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Teaching Non-Literal Biblical Interpretation as Foundational for Christians Unlearning Violence

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On a cold, March day in upstate New York the personnel committee in a United Methodist Church gathered because of grumbling in the congregation.

“What’s the problem?” asked the denominational supervisor the pastor had invited to the meeting.

“It’s her preaching!” exclaimed a middle-aged man. “It’s too P.C. It’s too liberal. This has always been a conservative church, and we intend to keep it that way. We want her to leave.”

The supervisor listened to the ensuing conversation and encouraged the pastor and committee to work out the problem. He said he would not recommend to the bishop that the pastor be moved.

The committee was advised to use a particular book to guide their work together, but throughout the congregation battle lines were drawn. Long-time members feared the encroachment of more modern viewpoints and practices, while younger members supported the pastor’s preaching. Future events were to escalate the traditional conservative vs. liberal dichotomy.

In the days that followed the meeting, events occurred that one person summed up with the words, “Things got ugly.” First, the Lay Leader sent an email using the newsletter emailing list, declaring that since the pastor’s preaching was unbiblical and made fun of Scripture, he would worship elsewhere until the pastor was removed. He invited others to join him.

Then, when there appeared to be no reaction to that, sixteen people gathered in a member’s home to strategize how to get rid of the pastor. A spokesperson from the group informed the personnel committee that all sixteen, leaders in the congregation, were prepared to leave the church if the pastor was not removed. Subsequent questioning of some of the participants revealed that the number prepared to leave was actually much smaller.

The supervisor again reported his support of the pastor and directed the committee to draw up a covenant on which the pastor and committee could agree. A member of the committee once more voiced his unhappiness with the pastor and declared, “She is not my pastor.”

Although there were no actual shots fired, and no blood was shed, this scenario invites us to examine the nature of violence. Violence has been defined as “intense, turbulent, or furious, and often destructive, action or force.” (Miriam Webster online) In this scenario we see two examples of violence. The more obvious example is that of the Lay Leader and a small group of people doing violence to the fabric of the congregation’s life, choosing to be disruptive and undermining the pastor’s ministry in an attempt to force her removal, instead of going through the approved channels for addressing grievances.

The second example of violence is the attempt of the Lay Leader and a few of his friends, to force the congregation’s theology to reflect their own conservative views. The battle between theological perspectives in the churches of the United States has been cast as violent, as reflected in book titles addressing the issue: “Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism,” “The Struggle for America’s Soul,” and “Who Stole My Church?”

It should not come as a surprise that many church people resort to such violence. Based on the Biblical narrative, Christians have been taught about a God whose violent acts stretched from drowning humankind in a great flood, to killing His (sic) own Son. One person has identified 317 violent verses in the Bible, 154 of them in the New Testament. (Skepticsannotatedbible.com. April 9, 2014.)

As Brian McLaren has stated,

.....the God of fundamentalists is a competitive warrior - always jealous of rivals and determined to drive them into defeat and disgrace. And the God of the fundamentalists is superficially exacting - demanding technical perfection in regard to ceremonial and legal matters while minimizing deeper concerns about social justice - especially where outsiders and outcasts are concerned. Similarly, the fundamentalist God is exclusive, faithfully loving one in-group and rejecting - perhaps even hating -all others. The fundamentalist God is also deterministic - controlling rather than interacting, a mover of events but never moved by them. And finally, though the fundamentalist God may be patient for a while, he (fundamentalist versions of God tend to be very male) is ultimately violent, eventually destined to explode with unquenchable rage, condemnation, punishment, torture, and vengeance if you push him to far. (A New Kind of Christianity, p.101.)

However, there are many ways to interpret Scripture, and just as fundamentalist pedagogical interpretations of Scripture may have contributed to a culture of violence, so other interpretations may help congregations unlearn violence. Unfortunately, these other interpretations are often unappreciated, a fact which brings us back to the scenario with which this paper began. Biblical interpretations that are less violent can be perceived as “too P.C.” and “too liberal”, charges that were leveled against the pastor and resulted in violent actions by those who disagreed with the pastor’s Biblical interpretation. Nevertheless, it is extremely important that Christians be taught interpretations that are non-violent.

