

(Tim Geddert, April 14, 2018)

“Reading the Bible Together” (Conference)

Presentation 1

Scribes Who Are Becoming Disciples

(my story and some reflections on it)

INTRODUCTION:

It must have been a calm, sunny day on the Sea of Galilee. At any rate a curious and patient crowd listened all day as Jesus told his tales of the kingdom, provided new twists on well-known passages from the Tora, and shocked religious experts with outrageous claims about God caring for sinners and for down-and-outers, as much as for pious people, indeed as much as for those whose primary preoccupation was Bible study and scrupulous obedience. Of course, there were a lot of riddles included in Jesus’s teaching, too. Apparently, he was serious when he said his teaching was designed to open some people’s eyes and blind others’.

The long day of teaching finally ends. Jesus and his groupie head for shore and retire to a house for the night. And then a very strange conversation takes place.

Out of the blue comes Jesus’s question: “Have you understood all these things?” (cf. Matt. 13:51). And the disciples give him a one-word answer. Remember the passage? I bet some of you think I am making this up. Nope, it’s right there in the middle of Matthew’s Gospel! A one-word answer.

They could have nuanced it, don’t you think? Like: “Well, we’re trying. We’re getting most of it, we think. Is this going to be on the test?” Nope, they are ready with their one-word answer.

What is it? (wait). “Yes.” “Of course, we understand everything, Jesus.”

Now I said this was a strange conversation. So, some of you are familiar with this passage. You know about Jesus’s question. You know the answer they gave. But do you know what Jesus says next?

Here it is.

“Have you understood all these things?”

“Yes.”

“Therefore, every scribe who has become a disciple of the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old” (13:52).

Huh?

What is that supposed to mean?

Maybe: "Great, you can each go and pick out a prize from the treasure box!" (That's what my kindergartner would probably say.)

Or: "Well then, you have already discovered all the treasure hidden in my teaching?"

Or maybe: "Well, if the other parables were so easy, try this one!"

OK, here's my proposal: Listen to it once more: "Therefore, every scribe who has become a disciple of the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old" (13:52).

Jesus refers to scribes and disciples . . . actually to scribes becoming disciples.

So, who are scribes? In Jesus's day, they were the experts, the Bible scholars, the "*grammatai*" (that's Greek). "*grammatai*" . . . you see, they understand the grammar of every text in the Bible. They are the "men of letters" (yup . . . all men, back then). They knew the Scriptures like the back of their hand. Knew what each text said, knew what each text meant, knew how to use each text to their advantage. They were the experts. They knew it all!

And who are disciples? They are learners. That is what the word means . . . "*mathetai*" . . . from verb "*manthano*". One of the major goals of Jesus's ministry was to mentor a group of ordinary people for their extraordinary role as the founding members of a renewed Israel.

So, Jesus is talking about scribes and disciples . . . "know-it-alls" and "learners".

OK, let's listen to this conversation again.

"Have you understood all these things?"

"Yes."

Oh no! You have become know-it-alls. You've become "*grammatai*". That's terrible. I didn't recruit you to be "*grammatai*" . . . I recruited you to become "*mathetai*". You are supposed to be learners. Non-stop learners. Life-long learners.

So, you think you understand everything? Well, that means you need to become disciples all over again. Let's get back to square one. Go back to being learners. There is a rich treasure store awaiting learners. Old treasures! New treasures! But they are only there for learners. Scribes have no access to them.

Jesus knows that one of the biggest enemies of discipleship is thinking one knows everything. When the disciples claim that they understand everything, Jesus, doesn't congratulate them. Nor does he scold them. He simply says, "True disciples never claim to understand everything. Scribes do that. You were called to be disciples." If you've turned into 'scribes,' I'm inviting you back to a life of being disciples!"

Often, I hear students lament the fact that there are so many things in the Bible that they just don't understand. I do not lament with them. I rejoice for them. And I encourage them that

their posture is far better than that of some other people I meet. They are so sure that they have the Bible all figured out, they can tell me exactly where my beliefs are wrong. I never congratulate them. I try not to scold them. But I certainly lament for them and for those who hear their preaching and teaching, for those who read their blogs and their books.

