

# Reading the Bible with the Global Church



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## Introduction

In the introduction to his excellent book, *Mission After Christendom*, David Smith recounts the occasion when he was working through the Joseph story with a group of students in Nigeria. As they got to the end of the story, Smith asked them what lessons could be learned from it. He expected the students to say something along the lines of God can always be trusted, but instead the students all replied that you should always look after your family (Smith 2003, p.1).

I wonder how many people here see a message about family loyalty as the first thing they gather from the story of Joseph. I've no doubt that for most, if not all of us, the message that we would take away is about the way in which God works out his purposes down through the years even when things seem to go against him. But this group of students from a very family and community orientated society came to a very different conclusion. Of course, both of the lessons which could be drawn from the story are true and one doesn't invalidate the other in anyway.

The point of this illustration is a very simple one. People from different cultures and backgrounds bring different experiences to the Bible and ask different questions of it and so see different things in the text. This simple proposition is the central theme of this lecture. Over the next hour we will be looking at different ways in which people from different parts of the world read the Scriptures and exploring what, if any, the relevance is for our context here in the UK.

However, there may be those who question the eligibility of reading the Bible in this way; shouldn't we stick with the 'plain sense' of the word? Surely if the Bible is inerrant, there is only one way to read any given passage?

There are a number of answers to this point of view which we need to briefly consider. The first is the purely pragmatic question of, What is the plain sense of the text? Did the Nigerian students get it right, or do we? People in different places, not to mention in different historical times, have all come to the Scriptures with different questions and found different answers. David Fitch (Fitch 2011, p.53), among others, has shown that to say there is only one way to read the Bible is almost always another way of saying 'I am right and you are wrong'.

Secondly, there are numerous NT examples of people re-interpreting OT verses to fit a new context. Hebrews 1, for example, is composed almost entirely from OT texts which are given senses that the original writer could not have imagined. In Luke 4, Jesus deliberately misquotes Isaiah, setting the crowd against him in the process. Now, obviously, we don't have the authority that comes with the inspiration of Hebrews and the Gospels; but this serves as an indication that Scripture is not as rigid as we might imagine.

Two events defined the founding of the Christian Church in the book of Acts. The first was the miracle at Pentecost in Acts 2 which demonstrated that the Gospel could be understood and appropriated in any language. The second was the way in which the early believers broke out of their Jewish background at Antioch and started to witness directly to Greeks. It is no surprise that it was at Antioch that the believers were first called Christians (Acts 11:26).

The implication of these events is very clear; Christianity was not to be constrained by its Jewish background, but could be lived out in any language and culture. This was further emphasised when the Gospel writers chose to record Jesus' life and deeds in Greek, rather than the Aramaic that he would have spoken. Christianity is the only religion that is

transmitted without the language or culture of its founder (Peskest & Ramachandra 2003, p.76).

Christianity doesn't belong to any culture: attempts to force believers to fit into one cultural mould, be it first century Judaism, mediaeval Latin or the King James Only movement, have missed one of the central points about the nature of the Church.

What this means in every day terms is that it is perfectly legitimate for us to use the English language for worship, prayer and Bible reading. We don't have to become first century Palestinians in order to become Christians. Equally, Christians around the world don't have to adopt a Western lifestyle in order to become Christians. But for our purposes tonight, we need to highlight that diversity is central to the Christian faith and this diversity inevitably leads to different readings of the Scriptures.

The Bible lies above our desire to impose any one way of reading and understanding it. Kim (Kim 2009, p.263) writes, "The Bible is a multicultural, inter-cultural and cross-cultural book". It is a multicultural book because it was written over a large period of time in a variety of cultural settings. It is an inter-cultural book because it draws together writers from different perspectives: for example, there has been no attempt to condense the four Gospels into one story. And it is a cross-cultural book because it moves from the mono-cultural setting of ancient Israel to the multi-cultural life of the Church.

We cannot insist that such a varied book be read from only one perspective.

### **Size and extent of the World Church**

As we consider the issue of reading the Bible with the Global Church, it is important that we take a moment to remind ourselves about its nature. The huge growth in the Church in the Southern Continents over the past fifty years has been well documented, though it is my experience that most Christians in Britain are still unaware of the extent of the changes that have occurred during our lifetime.

"By 1985 there were over 16,500 conversions a day (in Africa), yielding an annual rate of over 6 million. In the same period some 4,300 people were leaving the Church on a daily basis in Europe and North America." (Sanneh 2003, p.15)

The different experiences of the Church in the West and elsewhere have led to a change in the profile of Christians around the world. In 1800, well over 90% of Christians lived in Europe and North America, whereas in 1990 over 60% lived in Africa, South America, Asia and the Pacific, with that proportion increasing each year. (Walls 2002, p.31)

"If we want to visualize a "typical" contemporary Christian, we should think of a woman living in a village in Nigeria or in a Brazilian favela." (Jenkins 2002, p.2)

It is a simple fact that the majority of Christians now live in what many of us still consider as mission fields, while the percentage of believers in traditional missionary sending countries is in a state of constant decline. The believers who accompanied Peter to Cornelius' house were surprised when the Spirit descended on the family (Acts 10:45) and it seems that some British Christians are rather surprised when they discover that people from other parts of the world are real believers; but they shouldn't be. There has been a "shift in the centre of gravity of the Church" (Walls 2002, p.32)

So, the Global Church is very large and it is also very varied. It is tempting for British Christians to assume that there are two types of believers; those who are like us and those who are different. But it is impossible to lump Christians together in this way. It is inaccurate to talk about African Christians as if all Christian experience on the continent was identical (Adeyemo 2006, p.ix). It would be even more inaccurate to assume that Latin American, African and Asian Christianity were all the same because they are somehow not British. That

being said, in the space allowed for a lecture such as this, we will be forced to make some generalisations.

