

Wrestling with the Bible

A congregational biography

Joetta Handrich Schlabach

As I write this article, Faith Mennonite Church, Minneapolis, is launching our first vacation Bible school in more than ten years. Our forty-nine-year-old congregation has already experienced several demographic waves. After more than a decade with few young children and thus a slim primary Christian education program, we are now blessed with young families and some thirty children under the age of ten. As we have been rebuilding a

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Sunday school program, we've also been working to forge more connections in our neighborhood. It occurred to us that offering a summer children's program, especially with a peace emphasis, would serve our church families as well as our neighborhood.

Watching the plans unfold for this summer's VBS program has brought back memories of Bible schools I attended as a child. One chorus in particular has coursed through my head as I have been reflecting on my current congregation's relationship with

the Bible. As a child I sang: "The B-I-B-L-E—yes, that's the book for me! I stand alone on the word of God, the B-I-B-L-E."

The Bible was *the book* in my family's life. We read from it each morning before breakfast. We each carried our own copy when we went to church during the week—for Sunday school and worship, Sunday evening Bible study, and Wednesday evening prayer meeting. We were expected to spend personal time reading and memorizing scripture. In the summer we attended two weeks of Bible school. And *school* it was: we memorized, quizzed, learned the books of the Bible, traced the missionary journeys of Paul, and recited entire chapters of scripture. And we had fun! The Bible was filled with exciting and intriguing stories.

Today I witness the same enthusiasm among the children of our congregation. Each fall we present a Bible to children entering second grade, marking their ability to read. Last fall we found a new version that had an attractive cover and was designed to highlight various things for young readers. The parents all commented about their children's excitement in receiving their Bibles. One young girl was just beginning a mentoring relationship with another member of the congregation, and when they would get together, they'd discuss what she was discovering in her reading. One young boy approached me after church several weeks after receiving his Bible and began to quiz me on things he had learned: "Who comes first in the Bible," he asked, "Moses or Jesus?"

A more mature version of this enthusiasm for the Bible is found in the handful of people in our congregation who are retired. (Minneapolis has not yet become a Mennonite retirement haven, so we have only three people over seventy, and fewer than ten who are retired.) Three of our retired members are former pastors who served in three different denominations—Baptist, Moravian, and United Methodist. They meet with me each week to discuss the upcoming preaching texts. These men grew up in Christian homes and churches and have lived with the Bible for many years. Although their understanding of the Bible has changed over time, they have retained a deep love of the Bible and an inquisitive attitude that serve us well as we read familiar and obscure passages.

One of these men relates his gratitude for having done his theological training in Scotland under theologians who combined strong scholarly acumen with a warm, personal expression of faith. In them he observed deep theological reflection that went hand in hand with a profound love of Jesus. "What a friend we have in Jesus" has been the subtext of his years of preaching.

Between our children and our sages are people whose relationship with the Bible—and with faith—is more complex. Some of our members grew up in the church (Mennonite and other), left for a time in their early adult years, and returned when they began their family. They recognize the importance of a faith community for raising their children, yet they have some uncertainty about how to pass along to their children the faith tradition, especially an understanding of the Bible. Some carry unresolved questions

about the meaning and claims of scripture. Reacting against the way Christianity is co-opted by popular culture and manipulated by the religious right, some find it easier to articulate what they reject than what they embrace and find life giving.

Not all share these struggles, of course. Some of our members came to faith as adults and don't carry the angst of a tradition or struggle to reconcile their childhood understanding of the Bible with their adult questions. No less serious or thoughtful, their hunger is for learning and familiarity with a sacred text that is relatively new to them. They long to place a foundation under their fledgling faith.

These are accompanied by still others who grew up in evangelical churches and continue to hold a high view of scripture, yet have grown beyond only vertical expressions of faith and are in search of a community committed to a holistic gospel of peace.

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They are glad for a setting in which taking the Bible seriously allows room for questions.

They find it refreshing to be among people for whom there is not just *one* right way to understand a passage.

About a quarter of our households have lived through a painful earlier time when our congregation became divided over biblical interpretation as it related to the understanding of same-sex relationships. The internal pain caused by the disagreement and eventual separation of a portion of members grew

even deeper when the regional conference suspended our congregation's voting rights for five years. Although reconciliation with the conference was achieved, the residue of such conflict no doubt continues to subtly influence some members' attitude toward engaging with the Bible around conflictive issues.

This brief summary hardly catches the full range of backgrounds, perspectives, and relationships with the Bible present on any Sunday morning when our congregation gathers for worship. How do we worship and engage with integrity in the midst of such diversity of experience and relationships with the Bible?

The answer, perhaps, is in the refrain we speak each Sunday following our final scripture reading. Several years ago, our

worship committee instituted this responsorial practice taken from more liturgical traditions. At the conclusion of what is usually a Gospel reading, the reader says: “For the Word of God in scripture, for the Word of God within us, for the Word of God among us,” and the congregation responds: “Thanks be to God.”¹ These words, repeated each week, express reverence for the written/spoken word. They also remind us that scripture is not *the* Word. Scripture points to the true Word, Jesus. This Word also is made known to us in the context of our lived experiences. Jesus is present and becomes known to us as we gather and worship and pray.

