

Then Something Happened

By Earl F. Palmer

Then something happened, something that has changed and transformed my life to the present day. For the first time I discovered the Bible... since then everything has changed. I have felt this plainly, and so have other people around me. It was a great liberation.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer ⁽¹⁾

It was my sophomore year at U.C. Berkeley when the Bible first became a book I really wanted to read. I lived in a large co-op called Barrington Hall and it was there in a weekly student-led Bible discussion group that the random pieces of my worldview began to come together. It was my discovery of the Jesus Christ of the Bible that made the difference for me. A new wholeness was taking shape for me.

Some of us in that group of friends later attended a retreat at Lake Tahoe and it was there that Rev. Robert Boyd Munger, Pastor of First Presbyterian Church of Berkeley, in one sentence during a Bible Study session helped me the most. He put it this way: "If on the basis of the evidence of what you now know about Jesus Christ you are willing to trust in his trustworthiness, then you are on your way to becoming a Christian believer." At Lake Tahoe that summer I did just that.

But who is this Jesus Christ? He is the Jesus of history to whom the Bible points first in the Old Testament by its own story and anticipation, and in the New Testament through its witness to the fulfillment of the ancient prophets and songs. He is the Jesus of the First Century. If I agree that indeed Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ in whom I trust and follow, then I have joined myself to the Bible and to Biblical faith. To quote Joachim Jeremais, "Every verse of the Gospels tells us that the origin of Christianity is not the kerygma, not the resurrection experience of the disciples, not the Christ idea, but an historical event, to wit, the appearance of the man Jesus of Nazareth" ⁽²⁾

The Bible as Witness

The Old Testament histories, prophets and Psalms prepare an ordinary reader to meet Jesus of Nazareth and discover his story in the narratives of New Testament writers. We can understand in practical terms what this means when we reflect personally upon how we ourselves became open to consider the story about Jesus. Some one—perhaps many people in different ways—turned our attention to the New Testament. Perhaps we began our journey with serious reservations, even skeptically. Nevertheless, we listened to its accounts. "Mathew, whoever he is" we said to ourselves, "tells about Jesus." Mark, Luke, and John also tell of Jesus' works, his ministry, his death and his victory over death. Paul writes letters to pockets of believers throughout the first-century world, and in that correspondence even more of the parts of the puzzle come together showing who the person Jesus Christ is.

Finally, whether gradually or quickly, the New Testament Jesus wins us to Himself. He gains our respect and, when we trust Him and His promises, our faith. As stated by Karl Barth, “Holy Scripture is the document of the basis, of the innermost life of the Church, the document of the manifestation of the Word of God in the person of Jesus Christ. We have no other document for the living basis of the Church.”⁽³⁾

On the Basis of the Evidence

Every teacher in the church, like every believer, has been granted the same good news about Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The one difference is that the teacher/pastor has been recognized by the community of believers to bear special responsibility as a teacher of the message of the Gospel.

The first question is this: Where does a teacher find the ingredient themes and content for the teaching? The answer is not as simple as we might think. Consider this possibility: Suppose that I have experienced the impact of God’s grace in my own life journey. There is no question in my mind that the experience has been granted as a gift from God. Shall I preach or teach this experience? Is perhaps this the message I should affirm on Sunday or Tuesday evening? Is not this contemporary work of the Holy Spirit in the life of one of God’s people and are not the stories that go with that experience the most relevant message? How do we reply to these possibilities? For visions and for all of the experiences of God’s grace we are grateful; they are endorsements of the message of the Good News about Jesus but not the source of the message! Jesus, the one at the center, and the Bible that bears witness to him is the source.

In an ironic sense the same observation may be made of the moral and spiritual tragedies of life, as well as the profound physical hardships of daily existence. These are also twenty-first-century signposts. They cry out the need of humanity for saving hope that Jesus Christ grants. But neither the positive faith of the faithful, nor the negative pains of a world hurting are the message. Jesus himself and his teaching is that eternal word. He is the one who said, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not be walking in the dark, he will have the light of life.” (John 8:12)

The challenge of being a teacher is now on our minds. Every believer agrees that the grand themes such as faith, hope, love and joy deserve affirmation. But what if these central truths are discovered by a listener within a biblical text where the theme occurs? This would mean that an ordinary listener would have the “*a-ba moment*” of seeing for himself or herself the truth in the text. The listener might say, “I not only heard a teacher tell me or urge me to see the Grace of Christ by the persuasive influence of the speaker’s own affirmation but I saw it *myself* a few seconds before the preacher or teacher said it.” This is an exciting moment of expositional breakthrough. It means the teaching content in the text or the person being studied in a text of scripture is allowed to speak. We the listeners are able then to see and hear for ourselves what is being said. *We sense that the person is present in the room with us.* Blaisé Pascal reminds us that “People are generally better persuaded by the reasons which they have discovered than by those which have come into the mind of others.”⁽⁴⁾

What exactly is “Exposition”? Exposition is the task of enabling a sentence or paragraph in a biblical text to make its own point so that we as readers and listeners experience it for ourselves. Exposition can become a rich way of discovery so that connections can happen that put texts together toward the finding of the whole witness of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The joy of exposition happens when the teacher and student together have moments of discovery together.