### **Attitudes to the Bible in the Global Church**

Bearing in mind the weaknesses of any generalisation, the Global Church tends to be more conservative and convinced of supernatural realities than the Church in the West (Jenkins 2002, p.7). This is reflected in the way in which many Southern Christians approach the Bible. Miracles are taken seriously and some of the moral strictures of the Bible which can be faintly embarrassing to many Western Christians are accepted wholeheartedly in much of the Global Church. Philip Jenkins recounts the story of two Bishops discussing the Bible in the light of contemporary culture. Finally, the African Bishop looked at his American counterpart and asked "If you don't believe the Scripture, why did you bring it to us in the first place?" (Jenkins 2006, p.1)

The fracturing of the Anglican Church over the issue of homosexuality is one example of how this tension can work out, with the more conservative Anglican churches opposing the more liberal attitudes in the US and elsewhere.

This is not to imply that the way in which Global Christians read the Bible is necessarily simplistic. Christians around the world are aware of Biblical Scholarship (Jenkins 2006, p.18) and books like the Africa Bible Commentary (Adeyemo 2006) testify to the growth of serious scholarship around the world. That being said, many Global Christians do have a naïve approach to the Scriptures; but the same thing could be said, without the same excuses, for many Christians in the West too.

With this background in mind, let's turn to the issue of reading the Bible with the Global Church.

### **Interaction of Faith and Culture**

Though the Christian faith can be expressed in any language and culture, this does not mean that everything in every language and culture is permissible. In the same way that any culture can be a vehicle for the Gospel; the Gospel also confronts every culture with a need to change and be aligned to God's purposes. As someone once said, "all cultures are the same distance from Jerusalem" and all are examined in the same way by the Gospel.

The way in which the Gospel confronts a culture is not always easily predictable, as in the case of Hindus who complained that the book of Ruth encouraged widows to remarry (Sugirtharajah 2001, p.152).

One implication of this is that not all Global Readings of Scripture are to be taken seriously. We must avoid falling into the tokenistic view that something is good just because it comes from the Global Church. This is not always true. One example of this is the so called 'prosperity Gospel' in West Africa. Undoubtedly, there are problems with some of the excesses of this movement; the corruption involved when unscrupulous ministers profit from the gifts of their congregation and the way in which God is reduced to a celestial slot machine. However, we also need to remember that much of this teaching arises in the West. It is also true that becoming a Christian does often bring prosperity to people; they work harder, waste less money and generally take more care of themselves (Adeney 2009, p.248).

However, in cases like this we need to measure any criticism with understanding. It is difficult for rich westerners to understand the impact of the grinding poverty and glaring inequalities which are part of the life of many global Christians. We also need to be prepared to confront the other side of the coin which is the materialism and syncretism which lies at the heart of

many western expressions of the Gospel. There is something frankly rather disturbing about the way in which rich westerners are so quick to criticise African Christians for wanting to become rich.

### **Different Readings of the Bible**

We have already seen an example of the way that people in Nigeria bring a degree of insight into the Scriptural narrative that is not easily available to us in the West and we could multiply examples. People from a Confucian background, or another context where ancestors are given special reverence, might well see a far greater significance in Biblical genealogies than we do. Those who live under corrupt regimes might find resonance in some of the stories of the Old Testament such as Naboth's vineyard and even fifty years after the end of the colonial era, there are still many people who can relate to the experiences of the Jewish people under the Roman and other Empires.

A Bible Society translator who was involved in translating the Old Testament into Nepali found all of the detail and legal issues in Leviticus very hard going whereas his Nepali co-workers were enamoured of the book and very impressed with the way in which it mirrored their own backgrounds (Sugirtharajah 2001, p.166).

People can also have their reading shaped by the experiences they have faced in life. In the west, the word Samaritan has come to be associated with a friendly helper. However, in divided societies, such as central Nigeria, people easily grasp the notion of a hated and despised tribe. In these circumstances, Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan helps people reflect on how they should relate to their Muslim neighbours (Jenkins 2006, p.81).

Asian Christians who live in a highly pluralistic society find great relevance in the fact that the Bible was written in a pluralistic context (Ma 2003, p.148), connecting issues which would be more or less irrelevant to many westerners – though this may well be changing!

One of the defining characteristics of much of the Global Church is that it is economically poor. The fragility of human life is much more evident in these situations than it is in the rich Western world. In these situations, the wisdom literature and other texts which refer to the transience of human life are consulted much more often than they would be in the west. In the aftermath of the 2004 tsunami, sermons in south and east Asian churches made great use of James (Jenkins 2006, p.75).

For most of us, when we read about the conquest of the Promised Land in the book of Joshua, we identify with the people of Israel. Perhaps we are a little uncomfortable about the way in which God calls them to eliminate the people who were already in the land, but our sympathies are definitely with Israel: they are the good guys. Anyway, generations of preachers have helped us by likening the struggle of the children of Israel against the Canaanites to our own struggle against sin. We know we need to eliminate sin from our lives, so somehow eliminating the Canaanites passes us by.

However, imagine reading the conquest narratives as a Native American, as someone who has been chased from his ancestral home and who has faced all sorts of privations and suffering because of a powerful invader – how might they come across now?

This is the situation of Robert Warrior of the Osage nation. He believes that the White settlers in North America used the story of the Exodus and conquest to justify their own treatment of the native population of the lands they settled in. (Sugirtharajah 2001, p.228) Warrior is not alone in finding these narratives difficult to read; people in the Pacific and the Philippines who have had their land stolen from them also find themselves sympathising with the Canaanites rather than with the children of Israel. (Jenkins 2006, p.138)

Reactions like these may make us feel uncomfortable, but we need to recognise that many in the Global Church come to the Bible from positions of poverty and oppression which naturally have an impact how they interpret what they read.

## **Politics**

There is much that has been written on the way in which Christians across the world read the Bible in a political context and time does not allow us to look at this in any detail. I would, however, like to give one illustration of an approach to scriptural/political discourse.

Much of our orientation to African life concerned the different way in which Africans and Westerners would approach a difficult issue. To put it simply, Westerners will go straight to the issue and address it face on, whereas Africans will talk around the subject allowing the person being confronted to understand what is being said.

This principle was illustrated beautifully by Kenyan, Anglican Clergyman, David Gitari who was a critic of the government of Daniel Arap Moi. Cleverly, Gitari did not openly accuse the President; instead he spoke on Biblical texts which had a clear reference to issues that were in the public consciousness. When an opposition figure was murdered, Gitari preached a public sermon on the death of Cain. He would often take passages from Daniel, pointing out that Daniel was a loyal subject of the King but that he was also willing to rebuke him when it was necessary. The implications were clear, but they did not give the government any actual cause to arrest or imprison him. Gitari finally abandoned his veiled criticism of the government when soldiers broke into the Cathedral in Nairobi to attack protestors who had sheltered there.

