on a driveway” and “driving on a parkway”; “kicking the bucket,” etc.) made the transition difficult. I may as well have been on the moon for all that I could understand. Yet, learn I had to. Learning new customs, language, dress, ways of speech, food, and other things shaped and sensitized me to the differences in cultural, social, political, and religious patterns of expression that were not translocal but particular to a region.

Paraguayan and early Canadian Anabaptists tended to be theologically conservative (though in recent years this has changed considerably). They were initially quite suspicious of higher education because it stimulated in their children questions about faith, exposed them to new ideas, and sometimes led them to fall away from church and family. My local community fled the complexity of the world and sought solace in the stability of simplicity. Members of the community prided themselves in being biblicists and non-credalists. This led to a kind of bibliolatry that tamed and domesticated the biblical text to become a book for personal betterment, a guide to life, and the source of answers to all life’s problems, ethical, moral, or whatever.

An uncritical acceptance of the Bible was promoted, with a selective glossing of certain passages when they appeared to undermine theological certainty. For example, gender issues and so-called questions of morality on such matters as homosexuality and lesbianism were either not discussed

or, if discussed, condemned. The Bible was regarded as a blueprint or road map for life; it encapsulated a kind of universalizing timelessness. Truths, regardless of how time-conditioned they were, nevertheless spoke to modern concerns. (Here too my parents departed from the norm, because they saw that education was the way to a better life, and that hiding under the security blanket of simplicity produced a biased view of the external world.) The prevailing view sanctioned restrictive strategies for reading the Bible. No thought was given to the idea that the Bible was an ancient and alien book, written in a language other than German and describing social and cultural contexts incongruent with modern sensibilities.

Engrained with a survivalist mentality and cultural sensitivity, I was not entirely happy with the status quo in matters of faith. I raised questions and was quite dissatisfied with the answers so often offered by ministers, pastors, family members, and the church. I held a healthy suspicion of an approach to the biblical text that saw it as the solution to all life's problems. This hermeneutic of suspicion was not driven by cynicism or scepticism but by a deep curiosity and a fascination with cross-cultural perspectives of the biblical text. The Bible was not a western book, but if not, then what was it, and how best to bridge the gap between it and my world?

I decided that one way to tackle these questions was to pursue a degree in religious studies. The BA led to an MA and then eventually to a PhD in Christian Origins. For a while I naively believed that once I had mastered the social context of Jesus and Paul, making the transition from that alien and strange culture to ours would become somewhat easier. At least making that transition would be less fraught with danger – that is, the danger of ethnocentrism and anachronism would be lessened.

To some extent, ironically, a kind of reverse cultural imperialism has taken over. I have discovered that the ancient world of the biblical text does not easily intersect with my world. This view, while it creates exegetical difficulties, is an absolutely fascinating place to be. The ancient forms of expression were filled with meaning at the time of their crystallization into writing, and unless the world from which they arose is understood (as if that is ever really totally possible), moderns will experience little success in taking the Bible seriously in the way that it should perhaps be taken seriously: as a time-bound and conditioned-by-its-time literary artifact with surprises for those willing to embrace its strangeness.

I am not suggesting that advancing ancient cultural and social values (for example, honor/shame, kinship, and patriarchy) in place of modern ones will make the Bible relevant in answering life's concerns. If we take seriously that the Bible presents to modern readers a foreign, alien landscape in terms of language, culture, social patterns, and worldview, then will it ever be possible to bring the Bible close, in the sense that it is thought to be the holy book of God, revelation, inspired, etc.?

Despite this concern, however, the NT continues to hold great fascination for me. Social-cultural explanations of the biblical text add a public dynamic to its narratives that is of interest to one immersed in a global community of competing religious loyalties. For example, seeing forgiveness/redemption as restoration to a community is much more congenial to my way of thinking than basing it on total depravity and the idea that if forgiveness is to be experienced, it must be received passively from an external cosmological source.<sup>5</sup>

In my pedagogical approach, then, I tend to be anti-foundational, resolutely refusing to posit any one premise as the privileged or unassailable starting point for established claims of truth; anti-totalizing, resolutely refusing to claim that one worldview or so-called truth can account for everything; and demystifying, resolutely refusing the claim of a natural explanation for religious phenomena behind which often hide my ideological projections.

I love teaching the NT in the sense I have described it. It truly makes my day, and judging by from students' responses, it makes theirs too. I attempt to guide the watchers, learners, students along pathways wonderful and forbidding, and to encourage them to become venturesome transgressors, border-crossers into the strange world of the Bible inhabited by exorcists, healers and shamans; into the realm of demons, angels, and spirits; into the labyrinth of the human soul; and into the holy places, the sacred spaces of the ancients that require the removal of sandals. The journey is designed to strike strange fires under their own familiar spirituality.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Dietmar Neufeld and Richard E. DeMaris, eds., *Understanding the Social World of the New Testament* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> Bruce J. Malina, *Christian Origins and Cultural Anthropology: Practical Models of Biblical Interpretation* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1986). Jerome H. Neyrey and Eric C. Stewart, eds., *The Social World of the New Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2008). Philip Esler, *New Testament Theology: Communion and Community* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *The New Testament in Cross-cultural Perspective* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> Dietmar Neufeld, ed., *The Social Sciences and Biblical Translation* (Leiden/Atlanta: Brill/Society of Biblical Literature, 2008).

<sup>5</sup> Dietmar Neufeld, "Sins and Forgiveness. Release and Status Reinstatement of the Paralytic in Mark 2:1-12," in *The Social Sciences and Biblical Translation*, 51-64.

*Dietmar Neufeld is Associate Professor of Christian Origins, and Associate Head of the Department of Classical, Near Eastern and Religious Studies at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, British Columbia.*

## **Getting Along When We Don't Agree: Interpreting Romans Using Simulation and Controversy**

*Reta Halteman Finger*

*E-mail to five first-year college students taking the same "Encountering the Bible" section: "You seem like a thoughtful student and a natural leader. Would you be willing to act as the leader of one of the small groups we'll be working in when we begin our study of Romans next week? You will not have any more preparation than anyone else in your group, but your role will be to keep the conversation going and make sure everyone has a chance to give their opinions."*

For the past 14 years, I have taught Romans to approximately 30 different sections of 35 students each, plus several upper-level classes of students majoring within the Biblical and Religious Studies Department at Messiah College. Before that, I taught the course twice at Eastern Mennonite Seminary and other times in Sunday schools in various churches.

When I began my master's degree in the late 1980s in preparation for a PhD program at Garrett-Evangelical Seminary, the first Bible class I took was Romans with Dr. Robert Jewett, a Pauline scholar. Although as a feminist I wanted to engage Paul, the dense, abstract, theological tract that I thought was Romans was not at the top of my list. But in my first class, when Jewett read his paper on "Paul, Phoebe, and the Spanish Mission," I was blown away. Phoebe? I hardly knew she existed. And Spain? I didn't know Spain was even mentioned in the New Testament.

In the weeks that followed, every class period introduced me to new information about why Paul wrote this lengthy speech, how Phoebe may have interpreted it, and how the house church represented in Romans 16 might have received it. I began to see that my new rhetorical and social-scientific tools for interpreting Romans were changing its meaning. No longer was the overall thrust "How can I as a sinner get right with God?" Rather, it concerned questions like "Is God fair to accept non-law-observant Gentiles on the same basis as Jews?" and "How should believing Jews and

Gentiles relate to each other?” Paul was far more positive about his Jewish theological roots than I had ever imagined.

As someone more experienced in religious journalism than scholarly research, I found the questions recurring in my head throughout that course were Why didn’t I learn this in Sunday School? and Why didn’t anybody teach me this before? And more important: Can this material be made accessible in Christian education and to laypeople in general?

### **How Can I “Preach This Gospel”?**

If I had known at the time that this approach was part of a recent emerging paradigm in Romans study, I may not have felt as angry at being cheated in my early religious education, or as excited about figuring out how to teach it. Because these new methods highlighted the huge culture gap between the first-century Jesus movement and modern Western society, it seemed important to acknowledge and try to bridge the gap.

Gradually, an idea formed in my mind. If the original historical situation can be reconstructed to some degree, why not devise an interactive simulation? A class of students could recreate one or more Roman house churches, with each member playing a different role as Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female, poor or not-so-poor. Then “Phoebe” could read chunks of text aloud (as would have happened in a mostly illiterate group with no access to extra copies of the letter), and the “Roman believers” could then discuss what they thought about Paul’s ideas and whether or not they agreed with him. It wasn’t authoritative scripture yet! Finally, they would end the simulation and discuss what the text may mean in today’s cultural context. My idea eventually became *Paul and the Roman House Churches: A Simulation* (Herald, 1993); the second edition, with more teaching helps, is *Roman House Churches for Today: A Practical Guide for Small Groups* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007).

As noted above, I have taught Romans many times, adapting this simulation to classes in church school, college, and seminary. The most ideal teaching situation is a three-week course that meets every day for several hours. This keeps students more immersed in their roles in the house church, providing larger blocks of time for a sustained simulation and discussion of contemporary application.



However, conditions are usually not ideal, and the material must be adapted to shorter and/or fewer classes. These can range from a one-session class on Rom. 14 to a three-session “highlights of Romans” study to a one-month unit in my first year “Encountering the Bible” college course. The curriculum itself was written for a 13-week Sunday school quarter. In addition to providing historical and cultural background and using material from the beginning and end of Romans to suggest reasons why Paul wrote this letter, I include profiles of each of the five house church or cell groups mentioned in Rom. 16:3-5, 10, 11, 14, and 15.<sup>1</sup> Because of ethnic and economic differences, these groups may not be getting along very well. Another chapter creates names, backgrounds, and roles for seven or eight characters in each group.

When house church members have developed their character sketches, they introduce themselves to everyone else in their group, and then the various house churches introduce themselves to each other. Only then can we begin reading and discussing the text of Romans. For oral reading, I try to find a good public reader as Phoebe, or I do it myself, condensing dense sections of Romans into easier text for today’s shorter attention spans.

### **Tales from the Front Lines**

My first experience teaching Romans (after a trial run in Sunday school at my home church in Chicago) was with a class of eight at Eastern Mennonite Seminary in Harrisonburg, Virginia, during a month-long January 1990 term. We developed only one house church, that of Prisca and Aquila referred to in Rom. 16:3-5. Living in one household would have been socially, economically, and ethnically mixed, allowing for lively conversation.

But some students were skeptical. For the first two days, Kent<sup>2</sup> slouched in his seat, looking bored. But after the first weekend, he was leaning forward, enthusiastically immersed in the conversation. When I commented on the difference, he admitted that he finally started reading the material and got turned on. As the most liberal (or licentious) Gentile in our group, someone who enjoyed “sinning so that grace could much more abound,” we needed Kent’s antinomian remarks and accounts of questionable behavior on trading journeys for his master.

More difficult to deal with was Janet, preparing to pastor in the Foursquare Gospel Church. Her story taught me and our class how

unsettling a nontraditional method of Bible study can become. Janet was a good speaker, so I asked her to be Phoebe, the reader, as well as playing the role of a responsible slave house manager. But by the end of the first week, she was ready to drop out. She knew the traditional Romans, and this approach was simply too human. “I don’t believe the New Testament Christians experienced such conflict with each other. That’s not the way Christians behave. When you know the Lord, you all agree and get along with each other. That’s what happened to me.” I talked her into hanging on, especially since it would hardly be appropriate to lose Phoebe.

Janet managed until the last Wednesday, when we discussed Rom. 13, the passage on paying taxes and obeying the government. As we moved into contemporary implications of this text, denominational proclivities emerged. “If Paul asks us to pay our taxes, what do we do about war taxes?” asked Leonard, a Mennonite pastor taking courses during his year’s sabbatical. “If Paul tells us to feed our enemies instead of killing them (12:14-21), how can we pay taxes that support war?” (This was when US involvement in Central America dominated the news, full of murders, the Iran-Contra scandal, and other human rights abuses in El Salvador and Nicaragua.) Greg, who had seen Nicaraguan oppression first hand, also struggled with the tax issue. Janet was appalled that anyone would question the government’s foreign policy. “We have to support democracy against Communism. It can’t be helped if some people get killed in the process. We must obey the government, just like Paul says,” she declared. “On the other hand, I’ll pay your war taxes if you pay my taxes for welfare,” she added. “I think it’s wrong to give money to people who don’t work for a living.”

The discussion moved toward abortion, since many Mennonites link abortion with their general position on nonviolence. Here Janet was adamant. Abortion was always wrong because it killed human life. Anna asked Janet what she would do if she lived in China, where abortion was mandatory in the event of a second pregnancy: “Would you obey the government in this instance?”

“I certainly would not!” Janet maintained. “I would never have an abortion!”

“But then you’d be disobeying the government,” insisted Anna. “How is that consistent with your view of Romans 13?”

Janet was trapped and silenced. Even though I internally sided with the majority, I felt uncomfortable about her isolation. I can't wait till tomorrow, I thought. That's when we deal with Rom. 14 and how we get along with each other even when we don't agree.

Janet was absent after our last break. Students worried about this absence, afraid they had come down too hard on her. The next day she did not show up at all. My hopes for practicing "strenuous tolerance"<sup>3</sup> when Christians disagree were dashed. Janet, who declared that when people love the Lord they all get along, needed to understand the message of Rom. 14. Instead, her absence provided a powerful negative lesson for the rest of the class on the importance of accepting others when we don't agree with them – and how hard it is to carry out. I hope none of those students ever forget Paul's instructions to welcome others – "but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions" (14:1); I never will.

When Janet did not return on our last day of class, I phoned her to find out what happened. "I couldn't come back," she said. "I was so upset by our conversation on Wednesday, and that Christian people can actually relativize abortion. I could have never gone back." To her, we must have seemed like heretics that she could not associate with. "However," she said, "my husband and I are moving soon anyhow. We want to attend Pat Robertson's new seminary in eastern Virginia. I think we'll be a lot more comfortable there."

I'm sure you will be, I thought, knowing I had failed to reach this student with Paul's message of Christian tolerance. Figuring out the contemporary implications of Romans can be upsetting.

### **Multi-Ethnic Roman House Churches**

My most enthusiastic Romans class came a few years later, also at Eastern Mennonite Seminary. It was another January term, but this time I had nearly 35 students, enough for five house churches. Some of the students had remarkable acting skills, and by sheer serendipity our "Phoebe" was a woman by the same name, an experienced reader who always performed in costume. The class was enormously enriched by the fact that nearly a third of them were from other cultures – either international students or persons of color from urban backgrounds in the US. The ethnic diversity

of Romans delighted them. “That liberal/conservative struggle among Jews and Gentiles in Romans is the same sort of thing that’s happening in my church back home,” said the Ethiopian student.

Another church leader from El Salvador connected the attitudes of scorning and passing judgment among the Roman Christians with the paternalistic attitudes of white US Mennonite church administrators toward native leaders in his country. A Japanese student drew diagrams of Paul’s theology from Rom. 1-4 and its message for the church she was returning to in Japan. A Chinese pastor wrote her paper on the women of Rom. 16, thrilled to find strong evidence for women’s leadership in first-century Roman churches. I was touched by a Puerto Rican man’s reflection paper at the end of the course. He wrote of how skeptical he had been at the beginning: “I thought role-play was just for children – but within a few days I found out that I really WAS Vitalis, a humble cobbler in the house church of the Saints (16:15). I could learn better about Paul’s letter from Vitalis’s perspective.”

This diversity sharpened students’ awareness of economic and class issues in the Roman churches. They took seriously the fact that at least a third of them were slaves with no human rights, and that most lived at subsistence level. For instance, the slave Theotekna attended the house church of Prisca and Aquila, though she came from another household where her master regularly beat and abused her. Theotekna had heard of Jesus through her brother Aurelius, a slave in Prisca and Aquila’s household. Despite his lowly position, Aurelius would bring her plight to the whole group and plead with them for help, finding support in Paul’s vision of the equality of Jew and Gentile. The house church decided to save money to buy Theotekna from her master. By the end of the course, they had succeeded in doing so. They were thrilled, and the rest of us celebrated with them!

I was also pleased at the ingenuity of the poverty-stricken house church of the Saints living down in the slums of Trastevere. Discussing the ethics of hospitality and the command to “contribute to the needs of the saints” in 12:13, this house church pondered how they would keep from starving if they paid their taxes as instructed in 13:1-7.

Visiting another house church at the time, I looked up to see the entire group of Saints marching over to the Narcissus cell group, who were supposedly economically better off as upwardly mobile slaves in an imperial

household. “Can you share some of your food?” they begged. “We had to pay our taxes and now we’re starving!” The Narcissiani were startled by the request, and sheepish because they didn’t have any food at the time. However, at the next day’s simulation they produced pretzels and cookies, and ceremoniously presented them to the Saints.

### **Can Teenagers Imagine What Slavery is Like?**

Since then I’ve taught on the college level, and I spend a month on a Romans study with first-year students. With less knowledge or experience in multi-cultural situations, these students naturally exhibit less theological understanding. Sometimes house church discussions in the earlier chapters of Romans get repetitive when students do not prepare adequately ahead of time and end up arguing the same issue of law-observance versus non-law-observance for several consecutive class periods. However, inductive questions and “dear diary” requirements for each class have helped alleviate that.

A liberal Gentile male will occasionally boast of sexual indiscretions or flirting with orgiastic religions, shocking his more conservative, probably Jewish, counterparts. One very creative Prisca suggested to her surprised house church that she was pregnant and would need to buy the abused slave Theotekna for the baby’s nurse! I’ve had bright, articulate students play Epaenetus (16:5), a Jewish refugee butcher returning to Rome who insists on preparing kosher meat for the household, annoying the Gentile house manager. Roman names intrigue the students; they tell me they remember each other’s Roman names better than their real ones. I chuckled to hear the girls in Lucius’s house church call him “luscious.”

The reality of ancient slavery is difficult for today’s American youth to comprehend. They rarely see it as degrading and brutal as black slavery was in the US centuries later. When “slaves” write up their character sketches, they imagine considerate masters who teach them how to read and write and promise to free them when they become adults so they can get married. I often require them to further research and rewrite their character sketches, in order to get some sense of what it would be like to live with no human rights, not even to one’s own body, and with no likelihood of freedom until one is old or sick. This introduction to ancient slavery also provides an opportunity

for me to draw attention to the reality of today's horrific trade in sex slavery and the slavery of millions of child workers.

Teaching Romans to an upper-level college class of Bible and Christian Ministry majors and minors provides more excitement and versatility than the first-year general education class does. One vocal and articulate house church called "The Brothers and Sisters" deadlocked over conservative/liberal lifestyles and beliefs that pervaded every conversation throughout simulations on Rom. 1-11. Their intense arguments would distract the neighbors living only a few feet away. But by the time we reached the ethical admonitions of Rom. 12, something changed. I was sitting with another house church when I looked up to see the most legalistic, loud-mouthed Jewish brother embracing each of his fellow brothers and sisters. He had at last "seen the light," come to understand Paul's message of a law-free gospel, and was becoming reconciled with his cell group.

We conclude each course with a Roman meal, inviting all house churches to participate. I usually prompt Prisca and Aquila to issue the invitation, assuming they are the only ones wealthy enough to have a house. Because of the deep symbolism of "commensality" in this culture, bringing the squabbling house churches together is a momentous occasion. Still in their roles, they can mix with each other and tell stories from their own house church experience. Phoebe leads the Lord's Supper ritual, using the Mediterranean meal custom of bread-breaking before the meal and the drinking ritual at the end.

