

People of the Book

"People of the Book" is not a unique label: it's found in Judaism and Islam, as well as Christian groups. It became a hallmark of the Restoration Movement sparked by Disciple founders Thomas and Alexander Campbell. "We have no creed but Christ; no book but the Bible," they were fond of saying, along with "Where the Scriptures speak, we speak; where the Scriptures are silent, we are silent."

Regrettably, there's little consensus about where the Bible speaks and where it is silent. So, here's my question: "Do we read the Bible as Jesus did?"

LUKE 4:16-30 (NRSV) *When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, ¹⁷and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:*

¹⁸*"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.*

He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives

and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free,

¹⁹*to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."*

²⁰*And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. ²¹Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." ²²All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, "Is not*

this Joseph's son?" ²³He said to them, "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Doctor, cure yourself!' And you will say, 'Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.'" ²⁴And he said, "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown. ²⁵But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; ²⁶yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. ²⁷There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian." ²⁸When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. ²⁹They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. ³⁰But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

Have you ever wondered where you'd be had certain events not happened in a certain sequence? A buddy drops my car's cigarette lighter and burned a nickel-sized hole in the seat cover. Had Whites Auto Store not been a half-block from where I worked, I might have gone to Sears, and I'd have missed her and probably not had another opportunity, because, two weeks later she left on vacation with her family and then returned to School at TCU.

But there I was, walking into Whites Auto Store to buy seat covers, and there she was. 52-and-a-half years later, we're still soul mates.

Had any link of the chain been broken, who knows where life would have taken me—or her? I don't believe life is scripted or planned or that everything happens for a reason. Humans are not puppets or robots with God pushing buttons and manipulating strings to make things happen.

But I do believe God is present, and that events sometimes string together in unexpected ways. I don't understand; I just choose to celebrate the mystery.

Had I not read that Thomas Bandy book on the flights to and from General Assembly in 2005, the cumulative insights of 45 years of ministry would not have come into focus as they did. Had I not served as Interim Minister in Trenton, Missouri, I'd not have found that Edward Hammett book someone left in the desk.

Had I not read that book I might never have made the connections regarding the relationship—or non-relationship—between the church and the Millennial Generations. Millennials don't want doctrines or rules or outdated organizational structures that no longer are ineffective. They want simply to know how to follow Jesus.

Without that insight my eye might not have been drawn to the title of Derek Flood's book, *Disarming Scripture: Cherry-Picking Liberals, Violence-Loving Conservatives and Why We All Need to Learn to Read the Bible Like Jesus Did*.

If you can survive the title, you might find the book as enriching as I did. I've always been troubled by apparent contradictions in the Bible; and I've spent a lifetime doing damage control—defend Scripture and explaining the contradictions.

Well, guess what! Through Flood's book I rediscovered that the Scriptures don't need my defense! Once again I can let Scripture speak for itself without trying to make it say what I always thought it said—what I want it to say.

So, how can God be described as a jealous, tribal deity that plays favorites and strikes dead those who don't obey him and then, elsewhere in the Bible the same God be described as loving and forgiving, restoring relationships and offering his love to all and calling his people to be a beacon of light to all nations?

Flood builds on Walter Brueggemann's conclusion that the contradictions are intentional, part of the message—testimony and counter-testimony, like a courtroom debate—the faithful record of a community of faith struggling to understand as God reveals his nature and will.

One side of the debate sees God as territorial, vengeful and blood-thirsty; commanding his people to commit genocide, dashing babies' heads against rocks and disemboweling pregnant women! This perspective is ancient, probably the residue of pagan superstitions that surrounded the early Israelites.

The other side appears first in Melchizedek, the mysterious figure who blesses Abram in Genesis 14 and to whom the risen Christ is compared in Hebrews 7. Melchizedek is the "King of Salem" (or Shalom); and it's interesting that Isaiah prophesies that Messiah will be called "Prince of Peace (Shalom)".

This second side of the debate surfaced through Isaiah, Amos, Jeremiah, Hosea and other 8th century prophets in their call for justice in place of sacrifice;

mercy in place of ritual incantations.

Following Babylonian captivity, the debate raged in various Jewish expectations of Messiah. Would Messiah be a military/political hero and lead Israel in conquest over Israel's enemies? Or would he be the Suffering Servant of the second part of Isaiah: one who would not break a bruised reed or snuff out a smoldering wick; but would be faithful to justice (Isaiah 42:3 & Matthew 12:20).

Would he be a warrior/king like David (it's interesting in this context to remember that God would not allow David to build a temple because David had drawn blood!), or would Messiah be a selfless healer and reconciler of humanity?

I grew up with a third option: God is both, because the Bible says so. And yet, I can't get over the hang-up that this option represents a schizophrenic God. More than that, this option contradicts my understanding of Grace. If God relates in one way to "those who stray from his pronouncements and laws" and in a different way with "those who are obedient," then our relationship with God is based on our behavior rather than on God's Grace, and the whole Christ event is then rendered impotent and irrelevant. We are back under the law: obey or die.

We're under Grace or we're under Law. Limited as I am by the clay of which I am made, I can't imagine having it both ways. But, since Peter and Paul squared off over circumcision, a lot of energy has been spent trying to blend these conflicting images of God because they're both in the Bible.

But maybe it's not necessary to have it both ways! The debate peaked in the confrontations between Jesus and the Pharisees. And when Jesus quoted Scripture, he took sides. He made his stand on one side of the debate!

In our text today, Jesus' audience longed for God's wrath to fall—*on the Romans*. They believed—like so many Jews and Christians still today—that justice is fulfilled by the destruction of their enemies. It was the heart of the Jewish hope for Messiah. Jesus rejected that belief.

So, when the people of Nazareth heard Jesus speak of liberating the oppressed, they were pleased. But, when they understand that it would involve showing grace and not vengeance to Romans, they were furious and tried to kill him.

Jesus had chosen *part* of a text (Isaiah 61:1-2) which contained elements of both sides of the debate; but he didn't read all of it. He didn't ignore the rest. He rejected it. *He took sides*. He chose grace; and that realization impacts the way we read... ..the rest of the story.