

READING THE BIBLE WITH THE PEOPLE

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Embrace Bible's message for the poor, Tutu tells Evangelicals

'The Bible has revolutionary power to free the poor',

Archbishop Desmond Tutu told a conference of Evangelical UK Christians and church leaders in London at the weekend.

The Nobel Prize winner was speaking at an event organised by Evangelical aid agency Tearfund and Jesus House for all the Nations on Saturday, where he challenged churches to be 'the hands, feet, eyes and ears of Jesus' in the fight against local and global poverty.

Drawing on his experiences in apartheid-dominated South Africa, the Archbishop told more than 800 delegates:

“If you want to keep people subjugated, the last thing you place in their hands is a Bible.”

“There’s nothing more radical, nothing more revolutionary, nothing more subversive against injustice and oppression than the Bible.”

Let me read the words of Archbishop Tutu again... Are we in agreement with Archbishop Tutu in his appreciation of the role of the Bible in people’s lives and in the church? If we want to see people freed from economic and social oppression, are we giving them the Bible?

Where are we as we begin to look at our topic “Reading the Bible with the people”? The first question that we must answer before going any further is this:

What place does the Bible occupy in the life and mission of our churches and our church members – people like us? What place does the Bible occupy in our lives?

Buzz session (5-10 mins)

Discuss in pairs this question: **What is the place of the Bible in the life and mission of our churches and our church members?** You may want to begin by thinking of the relevance of the Bible in the daily life of our church members, and then consider the use of the Bible in the church—either in the liturgy, or in worship, in the singing, in the preaching, in evangelisation, in the mission of the church...

Feedback: What have you heard that you would like to share with everyone present? What is the place of the Bible in our churches? What is its place in our lives?

If Archbishop Tutu is right in his appreciation of the power of the Bible to free people from poverty and injustice and oppression, some big questions come to mind. We will consider an example that comes from Latin America where the evangelical church is growing very rapidly, and at the same time violent crime is increasing markedly as well. As an example, we will take the poor little country of El Salvador (named for Jesus Christ, the Saviour *El Salvador*). We have often visited the country, and a daughter and her husband have served there as missionaries. Evangelical churches report many new “converts”, and mega-churches are drawing large crowds with the preaching of the gospel of prosperity. Why is it then that El Salvador, where the church is growing so fast, at the same time is known as a very violent country, -- so violent that our daughter and her husband relinquished their ideal of living with the people and moved in to a closed, gated community—Why is it that El Salvador is known as a very violent country, with gang warfare a growing problem and the murder rate one of the highest in the world? This is the question Salvadoran church leaders are facing. Why is the growing church not making an impact on society? Are Christian families any different? How can there be as high a ratio of domestic violence in Christian families as in society at large, as statistics show?

Is the problem that there is something missing in the Gospel message to which these people have responded? Is the message that has been preached to them only the offer of a place in heaven after death? Have people received a truncated gospel that has prepared them for heaven but has not prepared them to live on this earth? Is the church not providing the teaching that is needed? Has the Bible been left closed up in our churches instead of touching the every-day life in the **home**, in the **workplace**, or in **society** in general – as well as in the **church** ?

This need presents us Christians with quite a challenge: How can we cooperate so that the fulfills its purpose of changing people’s lives? What should we do today to allow the Bible to be “revolutionary against injustice and oppression,” as Archbishop Tutu says? Are we helping to put the Bible into the hands –and the hearts—of the people who call themselves Christians? How can we help people read the Bible? Can the Bible be freed from its identification with the theologians, the clergy, and the institutionalised church that many people are rejecting, leaving or just drifting away? Can we take the Bible to the people where they are living, so it can accomplish its mission and be the liberating force that Bishop Tutu envisions?

Reflecting on this challenge, I find two essential elements in getting the Bible to the people:

1. The use of modern translations of the Bible in the language of the people.
2. A community or small group that provides the atmosphere conducive to understanding, interpreting and actualising (or applying) the principal teachings of the biblical text.

1. The Bible, the book for the people in their own language

To the people of Israel sacred history was their personal history; the Psalms were their hymnal, the expression of their faith in God. The Old Testament written in Hebrew was soon translated into Greek for the Jews returning from the Babylonian exile, and the NT was written in *koine* Greek, the trade language for all peoples throughout the sprawling Roman Empire (Greeks and Jews, slaves and slave owners, men and women). As Christians took their faith abroad there was need for translations to take the Word to all peoples in their own language (Syriac, as they went north; Coptic in Egypt as they traveled south). But the subversive character of the Bible in the hands of the people, as Bishop Tutu says, led to the persecution and martyrdom of some of the early translators who gave their lives to give the Bible to the people in their own language.

We have seen the importance of modern translations of the Bible in popular language. I think of Dominga, a young mother who had become a Christian through a little mission church with which we were working. When the Kairos retreat center opened, Dominga joined the team, in charge of the cooking and cleaning, and often was busy on Sunday mornings. She visited a local church that has an evening service, and returned quite puzzled -- her well marked, well worn copy of the popular version of the Bible showed the importance of the Word in her spiritual growth -- but she simply could not adapt to the use of the old classical translation of the Bible, or to using archaic Spanish in prayer, as was the practice in the church she visited. Her Christian experience was too down-to-earth, too much a part of her every-day life, for her to express it in unaccustomed archaic literary vocabulary. Dominga -- and many like her -- find that the distance between their life-experience and the Bible's teaching is sufficiently great that they don't need to have to struggle with an archaic form of their own language as well.

