

(Tim Geddert, April 14, 2018)

## **“Reading the Bible Together” (Conference)**

### **Presentation 2**

#### **“Anointing, Pious Slogans, Sola Scriptura, and Earthquake-Readiness”**

I want to reconnect with my first presentation by sharing my approach to interpreting a text from the Gospels. We read Gospel texts, not to reconstruct what “really happened” (as if we knew better than the Evangelists), but to grasp the unique contribution of each text within the self-contained portrait of Jesus offered to us by each writer. Of course, we always take into account what we can know about the history and culture of the first century, for only so can we hear the texts as the first readers did. And that must always be our starting point.

Enough backdrop. How do I read this text?

#### **Mark 14:3-9**

*3 While he was in Bethany, reclining at the table in the home of Simon the Leper, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, made of pure nard. She broke the jar and poured the perfume on his head.  
4 Some of those present were saying indignantly to one another, “Why this waste of perfume? 5 It could have been sold for more than a year’s wages and the money given to the poor.” And they rebuked her harshly.  
6 “Leave her alone,” said Jesus. “Why are you bothering her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. 7 The poor you will always have with you, and you can help them any time you want. But you will not always have me. 8 She did what she could. She poured perfume on my body beforehand to prepare for my burial. 9 Truly I tell you, wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her.”*

I thought I knew this text fairly well. I had memorized the book of Mark, written a dissertation on it, taught courses on Mark numerous times, written a commentary on Mark, preached from it a lot.

Yet after all that, the “aha” moment happened . . . but we’ll get to that. Let’s start with what I had previously seen in the text.

We get the impression this woman came with simple intentions . . . to honour Jesus. She claims no other motives. She wants to do it extravagantly, so instead of normal anointing oil, she uses costly nard. Instead of carefully removing the lid, she breaks it open. Instead of applying a few drops, she pours the entire contents over Jesus’s head. It’s a marvelous expression of “giving all she had” . . . of “being broken” so that Jesus can have it all! “She did what she could!” (said Jesus). Indeed, she did.

A straight-forward text about a woman with a straight-forward intention to honour Jesus! Yet both Jesus (as a character within the story), and Mark, the shaper of the narrative, ascribe far more significance to this woman’s deed than she herself could have intended. And this is

what keeps on fascinating me. When we do our little bit, God can make it into so much more. A woman wants to honour Jesus . . . and people are still talking about it, all over the world!

So what do Jesus, and Mark, have to say about this woman's deed?

### **FIRST, she did a “beautiful work.”**

NRSV calls it a “good service”. But there are two words in Greek for “good.” “*agathos*” means good, but in the sense of moral correctness, conforming to a high standard, righteous. “*kalos*” also means good, but in the sense of “well done!” “a work of art” “a thing of beauty.” (We get the English word “calligraphy”, beautiful writing, from it!)

According to Jesus, this woman did a “*kalon ergon*.” It's as if Jesus is saying to her critics: “Oh, you can get out your calculators and your spreadsheets. Go ahead. Defend the idea of selling the ointment. Figure out how you want to allocate the proceeds. You can probably even find laws that justify your moral calculations. But you can't argue with the beauty of what she has done.”

Sometimes we need to throw our calculations to the wind, and just do something extravagant for Jesus, something beautiful for God. She did! “So, get off her case, will you?” (says Jesus)

### **SECOND, she discerned the times.**

Some things are forever! Poverty, for example, will never go away. Nor will the stories told about this woman. But the time to minister to Jesus is slipping away.

When Jesus says, “The poor you will always have with you,” he is not saying, “Forget the poor! They can wait!” . . . and most certainly not, “Poverty is just a fact of life. We can't do anything about it.” His point is rather this: “Every day is the right time to help the poor; but this would be a particularly good day to minister to Jesus, the one who poured out his whole life serving the poor – the sick, the blind, the lame – and who will pour out his life one final time before passing on that mission to his followers.

But there is even more here. This event takes place at Passover time. The Passover festival brought with it an expectation that alms be given for the poor. In Mark's text the critical observers probably regret not getting the proceeds of this expensive ointment. It could have taken care of their alms-giving obligations for a whole year.

