

Bridging the Gaps: A response to “Mind the Gap” the Bible in the Life of the Church Project.¹

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The way we read the bible defines identity. It defines who we are as Christians and how our particular identity sits within the wider framework of Anglicanism, so it is not surprising that the bible has become the single most dividing issue in the life of the Anglican Communion.² What emerges most clearly from the meetings, conversations and scholarly reflections which went into the BILC report is that it is not the bible which is *per se* the problem, but the way it is read, or rather ‘heard’ and the way it is taught, or presented. Thus, the biggest challenge to the members of any reading community lies in being able to function dialogically with others, to be both a hearer and a teacher. In this short paper, I will argue that to function dialogically is both an intellectual and a spiritual exercise. It requires two levels of engagement, involving both the individual, or personal, journey and the collective journey of the group or church, it’s particular history seen, perhaps, from within a wider ecclesial historical perspective.

The Brueggemann exercise reveals that these levels of engagement pertain not only to the group itself, but to the intellectual and spiritual life of each person contributing to the conversation.³ Each person’s intellectual and spiritual formation is therefore an essential component in a coherent collective reading of scripture. With this in mind, I shall try to address three of the questions which appear at the end of the Report itself,⁴ while being mindful of the basic premise of Stephen Lyon’s paper ‘Mind the Gap’.

1. *How does the Anglican Communion conceptualize, describe or define members’ individual and communal interactions with the Bible beyond the ‘gaps’?*

What we are being challenged by here, is the need for a real understanding of the perspective of the other, along the lines of the ‘If I were you, I wouldn’t start from here’ story. We need to be asking different questions if we are to get answers which are both meaningful to the lives of people in today’s Church and world, and which at the same time preserve the coherence of scripture. This is basically a question of empathy which, more often than not, needs to be learned before it can be taught. It cannot simply be presumed to exist. David Ford’s paper is helpful here. He recalls us to a time when the Bible was understood through ‘a new way of teaching and learning’. This points to one of the gaps which need to be bridged in our common life with regard to how we read and interpret scripture today; the gap between ‘teachers’ and ‘learners’. It seems to me that one of the most important things to have emerged from the BILC project is that we are discovering and beginning to relearn our capacity for teaching and learning simultaneously, and from one another. A number of references have been made to a certain form of didactic approach to scripture as akin to pouring information into empty cups. These should prompt us to think more consciously

¹ Stephen Lyon ‘Mind the Gap’

² Ibid.

³ From reading much of the material which went into this report it seems to me that the Brueggemann exercise has helped people come to a place of mutual respect and understanding, even when they are approaching a biblical passage from a different cultural, or historical context, or from a different intellectual perspective. It has helped them to be mindful of the fact that these contexts and perspectives are themselves conditioned by the opportunities, or lack of them, afforded by a particular socio economic environment.

⁴ ‘What Now?’ Report of the Anglican Communion Bible in the Life of the Church project (hereafter referred to as The Report) p.64

about the common pool of wisdom which we already have and to be willing to engage with that wider and far deeper intellectual wealth which is of the Holy Spirit. How might we begin to do this?

I think the process begins with being honest with ourselves and with others about our assumptions relating to the bible itself, whether in a small group, or a larger congregation, in an academic context or in one which presumes little or no background in biblical studies. Do we find the bible arcane? Does its language and teaching have anything to say to the lives of those in the group or church? What assumptions are we making about any given passage or, in the case of the gospels, of any one story or parable? What do we really want to hear from this passage, and from scripture in general? Do we need reassurance of some kind? These are some of the questions we need to ask ourselves and one another before we can formulate methodologies and answers.

The Episcopal Church of the USA offers some helpful 'leads' for getting into the right frame of mind for both teaching and learning from scripture, whether in a 'classroom' context or in a more formal or church orientated setting. We are invited to avoid falling into the trap of cliché and short cut, as, for example, what do we mean when we say that God is speaking to us? The North America Regional Group found that this is the kind of question which can lead to a distorted sense of authority when it comes to the leader or 'priest figure' and the bible itself. It follows, therefore, that viewed in this way, authority becomes a barrier to empathy. The bible does not simply tell us what to do, or what to think, but invites us to inhabit the word, through prayerful thinking. Prayerful thinking is the basis of good theology. It is thereby also the basis of good preaching, or teaching, and good preaching is essential to the spiritual and intellectual formation of any congregation or church group.