OK, let's give the disciples one more chance. And I am going to invite you to identify with them, by joining me in giving them a new response to Jesus.

Jesus: "Have you understood all these things?"

(And now disciples are invited to respond. If you consider yourself a learner, and if you would like to say these words with me, please do.)

Disciples (say it with me): "No, Lord, we have not understood all these things, but we want to keep learning. We want you to open our minds and our hearts. Please make us humble about what we think we know. Reveal to us the treasures of your word . . . old ones and new ones, as we continue to be trained for the Kingdom of God. Amen."

So that was my introduction to the theme. The next major part of this presentation will be very autobiographical. But my purpose is not to talk about me; it's to help us consider the nature of Scripture and appropriate ways of interpreting it.

By the time I was 18, I thought I was an expert in the Scriptures. And then for three years after that I pursued my "scribal" goals with a passion. And I have been gradually pursuing the path towards discipleship ever since. So, here's the story.

I grew up immersed in the Bible . . . My dad read three chapters of it every morning while the porridge was getting cold; each week I attended two Bible study classes, one Sunday morning, one Wednesday evening. In addition, I was taught to have daily personal devotions. And I listened to more sermons than you can imagine (well, try imagine: a preacher's kid who was also a Bible School teacher's kid, and who had to attend every church service ever offered in Hepburn, Saskatchewan, at church *and* at the Bible school. And that was in the 50's and 60's when there were a lot more services offered than any church could pull off today. We **KNEW** the Bible.

And then I went to Bible School for three years. Why? (You are probably thinking). Because I had the sneaking suspicion that there were still one or two things I might not know about the Bible, AND, I had begun to suspect that there was more than one way to interpret some passages. I was eager to duke it out with my Bible School teachers. And I did it with a vengeance. (Yes, I think that is the right word.)

By the time I graduated from Bethany Bible Institute, I was a scribe of the scribes. I knew it all! Looking back, I don't think Jesus was overly impressed with my discipleship.

God has been working at me for about 45 years, graciously and persistently undoing my "scribe-ness". I want to narrate some of the steps along the way.

My first undoing: Going to seminary

I came to seminary with lots of answers. I learned in Seminary that when the Scriptures are read from a different angle of vision, quite a few texts look quite a lot different.

Remember what I brought with me to Seminary: a strong Bible background, having studied under godly and wise teachers, all well-educated in Bible content, all eager to make sure we were as well. But my seminary training helped me realize that I had brought with me far more than knowledge of Bible content; there were whole systems of thought shaping the way texts were being interpreted. And looking back, I think I understand why I left Bible School with the uneasy feeling that I had never quite managed to get all the pieces to fall into place very well. The underlying theological standpoints that framed and shaped the content were actually a pretty eclectic set of diverse standpoints. There was a pretty large dose of residual Dispensationalism, a fair share of tentative Calvinism, a bit of nascent Kingdom theology, and a great deal of (what I would now call), mainline right-wing conservative Evangelicalism. There was very little of what I now call “Biblical Theology”.

But in Bible School we didn’t think about these things. We thought we were “just reading the Bible”.

So then I went to Seminary, and precisely at a time when the professors were being recruited in order to advocate for an “Anabaptist alternative” to all of the above. Of course, that does not mean they disagreed with everything I had learned in Bible school. By far not! But in Seminary I learned that when we read the Bible, we always read from a perspective. And I learned one reading perspective pretty well. And there was a coherence to it.

I will give just one example: I had learned the Book of Romans extremely thoroughly in Bible School . . . we studied it verse by verse, passage by passage, theological puzzle by theological puzzle . . . and when we were done, we knew what I later learned was called “the old perspective on Paul” like the back of our hand.

