# Being Presbyterian in a Dysvangelical America

## A Guide to Reclaiming the Good News of God's Grace

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# Introduction

## Grace Is Our Word

It is hard for us to believe it has been twenty-five years since the publication of our book *Being Presbyterian in the Bible Belt*. It seems like yesterday we were discussing in a car while traveling to a church meeting (Presbyterians are always on their way to meetings!) our perceived need for a resource for Presbyterians young and old to respond to the Bible Belt theology that permeated where we lived. Having grown up in the Bible Belt and being pastors of churches in Oklahoma at the time, we and our communities were intimately familiar with the theological language of those we labeled neo-evangelicals. As Presbyterians, we instinctively knew that was not how we viewed God and salvation and our call to discipleship in the world.

We wrote the book to help our youth and parents and other "confused" (yet seeking) Presbyterians respond to questions like "When were you saved?" and "Who will be left behind?" To be honest, we were surprised by the response. It somehow struck a chord among many Presbyterians living not only in the Bible Belt but in many different parts of the country. It affirmed that the Bible Belt is a state of mind more than a geographical area.

The book was not simply a refutation of a certain theology but more importantly a positive affirmation of the insights and assertions of our being Presbyterian. Thus, we are convinced of the following:

1. God's grace and the claims of God's grace are the primary characteristic of God's interactions with the world.
2. When we experience this unmerited grace, we live in gratitude and awe.
3. Community is central for our shared human well-being.

This is the home base and mission and starting point for living this faith. This is the Way, we claim, because we are convinced that this is the Way God calls and claims us. This is the good news we preach and strive to embody.

## Being Presbyterian in Dysvangelical America

Now twenty-five years later, one of us (Ted) has lost a great deal of hair, and the other (Alex) has gone quite gray, yet we still think the issues raised in our first book (*Being Presbyterian in the Bible Belt*), and even its sequel (*Being Disciples of Jesus in a Dot.Com World*), are as vital today as then, if not more so. In part, this is because we have seen the growing public voice and political influence of a brand of Christian theology that is even more strident in its assertions about God and God's intentions for the world. We call this belief system dysvangelical. We think of these beliefs as neo-evangelicalism on reactionary and authoritarian steroids!

Nationally and locally, our political, social, and personal worlds are very much impacted by dysvangelicalism. Most dysvangelical theology claims to be the norm for following Jesus and advocates for social and cultural change reflecting this perspective. This belief system provides the theological and moral framework for pursuing policies and establishing values that are proclaimed as *the true* Christian worldview.

As pastors of congregations, we see Presbyterians and others struggle with how to respond to dysvangelical assertions. It is not uncommon as a pastor to hear members ask whether they can call themselves Christian anymore. We find people who do not come to church and even leave the church, because of associating it with dysvangelicalism and its harmful impact on American society. In most cases, those leaving are younger people disenchanted

with dysvangelicalism's vision of God and their understanding of humanity's place in the world.

We came up with the term *dysvangelical* to articulate what distinguishes this theological movement. Playing on the word *evangelical*, which essentially means sharing the good news, we use the prefix *dys* to describe how the good news has been turned into something more problematic and even dangerous. *Dys* means bad or ill or abnormal. Dysvangelical is a theology that is distorted, dysfunctional, and dystopian, turning the good news into the opposite of what it means to be evangelical. In fact, we argue in this book that to be Presbyterian is to be truly evangelical, bearers of the good news of God in Jesus Christ.

Dysvangelical is a theology that is distorted, dysfunctional, and dystopian, turning the good news into the opposite of what it means to be evangelical.

In the chapters that follow, we will more deeply describe the characteristics of this dysvangelical movement. We will also advocate positively for Presbyterians and others struggling to make sense of their own theology in the face of multiple faith assertions throughout religious, social, and political cultures generally. What do I believe about God whom some say is vindictive and angry toward some people who are considered other? Is God coming to punish the bad guys and reward the good guys? Which am I? Good or bad? What do I as a Presbyterian believe about democracy and authority? What am I called to do as a disciple? Wave a flag? Protest this harmful movement? Or simply say I believe in Jesus and do nothing else?