I arrange a Roman meal with the college dining services for my first-year students (extra credit for coming in costume!), but in situations where participants prepare their own meals, we have potlucks. My book includes lists of appropriate foods and some a number of recipes. Group members can bring only items appropriate to their religious or socio-economic station in life, i.e., no meat from poor people or from conservatives who cannot get kosher meat (Rom. 14:2). I make sure some wealthier liberal Gentiles bring pork or ham so the food laws can be observed or flouted, depending on one's character. Some observant Jews watch what they eat with great care.

Can simulated agape meals and Holy Communion have real spiritual meaning for the participants? It doesn't always happen among some less mature college students. Others react differently. Two years ago I led a Romans simulation for a Mennonite Ministers' Week in Waterloo, Ontario. We concluded with a ritual of hand washing and sharing bread and grape juice in separate house churches. The leader of one house church told me afterward that he had been concerned whether this ritual would have appropriate spiritual impact within a simulation. But he found it deeply meaningful for himself, and looking around his group he saw tears in many eyes. It was a time for unity after many heated debates.

### **Teaching Through Controversy and Conflict**

I admit that this method does not allow material to be presented as systematically as I would like it to be. My tension also mounts when house churches get stuck on repetitive conflicts, mostly because they haven't done enough homework. I think about how much more thoroughly Romans theology would be covered if I simply lectured.

Another challenge is keeping up with scholarship on Romans and adjusting the simulation accordingly. For example, what if the Jewish believers were still meeting in the synagogues? What if Claudius' edict expelling Jews was not a major factor affecting how Paul wrote his letter? What if the ethnic, religious, and political disagreements in Rome were far more nuanced than we can simulate? (Of course they were.) Virginia Wiles, a Pauline scholar in a more diverse liberal arts college, used my approach for Romans but included a synagogue of Jews who also reacted to Paul's letter. Wiles also created a web site with sample character sketches and additional information on ancient Rome, which I also found helpful.<sup>4</sup>

### **Conclusion**

In spite of these limitations, I close with some key concepts that role-playing Roman house churches can highlight:

- First, the early churches experienced conflict and not all believers agreed on many theological and ethical issues. Contrary to what Janet believed, if people "come to know the Lord," they will not always get along with each other and experience unity of mind

and heart. Understanding how NT writings exhibit the human limitations of the earliest believers can make the documents more accessible.

- Conversely, this method of presenting a new paradigm of interpreting Romans is less threatening, especially to younger students. During my years at Messiah, a Brethren in Christ college filled with Christian/evangelical students, I did not have a single student who had ever previously heard of the “emerging paradigm” of Romans interpretation, even though various forms of it have been accepted by scholars for years. The traditional paradigm, in which Romans timelessly tells individuals how to get saved by grace through faith and not the Jewish law, prevails in the church at large. Yet students (except Janet!) did not resist this approach as I imagine some may have otherwise.
- Third, I almost never need to talk about women’s leadership in the early church – and today. With the deacon Phoebe speaking for Paul, and at least half the house church leaders being females (Junia is an apostle!), I get less resistance than if I lectured on women’s leadership in the early church.
- Fourth, by arguing their case for or against the need to keep the Mosaic law, students come to appreciate the value of Jewish covenant traditions. They learn the difference between religious identity markers and ethical practices. They feel how easily grace can slip into license to do whatever one wants.
- Fifth, educational research has demonstrated that teaching through constructive controversy is more effective than either lecture or group discussion.<sup>5</sup> Even though less material is “covered,” more is retained as students wrestle with and provide arguments for or against various positions. Yet students, perhaps especially Christian students, have a difficult time vigorously debating their peers for fear of hurting or being hurt. Using role-play first, where they can be as obnoxious as they wish, loosens



up participants to speak their minds during the subsequent debate and discussion on contemporary application.

- Sixth, role-playing is fun!

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Much of this material is drawn from Robert Jewett's research, as well as Peter Lampe, *Die stadtrömischen Christen in dem ersten beiden Jahrhunderten: Untersuchen zur Sozialgeschichte* [The Christians of the City of Rome in the First Two Centuries: Exploring Social History] (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1989).

<sup>2</sup> Not their real names.

<sup>3</sup> This term is used by Robert Jewett in *Christian Tolerance: Paul's Message to the Modern Church* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1982).

<sup>4</sup> [www.nbts.edu/academics/faculty/wiles/romans/simul/htm](http://www.nbts.edu/academics/faculty/wiles/romans/simul/htm)

<sup>5</sup> For example, see David W. Johnson, Roger T. Johnson, and Karl A. Smith, "Constructive Controversy: The Educative Power of Intellectual Conflict" in *Change* (Jan./Feb. 2000): 29-37. Also David W. Johnson, Roger T. Johnson, and Karl A. Smith, *Academic Controversy: Enriching College Instruction through Intellectual Conflict. ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report Volume 25, No. 3.* (Washington, DC: The George Washington University, Graduate School of Education and Human Development, 1996).

*Reta Halteman Finger taught New Testament at Messiah College in Grantham, Pennsylvania from 1995 to 2009. Recently retired, she is now doing research to create a simulation using First Corinthians.*

## **Enhancing Student Engagement in a Course on the Book of Acts**

*Gary Yamasaki*

As a student in biblical studies courses – first at Regent College in Vancouver, then at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Elkhart, and then at Union Theological Seminary in Virginia – I had no problem becoming engaged in the material, perhaps because I have always found studying biblical texts inherently interesting. However, once I assumed a position on the other side of the lectern, I quickly discovered that studying biblical texts is not inherently interesting for everyone. In those early years at Columbia Bible College, I found that many undergraduate students just did not care to engage in material that was so fascinating to me.

Upon reflection, I came to realize that since I was teaching at a Bible college, I should not have expected anything different, for the students we attract come with a greater diversity of expectations than do students attending more typical post-secondary educational institutions. Besides students who come for the academics, there are also those who come for specific vocational training to become a worship arts pastor, or a youth pastor, or a missionary. Many of them have little tolerance for anything not directly relevant to their future ministries; for these students, the finer points of biblical interpretation are a tough sell. Then there are the students whose primary purpose for coming is faith formation and who see their time at college as an opportunity to grow in their faith. Many of these students grow impatient with any discussion of biblical texts that does not address “what the Bible means to me today.” Planning a course to meet the needs of so wide a range of students is a daunting task.

In the mid-1990s, I was assigned a course in the Book of Acts that was required for all first-year students, with each of the four class sections consisting of a mix of academically oriented, vocationally oriented, and faith-formation oriented students. At that point in my teaching career, I was still finding my way about how to engage students who were not particularly interested in an academically-based approach, and my efforts in those years

with the Acts course did not meet with a whole lot of success. However, sabbatical leave during 2001-2002 provided an opportunity to reflect on this problem, and I returned from the leave having totally revamped the course, with regard to both the material and the structure, all in an attempt to help students become more engaged.

In this new incarnation of the course, I decided against incorporating the typical discussions of critical issues surrounding the Book of Acts such as composition and redaction. I figured that while such discussions may be interesting to academically-oriented students, they would be dismissed as irrelevant by vocationally-oriented ones, and would be excruciating for those merely looking for how Acts applies to their spiritual lives today.

While abandoning discussions of these critical issues, I did work at sneaking in insights related to less-typical critical issues here and there throughout the course. The recently-developed discipline of social-scientific criticism has proven a veritable gold mine in this regard. The practice of taking present-day anthropological models developed from research into cultures not touched by modernist thinking and using them as interpretive grids for analyzing the pre-modern biblical texts has supplied insights into the Book of Acts that have caught the attention of students in all three categories (more on this later).

Another recently-developed discipline helpful for raising less-typical critical issues has been narrative criticism. In revamping the course, I remained constantly vigilant to the fact that the Book of Acts is a piece of narrative. Narrative possesses the capacity to engage an audience. It invites members of the audience into a story world to have them experience for themselves the events being related. In fact, well-crafted narratives can engage the audience to such an extent that they lose all awareness of the real world as they become totally immersed in the story world, an experience I have had often in movie theaters.

Of course, it would be impossible to concoct such an experience of the Book of Acts for students, short of a well-made 35-hour re-enactment of the book. However, here are some key considerations in attempting to draw out the narrative nature of a text such as Acts for the purpose of producing a narrative experience. First, discussion of the overall structure of the book at the beginning of the course should be avoided. Narrative by its

very nature is sequential, with events unfolding one after another, building for the audience a cumulative experience of the elements of the story, an experience that becomes distorted if they are made aware of all the elements from the outset. Therefore, if students are presented with an outline of all the major events in the Book of Acts, their reading of any given episode will be tainted by awareness of later events in the story line.

Even at the level of the individual episode, I avoid providing at the outset a summary of the passage. Rather, I try to carry students along in the drama of the events of the passage. For example, when covering the Council of Jerusalem, the gathering to decide on whether Gentiles coming to faith in Jesus need to convert to Judaism (Acts 15), I walk students through one side of the debate and then the other, noting the serious tension that would have existed in this gathering and that the decision was not a “slam dunk” but could legitimately have gone either way. Only after having them *experience* the powder-keg atmosphere of the proceedings do I reveal the outcome.

Also, in dealing with the details of a particular passage, I try hard not to succumb to the common practice of referencing material from a passage subsequent to the one under examination. For example, in interpreting Saul’s Damascus Road experience in Acts 9, it would be illegitimate to draw into the discussion what this character goes on to do later in the narrative; such information is irrelevant to the task of discerning the nature of the impact that Acts 9 makes on the audience, since not having yet reached this later material, they would be unaware of its content. Therefore, in teaching Acts, I avoid referencing material from later in the book, but I do draw students’ attention to related material already encountered earlier.

Essentially, all these practices contribute to an approach whose goal is to recreate the story world of the Book of Acts, and to transport students into this world so that they do not just learn cognitively about the events but actually experience them along with the characters. It is my hope that by immersing themselves in the story world of Acts in this way, and by being carried along in the flow of the narrative as episode unfolds into episode, students will increase their level of engagement. One piece of anecdotal evidence suggesting this is indeed working comes from an end-of-semester note from a student who had just completed the course. Initially she had not wanted to take it, thinking that Acts was “long and boring.” However, about

her experience of the course she wrote, “You made it come alive in your class. What you taught has clung to my brain – when reading through Acts now I remember all these things you said in class and I feel like I can really enter the story.”

Another way in which narrative is used in the course to facilitate engagement with the material is the employment of clips from movies and TV shows – that is, audio-visual narratives. I try to incorporate at least one clip into each class session – essentially using narrative to teach narrative – with each clip designed to illustrate some dynamic in an event of the story line of Acts with a scene from a contemporary movie or TV show depicting the same dynamic. For example, when discussing how the Jews considered the Gentiles unclean and thus avoided any contact with them, I show a clip from the movie *Introducing Dorothy Dandridge* to provide the students with a 20th-century illustration of this dynamic. The clip shows Dorothy Dandridge, a major singer and movie star of the 1950s, being prohibited from using a hotel pool simply because she is African-American. In response, she sticks her foot into the pool as an act of defiance. And that evening, as she returns to the pool area, she finds the pool drained and in the process of being scrubbed. It is my hope that such a vivid image might succeed in providing students with at least a sense of the attitude Jews would have had toward Gentiles in the New Testament era. And, if some students have drifted away at that point in the class session, a movie clip is quite effective in re-engaging them.

### **“Acts: The Game”**

There is one other innovation included in the revamp of the course – the most significant innovation – and it is the focus of the rest of this paper. In reflecting on the narrative movement of Acts from Jerusalem to Rome, I came to realize that this movement lends itself very well to a game format, a game involving competition to get to Rome first. Proceeding on the assumption that tapping into students’ competitive nature could increase engagement in the material, I formulated what I have entitled “Acts: The Game.”

In its new incarnation, the course still had all the basic standard elements: readings, lectures, group discussions, exams, papers, quizzes. It is just that many of these elements have become incorporated into a game format.

For the purposes of Acts: The Game, I decided to conduct the competition on a group, as opposed to an individual, basis. Therefore, at the beginning of the semester, I divide students into teams – or “tribes,” if they prefer – of five or six. In making up the teams, I am careful to ensure there are no pre-existing friendships between any members of a given team. At one level, this is simply a precaution to prevent cliques forming within the teams. At a more important level, however, I want this experience of teamwork to serve as training for students in working with people they do not know – or know, but do not like – a skill helpful for functioning in the real world.

The teams then compete against each other, with their progress charted on a PowerPoint-generated game board, with the starting line at Jerusalem and the finish line at Rome, and with sixty spaces to navigate in between. There are markers every twelve spaces, each designating entry into a new “bonus” territory. As a team passes each of the markers, members of the team each earn one bonus mark toward their final grade up to a maximum of five, with Rome being the fifth marker. The team that reaches Rome first – or, if no team makes it that far, then the team that has advanced the farthest – wins the game, and members get to have their names engraved on an Acts: The Game plaque that is presented during the final class session. And, as an added incentive, I offer a pizza party for any team that actually makes it all the way to Rome.

There are various ways to earn spaces on the game board, each designed to enhance students’ learning. The first is by means of quizzes based on the required readings. I have found that many students will not do the readings unless they can gain some tangible benefit from doing so, that is, something that counts toward their final grade. For this reason, I attach a benefit for completing the required readings. I give a series of pop quizzes, each consisting of a single multiple-choice question based on the readings for that class session, with students’ performance on these quizzes counting toward their final grade. I formulate each question in such a way that if the reading has been done to a reasonable degree of thoroughness, the answer will be obvious. And with these quizzes occurring at a rate of almost one per class session, I hope to induce the students to read – not just skim – every reading. I also hope that this experience of having to stay on top of the

readings for every session might help students grow in discipline.

In addition, I incorporate these quizzes into Acts: The Game. For every quiz where at least half the members of a team get the correct answer, the team earns one space on the game board; but if every member gets the correct answer, the team earns two spaces. With this provision comes further inducement to get the readings done; more correct answers mean a better chance at bonus marks and also a better chance of winning the game. However, this provision also makes for some helpful group dynamics. Because one's performance on the quizzes affects not only one's own grade but the whole team's progress – and thus the grades of the other team members – I hope students will develop a sense of responsibility to others on the team. I also hope this provision might prompt some actual accountability dynamics, with team members holding each other accountable for getting the reading done.

The dynamic of responsibility also comes into play in another component of the game, and that is attendance. The college where I teach has a policy of compulsory attendance, with unaccounted-for absences resulting in reductions in one's final grade. Despite this inducement to attend classes, some students still skip. To provide further inducement not to skip, I offer one space on the game board for each block of four consecutive class sessions where every member of a team has no unaccounted-for absences. So, for a student thinking about skipping a class, who may not care about losing marks toward his or her own final grade, perhaps a sense of responsibility to their teammates might be enough to cause a change of heart. This past semester, I was interested to note that entering the final week the Acts students still had a string of perfect attendance going. And though the string was broken by a single absence in the final week, the 99.79 percent attendance rate far exceeds anything attained in the era before Acts: The Game was introduced.

Another way spaces on the game board can be earned is by means of group quizzes. In almost every session, I will press "pause" on a lecture and pose a question to the class, awarding spaces on the game board for teams able to produce the correct answer. While the quizzes mentioned earlier are designed to hold students accountable for the readings, these quizzes are designed to test their analytical skills – specifically, their ability to integrate

into the interpretation of a newly-encountered passage what they have already encountered earlier in the course.

For example, following the apostles' flogging and second release by the Sanhedrin in chapter 5, the narrator mentions, "As they left the council, they rejoiced that they were considered worthy to suffer dishonor for the sake of the name" (5:41 NRSV). I use this as an opportunity to draw into the lecture a cultural dynamic coming out of social-scientific research, specifically the concept of honor. After providing a basic understanding of this value, I use a movie clip depicting an honor-challenge situation, a newspaper report on an honor killing in Iraq, and a description of the honor-restoring practice of hara kiri from my own Japanese heritage to drive home the nature of this value that would have played a significant role in the cultures of the NT era. Then, when we reach chapter 16 and the account of the Philippian jailer, I first explain the traditional interpretation of the jailer's drawing his sword to kill himself: that his allowing prisoners to escape meant he would have to face the penalty they would have faced, and so he decides to take matters into his own hands. But then I give the teams, as a group quiz, the question, "Given what we have seen in the Book of Acts to this point, what is an alternative explanation for the jailer's wanting to kill himself?"

Whether or not members of a given team can make the connection between the jailer's decision to kill himself and the discussion of honor from weeks earlier, the group quiz serves a number of purposes. First, and most obviously, it gives students experience in corporate problem-solving – an experience of working together to achieve a goal – and this serves as a good counter-balance to the dynamic of competition inherent in the game format. Therefore, at the same time members of a given team are thinking in terms of working against the other teams, they will also be thinking in terms of working with members of their own team – in the midst of competition, the dynamic of co-operation. Second, these group quizzes help to accommodate those students who may not learn best through lectures but learn effectively through group discussion. Third, because of the nature of the questions used for these quizzes, students are compelled to continually address their minds to earlier material, resulting in a stronger grasp of the course as a whole. Fourth, when they are able to discern the correct answer, the fact that they have discovered the connection themselves makes a much stronger



impression on them than if I had just explained it as part of the lecture. And, finally, a group quiz simply provides a change of pace – and thus an opportunity to re-engage – for students who may have drifted away during the lecture.

I have noticed that allowing sufficient time for team members to work through the group-quiz questions does add to the already considerable time pressure created by trying to do justice to all 28 chapters of the Book of Acts in just 27 class sessions. With the addition of discussion time for the group quizzes, something had to give, and that has ended up being discussion time of personal application issues.

The new-look Acts course has not completely eliminated discussion of application issues, but the amount retained is definitely below the norm for first-year courses, the level at which the proportion of faith-formation oriented students per class is the highest. To compensate for this loss, I use the opening of each class session to raise points of application. Over the years, I have compiled a library of anecdotes – some from things I have read, others from things I have experienced – and at the beginning of each session, I present one that relates to a theme raised in the previous session. In this way students are invited, without the investment of a significant amount of class time, to reflect on how what they experienced last class relates to their lives today.

As is evident from the foregoing, Acts: The Game does not involve much in the way of head-to-head competition between the teams. However, there is one other major component of the game that does raise head-to-head competition. In discussing the significance of honor in the first-century Mediterranean world, I cover the basics of honor challenges, conceptualizing the challenge-riposte dynamic as something like a game in which units of honor are at stake. So, if one person challenges another and the challenged person is not able to riposte, the challenged person loses honor while the challenging person gains honor. I use this concept as the basis for providing another means by which teams can earn spaces on the game board: the successful challenge of another team.

The challenge would not take the form that an actual honor challenge, such as an insult, a slap – or even a gift – would play in an honor-dominated culture. In fact, the challenge does not have anything to do with honor at all.

But this dynamic of challenge-riposte seemed so well-suited as a component of the game that I had to find some way of including it.