The Testing Principle

The Bible derives its authority in the following fashion: Jesus Christ, the living word himself, and his teaching have the binding authority over our lives and our doctrines. Every new doctrinal statement, therefore, must be tested by that biblical witness, and every Christian teaching, therefore, should begin with its own willingness to be tested. On May 29-31, 1934, a group of Pastors and Laity from churches of Germany met together at Barmen, Germany. The time was strained by the success that the government of the 3rd Reich had had in effectively seizing real control of the formal structure of the German Protestant Church. From that meeting the Confessing Church Movement was born. The principal writers of the six evangelical articles of faith at Barmen were Martin Niemoller and Karl Barth. That brave declaration adopted by those in Barmen begins with this preface:

Try the spirits whether they are of God! Prove also the words of the Confessional Synod of the German Evangelical Church to see whether they agree with Holy Scripture and with the Confessions of the Fathers. If you find that we are speaking contrary to Scripture then do not listen to us! But if you find that we are taking our stand upon Scripture, then let no fear or temptations keep you from treading with us the path of faith and obedience to the Word of God, in order that God’s people be of one mind upon earth and that we in faith experience what he himself has said: ‘I will never leave you, nor forsake you. Therefore, Fear not, little flock for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.’

The six articles of the declaration are each written as expositions of biblical text combined with the statement of discipleship implication. Article one is an example:

“I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me.” (John 14:6) “Truly, truly, I say to you he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door, but comes in by another way, that man is a thief and a robber....I am the door; if anyone enters by me, he will be saved.” (John 10:1, 9)

Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in the Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death.

We reject the false doctrine, as though the church could and would have to acknowledge as a source of its proclamation, apart from and besides this one

Word of God, still other events and powers, figures and truths, as God's revelation.⁽⁵⁾

Christians through the centuries have discovered that such a confidence in the Bible results in our greatest freedom from captivity to the false and the exotic. If we are not clear about this fundamental confidence, we can be victimized throughout our lives by the visions and dreams of people around us. Apart from this standard for testing doctrines we have no defense against false or half-truth visions and ideas – or, for that matter, our own visions and ideas.

I believe that the best corrective in the face of any error is the positive affirmation of the faithfulness of Scripture and the demonstration of willingness to hear and learn from others with respect and then to teach truth as we understand it. With that we need to wisely show grace when it is necessary to agree or to disagree on matters of honest differences of understanding and meanings. The result is teaching that seeks to be non-defensive so that we are aided in our own theological clarification by the challenges that come to us from those around us.

Guidelines for Biblical Interpretation and Teaching

What then are the most helpful and balanced guidelines for the interpretation of a biblical text? Our task as teachers is not simply to read the Bible aloud, but to say in our own words what we think and feel it means. Think of some of the steps involved as a journey through five questions:

- (1) **The first step is to establish the text.** Who is the writer and what is the date of the writing? Who are the first receivers of the writing? The tools for this work are universally available and applicable. Fortunately for the English-speaking Bible interpreter, we have an extensive and very rich resource in the many English translations of the Bible available today. Each of these represents the work of translators endeavoring to establish the best English reading of the Greek/Hebrew text. Though few of us as pastors will become involved in actual translation, we also must begin the interpretive journey with careful reading that seeks out the meanings of the sentences and especially the meanings of the words used. In Lewis' words, "Tell me what the hard words mean."⁽⁶⁾
- (2) **The second question focuses on the historical setting of the text itself.** We need a news reporter's inquisitiveness about time, place, people, atmosphere, and crises present or about to happen. Are there interior clues about why the book is written? What problems are surfaced in the material itself? Background books and dictionaries of the bible are a great aid here.
- (3) **The third step in interpretation is to determine the meaning and purpose of the text.** What do the words say, what do the words mean? At this point we ask the theological content question. The most helpful interpretations come from moving slowly and carefully to learn from the whole context of the book what the writer is

saying and why. The general rule is that the meaning of each separate part is principally governed by the meaning of the larger part. For example, to find the meaning of one sentence by Saint Paul we must first look to that sentence's larger paragraph; then to the collections of paragraphs.

