

THE BIBLE AS A CHARTER FOR THE HUMAN SPIRIT: READING THE BIBLE TO PROMOTE HUMAN FLOURISHING



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Let me begin by acknowledge the Kuringgai people, the indigenous owners and custodians of the land where we are gathered this afternoon. If we were inclined to add up all the dates in the Bible, as Archbishop Ussher tried to do just over 300 years ago, we would come up with a story that reaches back around 6,000 years. The first people of this ancient land have a story that stretches back some 60,000 years. Their story dwarfs the biblical narrative and invites us to look at Scripture differently.

So we honour their elders past and present, as well as the emerging elders of the first nations of the land and especially of this place where we meet today.

I want to thank those responsible for this opportunity to explore with you some of the ways in which the Christian Scriptures can serve as a charter for the human spirit, rather than as manacles for humanity. What I hope will happen this afternoon, is that we shall have a conversation around those issues. In preparation for that conversation, my goal in the next 45 minutes or so is to provide some stimulus material to assist us in beginning that conversation and perhaps also to provide some parameters for it.

In considering what I was going to say here today, I was conscious of the need to choose a topic that is clearly relevant to the life and mission of churches, but also relevant for the public square: a topic that is relevant to the life and mission of the church, and which has some ecumenical dimensions to it, as well as being a topic which might be relevant to the wider community or have some significance for the voice of faith in the public square.

My role is not that of a politician nor indeed a senior figure in the life of the churches nor even a leading ecumenical contributor. My personal background is that I have spent most of my adult life as a religion scholar specialising in biblical studies. My particular interests are the historical origins of the Bible and especially historical Jesus research. These days I am a priest responsible for a cathedral in a small regional town on the north coast of New South Wales about 100 km away from where I was born, so life has been something of a circle.

What I hope we can do in our time together this afternoon is to explore the role of the Bible inside but also beyond those communities of spiritual practice which we call churches.

Core proposition

I can sum up my core ideas for this afternoon's presentation as follows:

The immense cultural and spiritual significance of the scriptures lies precisely in their capacity to inspire us to move beyond earlier expressions of humanity and to reach new levels of awareness courage and compassion; in short, to be more fully human than ever before. I want to suggest that this is true at both the individual and the collective level. I would also want to suggest that this truth is not limited to the Christian Bible — in all its variations — but also applies to the sacred texts of all the great spiritual traditions. However, as a Christian scholar I will limit my comments to the role of the Christian Bible.

In reviewing some earlier work recently, I realised that this concept has been on my mind for some years.

1. The Bible was mostly written by ancient Jews, a few of whom were followers of Jesus although probably none of them had ever seen or heard Jesus during his lifetime.

2. Most of the Bible was prepared for oral presentation via live performance in community gatherings for worship and mutual support (and not for close study by literate and highly educated individuals).
3. The Bible has very little to do with history even though some historical elements are embedded in it.
4. Decisions on which texts to include in the Bible were mostly determined by political needs of Jewish communities after Alexander the Great and of emerging Catholic Christianity in the third and fourth centuries ce.
5. *While the Bible has been used to validate prejudice and oppression of various kinds, it can also be used in ways that enhance humanity and encourage respect for the Earth.*
6. The Bible is best read in the company of other people, so that we benefit from the wisdom of others as we seek to hear what the Spirit is saying to the church.

Those words were drafted on 9 May 2009, so almost exactly ten years ago. I was especially interested to read #5, and I look forward to exploring that key insight with you all this afternoon.

Relevance

Perhaps the first thing to be considered is the relevance of my chosen topic. It seems fairly clear that the topic is indeed relevant for the life and mission of the church, whether as separate faith communities or as an ecumenical movement. However, I think it is also highly relevant for the wider community in the place of religion in the public square.

A few examples may suffice to make the point:

The marriage equality debate in which we have been engaged for the past couple of years has seen substantial progress, but there remains considerable unfinished business. This is particularly so with regards to the reception of marriage equality within the life of the churches as well as equality for transgender persons in the wider society.

The pressure coming from conservative Christian groups for their 'religious freedom' to be protected is another of the reasons why this topic may be relevant for us this afternoon. The kinds of protections which seem to be desired nowadays are protections born of a looming awareness of the futility of

traditional theological positions and their well-earned disrepute in the more general community.

One further and more recent example: Israel Folau.



The recent media storm around his online comments threatening the fires of hell for those whose beliefs or personal lifestyles do not conform with ultraconservative Christian perspectives is just the latest example of why this topic matters.

So, I suggest we explore whether the role of Scripture is to protect the past and regulate the present, or to inspire us in the present to create a more human future?

Process

If we are going to engage in this conversation, we going to have to set aside common pious and devotional concepts about the Bible and indeed about the nature of Christianity. I am sure you will be up for that challenge if you have chosen to participate in the program this weekend.