Speaking from my own church experience, it seems that those who preach risk finding themselves going down one of two 'tram lines' when it comes to the way scripture is taught. As some groups (UK and USA in particular) have noted, exegetical preaching is helpful, as long as it does not become theologically 'loaded' (eg an over emphasis on the epistles or Old Testament at the expense of the gospels), or theologically 'thin', leading to an anecdotal and ultimately unscriptural way of handling the bible in the context of public worship. This suggests that preachers need spiritual as well as intellectual formation. They are two sides of the same coin, the one informing or 'en-visioning' the other.

Similarly, individual and communal reactions towards the bible ought ultimately to be mutually reflective of wisdom, that dynamic force which shapes the missional life of the Church. In other words, reading the bible ought to be an ongoing interactive and creative process. Creativity and movement are essential if the word of God is to convey meaning and life in the transient flux of our 'sound bite' world. The word of scripture is always moving us on, but it is never transient. The more the Spirit is allowed freedom of movement, the deeper it penetrates into our consciousness and so informs the way we live our lives and conduct our relationships. This is completely at odds with the adrenalin-driven, largely self interested, intellectual climate which we currently inhabit. Asking the kind of questions which allow for movement does not amount to keeping up with the way things are done in the spirit of the age we live in. It is about going with the Holy Spirit who 'drives' the teacher and learner together further on and into a more nuanced understanding of what God is saying to us now. This is where Anthony Thiselton's 'divinatory dimension' can help us to shape new ways of

teaching and learning together.⁵ It leads into a further question raised at the end of the Report:

2. *How do contemporary approaches to Scripture help members hear the multiple layers of voices and perspectives embedded in the biblical texts?*

This too is a 'gap filling' exercise. Here, we are not so much bridging the gap between teaching and learning, by respecting the teaching which all the parties involved in a discussion have to bring, as bridging the gap between the rational and the sensed (or intuited) dimension of the intellectual process. It is much more of a listening exercise, akin to the method employed by Quakers. Anybody can listen, but, as Jesus himself said on numerous occasions, not everyone can hear. Hearing is a matter of application, or 'paying attention' to both the text and the questions which others are asking. Real hearing comes with the desire to understand, and with a willingness to honour the other person's integrity.

Desire and will represent the two vital ingredients of good bible reading, the spiritual and the rational. Thus, real hearing involves a conscious, and thereby rational, decision to enquire into what the other is really saying and, at the same time, to be aware of what the other is in need of hearing. Do they need reassurance? Are they yearning for challenge, so that they can test their own convictions? Do they want to discover truth in a new way? What can we offer them from our own experience of questioning which would be of service to them? All of this is about inhabiting the love of God in the movement of his Spirit as we seek a deeper common understanding of his Word.

It is also about inhabiting the context of the other. What is the context, intellectual or otherwise, which shapes the understanding from which our own love for God derives? Are we protective of it? Do we in fact *want* to hear and understand what the other hears when it differs from our own accustomed way of reading a given text? If a group or congregation is not sure about this (and it may take time and effort to come to an honest answer) the question which then needs to be asked corresponds to the fundamental reason for convening together in the first place. In other words, why are we here? What is the purpose of this discussion? What do we hope to gain from it? Some surprising contradictions might well emerge, given that not everyone comes to a meeting for the same reason, nor, if they are honest about it, do they expect to leave it with a radically changed perception of the issue under discussion.

