

The Meaning of Being Biblical

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What do we mean by biblical? This is the issue I have addressed during the first session of the Lenten Studies on Ash Wednesday. In the following, I am not trying to repeat what I said, but to make further clarification of why I think the literal reading of the Bible is not preferable.

In the study, I introduced the “more-than-literal” reading of the Bible. 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 and concerns. To understand the Bible, one must pay attention to the hidden texts – political, social and cultural background. The Bible is a historical product of two ancient communities – ancient Judaism and early Jewish-Christian.

Food for Thought

I would like to offer a reflection on this fact: The Bible is a historical product. A good proportion of this year’s Lenten Studies are Jewish-Christian relations. In that discussion, I highlighted the fact that the original followers of Jesus were Jews; and the Bible was written by Jews with Jewish culture and frame of mind as the core. The nature of the Bible is deeply Jewish. It so happened that when the church gained political power near the end of the fourth century, Gentile Christians dominated church membership. The church gradually forgot its Jewish roots and fashioned Christianity in the European soil.

This fact to me serves as the key reason why we cannot read the Bible literally. The biblical writings incorporated Jewish culture and Jewish frame of reference, but none of us are Jews, live within the confine of Jewish culture or exercise the Jewish mode of thinking. As non-Jews reading the Jewish document literally, the potential of misinterpretation is high. We must realize that after two thousand years, we do not live exactly the same way as those who lived in the biblical world. To read this historical document literally runs the risk of imposing our contemporary social understanding of things onto the written words.

Another side of the same point raised above is the fact that not only did the church in the past not interpret the Bible with a Jewish frame of mind, the church formulated Christian theology with Greek and later Germanic influences. Contemporary discussion on Christian theology makes us aware that western Christianity had been Hellenized and Germanized. The Jewish frame of thinking has been forgotten. Instead, the church employed the language and thought pattern of Europeans to construct faith. That is how the world gets an impression that Christianity is a European religion. The fact is that the first century Jesus’ Movement originated as a Middle-Eastern Jewish renewal movement. We would be closer to “truth” if we employ Jewish not Canadian thought when reading the Bible. We would indeed be much closer to “truth” if we spent quality time studying the first century political and social circumstances that formed the context of the sayings.

Second, we need to read the Bible as a historical document before reading it as a book of faith. The Bible was written two thousand years ago and with its composition spanned over three centuries. It is definitely qualified as a historical document. The Bible was written using three languages: Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. Each book in the Bible was a product of one or several editors who interpreted or synthesized information. You would be stunned to realize that Moses could not have written the first five books of the Bible. Biblical scholars help us to understand that the books were the result of compilation made by several editors. The formation of the book was the result of interpretation and editing. While the document can be read as a book of faith that guides our living, it can also be read as a history book, a literature, and an anthropology text. Because of the presence of a huge gap in time, culture and literacy styles, it is paramount for the church to study its style, background, genres, structure and social circumstances before reading it as a book of faith.

Third, one will not be able to find words such as “Trinity,” “church policy,” “how to conduct a Eucharist” and so on in the Bible. Through reading the Bible, we find pieces of data that are culturally and contextually specific. But these scattered sayings do not help the contemporary church to solve our problems because we are so far away from the original community. The church needs a comprehensive system of thinking or belief derived from the Bible to serve as a guide when dealing with complicated issues of our times. The church needs theology.

What is theology? The essence of Christian theology can be described as faith seeking understanding. Doctrine such as Trinity and Justification by Faith, for example, are the result of the church’s interpretation of Scripture. Theology requires human beings like you and me after reading the Bible, to synthesize biblical sayings in a manner that forms a cohesive teaching. This is the work of interpretation. The plethora of Christian denominations is a testimony to the fact that there are multiple ways to use the Bible when it comes to formulating theology. Theology derives from the Bible; in turn, theology guides us to read the Bible. I am sure that you recognize the cycle. Nobody reads the Bible in a vacuum. Something, some theology, or some one provides guidance when we read the Bible. Because of this reason, the Bible and our theology form an intertwining relationship. To be conscious of our theology is paramount in reading the Bible because the nature of theology is human work. Since the beginning of Christianity, revising theology has been the ongoing task of the church.

Based on these convictions, I say the Bible is a living book that demands interpretation. Literal reading of the Bible pretends to be faithful to biblical authority. Yet, it is a questionable approach in which the readers knowingly or unknowingly ignore the complexities of the formation of the Bible, including its contexts. Such an approach also ignores the readers’ own social contexts and social locations. They forget to name the lenses in which they use to read the text. They forfeit the responsibility to bridge the gap that already exists between the sacred text and our contexts. Such responsibility is bestowed on us wherever we open the Bible. Living in the post-Holocaust era, not to read the sacred text in context, including one’s own is morally irresponsible.