But modern language versions are not only for the uneducated. How many educated people have read and repeated "religious" language from the Bible or the prayer book without ever really stopping to think of the meaning of the religious-sounding words? Could we communicate the meaning of *salvation*, *redemption* or *sanctification* in one-syllable words? Could we express them in the vocabulary that our teenagers use? I remember leading a weekly Bible study with the recovering drug addicts in the Rehabilitation center our church helps to support. As we met informally to read the Bible and discuss its meaning for life, at first the young people would give me the "religious" answers they thought I wanted. But when they began to talk freely in their slang off the streets -- the way they talk with each other -- when I couldn't understand half of what they were saying -- then I knew they were understanding what they had read. They were interpreting and contextualising the biblical text; and formed a small hermeneutical community. But they wouldn't have understood those words. They were just reading the Bible and expressing their personal reactions to the character of Jesus, their new hero who dared to defy the hypocritical religious establishment of his day, as one fellow later described his experience of conversion to Jesus Christ.

2. From the Bible to life: Small group, the community that interprets and applies

This brings us to the second part of our reflection, the moment in which the Bible and the every-day life of a person intersect. It is here that the Bible begins to fulfill its purpose, as the Holy Spirit brings the light of the truth into contact with the mind and heart of the people.

Join me and 4 or 5 women around the table in a hot, crowded little house in a poor sector of BuenosAires...

“Cyprus? Cyprus!”, interrupted Liliana excitedly, as another woman was reading aloud about Barnabas from the end of the fourth chapter of Acts. “My brother is in Cyprus!” And she went on to explain that her brother hadn’t been able to find a job and had joined the Army and was stationed on Cyprus with the UN peace-keeping forces. For a while Acts and Barnabas were forgotten as Liliana told how her brother had written about the beautiful beaches of Cyprus. This point of contact gave a new sense of reality to the Bible for Liliana and the other women seated around the table. If Cyprus was a real place –as it was for Liliana-- then Barnabas could be a real person and his gift to the Christian community a real action that could be repeated today. The Bible reading turned out to be not only about first-century Christians, but about 21st century ones as well, as the women criticized the way the official church charges for its services. They even came to talk about their own responsibility to give to help their own little church, even out of their poverty...

I would like to recommend Bob Ekblad’s *“Reading the Bible with the Damned”* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005) for examples of situations in which the rural poor in Honduras and especially groups of prisoners in a U.S. county jail were able to read biblical narratives, identify with biblical characters, and understand the message in the text for themselves –identification on the most basic levels of human life and emotions. Ekblad describes the sense of failure and shame of undocumented immigrants who had been arrested for selling drugs often enough that they could only expect a jail sentence and deportation, and consequently the end of any opportunity to earn dollars to send back to Mexico to their families. The Bible brought the good news that just as God forgave, restored and used Jacob or Moses, he could do the same for people who had failed today.

Ekblad has done what I have never been able to do: remember, record and relate the details of the way people have responded to reading the biblical text. I wish I had, because time and again I have been humbled and impressed by the way simple people show profound insight into the practical application of Scripture truth in their lives.. They are the ones who understand Archbishop Tutu’s statements about the power of the Bible to free the oppressed . Dominga is one who understands--in her Bible she has discovered a new sense of her own worth, her personal dignity as a child of God, and her responsibility for her life, She is the first to admit to making many mistakes, but she also is using her abilities and gifts. She recognised the importance of education, so while she was working with us in the

kitchen, she did her entire secondary school; then she entered the national university, and now has completed half the requirements for her degree in social work. She chose this field in order to serve God and help people.

We have seen in different situations the value of the give-and-take of Bible study in a small group, with the leadership of a lay facilitator – not a pastor or clergyman, who represents the religious authority and is expected to have and to give all the answers. The responsibility of the ‘pastors and teachers’ is to prepare the church to serve – including preparing facilitators to give leadership to small groups. These small group can provide the setting for each member to give and to receive, because each individual has something to share and some need to be filled. A small group that meets frequently can provide the intimacy and the freedom for people to be themselves, to be open, to share and to learn, as together they read, interpret and apply biblical narratives and instructions.

Two Roman Catholic authors have shared in writing their experiences in participating in Bible reading with simple people in the base communities movement: Carlos Mesters in Brazil and Ernesto Cardenal in Nicaragua. Cardenal records the conversations that result from the reading of a Bible portion in a small rural community, Solentiname. Mesters details the hermeneutical process that takes place in the popular study of the Bible, as people meet the Author in the text, using very creative parables in illustration of biblical truth.

I would like to take you with me to visit the poor, violent little country of El Salvador and let you see a bit of what can happen when the Bible intersects people’s daily lives, when people read the Bible in light of their daily life, or when they live their daily life in light of the Bible. The leader of the largest Pentecostal denomination told our daughter of the need he felt for better preparation for local and rural pastors and leaders, and she suggested a study program that we had developed in Buenos Aires for use with lay leaders, the Centre for Interdisciplinary Theological Studies. In its first stage this program was prepared for college or university graduates, to help them integrate their faith, their daily lives, and their profession. In place of the typical seminary program in theology, it focused on thinking theologically about the whole of life: Work, Family, Society, and Church. Then we were impressed by the need for similar material for church leaders who had little formal academic skill, but a real desire to prepare for service in the church. In this program as well everything centers on four areas of practical life: Work, Family, Society and the Church. Learning takes place during the class sessions as a facilitator (preferably not a professor or pastor) moderates and the group reads and discusses the topic.

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