

From our Churches

Author: John H. Neufeld

Church: First Mennonite

Date: 2007

This resource is part of a larger **From Our Churches** archives available as an inspirational resource to teachers, ministers and others of Mennonite Church Canada. Posted by permission of the author. Permission to reproduce and distribute is granted.

What's the point of reading (the Bible)?

Texts: Deut 6:4-9, 12, 20-21, Isaiah 55:6-11, Matt. 7:24-27 and James 2:22-24

Introduction

A year ago I started I started working on the question, "Do you understand what you are reading?" I had a second installment on the topic in June – "Take, eat, but beware." You may have thought I should have been done by then, but I'm not. I've continued reading and working on it. So today I want to give you part three of a series on the Bible – and I have no idea how many more parts there will be. If you're totally not interested in this extended process you can think about other stuff during this time.

You may remember that I began with the unlikely meeting of Philip and an unnamed Ethiopian talking in a chariot. It was there that the question was posed: "Do you understand what you are reading?" and I enlarged it by adding, "How do you understand what you are reading?" On the surface reading seems simple, but taking even six words, "Take eat, this is my body" – there are three very different ways of understanding - RC, Lutherans, Mennonites.

Then, I suggested some Guidelines for reading

- remember the church preceded the Bible, didn't fall into our laps ready-made; many writers, over many centuries contributed, guided by God's Spirit.

- notice what kind of literature a passage is – poetry, prose, parable etc –this will help decide whether to take it literally or symbolically (creation accounts)

- historical context

- cultural matters

- creative tension between passages

- christo-centric approach

--How we understand is affected by what we bring to the text

-Eating the book – not speedreading,

Not primarily for mastery, Not for getting all the facts

But for digestion, incorporation and then expression.

Some times we are challenged to read the Bible through from cover to cover; I know that some of you have done that. At the end of a year or so, we say we've done it. That's not what I want to talk about this morning. Some of you may wonder and even ask, so what is the point of reading the Bible anyway?

So, what is the point of reading the Bible?

One, simply to be “with it” in our culture

-I watch *Jeopardy* most every day at 5:30 and find it interesting that whenever a Bible category shows up it becomes evident immediately who of the contestants has any knowledge of the Bible.

-When my brother Henry attended UBC he enrolled in an English course on Milton, and in the first lecture the prof told the large class, “Go home, dust off your grandmother’s Bible and start reading. You will get little out of Milton if you don’t know your Bibles.”

-Not only in literature, but elsewhere, embedded in our culture, there are many assumptions, allusions and references to biblical material. Here’s a few examples:

- doubting Thomas, thorn in the flesh,
- burning bush, patience of Job, raising Cain,
- he saw the writing on the wall, don’t bury your talents
- let your light shine, the salt of the earth

-Given the increasing biblical illiteracy in society and even in churches, it will get more and more difficult for people to understand.

So, one of the important, but lesser reasons for reading the Bible is simply to be ‘with it,’ to have a general awareness of things assumed by well-read, literate folks.

A second important but lesser point is this - to become familiar with a profound story line –

-the many-voiced story-line that witnesses to God’s involvement with one people, Israel, for the sake of all people.

-Remember that God told Abraham, “I will bless you and make you a blessing to all peoples.”

-This story line beginning with Abraham and Sarah, winds its way through the lives of the patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac and Jacob),
devotes a lot of time to Joseph and Moses,
and then goes on to leaders like Joshua, Gideon, Samuel,
and a few kings like David and Solomon,
and a number of prophetic voices from Isaiah to Malachi,
from Jeremiah to Amos
with promises and hints of someone,
something greater to come.

This magnificent story-line reaches its peak in the life of Jesus –
of whom the disciples said,
this is the fulfilment of all that has gone before.

Here, we have the clearest portrayal of what God's character is like
and what human beings ought to be like.

Then the church is born to carry the good news of Jesus to the ends of the world
and into every nook and cranny of life.