I decided to have the challenges consist of questions on course content. Regarding the formulation of a challenge question, I stipulate that it must be reasonable. In devising the question, students are to think in terms of something they would deem fair if they were to encounter it on an exam. The question is then presented to the challenged team, who have one minute to come up with an answer, being allowed to discuss the question among themselves but not to consult any books or class notes. If they cannot answer the question, the challenging team advances one space on the game board and the challenged team is knocked back one space. But if the challenged team can answer the question, it advances one space and the challenging team is knocked back one space. I hope that the prospect of having to face questions from other teams might be enough to induce students to be constantly reviewing earlier material, thus enhancing their learning in the course. And I suppose that, beside the prospect of losing a space on the game board as a result of being unable to answer a question, there is also the prospect of losing face before one's peers. So perhaps there is an honor component in these challenges after all.

The first year I introduced the "challenge" component, it was hardly used at all. In fact, in one section there was not a single challenge for the whole semester. I discovered at the end of the semester that students in that section had entered into a pact not to issue any challenges, and thus save themselves from having to constantly review the course material; my attempt at tricking these students into learning had failed. In a later semester, however, one section saw a flurry of challenges right near the end. One team was getting close to the finish line in Rome, and thus the pizza party. Another team was so far behind they had no chance at the winner's plaque but became obsessed with preventing the first-place team from making it to Rome. Therefore, the far-behind team challenged the leading team with question after question. In the last session of the semester, members posed a question that stumped the leading team, thus pulling it back one space and leaving it one shy of Rome. With these challenges, the challenging team risked losing spaces and thus moving backwards, perhaps even into a lower bonus territory. That they were willing to take on this spoiler role

demonstrates just how engaged in the game students can become.

This type of engagement does not surround only the challenges. Even with the simple single-question multiple-choice quizzes, the classroom often explodes into cheers and high-fives when I announce the answer. And among the more subdued students, I have witnessed quick conferences among team members to figure out how many spaces they earned through their answers.

I have found that these spaces on the game board really do matter to the students, and not only for the earning of bonus points. When I put the weekly update of the game board up on the screen – weekly is not frequent enough to keep some students from asking for updates in the intervening class sessions as well – students’ reaction is not “How many bonus points do we now have?” Rather, it is more likely to be some good-natured trash-talking.

### **Course Survey Results**

Over the years, I have had students fill out a short survey at the end of the semester, soliciting their feedback on such things as how they feel about the “game” component of the course and about the use of clips from movies and TV shows. However, some of the questions dig deeper, seeking to discover whether the course has made an impact on them. One such question is designed to probe to what extent a student’s interpretive approach to biblical texts might have changed: One of the objectives of the course was to train students in viewing Biblical texts through 1st-century eyes (by introducing concepts such as ‘honour & shame / dyadism / fatalism). Was this objective met for you? Following are results from three Acts classes during the past two years: To a great extent: 69; To some extent: 25; To only a small extent: 2; Not at all: 1. This data strongly suggests that the course has been effective in instilling within students the importance of reading texts from biblical times against the backdrop of the culture of those times, as opposed to automatically defaulting to the cultural norms of 21st century North American Christians.

Given how ethnocentricity is such a prevalent trait of the North American church today, students with this type of training have the opportunity to make an impact on how biblical interpretation is practiced

at the congregational level. Some will go on to become preachers, and with this awareness of the differences between present-day culture and ancient culture, they will be able to do exegesis that takes into account these differences, thus allowing them to produce sermons that better reflect the intended meaning of biblical passages. And even those who do not go into pastoral ministry can use this awareness to help steer others away from anachronistic interpretations of texts in the context of Bible studies.

It remains to address the issue that prompted the revamp of the Acts course in the first place: Has the new-look course succeeded in increasing the level of student engagement with the material? I formulated a pair of questions on the semester-end survey to help provide an assessment of this issue, and following are the results from students in one particular semester fairly early in the life of the course in its new incarnation, at a time when Acts was still a required course and thus prone to having engagement problems with students who did not want to be in it in the first place.

The first question probed the degree of enthusiasm students had as they entered the course. The results indicated that only 28 percent had looked forward to taking it, while the remaining 72 percent ranged from feeling lukewarm about having to take it to not wanting to take it at all.

With that as the before picture, I included the following question to get the after picture: Overall, did you enjoy the course? with the students able to answer: definitely no / no / neutral / yes / definitely yes. There were no students who answered “definitely no” or “no,” and only 14 percent answered “neutral,” with 86 percent answering “yes” or “definitely yes.”

These survey results evidence a marked shift in the attitudes of students, and though there is no way to know for sure if the more positive attitude toward the course resulted in a greater degree of engagement with the material, my subjective observations of the dynamics during class sessions suggest that this was indeed the case. I have been able to declare the experiment a success, and the innovations are here to stay.

*Gary Yamasaki is Professor of Biblical Studies at Columbia Bible College in Abbotsford, British Columbia.*

## Faith and Historical-Critical Pursuits in Teaching

*Loren L. Johns*

### **To Believe ... or to be Honest?**

When I was in Grade 12 at Rockway Mennonite Collegiate in Kitchener, Ontario, one of my teachers dedicated three days to introducing critical issues with regard to the Bible and Christian faith. I recall him saying something like, “I would like your faith to be grounded in something other than naïve Sunday school understandings.”

I was impressed with what he said – and shaken to my core. Although I do not recall now any of the specifics, I do remember being surprised and startled, even shocked, by what he said on those days. It seemed that in my upbringing and church experience, I had not been told the whole story! My great-grandfather, grandfather, and father were all preachers, and I had grown up in the Mennonite Church. But here it felt like I was being invited to think critically about faith-related issues for the first time. Why had I not been told these things before? It was disturbing. Although my teacher did a good job of stimulating my critical thought, he was not gifted with a pastoral approach to the subject matter. I quickly concluded that I had but one choice: to be a Christian, or to be honest. It did not take long to conclude that I must at least be honest. So I rejected my faith, and entered Goshen College as an agnostic.

As a mathematics major, it was not long until I had to take one of the required Bible courses. So I took Old Testament the second semester. The professor was Stanley C. Shenk, who had his PhD in American fiction. He was schooled in the inductive Bible study method propagated by the New York Biblical Seminary and was a local pastor.

Soon we came to the flood narrative in Genesis. As I recall, Shenk identified eleven different critical problems with reading the story literally. For instance, biophysicists had calculated that if indeed “all the high mountains under the whole heaven were covered; the waters swelled above the mountains, covering them fifteen cubits deep” (Gen. 7:19-20), all living plants and trees at the normal sea level would be killed – crushed by 14,000

pounds per square inch of pressure from all of the water. So when all of the water receded, the earth's plant life, needed to support its animal life, would no longer be living!

Shenk then proceeded to consider several possible answers to each of the eleven critical problems. One answer to the above problem was that perhaps for all the hyperbole in the story, the flood was more localized and did not actually involve pouring more than a billion cubic miles of extra water on the earth at the remarkable rate of more than 6 inches of rainfall per minute (30 feet per hour) for 40 days straight! Another possible answer was that if God created everything in the first place, why couldn't God do it again? Here again – this time in college – I was encountering both problems and possible explanations that I had never heard or considered before. And again I was intrigued. But this time I was studying with someone who brought a pastoral concern for his students into the classroom.

Although my thinking and intellectual curiosity were clearly piqued by Shenk in his classes, what made the biggest impression on me was the spirit with which he introduced and addressed critical problems. On the one hand, like my high school teacher, he did not avoid them or pretend as though they did not matter. Unfortunately, this is exactly what the church historically has done with critical issues – and what the Mennonite church continues to do, for the most part: avoid them or pretend as though they do not matter. On the other hand, Shenk was not fearful of those questions. I never got the impression that we were in danger of asking the wrong question – some unknown question that was so dangerous it might bring down the faith like a big house of cards. Nor was he afraid to discover an answer to one of those dangerous questions that might be even more dangerous. This was hugely important for me, given my high school experience. Shenk was confident in his faith and in the rightness of using our minds to think through issues, so far as the limitations of our created minds would permit. He considered critical thinking about life, about God, and about the Bible as a way of loving God with all one's mind.

This was refreshing and deeply encouraging to me. It brought healing to my soul. Ever since then, I have wondered why the church has been so slow to look truth in the eye. In time I found biblical studies so intriguing that I switched my major to Bible, Religion, and Philosophy. I took as many

courses from Shenk as I could. As a teacher of the Bible myself, I have tried to emulate him in his open-eyed embrace of difficult questions in the context of faith, and I have grown in my conviction that it is possible to be both honest and Christian at the same time.

Later in college I encountered a professor who was more like my high school teacher. He had a reputation for entering a freshman Bible class and saying, “The sooner you learn that Matthew didn’t write Matthew, Mark didn’t write Mark, Luke didn’t write Luke, and John didn’t write John, the better!” This was understandably disturbing to students, and it was not long before he was let go by the college. It seems that he too had little inclination – or perhaps giftedness – in reorientation, in connecting or reconnecting critical thought with personal faith.

In 1988-1989 I happened to mention to one of the persons in the church I was attending that I planned to begin a PhD program in New Testament the following year. The church was West Philadelphia Mennonite Fellowship, and the person was Christopher Melchert, who at the time was working on his PhD in Islam at the University of Pennsylvania. (He is currently a Fellow in Arabic at Pembroke College, University of Oxford.) Christopher expressed both surprise and incredulity that I as a Christian could undertake a PhD program in the scriptures of my own religion! Wouldn’t my critical scholarship necessarily compromise my faith ... or vice versa? As a Christian himself he would not be faced with such questions in studying Islam.

### **The Nature of Learning**

In *The Courage to Teach*, Parker Palmer calls teaching and learning a journey of the heart. There is something irreducibly personal about learning. As Palmer puts it, “Teaching ... emerges from one’s inwardness, for better or worse.”<sup>1</sup> To be sure, there is a kind of rote memory learning that is not very personal, but learning that matters is learning that touches on who we are, how we imagine our place in this world, and what we value. Learning is ultimately about shaping and reshaping a worldview that puts us in a proper relationship with God and with the rest of God’s creation.

Because of the personal nature of teaching and learning, there is no such thing as “mastery” in pedagogy, apart from being genuine as a person and persistent in one’s own learning approach to life. One can achieve technical

mastery in various aspects of teaching, but technique is never enough. The best teachers never “arrive”; instead, they continue to embrace the journey. Our capacity to learn is inevitably affected by what is going on in our lives – how invested we are in the subject matter, and how comfortable we are with opening ourselves to it and with making ourselves vulnerable.

True learning changes a person. Learning gives a person power. And yes, there are many stories about how this or that nice young Christian went off to college and there rejected his or her faith. Knowledge is power, and power is capable of making people more effective in their defensiveness. But knowledge and power can also be put into the service of God’s reign. I know of seasoned Christians in the church who pleaded with their grandchildren not to go even to a Christian college, fearing that if they did they would change. More often than not, they did change. Learning does that.

### **Orientation, Disorientation, and Reorientation**

At AMBS I regularly teach “Canon and Community,” which focuses on the writing, preserving, transmitting, canonizing, and translating of the Scriptures throughout history. I also teach an introductory course called “Reading the Bible.” The course is part survey and part introduction to critical methodologies in biblical studies. For many students, these courses are a stretch because they had never been encouraged to think critically about the Bible in their churches. Some were educated to think critically in university, but not to take their faith seriously or to think of critical scholarship as a tool in God’s reign.

So, students come to seminary without much inclination or ability to ask questions about the historical reliability of certain Jesus sayings or to explore how the ancient near Eastern mythologies might inform our reading of the Genesis creation narratives. Both of these courses have significant potential for disorienting students. Our students are diverse anyway. Some come convinced that questioning any straightforward, literal reading of a text is both wrong and dangerous. Others are convinced that only literal readings can be right or faithful. Still others come wondering whether faith itself has any integrity. Most are somewhere between these positions. Given that learning is so personal and that the journeys of our students are so different, it sometimes amazes me that we can make any real progress of the type that matters in our classes.



A number of people have worked with the idea of orientation, disorientation, and reorientation as the basic pattern of life. Paul Ricoeur claimed that Jesus' parables were so memorable and poignant because they typically led a listener on the orientation-disorientation-reorientation journey.<sup>2</sup> Walter Brueggemann has used this same schema in his typological identification of the Psalms.<sup>3</sup>

Students in my "Reading the Bible" course who are most profoundly affected by it are not those who have learned "new facts." Rather, they are those who were disoriented by their learning. They struggled with the critical approach to biblical studies because they felt that a world to which they had long clung was passing out of existence before their very eyes. But they eventually embraced a new world – a new way of making sense of the Bible through the eyes of faith. Hope, despair, and resistance all normally come into play in students' experience of this course. As David Clines puts it, "It is only when that newness meets the human person or community convincingly that an abandonment of the old orientation may be fully affirmed."<sup>4</sup>

Disorientation is naturally and inevitably disturbing. I can imagine no way of teaching this course that avoids the dangerous territory of questioning one's faith. Disorientation is unbearable when it is accompanied by significant fear or mistrust. It is most bearable when students feel just safe enough (psychologically, spiritually, socially, etc.) in the midst of their disorientation to give themselves permission to be disoriented for a time.

In the midst of their disorientation, modeling can offer brief stabilization. If students are able to recognize that others have gone on this same disorienting journey and have maintained faith as they came out the other side, they are encouraged to think that perhaps they can too. As I recognized that Stanley Shenk was not threatened by the "hard" questions of biblical studies, I too gained the courage to follow questions wherever they might go. This underscores the importance of ethos in teaching: the greater the credibility that teachers are able to gain with their students, the greater the disorientation the students will be able to sustain, and the more profound reorientation they will be able to achieve.

Isaiah's comments on the Suffering Servant as teacher in Isaiah 50 have long intrigued me. Isaiah begins with the pronouncement, "The Lord

GOD has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word” (v. 4a-d). But he says nothing more about speaking or the pastoral goals of teaching; he focuses rather on listening: “Morning by morning he wakens – wakens my ear to listen as those who are taught. The Lord GOD has opened my ear” (vv. 4e-5a). The teacher is first and foremost a learner (the real meaning of scholar). Just as intriguing, Isaiah then moves from listening to a posture of vulnerability: “I was not rebellious, I did not turn backward. I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I did not hide my face from insult and spitting” (vv. 5b-6). Speaking, offering pastoral care, listening (well), always being open to learn more, and being vulnerable are the five things Isaiah associates with teaching. It is as if he knew that teaching is, at its best, a personal matter.

It is asking a lot of a course – and of professors – to teach basic Bible content and critical methodologies all while deconstructing and constructing new worlds and offering some limited form of pastoral care to students. Incoming students are increasingly diverse, not only in their knowledge of the Bible but in their journey with faith, their level of comfort with ambiguities in life, and their capacity to tolerate disorientation.

### **Temptations of a Teacher**

Sometimes I am tempted to shortchange the necessary and personal journey of orientation-disorientation-reorientation. Sometimes I get frustrated when students hear things that I did not say – or do not hear what I thought I said. Sometimes I just wish I could control what they heard! But ludicrous as that thought is, it misses the fact that each student must participate individually in the corporate responsibility and opportunity of making sense of life – and of the Bible.

Another temptation is to take the easy way out and not care. It costs to care. How much easier it would be just to be satisfied with delivering the content, assigning grades, and being done with it. Easier, yes. But meaningful, fulfilling, satisfying? No. Our trust as teachers is too precious for that!

The Lord GOD has given me  
the tongue of a teacher,

that I may know how to sustain  
the weary with a word.  
Morning by morning he wakens—  
wakens my ear  
to listen as those who are taught.  
The Lord God has opened my ear,  
and I was not rebellious,  
I did not turn backward.  
I gave my back to those who struck me,  
and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard;  
I did not hide my face  
from insult and spitting.

**Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Parker J. Palmer, *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 2.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Ricoeur, "Biblical Hermeneutics," *Semeia* 4 (1975): 29-148, esp. 114-24; cf. also "Religion and Faith" in *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur: An Anthology of his Work*, ed. Charles E. Reagan and David Stewart (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), 234-35; Paul Tournier, "Two Movements," in *A Place for You* (London: SCM Press, 1968), 97-111; David J. A. Clines, *The Poetical Books; The Biblical Seminar, no. 41; A Sheffield Reader* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 40-42; and Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1982), 46-48.

<sup>3</sup> See Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984).

<sup>4</sup> Clines, *The Poetical Books*, 42.

*Loren L. Johns is Professor of New Testament at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Elkhart, Indiana.*

# **“Your Daughters Shall Prophecy”: How Can We Keep Silent?<sup>1</sup>**

*Laura L. Brenneman*

The full title of this essay consists of a biblical quotation and allusion, both of which are important for my argument. My central point is that women teachers of the Bible are essential guides for faithful interpretation of the Bible. This grows out of observations in my setting of a church-related institution of higher education; however, I believe that this point is also widely applicable in the church. Below, I engage in a brief exegesis of the title’s biblical references, reflect on experiences of some Christian women in relation to the Bible, and provide a pedagogical lens that highlights the importance of female interpreters of the Bible.

## **What’s in a Title?**

The quotation, “your daughters shall prophecy” is originally found in Joel 2:28 and then picked up in Acts in one of Peter’s speeches (Acts 2:17-18). The quotation in Joel is set within the context of God relenting from showing wrath to Israelites for disobedience to their covenant with God. After the ruin of the countryside from locusts and an unspecified foreign army, the Lord has pity on the people. God promises to restore them and says, “Then afterward I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophecy.”<sup>2</sup> This is to happen after their repentance and restoration; God’s spirit will descend upon all people before the day of the Lord comes (Joel 2:32). In Acts, Peter modifies Joel’s lead statement; the “afterward” becomes “in the last days.”<sup>3</sup> The apostles’ situation must have felt like the last days, the days when Joel’s prophecy is fulfilled. Just a few verses earlier, Peter and the other apostles were sitting in a house in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost. Acts reports that “suddenly from heaven came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting” (2:2). This is what the resurrected Jesus had promised to them before he ascended. They were to receive power when the Holy Spirit came upon them (1:8). On the day of Pentecost, the Spirit did come upon them and

they “began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability” (2:4). No wonder Peter likens this situation to the last days spoken of by the prophet Joel. He stands up to his critics who believe that the apostles are merely drunk and declares with prophetic authority,

In the last days it will be, God declares,  
that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,  
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,  
and your young men shall see visions,  
and your old men shall dream dreams.  
Even upon my slaves, both men and women,  
in those days I will pour out my Spirit;  
and they shall prophesy. (Acts 2:17-18)

It is clear that Peter is given great power in the Holy Spirit. After his impassioned speech, crowds came forward to be baptized, and Acts reports that about 3,000 people were added on that day (2:41). Acts indicates that divine authority can be discerned by being attuned to how the Lord is pouring out the Holy Spirit in the world. I suggest that this should continue to be an interpretive principle for our own church communities, in which I include church-sponsored academic institutions.

As a biblical scholar, I exist in a field of study that has traditionally been peopled by men.<sup>4</sup> Further, by nature of my calling and my training I am an interpreter of holy scriptures, but these very scriptures report at some points that I should have no authority to teach or interpret, particularly to men. However, bolstered by the texts from Joel and Acts, I impertinently raise the question, How can women keep silent?

