

Winter Refresher Notes

St. Andrew's Theological College in Saskatoon hosts a winter refresher each year for clergy and others who are interested in exploring new Biblical and theological concepts. Typically they bring in a speaker. Participants can take the course for credit or simply attend the lectures. This year the theme speaker was Timothy Beal, who is a Religious Studies Professor at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland Ohio.

It's hard to summarize so I'll just talk about some of the things I found most interesting.

He entitled his series "The End of the Word As We Know It", and the content of the lectures comprises the substance of the book he will publish shortly.

Dr Beal is a specialist in Hebrew Scriptures, particularly feminist approaches to them. He became interested, though, in the Bible as it functions in modern society; as a cultural icon. In his work teaching first year students at university, he noticed a couple of things: first, they are virtually Biblically illiterate. Second, in answering survey questions such as "the Bible has the answer to all questions about life and how to live it" they would all agree to that statement and others like it (for example "the Bible is the inerrant and unchanging Word of God") even though they had rarely if ever read it. He began to explore in detail why that might be. He discovered that what is true for the first year students is also largely true across ages and cultures in the USA. *People don't read the Bible but they believe that it speaks with one voice; that it holds answers to life's questions, and that it is not to be doubted.* The way the word is used in society speaks volumes. For example, there are books of expertise called Bibles, like "The Gardeners' Bible" what does that mean? It means that all the answers to gardening questions are in there; that it is authoritative and complete.

Where did this idea come from? We know that for centuries, Scripture was not seen in this way. It considered neither inerrant, nor literally and historically accurate. The Jewish rabbis loved to "play with it"; to tell stories about the characters, to add to the tradition. The fact that the Bible includes different accounts of the same story, and contradicts itself many times, was not a problem for anyone. Those things were considered part of the combined writings that expressed a people's encounter with the Holy. THE BIBLE as literally true is a modern idea, which came into being after the Enlightenment, and as late as the mid 1800s there were people who wrote about this "new" idea of the Bible and how disturbing it was.

In 1925, the Scopes "Monkey Trial" brought the issue to the public. Was Darwin's theory of evolution destroying the Biblical witness of creation? Clearly not; there are at least two differing stories of creation in the Bible to begin with so obviously it was never meant to be a historical or scientific account. But many people, even today, think they have to choose between evolution and "the Bible". You only have to choose between them if you believe in the first place that the Bible is a scientific and historically accurate book. *IT IS NOT AND WAS NEVER INTENDED TO BE SO.*

One thing I found very interesting and hadn't really thought about before is this: even the idea of the Bible as on constant unchanging thing, instead of a collection of books, didn't develop until

the invention of the printing press. It was physically impossible before that to bind the scrolls together into one big book. Until then, and even afterwards, what is included in the Bible was quite fluid. Some books didn't make it in until later such as the books of Esther and James. There are many historical examples of the collection of authoritative writings that we now call the Bible, that include other books we don't have now, and exclude some that we do include in our own Bible.

(the word for the collection of 66 books that make up our Bible is "the Canon")

A good image from Mark Twain: The Bible is like a drug store. You can find poison as well as healing, and much depends on how you use what you find and under what conditions. GOOD, EH?

He noted that the predominant cultural image of the Bible is a closed black book. What does that mean?

Beal showed us statistics regarding Bible sales in the USA. Bible sales are higher than ever before in history. Even during the latest economic downturn when publishers were in trouble, Bible publishers were doing very well. This is quite a paradox: Bible sales are higher than ever before in history AND biblical literacy is at an all time low. Less than half of the American people interviewed in his research could name the first book of the Bible. More than 80% believed that the expression "God helps those who help themselves" is in the Bible.

What's up with this?????

Biblical literacy on the decline

Popular reverence for the Bible is on the rise. 75% of the people in his research believe that the Bible is the Word of God to be taken literally.

2/3 of them said that people should guide their lives by it.

And of that number, 2/3 say they never read it.

Bible sales are soaring. IN 2008 IN THE USA BIBLE SALES WERE 823 MILLION DOLLARS.

In 2005 there were 6134 different versions of the Bible published in English; up 606 from the previous year.