We believe the insights of our Presbyterian tradition were important in giving us a framework to understand God and discipleship back twenty-five years ago and even more so today. The Presbyterian Church has certainly changed in those twenty-five years. We are smaller; yet we are also more inclusive. The Presbyterian Church has gone from mainline to sideline to (one might say) even being sent off to the locker room, reflecting a loss of societal clout and influence amid dysvangelicalism. Yet we believe being Presbyterian—and being aligned with others who are seeking wholeness in God's world—is a

very important witness, both to sustain and through which to grow and be transformed in these days.

## Being Reformed

This book is not an apologetic defense of Presbyterianism; nor is it an argument that this particular denomination will continue beyond the twenty-first century. In the challenges facing humanity at this point in history, these issues, while not unimportant to many, are not central to this book. In fact, we would argue that defining success according to the three *B*'s (buildings, bucks, and butts) or defining a certain brand of theology as right while others are wrong is more reflective of our consumer society than any definition of discipleship within the biblical tradition. By any measure of the three *B*'s and of prideful identification with a righteous or faith superior perspective, Jesus' own ministry was an utter failure (or an extreme corrective critique). The only thing he succeeded at was transforming the world.

What this book does address is the Reformed tradition as a viable and important paradigm for understanding and living in today's world. The Reformed tradition traces its roots to a French lawyer named John Calvin, who had fled religious persecution in France for the safety of Geneva, Switzerland, in the tumultuous sixteenth century. Many strands of Christianity—from Lutherans to Anabaptists to Anglicans—were born in the rich and complex movement called the Protestant Reformation. The Reformed tradition, by some accounts today numbering over eighty million adherents worldwide, includes denominations such as the Presbyterian Church, the United Church of Christ, the Disciples of Christ, and the Reformed Church. While the polity and organization of these churches may differ, they hold in common some basic ideas about God and the nature of the world expressed in Calvin's writings.

First, at its core, the Reformed tradition sees the nature of God (and thus reality) as grace. Grace is an assertion that life is a gift given freely and with no strings attached. Salvation and wholeness are not a matter of right belief or right action, but grace is given freely by a loving God. For those identifying as Reformed, this gift is expressed most fully in the incarnation of Jesus of Nazareth, who embodied God's love in a

concrete and particular way. God's love is not earned, not deserved, and not created and distributed like a commodity by any specific human or church/faith community. Grace is simply experienced in embracing the person and the Way of Jesus. This assertion about grace is not simply a theological concept or affirmation but a claim about the nature of creation and the world around us. The radical commitment to understanding God's love as a gift, unearned and unmerited, is a hallmark of the Reformed tradition.

> Grace is an assertion that life is a gift given freely and with no strings attached.

The second key component of the Reformed way is a more complicated and complex claim of God's sovereignty. In this archaic phrase, the Reformed tradition, building on the assertion that grace undergirds reality, views the universe as under the reign of God. The challenge in understanding this theological affirmation is how sovereignty and authority are often defined in our culture. One of the interesting aspects of the Way of Jesus is his redefinition of power not in terms of how the world understands it but in sacrificial and suffering compassion for the other. Additionally, if Jesus is the ultimate model— the enfleshment of God's love willing to suffer—then God's vulnerability is an undeniable element of God's sovereignty.

The third key component of the Reformed faith understanding is the claim that we are "reformed and always reforming." There is humility to this approach of always seeking truth even when that truth challenges our basic assumptions. There is a strong sense within the Reformed tradition of the difference between the finite boxes in which we strive to place God and the persistently steadfast ways God shatters our human efforts to represent and even package God for our satisfaction throughout history. The biblical tradition is just such an account of God challenging and reforming our human expectations to the extreme measure of becoming incarnate/alive in the life of a Jewish peasant in the backwaters of the Roman Empire.

One of the scandals of this biblical tradition is that the *universal* is experienced in the *particular*, and the *particular* is experienced in the *universal*. The Bible is a collection of stories, poems, songs, and teachings about a particular people's experiences of God, who is

universal. This evolving community (ancient Israel and, later, following Jesus, the church without boundaries) grapples with understanding the dual characteristic of their experiences (simultaneously particular and universal) in order to express this characteristic in their faith tradition and in conversation with their own personal, social-historical realities. There are many voices within this tradition, at times contradictory, yet always seeking to understand God, the world, and humanity's place in it.

