

Does the church ever change its mind?

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September 2005

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'. No one today would sing that verse; it is not included in our hymnbooks. It is based on a world-view that we now see as inconsistent with both reality and theology. The verse can be justified from some parts of the bible, but is outweighed by other parts of the Biblical tradition that alert us to our responsibility. We are to respect everyone and to take account of the way power and greed distort economic relationships.

The church now recognises the bias towards the poor in the Gospels of Luke and Matthew, for example, and in the prophets. We see Jesus as transforming relationships, not merely offering alms. Charity is important but it is not enough; we need to do something about the causes of poverty. Advocacy is now seen as an essential part of responding to people in poverty. This requires that we understand the life of people in poverty not from our own perspective, but from theirs. Only then can we understand the social change that is necessary.

As the churches developed a new understanding of poverty, they became aware that the language used about the poor was harmful and inappropriate. Many people die as a result of poverty – at present, some 30,000 children a day around the world. Poverty is not merely sad or unfortunate, it is violence. Terms like 'deserving poor' and 'undeserving poor', from the 19th century, or 'bludgers' and 'welfare cheats' from our own time cut us off from people in need, violating their human dignity and 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 realised, for example, that the situations of poverty in which many factory workers found themselves during the 19th century were 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.

The idea that God had given people their station in life had to be abandoned as dangerous and unjust. Our perceptions of the bible, our language, our theology and our practice were challenged by reality and compassion. The church had to pay attention to the reality of people's lives. It had to take seriously people's deep sense that it is not right to treat poor people as less than human by perpetuating systems that allow them to languish or die, or blaming them for their situation. When the churches went back to the Bible with this new perspective from life, they discovered Biblical material and theological language that encouraged them in their commitment to justice for the poor.

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. How can we value women if we use male language as if women do not exist? What does it mean to say that human beings are in the image of God if we only use male pronouns and titles for God? 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.

Women scholars raised the awareness within the church of the parts of the Bible that support the dignity and equality of women and their role as ministers of the Christian gospel. 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. In the Uniting Church it is no longer possible to say women are equal but treat them as second class Christians.

Today the Uniting Church is one of many churches around the world that recognises that the church needs the full ministry of women throughout its life. We recognise that God gives gifts of ministry to women and therefore ordain them and require their participation in the decision-making, ministry and mission of the church. The Christian understanding of the Biblical tradition has changed dramatically. We have recognised the contradictions within the Biblical text and explored ways of dealing with that maintain their integrity but bring them into dialogue with the experience of women and a sense of justice.

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 ordain women even though the Orthodox and the Catholic Churches do not. 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 missionaries 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 received the missionaries have also needed to repent. They have had to recognize where they gave up cultural insights that were consistent with the Gospel and replaced them with Western attitudes and prejudices. On these matters they need to restore their own culture. They have had to rethink some of their own cultural attitudes, where these were not consistent with Gospel insights, such as their attitude to women or disability.

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.

Environment

The church has long made the affirmation that God is creator. It is the opening statement of the creeds, a doctrinal statement, not a scientific one. But with a few notable exceptions, churches and theologians used to assume that the Bible justified the exploitation of the natural world by human beings for their own purposes, without regard to the effect on other living things.

Over time Christians watched the harm being done to the environment – the smog, the dirty water, the soil erosion, and the extinction of species. They felt the pain of the earth and so started to look differently at the theological tradition, to ask new questions of the Bible, and to demand new answers. Ecotheology was born. There have always been plenty of theological concepts that should have told us that the earth and the rest of creation mattered. It took the pain of the earth, and the concern of environmentalists, to open our eyes to what the Christian tradition really meant. Now it is mainstream. The Uniting Church is only one of several churches in Australia that has environment on its agenda for social justice advocacy and action, for Christian education of its members and as a theme in worship and prayer.

The question of the environment, like the poor and women, at first aroused hostility within the church. These changes - in perception, in the choice of motivating biblical texts, in the theological language, and in our practice - were the subject of debate, antagonism, hostility and anger. The change to a more responsible view of the environment did not happen easily. Sometimes the theologians themselves were the hardest to convince; sometimes church leaders; sometimes membership.