But in all the hard work we did interpreting Romans, nobody ever pointed out that if one reconsidered the definition of just two Greek words (*dikaiosune* and *pistis* – justification and faith/faithfulness) and if one reached a different conclusion on how two kinds of genitive constructions should be read (*dikaiosune tou theou* and *pistis tou iesou*), then the whole book actually looks very different. In Seminary, John Toews taught me Romans all over again. I could see the book from more than one perspective. And the one that “rang true” for me was what was then called “the new perspective” – a perspective that has been fine-tuned a lot in the last 40 years, but one that I believe is far more consistent with an Anabaptist reading of the Bible than the one I learned first. That’s just one example. I could multiply that by dozens more.

My point: When we discover that all reading is influenced by perspectives . . . and when we become aware of these perspectives and their influence . . . then we will be far better equipped to evaluate the pros and the cons of various options and we can adopt readings that are part of a coherent picture. When we recognize that we all read with glasses on, we can actually make occasional visits to an optometrist to fine tune our optical prescription. And then we can see things more and more clearly. And if we can avoid the temptation to think we have finally got everything figured out, we can be set for on a life-long quest of learning over and over again. And we can also learn to disagree respectfully, because we can see why other people interpret texts differently than we do.

My second undoing: Becoming a pastor

When I was invited to plant and then to lead a church, I experienced another unlearning . . . this time an unlearning of some of my *Seminary* training – not so much unlearning the conclusions I had reached but unlearning some inappropriate attitudes to those conclusions. At seminary I was trained to consider all the options, to cite sources in support of those I accepted and those I rejected, and when the evidence was not all on one side, to provide a tentative, and usually very nuanced, conclusion. An academic paper succeeded when it did those things well.

I tried that in my preaching. “Dear brothers and sisters: there are three ways to interpret this passage! Here are three representative scholars and here are the arguments they give for the diverse conclusions they reach. So, we cannot be completely certain of what the text means. May the Lord bless you and guide you as you go home and figure out what this passage means for you!” It did not work out very well, as my congregation pointed out to me. And so, I had to learn that proclaiming the word is not quite the same as pursuing a scholarly agenda and fine-tuning theological convictions. Not quite. Actually, not nearly!

I learned to do my homework, to reach my own tentative and sometimes even well-considered conclusions, to try to discern the needs of the congregation . . . and then to craft a sermon that set the text free to speak to us. Of course, I was running the risk of proclaiming an interpretation that a few years later I might very well have reason to re-consider. Suppose some additional study would lead me to change my mind about the text’s primary meaning and its potential impact! That would be a disaster, wouldn’t it?

Actually, not at all. So what, if my congregation sometimes heard me say, “I think I’ve changed my mind!”? If I can’t model that attitude for them, how can I reasonably expect them ever to change their mind about anything? Remember, Jesus wants disciples. And if as preachers and teachers start to look like scribes, we too need to be converted all over again.

My third undoing: Doctoral studies

I was fortunate to be able to write my dissertation at a time when some of the rather sterile methods of historical criticism had already run their course . . . historical criticism, source criticism, especially redaction criticism no longer seemed to fascinate Bible interpreters much, nor did they hold out the promise of bringing Scripture to life.

Scholars, especially interpreters of the Gospels, were learning that the Gospels are not archeological sites; they are *narratives*. Each Gospel provides its own portrait of Jesus . . . portraits that do not get clearer and clearer when they are mixed together . . . in fact, that is the surest way to misread them and push the portrait out of focus. For three years, I politely requested Matthew and Luke to keep out of my study. I was studying Mark. Matthew and Luke had provided their own portraits; they had no business sneaking into the room and applying their brush to Mark’s portrait.

A principle that all of us have been taught is, “Scripture interprets Scripture”. But “Scripture also misinterprets Scripture” . . . Well, that is probably not the best way to say it. It’s not Scripture’s fault. But reading texts into texts, bringing our conclusions with us before we begin

our study, looking for particular standpoints in texts that veer off from what authors were aiming to give us . . . Well, that can really mess up our Bible interpretation.

Each Evangelist chose to provide a unique portrait of Jesus. To understand a Gospel is to absorb that unique portrait. We don't mix the portraits. We don't second guess whether the author got it right. We don't take a narrative and turn it into doctrine. And we don't try to guess what Jesus must have *actually* said in Aramaic before the Evangelist provided us with an interpreted and translated form of it in Greek. We study the portrait! That is what it means to interpret a Gospel. And as Anabaptists, that should be one of the main things we do when we interpret the Bible.

