

## I. Intro.

### **A. 2 weeks ago in worship we were blessed by the humorous and sometimes riveting personal testimonies of Katie & JE Misz, and Liz & Phil Habecker, as they were received as members**

1. They gave us some insights into how all 4 of them, raised in churches other than Mennonite, came to be drawn to the Mennonites in general, & to Waterford in particular
2. In fact, these stories partly overshadowed Katie's helpful sermon on God's sense of time shaping how we live our lives as Christians
3. Faith stories like these are often highlights of our shared worship experiences ... they warm our hearts, because they show us God powerfully @ work in people's lives & in our own congregation

### **B. There's another time in the typical church year that I also consider a highlight, but it doesn't happen on Sunday morning in the sanctuary**

1. In a congregation w/ numerous youth group members attending Bethany Christian Schools, we usually have a few high school seniors taking the mandatory Bible class there with Dale Shenk.
  - a) The final exam for that class is an extended oral faith statement of about 20 minutes by each student
  - b) Some of Waterford's BCS seniors have chosen to present theirs on a Wed. night here @ church, often with their friends, family present
2. In the past 13 years or so of hearing these authentic faith statements, I have heard several students naming the sources of ultimate authority in their lives.
  - a) Many of them name the Bible in some way. For a few the Bible is clearly the most important authority in their lives
  - b) But I've noticed that for some, their faith in God or respect for Jesus does not draw heavily on the Bible
  - c) I'm also struck by how many youth in churches today, no matter what school or denomination they attend, seldom actually read from the Bible or know what's in it.

## II. Frankly, the youth are not alone

**A. If some youth are giving little more than lip service to the importance of the Bible in their lives ... perhaps it's because we adults have taught them well**

1. How often do we as parents and role models actually read from the Bible outside of church services?
2. How often do we make any authoritative reference to it in our daily lives?

**B. In today’s world, the Bible is considered largely irrelevant, so that even many professing Christians hardly bother with it**

1. Biblical illiteracy is a growing issue for all ages, not just for youth
  - a) After all, why should we bother today with a book composed by many different authors and written over a period of a thousand years in a distant culture?
  - b) It doesn’t take a rocket scientist to observe that whatever we’re unfamiliar with, functionally it’s irrelevant to us ... it’s “off our radar screen”, so to speak

We may casually say the Bible is still relevant today, but if we were honest some of us would admit to desperately wishing this incomprehensible volume from 2K years WERE relevant today

But the relevance of the Bible is not in what we say we believe re. it ... in the end, we’re serious about the Bible’s relevance only IF we read it, study it, pray it and live it.

2. If you recognize those last few words I just said, it comes from the big congregational emphasis we did 3 years ago, called Year of the Bible
  - a) The motto: read it, study it, pray it, live it.
  - b) How many of you remember YOTB? How many of you read through the whole Bible during that year? Let’s give them a silent hands-raised affirmation!

**III. Today we’re concluding this series on 4 primary symbols of the Christian faith with “Book” – The Bible**

**A. (As you heard from Aaron), what we’re focusing on today is the last of the 4, but certainly not least in this series**

1. About 10 years ago, Mennonite World Conference distributed “Seven Shared Convictions” of Anabaptist-Related Churches, as a way of identifying some core beliefs held in common within MWC
  - a) Paraguayan theologian Alfred Neufeld developed these shared convictions into a great little book called What We Believe Together
  - b) The fourth of these shared convictions from Mennonite World Conference is as follows:

*As a faith community, we accept the Bible as our authority for faith and life, interpreting it together under Holy Spirit guidance, in the light of Jesus Christ to discern God's will for our obedience.*

(Mennonite World Conference General Council, in Alfred Neufeld, What We Believe Together, Good Books, ©2007, p. 4)

## **B. The fact that we even had something called YOTB shows how foundational this book is as a symbol of our faith**

1. It might be possible to have a "Year of Baptism" ... or a "Year of the Lord's Supper", but there is something unique about the Bible among the great symbols of our faith.
  - a) True – the Bible is not exactly something you DO, like baptism or the Lord's Supper
  - b) Yet it is also more than just something you read ... something you just pick up and set down when you feel like it.
2. As the trustworthy Word of God written, it is not the only way God speaks to us, but it is an indispensable way.
  - a) If you want to understand who God is, what God thinks of you, why you are here, and what God wants for you, the Bible is the crucial source for that message.
  - b) After the Holy Spirit itself, the Bible is the most important resource for us to draw close to God and to follow in God's will.
  - c) That's why the Bible is not just "something you read" ... In today's digital world everything is just a few clicks away. We are drowning in stuff to read.
3. But if you consider yourself a Christian ... a Christ-follower ... then you need to let the Bible read you!
  - a) That means you submit yourself to the pattern of living that the Bible reveals God wants for God's people
  - b) As it says in verses we heard from 2 Timothy 3, the Scriptures are able to make you wise for salvation & to train you in righteousness.
  - c) You "let the Bible read you" when you read it often ... when you pray and memorize its words so that those words settle within you ... they become familiar ways of thinking and acting for you

