

**“WHY DO YOU STILL READ THAT  
OLD THING?”**

**BIBLE LECTURE  
PENDLE HILL**

**4/8/96**

**Lloyd Lee Wilson**

## **Introduction**

Visiting Canadian Yearly Meeting in 1982 was a wonderfully eye-opening experience for me. Among other things, I was fascinated by their schedule - they are still the only yearly meeting of which I am aware that schedules general interest events to begin at midnight! These Friends had traveled as much as 3,000 miles to be together, and they were not about to waste a minute; they could sleep next week!

I was taking a short walk one afternoon during a break in the formal sessions, my bible under my arm as usual, when a twenty-something Canadian Friend approached me and struck up a conversation. After some preliminary greetings she got to the point. Pointing to my Bible, she asked, "Why do you still read that old thing when there is so much more modern material available?"

I was caught short by the question, and constructed an incomplete answer on the spot. I've been answering that same question, in many forms, for the fourteen years or so since that day. Tonight I can give you a progress report.

Asking this Canadian Friend's question, as so many other Friends do, in one form or another, implies that the questioner has made some assumptions about the Bible and those who read it: the Bible is old and therefore out of date, not historically accurate, full of violence, oppresses women, contradicts itself, etc., etc.; and those who read the Bible believe it is literally, historically and factually true in every detail. Like many of our assumptions about people and things we don't know well, these are only half true at most.

What does seem to me to be completely true is that a Christian life and the Bible go hand in hand. Ignoring the Bible is like trying to go through life unable to remember anything that happened before today.

The Bible is not documentary history, as contemporary Western-educated people understand history. It is larger than mere history, because it connects us with the Big Story - God's cosmic story that incorporates all of creation and that gives our individual lives and personal stories true meaning.

Yes, the Bible is old. The Bible stories have been sifted through many centuries and many different cultures. Only those stories that have been consistently helpful in these very different times and settings have been remembered and passed down to the next generation. The age of the Bible is not a detriment, but a clue as to the real value of its contents.

As for violence, the Bible is about as violent as the front page of my daily newspaper. The world is violent. The Bible is about living in the world. Unlike the newspaper, television, or movies, the Bible is not interested in violence for its own sake, to boost readership or win viewers away from the competition. The Bible is interested in violence only as part of the context in which the Big Story unfolds.

Likewise, the Bible stories are set in the context of a society that did not recognize many groups as equals, including women. That is not an endorsement of that society or its practices, but the context of a story. Much of the meaning of that story is that God hears, cares, takes sides, and intervenes in imperfect human societies, working through flawed people on behalf of broken people. It is precisely because Bible societies are inequitable in ways we can now see so easily - the mote in our brother's eye - that God's actions have such symbolic importance for us today. If God cared and helped then, God will care and help now.

There are many ways for Christians to relate to the Bible, including fundamentalism. Quakers are not fundamentalists - but we started with such a close relationship to Scripture that it was said that if all the printed Bibles should disappear, the Scriptures could be re-constructed from the mouth of George Fox. Esther Murer has documented thousands of Scripture references in the writings of Fox, Penn, Penington, and other early Friends. Why, one might ask, was such a flawed document so important to our spiritual forebears? What should be the role of the Bible in our faith community's spiritual life in the present day?

Rather than address these issues a priori from first principles and conclude whether or not the Bible should be important to Friends, I want to proceed a posteriori - from my experience with the Bible - and let you conclude whether or not there is something there that could enrich your life.

## **The Bible in My Personal Spiritual Life**

I have three kinds of personal, daily experience with the Bible: daily devotions, directed Bible study, and Bible reading.

Daily Devotions - Our family has daily devotions, after breakfast and before the children leave for school and adults for work. We read a passage from the daily lectionary, often from another devotional book as well, and have some silent worship and/or vocal prayer. Susan or I may preface the Scripture reading with a brief explanation of the context of the passage for the benefit of our children, or make some comment after the reading about what is important in the passage for us, or how the passage affects our daily life.

