

Who Cares about the Bible?

by Tyler Schwaller

I have this cynical theory: in church debates, nobody *actually cares* what the Bible says. Words fly as if people are deeply committed to them, and yet, I suspect that Christians—on all sides of debate—are more committed to the outcome such sacred, authoritative words can achieve than to spiritual lives enlivened by biblical engagement.

One action at the 2010 Iowa Annual Conference confirmed my suspicion. A resolution calling for just immigration reform and a radically-hospitable response to xenophobia was replaced by a short, innocuous statement. It was vague enough to win general approval. But the prophetic edge of the original was entirely stripped away so as to say something without really saying anything.

Remarkably, this was achieved by completely striking the Bible from the text. The original resolution was firmly and explicitly rooted in our scriptural tradition of caring for all, even—especially—the stranger. However, scripture did not fit a politically-conservative vision of the world.

Ironic, is it not? One minute folks are deploying sacred texts to condemn LGBT persons and argue that the church should tell civil society how to manage its marriage laws; the next, scripture is thrown out while it is said that the church should not be involved in “political debates” on immigration.

Instead of a tool that informs our faith, too often the Bible is merely a tool for advancing an argument (or apparently something to be ignored when its challenges lead away from our political camp).

I raise this instance, not to debate who reads scripture in the best way, but as a starting point for all people to reflect upon how we engage with the Bible. Do scriptural witnesses of faith truly shape how we live and interact in the world? Or do we quote what will win votes?

These questions serve as the basis for a larger issue I will be exploring in a series of future writings, namely how we in the Wesleyan tradition can and should take the Bible seriously.

As we critically reflect upon the place of the Bible in our lives and work together, may we always take heart by being grounded in scripture when we speak prophetically for justice.

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