Of course, we can use the Gospels for all sorts of other things . . . like learning Greek participles, or like harmonizing all the diverse accounts, or like reconstructing a historical Jesus. But let's not call that interpreting the Gospels. During my doctoral studies and ever since, I have gradually been learning to read texts for what they offer us, not to come with an agenda and make the text come out right.

My fourth undoing: Learning that the Bible tells a story

This was already implied in what I just said. I said above that each Gospel is a self-contained portrait of Jesus . . . a narrative of his life, death and resurrection. (In case you wonder, I am quite aware that I am calling the Gospels *narratives* and also *portraits*.) But these belong together. A narrative is the genre used. A portrait is the outcome. Call it a "word picture", if you like. Had the Evangelists used a canvas, perhaps they could have portrayed Jesus wordlessly. But they used a scroll and a pen . . . so their portrait is communicated in the words of a narrative.

Actually, the whole Bible is a narrative. It has a plot line. Its components mean what they mean because they play specific roles in an unfolding story. Creation, Fall, the Creation of a Covenant People, the Advent of Jesus, the Empowered Church carrying out the Mission of God . . . the Consummation yet to come . . . these are all movements . . . acts . . . within the great drama of God and the Cosmos!

If we misinterpret *the story we find ourselves in*, we misread the plot and the individual scenes get all muddled. For much of church history, and for many people today, the plot of the story is very different. It goes something like this: "Every one of us was born outside of God's favor. God sent Jesus to die and rise again so that our original sin could be erased, and all the sins we commit in life can be forgiven. All we have to do is believe in Jesus and we can be assured that our final destiny is not an eternity of suffering in hell, but of bliss in heaven." With this approach, each text is read for its contribution to *that* story line.

I am not going to try to sort out with you this morning, exactly which parts of that plot line are more or less acceptable and which are rather doubtful . . . but I will urge anyone who thinks that that is a fair re-telling of the Bible's primary story line to reconsider. The plot line of Scripture is far grander, far more world-encompassing, far more God-centered. And the more we allow our personal stories to become subplots, smaller components of something far greater, the more clearly we will also see that the Bible is an inexhaustible treasure house of inspiration and challenge. The main plot of Scripture is nothing less than the arrival of God's Kingdom, God's will being brought to earth, as it is already being done in heaven. If we find

our place within that story, the lives of our congregations are enriched and we learn to soar with eagles.

The alternative . . . we pull verses out of context, rearrange them as if we were doing a jigsaw puzzle, and if they don't fit well, we twist and turn them until they do . . . and we construct our own picture, answer our questions, create our theologies, set up our ethical rules. When we do that, we put a lot of work into all the things we do with the Bible; we just don't really interpret it on its own terms.

My fifth undoing: discovering how damaging “theology” can be.

My last undoing (on this list) is perhaps the most provocative. I am far less convinced than I used to be that the Bible's primary goal is to give us all the answers we need so that we can write profound theology text books. My first introduction to such theology books had the whole Bible figured out (or at least rearranged to make it look that way). It began with the 18 attributes of God, each accompanied by 10 verses, proving that the author was right about each one. Next came Christology, correctly defined once and for all, then Pneumatology, then Anthropology, then Soteriology . . . I am sure many of you know what I mean.

The God I glimpse in Scripture is not very much like the God that is described for me in books like that. God is more like a Fortress and a Shepherd, a King, a Bridegroom, a Fountain of Living Water. That is how the God of the Hebrews, the Father of our Lord Jesus, is portrayed in Scripture. The God I encountered in the theology books was a lot more like the philosophical gods of Plato and Aristotle.