Jesus says: Poverty is pervasive; the poor need our help all the time. What better way to start than to serve the poorest of the poor with all that we have? Then we can invest the rest of our lives in caring for all the other poor, as Jesus himself did.

### **THIRD, she identified with Jesus's death.**

Did she come into the room for the purpose of performing an embalming ritual? Not likely. You don't embalm the living. She came to honour Jesus. But Jesus knows his earthly life will soon end. That's what he's been telling his disciples, over and over again. But they just don't get it.

According to Jesus, this woman is way ahead of them. They still misunderstand or oppose every reference he makes to his coming passion. They still assume they are destined for honourable thrones alongside a Messiah who will rule over a liberated nation. Not this woman: She anoints Jesus *for burial*. Jesus sees in her act of worship an identification with his true nature as the suffering servant, giving his life as a ransom for many.

This woman's act takes Jesus's passion predictions into account. The oil she brought to honour Jesus now becomes embalming oil. And Jesus knows it needs to be that in order for it also to become coronation oil.

#### **FOURTH, she took even the resurrection into account.**

Now where is this in the text (you might ask)? It's in the word "*beforehand*." "She has anointed my body *beforehand* for its burial." (v.8)

Anointing for burial is always done *after* a death has taken place . . . just not this time. Why? – because Jesus won't stay dead long enough for the anointing to be done afterward. Mark, in the final chapter of his book, tells us of three women who desire to anoint the body of Jesus. They have carefully prepared their spices the night before. Now it is Sunday morning. Just after the sun has risen (*catch the pun?*) "Just after the son has risen" – they hasten to the tomb where the body lies . . . or rather *had lain*. Too late! "The Sun of Righteousness has already risen with healing in his wings!"

This woman in Bethany has the foresight . . . at least Mark's text attributes it to her . . . to anoint the body *beforehand* for burial. Anyone who takes the resurrection into account, must pour out all they have on this side of death. Afterwards it will be too late.

#### **FIFTH, she anointed the Messiah**

Since the very first verse of Mark's Gospel, Jesus has been called "Christ" (that's our badly pronounced Greek), Messiah (that's our badly pronounced Hebrew). But what do the words mean? "Anointed"! Jesus is "The Anointed One".

But when does Jesus ever get anointed? Mark's whole Gospel is about the Anointed King Jesus! He's been announcing a kingdom; he's been acclaimed as a king. He'll soon be mocked as a king, crucified as "King of the Jews." But when is he ever anointed for this kingly role? Right here. This woman performs the ritual by which the Messiah gets his name!

Wherever the Gospel is preached, wherever Jesus is called the Christ, this woman's deed ***IS BEING*** proclaimed! By God's providence she gets to perform the ritual that declares Jesus of Nazareth to be God's Messiah.

Isn't it amazing how much more significance Jesus and Mark see in this woman's action than she herself could possibly have intended! Makes me wonder how often our own little acts of faithfulness or devotion have an impact way, way beyond anything we could ever dream of. Wouldn't it be wonderful to imagine that sometimes people are still talking about something we said or did, long after we ourselves have forgotten it!

**And now, if all that were not fascinating enough . . . here's the "aha moment" I referred to above.**

It was in a chapel service at the Seminary. We were doing a "*lectio divina*" reading of this text . . . you know, the sort of reading that does not undertake a lot of analysis or diligent research. We don't try to reconstruct the historical context, nor read it in the light of the Gospel's story line. We simply invite the text (or more accurately the Spirit of God) to talk to *us*. We let the text be *about us*. We invite the text to "hit us" with a word or a phrase. We ask: "Does this text talk about *me* as well?"

OK, I admit it. I was skeptical. After all of my study, something new was supposed to suddenly "hit me"? *Come on!* But it did.

It suddenly hit me: This text includes a word of prophecy – about me! I don't have to put myself into the story. The story puts me into itself!