The subtitle, then, of this essay is an allusion to several passages in the New Testament. The first is to 1 Timothy, where we read “Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent” (2:11-12).<sup>5</sup> It is difficult for me to see how this admonition can be generalized outside of the context that the author is addressing, particularly since he follows this with the “encouragement” that a woman “will be saved through childbearing, provided they<sup>6</sup> continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty”

(2:15). It is remarkable that a Christian, claiming to write with the authority of the Apostle Paul, can say that salvation comes through any means other than Jesus Christ.<sup>7</sup>

My question in the subtitle – how can we keep silent? – also refers to a passage in an undisputed letter of Paul.<sup>8</sup> In 1 Cor. 14:34-35 we find that “women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says. If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church.” Those who oppose women in church leadership (including being a biblical scholar at a church institution) often look here to demonstrate their position. Again, this is not easily generalized to all women; in fact, if given the opportunity to discuss this with Paul, I would probably question him about how serious he is.<sup>9</sup> In this passage, he is concerned about orderly worship. He addresses the proper protocol for speaking in tongues, prophesying, and women speaking in church (14:26-40). He seems particularly concerned about order for the sake of outsiders and unbelievers who may observe church in session and have reason to be turned off (14:23-24). In addition, we know from chapter 11 that Paul is thinking that the Corinthian women are already getting a bit out of hand because they are not covering their heads when they pray.<sup>10</sup>

So, it is clear that Paul is nervous about the liberties that women are taking in worship. However, in chapter 14, before he addresses who needs to keep silent in church, he points to the possibility that the whole church, regardless of gender, could come together to speak in tongues (14:23); all of the people could even prophesy (14:24). In the face of this assertion, it is strange that Paul tells married women (for how can single women consult their husbands when they get home?) to be silent altogether. Further, Paul’s counsel to men and women alike in chapter 7 about marriage and service to the Lord indicates that he considers them equally affected by these things. The advice is strikingly balanced throughout, without distinction in expectations between men and women. Paul writes to the Corinthian women that “the unmarried woman and the virgin are anxious about the affairs of the Lord, so that they may be holy in body and spirit; but the married woman is anxious about the affairs of the world, how to please her husband” (7:34); this follows his parallel observations about unmarried and

married men (7:32-33).

Up to this point I have completely neglected Paul’s famous proclamation in Gal. 3:28 that as Christians “there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ.” This does not mesh well with the passage on silence in 1 Cor. 14 that unequally affects women. If Paul did write 1 Cor. 14:34-35 in sincerity, either he must have done so because of a particular situation in Corinth at that time or he must have been altering his previously-held notion (just ten verses earlier) that male and female are equal in Christ.

I suppose if I should ever gain my much longed-for chat session with the Apostle Paul, I would pose my question – how can we keep silent? – with a third biblical allusion in mind. The verse contains Jesus’ response to the Pharisees in Luke 19. Here, Jesus has just entered Jerusalem triumphantly on the back of a colt to the cheers of a “whole multitude of disciples” (19:37).<sup>11</sup> The Pharisees in the crowd asked Jesus to order his disciples to stop; Jesus answered, “I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out” (19:40). How, then, can women accept admonitions to keep silent? This becomes particularly pressing if we believe the early apostles that the Holy Spirit is already moving among Christian believers and may cause both sons and daughters to prophesy.

### **Experiences of Young Women**

Perhaps the issue of women as authorities in matters of biblical interpretation is passé. It could be that we exist in a time when women no longer hear that we are not as worthy or as reliable as men in positions of authority. Perhaps Biola University is correct to be worried that things have actually tipped in the other direction and that there is a feminization of church institutions, meaning that there is a preference for women leaders that is driving men away.<sup>12</sup> However, my own experience does not bear this out.

I will point to only three instances here. I received the message that women are inferior to men in my home congregation; this was particularly clear after our male pastor, who had been at my church during my high school years, was asked to leave. The reasons I heard for this were that he preached that men and women were created as equals and that he did not use a gendered pronoun for God, among other things. I also heard messages from

my family about the untrustworthiness of women in leadership. Just before I embarked on my academic pursuit to become an interpreter of the Bible, a relative quoted 1 Tim. 2:12 to me, the passage about women not being allowed to teach or to have any authority over men. Finally, that same verse was quoted defiantly by a fellow camp counselor to the female director of the church camp where we were working for the summer. That young man used the verse to disregard what this much older and wiser person had to say about how to be a good camp counselor. It has been my experience that some people of faith will marshal arguments from the Bible to show that women are not legitimate biblical interpreters.

As a teacher, I adhere to the philosophy that personal experience facilitates learning. What I study is reinforced or challenged by what I experience, and vice versa. This is typically called an action-reflection model of learning.<sup>13</sup> In the classroom, I invite students into reflection about their experiences as a way to reinforce material. In a similar manner, I asked several of my women students at Bluffton University what their experience has taught them about appropriate roles for women in church-based settings.

Among the responses, I found there are still strong messages from home and church that women are less trusted interpreters of scripture than are men.<sup>14</sup> Of the women I interviewed, those who had received positive messages had mothers who were ministers. Most of these young women admitted to having problems or being confused about women in leadership roles when reading the biblical text. However, despite some unease with the Bible about women, they all thought that they could put together a biblical case for women in ministry. In one e-mail I received, a woman said, "In reading the Bible I have been challenged to find examples of female leadership, but I have found them despite the sometimes overwhelmingly patriarchal language. Strong female leadership is visible in the Bible and it has challenged me not to buy into a restrictive understanding [of] gender roles."<sup>15</sup>

My experience is that biblical evidence can be exploited for what seem to be less-than-honorable agendas; and while churchgoers may be growing more accepting of women as interpreters of the Bible, my interviews with just a few Bluffton students indicate that we are not yet fully comfortable



with this view. There is still work to do. Instead of allowing people to tell women that it is appropriate for us to keep silent, we must insist that when God pours out the Holy Spirit even the daughters will prophesy.

### **Importance of Role Models: A Pedagogical Lens**

I have come to believe in the importance of role models, particularly for females seeking to sort through the various messages in society and church about what it is to be a proper woman. These role models are both living and dead. Along these lines, I suggest that it is good for women and men to learn from women Bible scholars. The Bible is a text that contains shocking stories about the use and abuse of women. For our own strength and wisdom in this world, it is good to know about these “texts of terror,”<sup>16</sup> to develop interpretive strategies about them, and to celebrate the strength of our foremothers. Just as the Bible often deconstructs and challenges the use and abuse of women in the ancient Near Eastern cultures (including the Israelite culture), it is important for us to be witnesses to the leadership and strength of biblical women. Further, I believe that women are uniquely positioned to teach those stories.

The Bible has a wide range of both encouraging and dreadful stories of women. Here are some examples. Women are often talked about as objects that can be taken or given as men please, such as Jephthah’s daughter (Judges 11), the women of Shiloh (Judges 21), the unnamed Levite’s concubine (Judges 19), and Hagar (Genesis 16, 21). Often women are depicted as sexual objects, such as Tamar who was raped by her brother (2 Samuel 13), Gomer (Hosea), and Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11-12). Women are also understood to be dangerous, particularly because their sexual allure might entice otherwise steadfast men into idolatry, as was the case with the Moabite women in the Baal Peor incident (Numbers 25) and the women of the land who were set aside by returning Israelite exiles (Ezra 10; Nehemiah 13). It is important to know these stories because we, then, have a glimpse of what our spiritual foremothers endured. In knowing them, we have a firsthand appreciation of the rare occasions in which dignity and authority are afforded women of the Bible. Specifically, in the world of the prophet Joel, it is remarkably counter-cultural for him to portray God’s Spirit pouring out on men and women alike, allowing both to prophesy.

These are important stories to know. As a teacher, I highlight them

because they are challenging and do not allow for “pat” answers in regard to scripture. I teach Tribble’s *Texts of Terror* to senior religion majors and it is unsettling for us all; however, hard texts do not go away by ignoring them. In fact, Tribble makes a compelling case that studying hard texts is important because it “undercuts triumphalism.”<sup>17</sup> There are always people who are hurt, always people who are run over by dominant stories, even in the Bible. Thus it is good for us to learn to pause in our pursuit of comfort, to take the time to look and listen; if Christians do not learn to notice and deal with distress, how can we possibly reach out to “the least of these” (Matt. 25:40)? Moreover, who will sit with us when it is we who are in distress?

Not all of the stories of the women in the Bible are terrible and degrading, so we should cherish the stories of strong leader-women all the more. Here we find wise women and prophets, like Deborah (Judges 4-5), Huldah (2 Kings 22), Miriam (Exodus 15), Abigail (1 Samuel 25), Anna (Luke 2), and Paul’s prophet women in 1 Corinthians 14. Jesus’ most faithful companions were women – Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, Martha, Salome, Joanna, and the woman who anointed him before his death and who seem to understand him better than the Twelve (Mark 14//Matthew 26//John 12). Even some of the sexually “shady” women, like Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba, and Mary are given pride of place in Matthew’s genealogy and story of Jesus Christ (Matthew 1). We also read about women who were leaders in the early church, like Junia (Rom. 16:7), Chloe (1 Cor. 1:11), Phoebe (Rom. 16:1), Priscilla (Acts 18; Rom. 16:3; 1 Cor. 16:19; 2 Tim. 4:19), and Lydia (Acts 16). Finally, there are women who conversed with God, like Hagar (Genesis 16; 21) and the Canaanite/Syrophenician woman (Matthew 15//Mark 7).

Women and men alike can draw strength from these stories, knowing that God loves women who are leaders – strong, wise, and articulate. In addition to teaching these biblical stories, I can offer encouragement to my students because I am a biblical interpreter and authority figure. I serve as a mentor to them, sometimes sharing personal stories and passing on hope. Words of encouragement can go a long way. I have been lucky enough to have several women professors who prompted me to continue in my studies and to become a teacher.<sup>18</sup> Role models can make a difference in people’s lives. Without my role models, I would not be a Bible professor and church leader.

In sum, here I suggest that the Bible itself helps us learn how to read it, and that it matters who is teaching it. My eyes are sensitive to the stories of women in the Bible because I can relate to their fears and joys. Further, I am not afraid to teach difficult texts like those listed above, because I know from experience that it is better to speak up than to remain silent on issues that scare us. We teachers do our students a disservice when we skip over hard texts; we are not helping them to develop interpretive strategies for these difficulties. In a world in which acts of violence against women still occur and women are often not treated as honorably as men, I believe that my unique place as a woman biblical scholar benefits my female and male students, both as teacher and role model. We talk about hard texts together and we develop strategies to resist oppressive readings. I teach them that our primary tool of resistance is the Bible itself. We learn from its pages that God desires to grace all of us with the Holy Spirit.

In Acts Peter assures all his hearers, including us, that the Spirit of the Lord is poured out and we should expect it to fall on us to do great things. We can take heart from the stories of the Bible and from the stories of women around us who are living in the Spirit. Indeed, we have the interpretive onus to declare that the Lord is coming and that the Lord’s Spirit is poured out. We must discern the movement of the Spirit and give ear to those who prophesy, sons and daughters alike.<sup>19</sup> I believe that reading the Bible with attention to women’s experience, both in and out of the Bible, can help Christians in discerning the Spirit. For that, women Bible teachers are essential.

So, how can we keep silent?

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> A version of this essay was originally delivered in honor of Bluffton University’s president, Dr. Lee Snyder, upon her retirement; the event was called “Lee Snyder, Bluffton University, and Women in the Academy,” April 19, 2006.

<sup>2</sup> All biblical quotations are from the NRSV unless otherwise noted.

<sup>3</sup> As a matter of convenience, I say here that the quotation from Peter is “modified.” It could be that the author has joined the opening words of Isaiah’s oracle in 2:2 with the passage from Joel. However, there were multiple Greek translations of the Hebrew Bible in circulation in the first century CE, so the Joel quotation in Acts may also be as it appeared in the scripture that Luke knew. This is a debated and technical point; the reader may refer to Kenneth Duncan Litwak, *Echoes of Scripture in Luke-Acts: Telling the History of God’s*

*People Intertextually*. Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series 282, ed. Mark Goodacre (London: T & T Clark International, 2005), 1-7, for a more thorough overview of these issues.

<sup>4</sup> This reality in the field is also mirrored in my institution, Bluffton University, where I am the only woman in a 6-person department (History and Religion). In a staff of 63 full-time teaching faculty, there are 22 women (35 percent of the whole). This information is from a personal e-mail from Dr. Sally Weaver Sommer, Vice President and Dean of Academic Affairs, received December 14, 2009.

<sup>5</sup> On the topic of submission, see also Titus 2:5; 1 Pet. 3:1-7; Eph. 5:22-24; Col. 3:18.

<sup>6</sup> The “they” here is difficult. It could refer to the woman as the RSV translates it, or to the children as the NRSV translates it. The latter is more likely, given that “woman” is singular in 2:15 in the Greek, as it is throughout 1 Tim 2:11-15.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Paul in 1 Cor. 3:11, “For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ.”

<sup>8</sup> I use the word “undisputed” here because Pauline authorship of the Pastoral epistles (1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, and Titus) is not generally accepted by scholars.

<sup>9</sup> Of course, there is always the question as to whether these verses are authentically Pauline. Some scholars consider this an interpolation, given its similarity to the Pastoral position. Jerome Murphy-O’Connor is representative of the case against Pauline authorship: “In all probability Paul did not write 14:34-35 (though the point is disputed). Not only does it contradict 11:5, ... the injunctions reflect the misogyny of 1 Tim 2:11-14, and stem from the same patriarchal, postpauline circles which could not accept the full equality of women which Paul espoused (11:11).” See “1 and 2 Corinthians” in *The Cambridge Companion to St. Paul*, ed. James D. G. Dunn (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2003), 82.

<sup>10</sup> He gives several reasons for why women’s heads should be covered, some more comprehensible than others. They should have something on their heads because of angels (1 Cor. 11:10), because women and men are interdependent (11:11), and because nature teaches that women should have long hair, which is their covering (11:14). When it comes down to it, Paul closes by appealing to tradition: there should be no more discussion because it is the custom (11:16).

<sup>11</sup> The plural use of “disciples” makes it impossible to tell if only males were hailing Jesus as he came into town; however, the author emphasizes the largeness of the crowd, which points to the likelihood that it was a mixture of men and women.

<sup>12</sup> The reference is to an article in Biola University’s alumni magazine: Holly Pivec, “The Feminization of the Church: Why Its Music, Messages and Ministries Are Driving Men Away,” *Biola Connections* (Spring 2006): 10-17.

<sup>13</sup> The reader may recognize this as a truncated version of the “praxis” step of critical pedagogy, made famous by Paulo Freire in *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, originally published in Portuguese in 1968. I was first introduced to this model of teaching and learning by Dr. Daniel Schipani during a teaching practicum at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary several years after I had graduated from college.

<sup>14</sup> The sentiment was stronger against women engaged in pastoral ministry than against women as Bible teachers.

<sup>15</sup> Personal e-mail, April 18, 2006.

<sup>16</sup> This is a reference to Phyllis Tribble’s significant book, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984). Other classic texts on feminist hermeneutics are Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1987) and Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon, 1983).

<sup>17</sup> Tribble, *Texts of Terror*, 3.

<sup>18</sup> In fact, one of my undergraduate professors was Dr. Lee Snyder, then also the academic dean of Eastern Mennonite University. She was one of the people who encouraged me to pursue graduate studies and to consider teaching at a Mennonite college.

<sup>19</sup> This is akin to Peter’s declaration in Acts 10:47, when the early church was reckoning with how the Lord was working in new and mysterious ways with Gentiles, “Can we withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?”

*Laura Brenneman is Associate Professor of Religion and Director of Peace and Conflict Studies at Bluffton University in Bluffton, Ohio.*

## **Jonah, the “Whale,” and Dr. Seuss: Asking Historical Questions without Alienating Conservative Students<sup>1</sup>**

*Eric A. Seibert*

Many undergraduate students enrolled at Christian colleges and universities come into the requisite introductory Bible course with the belief that everything in the Bible, or almost everything, happened more or less as the Bible says it did. They are convinced there really was a worldwide flood, Egypt actually did suffer ten devastating plagues at the hands of God, and the walls of Jericho quite literally came crashing down after the Israelites circled the city seven times. In fact, virtually all the well-known Old Testament stories are regarded as “true” stories about real people and historical events. While they might allow for the possibility of some embellishment, and may even regard a few stories as more parabolic than historical, by and large they believe the OT contains an accurate rendering of Israel’s past.

Many factors contribute to this view of the OT. The notion that these stories are historical accounts of what actually happened is often implied by sermons, Sunday school curriculum, and a wide assortment of books, videos, and DVDs that give this impression. Our modern expectations and assumptions about history writing also contribute to this view. Today, we put a premium on historical reliability and expect a wide range of materials – history books, biographies, and newspapers – to include reasonably accurate stories about real people, places, and events. Many people expect no less of the Bible, assuming that similar standards for writing history existed then as do now.<sup>2</sup> Expectations about the historical nature of the Bible are also reinforced by claims scholars make. When OT scholar Tremper Longman declares that “the events of the Bible are as real as what happened to you today,” many readers instinctively agree.<sup>3</sup>

Additionally, this confidence in the Bible’s historical reliability is supported by the belief that the Bible is divinely inspired. Since many conservative students believe God is the source of the Bible, and thus its ultimate “author,” they see no reason to question its trustworthiness. If God

stands behind the writing of these stories, why question whether they report “what actually happened”? Certainly, they reason, God would not allow people to write things that were not “true.”

The cumulative effect of all these factors has a profound impact upon the way students view the Bible and makes it easy to understand why so many confidently believe the OT is a reliable record of the past. They are convinced the Bible is historically accurate because that is what they have been taught to believe or—at the very least—have always assumed. This results in a deeply held conviction at the core of their beliefs. Many theologically conservative students have never seriously questioned the validity of this belief or been introduced to alternate ways of understanding the biblical text. Understandably, they hesitate to relinquish this core conviction and often feel threatened when alternate perspectives are proposed.

For many students, the first real challenge to this view comes in the college classroom. Many professors who teach biblical studies do not share their students’ views about the historicity of various portions of the Bible. On the contrary, they regard such views as ill-informed and even potentially dangerous.

### **The Dangers of Demanding the Historicity of the Bible**

Those who assume everything in the Bible actually happened are often unaware of the potential dangers of maintaining this view. For example, insisting all the stories are historically reliable jeopardizes the Bible’s credibility. Some of the most embarrassing moments in the history of the church have been those in which Christians have publicly attempted to “defend” the Bible’s accuracy. One need only recall the humiliating performance of William Jennings Bryan at the Scopes Monkey Trial as case in point.<sup>4</sup>

Another significant problem resulting from assumptions about the Bible’s essential historicity is the view of God it fosters. These assumptions create severe difficulties for those wishing to use the Bible theologically, as a resource for understanding who God is and how God acts in the world. When certain texts are read as an account of what actually happened, the picture of God that emerges is deeply disturbing. Take, for instance, the divine command to exterminate the Amalekites in 1 Sam. 15:2-3. Here, the

prophet Samuel reportedly relays a divine message to King Saul:

Thus says the Lord of hosts, “I will punish the Amalekites for what they did in opposing the Israelites when they came up out of Egypt. Now go and attack Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have; do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey.”<sup>5</sup>

For those who take this divine directive as historical fact, it follows that the annihilation of the Amalekites was the will of God. As such, it reveals at least four highly troubling propositions about God: 1) God sometimes commissions and sanctions genocide, 2) God sometimes punishes people by commanding other people to kill them, 3) God sometimes punishes one group of people for the sins of another group, and 4) God sometimes demands the death of people who apparently have little or no opportunity to repent.