This paper highlights some of the more blatant Biblical passages along with their violent interpretations, and offers nonviolent interpretations. It is hoped that such an attempt to provide inspiration and information will facilitate the un-learning of violence in the Church. The methodologies used for this paper are based on literature and insights from my community of

practice, a congregation of the United Methodist Church in Upstate New York

As we begin to consider non-violent alternative understandings of specific Scriptural passages, we need to be clear about the meaning of a non-literal method of Biblical interpretation. This method allows for the possibility that a Biblical assertion that God said something, or that God did something, is a reflection of the belief of the Biblical writer or Biblical translator, and not necessarily a reflection of the action of God.

Four Old Testament stories filled with violence that will be highlighted here are (1) the flood, (2) the killing of Onan, (3) the exodus, and (4) the defeat of Goliath by David. The stories of the flood, the exodus, and the defeat of Goliath are included here because they are often told to children. The story of Onan is included because in some people's minds it has implications for birth control. Let us look at each of these passages in turn:

(1) Starting with the Genesis flood narrative (Gen. 6:5-8:21), we can see that the violent verse is 6:7 wherein God is quoted as saying "I will blot out from the earth the human beings I have created." A literal interpretation of Scripture can be summed up in the words of the old hymn, "God said it; I believe it, and that's good enough for me."

A non-literal interpretation of this verse asks the questions, "Did God really say that? Did the writer hear God say that? Did someone tell the writer that God said that? Do these words correspond with the God who later commanded 'Thou shalt not kill?' Or did the writer merely *believe* these words reflected what God was thinking?

If we conclude that there is no evidence that the writer ever actually heard God say those words, then we can believe the Biblical story as a whole, while making our own judgment about whether or not God created a flood to wipe out humankind.

Many cultures have naturally-occurring flood stories, but the Genesis story attributes the flood, not to a natural occurrence, but to God's desire to kill humankind. This is a violent interpretation by the writer of what may have been a natural event. The faithful do not have to buy into the violent interpretation in order to claim the story of God saving a remnant on an ark in the face of a devastating flood, a perspective which is celebrated in some Protestant Communion liturgies.

(2) Moving to the Genesis 38:8-10 story of Onan, we find the tale of a man who had intercourse with his dead brother's wife but used the method of coitus interruptus. The Scripture tells us that using that method displeased God, whereupon God killed Onan. Not only is this story problematic because it attributes Onan's death to a violent act of God, but also because some Biblical literalists find in these verses a condemnation of birth control, not only for themselves, but for everyone.

Forbidding men from "wasting" sperm, and forbidding women the agency of determining if and when they shall invite the conception of children, can be seen as acts of violence. Clearly, it matters how we interpret scripture. How we do so can have far-ranging implications, as in the case of Biblical literalists in the United States who want the national government to enforce their understanding of scripture as it relates to birth control.

Onan's death as a result of God's displeasure is not the only possible cause of his demise. One can easily attribute his death to a heart attack, especially following coitus.

(3) We will now turn to the story of the plagues leading up to the exodus and the parting of the sea that permitted the exodus, itself. A non-literal reading asks if God really did send those plagues, hurting both the innocent civilians as well as the evil pharaoh. Did God truly part the sea

so the Israelites could escape and then bring the water back together to kill the Egyptian pursuers? These words may help us:

The plague stories reflect an Egyptian locale and display a recollection of Egyptian life and manners, but they also show an interest in matters that properly belong in the category of folklore...there was a tendency to heighten the miraculous element as the tradition was retold through the generations to glorify Yahweh...The plagues in the J tradition are described with much more restraint than in E and especially in P...In Exodus everything that happens is a potential sign. It might be an ordinary event...Every reader of the Bible has to make up his mind about the historical nucleus which lies at the heart of the tradition that has been elaborated and colored by Israel's faith over a period of generations. (Anderson, Bernard W. *Understanding the Old Testament*, 1966. pp. 46-49, selected portions)

From these words we can affirm the possibility that what Biblical literalists might call supernatural events were actually ordinary events through which God worked to save the Hebrews. Thus, the plagues, concluding with the killing of the first-born sons, and the drowning of the Egyptian pursuers, were not necessarily violent actions by God. Rather, they may have been natural events.