## **Orality**

One issue that I would like to examine at some length doesn't quite fit under the rubric of Reading the Bible: it is the issue of orality. For many Christians around the world, the way they engage with the Bible is not by reading it, but by listening to it as someone else reads out the text. It is well worth remembering that Scripture is addressed to those who have ears to hear!

The choice between reading and listening to a text is not simply a case of preference for one medium over another. Oral learners comprise an estimated two thirds of the world's population (International Orality Network; Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization 2005) and they process information in a different way to literate learners. Oral learners tend to prefer engaging with information through stories and struggle to follow written modes of communication – even when the written communication is delivered orally (like this lecture) (Brown 2004, p.125).

There are obvious advantages to being literate including having unfettered access to written texts. However, oral learners do have some significant advantages over written learners. It seems that oral learners tend to have better memories than literate learners and they also interact with texts in a more intimate fashion.

The act of reading aloud and listening to a story can create an experience which draws people into the story in a way that simply reading the text could only rarely achieve. Philip Jenkins reports the story of a group in Northern Kenya who were listening to one of the Corinthian Epistles being read out. When the Epistle closed with Paul's greeting to the Corinthian Church, "My love be with you all in Christ Jesus", the whole group responded, "thank you Paul". The group were not thanking the reader; they were thanking the Apostle, who 2,000 years earlier had sent his greetings to them.

It is easy to see how people who engage so closely with the text that they thank the Apostle for writing to them, would find it easier to take Paul's moral, ethical and spiritual teaching to heart. It is far harder for written learners to engage with the text in this sort of active way. Orators and preachers down through the years have proved that the oral word has an inherent power which is rarely found in writing. (Maxey 2009, p.82)

Another difference between oral and written learners lies in the sort of material that they tend to prefer. Written learners tend to prefer material which is presented in an argued, propositional format, whereas oral learners prefer stories. So, Christians in the West tend to prefer the tightly argued material in Paul's Epistles, whereas oral learners prefer the Old Testament and Gospel narratives, or the more dramatic Epistles such as James. I wonder how much of the typical Evangelical theological focus on the Pauline Epistles is due to the fact that modern Evangelical Theology developed alongside an increase in literacy and hence in individualised study of the Scriptures.

However, in all of this, it is well worth remembering that God's ultimate self-revelation was neither oral nor written, it was in the person of Jesus Christ (Brown 2004, p.126). Neither reading, nor listening to the Scriptures is a substitute for a relationship with the living Word of God.

## **Community**

One issue which has a huge impact on the way in which people read scripture is their attitude to community. Western societies are highly individualised, whereas much of the Global Church lives in more community focused cultures. Speaking of his own east African context, Joe Kapolyo says that Europeans say "I think therefore I am" but Africans say "we are, therefore I am" (Kapolyo 2005, p.21).

For oral learners, listening to Scripture tends to be a community activity, whereas written learners tend to read the Bible on their own, or at best with small groups. The act of listening in community rather than reading individually, changes the way in which people engage with the text of Scripture profoundly. For the individual reader, their relationship with Scripture and through Scripture to God, himself, becomes an individual exercise and the Christian community becomes of secondary importance, whereas for the oral learner the opposite is true. The act of listening to the Bible in community gives prominence to the community itself and helps to give it the place that it occupies in Scripture. However, we should point out that oral learners tend to be from societies which are more community orientated to start with.

When individual readers turn to the Scriptures, they tend to ask questions about how the passage affects them as individuals in their relationship to God. We've all come across Bible reading notes which encourage us to ask what God is saying to us as individuals today. Even Bible study groups can often be little more than a group of people studying the Bible for individual insight. This sort of approach encourages the development of a privatised version of Christianity which addresses issues of individual morality, but which pays little attention to society as a whole. Once again, listening in a group encourages corporate engagement with the text: what is God saying to US today? As we have already noted, Churches who listen to the Scriptures together tend to have a deeper engagement with issues of politics and justice than individual readers.

To many of us the idea of listening to the Scriptures rather than reading and studying individually seems rather quaint. However, it is well worth remembering that individual reading is actually a relatively recent phenomenon. The Spirit spoke to those who have "ears to hear" not to those who have eyes to read!

However, it is not just at the level of orality that a community approach to reading has an impact. People with a community orientation will focus on things in Scripture which are not

immediately obvious to those with a more individualistic approach. For example, banishment from the community is the harshest punishment that can be imposed on people in many parts of the world. Banishment is worse than death, because at least in death you remain a part of the community. This perspective adds a whole new depth of poignancy and pain to Adam's expulsion from the garden and the presence of God in Genesis 4:13 (Kim 2009, p.200).

In a community orientated society, evangelism is viewed very differently than it is in an individualistic setting. Rather than thinking in terms of convincing an individual to make a decision which is between themselves and God, evangelism focuses on the way in which people are drawn into the discipling community (Escobar 2010).

However, where the issue of community becomes really critical is in societies which are divided along ethnic and religious boundaries. The Bible is written against a background of almost constant ethnic and religious conflict, and this is exactly the situation that much of the Global Church finds itself living in today. Much of the Old Testament narrative of struggles for land and domination and the ensuing contest between rival Gods speaks very clearly to people for whom the same struggles are a feature of daily life.

However, it is when social cohesion completely breaks down that the way in which people read the Scriptures starts to make a difference.

Rwanda is famous for being considered one of the most Christian countries on the planet. It was hailed as a success story of the modern missionary movement. However, all of this seemed to be of little consequence when genocide broke out in 1994. In the space of three months, around 800,000 people were killed, often by their neighbours or others that they knew. To the great shame of the Christian church, many of those involved in the killings were professing Christians.