These “truths” necessarily follow when reading the divine command as historical fact. But does this picture accurately represent the true nature and character of God? If so, it is certainly not the God many Christians today worship. Insisting that this narrative portrays what actually happened creates serious theological problems that are difficult to overcome.<sup>6</sup>

### **Five Effective Pedagogical Strategies**

What are we as educators to do? How can we help students think more critically about the nature of the Bible? How can we raise the historical question without unnecessarily raising their defenses? I would like to offer five pedagogical strategies – suggestions, really – designed to enable educators to help theologically conservative students wrestle with this issue more constructively. Although my comments are especially geared toward how to raise this issue when discussing OT narratives, the approach applies to the entire Bible. In what follows, I will use the book of Jonah to illustrate how the suggested strategies might be deployed.

#### *1. Differentiate between a Story's Truthfulness and its Historicity*

When discussing the historical question, one of the most important things we can do is help students realize that a story's truthfulness does not depend upon its historicity. Doing so requires making careful distinctions between



“truth” and “history.” Unfortunately, the common way the word “true” is used renders this task far more difficult. For example, suppose you and a friend have just finished watching a movie. As you are leaving the theater, your friend asks, “Do you think that movie was based on a true story?” By putting the question this way, your friend is asking whether you think the story really happened, whether it is rooted in historical events. Even granting considerable artistic license, your friend wants to know if you think the movie portrayed real people and real events. By asking if it was based on a true story, your friend essentially equates the words “true” and “historical,” using them as virtual synonyms.

Although the practice of using “true” and “historical” synonymously is understandable, it is unfortunate because of how it conditions us to think about the Bible. Since we are taught to believe the Bible is true, we instinctively conclude it must be historical, given the way these two terms function in modern usage. Admitting that the Bible is not historical would seem tantamount to admitting it is not true. But is this necessarily the case? I think not. Determining whether something is historical and determining whether something is true are two fundamentally different kinds of questions. Something can be undeniably true even if it is not historical.

I routinely try to make this point in the introductory Bible course I teach. Late in the semester, I show the class a Dr. Seuss video titled “The Butter Battle Book.”<sup>7</sup> The video has a very simple plot. It describes a conflict between two groups of “people” (cartoon characters), the Yooks and the Zooks. As the story begins, we see a very small Yook and his grandfather walking toward a high stone wall. The grandson says:

On the last day of summer, ten hours before fall, my grandfather took me out to the Wall. For a while we stood silent, and finally he said with a very sad shake of his very old head: “As you know, on this side of the Wall, we are Yooks. On the far other side of this Wall live the Zooks. And the things that you’ve heard about Zooks are all true, that terribly horrible thing that they do. And at every Zook house, and in every Zook town, every Zook eats his bread (shudder) with the butter side down!”

The Yooks hate the Zooks and the Zooks return the favor for one simple reason: they disagree over which side of the bread to butter. The

Yooks butter their bread up on top – “the true honest way” – while the Zooks butter theirs “down below.” This causes great tension between the two groups, who seem to know virtually nothing else about each other. In order to keep an eye on the Zooks “in their land of bad butter,” the elder Yook tells his grandson about taking a job on “the Zook-Watching Border Patrol.” Walking along the wall, he watched the Zooks closely. If they gave him any trouble, he just threatened them with a shake of his “tough-tufted prickly Snick-Berry Switch.” For a time, that was all that was needed to maintain order.

At this point, the story sours for the Yooks. “Then one terrible day,” says grandfather Yook, “a very rude Zook by the name of Van Itch, snuck up and slingshotted my Snick-Berry Switch.” An arms race ensues as each side builds bigger or comparable weapons. As the story draws to a close, the grandfather (Yook) and Van Itch (Zook) stand face-to-face on the wall, each armed with a “Big-Boy Boomeroo” (a nuclear weapon). Only then do we again hear from the grandson, who by this point in the story has been all but forgotten. “Grandpa, be careful,” he says. “Hey, easy. Oh gee. Who’s going to drop it? Will you or will he?” His grandfather replies, “Why, be patient. We’ll see. We will see.” A screen then appears with the words “The End,” followed momentarily with the word “Maybe” underneath.

After watching this video, I ask the students three questions. First, I ask them whether what they just saw actually happened. Of course, the answer is “No.” It did not actually happen because there are no such beings as “Yooks” and “Zooks.” There are no such weapons as a “Snick-Berry Switch” or a “Big-Boy Boomeroo.” And besides, cartoons typically do not portray stories that actually happened.

Next, I ask them if the story is true. They say “Yes,” because they easily recognize this story as symbolic of the Cold War and think that something is true if it is historical. Moreover, many “truths” can be found in this story. It demonstrates how prejudice gets passed down from one generation to another by family members and educational systems. That is unquestionably, albeit tragically, true. Another “truth” in the story is that large conflicts often erupt over seemingly insignificant matters. After reflecting on the “truth” of the story, I then summarize what I am hearing: “So far we have said that even though this story didn’t actually happen, it is

still true in certain respects.”

Then I ask my final question. “Might we apply this same line of thinking to the biblical text? Is it possible that there might be things in the Bible that never actually happened but which are still profoundly true?” Some students are obviously uncomfortable with this move, though it is not too difficult to recognize that certain biblical stories are true even though they never happened. Students typically mention Jesus’ parables in this regard. Take, for instance, the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-37). If you had been in the crowd that day and asked Jesus the Samaritan’s name or the town where he took the victim for lodging, the crowd would have had a good laugh at your expense! Jesus was telling a story to make a point, not to report a specific historical incident. To be sure, Jerusalem and Jericho were real cities, and there actually was a road between the two as the story claims. Moreover, we know that robbers and bandits frequently did assault people on that dangerous stretch of road in the first century. That notwithstanding, the story Jesus told about the good Samaritan did not actually take place. It was “only” a parable.

So, is the parable true? Not according to the way many people normally classify a story as being true. If a story must be historical to be true, then this parable is most certainly false. But that conclusion immediately exposes the inadequacy of our language and our common notions of what constitutes a “true” story. To say this parable is not true is ridiculous! Of course it’s true. It’s true because it reveals something about God’s will for how human beings are to relate to one another. Specifically, it teaches us who our neighbors are and how we should respond to someone in need, even when that person is our enemy.

A story’s truthfulness is not dependent upon whether or not it actually happened. Truth can be delivered through many different genres: parables, historiographical writings, gospels – even fiction. As Hebrew Bible scholar Ronald Hendel puts it in a brief article dealing with the flood narrative in Genesis, “The best stories, of course, are a vehicle for profound insights into our relationship to the world, each other, and God. . . . The biblical story of Noah’s Flood is an exemplary and immortal narrative in this respect. Even if it didn’t happen, it’s a true story.”<sup>8</sup> Differentiating between questions of historicity and questions of truth is crucial to helping theological conservative students entertain new ideas about the nature of the Bible.

## *2. Explain Why Scholars Question the Historicity of Certain Stories*

It is important to take time to explore the kind of evidence that leads biblical scholars to question the historical veracity of certain stories in the Bible. In my introductory Bible course, I used to assign a small book by John Barton titled *How the Bible Came to Be*. While I think it was helpful to students in many ways, some brief comments Barton makes about the books of Ruth and Jonah were not. As something of an aside, he writes that “The books of Ruth and Jonah, short stories about imaginary characters, have few signs of being compilations. They seem to be conscious works of fiction.”<sup>9</sup> Inevitably, students would either ask me about this in class or write about it in their assigned journals. Barton’s statement catches many of them off guard and challenges some of their most basic beliefs about the Bible. Regrettably, Barton never explains why he thinks as he does about these two OT books. He simply declares them “fictional” without supplying any rationale for that conclusion. This kind of casual proclamation is not very persuasive to people who have believed in the Bible’s historical reliability all their lives. In fact, unexplained declarations like these tend to do more harm than good, raising readers’ defenses rather than inviting them to seriously consider an alternative way of viewing things.

In order to avoid this pitfall, I try to be explicit about the kind of evidence prompting some interpreters to conclude that the OT does not always report exactly what happened. When discussing the book of Jonah, for example, I highlight several items that seem to cast doubt on its historicity.<sup>10</sup> I start with Jonah’s physiologically implausible fish ride, undoubtedly the best known part of the story. There are numerous difficulties with the prophet’s three-day, three-night underwater adventure. The gullet of a whale<sup>11</sup> is too narrow to swallow an adult. Even if it were wide enough, the chances of a person surviving for three days and nights inside such a creature seem highly unlikely. The gastric juices – not to mention the lack of oxygen – would not be very conducive for sustaining human life. Additionally, it seems rather improbable that Jonah would have been in any state, physically or mentally, to pray the prayer that he reportedly uttered while inside the fish’s belly (Jon. 2:2-9).

From a historical point of view, another problematic feature of the story is the enormous size of Nineveh. Traveling through Nineveh required

“a three days’ walk across” (Jon. 3:3). For a city to be a three days’ walk across, it would have to be approximately fifty miles in diameter. Yet archaeological excavations at the ancient city of Nineveh have determined the city was never that large. Instead, it was no greater than seven and a half miles in circumference, and only about three miles in diameter at the oblong axis. Although this is still very large by ancient standards, walking from one end of the city to the other could easily have been done in less than half a day.<sup>12</sup>

The presence of numerous supernatural events in this very short prophetic book has also led scholars to question its historicity. As Leslie Allen writes:

This little book is a series of surprises; it is crammed with an accumulation of hair-raising and eye-popping phenomena, one after the other. The violent seastorm, the submarine-like fish in which Jonah survives as he composes a song, the mass conversion in Nineveh, the magic plant – these are not commonplace features of OT prophetic narratives. While one or two exciting events would raise no question, the bombardment of the reader with surprise after surprise in a provocative manner suggests that the author’s intention is other than simply to describe historical facts.<sup>13</sup>

While I do not question God’s ability to perform miracles, the fact that this prophetic book contains so many, while other Latter Prophets contain none at all, raises serious questions about the kind of story we are reading. The writer seems to be sending the reader important signals that suggest this book is not to be read as straightforward historical reporting.

Finally, a close reading of the book reveals a highly sophisticated literary structure that makes it seem more like a carefully written piece of literature than a record of past events. For example, there are intriguing parallels between chapters 1 and 3. Both chapters describe an unnamed “pagan” acting decisively in a time of crisis – the captain in chapter 1 and the king in chapter 3 – and both chapters begin with a nearly identical word from God to Jonah. Interesting parallels also occur between chapters 2 and 4. Jonah speaks to God in both chapters, though in the former Jonah thanks God for saving his life and in the latter he asks God to take it. The

conversation that takes place between Jonah and God in chapter 4 is an especially striking piece of literary artistry. According to the Hebrew text, both individuals speak exactly the same number of words in the following order: Jonah thirty-nine, God three, Jonah three, God five, Jonah five, God thirty-nine.<sup>14</sup> This level of linguistic coordination is difficult to explain if someone was simply recording what actually happened.

When raising the historical question, I think it is important to share this kind of information with students so they can evaluate the evidence for themselves. This allows them to actively engage the issue in a more informed manner, and opens them to the possibility that the story represents something other than an unvarnished record of the past.

### *3. Present Multiple Perspectives, Especially Theologically Conservative Ones.*

It is also helpful to present multiple perspectives. Particularly, it seems important to give some attention to the way those who maintain the Bible's historicity respond to those who raise questions about it. One way to do this in regard to the book of Jonah is to present counter-arguments to some of the challenges mentioned above by demonstrating how conservative scholars – and others – might respond.

Take, for example, the claim that the story could not have happened because it is impossible for a person to survive inside the belly of a “great fish” for three days and nights. When I deal with this in class, I indicate that one way to counter the argument is to claim that what happened to Jonah was simply a miracle. While humanly speaking such an event would be impossible, God made it happen because God can do anything. Another approach some have taken is to offer supporting evidence that something like this actually could have happened by appealing to modern stories about people who have been swallowed by a whale and survived. The most popular story is about a man named James Bartley, who reportedly survived in the belly of a whale for thirty-six hours.<sup>15</sup> Although this particular story is unfounded, it illustrates an attempt to counter the charge of Jonah's physiologically implausible fish ride.<sup>16</sup>

Similarly, those who defend the historicity of the book of Jonah have found ways to respond to the problematic notion of Nineveh being a three-day's walk across. Some have suggested what is meant in Jon. 3:3 is a three-

day preaching mission. Others have argued that the three days’ walk refers to “Greater Nineveh,” a more extensive area that included both the city and the surrounding region. This would explain why it took a number of days to traverse.<sup>17</sup>

Regardless of how we might feel about the merit of such arguments, it is important to introduce students to alternative explanations. Offering more than one perspective provides them with a more balanced presentation. Failing to provide multiple perspectives on sensitive issues may cause them to think we are trying to force them to think like we do. Students are less likely to feel we have an agenda or an axe to grind if more than one option is presented in class.

It may also be helpful to give students a select bibliography that includes various perspectives on the historical question. This provides them with resources they can use to explore this issue further as they weigh and evaluate the merits of different perspectives. Encouraging this kind of open inquiry is especially important when dealing with controversial issues. Otherwise, it may appear we are interested only in promoting our own ideas without engaging other voices and perspectives. Students are more likely to consider new thoughts about the nature of the Bible if they sense we are willing to discuss contested issues in an even-handed way.

#### *4. Create a Safe Space for Class Discussion*

Teachers who hope to ask the historical question without alienating conservative students need to create a safe environment for class discussion. Ample time should be set aside to dialogue about this issue, and students should be encouraged to share their questions and concerns. Due to the controversial nature of this issue, it is probably best not to discuss the historical question until later in the semester if at all possible.<sup>18</sup> That allows time for trust and good rapport to develop, and this relational capital is essential for facilitating a constructive conversation.

Before I enter into a conversation about the historicity of the book of Jonah, I have students complete a brief in-class writing assignment in which they respond to two questions: 1) Do you think the story of Jonah actually happened? and 2) Do you think it matters if the story of Jonah actually happened? The second question gives them an opportunity to voice their

concerns about questioning the historicity of this – or any other – biblical story. Students commonly worry that questioning the historicity of Jonah will lead them down a slippery slope. If we concede that the story of Jonah didn't really happen, they say, what is to stop us from saying the story of Abraham didn't happen? Or the story of the Exodus? Or the story of David? Or the story of Jesus (gulp!)? Doesn't admitting that one of these stories or events is non-historical put all the rest at risk? Where do we draw the line? These are very reasonable questions, and I think it is important to give students the space to voice them.

Ideally, there will be others in the class who do not think of this as an all-or-nothing proposition and who can provide other ways of framing the issue. But even if these voices are not forthcoming, allowing students to raise such concerns honors their own voice and paves the way for discussing their concern at some point in the conversation. It is important to let them know that just because we believe some parts of the Bible did not actually happen does not imply we believe none of it is historical. Such a conclusion is reductionist and unwarranted. The OT contains a great deal of extremely valuable historical information, and we should help students realize they must weigh all the evidence – textual, archaeological, social scientific – when trying to determine what most likely did or did not occur in Israel.

Whenever we respond to student concerns, we must do so graciously and hospitably if we hope to be persuasive. We should never ridicule or belittle a student for views we regard as naïve or uninformed. Such behavior will not encourage other students to share openly and honestly for fear that they too might be shamed. They need to know that the classroom is a safe place where sensitive questions can be asked and where alternative perspectives can be raised. They need to know that their ideas and opinions will be respected. Only then will they be able to wrestle with the issues in a way that can help them make significant movement on this critical journey.

##### *5. Communicate a Deep Appreciation for the Bible and Christianity*

Finally, if we hope to persuade theologically conservative students to rethink some of their deeply held convictions about the Bible's historicity, we must be sure to communicate our deep appreciation for the Bible and the Christian faith. If our students do not trust us, if they suspect that we care little about



the authority of Scripture or the Christian faith, there is little chance they will listen to what we have to say about such a controversial issue. Therefore, as educators, we must find ways to help them know how much we value and respect the Bible and how eager we are to help Christians strengthen their faith. Ideally, these commitments should be evident to students in various ways throughout the course.

In his article “Easing the Pain: Biblical Criticism and Undergraduate Students,” Terry Brensinger argues that teachers who introduce critical issues to undergraduates should be characterized by sensitivity, humility, accountability, and malleability.<sup>19</sup> While all these characteristics are valuable, “malleability” is especially relevant here. Brensinger describes malleability as “the attitude and devotion which the teacher brings to the Bible in particular and the Christian life in general.”<sup>20</sup> He writes, “So often, students shun critical ideas and difficult questions because they fear that a loss of faith inevitably lies somewhere around the corner. When they are invited to see first-hand that true faith and critical thinking can live nicely together, their defenses begin to fall.”<sup>21</sup> Therein lies the key. When students begin to realize that asking critical questions is a help rather than a hindrance to Christian faith and faithfulness, they become much more willing to engage in such conversations.

When I do a unit on the book of Jonah in my introductory Bible class, discussing the book’s historicity is just one part of a much larger discussion. For example, I also discuss some of the important themes and applications that grow out of it. I suggest that the book is useful for reflecting on such matters as the futility of running from God and the notion that grace freely received ought to be grace freely given. It can also be used to emphasize the extent of God’s grace and to reveal God’s concern for our attitudes as well as our actions. In this way, I try to demonstrate that even though I do not think the story of Jonah actually happened, I believe it is true and has much to say about how we should live our lives.

Communicating our deep appreciation of the Bible by emphasizing its truthfulness, and by demonstrating its applicability, should help conservative students be more receptive to alternative perspectives about its historicity. Such an approach demonstrates that a critical reading does not rob the Bible of its power to speak to us today. The ability to handle the Bible in this

way, to read both critically and applicationally, will help students be more receptive to what we have to say about the historical question.

### **Conclusion**

Although the five pedagogical strategies described above are no guarantee that theologically conservative students will happily engage critical questions about the historicity of OT stories, implementing these strategies should help reduce obstacles standing in their way. In addition to enabling us to demonstrate our firm commitment to Scripture, they prevent us from unnecessarily raising defenses that may keep students from seriously entertaining these ideas. Utilizing these strategies should help us facilitate this conversation in ways that encourage openness to perspectives that many students initially find quite threatening.

Still, at the end of the day, some students will inevitably feel a sense of disappointment and loss upon hearing that stories they believed to be historically accurate may not have happened. Such feelings are probably unavoidable. But, we may hope, if they can talk about this in a supportive environment, one that encourages honest inquiry and dialogue and is not hostile to the Christian faith, they will be able to consider alternative possibilities.

