

## Conversations With the Bible

Jamaica Plain, August 17, 2003, Karl Haakonsen

As some of you here probably know, I lead an adult bible study group here at the church. People who know me may wonder how it came to be that I do such a thing. Truly, it causes no end of giggles among my family and friends who aren't members of this church, as they deemed me an unlikely candidate to have anything to say about the Bible, let alone profess to have anything authoritative to say about it.

It's hard for me to say what drew me to my current fascination with the Bible. Sometime in the late 1990's, my mother returned a Bible to me that was presented to me more than thirty years ago. I had cracked it open from time to time; I was curious about it, and somewhat embarrassed about my utter lack of adult understanding of what was between its covers. I was finally inspired at Easter of last year to look up the "Passion" narratives in the Gospels. This was a big step for me, as the Easter story is certainly one that challenges my rational mind. Yet, perhaps it was this moment that I was finally able to transcend the rational, not into the irrational, but to the trans-rational (to steal a word from UU minister and author, Forrest Church). I could finally read the Bible without viewing it as someone's attempt at an answer book, telling me in a literal sense how to lead my life; and, more importantly, I reached a point where I neither felt the need to believe or disbelieve what it said. At this Zen-like state between belief and disbelief is truly the place where one can get the most out of an encounter with the Bible.

Soon after I began my journey through the pages of the Bible, I quickly came to the conclusion that adopting a fundamentalist theology, where the Bible was the "inerrant word of God" was a truly absurd position for anyone who actually bothers to read the Bible to take. One can't read too far before the text contradicts itself, sometimes within the same book. For some, this is cause to dismiss it outright but, so conditioned are we to take it literally, that we can only find two possible scenarios: either it's literally correct, or it's incorrect. To me, both stances miss the point of the Bible entirely.

The author of the Gospel of John seems to get this and illustrates it in the conversation between Jesus and the Pharisee Nicodemus. When Jesus says, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born from above," Nicodemus replies by saying, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" It's as if the author is wryly taunting anyone who takes a literal view of Jesus' words.

Reading and studying the Bible has been a great source of empowerment to me, as well as a source of spiritual growth. If someone were to say to me that "homosexuality is wrong... it says so in the Bible." Instead of ceding that argument by just disagreeing on secular terms, I can say, well... "I've read the entire Bible. I've studied the context in which all parts of the Bible were written, and who the audience was for each section of the Bible, and I find no theological basis for your position. Furthermore, the Bible explicitly tells us that such morality judgments are not ours to make, but God's alone." This is a much more powerful way to debate issues where one interpretation of the Bible is used to defend oppressive, or at least bigoted ideology. By careful reading and studying of the Bible, I sometimes feel like the Pope himself is no greater authority on what God wants us to do than I am. While, as UU's we recognize that the Bible is not the only authority on what God wants of us, but to dismiss it as not relevant to the argument is to lose the argument.

Lest you think that the only reason I read and study the Bible is to argue theology with Christian fundamentalists, the main reason I do read the Bible is to aid in my own spiritual growth. Perhaps only a truly honest spiritual quest can win the ideological arguments about theology anyway.

It is true that the Bible is patriarchal, superstitious and violent, but so was society two to three thousand years ago. It's instructive to keep in mind that people were burning fellow human beings whom they believed to be witches just a few hundred years ago. The history of ancient Israel is violent and often unjust, and the authors express a people who

were trying to make sense of that violence and injustice in the context of their faith in their God. But through it all, consistent themes ring out loud and clear about how God demands social justice, and challenges people to make the world a more just and humane place. Wisdom prevails, once you take into context the mores of the times, and enter the lives and the minds of the people who were a part of this story, thousands of years ago.

Some of you may recognize some of the words in our responsive reading from the book of Isaiah. They are paraphrased in one of our beloved UU hymns, "We'll Build a Land." Isaiah also tells us, "remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow." In the New Testament, the Epistle of James, which takes its name from the authority and tradition associated with James, the brother of Jesus, we're told, "What good is it, my brethren, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,' and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So, faith, by itself, if it has no works, is dead." In the reading from the Apocryphal book, Sirach, known in the Latin Vulgate as Ecclesiasticus, we are told, "Give a hearing to the poor, and return their greeting politely. Rescue the oppressed from the oppressor." These ancient words of wisdom, consistent throughout the Bible in their message of God's demands, are curiously ignored by many religious zealots who attempt to hide behind the Bible's authority.

In his book, *Understanding the Bible*, John Buehrens asks the rhetorical question, "Why bother with the Bible?" He answers it eloquently by saying:

The first motivation could be called political: If you can't or won't understand the bible, others surely will interpret it for you. The second could be called cultural or literary: Within this culture, you can't be fully literate and creative, artistically or rhetorically, without an acquaintance with the Bible. But now we come to the third and most personal reason: You also can't be spiritually mature or wise by simply rejecting the Bible as oppressive. The oppressive uses of the Bible are real, but unless you learn to understand

that there are other readings possible, the Bible will, indeed, simply continue to be a source of oppression for you, and not a source of inspiration, liberation, creation, and even exultation as you understand it anew for yourself, at a deeper and less literal level.

Readings:

Sirach (Ecclesiasticus) 4:1-10

1 My child, do not cheat the poor of their living, and do not keep needy eyes waiting. 2 Do not grieve the hungry, or anger one in need. 3 Do not add to the troubles of the desperate, or delay giving to the needy. 4 Do not reject a suppliant in distress, or turn your face away from the poor. 5 Do not avert your eye from the needy, and give no one reason to curse you; 6 for if in bitterness of soul some should curse you, their Creator will hear their prayer. 7 Endear yourself to the congregation; bow your head low to the great. 8 Give a hearing to the poor, and return their greeting politely. 9 Rescue the oppressed from the oppressor; and do not be hesitant in giving a verdict. 10 Be a father to orphans, and be like a husband to their mother; you will then be like a son of the Most High, and he will love you more than does your mother.

From Understanding the Bible, by John Buehrens

"An understanding of the Bible is indispensable to anybody in the Western world who wishes to think wisely about religion. By no possibility can any one of us be independent of the Bible's influence. Our intellectual heritage is full of words and phrases, ideas and formulas. Ignorance of it constitutes a hopeless handicap in the endeavor to understand any great Western literature."

The great liberal minister Henry Emerson Fosdick wrote those words in 1925. They are just as true today. The influence of the Bible remains pervasive in our culture. It not only functions as authoritative scripture for our largest religious communities, both Christian and Jewish. Its language and stories also still resonate throughout our literature and public rhetoric. Many contentious political debates in our public life - over issues of

sexuality, economics and foreign policy - disguise sharply divergent interpretations of the Bible.

My friend Forrest Church is the son of the late U.S. senator Frank Church of Idaho. In his book *God and Other Famous Liberals: Reclaiming the Politics of America*, Forrest argued that the Bible and God, like the Constitution and the American Flag, like Motherhood and Apple Pie, remain powerful icons in our culture. Progressive people simply cede their power to opponents when they leave interpretation of our religious heritage, or the meaning of our nation, or authentic "family values," to the reactionaries, the chauvinists, and the bigots. Bishop John Spong of the Episcopal Church has similarly called for *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism*. Like Fosdick, both are ministers who see biblical fundamentalism and literalism for what they truly are: not authentic faith, but disguised fear; reactions against modernity that violate the Bible's own spirit, and even its guideline of how it should be interpreted: "For the letter kills, while the spirit gives life" [2 Corinthians 3:6].