However, in the aftermath of the violence, there are many remarkable stories of the way in which people who were touched by the horror have been transformed by the power of Christ. Meg Gilliebaud's remarkable book *After the Locusts* chronicles the way in which people have learned to forgive and be forgiven across the dividing lines (Guillebaud 2005). The sheer scale of the suffering in Rwanda and the remarkable way in which people have been drawn together to rebuild broken lives and communities make a very challenging read.

One feature of post-conflict life in Rwanda have been workshops designed to help people work through the trauma that they have faced. Through a series of symbolic acts, including writing down the pain they have faced on pieces of paper, which are then nailed to the cross, Scripture reading and confession, people are reconciled with themselves, to God and with others around them (Adeney 2009, p.236).

Similar workshops have been held across the war torn areas of Central and West Africa, including DRC, Ivory Coast, Sudan and Rwanda. These form a key part of Wycliffe's strategy to encourage the use of mother tongue Scriptures in these parts of the world (Hill 2004). The transformative effect of the Spirit of God, working through Scripture is revealed very clearly through these workshops.

In Burundi, a country which has the same ethnic mix as Rwanda and which has suffered some of the same ethnic tensions, a university president made this telling observation: "Our culture is disintegrating. On our campus, there are three types of people: Hutus, Tutsis and Christians. If our culture is to survive, we must follow the example of the Christians" (Adeney 2009, p.252)

*Reading the Bible with the world church – are we all sitting in our corner comparing what we come up with, or are we reading as a community.*

## What Difference Can This Make to Us?

### Seeing ourselves as others see us

*O would some power the giftie gie us to see ourselves as others see us.* (Robert Burns: Poem to a Louse)

The most obvious advantage of reading the Bible with other people is that this gives us the opportunity to see ourselves through their eyes. Our own familiarity with the text of Scripture coupled with the way in which our own practices become habitual means that it is hard to turn the search light of the Bible on ourselves. We just stop seeing things.

However, if we are going to do this we have to ask ourselves whether or not we believe that we have anything to learn from the Global Church. There is still an assumption in some quarters that real, authentic Christianity lies in the West and that the rest of the world has little, if anything to contribute. After all, Christianity in Africa is a mile wide but only an inch deep, or is it? (Jenkins 2006, p.186)

During the recent Lausanne III Congress in Cape Town, an American delegate posted a message on Twitter saying "Today is Piper and Keller day". This person had travelled thousands of miles to attend a congress of Christians from across the globe, but the highlight was that among the day's many speakers were two from his home country and tradition.

If we are going to learn to read the Bible with the Global Church, we may first have to deal with a good deal of unstated prejudice, a number of false assumptions and a massive amount of ignorance of what is really happening in the Christian world. Perhaps the way in which we hold on to power and belief in our own superiority is the most important lesson that we have to learn in reading the Bible with others!

Equally, we can't afford to be naïve. The Global Church is far from perfect and there is the same need for discernment here as there is when we read the Bible at home.

### Looking at the faith anew

It is said that if you want to know about water, the last person you should ask is a fish: a fish knows nothing else. Likewise, Western Christians have no real way to evaluate or understand their own spiritual background and heritage. However, when we read the Bible with the Global Church it gives us an opportunity to see the Christian Faith in a new light (Jenkins 2002, p.215). By comparing our experience and understanding of the Scriptures with others, we can deepen our understanding of our own Christian experience.

As we read the Scriptures with others, we are taking a glimpse both into the past and the future of the Christian faith.

Reading the Bible with believers who are outside of the European tradition allows us a glimpse at a Christianity which has not been entirely shaped by the experiences of Christendom, the Reformation and the Enlightenment. This is particularly the case when we encounter African Christianity. The early church had deep roots in Africa and African theology and controversies did much to shape the history of the Christian faith (Oden 2007). Reading the Bible with African Christians is in many ways a rediscovery of the ancient heart of the faith.

Equally, when we read the Bible with the Global Church, we are also getting a glimpse of the Christianity of the future. Despite all of the sound and fury in the west over issues such as women bishops, the disputes between NT Wright and John Piper or Rob Bell's theology, the demographics of the Church show that these issues are really only sideshows for the global onward march of Christianity. Though power and influence still lie very much in the western



world, the future of the Church will eventually be determined by the majority of believers (Jenkins 2002, p.107).

Actually, it has always been true that Christian theology and scholarship are forged at the frontiers of mission (Kapolyo 2005, p.107). It is true that at the moment, a Western agenda dominates much theological teaching around the world. Blogger Bill Black (<http://onesimonline.blogspot.com/>) who teaches theology in Nairobi often waxes lyrical at the folly of teaching Western orientated Biblical studies to people for whom much of it is an irrelevance. However, the picture is shifting and genuine, Africa, Asian and Latin theologies are being developed (Maxey 2009, p.50). It is the questions that these Christians raise as they face issues which are important to them that will shape the future of Christian thinking.

For example, how are Christians facing up to the incredibly rapid urbanization in China? What does, say, the book of Revelation have to say to people who are living through what is happening there? What can we learn about Christian-Muslim relations from believers who have lived in close proximity to Islam for years if not centuries?

### **Confronting Issues**

Reading the Bible with the Global Church can also force us to examine issues that we are generally unaware of.

If we were to read the Bible together with Christians from other parts of the world we might begin to understand their realities. If we were to read Amos or James with them, our own affluence and the materialism of Western Christianity might well come home to us in a way that it has not done before.

Another issue where we could learn from the Global Church is how to deal with tribalism and disunity in Society. On the surface, British society seems very uniform, certainly more so than Rwanda. But, at a deeper level it is clear that our society is actually very fractured and that slices of it are untouched by the Church.

Perhaps some of the experiences of the Global Church in dealing with divisions in society could be useful in the UK?

Another way in which reading the Bible with the Global Church could help the church in the West is in terms of dealing with culture change in our own context. The shift from modernism to post-modernism seems to have left the church at somewhat of a loss. The response of much of evangelicalism seems to have been to want to push society back to modernism. A young man of my acquaintance read a leading Christian critique of post-modernism and his reaction was revealing. He simply said "don't diss my culture". The desire to maintain modernism is understandable, but misguided. Rather than try and impose a culture on the rising generation, we should be learning how to present the Gospel in the new culture.