As we teach, we should keep in mind that students are on an intellectual journey that does not proceed at any set pace. While some may be ready to make shifts in their thinking by the end of the semester, others will require much more time. Some may need to hear these ideas multiple times in different contexts before they are ready to entertain them seriously. We should not be discouraged by this. Rather, we should see our job as being one step in a much larger process. Our task is to equip students to grapple with this topic responsibly and to help them have a positive encounter with the issues at hand. If we are able to do that, we have succeeded in raising the historical question without alienating them. Regardless of where they come out on the question at the end of the term, we can rest assured that our time and effort have been well spent.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Adapted from Eric Seibert, *Disturbing Divine Behavior: Troubling Old Testament Images of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009). Reproduced by special permission of Augsburg Fortress Publishers. This is a revised version of a paper I read at the 38th Annual Meeting of the Eastern Great Lakes Biblical Society at Perrysville, OH, April 3, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> These same expectations would not have been shared by our pre-modern counterparts. They had quite different expectations when reading and writing texts that utilized the past. For a general orientation to ancient Israelite historiography, see the helpful collection of essays in V. Philips Long, ed., *Israel's Past in Present Research: Essays on Ancient Israelite Historiography* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1999).

<sup>3</sup> Tremper Longman III, *Reading the Bible with Heart and Mind* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1997), 101, emphasis in original.

<sup>4</sup> For an excellent treatment of this event, see Edward J. Larson's Pulitzer Prize-winning *Summer for the Gods: The Scopes Trial and America's Continuing Debate over Science and Religion* (New York: Basic Books, 1997).

<sup>5</sup> All Scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

<sup>6</sup> For an extensive discussion of this issue, see my *Disturbing Divine Behavior: Troubling Old Testament Images of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009).

<sup>7</sup> Dr. Seuss, *The Butter Battle Book*, video, directed by Ralph Bakshi (1989; Atlanta: Turner Pictures, 1995). I am indebted to Dr. Terry L. Brensinger for introducing me to this delightful pedagogical tool, which he used similarly in some of his classes.

<sup>8</sup> Ronald S. Hendel, “The Search for Noah's Flood,” *Bible Review* 19.3 (2003): 8.

<sup>9</sup> John Barton, *How the Bible Came to Be* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 32.

<sup>10</sup> For attempts to defend the historicity of Jonah, see, e.g., T. Desmond Alexander, “Jonah: An Introduction and Commentary,” in T. Desmond Alexander, David W. Baker, and Bruce K. Waltke, *Obadiah, Jonah, Micah: An Introduction and Commentary* (Leicester, UK: Inter-Varsity, 1988), 69-77, and Douglas Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah, WBC 31* (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), 440-42. For a discussion of Jonah as something other than historical narrative, see Leslie C. Allen, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah, NICOT* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 175-81, and Jack M. Sasson, *Jonah: A New Translation with Introduction, Commentary, and Interpretations* (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 327-40.

<sup>11</sup> There are no Hebrew words in the OT referring to specific species of fish. In the book of Jonah, this creature is generically referred to as “a great fish.”

<sup>12</sup> For details about the size of Nineveh discussed in this paragraph, see Allen, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah*, 221.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 176, emphasis mine.

<sup>14</sup> Phyllis Trible, *Rhetorical Criticism: Context, Method, and the Book of Jonah* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 224.

<sup>15</sup> The story is conveniently located in Edward B. Davis, “A Whale of a Tale: Fundamentalists Fish Stories,” *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 43 (1991): 225-26.

<sup>16</sup> Davis, “A Whale of a Tale,” 224-37. Some of the evidence that mitigates against the authenticity of this account includes the following: the absence of James Bartley on the voyage in question (233); the facts that the Star of the East was not a whaling ship and that

British whalers didn't fish off the Falklands in 1891 (233), and the personal testimony of the captain's widow, who said, "There is not one word of truth in the whale story. I was with my husband all the years he was in the Star of the East. There was never a man lost overboard while my husband was in her" (232).

<sup>17</sup> Argued, for example, by Alexander, "Jonah," 57-58.

<sup>18</sup> Obviously, this is difficult to do if you are teaching a class on the Pentateuch. Such a discussion can hardly wait until the end of the term!

<sup>19</sup> Terry Brensinger, "Easing the Pain: Biblical Criticism and Undergraduate Students," CCCU New Faculty Workshop, Council for Christian Colleges and Universities, 2004. <http://65.221.16.189/resourcecenter/printerfriendly.asp?resID=888> (accessed 12/7/09)

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., under the heading "D: Malleability."

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

*Eric A. Seibert is Associate Professor of Old Testament at Messiah College in Grantham, Pennsylvania.*

# **Anabaptist Thoughts on Teaching the New Testament as an Anabaptist in a Non-Anabaptist Setting: Enough Already**

*Wes Bergen*

In 2008, I was asked by the Mennonite Scholars and Friends (MS&F) group to be part of a panel on “Teaching Bible: Setting, Method, Agenda” at the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL) annual meeting. I was ambivalent about saying “yes,” for while I always attend the MS&F reception on Friday evening at the SBL meetings, I almost never go to the panels. My reason for avoiding them is directly related to my practice of teaching, both where and how I teach. So in the following paragraphs, I want to outline a major flaw I see in current Anabaptist scholarship, and to describe how it hurts our teaching and our impact on the world as scholars and as a church.

Let me begin by laying out my status. I am a Mennonite. My father was a Mennonite pastor, and my mother loved being a Mennonite pastor’s wife. I have attended three Mennonite schools (and numerous non-Mennonite ones), and have enjoyed all of them. I am also a Mennonite pastor, although I am currently not serving in a church. I attend and am actively involved in a Mennonite church, and have in my past been an active member in numerous Mennonite churches in the US and Canada. So that makes me pretty solidly Mennonite.

In my teaching life, I teach at Wichita State University as part of the Religion program. Mainly I teach New Testament, although most of my publications are in Old Testament. My students are aware that I am a Mennonite pastor, although many of them have no idea what a Mennonite is. (I usually send them to the Third Way Café online if they want to know.)

In this way I straddle two worlds: the world of Mennonite church and the world of secular scholarship. I really enjoy both of these worlds, and I would feel a loss if one was missing. Of course, there is much overlap between these worlds. I teach New Testament, so I have no way of avoiding questions of faith and practice that come up regularly in the classroom. I teach as a Mennonite, and this affects how I teach, the questions I ask,

and the way I relate to students. For example, when talking about being a Christian, I think primarily in terms of “following Jesus” rather than the more usual Bible Belt assumption that Christianity is about what you believe. Some of my students find this odd, but most at least agree that there is some component of action involved in the Christian life, and the most obvious example is Jesus.

The frustration I feel as I work between these worlds is that most religion scholars who work as Mennonites seem to think that the purpose of the exercise is largely one of sectarian apologetics or an advanced form of navel-gazing. Too often the whole apparatus of Mennonite theological education appears (from the outside, at least) to be training for life inside a cloister. Mennonites write as if they assume that their audience and their frame of reference is somehow “Mennonite,” and that it is sufficient to address oneself to this microcosm.

The most obvious manifestation of this is the continual use of the word “Anabaptist” in publications, presentations, conference names, and any other place where scholars are asked to work as scholars.<sup>1</sup> I could cite hundreds of examples. To randomly choose one, a forthcoming book from Cascadia Press is titled *The Work of Jesus Christ in Anabaptist Perspective*. I’m sure that this is a fine book, although I haven’t read it. I also proudly claim my status as an Anabaptist, having actually re-baptized someone. As someone with reasonable Anabaptist scholarly connections, I also know many of the people who have written chapters for the book. As I read the title, however, it appears to have as its subtext the assumption that this book is of interest only to those who either already claim some Anabaptist connection or have some curiosity regarding this tiny cult. The assumption seems to be that this book would be of little interest to a Lutheran or Episcopalian, except as an object of curiosity or voyeurism.

Now, both of these assertions may in fact be true. I don’t work in the sub-disciplines of theology or ethics, so I don’t know how things work in those fields. It may be that Catholic theologians read only other Catholics and Pentecostal ethicists read only fellow Pentecostals. All I can speak to is my experience as a biblical scholar.

In biblical studies, denominational/religious distinctions are of only minor concern. For example, as I work in Leviticus, there currently appears

to be a small schism developing within the very small group of scholars interested in Leviticus and ritual. There does not appear to be any significant denomination angle to this schism. One group has a Jew, an Adventist and a Pentecostal, among others. The other group has a Mennonite, an Episcopalian, and a Presbyterian, among others.

When I write a paper about Leviticus, I write about Leviticus. I remain a Mennonite during the process, and my heritage in some ways informs my thoughts and ideas. But I would never consider thinking about my work as “An Anabaptist Perspective on Leviticus.” I really don’t think there is any such thing. My studies with professors of Lutheran, Anglican, Catholic and other backgrounds, as well as years of reading the works of others whose religious affiliation I often don’t know, make it impossible to know what parts of my writing come from which parts of myself.

So my Leviticus friends know that I’m Mennonite, and they claim they can see this in my work. I’m fine with that. It does not mean, however, that my perspective is any more or less sectarian than any other. My acknowledgement of my Mennonite heritage is informative to them, but that neither validates nor invalidates the content of my work. So when Jews read a Mennonite’s paper on Leviticus, they read from a Jewish perspective (whatever that might mean), but judge on the basis of their ability to make sense of and agree with the assertions made.

Part of the reality of my work, of course, is the impossibility of doing things any other way. If I talked about Leviticus and ritual only to other Anabaptists, I would be very lonely. I’m already alone in the field of Leviticus and pop culture, but get to tag along with other Leviticus scholars because working in Leviticus is lonely enough without splitting hairs too finely.

On the surface, Mennonite theologians seem to have things quite differently. There are lots of them about (at least in comparison to Mennonite Leviticus scholars), and they can keep busy reading each others’ works and writing for in-house publications and conferences. On the other hand, I really don’t think there is any such thing as Mennonite theology (unless we are speaking historically), and there hopefully can be no such thing as Mennonite ethics (sorry, Harry).<sup>2</sup> Either we are either speaking meaningfully and intelligibly about God and the world or we are not. Yes, we speak from

somewhere, but that does not allow us to speak nonsense. Neither does it validate our ideas to have them make sense only within a small sectarian community. Mennonite actions are human actions, and writing about them should conform to the same rules of language as writings from any other perspective.

The most obvious and quoted example of this issue is the work of John Howard Yoder. I am not a Yoder scholar, so I hesitate to make assertions about his work that others can easily contradict, but I do notice a lack of the word “Anabaptist” in the titles of most of his better-known books. *The Politics of Jesus* stands or falls on its own. Its ideas are not “Anabaptist.” Yoder is writing to Christians, not to the cloistered community of Mennonites. It is Yoder who often draws people into the Mennonite church, yet he also draws people into new ways of being Lutheran or Catholic. You can be a Yoderian Baptist (a ridiculous title in itself; why not “follower of Jesus”?) without needing to become Mennonite. Yes, Yoder does articulate a particular way to follow Jesus, but all ways to follow Jesus are particular. The trick is to be something without needing to say that your way of understanding requires denominational commitments.

Another manifestation of our cloistered perspective is the practice of needing to cite every Anabaptist who has ever published on a subject in any paper or presentation. In other words, mostly we seem to be talking to each other about our own little world. This practice continues the appearance that the Anabaptist world is a self-contained entity that only occasionally needs to speak about (but never to) the “world.”

I realize that in an issue of *The Conrad Grebel Review* devoted to teaching theory and practice, what I have said so far may appear to be off the topic. Yet it significantly affects teaching both inside and outside the Mennonite world. I teach in a secular university; I teach as a Mennonite pastor and biblical scholar. Yet my assumption in teaching New Testament is that we in the class can look at a passage and come to some basic understandings of what is or is not being said. My message is not “this is how Mennonites understand Jesus.” My message is “this is how Mark understands Jesus, as best as I can understand Mark.” The impact of subjectivity remains but does not itself become the object of study. Otherwise, the class would quickly become “Sectarian Approaches to the New Testament,” a study of little interest to me or my students.



The same would be true, I think, if I taught in a Mennonite institution. In fact, it is truer in those contexts. Do students learn a specifically sectarian approach to the New Testament? If so, they learn that the content of the course is somehow relevant only to those who are Mennonite. This is especially problematic because we live in a world in which the term “Mennonite” has no significant meaning. In this world, “Mennonite” is roughly equivalent to “Irrelevant.” Adding the adjunct “theology” or “ethics” or “biblical studies” to the modifier “Mennonite” does not alter this fact.<sup>3</sup>

This suggests that Irrelevant colleges offer numerous courses on Irrelevant theology and ethics (at least irrelevant to life outside the cloister). If biblical studies courses claim a specifically Mennonite orientation, the same would be true for them.<sup>4</sup> This may qualify as a good job if you can get it, but is not likely to be the life goal of most professors. The alternative, as I see it, is to teach theology, ethics, and biblical studies in ways that make sense in the world in which we live. Some of our conversation partners along the way are likely to be Mennonite, but there is nothing that privileges their positions. If the ideas cannot stand on their own merits, then attaching the modifier “Mennonite” only denigrates the word “Mennonite.”

Another way of looking at this question is to imagine a course called “Mennonite Biochemistry” or “Mennonite English Composition.” Professors of Mennonite background or those teaching in Mennonite colleges do not become less Mennonite by teaching regular biochemistry or composition. Perhaps a more helpful parallel is to imagine a course called “Mennonite American History.” What exactly is the Mennonite position on American history? There are certainly aspects of American history that would be taught differently in a Mennonite college than in a secular one or a Southern Baptist one, such as wars and the duties of a citizen. What does this mean for how the class is taught? And more to my point, what does it mean for how often the term “Anabaptist” appears in course titles, descriptions, and readings?

Thus, if class considers the US Civil War, does a critique of the war arise from our being Mennonite or from a study of the evidence and a logical, thoughtful construction of alternatives? Only the latter has meaning outside the cloister. In my New Testament classes, we look at what Jesus says about violence. Sociologically, I recognize that I do this because I am Mennonite. But my students are asked to look at the evidence and reach a logical and

defensible conclusion. Many of them feel the need to invoke theology as a means to avoid what Jesus is saying. As their professor, I point this out to them but do not challenge the point. In this instance, the study of the Bible becomes a way of moving beyond sectarian theology rather than a way of instilling it.

If I taught peacemaking as a “Mennonite” thing, my students would automatically and logically believe that this idea had no relevance to them. If I teach it as a Jesus thing, they are forced to deal with this as a Christian issue. When they choose to argue with me about peacemaking being impractical or unrealistic, I tell them to argue with Jesus. In this way, we are not debating the superiority of one denominational position over another. We are trying to make sense of the words of Jesus as they apply to the world around us. There is always context to these discussions, but context does not allow us to speak drivel and pretend it is wisdom. There is no more nutrition in Mennonite cake than there is in Catholic cake.

On numerous occasions I have heard speakers say there is a generation of young people out there ready to hear the message of the gospel as articulated by the Mennonite churches. They are eager to hear about peacemaking and simplicity and following Jesus. The problem, as I see it, is that our message is not getting out to them. Rather, we are busy talking to one another in our own code. What does “Anabaptist” mean to most youth today? Nothing at all. Even if someone were to penetrate the code and realize there is good news hidden in these writings, the message too often is “come join our cloisters.” We know what happens when idealistic youth show up at most Mennonite churches. Sure, we can all think of exceptions, but the rule is that they go away discouraged, never to return.

As teachers, then, we need to find a way to articulate the gospel beyond the Mennonite cloister code. This is not a call to “dumb it down.” Most of us don’t need any help in that area. Our guide, rather, should be the writer of the gospel of John, who managed to say the most profound things using the simplest vocabulary in the New Testament. His “code” was words like “life” and “bread,” transformed into ideas of profound spiritual and social significance. If we can teach this way, then we can give students a vision and a message that does not come pre-coded as specifically “Mennonite.” This, ideally, would provide them with the vocabulary and example of a gospel

for the world rather than a gospel for the cloister.

I realize that this paper has wandered into the category of the sermonic. It is more usual in academic journals to be descriptive, not prescriptive. My ending is a deliberate choice not to play the game. I have crossed the line that separates religious-study-as-science from religion-as-life-transformation. In most journals, crossing that line makes a paper unpublishable. In books, it means that an editor will move it from the academic section to the trade paper section. In teaching, it starts to sound like preaching.

So we face a dilemma in our writing and teaching. We can write for Mennonite journals and publishers, and publish material that will be read by a few fellow academics and occasional students in Mennonite colleges, or we can write for a broader audience and risk not being published at all. In the meantime, we can teach in such a way as to prepare our students to engage the world and challenge the church, or we can stay inside the cloister and invite students into the closed world of Mennonite language and thought. As I teach at Wichita State University, I regularly encounter students who are hungry for the challenge of the gospel. After thirteen years, I have yet to encounter a student who is hungry for Mennoniteness. There would be no point in attempting to create a desire for the latter, when it is so much easier to work with a desire that is already present.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I will mostly use “Mennonite” in this paper rather than “Anabaptist,” because I have little experience with Anabaptism outside the Mennonite church.

<sup>2</sup> An insider Mennonite reference. Insiders will know or guess that I am speaking to Harry Huebner of Winnipeg, who has long taught ethics at Canadian Mennonite University, and who happens to be married to my cousin.

<sup>3</sup> I realize that, in significant parts of this world, “Christian” is also roughly equivalent to “irrelevant.” Our use of the modifier “Mennonite” only increases the irrelevance of our discussion. Using “Christian” as our frame of reference at least increases the number of fellow travelers on our journey.

<sup>4</sup> This is a significant issue in my life right now, as my son is a senior in high school. Do I really want to spend thousands of dollars to send him to an Irrelevant college?

*Wes Bergen is Visiting Associate Professor in the Dept. of Religion at Wichita State University in Wichita, Kansas.*

## AFTERWORD

### Teaching the Bible: Goals for Student Learning

*Nadine S. Pence*

Teaching is an interplay of dynamics between the classroom, the teacher, and the student. Learning is a complex interplay between the student, subject matter, teacher, and learning context. Each of the essays in this issue of *The Conrad Grebel Review* works at some mix of these factors as the authors describe the pedagogical challenges and opportunities that they face in teaching the Christian scriptures in their particular classroom. Common to this group of authors is that they each have found some way to negotiate their role of teaching biblical studies with their personal history from within the Mennonite or Anabaptist tradition. How this has been negotiated varies greatly according to their pedagogical philosophy, the school's institutional mission, their department or school curricular goals, and the students in front of them in the classroom.

One of the temptations we all face as teachers is that we feel we have so much to teach. We have spent years in close study of a text or subject matter, immersing ourselves in a discipline of study through our doctoral programs. For every teacher, the temptation is to focus on the body of work that we have mastered and thus the amount of knowledge that we need to pass on. We approach teaching by asking ourselves: What do we know that we must teach? What content, method, or approach must we be sure the students get? As members in a particular society or guild (for most of these authors it would be the Society of Biblical Literature), we ask what we need to teach to be true representatives of that discipline of study or loyal to the guild.

This temptation is complicated when we are also teachers from within a particular confessional tradition, either by personal confession or because of the institution which we serve. Then our loyalties are also claimed by the tradition and what it wants the students to know. How do we represent this particular lens of Christianity, Mennonite beliefs, or the Anabaptist tradition

in our classroom? How are we both a professor of the discipline and of a particular confessional tradition?

Imagining that teaching is a process of passing on is much like the image of ourselves as containers of information which pour into the containers of the learners/students. And compared to our almost-full-to-overflowing containers, the containers of the students are practically empty. So the task becomes one of filling their container with some of what is overflowing in us. In this model, a good teaching session is measured according to what we have imparted to them that makes them more like us in terms of what is known, how much is known, and what is valued.

