

Who Says So? Encountering the Authority of Scripture

An Adult Education Curriculum

Purpose

This adult education curriculum is designed to lead participants into an encounter with scripture as a source of authority for the Church and in their own lives. Its purpose is:

- To overcome common fears of discussing scriptural authority shared by many Episcopalians
- To give participants an awareness of the existence, strengths and limitations of a diversity of positions in relation to the authority of scripture, together with tools to understand the ways in which scriptural authority can be invoked by different groups
- To give participants an understanding of changing views of scriptural authority throughout history, including the uniquely Anglican perspective
- To enable participants to experience a diversity of methods of exploring and interpreting the scriptures
- To encourage participants to reflect upon the authoritative claims that they allow scripture to make on their own lives

Structure

The program is designed in five sessions of an hour and a half each. It could most easily be offered on weeknight evenings (possibly as a Lenten or Easter season series), or after church on Sundays (including a simple lunch). The sessions can also be combined into two, five-hour workshops. We do not recommend that the program be attempted as a full-day workshop. The need for reflection and processing time between sessions and the amount of material covered make a full day schedule undesirable. We also do not recommend offering the program between services on a Sunday morning (in a 45-minute time slot), again because of the amount of material to be covered and the need to allow participants ample time for the exercises.

Program Materials

Included in the program are:

- A complete program outline, with full directions for leading each session
- Handouts for each session
- Full texts of the essays which form the basis for each session's reflection exercises

Leadership

The program is designed to be led by laity or clergy. Extensive academic background in scriptural studies is not required of leaders. A willingness to engage with the program materials and to enable participants to do the same is essential. As with all adult education classes, we recommend that a team of two or more people lead the sessions.

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Session One: Liberating Word or Barrier?

Purpose

This session is designed to begin building community among the participants, to explore some common fears related to the issue of scriptural authority and to experience the wide variety of writings in the Bible.

Materials needed

- Name tags and refreshments
- Copies of the handout for the exercises "Types of Writing" and "Types of Writing in the Bible"
- Answer sheets for the two exercises
- Copies of the essay "Barriers to Engagement with the Scriptures" for participants to take home
- Flip chart, paper, markers and red and blue pens for all participants
- A large white board with markers or a large area of paper with markers for the creation of the "Graffiti Wall"
- Copies of *The Book of Common Prayer*, p.236, for closing prayer

Introductions and Opening Exercise - 20 minutes

Welcome the participants and deal with any necessary logistical details (bathrooms, breaks, refreshments). Invite each participant to introduce him or herself and say one thing they hope to gain from participating in the program.

Briefly summarize the purpose of the program and share some of your own hopes for the participants. Introduce the opening discussion exercise.

On a flip chart, write:

"Jesus loves me this I know, for the _____ tells me so."

Invite the group to identify the quotation (it comes from a well-known children's hymn) and perhaps sing the first verse and chorus:

Jesus loves me, this I know,
For the Bible tells me so.
Little ones to him belong,
They are weak but he is strong.

Yes, Jesus loves me! (repeat twice more)
The Bible tells me so.

Depending on the size of your group, you may want to do this exercise as one large group or break into smaller groups (small groups should not be less than five people).

Allow fifteen minutes to address these three sets of questions that arise out of the quotation:

- Do you know that Jesus loves you? How? Does the Bible tell you so? If so, or if not, is that a problem for you?
- Where did you first find out that Jesus loves you? Who or what told you? Who or what told you that he didn't?
- Has anyone ever told you what to think about the Bible and why?

If you have divided into small groups to discuss the questions, come back together and invite participants to share points of particular interest.

Presentation and Discussion - 20 minutes

Present the materials from the essay, "Barriers to Engagement with the Scripture." Explain that copies of the essay will be available to take home at the end of the session. Discuss the following questions in the large group or (if necessary because of numbers) in small groups which then report back to the large group.

- What did you learn that was new to you?
- What questions are you left with?
- Upon learning this, do you feel compelled to engage the scriptures in a new way?
- What, if any, barriers get in the way of your engagement with scripture?

"Types of Writing" Exercise - 10 minutes

Open the exercise by pointing out that we distinguish different types of writing in our everyday lives, and can often do it just by looking at what words are used and how they are put together. Divide into small groups and ask them to discuss the "Types of Writing" handout to decide how they would classify the examples given.

Go through the answer sheet in a lighthearted manner and ask if participants found it easy to distinguish between the passages.

