# Reflections on the “Bible in the Life of the Church” Project

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In the context of the crisis over same-sex marriage in the Anglican Communion, in 2004 the Windsor Report urged the need for the Communion to reflect on its use of Scripture. There arose out of this comment a study process concerned with “The Bible in the Life of the Church.” In North America this involved asking about eight people to set up study groups in their area to reflect on this question, which we did by considering passages of Scripture that might relate to the fifth of the Anglican Communion’s five marks of mission formulated in the 1980s, to “strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth.” These group leaders then met at Sewanee in June 2010 to pool results, which were subsequently forwarded to a central steering group. My reflections here combine observations that came out of our group of students and faculty in Pasadena and observations from other groups that were shared in Sewanee. I have eight points to make.

1. In the study I was involved in, the group included both Episcopalians and people who have left the Episcopal Church to join another Anglican province. However, those differences did not seem to make a difference in this project—i.e., their theological and ecclesial differences were irrelevant when it came to engaging with these texts and questions.

2. On the other hand, one or two of the students were thrown to find that the texts we were invited to study included the Song of the Three Young Men in the deuteron-canonical Daniel material, and I think this reflects an unresolved uncertainty in the Anglican Communion about the status of the deutero-canonical writings. While as an Old Testament guy my own default as a preacher is to start from the Old Testament lection (or the psalm), I confess that when the first reading comes from deutero-canonical books, I don’t know what to do. I will prefer to preach on the most “difficult” text from the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings rather than on an “easy” text from the deutero-canonical writings, even though I recognize that the Articles give these writings a status that ought to make them as preachable as Obadiah. I also recognize that adding the deutero-canonical writings to the canon would make little difference to the nature of the Old Testament Scriptures; it would simply increase the size of the biblical material that we ignore.

3. The Anglican Communion has some more significant unresolved uncertainty about the relationship of Scripture, tradition, the creeds, reason, culture, and experience. In connection with conservation, do we expect that Scripture will have something to distinctive to say? How do we avoid getting swept up by the environmentalist movement in a way that not fit with Scripture? While it may be okay to use the Bible to support ideas that come from our contemporary world, there is a risk of our stopping there. We also need to use the Bible to set the world’s ideas in a new context which may make a big difference to them, to critique the world’s ideas in light of the Bible, and to see new insights in the Bible that the world has not seen. One point about having the Bible is to listen to is saying things that are different from what we are inclined to think. There is a related irresolvable tension between reading Scripture in order to find answers to our questions and reading Scripture in order to have our questions reshaped.

4. A student commented that in his eight years of experience in a small Episcopal Church, the Bible does not play a prominent role in the lives of parishioners. “Most parishioners seem to have their own personal beliefs and ethics,” he said, “and attempting to mine Scripture for ethical guidance in the world would not be something I would expect to see happen very often.” It can also seem that this is true at other levels in the church. We make up our minds on the basis of convictions we have somehow come to and are prepared to attribute to the Holy Spirit but there is no serious testing of whether we are right in that attribution. They are so obviously true, there is really no need.

5. The point emerges at its sharpest in connection with the debate over same-sex relations. As well as being involved in the “Bible in the Life of the Church” process, I was part of the Bishops’ task force on the theology of same-sex relations. That task force demonstrated that it is possible to make a serious biblical and theological case for accepting same-sex relationships. We may differ over whether the case is compelling, but there is no doubt that the “revisionist” group on the task force made a serious biblical and theological case. But the very fact that the Episcopal Church was considering the theological questions long after having made decisions on what to do in relation to the subject reflects the way the key factor in making the decisions was cultural rather than biblical. It’s just obvious in our culture that justice demands that gay people should have the right to marry one another. When things are obvious, who needs to examine the Bible closely? Or if things are obvious, surely the Bible must agree with them? As a professor in an evangelical seminary, I often think student see my task as to reassure people that the Bible says nothing that clashes with what they already think, because obviously what they think is Christian. It is hard to recognize that what seems obvious to us is culturally-shaped.

6. Similar considerations apply in connection with discussion of social justice. It seems to be quite obvious that the biblical God has “a preferential option for the poor” and that God is a God of justice. The notion of social justice is rarely defined, but when it is defined it suggests a concern with human rights, an equitable distribution of resources, a healthy planet, and democracy. Now these may all be good things, but they are not a profile that emerges from the Bible. Further, the Old Testament notion of justice is quite different from the one that prevails in the West, and biblical ideas about the subject to which the phrase “social justice” points suggest a different framework from the one that prevails.

7. From the viewpoint of biblical study, we are fortunate to be a worldwide communion most of whose members live in the global South, fortunate because life in such contexts and the cultural assumptions that its life presupposes often have more immediate parallels with life and assumptions in the Bible than do life and assumptions in Western culture. In the past we have tended to assume that where there are differences between the way people in (say) Africa interpret the Bible and the way Western scholars do so, the Western scholars are right. There is more realization now that the opposite may be the case. The use of Scripture in Africa may help us to understand Scripture when it talks about (say) marriage and family or community life. A further aspect of the difference between Bible study in the West and Bible study in traditional cultures is the Western church’s assumption that it is natural to study Scripture in a study group setting rather than in the context of communal worship. Bishop Mark MacDonald notes that for First Nation Christians it would be odd to study Scripture outside the context of a communal worship gathering where God is known to be present to speak to God’s people.

8. As Episcopalians and Anglicans we are inclined to lament the crisis of biblical literacy in the North American church, and we are right to do so, but in this connection we need to see how being a lectionary church constitutes a huge asset. From time to time I worship in churches of other denominations or of no denominational allegiance. These are usually churches that formally or officially have a rather “higher doctrine of Scripture” than the Episcopal or Anglican Church may seem to have, yet almost invariably the worship in such churches gives virtually no place to the reading of Scripture in its own right or to the systematic reading of Scripture. If Scripture is read, it is read very selectively and/or only in the interpretive context of the sermon. It fits with this that congregations of this kind and the ministerial candidates they produce have no more and maybe even less acquaintance than Episcopal or Anglican students with the “grand narrative” that emerges from the Scriptures as a whole. I have noted already that Christians are interested only in the way the Scriptures may provide resources for dealing with concerns they have already. There is no more illuminating book on the place of the Bible in the church than Hans Frei’s *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*. Frei notes that in the seventeenth century, readers read the biblical story as if related something that happened and as the story in light of which they had to understand the story of their own lives. Over the subsequent two centuries the link between story and history and that way of linking the scriptural story and our story dissolved. At a scholarly level, we discovered the difference between the story and the history it related and had to choose between the two. In the context of the stress on history in the context of modernity there was no contest; history was God, and biblical scholarship (conservative or liberal) came to focus on that, and became useless to anyone who wanted to discover what the Bible had to say to us. Frei further notes how at a scholarly level and at a congregational level the traditional way of linking the scriptural story and our story also dissolved. Instead of setting our story in the context of Scripture’s story, our story became the basis for deciding on the significance of the scriptural story. Yet at least the Episcopal and Anglican Church still reads Scripture and in a formal sense lets Scripture set the agenda in worship. The North American church’s changed relationship with Scripture is one of the factors that will mean it will be dead within twenty years, but the Episcopal or Anglican Church will be in a position to survive as a remnant because (or insofar as) it continues to read Scripture and celebrate the Eucharist.