That's my second answer to the question: what's the point of reading? – to "get" this story-line and find ourselves in it.

A third important but not yet the most important reason for us reading the Bible is
to learn the language of our faith.

Some may wonder why that's important –
every discipline every vocation has its vocabulary –
medicine, engineering, law, computers, sociology, etc.
and our faith, every faith,
has its own unique vocabulary.

We cannot be Christians unless we live and learn this vocabulary
that is uniquely Christian –
abstract terms like creation, call, image of God, redemption,
salvation, law, promise, holiness, hope, repentance, sin,
grace, love, worship, sanctification, neighbor, eternal life -
have their roots in the experiences of God's people through the centuries. ***That's my third answer to the question: what's the point of reading? To learn faith's vocabulary and practise using it.***

A fourth important, but not yet the most important reason for reading the Bible is
to learn how to talk with God.

And we bump into one surprise after another.

These men and women in the Bible show us
that we can rant and rave against God,
we can declare our doubts and confess our failures,
we can complain about the unfairness of life,
we can argue against God's call to do something useful,
we can voice our praise to God in gratitude
in private or together with others,
we can plead with God for help, for answers, for direction, for forgiveness.

You and I may wonder, how does one pray,
what can we say to God through all the highs and lows of life?

If we read the Bible with open eyes
we will notice those forbears of ours in this pilgrimage of faith said it all;
and so can we.

We can use their very words if we cannot formulate our own, (as Jesus did on the cross)
we can use them as patterns for us to follow.

And you know what comes through these narratives and those psalms?

That God is capable of hearing whatever we might think or say
and God will not turn away from us no matter what we might have to say. The Bible
invites us to enter into a lively conversation with the God
"in whom we live and move and have our being." Acts 17:28

That's my fourth answer to the question: what's the point of reading? - to learn how to talk with God.

Now I've come to the fifth, and most important reason:

to get a script for living.

Every person's life is scripted; and every possible script is a biased script.

Being biased is not to be avoided, it cannot be avoided.

You and I are biased – sometimes unconsciously, without much thought,
at other times we have thought through our bias,
our basic position in life,
what we are for and what we are against.

We are biased and our lives are scripted in the direction of our basic bias.

An Old Testament scholar, Walter Brueggeman, has suggested in one of his books that the Bible is “*The Word that Redescribes the World.*”

He shows that the Bible is in the business of re-scripting our lives.

That’s the ultimate point of our reading and our listening to the word.

One of the things this means is that

when the Bible re-scripts our lives it creates tension,
dissonance and anxiety.

For the new script, the script that is anchored in the story
that reaches its peak in the coming of Jesus
challenges the well-known scripts of our culture
and any other faith that we might have.

Another way of saying this is to say that the world is filled with countless stories,
stories that shape attitudes and dictate behavior.

Thomas Long (an American preacher and teacher) asks the following questions
about some of the dominant story scripts that vie for our attention:

- Was the universe created by a loving and just God or is the universe a blind and random collection of cold stones and burning embers floating through empty space and unshaped by creative hand?
- Are human beings created in the image of God and given lives of purpose and meaning or is life “a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing”?
- Are human beings in some sense created to be together in communities of trust and harmony or is the law of the talon and the claw our fate?
- Is generosity a virtue or a stupidity?
- When we stand at the grave of someone we have loved can we hope to meet again on another shore and in a brighter light, or is this weak sentimentality and a cowardly denial of brute facts?

We could add more questions:

- Our materialistic culture says acquisition of stuff is the proper focus of life and has created the motto, he who has the most toys and the end wins? Is that the script by which you and I want to shape our lives?
- Our hedonistic culture says that seeking and attaining pleasure, physical, emotional, sexual is what it’s all about; and the script goes on to say if one person doesn’t satisfy

you anymore than let them go, break any commitments you have made, for you have the inherent right to be happy; at all costs, find yourself! Is that the script by which you and I want to shape our lives?

