

Transformed by the Bible - But By Many Routes

Reflections of the work of the Regional Group in North America

(Background: The North American Group met twice residentially over the three years of the project. In addition to these meetings, the Regional Group members led and observed their respective local groups as they engaged with Scripture through the Case Studies that explored the Fifth and then Fourth Mark of Mission. At its second meeting, at the conclusion of the project, the Regional Group shared some final observations that are captured in this reflection.)

North America is a vast continent with many climates, time zones, geographies, races, ethnic groups, languages, cultures, communities, and religions—including multiple Christian traditions. It is also the home of two different Provinces of the Anglican Communion: the Anglican Church of Canada and The Episcopal Church. The lives of these two provinces naturally reflect the diversity of their continent. We thus sought to capture and express at least some of this diversity in our engagement with this project. Our representatives included members of both provinces: Canadian and American, men and women, ordained and lay, academics and those more directly engaged in pastoral work (*parish ministry, university chaplaincy, and episcopal oversight*), working within various ethnic, racial, and social settings. We likewise represented the theological spectrum of North American Anglicanism, with some more conservative and others more liberal, some more Anglo-Catholic and others more evangelical.

Unsurprisingly, the members of this Regional Group also represented very different approaches to understanding and interpreting the Bible: we had practitioners of historical-critical, canonical, contextual, feminist, and liberationist interpretation, and perhaps other methods as well. However, despite these considerable differences, we could all testify to the transformative power of engagement with the Biblical text. We confess that we have experienced God speaking to us through this text. The text interrogates us. As a meaning-making artefact, the Bible is experientially deeper and more powerful than other alternatives.

The conversations ranged across North America and reflected its great diversity. For African-American and Afro-Caribbean women of a small, struggling parish in a poor and crime-ridden urban neighbourhood, the biblical narratives were seen with immediacy and prophetic accuracy as speaking directly to the reality of their lives. But in a major university chaplaincy, the students expressed fear that the scriptural texts would only confirm fundamentalist beliefs and thus undermine their deepest convictions. In a large seminary in California, Episcopal students met with Anglicans who had left the Episcopal Church, and yet found that their ecclesial location did not make much difference when it came to interpreting the Biblical texts on the Fourth and Fifth Marks of Mission. In a traditional middle-class parish in the west of Canada, this project initiated its first-ever Bible study, whereas in another Canadian congregation the project simply took place during their regular weekly Bible study group. For some North American Anglicans, *'The Bible in the Life of the Church'* is just what happens in Sunday-morning liturgy (*hearing the lectionary texts read aloud and then a sermon possibly on them*), while for others the Bible is studied intentionally and intensively with various methods.

However, a bishop who works with indigenous / First Nations people suggested that Western education is itself a detriment to people's capacity to see sacred truth and feel divine presence in Scripture, as *"we have been educated out of believing that God is present and speaks to God's people."* He argued that the same thing that keeps contemporary North American and European people from seeing what's in the world (*i.e. the ecological crisis*) also keeps them from seeing what's in the Bible: the same cultural captivity and alienation blinds them to both of these realities. We thus need *"not a method but an attitude."* On the other hand, in direct response, a historical-critical biblical scholar argued that in order to understand a text like the one from 2 Peter 3 we needed more than just our personal experience or cultural tradition. We now understand the universe differently than the author of that text, and must thus recognize that *"contemporary cosmology has led to a new context for Christian eschatology."*

In summary, these are some issues in biblical interpretation canvassed by the North American Regional Group :

- The contrast between academic and non-academic approaches to Scripture
- The possibility that the Bible is read properly in community, particularly in a liturgical setting
- The contested place of **'culture'**, both as a singular concept and its relation to Scripture: *i.e.*, **'Scripture'** is also **'culture'**
- The contested place of received interpretations of biblical texts in Christian tradition.
- The implications of multiple levels of meaning in the biblical text, rather than simply one

8. 2 Peter 3:1-13, one of the passages used in Case Study 1 – see xxxxx

9. These issues are dealt with more fully in the North American Regional Reports

- The need to read Scripture to challenge our perspectives, not just to affirm them
- The claim that we should not reduce the Bible to merely human words: the question, 'How are we addressed by God in Scripture?' remains essential
- The reality of a functional canon within the canon (*whether we like it or not*)
- The claim that, properly understood, the Bible proclaims a liberating word to the poor and oppressed, and that God's liberating work is necessary and continuous in the reading of Scripture itself.

We concluded by asking ourselves: *'If you had the ear of the whole Anglican Communion, what would you want to say about the "Bible in the life of the Church"?'*

The following responses were offered:

One member said, ***"If we have Scripture—that is, a sacred text—then interpretation is inevitable: we are in a fundamentally and inescapably hermeneutical situation as Christians."***

Another said, ***"Scripture is God's Word and has transforming power in people's lives. We need to keep encouraging Anglicans to read and study the Bible."***

Another said, ***"I am a feminist progressive hyper-educated woman in Holy Orders with post-modern leanings, and I cherish Scripture as the living and fully authoritative Word of God that leads me daily to submit to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Please believe that both are true. And now please tell me who you are."***

Another said, quite simply and sincerely, speaking on behalf of all North American Anglicans: ***"We love Jesus, and we seek to hear his voice in the Scriptures."***

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