These devotions accomplish several purposes. I began reading the lectionary passages several years ago, in order to be connected with Christians outside the Religious Society of Friends. Following the Lectionary means reading the same Scripture passages as Christians all over the world. I feel this connection most strongly when we worship with other Christians and have been reading their liturgical Scripture all week, but the connection is there all the time. God's interest in human beings didn't begin with George Fox and is not limited to the Religious Society of Friends. Staying connected with other Christians both reminds us of the Big(ger) Story and keeps us in touch with other ways in which God is in relationship with human beings, outside Quakerdom.

A second effect of our daily lectionary reading is a more complete connection to the many ways we can encounter and experience God, through the seasons of the liturgical year. The structure of the liturgical year embodied in the lectionary keeps me balanced in my devotions - I can't spend all my time in Easter and ignore the Christmas story. We have to engage the Big Story in all its fullness, and the lectionary helps us do this.

The third effect of our daily devotional Bible readings is that it helps teach our children the Big Story. The most important inheritance we can give our children is not a trust fund, and it is not a good education or a trade. The most important inheritance we can give our children is an understanding of the Big Story of God's involvement with creation through the ages and how that involvement extends directly to them right here and right now. We attempt to do this by all our words and deeds 24 hours a day. The importance of daily devotions, with this structured reading of the

Scriptures, is that it gives them a resource to which they can turn when Susan and I are no longer around. We are seeding the ground for a harvest we will never see in its fullness, but I believe that a familiarity with the Bible stories will help my children in their life choices over and over again.

What does Noah's story say about the Endangered Species Act? What does the parable in Luke 19 say about how its going to feel to try to live a kingdom life in this world? I couldn't put the answers to these questions in their minds, even if I thought that would be right or helpful - but through these daily Bible readings Susan and I can give them grist for the mill - the resources to help them find their own answers.

By encountering the range of the Bible story through the lectionary readings, our children learn that the Bible is a collection of different books on different topics, each useful in a range of varied situations. They know the Bible is not simply about an old man in the sky telling the Israelites to kill everyone else, because they have sampled bits and pieces of the Big Story throughout the Bible. When life crises come to them, and they inevitably will, they will have another resource they know can help - the Bible.

The importance of familiarity with the Bible as a resource when other resources may not be available is shown in the experience of one of our Norfolk Quaker House clients, currently serving on a carrier off the coast of Bosnia. When he began to have the first twinges of conscience about his military service, there were no pacifists or sympathetic counselors on board ship. He did have his Bible, though, and remembered passages that were relevant to issues of war and peace. He went back to Scripture, studying in private, and became a Conscientious Objector.

Directed Bible Study - The second type of regular Bible experience I have is Directed Bible study: a process of "cleaning the lens" so I can see the Big Story more clearly. Bible study helps me break through what one of our Norfolk Quaker House clients calls the cultural sugar coating over the Scriptures, and get to the real meaning of the Bible stories. I am able to do this with the help of people who have put their own insights and understandings into a Bible study or commentary that I can then engage in depth. Ched Myers has helped me and many people like me see the gospel from a new perspective through his book *Binding the Strong Man - A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus*. For well over a year I have been studying the Gospel of Mark with the help of this book, discovering meanings in the symbolic actions of Jesus that had previously been invisible to me.

What I'm learning, over and over again, is that Jesus was so radical and so revolutionary that the dominant culture of every generation has to sugarcoat his message to make it less threatening to the institutions of power and wealth. I say learning over and over again because I am part of the dominant culture, and the gospel afflicts me as much as it comforts me. Directed study like this helps me understand Jesus' real import in a new way, and enables me to be more faithful in my own actions.

The Gospel calls us to a new life so different from our old life in every way that it is like being born again. That is uncomfortable living. We Christians and the world both work to smooth over those differences so we can be more comfortable. Directed Bible study takes the smooth patina off old familiar stories and restores their sharp edges, so we can see them more nearly as those who witnessed them at first hand.