An additional affirmation of the Reformed tradition is an emphasis on humility when we struggle with our understanding of God as it relates to our lives and tradition. We must always start with the assertion we could be wrong. But we also think there are times when we might be getting it right or at least getting closer to the mystery that undergirds our human experience.

We write from the perspective of pastors embedded in the institution and tradition of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). We were baptized and grew up among that fallible group of people called the Church with all the quirks, complexities, and challenges of such a community. We learned the faith from people who wrestled with their tradition, who asked difficult and seemingly unanswerable questions, and who tried to live out their beliefs with integrity and conviction, never perfectly, yet usually evolving by the Spirit's transforming each one's life through discipleship, following Jesus. We were both trained in Reformed theology at a seminary. Through the years, we have strived to bring its insights to disciples of different ages and in different parts of the country. As pastors, we have experienced the challenges of being the church in the twenty-first century and have seen the church at its best and worst. We, it can be said, are children of the Reformed tradition.

Some think that theologians live in academic towers above the fray of real life where they debate theological paradoxes and minutia. Academic discourse can be opaque to anyone who is not familiar with the language and ideas discussed in professional journals and books. Thomas Aquinas, Karl Barth, and others are not easy reading! But the truth is that all theologians are shaped by the context and challenges of the world at their time.

Can Francis of Assisi be understood without an informed sense of the role of wealth and power in the Italian Catholic Church of the

1200s? Can Julian of Norwich be understood without knowing something of women in religious life and of political and public health adversity during the 1300s in England? Do Martin Luther's assertions make sense without understanding his personal struggles with guilt and shame? Can we fully understand the ideas and theological vision of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Karl Barth without examining German society during Nazism? Can we grasp Paul Tillich's insights without exploring the intellectual and philosophical ferment of the twentieth century? Or James Cone's Black theology without appreciating the suppression of African Americans via slavery and Jim Crow decades in the US? Or Gustavo Gutiérrez without becoming informed of the long-lasting effects of his nation's militarized and economic colonialization with churches collaborating in and benefiting from such efforts? Or feminist theologians in the twentieth century without becoming sensitized to how religious traditions' masculine imagery and enforced traditions of male leadership across centuries have warped legitimate holistic and inclusive expressions of God, life, and faith communities?

Our task in this book is to express how these ideas about God relate to the lived experience of the everyday. Theological assertions have political, spiritual, and personal consequences. What does grace mean to someone who has lost a job and struggles to make ends meet? What is the meaning of the sovereignty of God to a husband who sits at the bedside of his dying, cancer-ridden wife? How does a small church in the country understand being reformed as their numbers dwindle to a handful of people on Sunday morning?

We face a profound challenge in the church today with the rise of dysvangelicalism and its images of God. It is an identity crisis. The cultural power of its influence is out of proportion to its actual numbers of adherents. It has costs for our communities, for creation, and for the future of humanity. In the Presbyterian tradition, we know the importance of the Confessions as a tool to speak to such distortions of the gospel: from the Westminster Confession (1647) staking out distinctions of government authority and spiritual authority; to the Barmen Declaration (1934), which, amid the rise of authoritarian regimes, claims that only Jesus is Lord; to the Belhar Confession (1986) denouncing racism in apartheid. We Presbyterians have always strived to articulate publicly and clearly: this is the Way.

Before we move forward, we think it important to be clear about two intentions. First, we do not desire to classify or associate the dysvangelical movement with all evangelicals and their spokespersons who have shared in their own traditions the good news of God's love to be lived and shared through Jesus Christ. The evangelical tradition is rich and life-giving, with a long history of faithfulness and a desire to live out biblical principles and discipleship every day. Many current-day evangelicals are as critical themselves of the dysvangelical theology as we will be in this book.

The truth is that we Presbyterians have roots deep in the evangelical tradition of living and announcing the good news of God's kin-dom. *Kin-dom* is an expression describing God-given and blessed relationships among people and creation, distinguished from *kingdom* because *kingdom* (or *queendom*) has historical associations with hierarchy as its structure and with being gender specific when describing the dominant authorities of the hierarchy.

