

## **Adult Forum, February 10, 2019: How to Read the Bible**

Why do some people dislike the Bible so much? I think it's because for the past five hundred years we've been living in an era that has read the Bible in a way it never intended to be read by those who delivered it to the world. Since the Reformation, we have reduced the ways to understand the Bible in a single way: through rationalism. In general, people assume that the Bible is supposed to be read as a rational document, filled with literal stories, based in a linear sense of history. Any other way of reading and interpreting the Bible is looked at with skepticism and scorn.

As a result of this, we think of the Bible as either a silly children's book or something that is astonishingly cruel, something that only ignorant people would pay attention to. Or we think that if we explain the stories of the Bible clearly enough, people will see the obvious truth of it. But that is not the way that we most valuably can read the Bible.

Instead, what if we read the Bible as a series of narratives that do not fit easily together but that seek to communicate a transformative worldview to the reader. There is no absolute value in Bible stories being literally true or to have literally happened. The value of the Bible is that it changes the way that you know yourself, other people, and the mystery that we name God.

Like any good book, the Bible exists to transfer the experience of its writers to another audience. Name a book that has influenced you – that has changed the way you know yourself, others, and ultimate mystery. Why and how is that book valuable? That dynamic of transformation is the real function of the Bible. So the value of *To Kill a Mockingbird* is equivalent to the value of the Bible. The value of both is transformation.

If you don't look to the transformative potential of the Bible, it ceases to be very interesting. If you read it in a narrow, rationalist-literalist-historicist way, it creates (at best) an interesting take on ancient cultures. Reading the Bible this way keeps you looking at the past and not at where you are in your life right now. Reading the Bible like it is a literal description that must be embraced literally removes it as a reliable and valued way of moving into the future.

Worse than that, reading the Bible in a rationalist-literalist-historicist way tends to render your relationship to the mystery we name God small; God becomes a remote being that you have to strike a deal with instead of one

who emerges from your own soul as what Paul Tillich calls the Ground of Being. Reading the Bible literally makes God silly and distant, and requires people to be in allegiance to silly and cruel ways of being. Conformity becomes essential, and transformation through things like love and service of others is negotiable. If you read the Bible literally, you don't need anyone else to be your companion in transformation; you just have to believe unbelievable things.

The Bible – as a literary text – never asks to be taken the way we've taken it for the past 500 years. The Bible celebrates its internal discrepancies and logical inconsistencies. It is like poetry that wants you to hold two disparate ideas in one moment and call them beautiful. The Bible is not rational as much as it is trans-rational: it wants to create an atmosphere within which we are invited to make meaning.

This is easily seen in the way that Jesus uses parables to teach. He tells stories that are both familiar and scandalous. He doesn't write systematic theology as much as he tells jokes. He doesn't create a rational set of dogmatic truths as he points to the craziness of human culture, and the beauty that is found there.

So, in Matthew's Gospel, it says of Jesus, "He would never speak to them except in parables." And sometimes you might find yourself saying, "Just tell me what to do! Don't give me these crazy stories with bizarre endings! Just give me a straightforward way to live!" And Jesus just won't do that. Instead, he weaves a world that causes the listener to question the way the world works. Jesus teaches in roundabout ways because he wants us to engage the mystery that we name God in our own lives, not at second hand.

So, instead of "Top Ten Tips for Tip Top Christians" Jesus describes an impossibly complex world in which God longs to be encountered. He expects us to engage the challenging narratives that almost always begin, "The Reign of God is like..." not just "do what I say." And maybe the work of engaging these narratives is so global, so life-long, that we prefer a Jesus who is less than free as a teacher but is bound by the same rationalist-literalist-historicist way of reading the world around us as are we.

So, people who hate the Bible are not half wrong in their hatred. But we have done and said little to dissuade them or to offer them an alternative optic through which to read. We have not heard the Bible's wisdom, because we have wanted it to make sense. Like little Thomas Jeffersons, we have

carved out the moralistic teachings of scripture and left behind the good stuff, the messy stuff, the stuff that has the hot power to pull us into a transformative experience. And we are diminished and less wise as a result.

So, what to do? Here are eleven ideas to keep in mind when you read the Bible:

1. Disagree with the Bible when it doesn't sound like love.
2. Know enough about your own prejudices to know when you're reading the Bible to confirm what you already believe that doesn't make you more alive.
3. Have enough compassion for yourself and those around you to know that we still want to bargain with God and try to fit him into our plans instead of trusting that God has got the whole world in her hands.
4. Recognize that some of the Bible is not only NOT written to us, but it is also not written to the world in which we live.
5. Actively deconstruct whatever sounds like a taboo and see if it's worth keeping.
6. Understand that sometimes reading the Bible makes you feel something besides happy – but that if it makes you feel miserable, you may be reading the wrong thing (or living in the wrong world).
7. It really is all about the love of God and love of neighbor – which is more about the way we think than the way we feel.
8. It is our responsibility to rank order what the Bible says – because if it isn't about love, it isn't about God.
9. Instead of reading it from the top down, read the Bible from the bottom up: the Bible cares about defending the weak above all else.
10. God made the world for us to love, not hate.
11. The wisdom of God may ask us to tear up our plans and start over.