Another author who has been helpful to me and to others is Robert McAfee Brown. His small book *Unexpected News - Reading the Bible with Third World Eyes* showed me the real power in the new Scripture exegesis being produced by the base communities of Latin America. Brown's translation of their experience into words I could understand helped me find a new perspective on Scripture and the Big Story and see truth that had previously been hidden from me.

One needs the help of other people to understand the Bible because what we are able to see in the Bible depends greatly on what we bring to the Bible: our own questions, our own life experiences, and our own pre-dispositions. The Bible was written by and for the underclass of the world, but it has been interpreted in Western society by the overclass. We 20th-century North Americans are in the difficult position of trying to understand a book written in a different historical era for a different social class of people - understandably, some nuance has been lost. Those who bring different questions and life experiences to study of the Bible can illustrate the Scripture for us in new and revealing ways. For example, the underlying question for us in North America has long been "Do you believe?" In the third world, it is "Does God care?" This different question leads one to very different understandings about the meaning of Scripture stories.

These have not been for me purely intellectual exercises. Clearly the Holy Spirit has been active in me, opening my eyes and ears to the hidden Scripture message; as Quakers know, it takes personal inspiration to under-

stand the inspired Scriptures. Without God's breath in our souls, the Bible remains mostly a closed book. However, if we want to go where God's wind would carry us, we had best raise the sail and grasp the rudder - that's the Scripture.

Bible Reading: My third type of Bible experience is what Conservative Friends call "Bible Reading" - Soaking up the Scriptures. We don't always know what we need to study. Simply soaking up the Scripture gives God grist for our mill, and a context in which bible study and devotional reading can be richer experiences. When we bump up against an experience in real life, the storehouse of Scripture stories we have soaked up can help us understand what is happening to us right now. Our leadings, understandings, and admonishments from God are enriched by the Scripture that has become part of us. You don't have to have a "good reason" to read any particular part of Scripture in this way. I've been reading Ezekiel for several months, since I purchased a used Blazer to drive, because the Blazer brought to mind the "wheels of fire" passage from Ezekiel. I wasn't expecting Ezekiel's theological message that God's forgiveness comes to us before we repent of our sins, but there it is.

Every so often I get the urge to listen to Scripture as I'm driving around. I keep the New Testament on tape in the center console of my Blazer, and just pop a cassette into the tape deck. This is strictly "Bible reading": No commentary, no exegesis or exposition, just the words of the Bible in great chunks - 10-15 minutes or more of uninterrupted Scripture. It doesn't have to "do" anything for me immediately (though it often does); it takes its place in my mind, ready for use when the time comes.

One hears passages unexpectedly this way, before one can set up defenses against their message. I have filters that tell me what a particular passage means; when listening to the Bible in this way, a parable or incident can get to me before I filter out other possible meanings, and I learn something new! The context of when and where Jesus told a parable, or when the gospel writer placed it in his narrative of Jesus' life and ministry, is often a clue to its meaning and significance. When we read selected passages we are often reading "out of context"; hearing long passages read to me reminds me of these contexts. Finally, hearing the Bible in large chunks sows the ground of one's mind with Scripture stories and parables that will bear fruit in their own season. I hear passages that I would not otherwise have

picked out to read, and they have their effect on me, consciously or unconsciously.

## **The Bible in the Work of Norfolk Quaker House**

Norfolk Quaker House is a Christian peace witness in Hampton Roads, Virginia - the most heavily militarized region in the world. Now in its second year, NQH does military counseling, counter-recruitment, peace training and evangelical work in our faith communities. My wife Susan is the founder and clerk of the board of directors; I am the part-time staff person. The Bible has several functions or roles in the work of Norfolk Quaker House: it builds up the faith of those we counsel and helps them articulate their beliefs; it helps the board and staff build up our own faith and faithfulness; it helps us communicate and connect with other people of the Book, especially Christians; and it helps us understand our work in the context of the Big Story, which both guides us and protects us against burn-out.