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Second, our intent is not primarily being political, as in choosing a particular party or candidate. There are Presbyterians across the political spectrum whose ideas about government and its role in our lives differ from one another. There is the joke that when you get two Presbyterians together, you will find three different opinions! (Baptists, Catholics, Methodists, Lutherans, and others say the same about themselves.) In fact, as we claim later in the book, our very tradition strives to balance our differences and to provide processes to work together toward God's vision for creation and community. Our Presbyterian expression for many years has been to do things "decently and in order" (1 Cor. 14:40).

Instead, in this book, we seek to speak to the underlying theological, biblical claims that lead to political and social consequences. People's images of God (whether angry, jealous, graceful) and people's claims about God's vision of the future (punishing, violent, hopeful) are key components of how we live our lives as a society and as people in a world community. We believe that what we say about God and Christ

matters profoundly, and it is important to make clear the corrosive costs of bad theology.

## Overview

Chapter 1 defines the problematic claims of literal interpretations of Scripture, especially those articulated by perspectives of White privileged males in America. We will explore basic Presbyterian principles in reading Scripture, such as the centrality of Jesus, Scripture interpreting Scripture, and the rule of love. We will also listen to the different voices from less privileged communities (feminist, African American, LGBTQIA+, Central American, Palestinian, and so on) and how they have opened our eyes to the variety of voices in the Scriptures. We argue this holy diversity makes the Bible a source of grace and community and not a weapon to bludgeon others.

Chapter 2 deepens our discussion on the centrality of grace for Presbyterians. Pushing against the commodification of faith inherent in dysvangelical theological discourse, we highlight the Presbyterian profound commitment to the gift of God's love in Jesus the Christ. This is the heart of the good news we preach and embody: faith as covenant and not contract!

In Chapter 3, we ask the question, Why be faithful if God's love is an unmerited gift? Why go to church or follow the words of Jesus if it isn't about earning salvation? This chapter looks at how discipleship is not about earning one's way to heaven or avoiding hell but about being set free from fear and guilt and anger to create a loving, peaceful, and just world.

Moving beyond the dysvangelical language of a personal relationship with Jesus, chapter 4 articulates how Presbyterians root our understanding of faith in community. This plays out in Presbyterian practices in the importance of community in salvation; baptism as an act of community rather than simply a personal choice; Jesus being present in the Lord's Supper through the body of Christ; and a larger vision of the community of all creation.

In chapter 5, we delve into the complexities of a Presbyterian understanding of the central concept Jesus preached about in the metaphor of the kingdom, kin-dom, realm of God. In contrast to the

dystopian visions of the end of the world articulated by dysvangelicalism, Presbyterians imagine a very different future. We will highlight how this different vision has meaningful impacts on understanding the current mission of the church and communities of faith.

Chapter 6 explores the reactionary tendencies of dysvangelicalism that claim to know God's truth as being a once-and-for-all unchanging reality. Instead, Presbyterians believe in a living God who is involved in God's creation over time and is known amid events and lived experiences. The chapter will consider how humility and repentance are important characteristics of being "reformed and always reforming" and how binary thinking is no friend of the reconciliations and transformations God seeks. Truth is not some static inert idea but an ever-changing conversation and contestation of ideas over time. We will highlight the transformational evolving of the Presbyterian Church as related to science, gender, and sexual orientation.

In chapter 7, we dive deeper into exploring the meaning of being "reformed and always reforming" by understanding better the reformation of the Presbyterian Church around race. Slavery and its legacy have been described by many as our country's original sin, and the movement of the Presbyterian Church toward a more just and faithful stance has been slow and intermittent. Rather than claiming we were great in some imagined past and needing only to be great again, we dive into our history as a church with all its foibles, failures, and fiascos laid bare. Yet this history lesson will illustrate how the Holy Spirit acts to reform people and institutions into a new way of being in the world unimagined previously.

In contrast to Presbyterian's radical commitment to shared governance, the problem of Christian nationalism will come under scrutiny in chapter 8 as being antithetical to the evangelical nature and character of grace and God's eternal intentions revealed as faith, hope, and love.

