

HOW DOES THE UNITED CHURCH INTERPRET THE BIBLE?

PART I 1904 - 1940s: Tradition and Resistance

by Robert C. Fennell

How does The United Church of Canada read and interpret the Bible? The question often arises, both within and beyond United Church contexts, in a way that suggests that people imagine that there is – or ought to be – a normative method for a denomination to interpret its sacred text. It often seems true, too, that for the questioner the answer is not entirely clear or obvious. This brings to mind the old story about the people gathered in a dark room who encounter a large animal among them (an elephant), then begin to describe aloud what they have found. They find that each description is significantly different from the others.

Biblical interpretation captivates our interest. The Bible is, by turns, inspiring, strange, frightening, confusing, and comforting. Christians continue to invest much spiritual and theological value in it. There is a slot in every Sunday service for a portion, or portions, of it to be read. Most of our ministers assume that the sermon will relate in some way to a biblical text read earlier in the service. We look to the Bible to inform the key congregational activities of worship, preaching, teaching, and mission; denominationally we listen closely to it when making decisions; and personal devotion is very often centred upon it. When so much time is spent with, and so much importance is claimed for, Scripture, and when we struggle with the realities of passages that are often difficult to decipher, it is little wonder that we go searching for ways to interpret and to understand. We long in our hearts for the “big picture” of God’s love and truth, God’s ways and God’s call to us to be comprehensible. We yearn deeply to connect with God, who is both beyond us and immediately with us, and we have been told that this Book may

be singularly helpful in that connecting. Despite differences among our theological and social perspectives, we collectively consider the Bible to be a resource of incomparable value. So how is Scripture to be interpreted – decoded, understood, applied, faithfully heard?

Among the “elephantine” variety of possible descriptions about the United Church’s approaches to Scripture, I want to suggest that the denomination’s public voice concerning biblical interpretation has principally dealt with appeals to two main sources of authority: *tradition* and *liberation*. To understand how those appeals have been made, we’ll glance briefly at the 20th century history of the United Church, taken in two articles. The first period (1904-1940s) is treated in the present essay; the second period (1950s-1990s) will be taken up in a subsequent article which is to appear in the September issue of this journal. These brief surveys will consider biblical interpretation as enacted in creedal and “official” teachings of the denomination, in popular reform movements, in resources for Christian education, in General Council reports, and in other official publications. It is not possible to be exhaustive in surveying all possible sources for such a discussion, but the materials examined in this article, and in the one that will appear in the September issue, will reveal the main elements of the United Church’s approach to interpreting the Bible from the turn of the 20th century up to and including the 1990s.

Tradition and Its Challengers

In the early decades of the United Church, the norms of *tradition* were the primary lenses through which the denomination looked upon the Bible. While there were movements that worked to challenge or even to revolutionize that approach, *tradition* tended to assert and reassert itself. Tradition, as we are using the term, consists of the heritage and theological identity of a denomination, including publications, faith statements, and patterns of life and doctrinal thought.

In the heady days of Church Union negotiations (from 1904 onward), little attention was given to the details of biblical interpretation. The founding denominational traditions all held a high view of Scripture, regarding it as an absolute, superlative norm. The Bible's unique role in disclosing Jesus Christ meant it overruled all other doctrinal sources, including reason, revelation from history or creation, science, and even creedal statements. That extent of agreement among the founding traditions was sufficient to serve the pressing theological issue of Church Union: to find a common ground of harmonized doctrine to which all could agree.

The doctrine section of the *Basis of Union*, also called the "Twenty Articles of Faith", was adopted by the three denominations by 1908. There was a readiness to live with some degree of doctrinal tension, but there also was confidence that the document confessed a commonly held faith. When speaking of the Bible, the language was general and innocuous:

We affirm our belief in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the primary source and ultimate standard of Christian faith and life. ... We receive the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, given by inspiration of God, as containing the only infallible rule of faith and life, a faithful record of God's gracious revelations, and as the sure witness to Christ.¹

Nothing is said here about *how* one ought to interpret this "primary source and ultimate standard" – it was simply commended as trustworthy and essential to the life of the Church. Both Methodists and Presbyterians on their own would have drawn upon subordinate standards – for example, the Westminster Confession, or the role of reason or tradition – for such a discussion. Presbyterians in particular might have been

¹ "The Basis of Union: Doctrine," in *The Manual 2007* (Toronto: United Church Publishing House, 2007) pp. 14-15.

especially keen to name the work of the Holy Spirit in proper interpretation.² However, the framers of the *Basis* chose a simpler and less prescriptive formula. Traditional language about the Bible as the “ultimate standard”, “infallible”, and “the sure witness to Christ” largely repeated long-held orthodox perspectives that the United Church simply inherited. The denomination began its life with a traditional and uncontroversial view of Scripture.