What many of these essays struggle to articulate and understand, however, is the harder challenge of who we want our students to be (instead of what we need to teach). Asking what we want the students to learn presses us to look not at ourselves and all that we have to impart, but at the students and the future world in which they will live in order to ask what character, skills, and beliefs we would like them to exhibit in light of those future possibilities. It is this more nuanced issue of what these authors want their students to learn (and why) that I wish to explore in relation to these essays.

### **Knowing Narrators**

The essay by Jo-Ann Brant, “The Power of the Spoken Word,” is attentive to her own progression of pedagogical thinking from the time she began teaching up to her present classroom goals. Noting that her original task was “to guide my students to a level of sophistication in their reading of the Bible and to a broad canonical approach tempered by a historical consciousness,” Brant documents the nature of, and reasons for, changes in her pedagogy as she constantly engaged the question of what she wanted her students to learn.

Her current set of goals for student learning are shaped by three factors: 1) an analysis of the current church and its needs; 2) an intuitive understanding of the type of religious decisions that are ahead for her students; 3) and a sense of what she teaches as a representative of the guild. Her most explicit nervousness about her current pedagogical methods is directed toward her doctoral mentor who functions as the initiator for

the discipline's guild ("What would my dignified Jesuit doctoral advisor think ... ?"). Yet despite this nervousness, she is willing to proceed with a performative pedagogy because she is committed to Goshen students being able to take on the role of transmitters of scripture through being engaged story-tellers. For Brant, this involves the students in encountering the emotive and kinetic dimensions of the text, which brings to the fore the receptive dimension of listening instead of reading and analyzing. "The text becomes much more memorable and meaningful," states Brant, as the students become "the knowing narrator" of the biblical stories.

The use of pre-and post-tests by Brant and her colleague give them a way of assessing what their students bring to the classroom and of evaluating the learning outcomes of classroom activities. And while the pedagogy that she has adapted for this class may not be filled with the textual criticism expected by the guild, her student learning goals do demonstrate a level of sophistication about reflective classroom practice that will serve her students (and the church) well.

### **Teaching Venturesome Transgressors**

Dietmar Neufeld articulates his role of New Testament teacher as a guide who encourages the students "to become venturesome transgressors, border crossers into the strange world of the Bible . . . ." His pedagogical journey has brought him to a set of student learning goals that are much more tightly linked with that of the guild of biblical studies than has Brant, as a way to engage his students' "genuine curiosity about Jesus, Paul, gospels, epistles, and apocalypses" with the strange world of the Bible.

Neufeld reflects on his personal biography as he describes how he came to the pedagogical commitment of "inculcating within students a cultural sensitivity and a cross-cultural perspective." Understanding that meaning comes through social systems of signification, Neufeld uses the social-cultural milieu of the New Testament world to press students to understand their own embedding or transgressing of cultures and the meaning-making that they experience in those ventures. This set of student learning goals matches well with the student body and institution in which he teaches – a non-confessional university setting where a wide variety of students take his courses (students with cultural, religious, and ethnic diversity as well as majors and non-majors).

In this way, Neufeld gives his own Mennonite upbringing significance as a series of places and people who struggled and survived within a variety of alien landscapes, rather than as a set of beliefs or habits of the heart which must be passed on to others. Thus, as a teacher of the New Testament, he exposes the first-century world as a strange and foreign place in order to counter the dangers of ethnocentrism in his students through striking “strange fires under their own spirituality.”

### **Constructive Controversy**

The strange world of the Bible also plays a key role in the pedagogical strategy described by Reta Halteman Finger, who uses biblical simulation to teach the Book of Romans. Her student learning goals, however, differ from Neufeld’s as she uses the Romans material to design alternate social settings and allegiances whereby the students can engage in simulated role-play and conflict resolution. Her intent is to bridge the gap between the historically re-constructed first-century Jesus movement and modern Western society so that the students might understand more fully “the human limitations of the earliest believers” and “the contemporary implications of Romans.” This pedagogy establishes an authoritative role for the biblical text as it models norms for contemporary behavior, and it posits student learning as the ability to recognize this textual normativity and relevance.

A challenge faced by Halteman Finger is the transition in and out of the role simulation. She works well with the issue of how to get students to engage in the role play as they adjust to this being their “course work” and with debriefing in their individual journals. In addition to this, there are some group questions that might be explored around the issues of performance and identity, or how the students experienced the points of immersion and the points of differentiation between their identity and the roles they played. Given all the virtual role-playing that is a part of the students’ gaming world, it would be interesting to hear how the students would describe being in a prescribed role within the simulation.

The question of performance and identity becomes especially important when teaching within a Mennonite or Anabaptist context. While this method depends on discovering a contemporary affinity and identity with the first-century church (which fits well with a Mennonite ecclesiology), I would

assume that Halteman Finger has discovered many points of difference between the two that would be a helpful counterpoint to articulate in order to avoid a collapsing together of the 21st-century and biblical worlds.

### **Narrative Teaching Narrative**

Gary Yamasaki's teaching has also evolved as he took more seriously what skills and interests the students were bringing to the classroom. More specifically, Yamasaki noted the students' apparent lack of interest in biblical interpretation. The course that he developed around the Book of Acts serves as a first-year requirement for all students and emphasizes the narrative experience of the book. The goal, as he states it, "is to recreate the story world of the Book of Acts and transport the students into this world so that they do not just learn cognitively about the events covered, but actually experience them along with the characters." He does this through a variety of means (video-clips, avoiding overall summaries of the structure, building explanations in narrative sequence, and a competition game), all with the intent of using some form of "narrative to teach narrative."

While many of his pedagogical methods highlight the narrative nature of Acts, the framework of the game is somewhat at counter-purposes, as is demonstrated by his assessment methods at various stages and points on the journey. These tests and awards measure student learnings such as analytical skills, content mastery, and level of engagement. But what is taught when narrative teaches narrative; what might be articulated as the student learning goal? Do students demonstrate an ability to place events in a narrative sequence? Do they demonstrate a shift of worldviews from a non-narrative to a narrative framework? And what is the desired outcome if it is demonstrated that they do? That said, there are still clear gains in this method, especially when measuring the group learnings, such as corporate problem-solving.

As with Halteman Finger, I would prod Yamasaki to design a clear debriefing time with his students where they can think about the gaming aspect of the class learning and consider what happened with the heightened interest through the game. It could become a moment of reflective engagement for the students about their assumptions and help Yamasaki consider the learning that takes places through this method.



**Spirit of Appreciation and Essential Guide**

The essays by Loren Johns and Laura Brenneman focus on the importance of the modeling and attitude of the teacher. Johns argues for an approach that links critical thinking with a spirit of appreciation for faith-related issues. Tracing parts of his own history of learning about the Mennonite faith, Johns talks about the teachers who were not afraid of questions or the use of one's mind. Recognizing that teaching and learning often involve the processes of orientation, disorientation, and reorientation, he underscores the importance of the ethos in teaching in order to sustain the learning goal of student transformation.

Brenneman focuses more on the modeling that occurs when the teacher is a member of an under-represented group within the tradition. Calling them "essential guides for faithful interpretation of the Bible," Brenneman argues that women provide a pedagogical lens that is supported biblically and is educationally necessary for men and women students.

Both of these scholars understand that teaching is always a fine balance between raising questions about, and expressing appreciation for, a tradition of faith. As Johns says, "learning that matters is learning that touches on who we are, how we imagine our place in this world, and what we value." When the learning goal is student transformation, the teacher who is the guide becomes more than just one who possesses knowledge; he or she becomes the model of how one can reshape a worldview that puts us in a proper relationship with God. And with Brenneman's stress on the Holy Spirit being available to all, women and other under-represented groups must be able to teach with authority to facilitate this transformation.

**The Bible as Scripture**

Eric Seibert demonstrates pedagogical creativity as he structures the required introductory Bible course at Messiah College around the questions of historicity, truth, and the trustworthiness of the Bible as scripture. Establishing his student learning goal as enabling students to think more critically about the nature of the Bible as a way of strengthening their faith, Seibert does a careful job of articulating a variety of classroom practices for this goal. Some of his work is closely aligned with that of Johns and Brenneman, since the attitude of the professor is key in helping this goal come across with authenticity.

Seibert also demonstrates how closely aligned the task of being a biblical scholar and a theologian are within teaching contexts that are strongly marked by a confessional tradition. Often doctoral programs do not serve this overlap of training (making stark distinctions between the training of a biblical scholar and that of a Christian theologian), a situation that can leave the particular teacher scrambling to develop some thoughtful approaches to that area in which they were not trained.

### **Speaking Intelligibly and Meaningfully about God**

I end with Wes Bergen's articulation of his teaching philosophy, since he argues strongly that the study of the Bible is a way of moving beyond sectarian theology rather than instilling it. His student learning goal is to prepare students to speak meaningfully and intelligibly about God and the world. This, he argues, is a human need and not one that should be kept cloistered within the Mennonite world. A Mennonite pastor who teaches at a state school, Bergen understands that his Mennonite heritage informs his scholarly perspective, but also assumes that his work will be judged by others "on the basis of their ability to make sense of and agree with the assertions made."

This is a teaching philosophy that is counter to the sectarian understanding of 'the world' as that from which we need to be separate. Indeed, 'the world' becomes a theologically expansive term to mean the context in which the God/human interaction is 'enfleshed,' or even with a more positive valance as 'that outside of what we are, toward which we are directed.' One could contextualize Bergen's argument by noting that it is a very appropriate expansive teaching philosophy, given his position as a professor of religious studies within a state university. But my sense is that this pedagogy would hold for Bergen even if he was teaching undergrads within a Mennonite-related institution.

And so I am back to the question of student learning goals. Toward what are we teaching? What is the future that is yearning to be brought into being? What are our learning goals for our students? Who do we wish them to be, and how do we want them to inhabit their future worlds? It is only as we direct ourselves towards those questions that we can truly inhabit our profession as teachers.

*Nadine S. Pence is Director of the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion, a center which offers grants, consultants, and workshops for faculty and institutions of higher education in the US and Canada that wish to work on teaching and learning issues. The Center is located on the Wabash College campus in Crawfordsville, Indiana.*

Daniel Izuzquiza. *Rooted in Jesus Christ: Toward a Radical Ecclesiology*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009.

Daniel Izuzquiza, S.J. is one of a new generation of Roman Catholic theologians committed to developing a theological foundation for Catholic social teaching and practices. *Rooted in Jesus Christ* is his proposal for an ecclesiology centred on the lived experience of the church and founded on the person of Christ. The first part of the book is a dialogue – with post-liberal George Lindbeck, radical orthodoxy’s John Milbank, Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder, and Dorothy Day of the Catholic Worker Movement – on how the Christian community when rooted in the life and death of Christ can embody a radical alternative to the dominant Western worldview. Izuzquiza orders this dialogue through four themes drawn from liberation theology: methodology, God, martyrdom, and the option for the poor.

The method of liberation theology gives primacy to praxis, the lived experience of Christian communities. The result is the creation of an alternative community that embodies Christian practices based on the members’ experience of God in the incarnation of Christ. In order to avoid falling into sectarianism, the community must develop a theological discourse grounded in those shared experiences which can then be translated into a discourse that is intelligible in a pluralistic society.

The nature of this alternative social reality is based on a theology of lived martyrdom and the option for the poor. Izuzquiza makes lived martyrdom a necessary ethical imperative by inextricably linking Jesus’ life and death to reveal a nonviolent way of peace and justice that overcomes the structures of sin, evil, and oppression. By living in imitation of Jesus’ revolutionary nonviolence, Christian communities demonstrate how human culture can be radically transformed: creating a real alternative to the oppressive capitalist economic system, participating in nonviolent direct political action, and promoting the common good in solidarity with the poor.

The second half of the book is more explicitly Roman Catholic in both subject matter and method. Using Scripture, tradition, and ecclesial teachings, the author develops the notion of the body of Christ as the guiding

image for understanding the nature and role of the church in the world. Echoing Yoder's approach in *Body Politics*, Izuzquiza reveals the social, political, and economic transformative power in the sacramental practices of the Christian community. The seven sacraments encompass all aspects of life – social, economic, and political – uniting the whole of the individual and the community with the new eschatological reality created by Jesus' life and death. If Yoder were Roman Catholic, this could be exactly what he would have written.

Izuzquiza's ecclesiology may not seem particularly radical to those from the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition, but it is a departure in Roman Catholic thought. First, the author draws more from the ecclesiology of non-Catholic Christian traditions than is typical for Catholic theologians. He also gives a more significant role to the people in Christian communities; it is the laity, not the priesthood, that is the essence of the church. Affinities with Mennonite theology continue in his re-imagining of the relationship between the church and world – a counter-cultural role he feels is well suited for a pluralistic post-Christendom age.

The reduced role for the priesthood and the virtual absence of the Catholic hierarchy in Izuzquiza's ecclesiology is both a strength and a weakness. Izuzquiza's Christian communities mediate the radical transformation they experience through Jesus Christ to the world while renouncing worldly structures of power and domination. But in reality, the hierarchy forms the primary structure of the Catholic church, one in which power and domination are embedded. The author's ecclesiology is that of a minority church in a powerless position, and the Catholic church in the Western world has yet to realize that this is the state she is in. Izuzquiza's congregationalist critique of the power structure of the Catholic church while remaining faithful to that church is a strong challenge for the Anabaptist-Mennonite church to contemplate how essential schism is to its own identity.

Izuzquiza acknowledges that the second half of the book may be slightly tedious or technical for non-Catholic readers. He's right. The book is written for those with some level of formal theological education and familiarity with Catholic tradition. Yet his openness and clear desire to engage with the practices of the broader Christian tradition – and the Mennonite

tradition in particular – make this book worth engaging regardless of one’s tradition.

*Ryan Klassen*, PhD student, Toronto School of Theology, Toronto, ON

Ralf K. Wüstenberg. *The Political Dimensions of Reconciliation: A Theological Analysis of Ways of Dealing with Guilt During the Transition to Democracy in South Africa and East Germany*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009.

Ralf Wüstenberg’s exhaustive empirical study of guilt and reconciliation within the transitional systems of governance in South Africa and East Germany comes to a central conclusion: political reconciliation for the purpose of (re)building nations after structural collapse and historical trauma is not connected to theological reconciliation and related ways of dealing with guilt. It is only in the interpersonal realm that theological and national reconciliation interface, since “[g]uilt and reconciliation can only be thought of as occurring between people ... [not] national entities” (261).

This conclusion requires Wüstenberg to explain concepts of truth, freedom, justice, reconciliation, and guilt from various perspectives. The categories of truth, for example, are described as concepts “that pave the way for the theological reconstruction of reconciliation in political reality” (258). This is because they allow for the possibility of reparations and new beginnings in interpersonal relationships. Justice “does not produce [effective] reconciliation, but it can lead to it and can guide the processes to an acceptance of guilt” (259). Justice is connected theologically to politics through its understanding of the need to honor basic humanity.

Interpersonal reconciliation is examined within the political forums of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and the Investigation Commission of the German Parliament (EK). Wüstenberg directs the reader to the principles of systematic theology regarding process,

Pauline commentary on reconciling deeds, and to the Synoptic Gospels, especially the path of reconciliation in Matthew. He argues that theologically and linguistically “process” is distinct from “path,” since “the political process of reconciliation is open and indeterminate. The spiritual path to reconciliation is defined by hope” (267). It is hope that often breaks into the political process of reconciliation, manifesting in acts of remorse, apology, and forgiveness.

Through the TRC and EK, offenders and victims were given the opportunity to walk the spiritual path of new beginnings. Some chose this path, while others did not. When chosen, new relationships were formed and a new narrative begun; and justice went beyond a legal/punitive model, taking on the biblical meaning of right relationship with one’s fellow human being, made possible by God’s love for humanity.

This last point is poignantly reflected in the apology of a Mr. Benzien to his torture victims during a TRC Amnesty Committee hearing. The confessional stories he told, the remorse he showed, and the forgiveness offered by one of his victims, a Mr. Forbes, demonstrates for Wüstenberg the transformation of the political formula “reconciliation through truth” from the secular into the spiritual realm (275). Interpersonal reconciliation was possible because Benzien could awaken from the nightmare of apartheid through a process of confessing and accepting his guilt; and Forbes could come to a place of forgiving the person who violated his human rights and dignity. For the author, this was interpreted as an act of God through Christ that occurred, as it must, through human actors. Reconciliation didn’t happen between all victims and offenders in this case or in the EK processes, which indicates an “open ended” quality of the reconciliation process within the political sphere. The door of reconciliation is offered, but not all choose to pass through it.

The justice question requires further examination, specifically the tension between retributive and restorative justice and their relationship to the criminal justice system and reconciliation. Wüstenberg’s analysis differentiates “justice as punishment” in the South African and German contexts; in the former the “wrongdoer goes to jail and the victim receives recompense” while in the latter it is seen as less effective and implemented in only a small number of cases (188). Justice is also explained in terms

of acknowledgement and restoring human dignity, following a restorative trajectory.

Restorative justice “includes moral, political, as well as legal dimensions [and because of that] exceeds the limitations of the possibilities open to a constitutional government” (190). The author’s argument is that the constitutional state is bound by legal principles and can provide only formal and therefore punitive justice procedures. Restorative justice goes beyond the possibilities of criminal law, although the author acknowledges it can be constructively used outside the criminal justice system.

If victims and offenders are to be given the opportunity to reconcile, Wüstenberg must recognize that restorative justice, which holds reconciliation as a fundamental principle, can be an effective part of the criminal justice system and therefore the political process of reconciliation.

*Barry Hart*, Professor of Identity, Trauma and Conflict Studies, Center for Justice and Peacebuilding, Eastern Mennonite University, Harrisonburg, VA

Jon Isaak, ed. *The Old Testament in the Life of God’s People: Essays in Honor of Elmer A. Martens*. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2009.

This festschrift was written in honor of Elmer A. Martens, Professor Emeritus of Old Testament and President Emeritus of the Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary in Fresno, California. Martens was, and is, a biblical theologian. His interests extend beyond textual study to asking questions about how to formulate a coherent theology that includes both Testaments. This volume focuses on that issue.

After a brief biographical sketch, the book is divided into three parts, each dealing with a major area of Martens’s scholarly interests: Christian Use of the Old Testament, Aligning God’s People with God’s Call for Justice, and Addressing the Issue of Land in the Life of God’s People. Each section starts with an article written by Martens himself, followed by articles by his colleagues, friends, and former students.



In the first section, Martens describes his approach to biblical law (torah) as wholistic and “grounded in Heilsgeschichte” (24), which places him squarely in the biblical theology movement of the mid-20th century. Although he affirms that the law was rightly received as a gift from God by ancient Israel and was meant to serve the purposes of faith, in the end “the law is superseded by God’s latest gift, Jesus, the Christ” (27). Some of the articles that follow Marten’s continue in a similar vein, interpreting the NT witness (though not the church) as either continuing or superseding the OT witness. A couple of essays in this section, such as Marlene Enns’s study of intercultural theological education, though interesting, seem only tangentially related to the general topic of law.

