

QREC Conversation Circle  
**Quakers and the Bible**  
**Notes**  
10/19/2017

**Present:** Marian Baker, Lee Bennet, Karen Greenfield, Reb MacKenzie, Maria Nicklin, Dean Olson, Julie Peyton, Nia Thomas, May Witte

**Facilitators:** Chris Jorgenson, Peter Blood-Patterson, Sita Diehl

## Welcome

## Description of the Quaker Religious Education Collaborative (QREC)

<http://www.quakers4re.org/>

## Overview of the Agenda

### Centering Silence

### Introductions:

*What draws you to this conversation?*

- Sita Diehl, Nashville TN MM, uses the Bible as a tool for self-reflection and spiritual deepening. She also sees the Bible as essential for cultural literacy, being foundational to western culture. She would like to open the way for other Friends;
- Chris Jorgensen, Cambridge MA MM, sees a lot of wounded people among Friends. Monthly Meetings often tiptoe around issues with the Bible, rather than addressing them. She seeks ways to make the Bible more universally compelling.
- Peter Blood Patterson, Mt. Toby MA MM, was raised in a Friends meeting where Bible study did not go deep enough. As a young adult he encountered the Bible in a direct, powerful way. Offering Bible study in his Monthly Meeting has been meaningful.
- Julie Peyton, Portland OR MM, was raised as an evangelical Christian where the Bible was THE authority and memorizing passages was part of the discipline. The more she read the Bible, the more she found that it wasn't what they said it was. She put away the Bible, but opened it years later with a Quaker understanding. Now she is in love with the book again because with a Quaker understanding she can read the passage and ask, "How is this true?" and waits for understanding, sometimes after a long time has passed.
- Nia Thomas, North Hampton MA MM. She serves as young Friends coordinator for New England Yearly Meeting and co-clerk of North Hampton Ministry and Counsel Committee. Her Meeting struggles to make peace with Christ centered language and the Bible. They are seeking how to use the Bible to understand our Quaker roots. She is new to learning about the Bible although she has loose knowledge of the Bible having grown up in NEYM. One anecdote: She recently attended is the contemplative Episcopal service in which passages are read, followed by a period of silent contemplation. She spotted three other Quakers in the congregation. Nia feels there is a hunger among Friends to learn about the Bible.
- Karen Greenler, Madison WI MM, teaches First Day School to middle schoolers. Many are vocal atheists. They may not know what that means, but they don't want to be associated with the religious right. She values Marcus Borg's framework of factual vs. true.<sup>1</sup> She also resonates with Madeline L'Engle's sentiment, "I take the Bible too seriously to take it all literally." She seeks a way to bring scripture to life for young Friends.
- Lee Bennett, Seattle WA MM, and has been a Friend for 84 years and has studied the Bible consistently. He lives in a retirement community and attends a programmed meeting. One

of the members of his retirement community organizes Jesus seminars. The group has studied the book of Mark and is now in the book of Thomas.

- Dean Olson, Grass Valley MM, Nevada CA, came to Friends from a Lutheran background. He now facilitates a Bible study series, "Finding Jesus, Discovering Self." (See attached sample lesson)
- Maria Nicklin, Goose Creek MM in Lincoln VA, is curious about how other Friends learn the Bible, how it is integrated into First Day School and worship.
- Reb MacKenzie, Quaker City MM, Claremont NH. Introduced to the Bible in a positive way through the Methodist church. As a teen, she grew discouraged with the Methodist Church and did not read the Bible for several years. When she was a young mother, Jehovah's Witnesses visited. Because she did not know the Bible, she could not understand or refute what they were telling her. There are things about the Bible that she does not accept, but more that she does. She studies with New Foundation Fellowship and hungers for more of this type of conversation.
- May Witte, attends Cambridge MA MM. She was raised as a fundamentalist Christian where they studied the Bible extensively. She finds it sad that Quakers view the Bible with mistrust. In her view, learning the Bible is important in understanding western culture.
- Marian Baker, Weare/Henneker NH MM. She has always loved the Bible. She spends 3 – 6 months per year in East Africa. One thing that is lacking is Sunday Schools. She has been sharing about the Bible with Friends there.