Of course this is exactly the same mistake that was made by early missionaries who sought to impose their own culture on people, rather than working out how to express the gospel in the new culture. Exploring what it means to be a Christian and how other cultures understand notions of salvation and forgiveness can help us develop new ways to express the Gospel in our rapidly evolving context.

### **Friends**

Perhaps the most important aspect of reading the Bible with the Global church is that it puts us on equal footing with them. The history of colonialism and much of the modern missionary movement has elevated the western church to a status which it does not deserve. We need to learn to be friends and not to expect to be leaders. I will finish by quoting from V.S. Azariah at the 1910 Edinburgh conference:

*"I do not plead for returning calls, handshakes, chairs, dinners and teas as such. I do on the other hand plead for all of them and more if they can be expressions of a friendly feeling, if these or anything else can be the outward proofs of a real willingness on the part of the foreign missionary to show that he is in the midst of the people to be to them not a lord and master but a brother and a friend."*

*"Through all the ages to come the Indian Church will rise up in gratitude to attest the heroism and self denying labors of the missionary body. You have given your goods to feed the poor. You have given your bodies to be burned. We ask for love. Give us friends."*

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# Reading the Bible with the Global Church

## A Response from Malaysia

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The key issue that Eddie wants to highlight is that Christians, where ever they are, often presume that there is only one standard way to read the Bible. This is based on the premise that the Bible is inherently true and that anyone coming to the Bible would be able to figure the plain sense of the biblical text and thereby come to a standard way of reading and understanding it. Eddie provides numerous real-life examples in his paper of how this presumption is repeatedly shown to be false. The primary reason is because the Bible itself is a 'multicultural, inter-cultural and cross-cultural book' and written over a large span of time and in a variety of cultural and political settings.

Eddie goes on to provide excellent examples of how the Bible is read and understood differently in other parts of the world, whether this is a case of the interaction between faith and culture, or a different political context from the West, or the issue of orality vs. literacy, or the impact of a community reading vs. an individualistic reading.

The issues that Eddie raised are pertinent ones in the context of a western-based and European form of Christianity which has grown up with the understanding that 'the best scholarship comes from the west' and that the others in the developing world are often naive and simplistic in their understanding of the Bible. Unfortunately, this idea that 'the west is best' has seeped into other parts of the world where books from the west are perceived to be better than locally written ones or that a speaker from the west is the only one who can bring real teaching compared with his local counterpart.

Eddie is to be commended for raising these pertinent issues which are factual and accurate but often hard to accept by the majority. He quotes Fitch who rightly argues that the claim 'there is only one way to read the Bible' is synonymous with saying 'I am right and you are wrong'. Although Eddie doesn't use these phrases - 'hermeneutical circle, reader-response theory, Christ above culture' - his paper is a fine example of what silent processes are involved in reading the Bible, the strong presuppositions we bring to the biblical text, and how things like our own cultural-conditioning can prevent us from seeing what someone else brought up in a different culture may see in the same text.

Eddie ends his paper by highlighting some differences that will occur to us if we choose to read the Bible with other people, including seeing ourselves as others see us, looking at the faith anew, confronting issues, and learning to be friends together. In a post-colonial and post-modernity world, these are real advantages we could not seek to do without and which will highly enrich our own reading and understanding of the Bible.

In terms of a critique of the paper, I will offer only two brief ones. Firstly, Eddie uses the phrase 'global church' (once as 'world church') in a different way than I expected. By 'global church', Eddie is referring to the 'church' in the Second and Third World contexts in contrast to 'westerners' or the 'European tradition'. In his call to his readers to 'read the Bible with the Global Church', Eddie is implying that his hearers (the Christian believers in the UK context) are not a part of the 'Global Church'! As an Asian Christian residing in South-East Asia, this divide comes across very strongly in his paper namely, his 'we' (that is, western Christians, especially addressing those in the UK context) and the 'they' (that is, the global church). If the 'global church' is truly global, we should begin to speak as one church! I know Eddie means no malice in making use of the two terms in order to make the differentiation but his usage continues to separate the divide that already exists instead of narrowing it.

Secondly, Eddie's references to the Christianity in his context and the examples he uses show a narrow range; that is, evangelical Christianity. There is not one reference to the other 'branches' of Christianity which are larger than the evangelical tradition; namely, the Roman Catholic tradition and the Orthodox tradition. Taken together, these two branches have a larger number of adherents and these forms of Christianity pre-dominate in many countries. The way the Bible is read and understood in these traditions differ significantly from that of the evangelical tradition. For example, what is the place of the Pope's teachings uttered *ex cathedra* and the issue of papal infallibility with reference to one's reading of the Bible? The paper will be far richer if examples from these two traditions can be provided. One can also add the large Pentecostal tradition whose adherents read the Bible often rejecting good biblical scholarship and depending entirely on the illumination and enlightenment of the Holy Spirit. Yet, this way of reading and understanding the Bible has its excesses and sometimes these personal interpretations of the texts have led to heresies and divisions. There must be some common ground of agreement. 'Is the text the king or the reader the king?'

Nevertheless, Eddie's paper is a timely and important one to stir ourselves out of our own complacency and challenge our unstated prejudices and biases in order to help us see that there is a larger world out there and that we can learn from one another and in the process deepen our own Christian experience and faith.

# Reading the Bible with the Global Church

## A Response from Uganda



UGANDA CHRISTIAN  
UNIVERSITY  
A Centre of Excellence in the Heart of Africa

Author: Wankuma Abel Kibbedi, Lecturer Education and Theology, Uganda Christian University

### Hearing God's Word with the Global Church

#### Introduction

It is very interesting how people want to only hear what their ears itch to hear. For the western world, most theologians are interested in reading from Western books, magazines and journals, and African Theology is limping slowly towards conforming to 'the true Christian' theology. They would rather hear this than read for themselves the strands that Christians and African theologians are making in terms of Biblical scholarship, interpretation and in the furtherance of the Christian faith. Many want to keep the thought that Christianity though spreading like a wild fire in Africa is still miles wide and an inch deep. (Jenkins, 2006, p.186). This is unfortunate because unless one steps out of one's comfort zone, the suburban to the deep villages, the seminaries to the universities and Churches in Africa, then can they appreciate what God is doing here? Eddie Arthur's Redcliffe lecture steps out of that comfort zone to critically analyze how the Bible is being read by the global church which we feel is right on when it comes to the African perception of the Bible and how it should be 'listened to' or read according to Arthur.