After the achievement of Union, the United Church was deeply influenced by four theological movements. The first three of these attempted to challenge or to disestablish traditional approaches to the Bible. The fourth movement was a reaffirmation of doctrinal orthodoxy. We will survey each of these movements briefly.

The first theological movement influencing the post-Union era was Evangelical Liberalism. This movement had in fact already been underway in North America for several decades when Union took effect in 1925. Intellectual freedom, openness to academic critical tools for biblical research, communitarian interests, Spirit-led “heart religion”, and Christ-centered interpretation were all hallmarks of this movement. Evangelical Liberals rejected older orthodoxies (or at least claimed to do so). Believing that all knowledge is one and is divinely-inspired, they

² As Calvin said in 16th century, “the testimony of the Spirit is more excellent than all reason ... the Word will not find acceptance in [human] hearts before it is sealed by the inward testimony of the Spirit.” John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John Baillie, et al, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, *The Library of Christian Classics*, Vol. 1 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960/1967) 1.7.4. Methodists also looked to the Holy Spirit to convict them of biblical truth.

were unafraid of scientific inquiry, and believed that their theological and interpretive work was fully congruent with it.

Nathanael Burwash is a good Canadian example of Evangelical Liberalism, though he died in 1918, before Church Union was consummated.³ His appreciation for the “higher criticism” of the biblical academy stemmed in part from his elevated regard for both reason and faith. To him, the “new” academic approach was just the latest instrument of reason, which in its own way was part of God’s ongoing self-disclosure. For Burwash, Christ-centered faith was always the first and primary source of knowledge, but faith was never truly in conflict with reason and science.⁴ Burwash expressed great confidence in modern critical methods:

We may quite safely allow reverent and truth-loving biblical critics to press their investigations with scientific fidelity to all facts, and we think that there is not the slightest reason to fear....⁵

Even as he identified Scripture as the most important of all sources of knowledge – above reason, experience, and tradition – Burwash stressed the inner spiritual life as vital to the interpretive task, just as Wesley had done before him.

The second influential theological movement in the period following Church Union was the Social Gospel. The phrase

³ Burwash was a great educator, leader, and statesman of Canadian Methodism. For more on him, see Marguerite Van Die, “Nathanael Burwash: Canadian Methodist Theologian and Educator, 1839-1918,” *Touchstone* Vol. 5, No. 3 (1987), and Van Die, *An Evangelical Mind: Nathanael Burwash and the Methodist Tradition in Canada, 1839-1918*, McGill-Queen’s Studies in the History of Religion, Vol. 3, ed. George R. Rawlyk (Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1989).

⁴ Van Die, *An Evangelical Mind*, p. 58.

⁵ Nathanael Burwash, *Manual of Christian Theology of the Inductive Method, Vol. I* (London: Horace Marshall & Son, 1900) p. 186.

today suggests, within the United Church, progressive communitarian concern. It emerged amid the theological liberalism of the late 19th and early 20th centuries that had confidently embraced the historical-critical tools of the academy for biblical study. Such tools were systematically skeptical of Scriptural inerrancy and authority. Until this era, official Church teaching had normatively looked upon the canon of Scripture as the unassailable foundation of faith. But the increasing prevalence of critical academic approaches “attempted to *authenticate and verify* the historical accuracy of biblical events [italics added].”⁶ Alert to the problem of historical inaccuracies in the biblical record, interpretation within the Social Gospel movement tended to condense the contents of the Bible and Christianity by referring to their “essence” and “core ideas”. Similarly, they ignored any awkward, historically dubious, or “unscientific” elements. Shailer Matthews, for example, argued that reading, especially the New Testament, would yield a clear picture of the “basic social principles” of Christianity, especially love, fraternity, and God’s intention to bring about “the better social order”.⁷

When read through Social Gospel eyes, the biblical materials were especially concerned with two “principles”: social salvation, and the progressive realization of the Kingdom of God. Consequently, Social Gospel theology emphasized the social-salvation and Kingdom themes in Jesus’ teaching and in the writings of Old Testament prophets. Social Gospel proponents believed that the prophets in particular urged upon the Church a view that “salvation was a social matter – that Christians were responsible for their brothers’ and sisters’ redemption as much as their own”.⁸

⁶ Susan Curtis, *A Consuming Faith: The Social Gospel and Modern American Culture* (Columbia, MO and London: University of Missouri Press, 2001) p. 86.

⁷ Shailer Matthews, *The Social Gospel* (Philadelphia: Griffith & Rowland Press, 1910) pp. 24-31.

