

QREC Conversation Circle
Quakers and the Bible
Notes
10/26/2017

Present: Marian Baker, Mark Barker, Thais Carr, Beth Collea, Tim Diehl, Susan Hopkins, Liz Yeats

Facilitators: Christel Jorgenson, Peter Blood Paterson, Sita Diehl

Welcome

Chris welcomed Friends. This is the second of two conversations focused on reluctance among Friends, especially liberal Quakers, to study the Bible and use it in spiritual practice. This meeting is being recorded with notes taken. Both will be posted after Friends present have had an opportunity to review.

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, was drawn to the conversation having not grown up with the Bible and realizing from the outside its importance to cultural literacy. As a teen and young adult, she studied the Bible and found it to be a powerful tool for spiritual growth. For these reasons she feels it is important to give Friends the opportunity within the Meeting community to explore the Bible.
- Chris Jorgenson, Cambridge MA MM, noted that she doesn't use the Bible as much as would benefit her but still more than others. She asks how to heal the wounds keeping people away from the Bible. She finds that experiential study methods allow Friends to explore as they are led.
- Liz Yeats, Austin TX MM, grew up secular Jewish home religious discussion, although she liked the Jewish Bible stories as child. As a young adult she studied the Bible as literature and was drawn to Eliz Watson's feminist perspective (<https://universalistfriends.org/watson-1.html>). She participated in a 2-year study of Genesis using the Spears method.
- Peter Blood-Patterson, Mt. Toby MA MM, grew up as a Quaker where the Bible was taught, but it felt like an intellectual exercise. As a young adult he explored the Bible deeper. When as a replacement teacher for a Bible course at Westtown Friends school, he was only a week or two ahead of his students. For ten years he has participated in the annual QuakerSpring gathering with daily Bible reading according to the tradition of Conservative Friends. He and his wife read the Bible each morning.
- Beth Collea, Wellesley MA MM. Her father was a Presbyterian minister. The Bible was woven through her childhood, although she has not studied it systematically. She comes closer to a real encounter with the Bible by teaching Godly Play in First Day School. This discussion draws her because she has seen Friends struggle with the Bible and push it away. Her Monthly Meeting offers all ages First Day School in which adults are drawn into

topics – including the Bible – that they may not have chosen. Once engaged, however, they have found it rich food.

- Mark Barker, Concord NH MM, was a Baptist preacher's kid. When he was young, he tried to read the Bible straight through but never succeeded. Over the last 30 years he has gone deeper, although he tends to read the same parts over and over. He finds memorization helpful. As a member of Richmond Friends Meeting in southwest London he participated in a Spears Bible study exploration of the Book of Matthew. As a facilitator of Quakerism 101 and 201 he includes Bible excerpts and has seen more interest in the Bible in his monthly meeting.
- Tim Diehl, Nashville TN MM, was raised Unitarian and, as an adult, viewed the Bible with a skeptical eye. As a student he read the entire Bible because of its importance in American culture. When teaching First Day School to middle schoolers, he chooses a provocative Bible excerpt and has young Friends read the passage in different translations. Nashville Friends Meeting has a weekly Bible study group based on the Common Lectionary¹ and using a meditative approach.
- Susan Hopkins, Grass Valley CA MM. She also attends a Methodist Church. She attended Friends School of Baltimore where her Bible teacher made a real impression. After graduation, the Bible did not play a big part in her life. Currently, the clerk of her monthly meeting leads a Bible study called *Finding Jesus, Finding Self*.
- Thais Carr, Nashville TN MM, attended a fundamentalist church as a child. She does not teach religious education, but serves as clerk and co-clerk of the Ministry and Nurture committee for SAYMA. She joined the call hoping to learn more about what Friends do with the Bible.