#### The Bible

To the African Christian, the Bible is a form of identity; it is a unifying factor to a people of the same family called Christians, be it from the same tribe or from a different race. Though millions are yet to read it, many have the knowledge of Scripture in some form I presume, even higher than most people in the West do. Some might think that this is an over statement but as a member of the clergy, serving in a rural parish, and as someone who has served in a Western urban (suburban) setting, I make this observation strongly. The Bible as heard by most Africans is being heard in a way that brothers and sisters across the entire globe are either reading or hearing it.

#### God speaking

The hearer and the reader of the Biblical text is not merely listening to the one reading the Bible out loud in a public place of worship. They are listening to God speak to them actively, concerning their wellbeing which most times is about survival (in times of war, hunger, disease, famine, scarcity, or in times of marriage, bliss, and plenty). It is God speaking to the group that have been called, and adopted into the family as children of a heavenly Father. The God known to their forefathers in the past spoke harshly, and always in an angry tone but now speaks to them in a condescending love, grace and mercy. They hear him speak in love.

#### The listening

Recently, I invited my friend James Schaffer who was visiting with me from his mission station in Kenya – where there is a missionary effort by World Harvest USA – to teach the Bible to illiterate communities through Forty Biblical stories. So on the occasion of James'

visit, I asked him to my Church, St. Paul's Church – Bunyiro (Iganga-Uganda) to tell one of the stories (Matt 9:1-7). After telling the story several times and it seemingly had sank into the hearts of the very attentive and mesmerized Christian, James asked them, 'What do we learn from the story about the character of God?' One man answered, 'We learn that God wants people to listen to his word – so wherever Jesus went, God gathered crowds around him.'

This took both James and me by surprise. We never thought that such an observation would come from an illiterate person. So to the African, depending on time and occasion, the Scripture read is true and applicable to the community of believers as the sacred word of God the Father of this believing community.

## **Orality**

In his lecture Eddie Arthur so articulately brings out the burning issue of the place of orality. The hearing of the word is, I believe, the central thing the Global Church should learn from the Church in Africa. I believe that by God's inspiration, men, preachers, evangelists, missionaries and Christians have come up with creative ways in which to minister the Gospel to God's people at all times. (How will they believe?) God as he has done in times past in many ways and places (Heb 1:1) has spoken to us through his son: Jesus is speaking in word and action, speaking to the family of God and doing what he says through the Church.

The literate and non-literate in the Church pews are listening to the same story. They are all critically asking, 'What does this mean to us who are gathered here? What is God's intended purpose in us hearing this particular portion of his word?' In most African contexts, the whole gathering is listening as a community and occasionally as individuals. What happens to one affects the entire community: if Wankuma's child is sick, all members of the community will go and pay them a visit in their home because it hurts the entire village, even if it is just a little child that is sick. You are members of one body.

So, Eddie in his evaluation of how the Church is listening to the word of God in its oral form is right on! I would say to the global Church that if we are to benefit from our union with Christ, then we need to actively listen to the word of God with both our ears, inner and outer, hearts of flesh (soft and malleable), all our minds and all our strength as Christian communities are doing in Africa.

For that matter, I would propose further that in as far as Christianity is concerned, its furtherance lies in the sacred writing, in the sharing in meals (spiritual and physical) in the drinking of wine and breaking of the bread, and the living in community with others which is a constant in Christianity. I highly commend Eddies for his critical observation of issues and analysis of them and indeed, if we appreciated the word of God as his greatest love gift to the Church, then we should pour it out to others as a love offering rather than crucify it by keeping it individually in our closets. 'If you want to hide from an African, put it in writing', so it is said. But rather read it out loud! And give it out in an extravagant way just like God has given extravagantly to the world. In the hearing of his word, God's love truly rolls from one end of the globe to another.

# Reading the Bible with the Global Church

## A Response from the UK

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Author: Rev Dr David Spriggs, Dean of Studies, Bible Society.

I am very grateful to Eddie for a fascinating, accessible, well-illustrated lecture introducing us to one of the key issues of contemporary hermeneutics, that of the inevitability of the conditional and thus conditioning nature of the reader's context and the significant contribution which this makes to the way we all read Scripture.

It is helpful both pedagogically and pastorally that we were introduced to this initially strange and puzzling factor through the eyes of the world church, rather than as a theoretical issue. Even so, it is hard to come to terms with one of several implications, namely even if we believe in the inerrancy and divine inspiration of Scripture, we must accept that our understanding of any and all Scripture will not be inerrant, nor infallible nor divinely inspired. Any sense that 'our' interpretation is fully commensurate with the divinely given meaning of Scripture needs to be seriously re-evaluated in the light of the global churches' perspectives. If we don't we run at least two risks, either divinising the enlightenment understanding of the nature of 'truth' and/or elevating the Western way of reading the Bible and thus betraying a sense of superiority generated by Western imperialism from which we need to repent. This applies – as Eddie hinted - not only to forms of scriptural fundamentalism but also to liberal 'higher critical' approaches and conclusions.

In this response I hope to do two things – inevitably very briefly. One is to illustrate different readings of a well know parable – in the light of the global church. The second is to offer an initial reflection on the issue of how we can handle diversity without opening the flood gates to total relativity – which if inevitable would call in question the value of Scripture as the primary source for divine truth. Clearly, as Eddie's reference to the 'Prosperity Gospel' indicated, he has no wish to do this.

### The 'Good Samaritan'

We all know the story of the Good Samaritan and the meaning of this parable is obvious to all. Jesus provides us with an example of what it means to be a good neighbour. The Samaritan helps the wounded, vulnerable and penniless victim of the robbery – so should the teacher of the law who asks Jesus about being a neighbour and so should we. This is the 'common sense' meaning and concurs roughly with the way 'good Samaritan' has become part of our English language.