Although more of our congregants carry coffee and phones than Bibles to church on Sunday morning, regular attenders know that they will likely hear several scriptures read during worship, passages from the Old and New Testament. They will often recognize scripture allusions in the songs and hymns that are sung and in the prayers that are spoken. The children’s time will usually retell or refer to one of the morning’s scriptures. Thus, worship takes its shape from scripture; it enters into the drama of scripture.

During the ten years I have been at this church (the last three as a pastor), I have seen the Bible come alive in various ways. One of our members has a background in theater. He also was on Bible memory quiz teams in his youth, when he committed hundreds, if not thousands, of verses to memory. When Matthew recites scripture, people sit up and listen. We feel the power of the word. Sometimes, after such a reading, I wonder if there is really need for a sermon. Perhaps we should just meditate in silence on his rendering of a powerful text.

At times we’ve had scripture portrayed before us. A liturgical dancer brought Ezekiel’s dry bones to life before us one Sunday. During a sermon on Isaiah’s images of God as a potter, two young potters stood in front of the congregation pounding and shaping clay. Similarly, during a sermon on the parable of houses built on sand and rock, an architect helped the children of the congregation build a house with blocks in a pile of sand. The house came tumbling down when they added water.

These experiences create images and memory around scripture, much needed in a time of multimedia saturation. But many scriptures require a different form of engagement—more in line with wrestling, prolonged inquiry, deliberation. Our canon is filled

with difficult scriptures that ring harshly in our ears or that confound and embarrass. Some are not appropriate to read in the worship setting. Last Sunday our worship, based on the summer 2010 *Gather 'Round* curriculum, “Stories of God’s People,” celebrated Deborah, the prophet and judge. A full rendering of the story from Judges 4 and 5 would also include Jael. It would acknowledge a twist of events, in which a woman is the victor rather than the one violated in war.

Working with difficult scriptures requires more time and a setting different from Sunday worship. And herein lies our Achilles heel when it comes to deeper engagement with scripture. Most of our congregation gathers just once a week for worship. For some people, whose lives do not otherwise intersect during the week, the deep need for fellowship and connection trumps interest in our adult education classes. Attempts to form midweek study and fellowship groups even once a month are often thwarted by busy schedules, demanding professional lives, and the need to care for children.

Despite these challenges, I am encouraged when people do gather in adult education classes and seriously engage with one

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another around theological topics. I was delighted when six people, over the course of eight months, arrived at church an hour early on Sundays to engage in Bible study. I was pleased when one parent of young children invited other parents to begin a “Connections” class, following the themes of their children’s Sunday school lessons. The group planned to meet for one quarter, but they have decided to continue meeting.

My hope is that in the long term people can develop a relationship with scripture that is prayerful. I hope that we will not be satisfied to interact with scripture just on an

intellectual, rational basis—which is probably the dominant mode for well-educated folks—but that we will also seek emotional, spiritual engagement. Some persons in the church have found the practice of *lectio divina* helpful, with its invitation to listen not just with the ear and the mind but also with the heart.

But this is a difficult movement for many. Progressive Christians can be rigid in their rationality! I've recently begun to wonder if part of the struggle with scripture for progressive-minded Christians, who generally eschew literalism, isn't actually another form of literalism. Many, if not most, people in our congregation are sufficiently familiar with historical and literary criticism to reject a literal view of the Bible. Yet, when faced with perplexing passages, such as violence in the Old Testament or a particular interpretation of an Old Testament text by Paul, the impatience or cynicism they sometimes express suggests that they do take the text at face value.

As followers of Christ, we are empowered by the Holy Spirit to continue the task of seeking truth. Rather than jump to conclusions about a passage or dismiss it outright, we are invited to engage with it, wrestle with it—and be wrestled by it. Sometimes as we read a difficult passage in its broader context, we find the text engaging in its own criticism. But we mustn't stop there: we can shape new metaphors, create new parables, and tell stories true to our times.

We did not sing “The B-I-B-L-E” in Bible school this summer. We know that this book will not be the *only* book that influences the lives of our children. But we are teaching the stories of the Bible. We are memorizing scripture. We are modeling a living faith in a loving God. And we are committed to being a community in which people of all ages know they are not alone as they grow, have questions, and engage the living Word throughout life.

Note

¹ The Iona Community, *Iona Abbey Worship Book* (Glasgow: Wild Goose Publications, 2001), 18.

About the author

Joetta Handrich Schlabach is pastor of Faith Mennonite Church, Minneapolis, Minnesota. She entered formal ministry after serving with Mennonite Central Committee in Pennsylvania and Central America in the 1980s, editing *Extending the Table: A World Community Cookbook* (1991), and working in program administration in several colleges and universities. She enjoys reading, urban gardening, keeping up with her adult children via Facebook and Skype, and—with her husband, Gerald—taking part in Mennonite-Catholic conversations through Bridgefolk.