#### **Query 1: How does the Bible offer language to explore your inner landscape?**

- Reb loves the mystical orientation of the Bible, its earthy metaphors such as light and darkness or living water. She is inspired by Bible stories of unconditional love. She does not rely on the Bible as moral teaching because there are too many contradictions, although it is helpful to explore scripture at a deeper level than the intellect.
- Chris is drawn imaginatively into Bible stories. She has used Lectio Divina<sup>2</sup>, an open-ended format for meditation on scripture to open familiar passages in new ways. She values the method developed by Walter Wink (see more below) in which one stands in the shoes of the various Bible characters.
- Peter grew from seeing the Bible as a document about the past to a sense of the living Bible, a window through which God touches us in daily life. Like early Friends, he is inspired by John, the mystical gospel. He feels the power in the Bible when he is willing to let it touch him.
- Julie said that by the time she found Friends she had rejected evangelical explanations of the Bible. As an attender she was struck by the passage, "I no longer call you servants, but friends because the servant does not know the master's business." The burden of being a Friend seemed too heavy until she had an opening with the story of Jesus in the Temple in which he said he was anointed by God. The passage showed that she too had access to continuing revelation. Now she finds the most troubling passages in the Bible to be the most fascinating.
- Dean facilitates a weekly Bible study in his monthly meeting using a question-based approach (more below). In the past, the Bible died for him in Hebrew scripture class. Now he loves being alive in the story and feeling the power of the Bible as literature. Walter Wink's imaginative approach also spoke to him. More below.

## Query 2: What fresh, life-giving approaches have you found effective in introducing the Bible to those with reservations or blocks against it?

Peter explained that the idea for this conversation arose from an interest group at the Quaker Religious Education Collaborative Retreat in August. Friends wondered how to introduce the Bible to Friends who feel alienated from it, how to pry scripture open in a way that would be meaningful for them. One approach is to read a passage and simply ask, “What does this text open for you?”

- Several Friends value the method developed by Joanne and Larry Spears (<http://www.read-the-bible.org/friendlybiblestudy.htm>). Six-week sessions focus on a book of the Bible. Participants reflect on a brief passage using a set of questions.
- Dean described the Bible Workbench, a question-based approach developed by the Educational Center (<https://educationalcenter.org/item/the-educational-center>). Questions are posed for specific verses in a passage and individuals respond briefly. Like worship sharing, the class is not a conversation although responses may fall into clusters. This method forges personal connection with the text, each person having value to contribute vs. relying on expert exegesis. See the attached handout for details.
- He also mentioned the Guild for Psychological Studies ([www.guildsf.org/about-the-guild/](http://www.guildsf.org/about-the-guild/)), which offers Bible seminars on sacred texts and wisdom teachings. He participated in a seminar centered on questions such as, “Who is Jesus?” “What is the Bible passage touching in our lives?” “What is the passage calling us to be aware of?”
- Several Friends spoke highly of the late Walter Wink (Union Theological Seminary)<sup>3</sup> who developed an experiential method in which participants look at Bible stories from the perspective of each of the characters in the story, opening a new sense of the text.
- Julie spoke from her experience with Evangelical Christians who believe in the Bible whether or not they have read it. She found that pieces of the Bible were taken out of context and used to batter others. She feels it is important to read the Bible as a whole and to know what it actually says.
- Beth finds Godly Play to be valuable for adult Friends, not just children. Her Meeting hosts ‘All-ages First Day School’ in which Friends are invited to engage with the story in a hands-on way. Playing with the elements of the story leads adults and children alike to a deeper understanding of Bible stories.
- Reb uses Godly Play with middle school Friends, adapting the script to include more of the complexity and difficulty of the stories. In Godly Play, the story teller does not make eye contact with the audience. By focusing on the little figures representing elements of the story, listeners attend to the story rather than the storyteller.

Chris asked what would draw Friends to Bible study who have blocks or wounds from the past? Why would they come? Should Bible study be woven into something else?

- Chris has used Lectio Divina successfully with high school and young adult Friends. Parents often come to Meeting because they want their children to learn the Bible in an open way, free of doctrinal baggage. They may be drawn to Bible study to understand what their children are learning.
- Chris has organized sleep over weekends for Young Friends. A retreat called, “Sex or Jesus” posed playful questions like, “Which has fostered more terrible bumper stickers?” and “Which of these would your parents rather give you a book than talk about it with you?” This sort of provocative approach may be attractive to adults too.
- Peter noted that those who appreciate the Bible often hesitate to share passages as part of vocal ministry for fear of angering others. Actually, when Friends are led to read brief

passages during Meeting for Worship, most people seem to appreciate the opportunity to hear the Bible in a living way.