If we know about St Augustine's allegorical interpretation, where the victim is Adam – fallen humanity – and the Good Samaritan is Jesus, the inn is the church and the money paid over to the innkeeper is the sacraments etc., then obviously his approach is fanciful – to us! On the other hand, I did hear Billy Graham preach a sermon along these lines (I don't think the 'sacraments' featured!) at Mission:England, Aston Villa in 1984.

But what about some of the interpretations from around the world? John Drane, the respected biblical scholar and missiologist tells of his shock when he attended a Bible study with some young Christians who lived on Smokey Mountain – a huge rubbish tip outside Manilla, the capital of the Philippines. The members were people who worked and in some cases lived on the rubbish dumps. They lived with severe poverty and considerable vulnerability in many directions. They all listened to this story and were asked to identify with someone in the story. John chose, as most of us would also, to be the Good Samaritan – that's the role model Jesus is giving. The Philipinos, on the other hand, all identified with the



man who had been robbed. [1] As vulnerable people, they experienced this parable from the position of the rescued rather than the rescuer.

Another account from Tanzania takes this a little further. There, like the Philipinos and for similar reasons people identified primarily with the robbed person. For them the obvious interpretation is that it is acceptable to receive help from anyone – even someone of another religion or ethnicity. People who have been robbed and are near death cannot afford the luxury of prejudice, so they can legitimately accept help whether from Muslim, Roman Catholic or Jehovah's Witness. In God's eyes anyone can be a neighbour to us, they don't have to be important and powerful or religiously pure like the priest and Levite. But this goes further – it underlies the Government's policy of receiving help from any country that will offer it; it would be wrong to refuse aid simply because it comes from a source that you might not approve of. If God sends it, it should be received. Thus, the Bible influences public policy. 'In short, the story was understood to answer the question, 'Who is my neighbour?' not with, 'Whoever needs my help' but with, 'Whoever helps me'. [2]

Even in the West different understandings are possible. So there are some interpreters who suggest that the answer to the question, 'Who is my neighbour?' is not, 'anyone in need – like the man who has been robbed and mugged' but rather, 'The Samaritan'. If you read the text carefully Jesus asks the 'lawyer', 'Which of these three... was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?' The answer is, 'The Samaritan' – although the lawyer tries to avoid admitting this by using the words, 'The one who showed him mercy' (Luke 10: 36,37). So the neighbour is the Samaritan. The last thing (even worse than having to love people who were bleeding) the lawyer wanted was to have to love Samaritans! As often with Jesus he twists things around so that the protagonist – in this case the lawyer – had to face his own prejudices. This interpretation adds another level of challenge to the more obvious one for most of us that we should help anyone in need.

So which is correct? Perhaps with Parables it is less challenging to the core of our faith in Scripture. We have all heard many sermons on this and other parables and we can be swept along by the conviction and even the skill and oratory of the preacher. Even though it was a mantra of New Testament scholars during most of the last 50-60 years of the last century that 'parables only have one central point', we probably weren't quite convinced. So coping with multiple meanings here is not too difficult.

But with more ethical and doctrinal issues how can this be? Must we accept everyone's interpretation as of equal validity or appear as bigoted imperialists? If so, what has happened to the 'truth revealed in Scripture'? While we do well to recognise that we sit in one place and others sit elsewhere and so we might have different perspectives on the meaning of a passage, how can we handle not simply diversity but also clashing truth claims?

I do not imagine that I can neatly solve this pressing and difficult issue for us in these comments. But here are a few thoughts to hopefully kick-start the conversation.

First, we need the humility and openness which will enable us to listen carefully and empathetically to other people's understandings. It is probably a perennial temptation of at least some evangelicals to deal with diversity of interpretation by categorising the 'other' as having wandered away from the faith – or worse! The recent acrid responses by some to Rob Bell's attempt to explore the complex issues of believing in a God of perfect love, justice and power together with understanding the nature of Hell, reminds us of this.

To do this we need to be willing to explore what and how these different interpretations might impact on the things we believe and be prepared to rethink our positions. We need to do this because we should be in communion with the whole body of believers. To do this requires confidence in God even above our experience and expression of our faith.

But we also need courage – the courage which will graciously challenge other people's views and so, directly or indirectly enter into debate. The famous Bereans in Acts 17:11 provide us

with a good role model. But there is also the courage which is prepared to say, in effect, well I hear your perspective – please correct me if you think I don't understand it deeply enough – but for now I remain convinced that my understanding of this passage or the biblical basis for this doctrine or ethical stance, is the valid one. I do not, thereby reject *you* and my conviction actually commits me to continue the dialogue with you, to the best of my ability. Perhaps my view is only appropriate for my cultural context and should not be generalised as universally true, but please allow me the space I need living where I do at the time I do. Contextual hermeneutics requires this also!

Obviously all of these processes are complex. We need to seek the help of the Holy Spirit to understand the Scriptures for which he is the ultimate author. We need to be as aware as possible of the rich interpretative traditions of the church universal i.e. throughout history, as well as global.

But what we are also beginning to see is that if we need humility, openness and courage (and we could add others like confidence, faithfulness, and perseverance) then to understand and interpret the Bible rightly is more than having knowledge and being able skilfully to utilise a range of methods; it involves the character or virtues of the reader. So to read the Bible well we need to be transformed into the likeness of Christ and to be transformed into the likeness of Christ we need to read the Scriptures well (among several other things!). This is a 'virtuous circle' not a 'vicious' one!

Thus we really need to become lifelong apprentices of Christ through the Scriptures.

This is one reason why Bible Society has produced a training course called **H+** - *Making Good Sense of the Bible*, to help support normal Christian people in the process of engaging honestly and fruitfully with the Bible in our day. Do check out the H+ website <http://www.hplus.org.uk> for more details.

## Notes

[1] Drane, J. *Evangelism for a New Age: Creating Churches for the Next Century* (London: Marshall Pickering, 1994), pp.38-39.

[2] Powell, M.A. *Chasing the Eastern Star: Adventures in Biblical Reader-response Criticism* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), pp.20-21.