⁸ Curtis, *Consuming Faith*, p. 5.

While Social Gospel writers did not provide specific interpretive procedures, at least four hallmarks of the movement's biblical engagement can be readily discerned. First, contextual considerations, both from the point of view of the biblical writers and of the contemporary reader, were considered invaluable. It was not enough to identify the general themes of Scripture; applying them to contemporary social realities was essential. Second, Old Testament prophets, and Jesus' teachings, were privileged sources, and their concerns for justice were seen to be the standard for the reading of all of Scripture. Third, social and political amelioration, including equity between classes and genders, was the desired outcome of good interpretation. Finally, setting aside traditional readings was necessary if those older interpretations impeded the cause of social justice. Nellie McClung, one of the most outspoken of the Social Gospellers, rejected outright, for example, any biblical materials or conventionally pious treatments of biblical texts that resulted in the denial of the rights of women. She denounced "the barbarous Mosaic decree that the woman is to be stoned and the man allowed to go free."¹⁰ With these four modes of approach to the Bible, Social Gospellers characteristically adopted a critical stance toward Scripture, elevating human reason and modern science while disdaining tradition. As they sought both to alleviate human misery and to reform social systems, they were, however, largely unconcerned with the subtleties of interpretation theory.

The third influential theological movement in the period after Church Union was an effort to "Christianize the social order", something of a cousin of the Social Gospel, but perhaps more revolutionary in spirit. As a member of the Fellowship for a Christian Social Order (FCSO), R.B.Y. Scott appealed directly to Scripture to substantiate a new socio-political and theological

⁹ See Walter Rauschenbusch, *The Social Principles of Jesus* (New York: Association Press, 1923).

¹⁰ Nellie L. McClung, *In Times Like These* (Toronto: George J. McLeod Ltd., 1919) p. 38.

program.¹¹ Scott's work follows three discernible interpretive principles (though he does not state them explicitly). Like the Social Gospellers, Scott described the thematic overview of the Bible. He referred to "certain normative principles...main outlines and underlying principles[.]" Scott also gave special attention to the social and political realities of biblical figures and writers. Finally, he sought to offer interpretation in "modern terms" by freely adopting academic interpretive methods such as text criticism. Each of these three interpretive procedures was designed to enable social and political reform, or even revolution, by breaking away from old doctrines that bound Christianity to the *status quo* and to unjust practices.

Resistance and Reaction

While the Social Gospel and the FCSO enjoyed a good deal of popularity among United Church members, the denomination struggled with how to incorporate the insights of these movements. In this era of theological ferment, social analysis, political revolution, economic unrest, and new theological emphases, the United Church as a denomination reasserted rather traditional, even reactionary, approaches to the Bible by publishing the *Statement of Faith* and the *Catechism*. These constitute the fourth influential theological movement within the United Church in the early years after Church Union. These documents reaffirmed an older orthodoxy, an orthodoxy that the first three movements had sought to revise or to overturn.

The 1940 *Statement of Faith* specifically disavowed the use of "the language of modern science and philosophy", preferring instead the "language of Scripture, a language which matches the supreme facts it tells of, God's acts of judgement and of mercy"¹². Thus there was little novelty in the *Statement's* teaching about

¹¹ Citations in this section are drawn from R.B.Y. Scott's article, "The Biblical Basis," in *Towards the Christian Revolution*, ed. R.B.Y. Scott and Gregory Vlastos, 75-97 (Kingston: Ronald P. Frye & Co., 1936).

¹² *Record of Proceedings of the Ninth General Council (Winnipeg, September 1940)* (Toronto: The United Church of Canada, 1940) p. 168.

the Bible. Most striking, in fact, is the determined *resistance* to the historical-critical approaches and to the theological liberalism that had been current in the Social Gospel, the FCSO, and the universities of the era. Such resistance may be attributed, in part, to the ascendancy of “neo-orthodox” theology, especially through the growing influence of Karl Barth. Barth’s “renewed examination [and indeed criticism] of classical Protestant Orthodoxy”¹³ had been received with great enthusiasm by many in Canada. Some had rejected the Social Gospel and the FCSO, and others were simply looking for new expressions of theology more clearly grounded in the Reformed heritage.

This resistance is also attributable to the theologically (and politically and socially) conservative mainstream of the United Church at the time, despite the forays of the various liberal and radical movements of the previous decades. The neo-orthodoxy and conservatism of the era, as influential as it was upon the *Statement of Faith* and the *Catechism*, had more in common with the much older (Calvinist and Wesleyan) theology of the pre-Union denominations. Thus the *Statement of Faith* projected a traditionally “high” view of Scripture. The Bible in its final (Protestant) canonical form was held in very high regard as authoritative in itself:

We believe that the great moments of God’s revelation and communication of Himself to men [sic] are recorded and interpreted in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament. . . . So we acknowledge in Holy Scripture the true witness to God’s Word and the sure guide to Christian faith and conduct.