"Wherever this Gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told in memory of her!" Hmm. This story has indeed been told all over the world – by me! (and, of course, by lots of others). But I have actually told this woman's story in the US, in Canada, in Scotland, in Germany, in Paraguay, in Congo. "What she has done will be told! Indeed, it has been told! I have told it! Jesus predicted I would! And now I can BC to the list of places where "what she did" has been told in memory of her. Her memory lives on. I get to be a part of making sure it lives on – just by telling her story, wherever the Gospel is preached throughout the world. Amazing!

Of course, I'm not named in the text. But then, neither is the woman. She just wanted to honour Jesus. That's all I want to do, too. And, if anything you have heard in the last 15 minutes struck you as interesting or meaningful, well, pass it on! And when you do, you get to be a character in the story as well – un-named, just like the woman, but honouring Jesus, just as she did. Who knows what God might choose to make out of that?

So now to the main theme of this afternoon.

Oletta Wald wrote a great little book explaining why and how we should do "Discovery Bible Study". (It's a classic). I am using it this semester in an introductory course in Bible Interpretation. And now that I have praised it, let me critique it.

Page 25: "When you are reading a discourse passage, be on the alert for every time the writer tells you to *do something*, to *not do something*, or to *be something*. These might be admonitions, warnings, exhortations, advice, commands or promises."

Any red flags going up yet? What is the assumption being made here? The assumption is that if I am reading the text, then the author is obligating *me* to do whatever the text says, to avoid whatever the text prohibits, to claim whatever the text promises.

OK, maybe I just took those two sentences out of context. Actually not. If I provide the context, it becomes clear that she actually digs a deeper hole for herself. Here's the next sentence: [In these discourse passages] . . . "The writer will be speaking directly to you, the reader. Or in the case of Jesus's admonitions, he will be speaking directly to his listeners."

So, what is wrong with that? After all, Jesus is God, so Jesus's word to his disciples is God's word to me, right? Behind the human authors is the divine author. So, Paul's word to the Corinthians is God's word to me, right? When we encounter commands, prohibitions or promises in Scripture, we should *do* the things commanded, *avoid* the things prohibited, *claim* the things promised, right? "Well, of course" – some of us might be inclined to say. And I respond: Well, of course not! At least not in hundreds (if not thousands) of texts. OK, that should get your attention. Let me explain what I mean and why it matters.

Many sincere Christians seem convinced that to be faithful to Scripture we must keep everything as simple as possible:

- If the Bible says it, believe it.
- If the Bible commands it, do it.
- If the Bible forbids it, avoid it.
- If the Bible promises it, claim it.
- Always interpret the Bible literally.
- Always apply it literally.

Only one problem: the more we try to keep things simple in the short run, the more we make them complicated in the long run!

In the end, things are a lot *less* confusing if we start with assumptions almost exactly the opposite of those I just listed. There is in fact a great deal in Scripture that is not simple and straight-forward, a lot that needs careful discernment and sometimes hard work, a lot that is open to serious dialog and a lot that can quite easily lead to very diverse conclusions. If we assume that the task of interpreting Scripture is really worth our best efforts, worth investing time to learn and to practice, worth calling together diverse people to work at together, in community, then we will re-discover the joy of Bible study. And we will lose the false comfort of easy assurances that we have it all figured out.

Sometimes we are so enamored with pious slogans, we adopt them without actually thinking about them. I want to propose that some of our pious slogans about Scripture are quite dishonest (i.e. nobody *actually* believes them, though some people may *claim* they do). And they can also be dangerous: we claim a view that is not really ours, we apply it *selectively*; and that can easily become a very dangerous sort of abuse of power.) And then I want to offer some constructive suggestions.

I want to begin with some of the obvious examples.

As respected a biblical theologian as Bernhard Ram has been known to write this:

"If the Bible commands it, we are to do it."

"If the Bible promises it, we are to claim it."

"If the Bible forbids it, we are to avoid it."

(That might be where Oletta Wald got her convictions.)

Well, the Bible commands believers to greet each other with a holy kiss. It commands missionaries to take nothing for their journey, no staff, nor bag, nor bread, nor money—not

even an extra tunic. It even commands the reader, the very person the text directly addresses, to go to Troas and look for Paul's cloak. It commands literally thousands of things that I am clearly not expected to obey in any literal sense – either because the instructions are no longer relevant, or because they were never intended to be done by anyone except the first reader or hearer, or because the thing commanded had a cultural meaning it no longer has. It sounds so simple: "If the Bible commands it, we are to obey it." But it would be much more honest and helpful if our principle would be: "If the Bible *records* a command, we are challenged to discern whether it applies to us or not, and if it does, in what way."