The second section focuses on justice and religious pluralism. Martens’s article defines and describes the concepts of justice/righteousness through use of a wide variety of texts in both Testaments. In his reading of texts that speak about other religions, he concludes there is truth in other religions. The truth in them, however, is determined by “Yahweh’s standard of justice” (136). Some religions are roundly condemned by Scripture – those that are polytheistic. But salvation may very well be possible for others who do not know Christ, and that, he concludes, is “best left to God” (141). This article is followed by a rather eclectic collection related in some way to the general theme of religious pluralism in biblical texts.

In the third section, Martens’s essay examines references to “land” in the NT. He does not find many, so he examines metaphorical language that might be carrying forward the concepts expressed through land theology in the OT. Land, he notices, is a place of economic and political security and a place of rest in the OT. What is the equivalent in the NT? He writes that “land may be a metaphor for salvation” (231). Metaphors related to creation in Romans may be expressing some of the ideas of land in the first part of the Bible, he argues. It is surprising that Martens makes only a brief reference to negative aspects of land, such as the connection between land, conflict, and war, and the way land possession changed the theology of God from one who travels with the whole community of people to one who is connected to one place served by an elite priesthood.

This book as a whole is grounded in a middle-of-the-road conservative evangelical tradition that seeks a unified biblical theology that in some way

finds consistencies between the Testaments or sees the NT as a continuation of the OT, though not every essay fits that tradition. Any attempt to do this must deal with the presence of Judaism, a religion that claims the same material, less the NT, as its heritage. Many of the authors affirm the integrity of the Jewish tradition that grows out of what Christians call the Old Testament. But they still hold to a kind of supersessionism, expressed by Martens as “Christ has superseded the law” (26). Evangelical language such as Timothy Geddert’s “Jews who believed” (255) as being the “continuation of Israel” (260) would be interpreted as supersessionism by many.

Because many of the articles summarize the research of other prominent conservative evangelical scholars and an occasional liberal one, readers get a good sense of the thinking of this section of the Christian community on the chosen topics.

*Wilma Ann Bailey*, Professor of Hebrew and Aramaic Scripture, Christian Theological Seminary, Indianapolis, IN

Gale Heide. *System and Story: Narrative Critique and Construction in Theology*. Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2009.

This is a book about the theological ethics of Stanley Hauerwas, and it is mostly affirming of his project. In broad strokes its basic affirmations are on target, and its central critique names a weakness within Hauerwas that deserves attention. But then the detailed execution – in terms of affirmations, critiques and substantive correction – leaves much to be desired. All this is to say that what is valuable here could have made a decent article, but when filled out in detail it unfortunately does not make for a good book.

Let me begin with a summary of the first half of Heide’s volume. Serious students of Hauerwas are aware that he critiques modernist tendencies in philosophy, ethics, and theology; that is, approaches to these disciplines that assume a rootedness in abstract rational claims that are intelligible to anyone. These critiques appear in his writings negatively through narrations

of such modernist approaches; sometimes for shorthand Hauerwas uses labels such as “liberalism” or “foundationalism.” Sometimes the critiques are more specific, as in the case of some forms of systematic theology.

Hauerwas has many ways of countering such approaches to knowledge, claims regarding truth and ways to think about ethics. Among them are reclaiming a focus on narrative and tradition, and attempting to embed ethics within a rich theological account having Jesus at the center and made fully intelligible only within the context of the church. Heide is aware of these general contours of Hauerwas’s approach to theological ethics, and expresses his appreciation of it.

The overarching problem with Heide’s account is that too often there seems to be a less-than-clear use of key terms such as foundationalism, universalism, and systematic theology as these relate to Hauerwas’s project. Here I can focus only on what is intended to be most central to the book: a naming of Hauerwas’s theologically deficient ecclesiology. In fact, the author claims that Hauerwas’s ecclesiology is “mere anthropology.” Heide’s proffered solution is “ecclesiology as pneumatology,” that is, a communal and enfleshed pneumatology.

There are several ways in which this analysis of Hauerwas’s ecclesiology is deficient. First, I think Heide has really failed to enter empathetically into Hauerwas’s understanding of the sacraments. If one accepts the central role Hauerwas claims for the sacraments, and enters understandingly into the theologies and traditions that provide textured, detailed accounts of the ways these serve as vehicles for Christ’s redemptive presence, then the church is hardly reduced to a merely human reality.

Second, apart from the emphasis on the sacraments, there are many ways that Hauerwas attempts to signal that the community he is describing is unintelligible without God’s presence. One could argue he has not developed this fully enough. But it would seem to me to make more sense for someone sympathetic to Hauerwas to end chapters with discussions of, say, Joe R. Jones or James Wm. McClendon, Jr., suggesting how the systematic theologies of these friends of Hauerwas might be employed to fill out his suggestive comments (rather than the apparently arbitrary use of Wolfhart Pannenberg).

Third, it is inexplicable that John Howard Yoder is mostly absent from

Heide's book. Given how dependent Hauerwas is on Yoder theologically, it would have been instructive to provide a detailed account of Yoder's ecclesiology, noting how it underlies much of what Hauerwas writes. (Then again, one might supplement Yoder with cues from Thomas, Barth, Jones or McClendon.)

I would affirm Heide's sense that Hauerwas's ecclesiology could be improved through a more adequate pneumatology, but I would suggest that his account is deficient. That his account of the Spirit is both communal and enfleshed comports with emphases in Hauerwas's work. But the way in which these foci are elaborated is not carefully nuanced either in terms of New Testament theology or in connection with Hauerwas's theological ethics.

I was also taken aback by the absence of considerable recent New Testament scholarship that might have been helpful. Here I think especially of those directly influenced by Yoder and Hauerwas such as Michael Gorman and Doug Harrink. But, as with a suggestive article, Heide has certainly named areas for future constructive research.

*Mark Thiessen Nation*, Professor of Theology, Eastern Mennonite Seminary, Harrisonburg, VA

Dennis P. Hollinger. *The Meaning of Sex: Christian Ethics and the Moral Life*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009.

In this book Dennis Hollinger sets out to articulate the meaning of sex in a sex-crazed and sexually-confused world. He argues that there is inherent meaning in sex that is given by the God who designed sex and that is revealed through the Bible. Hollinger begins with his Christian ethicist professor hat on and lays out how the theories of consequentialist ethics, principle ethics, and virtue ethics are not adequate grounds for a Christian sexual ethic. He evaluates the worldviews of asceticism, naturalism, humanism, monism, and pluralism, and finds them inadequate as well. In contrast to these views,

Hollinger articulates his Christian worldview based on the biblical story of creation, fall, redemption, and consummation.

The author builds his sexual ethic on the “divine givens”; the primary one is that God created two ways of being human, male and female. Drawing significantly on Genesis 2:24, he bases his sexual ethic on God’s intention for male and female to become “one flesh” in marriage. Hollinger contends that the God-designed purpose for human sexual intimacy is four-fold: consummation of marriage, procreation, love, and pleasure. “These four purposes are found in only one location, the marriage of a man and a woman. This is where God designed sexual intimacy to be” (115).

In the introductory chapter Hollinger makes a helpful distinction between sexuality and sex, and declares his book is primarily about the latter. However, his use of the terms “sexual intimacy” and “sex” interchangeably obscures a range of physical acts other than intercourse that express sexual intimacy.

When one defines the meaning of God’s good gift of sexual intimacy only within marriage, the meaning of sexual wholeness for singles and homosexually-oriented persons is largely ignored. A sexual ethic that holds up marriage as the God-intended fulfillment of sexual being denigrates other ways of being sexually whole within God’s good design. Hollinger admits that churches have not done well in reaching out to singles and homosexuals. He doesn’t seem to recognize, however, that his predominantly marriage-focused sexual ethic contributes to this invisibility and inattentiveness to the sexual health and well-being of these persons. If the Creator’s orientation is toward males and females experiencing sexual intimacy within marriage, then churches that embrace this perspective tend not to address the real sexual yearnings for intimacy that all God’s children have been given.

A strength of the book is Hollinger’s focused and pastoral attention to four current sexual ethics issues: sex before marriage, sex in marriage, homosexuality, and reproductive therapies. Pastors and congregations dealing with these issues will find these chapters of particular interest.

As one who experienced infertility, I welcome more open and forthright discussion in our faith communities about ethical decision-making about reproductive options. Infertile couples are often alone in discerning the morality of the technologies offered to them in medical offices. I

commend Hollinger for giving this issue attention and raising important ethical questions that ought to be considered. In the intensity of desiring to create a child, couples can lose sight of the longer-term moral implications of the procedures they accept. The broader Christian community's wisdom and discernment is needed on these matters.

In the chapter addressing "The Challenge of Homosexuality," Hollinger not only makes the usual distinction between homosexual orientation and behavior but also discusses homosexual identity. He claims that a homosexual orientation is not chosen, and that homosexual identity and behaviors are the result of personal choices. It is important for him also to make distinctions between Christian ethics, pastoral care, and public policy. He argues "the Christian ethic of sex cannot capitulate to our fallen impulses ... [and] cannot sanction homosexual behavior" (197). He calls for churches to have compassion for those who struggle with homosexual desire without compromising the Christian sexual ethic. He urges churches to "hold together truth and compassion, righteousness and mercy" (197).

Those who genuinely need to re-examine the church's traditional sexual ethic or explore other Christian positions on homosexuality will not find much to support their efforts in this book. Hollinger stifles ongoing meaningful dialogue and further discernment on this controversial issue with his claim that "We fail the world and struggling individuals when we continually appeal to more dialogue, ambiguity, and merely compassion" (194). Nonetheless, he does contribute to the dialogue by providing a clear, thoughtful articulation of the traditional Christian understanding of the meaning of sex.

*Brenda Martin Hurst*, Pastor, Frazer Mennonite Church, Frazer, PA

Virgil Vogt, ed. *The Roots of Concern: Writings on Anabaptist Renewal 1952-1957*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2009.

World War II catapulted North American Mennonites into a world for which they were scarcely prepared. This reality was particularly true for those who left the confines of their predictable regional Mennonitism for the far shores of war-ravaged Europe. A group of seven men, including John Howard Yoder, Calvin Redekop, and John W. Miller, who all had firsthand experience in Mennonite relief work in postwar Europe and at the same time were involved in graduate studies at European universities, met in Amsterdam in 1952 to discuss the disjunction between their American Mennonite theology and their European experience. As one participant put it, “We were unable to define or to communicate the message that seemed implicit in our professed position. . . . What we in effect proclaimed as an answer for people in devastated countries was no longer a dynamic transforming leaven in our own midst” (2). These men had been influenced by the scholarly research of Anabaptist history and sociology, but their international experiences awakened them to both its inadequacy and its possibility.

Not only did the 1952 meeting mark the beginning of a crucial shift in thinking about Anabaptism that shook the “Old” Mennonite Church, the main target of its critique, but some of the ideas first heralded by this group are still resonant in theology today. Although the Concern movement resisted formal organization, it offered its ideas through eighteen pamphlet publications beginning in 1954 and ending in 1971.

*The Roots of Concern: Writings on Anabaptist Renewal 1952-1957* is a compilation of the first four volumes published between 1954 and 1957. Here the concerns and ideals of the group, and those with similar views, are promoted through articles, letters, and an annotated bibliography. These writings are a mix of visceral responses and academic insights, making the mood more personal and spiritual than strictly academic and theological. The first volume addresses the problems and solutions generally, but by 1957, in response to requests for greater clarity, the issues are more specific.

Although the men behind the Concern movement had been schooled in the “Anabaptist vision,” they were critical of it. “Neo-anabaptism is chiefly academic, an interesting subject to build libraries, journals, lectures around – but not to adopt personally in our daily lives....,” said one participant

(146). They discovered in Europe a new dimension of their history which brought into “sharp focus the genius of the sixteenth-century Anabaptists [and] their faithful application of New Testament Christianity....” This resulted in the conclusion that “our American Mennonite tradition is not the one of the Bible” (131).

These sharp criticisms are a few of those largely aimed at the perceived rigid institutional and doctrinal structure of the “Old” Mennonite Church. At the heart of this critique was a new realization of Anabaptism as formed and inspired by the Holy Spirit experienced in community. The Concern group perceived the Mennonite Church as compromising the genius of the Spirit-filled church through accommodating to a denominationalism more concerned with preserving the status quo. One reaction was against non-conformity, which in previous decades had been a theological category resulting in judgments on clothes and life insurance. In contrast, the Concern pamphlets endorse a faith focused on “living relationship with a living God” (159), so that “the Church ... is realized in the real presence of Christ in its midst” (160). It is in the dynamic Spirit-filled meeting of two or three in Christ where church happens, and this spontaneous existentialist spirit is central in this upstart movement. .

While the Concern group criticized preceding historical and theological interpretations of Anabaptism, they too founded their conclusions on some faulty historical research. For instance, Yoder contended that Anabaptism derived from the Reformed movement and he understood the Swiss Anabaptists as the true forebears of the movement. I believe that a broader, deeper understanding of the roots of Anabaptism leads to different conclusions about ecclesiology and ethics and a greater emphasis on spirituality.

The re-evaluation of “the Anabaptist vision” by the Concern group requires another assessment today, one that takes seriously their existential spirituality. *The Roots of Concern* is a good resource for anyone interested in ecclesiology, ethics, the early writing of Yoder, or Anabaptist-Mennonite history and spirituality. However, its special contribution is the challenge to live the Spirit-led life in community today.

*Andrew C. Martin*, ThD student, Regis College, Toronto School of Theology



Roger Epp. *We Are All Treaty People: Prairie Essays*. Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2008.

Roger Epp, a political scientist and dean of the Augustana campus of the University of Alberta, has written a thoughtful compendium of ten essays, many of which have appeared in prior incarnations, grouped together under the general theme of rural Canadian prairie life. Though displaying an idiosyncratic style, it is an instructive and at times deeply moving book.

The first three chapters are of a personal nature. Epp offers nostalgic descriptions of the Battle River, whose surrounding countryside lies in the heart of Treaty 6 territory, the area demarcated by the momentous 1876 agreement between the Crown and Cree First Nations. Next, he takes us on a journey to Oklahoma, recalling how his maternal great-grandfather, a farmer and pastor, moved from there to Saskatchewan in 1918 after his homestead had been claimed in the expansion of Indian Territory allotted to the Cheyenne. Epp then turns his attention to Hanley, Saskatchewan, a lonely little town where he was raised in the 1960s. Canada has lived off “both the economic *and* cultural capital” of places like Hanley; the country as a whole “will be impoverished by their decline and disappearance” (50).

Prairie politics is a recurring theme in the fifth, sixth and eighth chapters. Epp longs for a revival of agrarian tradition of the sort that Kentuckian Wendell Berry represents, which would empower farmers to act and reclaim their own history. Many prairie farmers today come from ancestors who were deeply suspicious of socialist tendencies that sprang from Rousseau’s notion of the people as a single entity with a common will. Consequently, they supported “the pluralist Canada, the one that promised an undisturbed, side-by-side home for diverse peoples” (118).

This pluralist vision, however, has recently been impeded by a farm crisis that extends to abandoned railway lines and grain elevators, diminished government services, and a general lack of leadership. Here Epp’s historical analysis sheds light on why many prairie farmers are reticent to cast their vote for the New Democratic Party, reticence stemming in no small measure from their forebears’ disillusionment with homogenizing socialism.

Alberta constitutes another key theme of the book. In the fourth chapter Epp explains how the United Farmers of Alberta became one of the

greatest Canadian populist democratic movements, unexpectedly winning a majority of seats in the 1921 Alberta general election and subsequently paving the way for the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) in Saskatchewan.

Today's Alberta is actually "two Albertas" (chapter 9), one urban and one rural. Though the latter is no longer at the center of Albertan life, Epp opines, urbanites nonetheless mimic the ranch lifestyle of cowboy boots, pickup trucks, and country music. Rural Alberta has become the "other Alberta," but it has survived in the Conservative dynasty through a patron-client relationship: oil revenue is exchanged for voter support. The reality of two Albertas has prompted Epp to think about the rural situatedness of the institution where he teaches (chapter 10). He concludes that a rural university should possess its own local pedagogy and curriculum that would encourage graduates to enter the rural workplace.

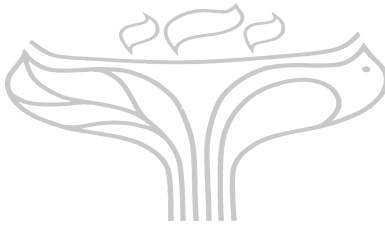
The seventh chapter, bearing the same title as the book, was provoked by the Canadian government's 1998 response to the report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples. Canadians at large must be disabused of the myth of *terra nullius*, which views pre-contact North America as a land belonging to no one. It is just this myth, the author argues, that allows many Canadians to view treaties as historically inconsequential with no meaning in perpetuity.

However, based on their "birthright" (a concept borrowed from political theorist Sheldon Wolin), "most Canadians exercise a treaty right simply by living where they do" (133). This is an arresting argument deserving careful pondering. What does it mean, say, for a Mennonite settler to "exercise a treaty right"? Could this become a barrier to healing and reconciliation with First Nations peoples? Or, if Canadians finally recognize that "we are all treaty people," are we then one step closer to reconciliation? Epp is to be commended for raising the issue of treaties in a candid, unrestrained manner.

Altogether, the ten chapters present a full account of Epp's own political vision, which stems from his identity as a treaty person from the rural prairies. Though the rationale for the ordering of the essays and the conceptual links between them are sometimes not obvious, each essay is readable and illuminating. The book is well annotated and contains a helpful

index of names and subjects. I recommend it unreservedly to political scientists, sociologists, anthropologists, scholars of literature, theologians, and anyone interested in the meaning of rural Canadian prairie life.

*Jeff Nowers*, PhD candidate, Emmanuel College, Toronto School of Theology



*Conrad Grebel University College  
at the University of Waterloo*

## **Sixteenth-Century Anabaptism and Mennonite History**

Conrad Grebel University College invites applications for a full-time continuing contract faculty position in undergraduate History and graduate Theological Studies at the University of Waterloo, with a teaching and research specialty in Sixteenth-Century Anabaptism and Mennonite History.

The appointment will begin July 1, 2011 at either the Assistant or Associate Professor level. The College will begin reviewing applications on November 15, 2010.

The College is committed to employment equity. Canadian citizens and permanent residents will be given priority.

For further information about the position, qualifications, and application procedures, see: [www.grebel.uwaterloo.ca/](http://www.grebel.uwaterloo.ca/).



*Conrad Grebel University College  
at the University of Waterloo*

# P R E S I D E N T

The Board of Governors of Conrad Grebel University College invites applications and/or nominations for the position of President, expected to be effective July 1, 2011. Conrad Grebel University College is a liberal arts college founded by the Mennonite Church, affiliated with the University of Waterloo, and grounded by its Christian identity and Anabaptist/Mennonite heritage.

The ideal candidate will have demonstrated ability for engaging various communities in fostering:

- the College values and mission – to seek wisdom, nurture faith, and pursue justice and peace in service to church and society;
- its programs, which embrace undergraduate courses in Arts, including the University of Waterloo Music and Peace & Conflict Studies programs, a graduate Theological Studies program, and an exceptional undergraduate residence and student life program. The resources of the College Library and Archives support these programs.

The College is committed to employment equity. Preference will be given to candidates who stand within the Anabaptist/Mennonite tradition and have earned a doctorate.

All inquiries will be kept in strict confidence.

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