These are some of the cultural scripts that shape people's lives;
the Bible offers us a counterscript.

Through Moses the people were offered a counterscript to the way of Pharaoh; they took God up on the offer and left slavery to become a freed people.

They were given a new script for life – summarized in the ten commandments.

In the years that followed they vacillated

between the old script and scripts of their culture and time.

During the time of Amos, Israel had given up

on the script that had freed them and given them identity and purpose

Instead, they lived according to a script of injustice and idolatry.

Amos reminded them of Yahweh's script for life,

he does so in no uncertain terms

the Lord was most interested in having "justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an everflowing stream." (Amos 5:24)

To a people who had succumbed to pagan practices of endless sacrifice

and defrauding of the neighbor, another prophet,

Micah, penned these powerful words

"What does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:8)

These words of Amos and of Micah are counterscripts –

an alternative way of seeing and of being in the world.

And Jesus continued this counterscripting in his time.

The Pharisees had boxed God in,

they knew exactly how people ought to behave,

and Jesus challenged their well established script and said,

"Listen, you honor me with your lips but your hearts are far from me, in vain do you worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines, abandoning the commandment of God and holding to human tradition." (Mark 7:6-7)

What is Jesus doing here?

He is challenging the accepted script and offering a new one.

The new script says, “Nothing that comes into a person from the outside defiles a person, but that which comes from the heart that defiles a person.”

Jesus updated everyone’s life script when he said, “You have heard it said to those of ancient times, but I say unto you...” and he rewrote the script on adultery, on oaths, on anger, on retaliation, on dealing with enemies. (Mt 5-7)

At the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount he focused it all by saying, “Everyone then who hears or reads these words of mine and acts on them will be likened to a man who built his house on a rock...the wind, rains and storms beat against that house, but it did not fall.” Do you see his emphasis?

Hearing and reading are pointless unless they become encrypted in life.

It’s no use having the script unless we live it.

Jesus’ brother James wrote something which ended up in the New Testament.

He got the message, the script, and he said,

“Be doers of the word and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in the mirror and on going away immediately forget what they were like.” (James 1:22-24)

I told you once about Eric Booth, Broadway Actor, teacher at Julliard, who recited the gospel of Mark at the Playhouse Theater in Chicago. Three weeks, twice a day, to packed houses. A group of us met him after one program and asked, “What impact has this had on your life?” His reply? “It has changed my life. I find myself responding to others the way Jesus did, I find myself thinking and assessing situations like Jesus.”

In other words, the script that he had learned by heart, was transforming his life.

Now that is the real point of reading the Bible.

That is what our Anabaptist forbears meant when they said the emphasis ought to be on following Jesus in life, *Nachfolge* or discipleship.

In addition to being with it,

in addition to knowing the story-line,

in addition to knowing the vocabulary of faith,

in addition to learning how to talk with God,

the biggest reason, the ultimate point of reading the Bible is to be changed, rescripted in life, or as Paul said it, “*to be conformed to the image of Christ.*” (Romans 8:29)

Peter Gomes, preacher to Harvard University has said, “The Bible is filled with the companionship of the confused and the seeking, men and women made of the ordinary stuff of life who often fail to understand, who make mistakes, whose humanity is transparent, but who encounter the living God and **whose lives are thereby changed.** ...People are not taken out of this life but are given strength and purpose and power to live in it. ...they are to grow and change and become something and somebody other than what they now are.”

We may get to the point where we can say, “I’ve done it, I’ve met the expectations:” I’m with it, I know the basic story-line, I know the words, I know how to talk with God, but about this most important thing, the real point of reading – being rescripted, changed, and transformed – about this I am sure no one would dare to claim, “I’ve met all the expectations. It’s a done deal.” No, being rescripted, changed and transformed remains a life-long journey, an endless challenge. May the Lord give each of us grace to live and to grow according to this amazing script for life.