"Types of Writing in the Bible" Exercise - 30 minutes

Explain to the group that the English word "bible" derives from the Greek "biblia," which means "books" (plural of "biblion"). This plural gives us a hint about what the Bible is, namely, a collection of writings that developed over a period of a thousand years. These writings come from different historical periods and contexts and are written in different literary styles. Now that you have practiced on non-biblical passages, try to identify the literary types of these Bible passages. Poetry or prose? What kind of verse or kind of story or message? Divide into small groups once again and ask them to work on the "Types of Writing in the Bible" handout.

Gather the group, and go through the answer sheet. Discuss any questions participants have, or things that puzzle them. Ask if there are any examples that they would not have expected to find in the Bible. Why? Are there examples of types of writing that they find more or less appealing

than others?

Personal Scripture Graffiti Wall Exercise - 10 minutes

Before the session, prepare a "Graffiti Wall" for the participants to write on. This may be a white board, or several large flip chart papers taped together and attached to the wall. The exercise is designed to enable each participant to bring to mind the passages of scripture they like the most and use the most, and also the passages they like the least and tend to avoid.

Before having them write on the wall, ask: "What passages of scripture make your heart sing? Or sink?" This large group discussion will help stir up thoughts and feelings. Give participants each a red pen (to write "heart singing" passages, and a blue pen (to write "heart sinking" passages). Encourage them to write from memory and not to worry about complete accuracy. Part of the purpose of the exercise is for participants to realize the extent of their scriptural knowledge. Keep the energy high on this exercise; give participants barely enough time to scrawl their passages. After the group has finished recording their passages, invite brief comments. Are there common passages in either category? Are certain parts of the Bible well-represented or not at all represented? Are there passages that make some people's hearts sing and some people's hearts sink?

Closing Prayer

Blessed Lord, who caused all holy scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn and inwardly digest them, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen. (*BCP*, p.236)

Types of Writing

Handout for Session One

In your small groups, read the examples given below and decide as a group what sort of writing each of them is and from what kind of document it came.

1. Goosey, goosey, gander,
 Whither dost thou wander?
Upstairs and downstairs
 And in my lady's chamber.
2. It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife.

 However little known the feelings or views of such a man may be on his first entering a neighborhood, this truth is so well fixed in the minds of the surrounding families, that he is considered as the rightful property of someone or other of their daughters.
3. The best bullfighter is the one in the box seats.
4. You don't take breaks, why should your computer? You count on your computer to work as hard as you do, so count on the HP Vectra running Windows NT Workstation-the most reliable Windows operating system available.
5. Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
 Thou art more lovely and more temperate.
6. Head of household-Generally, you may claim head of household filing status on your tax return only if you are unmarried and pay more than 50% of the costs of keeping up a home for yourself and your dependent(s) or other qualifying individuals.
7. Twenty-two American missionaries joined the flight of refugees out of Congo as President Laurent Kabila's troops battled rebels on the edges of the capital for a second straight day.
8. ... Weather abroad
 And weather in the heart is like a come on
 Regardless of prediction.

 Between foreseeing and averting change
 Lies all the mastery of elements
 Which clocks and weather glasses cannot alter.
 Time in the hand is not control of time,
 Nor shattered fragments of an instrument
 A proof against the wind; the wind will rise,
 We can only close the shutters.
9. Bestow on me, O Lord God, understanding to know you, diligence to seek you, wisdom to find you, a perseverance in waiting patiently for you, and a hope that may embrace you at the last.
10. Suits and nerds, 45-55. If you smile easily, like yourself, have traveled some, prefer a carefree, beautiful blonde to crease your shirt, please call! Caveat: If seeking a Woman to save you from yourself, skip this ad!

Answer Sheet is included in the program; omitted here to save space.

Types of Writing in the Bible

Handout for Session One

Read each of the following passages and decide in your small group what kind of writing it is. Poetry? History? Proverbial wisdom? A letter? A news summary? A song? A folk-tale? A law? A hymn?

- A. My beloved speaks and says to me:
 Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away;
for now the winter is past,
 the rain is over and gone.
The flowers appear on the earth;
 the time of singing has come,
 and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land.
- B. Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.
- C. A soft answer turns away wrath,
 but a harsh word stirs up anger.
The tongue of the wise dispenses knowledge,
 but the mouths of fools pour out folly.
- D. Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up."