Beal's theory is this:

People have a vague understanding that the Bible should give quick and easy answers, that it should be clear, and reading it should make them feel close to God, feel morally certain, and feel warm and fuzzy. They expect to read in its pages things like the Footprints poem.

When they DO read it, though, they don't understand what they read, they feel dumb, they assume that everyone else "gets it" and there is something wrong with them for feeling confused. It says strange and contradictory things, and it doesn't "deliver" what they expected it to.

People feel intimidated by it, they don't trust their own insights and they assume there is a "right" way to read it. Even people who are highly educated in their own fields are intimidated by their readings of the Bible and don't trust their own experience of it.

Among the Bible publications, there is a list of “Biblezines” –the Bible in magazine format, and different ones appealing to different target audiences. For example, *Becoming*” is a Biblezine for young professional women; it looks like Flare or Cosmo....

Align” is the same but for men, and there are ones for Boomers, for young teen boys, young teen girls...and so on. They do include the text of scripture, but in bigger bolder print are advertizements, and other features like advice columns and recipes and “10 top” lists. People get these, read them and feel like they are reading the Bible because the other things in the magazine are clear and easily understandable – what they wanted in the first place from the Bible itself but did not receive.

So what does this proliferation of Bibles mean?

He gives us the image of a “distress crop”. When a fruit tree is dying, it produces a “distress crop”. One last huge crop of fruit. It sends all its energy into producing this crop; diverting energy away from roots and foliage, in order to make as many seeds as possible thus giving it the best chance of reproducing after that tree has died.

He thinks that the current state of Bible publishing is a distress crop. He believes that we are in the last stages of the print culture and that as digital culture grows and books become less and less used in general, this will have a massive impact on the Bible –

Hence the name of his series “The End of the Word As We Know It”.

Not only will it affect the way we read scripture but the way we understand what it is. Will there be wicci Bibles where people can go in and add comments? This is exactly what happened before printing presses, when scribes would hand copy scrolls, and as well as making mistakes in the copying, they felt free to add comments of their own. Would this be a bad thing to go back to? The technology may well lead us there.

The end of book culture.

Beal says there is now an opportunity to engage Scripture in a way more true to both its content and to the early ways of being with scriptures.

It is not a rock, but a river, he says. Always changing. There is no “going back to the original Bible” because there never was one. It was always changing and fluid. The people who are on a crusade to save the Bible are on a fools’ errand because there is nothing to save and never was. What he means by that is that there is NO ORIGINAL SOLID TEXT that has been corrupted or changed....

Beal spent half a lecture giving us examples of even after the printing press, when there was for the first time in history a chance for the Bible to be printed with many copies exactly the same, even then there were different copies, different versions and no one seemed to have a problem with that.

People felt free to translate, to condense, to comment, to pick out what they thought was important and leave some out.....

The KING JAMES VERSION was never the only one. There were tons of translations and versions, just like today. The only constant in the Bible’s history is change. Not a rock but a river.

So how do we engage the Bible in a way true to its history and content?

Even the name “THE BIBLE” is misleading in a way – it implies that it is one book instead of 66 different ones. It’s a mistranslation of the expression “Ta Biblia” which is a plural...THE BOOKS”.

He uses a great expression: “impoverishment by univocality” meaning that when we expect or try to force the Bible to speak with one voice “uni – voce” – we impoverish it. It is polyvocal. It speaks with many voices and that’s its strength.

It is not a dictionary of answers but rather a pool of questions. Its power is to invite us over and over and over again to engage the Mystery of the Holy for ourselves.

A couple of quotes:

The Bible sheds light on the absence of answers
It hosts the human quest for the ultimate; for imagination
It is faithful to the unknowing that takes us to the edge of mystery.
It canonizes contradiction.

The word RELIGION has two root meanings.

One is re-ligio.....the root word there is the LIG root, to bind. Like ligaments
So...to bind again.....bound in community, held together internally....

But also

Re-legere – to read again

The ongoing process of inheriting a tradition, reading it again in our own lives and contexts and letting the living Spirit of God speak in ongoing ways through the traditions we receive.