And, just in case that was not provocative enough: What about doctrines of the atonement? I know longer think we benefit very much by fighting about which is the right theory – Christus Victor, the Ransom Theory, Penal Satisfaction. The Bible does not provide us with theories of the atonement. We create them. The Bible gives us images and metaphors. A variety of word pictures give us glimpses of what was accomplished through the sacrificial death of Jesus on the cross and God's response to the faithfulness of Jesus – raising him up to be the firstborn of the New Creation. It's kind of like a warrior defeating all God's enemies. It's kind of like manumission, the freeing of captives from their slave-master. It's kind of like paying a penalty for someone else. It's kind of like wiping the slate clean. It's kind of like exposing the threadbare pretensions of all who accuse us. BUT it is not exactly like any of these, because it is greater and grander than any theory or doctrine or theological formulation could ever be. To think that one theory of the atonement should be declared right, and all the others declared wrong, makes about as much sense to me now as picking one of Jesus's parables of the kingdom and saying: That's the right one! If you pick a different one, your theology is wrong.

The Bible aims to enlighten and inspire our imaginations far more than it aims to give us what we need to out-argue theological opponents. There are lots of “theologians” (so-called) out there building their theological house of cards . . . carefully stacking doctrine upon doctrine to create a shaky edifice. And most of them are eager to make the alternative constructions come crashing to the ground . . . No wonder they are so nervous when someone tampers with one of the cards in their system. If I were convinced that my task as a theologian was to do that, I think I'd be tempted to throw in the towel, or hang up my skates, or burn my

concordances . . . or whichever is the “correct doctrine” of quitting! I really believe in theology . . . just not that kind.

There you have it . . . five ways in which my earliest convictions about the Bible have been systematically dismantled . . . but, God be praised, five ways they were gradually replaced with approaches that have increased my fascination for Scripture over and over again.

But I still have 15 minutes left . . . What I have decided to do with them is to illustrate, using two texts, how I interpret Scripture in the context of the Bible’s grand story line. These two texts work particularly well because there is an “intertextual link” between them. That is fancy scholars talk for what happens when one text alludes to a previously known text, enlarging the meaning and the impact of the second text, but sometimes also, within a larger canonical context, shaping the way the first text plays its role in the ongoing narrative. Thus we, as readers, also see more clearly *the story we find ourselves in*.

The first text is from the book of Isaiah.

It was written to encourage a people who thought that the return from Babylonian exile would restore Israel’s fortunes to their former glory, perhaps to an even greater glory than anything they had previously experienced. It didn’t. By far not! So, in this section of Isaiah, the prophet becomes ever clearer, that it will require a great future intervention of God for Israel to be brought back on track for its great mission to draw all peoples into the orbit of God’s loving embrace.

Listen to the prophetic promises:

The Future New Creation (from Isa. 65)

17 For I am about to create new heavens
and a new earth;
the former things shall not be remembered
or come to mind.
18 But be glad and rejoice forever
in what I am creating; . . .

21 They shall build houses and inhabit them;
they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit.
22 They shall not build and another inhabit;
they shall not plant and another eat; for like the
days of a tree shall the days of my people be,
and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of
their hands.

23 **They shall not labor in vain**, . . .

25 The wolf and the lamb shall feed together,
the lion shall eat straw like the ox;
but the serpent—its food shall be dust!

They shall not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain,

says the Lord.

Some things just seem obvious to us. If you build a house (or have it built), of course you get to live in it! Why else build it? If you plant a vineyard (or a garden), of course you get to eat from the harvest. What would be the point, otherwise? Not so obvious for people still under foreign oppression. Not so obvious for a persecuted people. For that matter, not so obvious for people in tornado ally, or in the path of an onrushing hurricane, or an unstoppable tsunami. Not so obvious for food insecure people, for the homeless, for immigrants threatened with imminent expulsion.

“BUT ONE DAY . . . “, says the prophet. Our work will never be in vain again. No invading armies, no natural disasters, no brutal regimes, no laws protecting the haves as they exploit the have nots. Never again will anything or anyone ever again tear down or steal the houses we build and the vineyards we plant. *They shall not labor in vain!*

So just before we read the New Testament text that echoes this one, let’s listen to a song. I actually never listen to Country Music. So, who would have thought that one of my favorite songs would win a Country Music Award? Martina McBride picked up a little-known poem, written by Kent Keith, entitled “The Paradoxical Commands”, a poem that was one of Mother Teresa’s great favorites, and turned it into this.