When the LORD saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am."

Then he said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." He said further, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.
- E. There was once a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job. That man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil. There were born to him seven sons and three daughters. He had seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen, five hundred donkeys, and very many servants; so that this man was the greatest of all the people of the east.

- F. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
 who, though he was in the form of God,
 did not regard equality with God
 as something to be exploited,
But emptied himself,
 taking the form of a slave,
 being found in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
 he humbled himself
 and became obedient to the point of death,
 even death on a cross.
- G. When you offer a sacrifice of well-being to the Lord, offer it in such a way that it is acceptable on your behalf. It shall be eaten on the same day you offer it, or on the next day; and anything left over until the third day shall be consumed in fire. If it is eaten at all on the third day, it is an abomination; it will not be acceptable.
- H. "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you, desolate."

Answer Sheet is included in the program; omitted here to save space.

Essay

Barriers to Engagement with the Scriptures

In developing a deeper, more authentically Anglican understanding of scripture and its place and authority in the life of the Christian, we must first recognize and deal with certain barriers to fruitful engagement that can exist in individuals within our congregations. These barriers can range from negative associations and over-familiarity with scripture to virtually total ignorance of even the most rudimentary Biblical basics.

It has been widely recognized for many years that the Episcopal Church has particular appeal to adults coming out of fundamentalist and conservative evangelical Protestant backgrounds. Given the strong emphasis on Bible study in fundamentalist and evangelical churches, these men and women generally bring a level of Scriptural knowledge far surpassing that of most "cradle Episcopalians."

There is another side to this high scriptural literacy, however. At times, some have been schooled in a literalist interpretive model which supports what can be a simplistic and fairly legalistic theological system. These Christians come to the Episcopal Church with varying degrees of what several writers have dubbed "scripture-phobia."

Some may simply balk at certain "texts of terror," as one theologian has termed them. The unquestioning acceptance of a daughter's sacrifice to fulfill a father's rash oath in the story of Jephthah is an example (Judges 11:29-40), or the divine imprimatur given to genocide in the Pentateuch's instructions for the conquest of Canaan (Deuteronomy 7:1&2; Joshua 6:21). Or people may have difficulty with certain passages which tacitly approve slavery (I Timothy 6:1&2), urge the subordination of women in the family (Colossians 3:18) and oppose their leadership in the church (I Timothy 2:11-14), or appear to exclude gay and lesbian persons from the Eternal Reign of God (I Corinthians 6:9-11; I Timothy 1:9-10). In most cases, all that is required to overcome problems of this sort is a clearly reasoned explanation of an alternative interpretive paradigm which allows such materials to be understood in the context of their time and place, and which recognizes that their contemporary application is qualified by these factors, as well as by the larger, overriding themes of scripture.

For other former fundamentalists and evangelicals, however, the intensely negative associations the scriptures hold for them will require a deeper, more refined response. While a more informed analysis of particularly troublesome texts may be of some help to such Christians, it will often be insufficient, since they experience a visceral reaction to the Bible as both the symbol and, in many cases, the specific instrument, of the very real psycho-spiritual abuse they have endured and which may well continue to haunt their spiritual journeys. For them, it may be important first to affirm and focus upon other avenues of encounter with the living Word of God: the Prayer Book, corporate worship and the sacraments, meditative or centering prayer, perceptive spiritual works by contemporary Christian authors, the natural world, life in community and their own experience of God at work in their lives as a healing, strengthening presence.

Even where scripture-phobia is not an issue, many ex-fundamentalists and evangelicals find that the very familiarity bred by constant scripture study and extensive expository preaching can pose a barrier to hearing with any freshness the revelatory Word which speaks through the Bible. As one former fundamentalist has put it: "As soon as I read or hear the opening words of a passage, I know what's coming next." For some experiencing this difficulty, thoughtful study materials from non-literalist perspectives may prove useful; others have found that overly familiar scriptures can take on renewed vitality in the context of liturgy or small-group sharing.

The Episcopal Church also draws a number of its adult "converts" from the ranks of former Roman Catholics. For some of these people, the challenge with the Bible lies not in over-familiarity but with its opposite, a measurable lack of acquaintance with the scriptures, apart from a handful of familiar gospel stories associated with the major feasts of the Church. For them, issues of authority in the Christian life have never been understood to relate primarily to scripture, but rather to the Church (specifically, the magisterium—the teaching authority embodied in bishops, church councils, the Vatican curia and the Pope). As a result, while they may have been trained to view the Bible with a certain respect, it can often seem to have limited relevance to their lives as Christians.

