

BUILDING UP THE CORE IS ESSENTIAL

by Nancy T. Ammerman¹

I recently had the opportunity to read a series of essays written by young adult Mennonites, essays reflecting on their “wrestling with the text”. The text in question, not surprisingly, was the Bible, and their recounting of coming to terms with its complexity set me to thinking about my own experiences and what I’ve observed in recent years in American communities of faith. After rejecting the Bible of the fundamentalists, can people in the mainline reclaim this text? Would it matter if they did? As I listened to those young Mennonites, it seemed to me that the answer to both those questions must be yes.

I have to admit to reading their stories with a good dose of nostalgia. Like them, I grew up doing my “daily Bible readings” (we didn’t call it a lectionary, but it was) and memorizing weekly verses in Sunday School. I not only learned to name all 66 books of the Bible, but I could find any given passage faster than almost any “sword drill” competitor around. By the time I was in junior high and active in “Girls Auxiliary” (the Southern Baptist mission organization for girls), I was memorizing whole chapters – Proverbs 31 being among the more daunting. I always took my Bible to church (and never laid it on the floor). My father’s sermons were laced with impromptu references to dozens of verses that would buttress his points, so it was important to have a Bible handy at all times. While I might fail a Bible quiz today, I have a formidable reservoir of memory to call on, with words and images that remain a powerful part of my psyche.

I found myself wondering, however, whether my own young adult daughter has that same reservoir of memory. I have no doubt

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that she knows a great deal about the Bible and holds its values close to her heart; I also know that she simply did not spend her early childhood thoroughly immersed in scriptural words and images that now are be called up to guide her. Her experience probably falls somewhere between the intense biblical surroundings I experienced and the anemic platitudes many liberal Protestants pass along to their children.

Lest you think that last remark is uninformed prejudice, I should tell you that it is a worry born not only from my own research on American congregations, but also from my reading of studies such as *Soul Searching* by Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton (Oxford University Press, 2005) and *Choosing Church: What Makes a Difference For Teens*, by Carol Lytch (Westminster John Knox, 2004). There is reason to worry about the ability of mainline churches to pass on their traditions. In sheer organizational energy invested, the contrast between liberal Protestants and everybody else is dramatic. Everybody does some equivalent of Sunday School (even Muslims and Buddhists); mainline Protestants, however, are the only group that routinely does nothing else. Everyone else has weekday programs or day schools or bar mitzvah classes, for instance; but mainline churches are more likely to sponsor a scout troop than to have a regular organized religious activity for their children.

Many mainline kids don't even hear sermons, since they leave for Sunday school after the opening portion of the worship service. And in many New England churches, religious education shuts down for the summer. Even a pretty regular attender in these churches is lucky to get 20 to 30 hours a year of religious exposure. Also, when children are in Sunday school, free-thinking teachers rarely ask them to memorize anything, lest they be accused of indoctrination. It seems likely that these children's reservoir of biblical memory will run dry before they ever have a chance to reach adulthood.

In some churches, this pattern is more a matter of neglect than intent, while in others it reflects a genuine ambivalence about teaching children the Bible. Is all that Bible reading and memorization a good thing? Have those biblical images embedded

in our brains made us too accepting of patriarchy, too willing to trust authority, to willing to believe? Perhaps. But I am convinced that it need not be so, that when we commit something to memory, it sinks deep and often resurfaces in surprising ways to meet new situations. Biblical fragments (“knit together in my mother’s womb”, “her price is far above rubies”, “plans for your welfare and not for harm”) happily can grow with us, providing both a touchstone of the past and points of connection to new people and new meanings. We stuff our memories with so many things (lyrics to Sesame Street song, Santa’s reindeer), why worry about adding the names of the apostles and the words of Psalm 23 to the mix?