Now we understand that we are called to care for God's good earth. Not to care for it would run the risk of reversing God's good creation. There is now an "Earth Bible" which looks at the Bible from the viewpoint of the Earth itself. The goodness of creation and importance of caring for it is also a theme in many hymns.

Peace and War

Peace, war and violence is another area where the church has changed its mind. The early church took the view that war was wrong, and Christians gave up the sword. As Christianity became part of empire, just war theory was developed to set some limits on war. Some Christians were pacifist; others used just war theory to evaluate whether a conflict was appropriate. The crusades are an example of war that seemed a good idea at the time, but in hindsight leaves Christians appalled.

In World Wars I and World II, Australian churches supported Australia's involvement. Only a very brave few among church leaders took a stance against either or both of those wars. In 1945, nuclear bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Two cities were flattened, without regard for civilians. Christians and many other people look back, and are appalled. It was an act of barbarity. Their commitment became, 'Hiroshima: never again'.

The United Nations was created in 1945 to "save succeeding generations from the scourge of war". Under its charter, no member nation may initiate war, but only respond to an actual attack. Churches supported its establishment. Its charter is consistent with Christian beliefs in several ways - the reliance on non-violent resolution of disputes and the international rule of law, and the affirmation of human dignity, human rights and the value of international cooperation in human development.

Despite this, in the 1980s when the Uniting Church passed resolutions against war and nuclear weapons, they aroused intense concern and even outrage among church membership. The ideas and beliefs that support war and the arms race were deeply embedded in society and church. The Uniting Church was accused of being unpatriotic and unrealistic. Many harsh words were exchanged. New awareness, new use of the Bible, new theological language and new practice were hard to accept.

In 2003, the National Council of Churches in Australia (NCCA) launched its Decade to Overcome Violence, part of a worldwide Christian movement to challenge the use of violence in all its forms, including war, economic and personal violence. In the six months leading up to the war on Iraq in March 2003, NCCA member churches opposed the war.

When Australia went to war on Iraq in 2003, it went without the blessing of the churches. In the Uniting Church, several synods opposed the war on Iraq and the national assembly in 2003 re-affirmed its belief that war is not the way to resolve international disputes. The new awareness, new use of the Bible, new theological language, new language about people different from ourselves, and new practice that challenge violence are becoming an essential part of the way Christians understand the faith.

Learning Anew how to Use the Bible

These are only some of the issues on which the Church has changed its mind. Others include disability, the charging of interest on money that is lent, and contraception. 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 is now recognised in the Churches' Decade to Overcome Violence, which challenges violence in all its forms. In every case, people cried out against the violence (military, physical, economic or emotional) that they experienced, and the church moved away from violence, towards respectful relationship.

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 for 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 and order, and sexuality. It is the Christian tradition to learn from those who experience violence in our society, and ensure that nothing in the way

we use the Bible or theological ideas causes harm to people.

Faithful, careful use of the Bible requires that we think critically about both life and the Bible. Morality needs a sound ethical basis. That is, if we are to make correct moral choices, to choose right and avoid wrong action, we need to understand what makes things right or wrong. We need some principles to guide us and to help us test the rules that people tell us we should follow. Otherwise we find ourselves bound by rules that are contrary to human rights and the Gospel. We are called to love God with mind as well as heart and soul – to apply discernment, not merely blind obedience. First and foremost we must apply that discernment to ourselves - morality is about our own behaviour, not what we demand of another. Right behaviour comes from the right attitude towards people. Right behaviour expresses values such as respect, love, forgiveness, and justice.

The story of Job in the Old Testament 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, the idea that bad things happen only to bad people. 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 use the parts of the Bible that talk of God wreaking revenge on enemies. 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. No one may be called an abomination. 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 reached out with respect to the people who were excluded from the religious establishment as unworthy and sinful – women, the blind, deaf or lame, lepers, Samaritans, people of other races, a woman who had had five husbands and was living with a man who was not her husband, and so on. Jesus placed them at the centre of the Christian community. Jesus gave those people significant roles. They will be remembered when we are all forgotten. We must therefore be extremely careful in the way we use the Bible. The story of Jesus is a warning against assuming we know who belongs and who does not.

Our understanding of the nature of God, the life, 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 construed 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.

Action

- *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*

A short version for distribution to congregations is available at :

unitingcarenswact.org.au