Even more obviously fallacious is the proposal: If the Bible promises it, we are to claim it.

When I was growing up, we had a "promise box". Each person in the family was invited to pull at random some biblical promise out of the box. Amazingly, the promise we pulled matched the needs of the day – unfailingly, it seemed! Like "I will never leave you nor forsake you" turned up just when I faced a particular challenge (a test at school or a track meet).

The correspondence between the biblical promise and my own situation seemed convincing proof of the inerrancy and the authority of Scripture, of the divine origin of the book, and ultimately that the correct method of Biblical application was: "God said it! I believe it! That settles it!"

The fact that everyone in my family regularly drew from the box promises that also met their daily needs proved that every promise applies to every reader, every day! We even had a Sunday School song to go with this conviction. "Every promise in the book is mine, every chapter every verse every line, all the blessings of his love divine; every promise in the book is mine."

A "promise box" approach to Scripture actually works very well. But for only one reason (it later dawned on me). And that is because those who selected the promises to be included in the box did not believe what the promise box persuades its users to believe. They did *not* believe that all promises always apply to all readers at all times. That is why they could never sing, "Every promise in the *book* is mine." They could only sing, "Every promise in the *box* is mine."

That is why I never once in all my growing up years pulled out of the box this Scriptural promise: "In a year your wife will bear you a son!" (see Gen. 18:10-14) Not once did I ever pull from the box God's promise: "I will make all your enemies turn their backs and run." (Exod. 23:27) I never drew such promises from the box, because the producers never put them into the box. And they never put them into the box because they knew that these are not among the 200 or so promises in Scripture that virtually *always* apply to virtually all people virtually all the time. These are among the thousands of promises in the Bible that virtually *never* apply to anyone except to the individuals first addressed in their own particular circumstances.

In fact, "God said it! I believe it! That settles it!" is almost always a completely unreliable way of dealing with virtually every promise in Scripture, no matter how pious the slogan may sound.

A far more reliable principle would be: If the Bible records a promise, then the reader is challenged to discern who promised what to whom, and then to discern whether that promise applies to the modern reader as well, and if so, in what way.

That sounds to some people pretty cumbersome, pretty “wishy-washy”. But experience has taught me that things get a lot more chaotic and confusing and unconvincing when we claim some kind of universal application for Bible commands and promises, and then live consistent with our own principle about 20% of the time and selectively decide which 20%, without being able to specify any criteria of selection – because specifying criteria, would, of course, contradict what we are claiming.

All of that is intended to say: Let’s be honest about our convictions. Let’s believe what we say. And let’s only say what we intend to live by. Let’s search for reliable guidance that can help us take the Bible with utmost seriousness, so we can believe its message and follow its instructions, honestly. Through Scripture we are invited to listen in on how God revealed truth *in the past*, and how God revealed God’s will through promises and commands and through divine intervention in the lives of others. And now God invites us to let the very same texts speak to us once again, even when they do not say exactly the same things all over again.

So, all with all that as background, I want to challenge us to think carefully what we mean and what we believe when we call ourselves a “people of the book.” One of the most sacred mantras of Anabaptists, though of course it did not originate with us, has been *Sola Scriptura* . . . Allein das Wort . . . The Bible Alone! If we want to be faithful in belief and practice, we ask, “What does the Bible say?”

So, what about “Sola Scriptura” . . . what does it mean and what does it not mean? Let’s start with what it does not mean.

It does not mean that the Bible interprets itself . . . that we are innocent bystanders while the Bible talks to us. If only it were that simple. If only we could address a question to the Bible and it would simply tell us the answer.