The problem of unfamiliarity is even more pronounced for many who come to the Episcopal Church from entirely secular, unchurched backgrounds. While at one time it could be assumed with some confidence that any reasonably well educated adult would have at least a basic working knowledge of the Bible as literature and would understand its formative significance in Western philosophical and cultural thought, this is no longer the case. For those without such a background, the Bible often seems forbidding, not by virtue of any negative associations, but on account of the very "otherness" of the Biblical materials themselves, reflecting as they do cultures and world views so different from our own and written as they are in a variety of literary styles, many of which are unfamiliar to a modern reader. Similarly, the dense and sometimes convoluted Rabbinic style of St. Paul's doctrinal writings can leave the newcomer to Christian faith who first encounters them utterly confused and put off, convinced that the Bible "just doesn't speak to me." For those whose difficulty with scripture is unfamiliarity, a straightforward, solid background in the history, literary forms and basic "story" of the Bible (aimed at intelligent lay people, not academic specialists) is generally a necessary prerequisite to any sustained, fruitful engagement with specific scriptural texts.

Finally, it should be candidly acknowledged that a popular use of the Bible widely practiced among Episcopalians has its own challenges for thoughtful scripture reflection. This is what has often been called the "Base Christian" or "African" model of Bible study, but is now more properly termed the "Oral Tradition Method."¹ In this methodology, a small group hears a given biblical passage read aloud several times. Group members then individually respond regarding the word or image in the passage which particularly speaks to them and the personal call they hear within the text at this point in their lives.

¹This method has its origin in *Lectio Divina*, adopted by base Christian communities in South America, where it was learned by an American bishop who took it to Africa. It then was discovered by Americans visiting Africa who named it "African Bible Study" when teaching it in America.

The positive aspect of such a methodology is clear: it takes scripture study out of the realm of the academic and theoretical and encourages a personal engagement with the living word that breathes through the sacred text. Possible disadvantages to this approach, however, would seem to be at least three. First, it inevitably removes the passages considered from their larger context in the scriptural record, with the danger that their original meaning can be misapprehended or distorted. Similarly, without some knowledge of the historical and literary backgrounds to a given text, it is quite possible to mistake and misapply the Biblical authors' intent. Finally, and most significantly, such an approach runs the risk of encouraging the notion that whatever a given individual may hear in a particular Biblical text—whether it is supportable by informed explanation or not—is the authoritative voice of the Spirit. This would seem to carry certain extreme Protestant theories of the nature of scriptural authority ("whatever it means to me is what it means") to their logical and arguably worst end. It can also give an impression of the Bible as a "magical" book which can be opened at any point and read in relatively short, discrete sections which are guaranteed to have something to say to the specifics of every individual life at any point in time.

Given both its popularity and potential rewards, these cautions regarding the Oral Tradition Method should not disqualify its use. Rather, it and similar subjective approaches to Bible study should be integrated with other, more objective methods. Episcopal priest and Professor of New Testament at the Church Divinity School of the Pacific, William Countryman, suggests several extremely helpful "practical rules" for scripture reflection in his *Biblical Authority or Biblical Tyranny? Scripture and the Christian Pilgrimage* (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 1994, Revised Edition). Bearing in mind these rules when using the Oral Tradition Method (or other similar devotional approaches) can avoid potential pitfalls of such techniques. Among Countryman's suggestions for interpreting scripture are:

- (1) Read the text in the original context in which it was written, that is to say, in terms of its original cultural and historical setting (insofar as these can be determined).
- (2) Read the text in the larger context of the scriptures as a whole and their overall message.
- (3) Be aware of the kind of material a particular text represents—narrative, allegory, mythic legend, parable, poetry, wisdom saying, prophetic oration, apocalypse and so on.
- (4) Explore the continuities and connections between the text and one's own experience.
- (5) Take advantage of what others (both currently and in the past) have drawn from the text.

Through this balance of subjective and objective approaches to Bible study, we discover once again, as Cowley Father Martin L. Smith writes in *The Word is Very Near You* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Cowley Publications, 1989), the excitement of that "process by which God uses old stories, old records of faith encounter, to speak again in new ways to new people."

—SAMPLE PAGES END HERE—

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Who Says So?— The Authority of Scripture
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