Articulating and building up the faith of those we counsel - A common story among our clients is that a shocking experience early in their military life led them back to the Bible, which they had read as a child but neglected in recent years. In the Bible they found old familiar stories that now had new, different meanings and specific applicability to their circumstances. They now saw that Jesus taught that we should not wage war on one another. This Scriptural affirmation of their inner convictions is a source of tremendous inner strength to them, as well as a continual goad to change their life.

Each of our CO applicants entered the service with an understanding of the Bible that supported or at least was neutral toward military service. When they began to question their continued military enlistment and the Bible's support of it, they had to wrestle with authority figures who quoted the Bible against them. Family members and personal pastors have often bought into the "cultural Christianity" understanding that being a good Christian and being a patriotic American go hand in hand. I myself grew up with this notion that male churchgoers should all serve their country in the military. Military members whom the CO approaches for counsel and guidance may quote the Bible in defense of military service. One of our clients was told, in detail, that when Jesus blessed the centurion he blessed all soldiers and military service in general, thus justifying war.

To resolve these contradictions, these young people have to be able to claim the Bible for their own: to learn to come to their own understandings and be able to defend them. Given their heritage, it would be almost impossible for many of these young people to adopt and defend a position of conscience that was in fact contrary to the teaching of the Bible. If they can't be confident that Scripture supports their inner promptings of conscience, they won't pursue a CO discharge - to everyone's detriment, including the Navy.

When they do understand personally that Jesus Christ of the Bible is calling them to be peacemakers, they have an inner strength that makes them more than equal to the task of extricating themselves from the war machinery.

Building up our own faith and faithfulness- Study of the biblical bases for the Quaker peace testimony helps build up our own faith and faithfulness. Bible study is a way of understanding how and why God wants Susan and me to be active in this particular peace witness in this specific way, and increasing our ability to be faithful in this way. It is important to us because we know experientially that activism without deep roots will quickly burn out - no results, & no nurture. We also know that misplaced activism wastes time and energy without accomplishing the Divine Will. Our goal is not to accomplish great things, but to fulfill God's Divine Intent for each of us and for the world. What happens outwardly as an apparent result of our faithfulness is in God's hands.

A key piece of directed Bible study for us has been a study of the Declaration of 1660. In the course of this study we have found our own inner leadings confirmed by the witness of the early Friends who wrote this document, and all of us solidly based on Scripture. Susan and I have gathered the fullest text of this document we can reconstruct, and searched out the many, many scripture references embedded there. This effort has both confirmed and given words to the inner promptings of the Holy Spirit. We have been confirmed that our leadings are those of the early Friends, in that we understand as they did that we are called to be peacemakers because we have been converted/born again in the Holy Spirit, and redeemed from the lusts that are the occasion of war - no longer ruled by the greed, lust for power and fear that push men and women to war against one another. (James 4:1-3).

We understand as they did Christ's command not to fight in wars from whose power we have been redeemed (Matthew 26:52).

We understand as they did God's kingdom is not and cannot be brought forth by fighting, but only by God's own spirit (Zechariah 4:6).

We pray, as they did, not that the kingdoms of this world be conquered for Christ, but that they be converted and become the kingdoms of the Lord (Revelation 11:15).

Through this and other bible studies, with Quakers and non-Quakers, we have come to understand that our work is not about fighting the Navy in Hampton Roads, not about opposing the military ideology that permeates everything about the community in which we live, and not about extracting as many people as possible from military service. Our work is being spiritual midwives to a conversion experience in those we serve, helping them be birthed into a new world that, in the words of George Fox, "gives forth a new smell."