## **IV. So how do we view this Bible? What kind of book is it?**

Allow me to review with you some of the most basic things we highlighted together in our YOTB:

- A. **Across the breadth of history and Xian churches, various traditions have viewed the Bible in different ways:**

1. Some see it as a book of laws, propositions, ideas & theology
2. A single book of scattered, disconnected stories (& we somehow piece together an idea of God & what God wants)
3. (more common) A book of a God-scripted “puppet show” of God solving the sin problem
  - a) Often described in terms of an unchangeable “plan of salvation” where God had everything preordained
  - b) When you look at the Bible this way, all the human actors are like puppets in a divine script, where human decisions are actually initiated by God pulling the strings, even if the people don’t know it
  - c) This can make the Old Testament almost meaningless, existing basically to give a promise of the future solution, & then bide the time until Jesus arrives
4. A dynamic story of God’s interaction with a chosen people through whom God would be revealed to the whole world, for the purpose of reconciliation

## **B. This is the view we presented in YOTB**

1. And for this grand integrated overview of the Bible, we gratefully borrowed some excellent material from the Hesston College BibLit class that was taught by Marion Bontrager for over 25 years
2. If you ask any HC alumni who took that BibLit course, one of its legacies is a big long word – a word we introduced in YOTB

## **V. Heilsgeschichte**

**A. Let me explain that a little**, since you may have wondered, why did we feature a German word that’s 15 letters long?

1. For simplicity, we used a rough translation (“salvation history”) but that isn’t really adequate, either.
2. After all, what do we mean by this word ‘history’?
  - a) Some of us tend to think about history as just a set of facts ... a linear account of events happening in a sequence.

There’s a German word for that understanding, almost the same as the English: *historie*, which is basically just recounting the facts

But notice that we didn’t use that word to describe the Bible

- b) Instead, there’s another German word, *geschichte*, which goes beyond *historie*: *Geschichte* is basically facts + interpretation

*Geschichte* does not claim to be neutral & objective. It is interpreted history, with a message it intends to tell.

- c) Think of the difference between them like this

*Historie*: My car spun on the ice, hit a tree, & I walked away unharmed.

*Geschichte*: My car spun on the ice, hit a tree, & God saved my life.

3. So to be more accurate, *heilsgeschichte* = holy interpreted history  
That's more of a mouthful than the German word!

## B. And why does this big word matter?

1. This word informs what we expect to find in the Bible

- a) We don't come to the Bible expecting it to be a scientifically provable history book.

The Bible is a salvation book, not a science book.

The Bible was not written to answer questions that would not even be framed in modern scientific terms for another 1800 years!

- b) Although we don't expect the Bible to be a science book or an exact history book, we do expect writings that will point us to God

- c) We expect the Bible to give us guidance for living, once we take into account the differences between our worldview and the biblical worldview

2. Seeing the Bible as *heilsgeschichte* and not merely *historie*, is spoken most clearly in the words of John 20:31 -- these [things] are written so that you may come to believe<sup>[a]</sup> that Jesus is the Messiah,<sup>[b]</sup> the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name

- a) The Bible was given to us not merely to teach us about God, or to provide facts about the Jews and the early church.

- b) It was given to point us toward a living and committed faith in God, as eventually revealed to us in Jesus

## VI. When we went thru our YOTB, we also borrowed a few tools that the HC BibLit course provided

- A. These tools can help Bible students make more sense of all those seemingly disconnected stories ... **I will name 3 of these tools**

1. The 1<sup>st</sup> tool we Anabaptists use is a Christocentric interpretation of the Bible

- a) We view Jesus Christ as the ultimate fulfillment of God's revelation

A Christocentric approach means that when things don't agree in the Bible, we take the life, death and teachings of Jesus as the over-riding authority for interpretation

Another way to say this, in the form of a simple little jingle:  
“When things don't agree, Jesus is the referee”

b) A Christocentric approach also means Jesus is our yardstick both spiritually and ethically

When I was pastoring in Kansas, I remember being at a retreat led by Dale Schrag, long-time director of church relations at Bethel College (the Mennonite Bethel, not the one in Mishawaka)

(a) Dale is a church historian who loves to dress up as 16<sup>th</sup> C. Anabaptist leaders to describe what was unique in their approach to the Bible

(b) Dale made reference to teachings like the Sermon on the Mount, because ...