Perhaps some of you think it really is that simple. Well, let’s try it. What question shall we pose? On what question would we wish we could hear a clear Scriptural word. Let’s take a question that is probably not very controversial in this circle but is being hotly debated in my denomination in the country south of here. “Does the Bible or does it not teach that there are to be limits put on the authority and ministry roles of women in the church?” What does the Bible say to that, all by itself, without any human interpretation?

OK, *sola scriptura*! Let’s just listen to the bible? “Does the Bible or does it not teach that there are to be limits put on the authority and ministry roles of women in the church?” (listen!) Hearing nothing . . . (or did you get an answer?).

But, of course, you will respond: *You have to open the book!* You have to *read* it! You have to *listen* to its message! And I respond: Then it is not *sola scriptura*! Then it is the Bible, as examined by whom? By me? By you? By scholars? By the church? As interpreted by what? Historical critical methodologies? Through a particular systematic theological lens? Just trying to be in tune with the Spirit’s guidance?

We are always active participants in the process. We decide which pages to read, which translation of key words to accept, which application principles to adopt.

To summarize: The first thing Sola Scriptura does *not* mean, is that the Bible is self-interpreting.

The second thing it does *not* mean is that the Bible is the only valid source of information or guidance that we are allowed to examine. I once had a student in my Luke class, an “A” student, I might add. My student made an articulate case for a viewpoint that I considered wrong. He acknowledged that in order to interpret Bible texts appropriately we indeed need to take into account the historical circumstances in which the texts were written and those aspects of culture that shaped what the texts would have meant in that ancient world. But, he insisted, since God knows that we need this kind of help, God would surely have put *into the Bible itself* all the background information we would need in order to properly understand the texts. So, if cultural background information is in the Bible, use it. If scholars claim to have found background information from other ancient sources, ignore it.

The argument was well presented, but I was convinced then, and am convinced now that it is simply not valid. Fortunately, that student has also changed his mind. That is why he has gone on to become an even greater Bible interpreter. And if I told you his name, many of you would recognize it.

The fact is that the more we know about the history and the culture of biblical times, the more accurately we can discern what texts were designed to say, and the better we can discern which instructions apply to the very changed circumstances of our day. The truth of the Gospel challenged the culture of its day, and it will challenge the culture of our day . . . but unless we understand both cultures (theirs and ours), we will be hard-pressed to discern appropriately when we are actually living the Gospel and when we are merely perpetuating first century cultural norms in a twenty-first century world . . . or Middle Eastern customs in a Western world. A huge aspect of rightly interpreting Scripture is discerning how it addressed its world, so that we can discern how it addresses ours.

It is precisely by paying attention to this, that we guard ourselves against a whole series of very unbiblical steps . . . like placing the ancient Christological church creeds, written in their Platonic framework, on a higher plane than the teaching of Scripture itself . . . or like defining God with a set of attributes borrowed from Greek philosophy . . . or like choosing a particular version of rationalistic Evangelical systematic theology and making it a grid through which we interpret the Bible . . . or for that matter thinking we are more biblical when we wear sandals, or beards, or head coverings.

So, the second thing Sola Scriptura does not mean is that the Scriptures are to be interpreted and applied without reference to history and culture. On the contrary, to know the history and culture of Bible times and to discern the cultural forces that have always shaped the church throughout its history and today no less, is to have at least a fighting chance of avoiding reading texts with all the wrong lenses and therefore hearing all the wrong things.

A third thing Sola Scriptura does not mean is that Confessions of Faith and denominational guidelines should be avoided. On the contrary, they might well capture the collective wisdom of a whole body of disciples of Jesus, aiming together under the guidance of the Spirit to

interpret Scripture rightly. But when we consult these, (and we should), let's do so with humility and generosity. Guidelines are guidelines . . . the Bible is God's authoritative word.

What then does *Sola Scriptura* mean? Well, it had a very important function when first popularized. It was a valid and important rejection of the official dogma of the institutional church, which had turned into an authority *equal* to (in fact often *superior* to) the Bible for faith and life. Martin Luther insisted, Not, "Scripture plus tradition", but "Scripture alone", is the final court of appeal. So, the first thing it means is that the Scriptures are our final court of appeal, not some magisterium, nor some pope, nor (and now we bring it closer to home) some eloquent, persuasive, popular pastor, nor some best-selling author, or blogger gone viral. Let us read broadly, attend conventions, present papers, but never get on a band-wagon that claims to have finally gotten theology or ethics all figured out. When we do that, we are ripe for a new reformation.

