

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

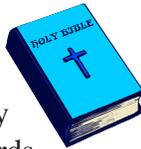


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BARBARA WENDLAND 505 CHEROKEE DRIVE TEMPLE TX 76504-3629 254-773-2625 BCWendland@aol.com

Seeing the Bible with open eyes

The more I learn about the Bible and how it reached its present form, the more troubled I become by so many Christians' insistence that the Bible's words are all historical accounts, rules for all situations and all times, or accurate descriptions of God, the universe, and human beings. I'm troubled by claims that the words of any particular Bible translation are



God's final, complete, and only words. I cringe when a pastor holds up the Bible after reading a passage from it and says, "This is the word of God." I want to reply, "Well, it is and it isn't."

Some parts don't match reality

Throughout my life, despite being a regular churchgoer and active church participant, I've often found some parts of the Bible unbelievable. They just don't seem to match with reality as I observe it and as everyone I know seems to understand it.

For the first forty or so years of my life I didn't have the nerve to admit that to anyone. I hardly even had the nerve to admit it to myself. I never heard anyone else express such feelings, so I assumed "everyone" was right and I was wrong. But eventually my concerns wouldn't stay stuffed away in my mental closet any longer. I started investigating, trying to make sense out of parts of the Bible that I didn't find convincing. I found that there were actually other people "out there"—quite a few, in fact—with questions and concerns like mine.



Why don't we discuss such concerns in Sunday School and Bible-study classes? Why don't we learn about biblical sources, and recent discoveries and views about their meaning? Christians need to know about them, but they're rarely mentioned in church.

The only God-given story?

As I reread the Genesis creation stories recently, I thought about the lovely sculpture I'd seen in a museum in Vancouver. It portrays the creation story of the Haida people of the Pacific Northwest. It shows Raven, a wise and powerful but mischievous trickster who has just found the first humans in a clam shell on the beach and is coaxing them out. I thought, too, about the Hopi creation story that I heard during a trip to the Grand Canyon. I remembered the tapestry I saw in New Zealand, depicting a Maori creation story. These stories, ours, and the many others that have arisen in cultures around the world throughout history have differences but they also have common features.



In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep ...
—Genesis 1:1-2

The other stories may not use the word "God," and they may give a picture of the creator that differs from ours in some respects, but like our story many of them portray the supreme being as creator of all that exists. Many also use darkness and nothingness to represent what

existed before anything else, and many show the creator's thoughts taking physical form to become animals and human beings.

The other creation stories have features that seem preposterous to us, but what about our story? If we take it at face value in the way we take the others, it also has plenty of preposterous features—a wily, talking snake, a tree that reveals knowledge,

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made.



—Genesis 3:1

and a supreme being that takes a rib out of a man's body and makes a woman from it.



How can we legitimately claim that our story came from God but the many others did not? How can we insist that they're mere pagan fantasies but ours is uniquely God-given truth?

Many documents, many views

A book I've recently read made me think about this subject again. It's *The Lost Gospel: The Book of Q and Christian Origins* (Burton L. Mack, HarperSanFrancisco, 1993). It's about what may have been the earliest written document about Jesus's earthly life and ministry, and may have been a primary source for the Gospels that are in the Bible. I'd known for years that some scholars thought such a document might have existed, and I knew of the discovery of other early documents that shed some light on aspects of the New Testament. However, reading *The Lost Gospel* updated my knowledge and revived my interest in what is now known and what is being theorized about the earthly life of Jesus, the earliest church, and the writings that make up the New Testament.



This reading also motivated me to read some in a newer book, *The Canon Debate* (Lee Martin McDonald and James A. Sanders, editors; Hendrickson Publishers, 2002). It's heavy reading but intriguing. It tells how the books that we now think of as being "in the Bible," in both the Old Testament and the New, got there. It also says a lot about the wide variety of opinions, from ancient times to the present, about what should be included and what shouldn't. And it discusses the possible origins and authenticity of ancient documents that did or didn't get included in what various Christian groups now call the Bible, and in what Jewish groups regard as sacred.

The gospel truth?

Books like those I've just read remind us that what's in the Bible rarely got there because of official decisions by authorized church bodies. Instead, it often got included merely by default or as a result of church power struggles. Some decisions about what to include have been quite arbitrary. The motives that led some of the "Bible authors" to write what most Christians assume to be the "gospel truth" have apparently been mixed at best. And the New Testament doesn't include the only early documents about Jesus. Why don't we hear in church about these important aspects of our faith?



A helpful course about the Bible

I've also thought a lot about the Bible recently because I've become part of a team leading a group in the *Disciple* Bible study in my local church. *Disciple* is widely used but until now I had never taken it or led it. It includes several years' courses, with each successive one covering a section of the Bible in greater depth. I'm doing the first course, an overview of the whole Bible.

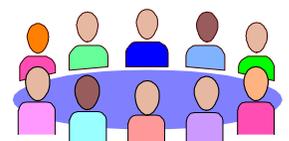
Disciple meets weekly for nine months. Each participant has a workbook with daily scripture-reading assignments and some interpretation and information about the assigned scriptures, plus space for writing reflections about each day's reading. Each class session includes a short video featuring a seminary professor, pastor, or rabbi speaking about the week's scriptures. Class discussion follows, about the contents of the video and the week's reading.