(4) Our fourth story of violence centers on one of the most famous Israelites in the Hebrew Bible, David, also one of the most violent, enabled by "the Spirit of God." David's first act of violence is told in a story that many children learn in religious instruction - his murder of the Philistine giant, Goliath. David tells Saul,

Your servant used to keep sheep for his father; and whenever a lion or a bear came, and took a lamb from the flock, I went after it and struck it down, rescuing the lamb from its mouth; and if it turned against me, I would catch it by the jaw, strike it down, and kill it. Your servant has killed both lions and bears; and this uncircumcised Philistine shall be like one of them, since he has defied the armies of the living God. The Lord, who saved me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear, will save me from the hand of this Philistine. (1 Sam. 17:34-37)

The Philistine predictably laughed at the young David who was armed only with his slingshot, but David let him know that the Philistine would be fighting not just a lad but also God. David said,

You come to me with sword and spear and javelin; but I come to you in the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. This very day the Lord will deliver you into my hand, and I will strike you down and cut off your head; and I will give the dead bodies of the Philistine army this very day to the birds of the air and to the wild animals of the earth, so that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel, and that all this assembly may know that the Lord does not save by sword and spear; for the battle is the Lord's and he will give you into our hand. (1 Sam. 17: 45-47)

As promised, David killed Goliath and cut off his head. The story of a child with a slingshot taking down a giant has made its way into American culture, all in the name of the LORD.

These four stories are not only violent, themselves. They are also representative of the vast amount of violence in the Bible. Many of the laws attributed to God in the Bible have violent penalties: Any person or animal that touches Mt. Sinai shall be stoned to death (Ex. 19:12-13), a child who curses his parents shall be executed (Ex. 21:15,17), witches shall not be allowed to live (Ex. 22:18), those who break the Sabbath are to be executed (Ex. 31:14), both parties in adultery shall be executed (Lev. 20:10), if a man has sex with another man, kill them both (Lev 20:13), and anyone who blasphemes or curses shall be stoned to death by the entire community (Lev. 24:16). A non-literal interpretation of Scripture allows the reader to ask if God truly demanded these penalties or if there was a lack of communication between God and those who claimed to speak for the Divine.

The Bible is replete with instances of God being given credit for winning Hebrew battles and for punishing the Hebrew people through defeat by their enemies. (See, for example, Deut. 1:30; 2:14-16, 2:20, 2:21-22, 2:24, 3:21, 7:2, 7:16; 28:68; Judges 3:12-14; 6:1) God's people are even to kill those whose religious beliefs are different from their own (Deut. 13:12-16; 17:2-7).

It could be argued that the violence reflected here is Old Testament, and that there is less violence in the New Testament. However, the most violent Bible story of all, from the perspective of its literal understanding, is the story of Jesus Christ, himself, whose life, death, and resurrection have been described as an act of atonement necessitated by the combination of human sin and God's need to have that sin atoned for through the death of His (sic) Son.

While some Christians share the perspective that in the crucifixion, the Godhead, being three-in-one, demonstrated God offering God's own self, a more popular view is that the Father arranged for the killing of His (sic) Son as a propitiation for the sins of humankind.

Several other less violent meanings have been attributed to the Christ event, not the least of which is that the actions of Jesus put him on a collision course with the authorities of his time and place, the logical outcome being the usual method of execution - death on a cross. Again, nothing by way of gratitude or respect toward Jesus has been taken away by this interpretation, but instead of suggesting that God would kill His (sic) son, we can attribute the death to the logical, if regrettable, outcome of Jesus' actions. This interpretation does not see God as requiring propitiation in order to rescue humankind.

In a time of respect for a multitude of beliefs, it is tempting to live and let live, to subscribe to the notion that the reality of human differences requires tolerance for a variety of approaches to sacred scriptures. However, we cannot escape the fact that a literal interpretation of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures portrays a violent God who sometimes encourages or applauds violent acts by human beings. If we wish to be values-free, that may not be problematic, but if we wish to unlearn violence, that is a huge problem, indeed.

Our own Religious Education Association has taken a position that is not values-free:

While we acknowledge differences across religious traditions and we respect those, the Religious Education Association has reflected a position siding for efforts for transformative and emancipatory education...The tradition of REA seeks to stimulate human flourishing and the healing of creation. Therefore, approaches to religious education are affirmed that call for

the widest participation possible and an openness to human learning and to God's dynamic revelation. (Seymour, p. 349.)

Only by avoiding literal interpretation of the Scriptures which portray God in a violent way, or which portray God encouraging or rewarding violence in others, will Christians be able to sing with integrity the words to the old spiritual:

*Gonna lay down my sword and shield, down by the riverside,
Down by the riverside,
Down by the riverside.
Gonna lay down my sword and shield, down by the riverside.
I ain't gonna study war no more.*

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