## An Important Theological Word

Alex tells the story of learning at a young age the most important theological word in his journey of faith. He learned it from his mother. His mom was raised by the city of Dallas in a foster home

after being abandoned as a child during the Great Depression. She always said she found a home in becoming Presbyterian as a young woman. In junior high, Alex came home from a Fellowship of Christian Athletes weekend retreat where he excitedly told her he had learned something very important—that Christians were better than other people! His mom paused, looked him in the eye, and simply said, "Bullshit!"

Somewhat taken aback and even a little offended, later in life he realized that word was her critical way of calling to task the false and misleading theological statements about God and Jesus he would hear in the church and in the world. He even came to believe that Jesus might have used a similar term (not sure what the Aramaic word would be) when challenging the political and religious authorities of his time and their vision of God. Alex even thought of the cross as God's claim of bullshit on human pride, greed, and power. In fact, much to his chagrin, he has realized he should even call himself out on his own misinterpretations and claims that reflect his own biases and prejudices.

This book strives to contrast dysvangelicalism with our Reformed/Presbyterian tradition to better clarify what we believe. Our desire is not to paint dysvangelicals as bad and immoral people. Not at all. We just think they are wrong in their biblical interpretations and theology. Yet we would even affirm that the grace we proclaim should be extended to those whose theology we disagree with and find problematic. God's grace is an affirmation of the dignity and worth of all human beings—gay, straight, Black, White, Republican and conservative, Democrat and liberal, and all the labels we conveniently use to define ourselves and others. All are loved by God even in our messiness and misunderstandings and, most especially, in our brokenness.

In fact, dysvangelicalism is not simply a religious belief system but a disturbing echo chamber of the values and vision of a hyper-capitalist, hyper-individualistic secular culture. We propose that dysvangelicalism is not countercultural, as proponents would like to claim, but it is instead a reflection of a worldview dominating most institutions today. Our critique of dysvangelicalism is also a critique of the zeitgeist of our time.

Most importantly in this book, we strive to reclaim the really good news of God's grace embodied in Christ. We hope as you read and discuss the book, you will see how being Presbyterian is truly biblical, unashamedly evangelical, and most assuredly Christian!

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*Chapter One*

# The Bible Is Authoritative, Not Literal

In the 1990s, Alex served a church in Stillwater, Oklahoma, home of the Oklahoma State Cowboys (Go Pokes!). The church had an outreach to an LGBTQIA+ student group on campus and held conversations around the larger church's lack of welcome toward this community. As discussions developed, several of the students expressed the desire for a deeper opportunity to explore the issues and formed a group that gathered weekly in a safe, confidential, informal setting to study the Bible together. Many of these students came from more biblically conservative traditions that had condemned who they were as people. Yet they deeply loved God and held Scripture as being important to them. They sought to reconcile who they were with the biblical interpretations preached at them all their young lives that said the Bible condemned them as an abomination and they were sinful in the eyes of God.

Over the next few weeks, then months, then eventually years, this group of seekers explored Scripture and found something surprising. Rather than seeing Scripture as a weapon that had been used to denounce their very selves, they found grace. "Blessed are the poor in spirit" (Matt. 5:3) spoke to their struggles to live their authentic selves. Affirmations of God's love in the stories Jesus told spoke not of a God of judgment but of a God who welcomes and embraces all creation in its goodness and brokenness. Reading the Scriptures together and wrestling with its meanings through

discussions and even arguments, they found the Bible to be a source of life-giving hope, not a source of oppression.

The group called themselves "The Circle of Friends." And through the years, they were church to each other as they lived their lives. A couple of them were diagnosed with HIV; another was supported by the group as they made the decision to come out to their family; and some found love. This community embodied the best of Scripture, both challenged by its assertions and lifted by its good news.