- (4) **A further step in the interpretive journey is to ask the question about the situation within the church that receives a document?** This question becomes the contemporary question. For example, we then notice how Paul's teachings about first century dangers of tribalism (Romans 12-16) or from the Lord's Sermon on the Mount (Mathew 5-7) are relevant to 21st century problems of tribalism and hatreds between people. This is the present tense question that biblical exposition opens up to us now in the present century just as it did in the first century.
- (5) **The final step in interpretation is to ask the discipleship question.** What does this text say to me? What are the implications for my life? In every study of the Bible we must always include ourselves and try to understand the ramifications of the teaching on the choices I make daily – what I do and how I do it. The best teaching uses “we” language more than “they” or “you” language. To understand the personal impact of the passage is life giving.

I believe that one of the greatest dangers to biblical interpretation today can be the various grid systems we superimpose upon the text ahead of time and through which we then demand that the text be read. We should avoid such filters. Exposition of texts in the Bible is an inductive safeguard against such damaging agendas. This is why biblical theology should always precede systematic theology.

The Bible Rightly Honored

Dorothy L. Sayers writes “The Christian faith is the most exciting drama that ever staggered the imagination...the plot pivots upon a single character, and the whole action is the answer to a single central problem: ‘What think ye of Christ?’”⁽⁷⁾ We worship Jesus Christ, not the Holy Bible. The Bible, taken seriously, never stimulates false worship, but through its texts and themes, its history and poetry, its yearnings and prayers, its real people from Moses to John, the Bible always finally points us to its Lord.

Because of the timelessness of Jesus Christ himself, the Bible's witness to his ministry is trans generational and transcultural. Biblical faith does not blunt our ability to be a wise and streetwise observer of the contemporary scene. I believe the healthy pressure of the gospel rather creates just the opposite result – a sharpened sensitivity and inquisitiveness that grows out of a stance toward life that does not need to fear truth wherever we find it.

There is one word of caution: A doctrinal wanderlust can sometimes take hold of a student of the bible. It may create its own momentum, and with it an insatiable appetite for the new and the different. This wanderlust should not be confused with the research instinct that we have been describing, or the hard work of theological inquiry and honest debate

about meanings and teachings. The restlessness in research is founded upon the whole principle of testing followed by meaningful response to truth discovered. Wanderlust is not freedom, though it may disguise itself as freedom but often it results in **intellectual, moral and spiritual adriftness**.

I can think of no more exciting task in our age, so often adrift, and yet underneath it all so hungry for the real, than to have the privilege of sharing in the witness of Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today and tomorrow. The words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer offer a steadying hope:

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly” (Col. 3:16). The Old Testament day begins at evening and ends with the going down of the sun. It is the time of expectation. The day of the New Testament church begins with the break of day and ends with the dawning of light of the next morning. It is the time of fulfillment, the resurrection of the Lord. At night Christ was born, a light in the darkness; noonday turned to night when Christ suffered and died on the Cross. But in the dawn of Easter morning Christ rose in victory from the grave. ⁽⁸⁾

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1 Thessalonians 5:11

Serving to Encourage and Build Up in Christian Faith

Sources and Notes

1. Bethge, Eberhard. (2000). *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press *page 205*. These are the opening comments by Bonhoeffer who wrote these words in a letter to a friend in 1936.
 2. Jeremais, Joachim. (1958). "The Present Position in the Controversy Confronting the Problem of the Historical Jesus". In *Expository Times 69*. *page 333*. Jeremias is always clear and "to the point."
 3. Barth, Karl. (1954). *Dogmatics in Outline*. New York: Harper & Row. *page 40*. Barth's first three chapters in this book are a very helpful introduction to Biblical Theology.
 4. Pascal, Blaisé. (1941). *The Pensees: The Provincial Letters*. New York: Random House. *page 7*. Pascal (1623-1662) has a lasting power to inspire and turn our eyes towards Jesus Christ.
 5. Cochrane, Arthur. (1962). "The Theological Declaration at Barmen in 1934." In *The Church's Confession under Hitler*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press. *page 238-242*. Cochrane tells the story of the people who met together at Barmen.
 6. Lewis, C.S. (1961). *An Experiment in Criticism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. *page 121*. This is Lewis' book about how to read a book. I think it is one of the best aids to Bible study I know.
 7. Sayers, Dorothy L (1969). *Christian Letters to a Post-Christian World*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans. *page 13*. See also her brilliant war time BBC broadcast drama "The Man Born to be King."
 8. Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. (1954). *Life Together*. New York: Harper & Row. *page 40*. The brief book was the result of his experience at the informal confessing pastors' lived-in seminars at Finkenwald
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