MARTINA MCBRIDE

"Anyway"

You can spend your whole life buildin'
Somethin' from nothin'
One storm can come and blow it all away
Build it anyway

You can chase a dream
That seems so out of reach
And you know it might not ever come your way
Dream it anyway

[chorus:]

God is great, but sometimes life ain't good
When I pray it doesn't always turn out like I think it should
But I do it anyway
I do it anyway

This world's gone crazy and it's hard to believe
That tomorrow will be better than today
Believe it anyway
You can love someone with all your heart
For all the right reasons
And in a moment they can choose to walk away
love 'em anyway

[chorus]

You can pour your soul out singing
A song you believe in
That tomorrow they'll forget you ever sang
Sing it anyway
Yeah, sing it anyway
I sing, I dream, I love
Anyway
yeah

One day, in the New Creation, nothing we do will ever be done in vain again! No storm will come and blow it all away. No loved one will ever walk away. No song sung will ever be forgotten. One day! *Which day?*

So, we come to 1 Corinthians 15 . . . one of the great Resurrection chapters of the New Testament. Paul argues that our whole faith journey is completely in vain if Christ has not been raised from the dead! And drawing on his conviction that in Christ the New Creation has begun, Paul holds out the great hope of *our own* future resurrection. One day God will bring to completion the story line of Scripture. Those who belong to Jesus will be raised from the dead and creation will be restored, not only to its former glory, but to a glory far exceeding anything visible in the first garden.

And then Paul ends his chapter like this:

The Future and the Present (1 Cor. 15)

54 When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled: "Death has been swallowed up in victory."

55 "Where, O death, is your victory?
Where, O death, is your sting?"

That is the backdrop to Paul's grand concluding challenge to carry on the ministry of Jesus, and thereby the great Mission of God.

58 Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord . . .

Now how do you imagine Paul should finish the sentence? Given the backdrop of Isaiah 65, wouldn't you expect him to say . . . "because you know that in the Lord . . . one day, when Jesus returns, your labor will never be in vain again!"

He could have, but he finishes like this:

. . . because you know that in the Lord, . . . **your labor is not in vain.**

Because the grand story-line of Scripture has been revealed to us, including the final act that still lies ahead . . . we already know that our *present* labor is *already* not in vain. The New

Creation has been inaugurated. God has decided to use us to build for his kingdom, to plant his vineyard. And it is never in vain, because it becomes part of God's grand restoration project. Even though storms still blow it all away. Even though people we love still turn and walk away. Even if people forget we ever sang. *Even now* it is not in vain . . . for behind and within and beyond the projects we are working on . . . God is at work, using every little act of faithfulness to build for God's already inaugurated kingdom.

To borrow NT Wright's analogy. All our faithful service can be compared to that of a stone mason, faithfully applying hammer and chisel to a hunk of granite, never suspecting what crucial role that stone will play when the master architect one day places it alongside all the others and it becomes part of a design we could never imagine, completing exactly what was needed way up there on one of the columns of God's great cathedral!

It is never in vain!

Martina McBride gets it exactly right, even though she doesn't tell us *why* we should do it anyway. Isaiah did. Paul did. Jesus does. The Scriptures do . . . if we read them, not so that we can out-argue our theological opponents, but in order to be drawn into the story line and be inspired to faithfully play the role Jesus has invited us to contribute.

Ever had anyone you've loved, turn and walk away? . . . love 'em anyway!
Ever built something that came crashing down? . . . build it anyway!
Ever prayed prayers that seemed to go unanswered? . . . pray anyway!
Ever preached a sermon that fell flat? . . . preach on!
Ever struggled with Bible interpretation? . . . interpret anyway!

It is NEVER in vain, if it is done as an act of faithful service to Jesus. One day you and I will be able to blink up at the finished project and see it! "I helped carve that stone!" . . . And it will be worth it all!

AMEN.