## Is the Bible Literal and Inerrant?

It is common for dysvangelicals to accuse those who disagree with their literal interpretation of Scripture to be biblically weak Christians. While it is more than appropriate to challenge anyone's interpretations of Scripture, often this critique is rooted in an assertion that the Bible contains the literal words of God for all times and all people. When engaged in theological discourse, dysvangelicals will appeal to their interpretation as God's unembellished word, pointing to certain verses and passages as proof of their assertions and moral claims. There is something appealing to having truth expressed in black-and-white lettering (or highlighting words Jesus supposedly said in red in some Bibles) that they assert is clear and unambiguous.

Actually, the idea of a literal interpretation of Scripture is a more modern concept that arose in the nineteenth century as a reaction to the inroads of scientific advancements. The rise of insights in the role of evolution in nature and understanding of the workings of the larger universe transformed society's understanding of ourselves and the place of human beings in creation. While it is understandable that scientific ideas might threaten long-held beliefs and worldviews, the assertion that the Bible refuted new scientific discoveries and was meant to be understood on the same scientific level was problematic. Thus began a false dichotomy between religion and science with cultural and political consequences that echo to this very day.

The history of biblical interpretation, especially in the early church, was far more complex than one literal interpretation. The centuries-long rabbinic tradition of midrash (commentary on the Torah) highlighted the many ways of understanding particular passages. Metaphorical readings

of the stories of the Bible were commonplace in the early church, and it is obvious in the Epistles (i.e., the letters in the New Testament) that the church had many disagreements about how to interpret the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. There has never been one interpretation to rule them all.

Paired with this claim of one literal interpretation is an assertion of the inerrancy of Scripture. The term *inerrant* was taken from science and was used to describe the movement of the planets as set and predictable and never wavering. When the word *inerrant* is used to describe the Bible, it is asserting that Scripture is without error and true in all ways. Again, in a changing world where traditional beliefs are coming under perceived attack, there is something appealing to having a set, clear, and unchangeable code for living one's life and making moral decisions and choices. We all yearn for clarity in an ambiguous world.

Yet, the obvious reality when reading Scripture is the apparent contradictions and conflicting points of view we find. There are not one but two stories of creation. Do we have to believe the universe was created literally in seven days when everything in scientific thought points to a much more complex, and we would say even more interesting, origin story for the cosmos? Did Jesus give his sermon on the "mountain" as Matthew 5 claims or on a "level place" as Luke 6 asserts? When Paul allegedly calls for women to be silent in church is he contradicting his very own practice of naming women as leaders in the early church? Do we ignore the fact that women were the first to witness and preach resurrection? These are but a few of the inconsistencies that crop up in any shallow reading of the Bible.

It is not uncommon when challenging a literal, inerrant interpretation of the Bible to be accused that one is simply saying anything goes. It's all up in the air! Without the certainty of an approved and set interpretation that is clear and unimpeachable, then we have nothing to guide our decisions or claim authoritatively as God's Word. What use is the Bible then, if any?

Another often-used phrase when discussing current issues is that this or that text in the Bible can be directly applied to any situation today. As if an appeal to an obvious clear voice that speaks from a particular passage of a particular book will clarify what should be

known and believed and followed always and forever in all contexts. We don't know about you, but we have never heard the Bible speak aloud literally. The Bible doesn't speak as if it is one voice; it is an expression of many voices covering a long period of history expressing the very real human experience of God through many centuries. The word *Bible* literally means a library of many books. Bibles don't speak. They are always interpreted!

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The fact is that early communities would have found this claim of biblical inerrancy rather silly. We know the process of deciding which books to include in the collection (canon) that we call the Bible was a long and complex discussion in early Jewish and Christian communities of faith. There was never unanimity about which scrolls and texts to include. The idea that God published the Bible that we have is simply untrue and ignores faithful conversations held through centuries. The community was wise in being inclusive and not feeling threatened by seeming contradictions in accounts of creation or the great flood that were faith stories told by generations of different communities. The New Testament communities followed suit. We have four Gospel accounts, not just one. How much richer it is to consider the witnesses of diverse communities as they encounter God through time.

### Does the Bible Have Any Authority, or Should I Just Ignore It?

A deeper and more profound issue for many of us is how to understand the authority of Scripture. Do we see the Bible to be God's authoritative direct voice about everything from religion to science that is to be followed in all situations? Do we assert the Scriptures, though written by human hands, to be so directed by God to be authoritative in all matters of theology and ethics? Or is the Bible simply a human document, possibly inspired by experiences of God yet containing the marks of human fallibility? Or is the Bible just a book like any other book, albeit a little risqué?

