

28 June 2020

Dear Friends of Elmwood,

‘Writing things down’ satisfies our need to be certain about them. The earliest examples are ‘cuneiform’ letters pressed into clay tablets. They’re mostly records of commercial transactions. We can imagine why.

“I gave you two silver coins. You owe me ten sheep!”

“No way! I said *four* sheep per coin, not five!”

At this point swords would be drawn. But in a cuneiform world, the customer could smile, and say, “Let’s just see what the tablet says, shall we?”

Today, we shout, “You’ll hear from my lawyer!” But what’s the first thing your lawyer asks you? “Did you get it in writing?”

My memory can hold a shopping list of ten items. More than that and I’ll need to write them down to be certain. (Full disclosure: I’m told the number is closer to three.)

We want certainty. Certainty carries a feeling of authority. The word ‘authority’ is related to the word ‘author’. *And authors write things down.* For the pen is powerful. Literacy is the greatest of all human inventions, and its Temple is the library. The Bible may look like a single book, but it’s really a library of sixty-six books: thirty-nine in the Old Testament, twenty-seven in the New.

### **‘The Big Book of What to Do When’**

Bookstore shelves display hefty volumes with confident titles like *The Chef’s Bible*, *The Golfer’s Bible*, or *The Home Renovation Bible*. Each one sells itself as an ultimate authority, the one and only book you’ll need to get the job done.

They remind me of *The Hitch Hiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*, the hilarious brainchild of Douglas Adams, an English author. *The Hitch Hiker’s Guide* is a fictional volume holding all the knowledge its users would ever need to thumb their way around the universe. He modelled it on those dog-eared guidebooks of the 1970s with titles like *Europe on Five Dollars a Day*.

Though it runs to many editions, *The Hitch Hiker’s Guide*, like the Bible itself, “has many omissions and contains much that is apocryphal.” It also has the words DON’T PANIC printed on its cover “in large friendly letters.”

A Jungian psychologist, Daryl Sharp, says, “I used to have a fantasy that somewhere there was a Big Book of collective wisdom called *What to Do When*. It

contained the prescribed solutions to all of life's problems. Whenever you found yourself in a conflict you could just look it up in the book and do what it said."

Who wouldn't welcome the certainty bestowed by such an authoritative book? Well, some wouldn't. In any case, the book exists only in dreams, and it's just as well. "If there were a book like that, I wouldn't have to think for myself," says Sharp. "I'd just do what was laid down by the tradition."

'Thinking for ourselves' is the opposing dream bequeathed to us by the 18<sup>th</sup> century Enlightenment. (Mind you, those French and German *philosophes* didn't invent 'thinking for yourself'; they merely rediscovered it.)

Today, 'learning to think for ourselves' is just what we mean by 'growing up'. We come of age by becoming authors of our own lives, assuming authority for our own thoughts and deeds. Having glimpsed this way of life and tasted its freedom, who'd want to revert to childhood, to be told what to do all over again?

Puffed-up Authority has a legitimate challenger: Experience. Authority and Experience fight an allegorical tug-of-war, frequently friendly but more often hostile. "This is how it is" says Frowsty Cleric, reading from the Big Book of Authority. "Really?" says Clever Sceptic. "Experience tells me otherwise."

And yet, wise books are wider than one person's experience can ever be. At their best, they're a distillation of *collective* human experience, written down.

If we've never made an omelette, we'd do well to trust a recipe taken from *Chef Ramsay's Culinary Bible*, not just because Chef Ramsay says so, loudly, but because we can be certain he tested it a thousand times before he wrote it down, and it works. Long experience bears this out. That's what makes it authoritative.

Little in life is certain. But a skilled person with long experience can still be a trustworthy authority. The same can be said of many, many books.

## Reading and Doing

When we listen to the Bible as it's read aloud in Church, we play that 'tug-of-war' game between ancient authority and living experience. It's the back-and-forth motion of 'reading' and 'doing'.

As we flip through the Bible's pages, what do we see? Do we see myths, stories, codes of law, histories, genealogies, fables, prophetic oracles, proverbs, gospels, letters, and psalms?

No, we only see black letters on a white page. But so practised are we at reading letters that we instantly read them as words and sentences. This is already to interpret them, to *do* something with them. For reading and

interpreting are inseparable movements of an undivided action, like launching and landing a jump in figure skating.

A simple interpretation simply extracts a 'meaning'. And the simplest kind of meaning derives from words that offer a 'verbal replica' of the world. "The cat sits on the mat." What does that mean? It means that somewhere in the universe there's a mat upon which a cat is sitting. Period.

What then do we *do* with these words? But we've already done something: we've extracted a meaning; we've interpreted the words. We interpret every sentence for the same reason a figure skater lands every jump: we can't not!

And yet, when we ask what to *do* with what we *read*, we often want something more than just 'saying what it means'.

