

Reconcile - Handout #1

How do Episcopalians read the Bible? What is our hermeneutic?

1) We read the Bible seriously, and frequently. Our daily morning prayers include at least two readings from scripture.

We have four readings in every Sunday morning worship: One from the Old Testament, one from the Epistles or from the Revelation; one from the Psalms, and one from one of the Gospels. They are all usually read sequentially, and in a three-year cycle, so that by the end of each cycle most of the Bible has been read aloud in worship.

2) We read the Bible as the word of God, but we also understand that Jesus, not a collection of texts, is the ever-living Word.

We do not generally read the Bible literally, since it is clearly not intended to be read that way. It is, for us, a true story of God's activity in the world, and the responses of believers to God. Every witness, every author of every part, told the truth about his experience, understandings, and convictions about God, from his own perspective, from his own culture, in his own historical context, in his own language. Those witnesses do not all "agree."

Their reports are not "flat." We believe God uses them all. We believe the holy Spirit is active in them all, and in the hearers in every generation.

3) We respect the kind of literature that each part represents. Psalms are poetry, not science or history, even though they so often reflect on God's acts in Jewish history. The "historical" books tell the story of Israel, but they do not even report the same events in the same way; they do not agree on what happened as the people moved into the land and became an independent nation. Each point of view is important.

The "prophetic" books, far from primarily predictive, were written by men who heard the heart and mind of God and spoke it to a people that had strayed from God; they served as both rebuke and reassurance of the unending love of God.

We recognize that the two different creation stories reflect two different perspectives; we also recognize their similarity to other creation stories from the ancient world and more importantly, the differences between them and the others; we are aware that no Jewish leaders ever thought it was necessary to reconcile the two accounts or avoid the "contradictions."

The letters of Paul were "occasional" letters. That is, they were written to specific churches (and to one individual within a church - Philemon)

to respond to specific questions, issues and concerns. They don't always offer the same advice, praise, rebuke or instruction, because each church was different.

Revelation is a piece of "apocalyptic" literature that was never intended to be taken literally, but poetically, to encourage believers to trust that no matter what, in the end, *God* wins.

Parables are just that - short stories, fiction, which Jesus used to make a point.

4) The four Gospels tell the good news of Jesus Christ, but they do not tell that good news in the same way, or even in the same order, and not every event is recorded by every writer. Mark is the earliest, and the shortest; it was written to Christians suffering those early persecutions; Luke and Matthew borrow large chunks from Mark, but tell the Jesus story differently because of their different audiences.

Matthew is constructed in five chunks of teaching, reflecting the five books of the Torah, where Jesus is seen as the second Moses, deliverer, prophet and priest. Luke was composed for a Gentile audience where non-Jews, foreigners, the poor, the outcast, women and children are the focus; Jesus came for the whole world.

John is a theological reflection on the Jesus story - the last written. A good way to see these differences is to look closely at the first chapters of the four gospels:

Notice that **Mark** doesn't include any story of Jesus' birth; it begins with Jesus' call to ministry.

Matthew does tell a birth story but begins with Jewish history, and pays attention to the foreign magi/wise men, as outsiders who believed and trusted God even when King Herod did not - a theme common in the prophets;

Luke's is the famous story we all know, where attention is on Mary, Elizabeth and the birth of John the Baptist, Joseph, angels, the shepherds - those unexpected messengers of God's act in sending Jesus.

John has no interest in Jesus' birth at all, but begins in prehistory - theologically, "In the beginning was the Word - and the Word was with God - and the Word was God." That's a theological statement, not a historical one.

5) We say that everything we need to understand and to come to experience salvation is in Scripture; we do NOT say that everything we find in Scripture is necessary for salvation.

6) We do not accept a contemporary and western understanding of "inerrancy." We accept the limitations of the Bible as an authority to

scientific, historical or sociological fact. In fact, it is often simply not accurate, if we look to impose those standards on it.

The Bible was not written to a 21st century American audience; it does not seek to argue for or against contemporary scientific understanding of the universe, human sexuality, guns, or to approve the structure of any human government. It has nothing to say about the United States of America. We believe the Bible is about God. Period.

7) We believe that all scripture must be read in its original context, with a view to understanding what it meant to its original hearers first, and only *afterwards* to consider what it has to say to us today. We cannot rightly read it as if it were written in English to Americans. We do believe that it is as challenging to us and to our society as it was to Israel's.

8) We also believe we need to trace an idea, such as "freedom/salvation" through the whole Bible, not just verse by isolated verse - so that we can see the pattern of God's acts of saving and freeing, rescuing God's people - from literal Egyptian slavery in the Exodus, all the way through the Bible into and beyond the expanded and deepened freedom that God offers us in the death and resurrection of Jesus.

9) We accept that there are many valid and differing ways to interpret particular passages of scripture; and we welcome those varieties of interpretation, but we do NOT accept that there is ever one "required" interpretation.