The Reformed tradition has wrestled with biblical authority throughout its history with many different answers to the questions above. Generally, there is agreement that the Bible was not intended to be authoritative on questions of science. The Bible is not science and was never intended to be a peer-reviewed publication in a scientific journal citing experimental, measurable, and physically observable evidence fitting within a proposed theoretical framework. This is not its area of authority for us.

Nor do we believe it is just another literature book (though it is literature) that really has no claim on our lives, unable to help us understand God and determine how we should be faithful. We do not set it aside as an interesting and sometimes entertaining book and simply ignore it, though at times it can be incredibly frustrating and confusing as to tempt us to toss it aside.

We do assert that the Bible is authoritative in our understanding of God and God's claims on faith, community, and life. We take the Bible very seriously. So seriously we do not view it as an answer book that confirms our own prejudices and bigotries. The authority of Scripture is not simply a claim to prove our argument or to be used to beat others into submission to our point of view. The authority of Scripture is rooted in how we are changed; our own egos and cultural paradigms are taken apart by an encounter with mystery.

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Some say the Bible is not a book of answers but a book of questions. These questions challenge our preconceived notions of the world, whatever those may be; contest the political, social, and cultural norms we arrogantly claim are God's will for all; and disrupt our perception of reality and provide a glimpse of something entirely different and wonderous and seemingly impossible. The Bible questions us. The true authority of Scripture is the claim that we are changed (reformed) in those questions.

## The Dangers of Biblical Interpretation

The Slave Bible was produced in the early nineteenth century in England to be used by missionaries for the education of enslaved Africans in the British West Indies. This disturbing Bible left out certain stories and passages that might incite enslaved populations to question their condition and rebel. The story of Moses leading the Hebrew people out of slavery from Egypt is not part of this Bible. Paul's exhortations that in Christ "there is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28) is conveniently left out as well. This Bible does include, of course, such passages as the moral claim that slaves should obey their masters. One cannot help but be shocked by the obvious intent of this edited Bible to emphasize certain passages and leave out others depending on the purposes and intent of the interpreter.

Each of us runs the danger of interpreting the Bible in ways that simply reflect our own partialities and perspectives. In fact, we would argue the literal interpretation espoused by some reflects the views of who is doing the interpretation and what they choose to highlight and what they choose to set aside. The literal interpretation advocated by many was developed by White men of a certain social class. (Look at any picture of translation committees, such as the Revised Standard Version of the Bible committee, and it is apparent it is all White men.) Their interpretations inescapably reflect their own biases and choices in translating certain passages and stories while not emphasizing others. They were not unique. All interpretations reflect bias.

The Western church began to understand this dynamic more directly in conversations with those who had previously and deliberately been left out of the conversation. The rise of feminist and womanist biblical scholarship led to deeper questions about assumptions of patriarchy and the surprising ways women's voices still come through in the Bible as equal partners and leaders in God's activity in the world. African American theologians questioned the assumptions of White authority and even saw in Jesus a person of color lynched on the cross. The Western church had their eyes opened to other

aspects of Scriptures by engaging with sister churches around the world. The churches in Latin and South America pointed out in the Bible the prevalent and omnipresent voice of God who advocates for the widow and orphan and who sides with the poor and oppressed. Palestinian Christians questioned and challenged the interpretation of biblical narratives of Zionism as rooted in colonialism and domination.

Our point now is not to make a claim about who is right and who is wrong in their interpretations but to fully understand how our social worlds shape our reading of Scripture. Every one of us has presumptions and prejudices and predispositions (including the literalists) that form our interpretations and our choices about the parts of Scripture we highlight and emphasize. The first task of any biblical interpretation is to begin with humility and acknowledge our own limited perspectives and biases.

Yet we still haven't addressed the appropriate worry that all we are doing in interpretation is picking and choosing what has authority for us and what does not. It is actually a very good question to ask ourselves and clarify what principles guide our interpretation. The first task of any biblical interpretation is to name these principles from the start.

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