Like the Methodists and Presbyterians before Union (and of course many generations of Christians before them), the *Statement of Faith* speaks clearly about the role of the Holy Spirit in interpretation:

¹³ Martin Rumscheidt, “Karl Barth and Radical Politics,” in *A Long and Faithful March ‘Towards the Christian Revolution’ 1930s/1980s*, ed. Harold Wells and Roger Hutchinson, 104-115 (Toronto: UCPH, 1989) p. 106.

We believe that in Holy Scripture God claims the complete allegiance of our mind and heart; that the full persuasion of the truth and authority of the Word of God contained in the Scripture is the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts; that, using Holy Scripture, the Spirit takes of the things of Christ and shows them unto us for our spiritual nourishment and growth in grace.¹⁴

Such language is characteristic of a much earlier age, but it was restated now as the living faith of the present-day Church. Just as the *Statement of Faith* mostly reasserted traditional approaches to the Bible, the *Catechism* also reaffirmed old, familiar views and again revealed denominational resistance to the procedures and results of academic biblical criticism. In particular, the *Catechism* displays quite a conservative approach to doctrine, expressing a series of dogmatic formulations that apparently have no awareness at all of historical criticism, nor of liberal developments in theology, nor of the recent religio-political radicalism that had clamoured for room on the United Church's public platform. The "chief purpose" of Scripture, according to the *Catechism*, is "to tell us what God has done to save us from sin and evil, and to claim for Him the complete allegiance of our mind and will".¹⁵ Christians are urged to *read* the Bible, but not really to interpret it. That task is left to preachers – though even for them no interpretive norms are suggested. The only method for reading is "to listen for the Word to God contained in the Bible with attention and desire, lay it up in our hearts, and practise it with our lives".¹⁶ A Christ-centered norm, so prevalent in traditional interpretive approaches, is clear. In partial answer to the Question 30, "What is the Bible?", the

¹⁴ *A Statement of Faith* (The United Church of Canada, 1940). Accessed 17 February 2008 at www.united-church.ca/en/beliefs/statements/1940.

¹⁵ The United Church of Canada, *Catechism* (Toronto: Board of Evangelism and Social Service, 1944) Q.31.

¹⁶ *Catechism*, Q.51.

Catechism stresses that “it is Christ that gives meaning to the whole revelation [of God] in Scripture”.¹⁷

As the first official doctrinal documents composed by the United Church itself after Union, the *Statement of Faith* and the *Catechism* gave little credence to the “higher criticism” of the academy that was by the 1940s well ensconced in the intellectual life of many in the United Church. Against the historical-critical scholarship and the social analysis so much in vogue at the time,¹⁸ the *Statement of Faith* and the *Catechism* asserted clearly that biblical interpretation need not annex itself nor subordinate itself to any form of human inquiry apart from theology. The Bible is authoritative, meaningful, and properly understood through practices of interpretation that, ultimately, predated Church Union. It is noteworthy that both of the 1940s documents retrieved a specific element of past traditions that had been omitted in the *Basis of Union*: the role of the Holy Spirit in interpretation.

Interim Summary

Thus the first half of the story of the United Church’s approach to the Bible reveals a mixture of forces. The denomination began with inherited patterns and perspectives on the sacred text that were orthodox and uncontroversial to the founding faith communities. After Union was accomplished, however, other theological influences, which in some cases predated Union negotiations, pressed public theological debate toward liberating, even revolutionary, social practices, and toward the embracing of new academic critical methods. Still other forces rallied to resist the latter movements, and reclaimed

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, Q.30.

¹⁸ Chalmers notes some criticisms that were leveled at the *Statement of Faith* in the early 1940s: “Some have said that its language is too traditional and lifeless, others that its contents lack social vision and perspective.” Chalmers himself, on the other hand, praises what he calls the “progressive conservatism” embodied in the *Statement*. R.C. Chalmers, *See the Christ Stand! A Study in Doctrine in The United Church of Canada* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1945) p. 228.

and reasserted quite traditional doctrinal and interpretive norms. In the official teaching of the denomination at the close of this period (the 1940s), traditional orthodoxy and resistance to liberalism tended to predominate. The second half of the story, which will appear in an article in the next issue of *Touchstone*, has rather a different outcome. In the period we will consider next (1950s-1990s), the authoritative voice of *tradition* met an equally powerful authority: *liberation*.