"Yes, yes, I know what it *means*," you might complain, "but don't leave me hanging. Help me land this jump. Tell me what I should *do* with this knowledge? How do I *apply* it to life in the world?"

Frustrated parishioners have been known to level this charge at preachers on their way out the door: "You spent all that time telling me what a tiny fragment of the Bible 'means'. Why didn't you tell me what to *do* with it? You're useless!"

Their frustration is forgivable. Hasn't the preacher ignored a sensible convention? You gaze at the page to read and know, then turn to the world to *do* what you know. Only fools rush in to assemble a barbecue without reading the instructions. And the first instruction is this: "Read first, then do."

And yet, to treat the Bible as a similar set of instructions is to turn it into *The Big Book of What to Do When*. Did you really want the preacher to tell you what to do? No, I didn't think so. You want to think for yourself.

### **Different Books, Different Uses**

The Bible is a library. Its various books represent various genres of writing. And every genre suggests its own best use. They differ.

Think of a cake recipe, a 'Dear Abby' column, or directions to a friend's cottage scratched on the back of an envelope. They all seem to say, "If you want 'x', do 'y'." The book of Proverbs sounds a lot like that. Other books sound like Aesop's fables, stories telling 'moral' truths. In places, the two books of Samuel read like a modern novel. Parts of Jeremiah emote like someone's diary. The Psalms are song lyrics, happy, sad, and angry.

Deuteronomy resembles the Criminal Code; it lists laws that apply everywhere, all the time. The Ten Commandments have that feel. But many of the laws in Leviticus govern rituals intended only for the ancient Temple, not away from it. They remind me of the NHL rule book. Its regulations cease to apply the moment you step off the ice. If I body check someone into the grocery store shelves (who hasn't thought it?), the NHL rule book won't absolve me.

You wouldn't recite a cake recipe as a poem or sing the weather report as a song, would you? (Mind you, my uncle had a vinyl record of the weather report sung as Anglican Chant. He insisted on playing it every New Year's Eve. It was very funny. The first time.) Each type of writing suggests its own best use, such that its misuse sounds ridiculous.

The thirtieth chapter of Genesis tells you how to raise spotted flocks using a technique devised by Jacob himself. You place a striped stick in front of them while they mate. The offspring will, of course, turn out to be striped too. *"It's true. The Bible says so."*

But no. I happen to know one or two experienced farmers. Not one of them would ever use this technique. That's because it's not a piece of animal husbandry at all. It's a piece of 'magic realism', a device of storytelling.

Why, then, would someone treat the first chapters of Genesis as a 'scientific' account of the world's coming-to-be? For it's an obvious myth, rich and complex, about the burden and joy of being made in God's image to live in an orderly creation. To use the book of Genesis as 'science', in our modern sense, is to misuse it badly, and a vast missing of the point.

The Bible's many books comprise many kinds of writing – myth, history, law, gospel, letter, poetry, and so on. Why did we think the Bible would lend itself to a single, uniform use? Why would we expect its meaning to be a verbal replica of the world, a simple description of 'fact' – historical, scientific, and 'plain'? How could we fall for the error that the Bible's voice is a monolithic monotone telling us 'what to do when'?

Whenever we say, "The Bible's position on *that is this*" (insert favourite cause), we teeter on the edge of this error.

### **"In, With, and Under"**

We teeter on the edge, but we don't have to fall into it, not if we develop a shrewd ear, one attuned to receive the voice that speaks 'in, with, and under' the Bible's wide array of genres, styles, and voices.

People once made loud Biblical Arguments for owning slaves (to own them, mind you; they never wanted to be slaves themselves). Not anymore. Why not? Has the Bible changed?

No, but we have changed under its influence. The holy voice that speaks 'in, with and under' the Bible's many voices did some work on the Western imagination. Its stentorian tones, slow-moving but certain, spoke to Experience with persuasive Authority over many generations; as when, for example, our forebears again and again heard St Paul expound the "freedom for which Christ has set us free" (Galatians 5:1).

The Bible asks us to imagine a form of social, political, and personal life that will truly answer the hospitable force of the voice who speaks 'in, with and under' its many, many voices. This is what preachers are asking us to do when they open the Bible, clear their throats, stare at you unnervingly, and presume to say, "Listen for the Word of God!" They're asking us to open 'the imagination of our hearts', not just our ears.

The move from 'reading the Bible' to 'doing what it means' will never be as straightforward as following a cake recipe. "Follow me," said Jesus. We read those words. They sound so simple. Then we try to do them. We stumble and fall. "I don't get it. What *does* it mean to follow you?" we pray. "What are we to *do* with all that we've read and heard? Tell us."

So, we turn back to the story, but in a stronger light, and with more maturity. Our willingness to return ('to repent' John the Baptist would say) – to speak aloud the objections raised by Experience and hear once again the story Authority is trying to tell us – this *is* the life of faith.

Yours in that very faith,  
Andrew