(i) some Christians spiritualize it,

(ii) others say it doesn't apply to countries and warmaking,

(iii) and still others say it applies only to some future millennial time but not to us today

What was memorable about a Christo-centric hermeneutic was what Dale said next: “We believe Jesus meant what he said ... and he was talking to us.”

2. A 2<sup>nd</sup> tool is the Heilsgeschichte timeline which Marion Bontrager developed as a visual aid or shortcut

a) You have it not only up here on a banner, but also in the pocket in the back of your blue hymnals

b) The timeline is basically linear, covering from the creation through the early church ... yet it is not simply a straight line

Sometimes the line goes up or down to show highlights or low points in the story of God's people

And the timeline shows more than one parallel line going on, reflecting both God's ultimate will and God's remedial will due to the people's disobedience.

3. The 3<sup>rd</sup> tool is a set of 3 basic orientation questions that can be helpful to ask when reading any part of the Bible

a) When we're trying to make sense of a Bible passage within the bigger salvation history, we can sometimes get perspective by asking 3 questions:

What is the sin problem?

What is God doing to solve the sin problem?

How faithfully are God's people cooperating?

**b)** These 3 questions can also help us make sense of the colored bars that run along the edge of the timeline.

## **B. (Broadbased review of Heilsgeschichte)**

1. Roughly speaking, the sin problem is defined in the creation & fall stories that give us pictures of sin & its effects ...
2. the solution to the sin problem is promised in God's covenant with Abraham to make his descendants into a people that are blessed and that bless the whole world
3. The solution is begun when a true covenant people of God is formed out of the Exodus of a ragtag assembly of Hebrew slaves from Egypt, but the people are often unfaithful to their covenant
4. The attempted solution continues when God's people do not trust God to lead them and fight for them but insist on taking up weapons and having a king like other nations, which is not what God wanted for them. Still, God let them have what they asked for, including the consequences it would bring in violence and turning away from God
5. The solution for the sin problem, according to God's original vision, is finally accomplished in the birth, life, death and resurrection of God's Son Jesus Christ and the coming of the Holy Spirit
6. And with the creation of the church by the power of the Holy Spirit, the solution continues to be realized even to this day through this new chosen covenant people

**c. We in the church are that new chosen covenant people, which brings us back to today!**

## **VII. Conclusion**

**A. A little earlier I urged you to let the Bible read you ... I also began by referring to the power of hearing people's faith stories**

1. In the youth faith exploration class which Pastor Katie is leading, they are using a book by Michelle Hershberger, who also teaches the HC BibLit course ... Her book is titled, God's Story, Our Story
2. That phrase "God's story, our story" also captures part of what I mean by letting the Bible read you

3. Your aim as a Christian is not to overlay the God-narrative on your busy life, so that "Christian" becomes simply one of many equal layers of your own story

a) But that's what lots of Christians today are doing ... putting some Christian language (some Christian window dressing) over a life that is primarily based on self-centered and worldly values and actions.

b) Friends, that's just backwards from what God wants!

**B. What the God of the Bible wants from us is for our lives to be centered on God's big story of love, as revealed through Jesus**

1. Rather than us trying to squeeze God into the margins of our story ... or us thinly pasting God over the surface of our story ...
2. God wants us to find our true story within God's story!
3. When our lives are centered in the overwhelming, never-ending, recless love of God shown to us in the Bible, our own personal stories will find their deepest meaning!

**C. Brothers & sisters, let me leave you with 3 concluding truths about this book (*hold up Bible*) this foundational symbol of our faith:**

1. You can't fully know God's desires for you apart from the Bible
2. If you want to be a follower of Jesus, reading the Bible through eyes of faith puts you in the best place for doing that
3. Finally ... don't just read the Bible, let the Bible read you

**D. May these 4 symbols of book, bath, table & time always keep us rooted and grounded in divine love! Amen**