Those biblical words are, in fact, the common language we speak as Christians, part of the tool kit with which we build ourselves and our communities of faith. If nothing else, the Bible’s existence means that we do not have to start from scratch in building a community of faith. And its infinitely multivocal and multiform self also means that there is plenty of material to work with as we and our communities change. Thinking again about how scripture works, I have become convinced that having a canon matters, not just because the words are uniquely inspired or holy or true, but because this is the core set of stories that we’ve all agreed to share and that have shaped us and our forebears in manifold ways. There are always other stories and always many interpretations, but those who have called themselves Christian for all these years have these characters and plots in common.

Spending time building up that core, then, is essential. It can later be deconstructed and reconstructed, added to or set aside, but if we don’t start here, we may lose something very important.

It’s not surprising, of course, that we all look back with ambivalence about the way we experienced the Bible as children. Looking back, we can see how much we simply trusted our families and our communities to tell us reliable stories about what life is like. It is probably equally likely that they didn’t tell us the whole truth. As much as we may feel betrayed when we begin to learn about the Bible’s darker side, that very sense of rupture is a predictable sign of our movement along a developmental path.

Trying to teach children to read the Bible as if they were skeptical young adults is just plain fruitless. I often wish that overanxious liberal parents could just relax and tell their children the stories. Never mind that you know all the sinister complications or that you aren't entirely sure it's true. Your six-year-old doesn't care, and when she does, you should be ready to talk about it.

As the wrestling of youth finds its way into adult commitments, childhood notions of scriptural truth quite naturally give way to more contingent but no less profound notions of faith. This is a postmodern generation that is aware of the power to choose – even to choose the degree to which they make the Bible sacred or give it authority over life. As youth begin to separate out fact from truth, they can continue to listen for revelation as it comes through their own experiences.

No matter how individual and subjective the sorting out may seem, it happens best in a community. Children need communities to tell them the stories *and* to provide a place to ask the questions when that time comes. Youth groups and college-age classes can introduce the questions and provoke the debate – *within* the household of faith, so that young adults do not have to leave the family to explore new territory.

But it is also important that these not be idle debates. While youth are sorting out what they think and how to talk about it, their faith communities can call them to action. One of the strongest and fastest-growing religions in the world today is the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and one of the secrets of the Mormon's success is sending their young adults out on mission. Kids get a challenge and an adventure at a time in life when they want one, but they get that adventure in the company of other Mormons and in the process of trying to convince others to join their movement – something that is very likely to solidify their own commitment to it.

Other traditions may not wish to send their kids out door-to-door, but they can provide equally challenging opportunities for young adults to embody the faith. Working for justice is no less powerful in solidifying a faith than working to produce converts.

Nurturing an engagement with scripture across childhood and into young adulthood requires a robust set of institutions. However imperfect, families and churches and schools and places to work in behalf of God's reign must provide the materials and the skills needed at each step of the way. They are the necessary spaces in which today's words and actions and relationships are put in conversation with the words and actions and people of the Bible. In the earliest days of a child's life, those conversations may be as much visual and tactile as verbal and mental, but that can be followed by cognitive mastery of the biblical landscape and memorization of passages worth having in the reservoir.

At some point, those same communities of faith can provide youth with exemplars of doubters and debaters who are nevertheless full of faith, helping them continue to make the connections between scripture and life. Across the years, biblically grounded adults may be surprised at the truths that emerge from long-memorized fragments to bring comfort and clarity of vision in new circumstances. A community of adult students of scripture is no less vital than that original children's Sunday school.

Some mainline Protestants have begun to talk about not "leaving the Bible to the fundamentalists". Now it is time to make the commitments that will bring talk to life. That may mean allowing more time for children's Sunday school every Sunday, starting regular adult Bible study classes, providing children and youth opportunities to excel and be honoured for their scriptural knowledge, sending intergenerational teams to do service work *and* providing the space for them to talk about what it means for their faith. At the very least, it means that when we think about "religious education", we place the Bible at the top of the list of subjects to be covered. What we may discover when we do is that we have new strength for living our faith in the world, that we can indeed "run and not be weary, walk and not faint" (Isa. 40:31).