What I will be asking you to consider is the 'real-world' spiritual value of the Bible. In other words, what practical value does the Bible have for the way we live our everyday lives? We may be people of Christian faith, we may be people

who identify as spiritual but not religious, we may be people of other faiths or people without faith, or we may simply be considering the value of the Bible for the secular Australian Commonwealth to which we all belong and in whose future well-being our own well-being is to be found. No matter where we are coming from in this conversation, the focus is much the same: what is the practical value of the ancient Christian Scriptures for the kind of society we aspire to be and become?

Using the Bible faithfully

The phrase 'taking the Bible seriously but not literally' has become quite well-known in progressive religious circles. That is certainly the exercise in which we will be engaged this afternoon, but I want to up the ante a little bit and raise the stakes for our conversation.

I am proposing that taking the Bible literally is not simply one valid theological option among several. On the contrary, I consider a literal view of the Bible to be a serious theological mistake. This mistake—common though it be in many Christian circles—has inevitable toxic consequences for people of faith, for the church, for the wider society; and indeed for our whole fragile biosphere. We may want to tease out some of these issues in the conversation which will follow shortly.

My goal then, is to speak plainly about matters of deep theological significance and to avoid mealy-mouthed theological terms that fudge things up to the point where nobody can take offence. While I am not seeking to offend, I will not be upset if you are. This is, after all, a festival of wild ideas, is it not?

We are giving ourselves permission to ask questions, to push boundaries, as we seek to gain a sense of the way forward from where we are now to where we need to be in the future. That is one reason why we meet in a public space rather than in church property. Our venue invites us to think outside traditional theological boundaries for the benefit of us all.

Exhibit A: slavery

These days no church would entertain a proposal to reintroduce slavery into our economy and our family structures. At least I hope that is the case. And yet slavery is good for business and it has strong biblical support.

Perhaps you can already guess where I am going with this?

During the US Civil War, the church was split over the slavery issue and indeed some of those divisions have not yet been healed.

The campaign to abolish slavery provides an example of the Bible inspiring a few activists and social advocates to develop new ideas that were controversial, radical, overturned millennia of unbroken tradition, and involved setting aside some parts of the Bible itself for the sake of a deeper truth. No wonder it was controversial.

Perhaps this sounds familiar?

Yet, when we consider the biblical basis for slavery it is actually quite extensive and in no sense a superficial element of the tradition:

We find slavery embedded in the social structures of countless narratives through both the Old Testament and the New Testament.

The institution of slavery includes the sexual exploitation of female slaves by their male owners.

The Hebrew slaves in Egypt were set free by their God, but slavery itself was not condemned. Remarkably, the desert constitution for the future Israelite society includes provisions for the institution of slavery, including both Hebrew slaves and Gentile slaves.

Slavery features in the parables of Jesus and is never condemned by him. Indeed, slavery becomes a favourite term in the New Testament to describe the relationship of the believer or the disciple to Jesus. These days with our sensitivity around slavery, we tend to translate the Greek term *doulos* as 'servant', but its natural interpretation in context is simply 'slave'.

When we look to the authentic letters of Paul, and particularly the brief letter to Philemon, we find a fascinating triangle between Paul, Philemon (a Christian slaveowner) and Onesimus (a runaway slave and convert to Christianity). At no stage is slavery called into question.

Looking further afield in the New Testament, including the Deutero-Pauline letters, we find a systemic acceptance of slavery and explicit guidelines within the household codes for relationships between masters and slaves.

We should also note that while the New Testament endorses slavery, it condemns slave traders; which is an interesting distinction to make.

If we were to summarise the biblical position on slavery it would be as follows: slavery is assumed, it is regulated by divine laws, it is widely practised and continues to be accepted even into the New Testament itself. Slavery provides a core metaphor for the personal faith and for major leadership roles within the church, and it is even embraced by Jesus as a metaphor for his own mission and purpose.

All of this is more than that can be said for several other cultural practices that acquire theological significance in the Bible and within later Christian tradition, including: marriage, divorce, and celibacy. In short, anything involving sex or gender. Little is said about those subjects relative to the broad acceptance of slavery.

Biblical literacy



RESPONSIBLE SERVICE OF ALCOHOL

We are all aware of the responsible service of alcohol provisions these days, but I want to suggest that we need a similar program for the responsible service of Scripture.



RESPONSIBLE SERVICE OF SCRIPTURE

Indeed, there is such a program, it is called biblical literacy.

