

Introduction

As Christians, we need to think carefully about how we use the Bible in debates about life, ethics and justice. Do we use the Bible as an expression of good news and love or as a weapon of control? What can we learn from past debates in the church that might help us with current controversies? Does the church change its mind, and if so, why?

Poverty

There was once a hymn verse *"The rich man in his castle, the poor man at his gate, God made them high and lowly, and gave them their estate"*. Today, this verse is not included in our hymn books. As the churches developed a new understanding of poverty, they became aware that the language used about the poor was harmful and inappropriate. The church now recognises the bias towards the poor in the Gospels of Luke and Matthew, for example, and in the prophets. Charity is important but we also need to do something about the causes of poverty. This requires that we understand the life of people in poverty not from our own perspective, but from theirs.

Many people die as a result of poverty – currently, some 30,000 children a day die around the world. Terms like 'deserving poor' from the 19th century, or 'bludgers' and 'welfare cheats' from our own time, violate peoples' human dignity and their right to be heard.

Churches now talk about the 'structures of sin' (institutions, policies, systems, social codes) that privilege some people and leave others struggling to survive. Churches realise, for example, that the poverty in which many factory workers found themselves during the 19th century was not the result of their own failure to work hard but because they were being exploited unjustly by their employers. This realisation saw the beginning of the Christian support for unions.

Women

In the 1980s, debate raged in the churches about a range of issues to do with women in the church. Women drew attention to the way theological language reinforced negative attitudes about women and contributed to domestic violence and misogyny. The churches were also forced to confront the Biblical stories of violence against women and the impact this had on women's lives. Such 'texts of terror' need to be treated as a warning of how belief can lead to behaviour that is appallingly destructive and inconsistent with the God revealed in Jesus Christ.

The church began to recognise the important roles that women play in the life and ministry of Jesus and how they are often at key points of these confessional narratives. As a result there has been a major shift in our understanding of what the Bible says about women. The role of women has changed in most Christian traditions, even those which still do not ordain women, for example, Pope John Paul II apologised to women for the church's past behaviour. Today the Uniting Church is one of many churches around the world that recognises that the church needs the full ministry of women. We recognise that God gives gifts of ministry to women and therefore ordains them and requires their participation in the decision-making, ministry and mission of the church. The Christian understanding of the Biblical tradition has changed dramatically.

Importantly, the Uniting Church has insisted on ordaining women even though some other churches do not. We ordained women before the Anglicans agreed to do so. We know that we would violate women's spirituality and gifts if we failed to recognise them in this way.

Racism and Culture

Some of the most extensive periods of Christian mission coincided with the centuries of European conquest and colonisation. In that era, Christian missionaries confused their own European culture with Christianity. Christianity became a vehicle of colonisation and cultural destruction. That period persisted for hundreds of years and is part of the history the Uniting Church and Australia. At times the Bible itself was used to justify claims that one race was superior over another.

Only in recent times have Western Christian churches realised how much they had syncretised (amalgamated) their own particular culture with their faith. Many things European Christians have assumed to be part of Christianity are in fact part of western culture, with origins outside Christianity. Churches now know that Indigenous Australians and people of non-western cultures need to worship in ways consistent with their own cultural traditions. There are many ways of being Christian. It depends on people's identity and culture. The test of our faithfulness is adherence to the great themes of the faith, particularly those that are the focus of the creeds. Even with these, how churches relate them to life differs from one context to another. Many churches established by Western Christians have imbibed cultural

approaches inconsistent with their own experience and understanding. Western Christians have had to repent of racism, that is, repent of their sense of cultural superiority accompanied by the power to enforce their views as the only legitimate way of thinking and acting. Those who were evangelised also have to repent – to recognise where they replaced their own cultural insights with western attitudes and prejudices. They have also had to rethink many of their cultural attitudes on many matters, such as poverty, women, and violence. Sin corrupts every culture. The Bible is clear *“All have sinned and come short of the glory of God.”* Whatever culture we identify with, Christianity challenges us all.

Learning Anew How to Use the Bible

Other issues on which the church has changed its mind include slavery, disability, the environment, criminal sanctions and war. These shifts were not about adopting the ways of the world, but rather recognition that the church had absorbed the cultural assumptions and violence of society. The church needed to reform. This ongoing need for reform is now recognised in the *Churches' Decade to Overcome Violence*, which challenges violence in all its forms.

We need to remember this history when we approach apparently contentious issues in the 21st century. The Bible reveals the Word of God. It offers us important guidance to the way we live our lives. But, it also contains passages that we cannot use unless we want to abuse. The church knows that we are called to give up violence and to recognise the dignity of all human beings. We have come to understand that the people of God in all ages have to repent and learn of God anew. This understanding requires us all to think carefully about how we use Biblical material in debates on issues such as peace, workplace relations, law & order and sexuality. It is the Christian tradition to learn from those who experience violence in our society; to ensure that nothing in the way we use the Bible or theological ideas causes harm to people.

The story of Job is a story of a man who held extremely orthodox views about life and faith until his own life experience changed. He then began to understand the world in a different way, and to review his understanding of where and how God was present in the world. His friends preferred to condemn him than change their theology. In their view, Job's anger confirmed their condemnation of him. They scoffed at Job challenging God. God, in contrast, boasted about the righteousness of Job, and responded to the challenge. God showed Job a different way of understanding the world, a different theology. Job did not have to repent of the things his friends thought were wrong, but of something quite different – his theology of reward and punishment. In the end, Job was vindicated, and those self-righteous friends were dependent on Job praying for them.

We can no longer talk about the God who called on the Israelites to put men, women and children to the sword and burn all their possessions. We can no longer stone to death unruly sons. We can no longer use those parts of the Bible that suggest that some races are inferior to others, that the rich are blessed by God or that homosexuals deserve to die.

Ethical debates are not mere abstract discussions; people live or die as a result of moral stances on war, poverty, women, crime and sexuality. The Bible reveals the God who dies on a cross in excruciating agony rather than harm human beings. The God revealed in Jesus Christ reaches out with respect to people who have been excluded by the religious establishment as unworthy and sinful purely because of their personal identity – women, the blind, deaf or lame, lepers and people of other races. Jesus placed them at the centre of the Christian community.

We must therefore be extremely careful in the way we use the Bible. Our understanding of the nature of God, the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the 'good news' which is the Gospel demands that we never use the Bible in a way that could be experienced as violence, or interpreted as supporting violence. We must remember our history as a Church on the Way, a history which acknowledges that we must continue to learn the meaning of love, repentance and discipleship in the context of our time and place.

Actions You May Take

- *Pray for wisdom in reading the Bible*
- *Be aware of the personal assumptions that you bring to the Bible*
- *Test conclusions by their effect on people*
- *Focus on the big theme of the Bible; we find salvation in Jesus Christ, expressed in love, forgiveness, grace, liberation, justice, peace and the goodness of creation. Evaluate everything else by this.*
- *Don't assume that the Church has always thought and acted in the same way about a particular issue*
- *Abandon any use of the Bible that may reinforce violent attitudes and actions; ensure your use of the Bible is consistent with the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ*
- *Be open to change, especially when change is consistent with compassion, human rights, and respect for people who are different*

The full article 'Does the Church ever Change its Mind?' can be found at:

www.unitingcarenswact.org.au/advocacy/church