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

- Mark reads the Bible for comfort more often than to seek challenge, although he resonates with the metaphor of Jacob wrestling with the angel because he identifies with Israel's struggle with God.
- Beth finds the Bible to offer powerful imagery that comes back quickly. A word or phrase from a passage will spark wondering about the story and seeing herself in it. For example, the healing touch of Jesus' robe brings a whole thread with it.
- It took Mark a while to see the brilliance of Jesus as a teacher. When a problem was posed to him, he asked questions, rather than answering directly, leading the questioner to answer for himself. The point is that we know the answers in our hearts.
- In the process of teaching well known Bible stories through Godly Play, Sita sits with the passage for a while which may open new doors to a story she thought she knew. She also opens the bible at random and reflects on what it means for her now. She finds many parts of the Bible appalling, but the sense of being repulsed leads to a deeper exploration.
- Peter uses the Bible mostly for comfort. He tends toward favorite passages in Isaiah and Psalms, where the Bible opens to him in precious ways. He prefers experiential group study to stir the embers of the heart rather than Bible criticism, which gets him into a less useful frame of mind.
- Susan resonates with group study. Working through Bible passages helps us think through our personal lives. We can reassure each other using the passage as a framework. The process helps her feel stronger in facing life's challenges.

- Thais reads the Bible mainly for comfort. She was reading early each morning and found that her day went better. Her work schedule has changed, but she now listens to a Bible podcast on her drive to work. She just listens to the Bible passage vs. the commentary.
- Liz noted that the Bible does not play a large part in what she does on a daily basis. She mainly reads when she is planning a First Day School lesson. Her study of early Friends such as John Woolman or Lucretia Mott also brings her to the Bible. For inspiration, she is more likely to look to Rumi, Ghandi or some other wisdom teaching, but she finds it refreshing when someone rises in Meeting with a Bible quote.

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 at the QREC retreat Friends reflected on the situation that our Meetings are filled with people who are closed to the Bible, many having had bad experiences in the past. In this discussion we would like to learn about the tools Friends use to offer opportunities for those who find the Bible irrelevant to their spiritual journey.

- Chris talked about this at a Quarterly Meeting with a young adult Friend who finds the Bible confusing. She doesn't have a place to start, opens the book, finds it confusing and lays it down. The reason she's interested is because the Bible seems important to people she respects.
- *What is the Bible?* By Rob Bell, has been helpful to dispel erroneous impressions of the Bible.²
- Art and music are effective in introducing biblical themes in a way that reaches beyond intellectual blocks.
- Liz's meeting convenes a singing meeting each month with adults and children. They also sing often with the children in First Day School. Spirituals are easy to sing and are often based on biblical passages with messages about freedom.
- Beth noted that some of the intellectual blocks toward the Bible are about doubting the miraculous. It comes to a head at Easter with the story of the resurrection. She carries walnut to remind herself of the mysterious and the miraculous. Big bang theory has everything springing into being in an instant from something the size of a walnut. We tend to rely on science for truth, but how do we bring ourselves to a sense of the mysterious?
- Mark uses the Spears method to read tiny bits of scripture in multiple translations before reading any criticism of the passage. With the Spears method, one realizes the radically different perception of scripture from one person to the next.
- Mark suggested the Jefferson Bible for skeptical readers. Thomas Jefferson physically pieced together several translations of the Bible to capture the moral teachings of Jesus.³
- For skeptics and people who want to see Bible passages in a new light, Mark also recommends *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language*, by Eugene Peterson.⁴
- Peter said, "For someone who has gotten a lot of richness out of the Bible I shouldn't dismiss the fact that the Bible is badly misused and that turns people off." He noted that it is very hard to go at the Bible cold as an individual because one needs to know where to start. Reading with a group is much easier. NEYM hosts half an hour of Bible reflection each day at the Yearly Meeting. Hundreds of people come. He would like to have more Bible weekends, but people don't attend.

- Sita observed that who is convening the Bible study is important. People are more likely to explore with Friends they respect who are familiar with and inspired by the Bible. Nashville Friends Meeting has a weekly Bible study group based on the Common Lectionary⁵ which uses an open, meditative approach. She notes that the lectionary takes us out of our ruts to explore passages we might not read otherwise. She agrees that reading in community helps those who have trouble getting into the Bible.