Biblical literacy has numerous elements, including at least the following:

- (1) It requires attention to how written text function as acts of communication between and among authors and readers. This is an unremarkable literacy skill in other areas of modern life, including media studies and genre analysis at school. Yet it seems oddly and sadly lacking in many Christian churches. Meaning is always negotiated between the author and reader, with all the power being in the hands of the reader who is the one constructing meaning out of the process. The author can seek to shape the form of those negotiations, but the reader is the one ultimately creating meaning from the communication process. As text the Bible is subject to those same dynamics. We determine what it means. It does not determine our meaning.
- (2) Typical literacy also requires us to pay attention to the nature and function of language as we create, share, adopt, implement and adapt human knowledge between individuals and across generations. This is essential as we seek to use the Bible authentically.
- (3) Biblical literacy further requires that we pay some attention to what may reasonably be known about the composition of those texts that we now value as sacred Scripture. They did not drop out of heaven and they were not dictated by the Holy Spirit. Despite years of teaching biblical studies in seminaries around Australia and elsewhere, I was still shocked the other day to see a Christian leader quote from Psalm 51 as part of his argument against abortion, with the claim that the Psalm represents the direct words of God. This is, of course, nonsense.
- (4) In addition to paying attention to how the text may have originally been composed, we also need to pay attention to the process of reception for certain texts which were accepted as sacred while other texts from the same period were excluded from those documents authorised to be read in church or consulted to settle theological disputes. In other words, both the formation of the canon and the history of the interpretation of the canonical texts have a part to play in genuine biblical literacy.
- (5) What we have learned about using these texts from the accumulated experience more than 2,500 years of continuous interpretation within communities of spiritual practice must also be brought into the

discussion. We are not the first people to read these texts and people of goodwill have been wrestling with them for centuries, constructing life-giving ways of reading the text as a charter for human flourishing in different cultural and social contexts. We ignore that wisdom at our peril.

- (6) An essential element of biblical literacy — or perhaps simply religious literacy — is that we consider what impact our new insights into the physical and social realities of being human in our kind of universe have on our contemporary reception and interpretation of these ancient texts. Since we no longer think we live on a flat earth or in an earth-centric universe, we will necessarily construct a different vision of life as we read these texts.
- (7) Finally, there is our own lived experience. This informs us as we reflect on past and contemporary interpretations of these venerated ancient texts. When we speak of the inspiration of Scripture, the work of the Holy Spirit is surely as much in the life of the reader and the listening community as it is in the texts themselves. Such a view of inspiration would certainly be consistent with our understanding of how meaning is constructed when a text is being read.

Living with theological difference

Binary gender stereotyping is an issue of wider cultural interest as we are well aware. We saw it in the marriage equality debate and we see it persisting in the culture wars around gender diversity and sexual orientation. It is particularly a controversial topic within the churches at the present time, but there is nothing new about the churches living with profound controversy and conflict.

At other times and in other places different issues have also been very divisive and continue to be so in some cases including: questions of shared meals between Gentiles and Jews, demands for male circumcision for Gentile converts to Christianity, Christian opposition to military service, the use of the vernacular in the liturgy, non-traditional music in worship, icons and images of various kinds, and (as we have seen) slavery.

Biblical and wider theological grounds for same-sex marriage

As we prepare for our discussion after the conclusion of my presentation, I want to suggest a series of basic hermeneutical principles which are particularly relevant to the question of same-sex marriage.

The first is *the limits of Biblicism*.

By that term I mean an excessive expectation of the authority of Scripture within the life of the church and of individual believers. So, I suggest that we ask the question: What kind of authority does the Bible actually have? And just how is that authority exercised? Is the authority of the Bible prescriptive or descriptive?

When we speak of the truth of the Bible, is that literal truth or metaphorical truth? And what are the extra-biblical considerations that drive our use of the Bible to settle theological debates in the first place? Why are some biblical statements prescriptive but others able to be set aside as cultural requirements or even as ritual texts?

I note, for example, that a famous rugby player who is opposed to homosexuality has tattoos covering his arms despite the explicit ban on such practices in the same Bible that he cites in opposition to same-sex relationships. Surely culture both presupposes and reinforces doctrine, and to dismiss a passage as merely 'ritual' is already to have some prior theological assumptions about the place and the value of ritual.

The second set of issues relates to *the marginal nature of questions about marriage and gender and sexuality within the Bible* more generally and particularly within the Gospels. And in passing, let me say that I do not accept the argument apparently quite popular in this part of the country, that the gospels are descriptive while the letters of Paul are prescriptive. What a convenient distinction. Every part of the Bible is canonical, but we can be very creative in generating strategies to evade those portions which do not suit our cultural and theological perspectives.

When we do find issues relating to marriage or gender or sexuality occurring in the New Testament, they *mostly occur as examples where Jesus or his followers are exercising freedom to modify ancient traditions typically found in what we call the Old Testament*.