Second, though it cannot mean that Scripture is self-interpreting, it does challenge interpreters to subject themselves to the texts they are interpreting. Not personal experience nor human reason, but rather God's revealed word is the standard of truth. My experience shapes my reading; my reasoning is essential if I am going to understand anything; I bring with me many convictions and assumptions; but all of these, experience and reason and convictions and assumptions, must be put in the service of that which stands above them . . . the texts that I am interpreting. When the convictions I bring with me to a text are not only settled, but hardened in cement before approaching the texts, then I have abandoned faithful Bible reading. The influence of my personal experience, my reasoning ability, even of our collective experience and our collective wisdom, must always be subjected to what the Bible teaches.

Third, not systematic theology but biblical theology, is the safest way to discern what God wants to reveal through the Scriptures. Sometimes consciously and sometimes unconsciously interpreters assume that the correct meaning of a text is whichever meaning can be harmonized with whatever else the Bible says about that topic. Everything is forced to fit into one grid. Everything is rationalized. There is one right answer to every question. It all sounds so reasonable. Only one problem . . . we have to do a great deal of violence to the texts to make them come out that way. Anyone who believes that the correct interpretation of every single text in Scripture points directly toward a Calvinist-Reformed theological system, is just as likely to be wrong as those who believe that every single text in Scripture points toward an Arminian theological system, or a Dispensational one. Any theological system can be made to seem right *because of some texts* and *in spite of some others*. We dare not let any theological system stand in judgment over what a particular text may be allowed to say. No system should ever be final arbiter on what a text can mean. I believe one of the great strengths of an Anabaptist heritage is to give preference to biblical theology over a systematic theology. I also believe that this is one of our strengths that is in serious danger of slipping away. If you bristle at the labels I have used ("biblical" vs. "systematic"), I understand that. But these are the labels, for better or for worse, that have stuck. I hope you wrestle with the point I am making, even if you would rather label the two approaches in another way.

Fourth, no distinctive personal (or denominational) conviction should ever become so sacrosanct, that we refuse to take seriously those texts that don't obviously support it. Yes, we all have convictions. Yes, we all bring assumptions to our reading. If the Scriptures no

longer have the power to challenge my belief system, I have put my belief system over the Scriptures and thus negated the Bible's role as the final standard for faith and life.

Fifth, the safest way to free up the Scriptures to actually function as the final authority for faith and life is to apply the broadest possible base for interpreting it. That means we value the private reading experience of every believer, but also the careful research of Bible teachers. It means we listen to and value diverse interpretations, but we still strive for consensus. It means we balance prayer and working hard at it; we balance spiritual discernment and debating alternatives; we balance our conviction that the Bible is a historical book written by many authors in diverse circumstances, with our conviction that despite this, perhaps because of this, it is also God's divine revelation leading us reliably to God's truth, as we believe and live what the Bible teaches.

I want to use an analogy to make my final point. It's the analogy of "Earthquake Readiness".

We live in a very insecure age. And it plays itself out not only in the fields of international politics, and environmental threats, and economic instability . . . but also in theology and religion. Part of the reason is that there are too many unholy alliances between religion and some of the other fields. Another factor is that when the earth moves under our feet, MANY people run to religion for security. Perhaps that is less true in Canada than in the US, but worldwide it is well-documented.

At least in religion everything is secure (we imagine). Tradition stabilizes; truth is objective; the bible is authoritative; God is unchanging. *And so also should be our faith!* That's what people are saying . . . unfortunately! . . . (I want to argue). I feel the effects of this flight into religious security all over the place. Don't tamper with what "Christians have always believed". Don't re-examine core convictions. Don't bring up controversial topics.

You can hardly imagine my dismay when the biggest criticism of my book, "All Right Now," came not from those who disagreed with something I claimed, but from those who were sure that openly talking about the controversial issues I addressed was already a step in the wrong direction. "We will not talk about this issue on my watch!" . . . I heard a key leader of our denomination say, in the company of many other leaders who apparently approved.