Helping us stand in the river of both Quakerism and Christianity, soaking up the nurture that comes from being an integral part of both those traditions. - Being a Quaker, which has historically meant being a "primitive Christian", means being a prophetic witness to the coming Kingdom of Christ. You have to be standing in the river to be a prophet. If not, you won't be heard and you won't be strong enough to persevere. The river of Quakerism in which we stand, a small part of the larger river of Christianity, is filled with the witnesses of those who have gone before us, whose understanding and faithfulness have been shaped and strengthened by their own rootedness in Scripture.

In Virginia, the witness of Quakers for peace includes George Wilson - a soldier turned Friend - who died in Jamestown jail for the crime of being a Quaker, and Henry Vaux - first Virginian to be convinced into Quakerism, who died shortly after being released from prison. Vaux' crime was giving shelter to William Robinson, late of the Woodhouse and soon to be hanged on Boston Common.

In Virginia, where we live and minister, the struggle for state recognition of the rights of conscience regarding military service dates to 1692. Our work at Norfolk Quaker House has deep roots. Like those Friends who carried

the first petition to the colonial House of Burgesses, we are nurtured by the witness of those who have gone before and particularly by the Scripture record, which tells us both what to expect and how to deal with it.

Communicating and connecting with other people of the Book, especially Christians - There are many Biblical paths to nonviolence; the Bible is not monolithic or monotonal. For example, Catholic writings on pacifism voice a particular concern with the idolatry of depending on nuclear weapons rather than God. The mainline Protestant emphasis seems to be on obedience: on Jesus' commandments to love rather than to kill. The Brethren in Christ church cites Jonah as a warning story about the evil of nationalism and idolatry of the state. The Quaker emphasis, in contrast, is on the redeeming power of Christ, and the conversion experience that frees us from the bonds of lust that are the cause of war. Knowing and understanding how people of different denominations have come to their understanding of Christian pacifism helps us explain ourselves in understandable ways, and to respect that others may support our work for reasons different than our own, but that are still authentic and valid.

Understanding our work and ministry in the context of the Big Story. The Bible helps us keep this ministry in Gospel Order and keep us from burning out in frustration. This ministry is about faithfulness and conversion, not production or success.

Scripture teaches that all persons have the potential for conversion no matter what their station or circumstances - Jesus' centurion and tax collectors, Peter's jailer, et al. Conversion leads to healing - is a healing. All healing is spiritual and incarnational. The Bible teaches that the incarnation is very good! Anyone may be converted as an outcome of our work - sailors, commanding officers, navy chaplains, spouses. Everyone with whom we deal is seen as a person in whom God is at work toward conversion. The person in this whole group we know will be converted is the NQH counselor, because we know we are in a process of continual conversion ourselves.

Because we undertake this work as helping individuals through a conversion process rather than as a war of ideologies versus the military industrial complex, we have been able to form collaborative relationships with military and civilian personnel to assist those we serve.

Because we understand the work to be the Lord's, not our own, we do not insist that the people we help use our vocabulary or even that they have discharge from the Navy as their goal. We are a Christian Peace Witness that counsels Christians who feel they may be COs. We also counsel non-Christians, theists, and Wiccans who feel they may be COs. We also help folks who know they don't fit in the military but who don't object to participation in war per se, and folks who simply need someone outside the service to hear their story and lend a compassionate hand.

We are protected from burnout in this work because we have been released from the need for results. Like Peter on his way to the temple, our shadow also falls behind us, where we cannot see, and bears fruit we know nothing about. Our need is only to be faithful, not to see great changes in the visible world.

## **My Vision for the Role of the Bible in the Religious Society of Friends**

My vision of the role of the Bible in the Religious Society of Friends involves our past, present and future. The role of the Bible in our past is to help us remember and understand our own history - George Fox, Robert Barclay, Henry Cadbury and all the others who have written our story as a people of faith with their testimonies and witness. Proverbs says that “Without vision, the people die.” I submit that without a past, the people can have no vision of who they are - and so they will die out. We cannot truly know and understand our own past as Quakers without knowing and understanding the Bible and its role in our story as a faith community.