- Peter recommends Bible study as part of annual retreats. By exposing Friends to the Bible in a convenient setting, those with blocks against it may participate from a sense of exploration. By reading the Bible aloud, the verses come to life, and frequently expose deeper levels of meaning. Peter noted that the Bible originated as oral tradition and is intended to be read in community. He resonates with Godly Play because the stories are learned “by heart” rather than by rote.
- Peter recommended the annual QuakerSpring gathering during which the Bible is read aloud daily according to the tradition of Conservative Friends.
- He notes that in the writings of early Friends, Bible passages are woven together in mysterious ways. Michael Birkel explores this practice in his book, *Reading the Bible with Early Friends*.<sup>4</sup>
- Nia plans to convene adult education in the hour before Meeting for Worship. Friends will be asked to bring a text, quote, poem or passage of sacred text that helped them when they felt spiritually lost. She expects some will bring Bible passages.
- Nia recommends the podcast, “The Bible for Normal People” a series of one-hour programs exploring Bible stories and interviewing scholars on issues related to the Bible. <https://thebiblefornormalpeople.podbean.com/>
- She hears from young adult Friends that the approach of opening the Bible randomly feels awkward for those who are unfamiliar with the book. They lack a sense of context.
- Julie emphasized the value of reading the Bible in different languages, as well as different English translations. In so doing, one realizes that Bible translators have biases. By reading the same passage in different translations one can approach the original intent of the text.
- Julie related her experience with living in other cultures. On several occasions when she was in Africa she was led to speak about the impact of the Bible on her life. Listeners seemed interested rather than intimidated or offended,

### **Query 3: How might interpretive community, including the writings of early Friends, renew our understanding and appreciation for the Bible?**

- Dean said that when reading the Bible in a group, the text frequently comes alive, each person’s perspective contributing to collective insight. The group helps individuals focus, speak out of their lives and attune to the Spirit. In reading the passage aloud, the Bible can trigger realization that speaks to our condition.
- He also finds that the Bible calls us as a community to prophetic action, to civil disobedience on issues such as peace racial justice, the climate or immigrant rights.
- Sita noted that early Friends were so steeped in the Bible that their writings are imbued with scriptural allusions. To truly understand their shorthand, we must trace and read the original passage. Attention to scripture deepens Meeting for Worship and brings a sense of joy and celebration into the community.
- Reb recommended, *That Thy Candles May Always be Burning, Nine Sermons of George Fox*.
- Peter spoke about how we can use the Bible to help Meetings:
  - Resolve conflicts in community;
  - Learn how to be faithful in an unfaithful world;

- Understand radical faithfulness, the Biblical journey with prophesy;
- How vocal ministry can be more closely guided by the Spirit as noted by Barclay;
- Reb described how her Quarterly Meeting gathers to worship and share from scripture as a vehicle to examine the strength of the Meeting's ministry.
- Chris mentioned Thomas Merton's book, *Reading the Bible*. Merton maintained that the Bible wasn't meant to be read in solitude. It seems dry when read to oneself because it is evolved as oral tradition spoken aloud in community. According to Merton, the Bible asks who is reading. As you read, the Bible is questioning you.

### **Announcement** of the next two calls

- The next conversation circle will be held on October 26 and will have the same focus as this one.
- There will be a conversation on November 9<sup>th</sup> on teaching the Bible to Young Friends.
- Please watch your email for a draft of the minutes of this call. The final version will be posted on the QREC website.

### **Closing Silence**

- Friends closed in waiting worship.

<sup>1</sup> Marcus Borg: <https://www.readthespirit.com/explore/let-marcus-borg-teach-your-next-bible-study-class/>

<sup>2</sup> Lectio Divina, "Divine reading" <http://ocarm.org/en/content/lectio/what-lectio-divina>

A way of reading the Scriptures whereby we gradually let go of our own agenda and open ourselves to what God wants to say to us. In the 12th century, a Carthusian monk called Guigo, described the stages which he saw as essential to the practice of Lectio Divina. There are various ways of practicing Lectio Divina either individually or in groups but Guigo's description remains fundamental.

Four stages:

1. Lectio (reading) where we read the Word of God, slowly and reflectively so that it sinks in. Any passage of Scripture can be used for this way of prayer, but the passage should not be too long.
2. Meditatio (reflection) where we think about the text we have chosen and ruminate upon it so that we take from it what God wants to give us.
3. Oratio (response) where we leave our thinking aside and simply let our hearts speak to God. This response is inspired by our reflection on the Word of God.
4. Contemplatio (rest) where we let go not only of our own ideas, plans and meditations but also of our holy words and thoughts. We simply rest in the Word of God. We listen at the deepest level of our being to God who speaks within us with a still small voice. As we listen, we are gradually transformed from within.

<sup>3</sup> Walter Wink: <https://www.westarinstitute.org/membership/westar-fellows/fellows-directory/walter-wink/>

<sup>4</sup> Michael Birkel, Engaging Scripture: Reading the Bible with Early Friends. [https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/890793.Engaging\\_Scripture](https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/890793.Engaging_Scripture)