# Reading the Bible with the Global Church

## A Response from the United States

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Author: Dr Brian D. Russell, Acting Dean, School of Urban Ministries and Professor of Biblical Studies, Asbury Theological Seminary, Orlando, Florida (United States)

Thank you for the opportunity to read and respond to Eddie Arthur's paper "Reading the Bible with the Global Church." I found the insights helpful and illuminating for readers of the Scriptures in the Western world. It opens our eyes to the profound potential of seeing and hearing the Bible through the cultural lenses of Christ followers from around our planet while also being upfront about some of the challenges and pitfalls of reading the Bible well today. Arthur is well read on the subject and as a "world Christian" he has the personal experience to communicate his ideas clearly and forthrightly.

### The paper as a whole

I fully resonated with the ideas and spirit of "Reading the Bible with the Global Church." For the last three years, I've taught a doctoral seminar "Biblical Interpretation for the Church and the World" in a class setting made up almost exclusively of non-Western church leaders. This course has been fruitful in my own thinking and reflecting on the practices of reading the Bible in and for our world today. As typically the lone North American, the key learning for me in the seminar was that I have much to learn from my fellow Christians around the globe, and I have consistently walked away from the seminar with a sense that I gained more than I gave.

Over the last few decades, the discipline of Biblical studies has seen the rise of more reader-centered methods of interpretation. A hallmark of these is an emphasis on the social location of readers. For evangelicals, this has sometimes been unsettling. We've always emphasized the biblical context as the most key determinant for meaning. The biblical context will always be primary, but as Arthur shows from his opening illustration of contrasting reading of the Joseph stories, the context of the reader plays a bigger role that perhaps we have acknowledged. Thinking critically about the social location of the reader however is increasingly helping Western evangelicals to see blind spots in our own reading due to our cultural biases.

Arthur has helped us to see that the "plain sense" of Scripture is more complicated and expansive than we sometimes acknowledge. Our interpretive strategies in the Western church have often focused on achieving a sort of "critically assured minimum" of what a text meant and thus means. I think that reading the Bible in the context of the global church helps us to recognize that our exegetical methods are limited by our cultural lenses. The danger for us is that we are tempted to naively ignore readings from global contexts where readers have not been trained in our Western critical methods.

The good news is that the Western church is beginning to awaken to the rich interpretive heritage of the Christ following movement from its inception. Western scholarship continues to reflect critically on the New Testament's use of the Old Testament. Such study demonstrates the role that 1<sup>st</sup> Century reading strategies served in influencing the hermeneutical approaches of Jesus and the Apostles. Moreover, we are witnessing the publication of new editions of classic commentaries from the Christ following movement's seminal first four hundred years. Arthur's paper shows the fecundity of the interpretive work from the global church that is now joining the interpretive conversation.

### What do we in North America need to hear?

The global church can help the church in North America to read the Bible in a number of ways.

### 1) The Translatability of the Gospel

The varied but faithful readings of Scripture that emerge from the Global church ought to encourage us about the translatability of the Gospel into the emerging cultures of the Western world. Arthur cited the troubling statistics that document the loss of Christian influence in the West. The North American church like those around the former Christian West is currently struggling for traction as it attempts to recommunicate the biblical Gospel to the post-Christendom generations.

The success of the Gospel around the world and the ability of the Bible to speak powerfully and meaningful into non-Christendom cultures bodes well for the church in North America as it seeks to rediscover its missional and apostolic imagination. Emerging generations may not have Christian memory and may not share Christendom's philosophical assumptions, but the biblical message can be contextualized successfully here just as it is being done around the world.

### 2) Community reading

The North American church also needs to grow in its appreciation and practice of communal reading. Small group movements continue to thrive but learning to think communally will enhance the use of the Bible in these group settings. Too often in our small groups in North America we reflect on how Scripture impacts us individually rather than how the Scriptures want to shape us into missional communities that embody the Gospel for the surrounding world.

### 3) Cultural blindspots

Arthur's opening illustration demonstrates the importance of reading the Bible through a variety of cultural lenses simply as a means of opening the plenary sense of the Bible. Every culture has blind spots. The North American church needs to recognize humbly that it can learn much from its brothers and sisters from the global church.

### 4) Attentiveness to the power of the Spirit

The global church models a praying and believing church. The Gospel advances through the power of God and not merely through human ingenuity or slick hermeneutical moves. As I think about the North American church, we must combine serious study of the Scriptures with a believing commitment to renewed prayer.

## **What can we in North America contribute?**

### 1) Dangers of reading Bible from a position of power

The collapse of Christendom has caused many North American Christians to feel threatened by and sometimes hopeless in the face of the competing ideologies of secularism and the growing diversity of religious expressions all around us. As the emerging culture has moved away from Christendom's assumptions, the church in North America has continued to read

the Bible as though the Church remains the cultural center. This has neutered the missional and transformational elements of the Gospel. North America was once a missional success story as the Gospel spread across the continent. As the Gospel continues to advance and prosper in former “missionary contexts”, the global church must not repeat the mistakes of the Christendom by equating “success” with prestige or political power.

## 2) Admission of hermeneutical arrogance

The Western church's embrace of exegetical conclusions rooted in historical-critical methods to the neglect of alternative hermeneutical approaches runs the risk of putting the Bible into a box of our own design. For generations, we have exported our methods of reading to the global church. Ironically, as we in the Western church begin to awake from our own hermeneutical slumbers, the global church now offer us insights into how to listen to and live out the Scriptures. In my seminar for international leaders I have found the need to offer a critique of Western exegetical methods as a means of validating contextual readings from their homelands. This hermeneutical humility has opened up my seminar to become a rich conversation with exegetes from around the world that is mutually beneficial as we share best practices from our various contexts.

## 3) Invitation to true Christian conferencing

The Biblical message is rich and always timely. Our growing awareness of the readings and interpretive methods from the global church opens up the possibility of productive and transformative conversations about the meaning and significance of the Scriptures in our day. The Church of Jesus Christ in our day may be uniquely positioned to truly hear God's word in all of its fullness. As the Gospel permeates the complex multi-cultural milieu of the global church, we have the possibility, maybe for the first time in history, of having a full-orbed conversation about the Bible in a global round table setting where no culture claims to have the privileged position for reading God's word. How rich are the possibilities for 21<sup>st</sup> century biblical interpretation!

Again I thank Eddie Arthur for producing and sharing his stimulating paper.

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Please Note: The views expressed in these articles are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the position of Redcliffe College.