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

- Peter feels that this query asks, “How could the Bible impact our communal shared journey?”
- This query reminds Mark of the year that Michael Birkel gave the Bible half hour at NEYM. He noted that early Friends were so familiar with the whole Bible that they would string passages together in their inspirational messages. At NEYM this year, Marty Grundy warned us that Biblical words may offend. She urged listeners to translate the words in ways that work for them. Speakers should feel free to speak authentically from the heart and trust that the burden of translation will be on the hearers.⁶
- Beth cited her experience that adult Friends have more hope for their children than for themselves. She tells parents that we teach the Bible in an open way. Once parents begin to read, it ignites the pilot light in their souls. At NEYM she urges parents just to come without worry; let it be an “all is forgiven” weekend.
- Peter observed that even for Friends who may not read it themselves, Bible messages are well received during Meeting for Worship. He finds that Friends who value the Bible may be hesitant to share passages in vocal ministry for fear of offending others, but people are rarely offended if the message comes from the heart.
- Chris asked, “In the need for interpretation and translation, when does a passage lose its message?” When she was involved in Youth Quake, she heard parents tell their children that they didn’t have to change who they were to fit, just add to who they already were. She questioned that point. Maybe something is supposed to change them, to shake them up.
- Chris thinks it is important to look closely at the challenges presented by the Bible. When her Bible study group examined Paul’s writing, they found they could not talk his sexism away. It is part of the message. Because of this, she has mixed feelings about translation and interpretation.
- Peter said, “If you are in Meeting for Worship hearing a Bible passage, let God work within you. Listen with compassion and seek to understand the journey of Biblical writers and of early Friends.”
- Tim thinks it is important to let the Bible speak for itself. Let the Bible disturb us. We should allow ourselves to feel discomfort with the Bible writers and with early Friends. The Bible is a challenge to all Christians, but we are less likely to accept that challenge than in the past. He doesn’t think we can look forward to a majority of Friends reading the Bible, but we need to provide opportunities to young Friends and to adults.
- Beth said, “A living faith is impactful. On the Quaker journey, expect some movement.”
- Chris thinks we should find a way to read the Bible as a community. Group reading is where the Bible really works. For centuries, few could read the Bible. It was envisioned as

something to be read aloud in community. The Spears method, Lectio Divina or other approaches are effective in helping people hear the Bible.

- Mark spoke of the change of meaning between translations. For example, in Hebrews 13 verse 1, the New Revised Version changed the word 'brotherly' to 'mutual': "Let mutual love continue." As a Friend, he has difficulty with other parts of Hebrews and with James. Marty Grundy encouraged people not to stop listening. Let God and remember that we do believe in continuing revelation. British Friends are encouraged to read other sources, to find places where we can compare and contrast.
- Liz feels it is important to offer opportunities to study the Bible, although Meetings should continue to be welcoming to those who do not relate to it. When someone reads the Bible in Meeting for Worship, it draws her in, although she still has trouble with the violence and sexism in the Bible.
- Peter felt it would be helpful to include Bible quotes in minutes and proposals in Meeting for Business.
- Mark recommended the Compassionate Listening Project⁷ and urged Friends to listen to the words of Israelis and Palestinians involved in the project: <https://vimeo.com/34998082>

Announcement

- There will be a conversation on November 9th 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.

Sita thanked Friends and asked them to watch for a draft of the notes. The final version will be posted on the QREC website.

Closing: Silent Worship

Respectfully submitted,

Sita Diehl

¹ Revised Common Lectionary (<https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/>) is a set of readings from the Bible for use in Protestant worship. Readings are prescribed for each Sunday: a passage typically from the [Old Testament](#) or the [Acts of the Apostles](#); a passage from one of the [Psalms](#); another from either the [Epistles](#) or the [Book of Revelation](#); and finally a passage from one of the four [Gospels](#). https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Revised_Common_Lectionary#Origin

² What is the Bible? Rob Bell https://www.amazon.com/What-Bible-Ancient-Transform-Everything/dp/0062194267/ref=cm_cr_arp_d_product_top?ie=UTF8

³ *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth (also known as the Jefferson Bible)*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jefferson_Bible

⁴ *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language* was created and translated by [Eugene H. Peterson](#) and published in segments from 1993 to 2002.

⁵ Revised Common Lectionary (<https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/>) is a set of readings from the Bible for use in Protestant worship. Readings are prescribed for each Sunday: a passage typically from the [Old Testament](#) or the [Acts of the Apostles](#); a passage from one of the [Psalms](#); another from either the [Epistles](#) or the [Book of Revelation](#); and finally a passage from one of the four [Gospels](#). https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Revised_Common_Lectionary#Origin

⁶ Marty Grundy, New England Yearly Meeting Bible Half Hour, 8/6/2017 https://neym.org/sites/default/files/recordings/NEYM%20Bible%20Half%20Hour%202017%20Sunday%208_6-17_0.mp3

⁷ The Compassionate Listening Project: <http://www.compassionatelistening.org/>