



Doc. bytes

The 15th Assembly decision on marriage sparked many conversations across the Uniting Church. These papers have been written as a resource to those ongoing conversations.

1 What does it mean to be biblical?

Summary Sentence:

For a position to be 'biblical' it cannot be based solely on its mere existence in the Bible; it needs to be found by serious reading, attentive to Scripture's overarching story, and with openness to the Spirit.

Common to debates on theology, ethics, and polity is the appeal that one's position is 'biblical'. There is, however, much in the Bible that we would/do not use in developing our doctrine and ethics (e.g. the kidnapping of women to make wives, the prohibition of divorce).

Throughout the history of the church there have been times when opposing theological convictions have each claimed to be biblical. For instance, both slave-owners and slaves have turned to the Bible to justify their respective arguments for and against slavery.

However, to be 'biblical' involves doing more than citing individual passages as they lie on the page. Instead, 'biblical' should be taken to mean continuity with the Bible's overarching story. To arrive at a biblical position also implies that Scripture is read with openness to the ongoing presence of the Risen Christ in our midst.

One way of thinking about this is to learn from the way the New Testament writers used *their* Bible, i.e., the Hebrew Scriptures. The early church was driven by two surprising phenomena: the unexpected execution of their Messiah *and* his continued felt presence in their midst. On the basis of Jesus' death and resurrection they were bold enough to reinterpret and re-read their Scriptures with imagination and novelty. The embrace of the Gentiles (without requiring circumcision) emerged from faithful re-reading of Scripture (e.g. Paul's interpretation of the nature of Abraham's faith) and encounters with the Spirit of God (e.g. Peter's acceptance that Cornelius and his household had received the Spirit). The church received this as a 'biblical' decision because they trusted God was with them and leading them into a new understanding of their existing Scriptures.

As the Basis of Union states, the church hears the Word of God in the Bible's unique prophetic and apostolic testimony to Jesus Christ who faith affirms is the Word of God. In this way its faith and obedience are nourished and regulated. This hearing "calls for a continuous wrestling, for imaginative, Spirit-filled, faith-full and rigorously critical reflection on the radically active presence and will of God in ever changing times and circumstances."¹ In undertaking this serious duty of reading Scripture we may well be led by the Spirit into new readings, yet still decidedly 'biblical' readings, for the flourishing of the church and its mission.

¹ Elna Mouton, *The Pathos of New Testament Studies: Of What Use Are We to the Church?* (Stellenbosch: University of Stellenbosch, 2005), 17.

The biblical witness

Quotable Quote

Connections

Texts: Acts 15:1-21, Deuteronomy 23:1-8 and Isaiah 56:1-8

Comment: Notice how the exclusion of eunuchs and foreigners declared as absolute law in Deuteronomy 23 is reversed in the prophetic vision of Isaiah 56. This has parallels with how the early Christians came to a new decision about the place of Gentiles in the church.

Scripture is the environment for the church. Scripture is the space we inhabit, the sanctuary where we meet God in Jesus by the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Scripture is not something 'over' us bearing down on us or ordering us around. It is the air we breathe, the water we Christian fish swim in.

Dale C. Martin, Biblical Truths: The Meaning of Scripture in the Twenty-First Century (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2017), 94.

Reflecting on all the above material, what do you hear and see which connects with your own journey of faith and that of your particular church community?

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