

Reframing the Heart of Christianity: The Meaning of Being Biblical

Pastor Alan Lai

What do we mean by biblical? The church has been facing many tough issues. Whatever the issue, there are people who claim that their views come from the Bible. There is no need to question the sincerity of our sisters and brothers. We grant that all are devout Christians who love the church. But God's people do not read the Bible the same. Apparently, there is more than one way to read the Bible and that leads to more than one way to be biblical.

Ordination Of Women: 1 Tim 2: 12-14

It might seem a long time ago, but it was only twenty some years ago when the church was deeply divided over the issue of Ordination of Women. A brief revisit of the debate helps us to see how the Bible was used.

During the debate, each side quoted many biblical verses to support their position. One of the biblical verses is 1 Timothy 2: 12-14.

I permit no women to teach to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve, and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor.

Arguments Against:

Those who rejected ordination of women claimed that the Bible is clear regarding ordination of women: NO! In 1 Tim 2, Apostle Paul is *very clear* that women should not be allowed to teach and preach. Women should not have authority over men. Taking these verses literally, also claimed the Bible teaches the inferiority of women. Women were created second and humanity fell because of Eve. Adam and Eve were created last. Two thousand years of church tradition was on their side. For close to two thousand years, the official teaching of the church says ordination is reserved for men only. Anyone who was not taking these verses literally meant giving in to human tradition. Anyone who tried to *interpret* other than the literal meaning was equated as dishonoring God's word or the truth because they feared allowing those "interpreters" to alter the literal meaning of the texts might grant them more "power" than the authority of God's word. These are the arguments for no women ordination:

1. The Bible says no.
2. Tradition says no.
3. Women are inferior.

Arguments for:

Other Christians also read the Bible, but they have a different idea. They pointed out the discrepancy in reading the Bible. If we have to take 1 Tim 2:12-15 literally, then we also have to take 1 Tim 2: 9 literally where Paul says women should dress modestly, not with their hair braided, or with gold, pearls, or expensive clothes. If the church forbids women ordination, the church should also forbid women wearing jewelry and expensive clothes. Traditionally, people dress to the finest to church. Women with flashy jewelry are seen everywhere. Why did we honor certain texts because it fits our preferred way of life but not the others, especially those texts that appear in the same book of the Bible? As this group pointed out, this is an act of

interpretation. The church simply cannot avoid interpreting the Bible. In another text Paul is also saying women should cover their heads when they worship. But the contemporary church has discarded his practice because it is seen as a culturally-shaped practice and not a timeless teaching for all people and all culture. These people argued that we needed to read the text in context. They said that Paul was writing with a specific condition and specific to women in mind. Paul was not giving the church a timeless formula in which to dismiss gifted women for ministry. To be biblical is to discern a bigger picture of what God is doing. They argued that in Christ, there is no Greek, Jews, male or female. All are called to serve. Lastly, the fact that Eve was created second is not an argument for inferiority. They pointed to the creation account where the human race, Adam and Eve were created last among many other creatures. Are we saying Adam and Eve were inferior compared to fish and monkeys? No chance!

1. The Bible might have said no to some, but the gospel says yes to all.
2. Tradition is not fixed.
3. Women are not inferior.

The Lessons

The first position is the one of literal reading. In this camp, to be biblical means reading the Bible literally. Reading the Bible literally, this group believes that the world was created exactly six days the way we (Canadians) understood time. Adam and Eve were literally real people. Everything that happened to Job as described literally happened to a real person. Jonah was literally swallowed and stayed in the belly of a big fish for three days. Jesus literally climbed up to the pinnacle of the Temple when tempted by Satan. To this group, to be biblical means believing the Bible has authority in itself. “If it is in the Bible” it is good enough. We as readers have no right to interpret the text to suit our understanding (never mind this position in itself is an interpretation). Any interpretation that does not conform to the former understanding of things or as it is written, is not biblical. Two thousand years of church traditions is a testimony of God’ truth for the church. This way of reading the Bible often resulted in believing a set of doctrines.

The second position is sometimes referred as “more-than-literal” reading of the Bible. They do not say the Bible is not the word of God, or literal reading is totally impossible, but they say the text must be understood in context. The Bible did not fall from heaven or the abstract construction of faith. Rather, it has specific contexts, people, situations, cultures, and political circumstances that formed the background. The biblical writers were not writing for us *per se*, but to their immediate contexts. To understand the Bible, one must pay attention to the hidden texts – political, social and cultural background. The Bible becomes authoritative because the community of faith gives authority to the Bible. The Bible is a “talking book” because it contains the past people’s experiences of God. To appropriate past people’s experience of God for our times is an act of interpretation. The Bible is called a “talking book” because it demands interpretation. The Bible is also called a “living book” because its meaning is still evolving. Each generation has to decide the meaning of the text.

The Emerging Ways

The Bible is a historical product of two ancient communities – ancient Judaism and early Jewish-Christian. Because of the historical and cultural specificity of these two Palestinian communities, the church needs to engage historical-grammatical-political analyses of texts and

context. The idea of power is also in play – who has the power to speak. The Bible can be understood as experiences of ancient people of God in written form.

We need to pay attention to the context of the writings. We also need to pay attention to the context of our times. 1 Tim 2: 12-15 was read countless times in history. But when it was read in the 13th century, the political culture was such that nobody would raise the question of women ordination. If they did, they would have been burned at the stakes! The political cultures of the day shape the way we read the Bible. When 1 Tim is read in the 80s, it became an hot issue.

The church cannot be solely satisfied with what is *in* the text. The essence of the Christian faith is never solely based on what is *in* the text. Instead, we should be diligent in studying *how* and *why* the church interprets what is in the text in light of the growing knowledge of the socio-political world of the writings and the experience of each contemporary Christian community. God's people needs to ask: what assumptions have been made?

In order to understand the Bible, we need to think critically by asking these questions: Whose story or interpretation is presented? What assumption has the presenter made? Who benefits from this interpretation? What other story is missing? Why? The Bible becomes a powerful medium for personal and social transformation because the readers are fully engaged in the process of meaning making. The readers make a conscious distinction between faithfulness to God and faithfulness to assumed teachings; they are not the same. Without this understanding, Christianity can easily be reduced to an internalization of a set of doctrines.

Helpful Mindset:

- Quoting a biblical verse is not the end of discussion.
- Uncovering the political, social and cultural context of the writing.
- Connecting the written text and the living text (our context and experience) is an act of interpretation.
- The Bible demands ongoing conversation between their context and ours.
- Place any text in the larger context or texts for evaluation.
- In what ways this verse connect/disconnect with the gospel message my tradition understood?