

Study Conference – ‘Confessing Jesus in a Pluralistic World’
Bible Study Round Table Discussion
Forest Grove Community Church
Oct 16, 2009

The goal of this session is to hear and discern the words of Scripture together. As with any difficult topic, the question of how we use the Bible is a significant one. This is especially the case when we try to hear the counsel of Scripture on a subject that is not central for the biblical authors themselves.

The structure you see below attempts to reflect both the *range* of biblical material that may be relevant to the question of pluralism and other religions as well as a basic outline of the overarching *narrative* that unfolds throughout the Bible. You will see texts grouped into six categories that attempt to reflect major ‘periods’ of biblical history. Each group will discuss the texts from one category and hopefully common themes will emerge as we hear from one another in the plenary responses.

As you work through the texts and related discussion questions, think about the way your group’s conclusions might fit within the larger biblical structure that you see reflected in the headings of this outline.

Covenant and Promise

(Gen 9:12-16; Gen 12:2-3; Gen 28:13-15; Ex 19:4-6; Deut 4:5-8)

These texts deal with one of the key themes of the Old Testament: in response to human sin and rebellion God has bound himself to his children and promised them a hopeful future. These promises give us insight into God’s ultimate purposes for the world, purposes that we believe reach their climax in Jesus Christ.

Briefly discuss the context of each of the texts above prior to reading them in your groups. If the text is too long to allow for a complete reading feel free to summarize for the benefit of the members of your group. After reading, use the questions below as a guide for your discussion.

Discussion Questions

- What are the implications of God’s covenant with Noah (Gen 9:12-16) for understanding God’s action among the nations?
- What is the function of the promise originally given to Abraham (Gen 12) within the larger story of the Old Testament?
- How should we interpret God’s promise that all of the nations of the earth would be blessed through Abraham (and by extension, the nation of Israel)?
- How is Israel’s identity as a “treasured possession” (Ex 19:5) understood alongside of her calling to be a “kingdom of priests” and a “holy nation” (19:6)? What is a “kingdom of priests”?
- How do Moses’ words in Deut 4:5-8 summarize Israel’s journey and her calling?
- **Key Question:** How would you summarize the promise and calling of Israel? How is this relevant to the question of pluralism?

Israel and the Nations

(Deut 7:1-11; Deut 30:15-20; Josh 23:6-13; Ruth; 1 Sam 28:-1-24; 1 Kings 18:16-40; 2 Kings 5)

Generally speaking these texts deal with the historical journey of the children of Israel as they anticipate and eventually receive their own land and ultimately become a nation. Here one of the key themes is Israel's call to separate themselves from the nations that surround them. But within this narrative we also find a number of stories that present members of other nations in more positive lights. How these two themes fit together is the question you will be addressing.

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Discussion Questions

- Why does God demand such exclusive loyalty to himself in Deut 7:1-11 and Deut 30:15-20? How does the context shed light on this passage? Why are 'the nations' seen as a source of corruption?
- How does the story of Ruth challenge the traditional understanding of Israel's strict separation from then nations around them?
- How should we interpret God's apparent use of a medium in order to speak to Saul?
- How does the story of Elijah and the prophets of Baal at Mt Carmel summarize Israel's predicament during the years of the kings (1 Kings 18:16-40)?
- How does the story of Naaman (an Aramean army commander) offer a different perspective? What motivates Naaman to seek out Elisha? How do you interpret 2 Kings 5:18,19?
- **Key Question:** How do we understand the exclusivity/separation theme of this period alongside the 'surprises' of the other people among whom God is at work?

Judgment and Exile

(Isa 19:23-25; Isa 42:6-9; Isa 44:6-20; Isa 45:1-7; Isa 49:5-6; Jer 29:4-7; Amos 9:5-8; Jonah 4:10-11)

These texts are from the time leading up to, including and following the conquest of Israel and the exile of Judah. They reflect a growing crisis in Israel's understanding of their future and the fulfillment of God's promises. As the children of the covenant come into increasing conflict with other nations, we see some new themes developing regarding what the 'hope of Israel' looks like and who it may ultimately include.

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Discussion Questions

- In general terms, why were the nations of Israel and Judah conquered and exiled? (see 2 Kings 17:7-23)
- How should we interpret Isaiah 19:23-25 in light of the preceding verses?
- How does Isaiah 42:6-9 represent a 'new thing'?
- Who is Cyrus (Isa 45:1)? What role does he play within God's larger plan for his people? Who is normally the 'Lord's anointed' in the history of Israel?

- How could Jeremiah's letter to the exiles (Jer 29:4-7) be understood as a model for interaction in a pluralistic environment?
- How are the Lord's words in Amos 9:5-8 a challenge to Israel's identity and sense of security?
- Who are the Ninevites? Why does Jonah run away from God?
- **Key Question:** How do these various aspects of Israel's emerging hope address the question of pluralism?