Jesus, for example, (1) opposes divorce even though it is very biblical, (2) he chooses not to marry or have children despite the biblical commands to marry

and reproduce, and (3) he welcomes women with unconventional sexual histories into the company of his disciples.

Likewise, the authentic letters of Paul challenge gender stereotypes, encourage celibacy and discourage traditional marriage commitments by calling for sexual abstinence even between married couples. When we get to the Deutero-Pauline letters and the Pastoral Epistles we see that the Pauline school is adopting a more traditional view of marriage and other domestic relationships than either Paul or Jesus, as Christianity becomes more conservative in the early decades of the second century.

Significantly, such matters are peripheral issues and not central to the gospel except when transgressing traditional purity codes becomes a sign of the kingdom of God active among us. Interesting.

Thirdly, there is a whole set of issues relating to *marriage in the Bible*. As is well known, biblical views of marriage and intimate relationships are diverse and in many respects they contradict mainstream Christian views of family values.

The Bible describes and reinforces particular ancient cultural practices relating to food and to sex. These practices include male domination, female subjugation, levirate marriage, ethnic taboos, concubinage, rape, and the sexual exploitation of vulnerable persons. These cultural views are integral elements of a social system that also included capital punishment, slavery, and ethnic cleansing; but are no longer widely accepted by Christians.

Fourthly, *creation theology*. A theology which takes seriously the significance of creation, that is God's activity as creator, also affirms that gender diversity is good and represents a wholesome feature of God's creation. In such a theological framework gender diversity is not an abomination, deviant or sinful.

It is instructive to note that the original earthling—*'adam* in Hebrew, correlating to the term *'adamah* (ground)—was a non-gendered human creature, neither male nor female, in Genesis 2. God was pleased with her workmanship and saw no need for gender difference within humanity, but created gender—according to one of the creation narratives—as a way of addressing loneliness.

As an aside, that story in Genesis 2 tends to suggest that the point of gender and sexual differentiation is companionship rather than reproduction; a point largely overlooked in traditional interpretations of sexuality and marriage.

Fifthly, *a bias to the poor*. In Scripture God especially cares about the poor.

While the poor typically do not have many assets, it is not their wealth but rather their lack of access to the common weal that constitutes their poverty. The poor and the marginalised are victims of the powerful and privileged classes in Western society and in biblical society.

If we pay attention to the biblical witness of God's preference for the poor, we cannot ignore the reality that LGBTQI are among the poor and marginalised in our society and in our churches. Of course, they are not the only victims, but they are typically among the victims.

Sixthly, *WWJD*.

Actually, we know a fair bit about what Jesus would do. It is clear from the gospel records that *Jesus deliberately violated sacred Jewish rules*, including biblical laws, relating to purity and social intimacy at meals. In addition to his own practice as a deviant Jew who refused to marry and raise a family, there is a total absence of any reference to marriage issues in his teaching, other than his extremely strict views on divorce and remarriage; which many contemporary Christian communities choose to set aside.

In this context, I suggest we do well to recall the tradition of Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well. Her personal life had apparently been a series of relationship disasters, and yet the focus of her discussion with Jesus is not her moral imperfections but the theological differences between Jews and Samaritans. Jesus does not lecture her about her relationship status but invites her into the generosity of God expressed in his own ministry.

Finally, we have the *sensus fidelium*.

The *sensus fidelium* evolves over time. It is effectively what the faithful have come to understand as the meaning of the faith for them in their situation at that time in history. It can be defined as what has been believed by everybody at all times and in all places, but that is to take a very rough grade of sandpaper and to remove the bumps and the wrinkles of historical reality from the theological systems of the church.

The mind of the faithful does indeed change. It evolves over time. And in our time the mind of the faithful is moving to a more generous and affirming

attitude towards LGBTQI persons and their intimate relationships. This is not just whistling in the dark. The remarkably high vote in favour of changes to marriage law in Australia during the postal ballot of 2017 demonstrates that most Christians — and specifically most members of those churches affiliated with the National Council of churches in Australia — are in favour of same-sex marriage.

Explicit opposition to the full inclusion of LGBTQI persons in the life of the church, including solemnising their marriages, is increasingly limited to fundamentalist and ultraconservative faith communities as part of the so-called culture wars in Western society. We know how those wars will end as do the Conservatives, which is why they are desperately seeking special laws to protect their right to discriminate.

Conclusion

When we use Scripture in ways that respect the nature of the documents, the history of their composition and reception, and the lived experience of people of faith over thousands of years, there seems no convincing reason to deploy Scripture as a tool of exclusion and oppression. Rather than serving as manacles on humanity, I propose that the Bible can indeed serve as a charter for human flourishing.

So, with all that as background information, now let's have a discussion about the usefulness or otherwise of the Bible in our lives today.

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