This being said, when it comes to reading scripture, it ought to be possible to establish some commonality of purpose and it seems that many of the regional groups did manage to do this. Establishing a commonality of purpose is essential if we are to begin to learn from one another's wisdom, as the abiding presence of Christ in our midst who we experience in our thinking and who leads us to purposeful dialogue. Learning from one another's wisdom is the beginning of authentic dialogue. This is the basis of *Indaba*. Such a dialogue ought to take all the parties involved into a different kind of hermeneutical place, one which is shaped entirely out of their common experience of their love for God and of his unchanging love for them. My own experience of working with students of different denominations and churchmanships has revealed how important it is, in the context of bible study, to agree on one indisputable fact: that we all love, and are loved by, the same God. How that love is translated may differ, but, in time, we come to see that our separate perceptions of God are enriched from learning to honour these different ways of loving him, and consequently of

⁵ Anthony Thiselton's discussion of language and the importance of person to person understanding at a deeper level shapes the social dimension of the kind of communication to which the work of the BILC report seems to be lead.

learning, as we read scripture together. Loving the same God, as we see him revealed in Jesus Christ, is how we begin to learn and teach one another the different languages of the Spirit, as that Spirit speaks into the hearts of every person present. This does not happen easily or quickly.

3. *What elements and processes are needed to facilitate authentic dialogue that makes possible the prospect of intersubjectivity?*

Learning each other's 'faith language' is a spiritual exercise, but it is too often dismissed as 'spiritualising', seen to be occurring at the expense of rigorous hermeneutical questioning followed by a visible witness to the truth of scripture in concrete action. Notwithstanding the need for intellectual discipline, the ambiguities and complexities which surface as we try to make good sense of the bible in any one cultural context make it difficult to arrive at answers. But the word of God is 'spirit'. It is continually evolving and its ambiguities and nuances oblige us to ask new questions, perhaps in different ways. So one of the elements needed for intersubjectivity involves allowing the difficult questions to be asked in the context of a community learning exercise, and not just in the private thoughts of the individual. At the same time it does require that we honour the integrity of the other as a person known and loved by Christ with the particular skills and insights which they bring to the discussion. BILC has revealed that questioning matters because questions are generated from individuals as 'subjects', people whose lives have made them who they are. So individuals matter. This is where we begin to 'mind', and bridge, the teaching and learning gap. If the individual, or person, is not confident and at peace with themselves with regard to their own intuited responses to scripture, they will have little to offer to the teaching/learning community. It is the person's inner peace that needs to be nurtured within the context of a growing confidence and literacy of scripture itself. Intersubjectivity therefore requires that the parties to any discussion think of themselves as both teachers and learners, people who have something to bring of themselves and who can expect to be enriched in their thinking by the experience of others. For this to be possible, all parties need to be able to get into, or 'experience' something of what it is like to be that person by hearing them, or meeting them, from the deepest level of their own inner life. It is at this point that 'listening' becomes 'hearing'.

When listening becomes hearing, intersubjectivity becomes the fulcrum for Anglican life, whether in the context of small groups or in those bodies whose task it is to shape the life of the wider Communion. In all of these areas, reading the bible together at this deeper level will yield surprises. I would suggest that it might even result in a complete re-ordering of our priorities, a complete transformation of our life together, so that what is consistent with the word of a just and compassionate God, as we see him revealed in Jesus Christ, is ultimately all that we are left with when we read the bible in an intersubjective way. Engaging with others at this deeper level requires trust. Both the Brueggemann exercise and the h+ Course⁶ facilitate trust and, in my view, ought to be shared and promoted in all churches, perhaps as a mandate from diocesan bishops for use during Advent and Lent. Hearing and listening to each other's educational and churchmanship background ought to be particularly useful as a basic building block for dialogue.⁷

⁶ *Making Good Sense of the Bible*

⁷ See also my *Finding God in Other Christians* (SPCK) 2012 with discussion questions at the end of each chapter

Conclusion

These few remarks come from a consideration of some of the material which was used in the compilation of the BILC report. They are merely a brief response to Stephen Lyon's paper, set within the limited framework of three of the questions posed at the end of the Report. They are by no means exhaustive. My aim has simply been to open another window and to offer a different vantage point from which to plot the way forward. I trust that they will be in some measure helpful.

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