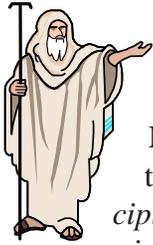


Disciple does an excellent job of teaching the contents of the Bible. Equally important it provides much-needed opportunities for sharing personal experiences and concerns in a small group, a feature that's important for building community within the church. In addition, the course encourages faithful discipleship and personal commitment to Jesus Christ. It also nudges participants to recognize and respond to whatever God may be calling them to do, both as individuals and as a church.

I wish for a wider range of views

What I've seen so far, however, makes me wish the *Disciple* material included a wider range of possible interpretations of the Bible passages it deals with. I also wish it encouraged participants to give more thought to the Bible's origins and to its significance in comparison to documents considered sacred by other religions. I wish the course included a reminder that different branches of Christianity have different views about what books belong in the Bible, and that early documents discovered in recent years may add important information about Jesus and the early church.





So far, my class has dealt mostly with Genesis—mainly the creation stories and the stories of Abraham and Noah and their descendants—and with the story of Moses in Exodus. The *Disciple* material acknowledges that the Genesis creation stories are ancient stories expressed in symbolic language, but it presents them as uniquely given by God. It doesn't acknowledge that many other creation stories also exist, having arisen in other cultures and groups just as "ours" arose in the ancient Hebrew culture. The material doesn't acknowledge that the others are just as likely to have come from God as ours is, and thus that we may have no legitimate basis for claiming that ours is the complete and accurate picture and all the others are false.

Class members have discussed in great detail what each feature of the Genesis stories means, as if each detail accurately portrayed what God, people, animals and plants, and the whole universe are like and how they're related to each other. Because of everything I believe we now know about human beings and the universe, however, this total acceptance of the Genesis portrayal seems inappropriate to me.

False explanations are harmful

The more advanced *Disciple* courses may mention these stories' limitations and lack of uniqueness, but failing to acknowledge those from the beginning is misleading. It's like telling children that the stork brings babies. Telling them all that gynecologists know about the subject wouldn't be helpful, but giving a false explanation is harmful.



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Sin isn't the whole story

The *Disciple* lesson material portrays human beings as innately wicked, rather than emphasizing that they also have innate motivation for good. "We are pushed and pulled by sinister forces," the material tells us, without mentioning that we're also influenced by forces for good. "We are part of the collective wickedness of the world." "From the brackish well of self-centeredness comes the foul water of our personal and collective sins." Good heavens! Everyone sins, but this picture ignores the fact that everyone also can do good. It's inconsistent with reality and with the Bible's overall message.

A nebulous process with mixed results

The *Disciple* material also implies that only one church-authorized, God-given group of books makes up the canon, the list of books that belong in the Bible. And the material speaks of the canonizing process as if it had been an official, unanimous decision of the early church, which it wasn't. In his writing, Athanasius, a fourth-century bishop, first included a list of books, and over time other Christians mentioned lists in their writings. But only centuries later did a church council adopt a list, and it wasn't accepted by the whole church. Even now, different branches of Christianity and different Christian denominations have different views of which books constitute the canon.

How can we legitimately claim that the Bible and this nebulous, unofficial process were inspired by God but that more recent writings, discoveries, and insights about early Christian documents are not similarly inspired? I don't think we can.



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I'm a United Methodist lay woman, and neither a church employee nor a clergyman's wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative, speaking only for myself. Many readers voluntarily make monetary contributions but I pay most of the cost myself. *Connections* goes to several thousand people in all 50 states, D.C., and Puerto Rico—laity and clergy in at least 12 denominations plus some nonchurchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics I believe our churches need to address.

A belief that won't support scrutiny

Do we need to shield our members by concealing current information and theories about the Bible? Should we keep hiding what's now known about how the Bible was formed, about what it has in common with other religions' sacred documents, and about recently discovered Christian documents that might make us need to revise

I could not speak to you as spiritual people, but rather as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food.
—1 Corinthians 3:1-2

some of our views about Jesus and the early church? Can we risk suggesting that the Bible may not be the only God-inspired religious document and Christianity may not be the only route to God and heaven?

I don't have to believe that the Bible and Jesus are God's only true revelations or God's complete and final revelation, to feel sure that the way modeled and taught by Jesus is the way God calls me to follow. Preserving that belief within the church may be necessary for the church's survival, but I hope not. It's a belief that doesn't hold up to open-eyed scrutiny.

Barbara



Connections

Barbara Wendland
505 Cherokee Drive
Temple TX 76504-3629

Seeing the Bible with open eyes

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What basis do we have for believing that the Bible was delivered by God when the writings and stories considered sacred by other religions were not? What makes us believe that Christianity has a monopoly on God-given truth?



Why do we see the Gospels' contents as direct quotes from Jesus and as accurate reports of his life and ministry, when we don't see other early documents about him in that way?



Should we be openly discussing questions like these in church, and hearing a variety of views on how to answer them? Or do we need to avoid disturbing the present beliefs of our members (and perhaps risking the loss of some members) by not mentioning the possibility that other understandings of the Bible and Christianity might be valid?

What about the members we lose by refusing to acknowledge ways in which the Bible contradicts what we now know about human beings and the universe?