Don't tamper with objective truth is the mantra we hear. We've put a lot of effort into figuring out exactly what is to be believed. People who call any part of it into question are obviously trying to bring the whole house of cards crashing down.

And there, I suggest, is our big misunderstanding. We imagine that true evangelical faith is a house of cards just waiting to come falling down if one of its supports is slightly adjusted. I don't want to invest my life for a faith that is so insecure that every challenge threatens to collapse it. I don't want to invest my teaching career in supporting that view of truth or faith.

I referred to living in a world where the earth sometimes seems to be moving under our feet. I think we have too long assumed that the norm is stability and that things should be built as though the earth will never move. In fact, the reality of the world is that there are tectonic plates that shift, that *will* shift, that *must* shift, for life on earth actually depends on it (scientists insist). So, we need to live lives with "earthquake readiness". We've learned quite

a bit about how to do that. Japan and Chile were built with far more earthquake readiness than Haiti was. So is BC's lower mainland, though nobody wants that claim to be tested.

So, what is earthquake readiness? (Don't worry, I will apply this to Bible interpretation soon.)

We used to prepare for earthquakes by building more and more *rigidly*. Now are learning to build more and more flexibly. I remember touring the Avianca building in Bogota, Colombia in September of 1970, only a year after it was completed, making it the tallest building in Colombia (It is now the 14<sup>th</sup> tallest). Our tour guide explained that the entire building was constructed on top of giant rollers, designed, in the event of an earthquake, to roll the building, so that it would not be shaken to pieces. I was totally impressed with the novel idea, an idea that apparently is not so novel anymore. I've learned since then that this is now commonplace. Since the San Francisco earthquake of 1989 and especially since the Northridge earthquake of 1995, freeway overpasses have been built differently. In California, at least, we no longer have solid concrete ribbons connecting both ends of major overpasses. Now we have moveable and unattached pieces sitting on each other, so that in the event of an earthquake they can slide but not crack; they will move instead of breaking. My parents-in-law live in a house with 36" thick stone walls. It could withstand a runaway bulldozer crash with hardly any damage, whereas my wood framed home would hardly slow down that same bulldozer as it drove right through it. But if a massive earthquake struck, the stone house would split in pieces and mine would eventually stop swaying.

My point . . . how do we prepare for tectonic shifts? Well we have two choices: build more rigidly; or, build more flexibly. If we can be rigid enough, we can withstand the onslaughts coming. But if we can't, we are better off building flexibly!!

I am not optimistic that we can afford, any longer, to construct ways of being Christian that are biblical and faithful, and at the same time rigid enough to withstand the tectonic shifts that are happening or are on the horizon. I think it is time to build flexibly!

We need to identify very basic core values that express our convictions, that fire up our imaginations, and that carry us through hard times. But we also need to free up each other and our Christian communities to build on such core values in ways that don't construct a house of cards waiting to fall down if one of the pieces shifts. We need Christian communities that can move and sway and roll with the shifting plates. Among other reasons, we need to do this so that we will be there for those who don't think ahead and whose houses of cards really do come crashing down, whether these are individuals or churches.

So where are tectonic plates shifting? What are the earthquakes up ahead? Where will the tsunamis hit land? I will not dare to predict in any specific way. But I think there are warning signs to be considered.

The church has not thought nearly carefully enough about what it really means to become a church that is truly missional rather than merely evangelistic . . . or what it means to be a prophetic voice in a post-Christian Western world . . . or what it means to be relevant in an age where our children are growing up with post-modern assumptions that are simply the air they breathe. These are tectonic shifts that are producing and will produce earthquakes that we had better be ready to flex with. The ballast of a strong tradition is almost spent already; the glue of ethnicity will not hold much together; pronouncements from former denominational

giants are no longer being heard and no one has their megaphones today; those who think they can save the day by building more rigidly, are gambling on a safeguard against earthquake damage that I think won't hold up.

When the earth shifts under us, what we need is not so much to be anchored and rigid; it is to be nimble and flexible. Remember, the wind blows where it wills!