Jesus Christ

(Mt 2:1-12; Mt 8:5-12; Mt 15:21-28; Lk 10:25-37; Luke 17:11-19; Jn 4:19-26; Jn 14:1-7)

As Mennonite Brethren our confession is that "the person, teaching and life of Jesus Christ [brings] continuity and clarity to both the Old and New Testaments" (Confession of Faith, Article 2). We believe that, in Jesus, we find the clearest and most comprehensive revelation of the character and purposes of God. During his ministry Jesus clearly raises expectations that he is the one through whom God's ancient promises to Israel will be kept. Yet he also subverts these expectations and points toward a new understanding of the identity of the people of God.

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Discussion Questions

- What is Matthew communicating by telling of a group of foreign scholars who recognize the royal identity of Jesus?
- How does Jesus use the faith of the Roman centurion to point toward the ultimate purposes of God (Mt 8:5-12)?
- How should we understand Jesus' words to the Canaanite woman (Mt 15:21-28)?
- Which two questions is the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25-37) told in response to? How would this parable have been heard by those listening to Jesus?
- What is the message of Luke 17:11-19?
- What is the context of the famous verse in John 14:6? Who is Jesus speaking to? What concern is he addressing?
- **Key Question:** How should we interpret Jesus' interactions with people outside of Israel?

The Experience and Proclamation of the First Christians

(Acts 4:8-13; Acts 10,11; Acts 14:15-17; Acts 15[cf. Gal 2:11-21]; Acts 17:16-34 [cf. Isa 42:5])

Much of the church's early theology was forged in a pluralistic context. While the church was initially seen as a radical offshoot of first century Judaism it quickly spread to the Gentiles which forced the early evangelists to frame their message with the dominant ideas and beliefs of their contemporaries in mind. Briefly discuss the context of each of the texts above prior to reading them in your groups. After reading, use the questions below as a guide for your discussion.

Discussion Questions

- What do we learn through the story of Peter and Cornelius? How does this encounter challenge Peter (see 10:28,29,34)?

- Paul and Barnabas offer a rebuke to the citizens of Lystra and Derbe but they also point toward the ‘testimony’ that God has left them (Acts 14:15-17). What is this testimony?
- What is the pivotal issue that the early church is forced to face in Acts 15 (Gal 2:11-21).
- In Acts 17:16-34 Paul preaches to the citizens of the Greek city of Athens. How does he begin his message? What does he appeal to? What else do you notice about his presentation of the gospel?
- How do we understand these texts that point to God’s revelation to all in light of the exclusive statement in Acts 4:12?
- **Key Question:** What new directions do these early proclamations of the gospel point in?

The Teaching of the Early Church

(Rom 1:18-20; Rom 2:12-16; Eph 2:11-18; Eph 3:1-13; Col 1:15-20; 1 Peter 2:9,10 [cf. Ex 19:6]; Rev 7:9-10)

The early church came to see itself as heirs of the promises of Israel. This recognition forced them to revise their understanding of who the people of God actually were and what the basis of that peoplehood was. As they reflected on these themes, early church leaders concluded that the unity of the new people of God was based on their shared faith in Jesus Christ, even as they asked questions about what this meant for others.

Briefly discuss the context of each of the texts above prior to reading them in your groups. After reading, use the questions below as a guide for your discussion.

Discussion Questions

- In Rom 1:18-20 Paul argues that what may be known about God has been plain to all people. How does he make his case?
- On what basis does God judge the Gentiles who are without the law according to Rom 2:12-16?
- What is the ‘barrier’ that Christ has destroyed according to this Eph 2:14?
- How do we understand the ‘peace’ that Jesus has made possible?
 - Social and political – i.e. between peoples?
 - Personal reconciliation with God?
- Compare with Matthew 10:34 - "Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword." Does Jesus ‘divide people’? Is this a legitimate part of the conversation on the peace that he has made (and the peace that he *is*)?
- In Eph 3:1-13, the whole text centers around the revelation of a ‘mystery’. What once was hidden is now disclosed. What is that mystery?
- Compare with Proverbs 3:13-20; 8:22-31
 - When the author of Ephesians uses the word ‘wisdom’ he is calling upon a long Jewish tradition. How do these texts shed light on the Ephesians text?
 - How would you define ‘wisdom’ based on these texts in Proverbs?
 - What does it mean to see Jesus as the ‘manifold wisdom of God’?
- How does the picture of Jesus Christ in Col 1:15-20 differ from the picture we find in the gospels?
- Which OT text does 1 Peter 2:9,10 appropriate? How does Peter’s application of this verse to the church represent something new in terms of the purposes of God?
- **Key Question:** How do these New Testament texts address the issues of nationhood and peoplehood that have characterized the entire biblical narrative (see Rev 7:9,10)?