When he gave the keynote address at NYCM(C) sessions some years ago, Wil Cooper was asked by an attender why Quakers spend so much time talking about ourselves. Wil’s response was that we have to tell our story to remember who we are. We are a faith people deeply rooted in the Scriptures, whose understanding of the meaning and usefulness of the Bible has enriched most of Christendom. We isolate ourselves from our own history, unable to understand our own forebears, if we cut ourselves off from a deep understanding of and familiarity with the Bible. A close engagement with the Scriptures shaped the leadings of the Friends whose witness built the Religious Society of Friends, and shaped their lives and testimonies that inspire us today. We can understand the meaning they gave to much of their actions only if we understand Scripture as thoroughly as they did.

In the Present, the Bible helps us remember that our story as Quakers is part of the Big Story. We lose much of the meaning of who we are today as a faith people if we do not value and nurture our connectedness with the Big Story - not the story of the Quakers over the past 350 years, but the story of God’s covenant relationship with all of creation since the beginning of time. We find that story expressed most fully and meaningfully in Scripture

Because we are an individualist faith tradition in an individualist age, it is easy to forget that our personal story and the Quaker story in general are only part of the Big Story of God’s covenant relationship with creation. The Bible reminds us of these true relationships, which is both humbling and reassuring. The dominant culture works on the premise that I am at the center of my story: my rights, my pleasures, my pains, my gains and losses. The Bible reminds us that God is at the center of the Big Story, and my story is only a small part of that. If I am at the center, the meaning of

life is “more for me” - which is ultimately nothing, since ultimately we each die. If God is at the center, then the meaning of life is that God created and sustains me moment by moment, saying of me as of the rest of creation, “This is very good.” God has a great love and a divine plan for all of creation, and I am a very good part and very loved part of that plan.

As we live into the Future the Bible confirms for us - as it did for George Fox and other Friends throughout our history - the promptings and leadings of the Holy Spirit, giving us the confidence and understanding to act clearly and faithfully.

The Bible confirms the leadings of our CO clients toward pacifism. My yearning for the Religious Society of Friends is that it would rediscover what these young people are discovering for themselves: The Bible is a living document of a living God - not the God of the dead, but of the living - and it teaches us in the present moment how to live into the promise of the coming kingdom of God.

The Bible confirms our leadings to begin Norfolk Quaker House and continue this work, and guides us to a fuller understanding of how we are to go about this work in Gospel Order. The dominant order is constantly at work on us, pushing and pulling us back toward its assumptions, understandings, and values. The Bible is an instrument of our continual conversion, over and over again drawing us into new understandings of the Big Story and how it is unfolding in kairos, and how we should understand and interpret current events. Friends have long cherished this sense of being a separated people, “in the world but not of it.” I yearn that Friends would rediscover the Bible as a resource in the struggle against assimilation into the dominant culture.

The Bible can have these roles of affirmation and discernment only if we give it the authority to withhold affirmation - if we believe, as did early Friends, that the Holy Spirit is not changeable, so as to lead us toward a thing as right at one time (in Scripture) and later to lead us from it as wrong (in the present). Our experience, as Friends, is that spiritual authority is acknowledged by the affirmation in one’s own heart of the truth of what is being said, and is borne out by the fruits of following what is said. I bear witness that the Bible has that authority, and that acknowledging it bears good fruit.

How to make the vision come true - The Bible can help us in these ways only if we learn, individually, how to strip away all the personal, cultural, and historical veils that hang between us and God's Truth in Scripture, preventing us from seeing and understanding the Word God has for us.

By personal veils between us and God's Truth in Scripture I mean the barriers and biases that you and I as individuals place between us and understanding the Bible story, including the very human desire to see our own circumstances approved by Scripture, or at least not condemned. We expect to read something in the Bible, and sure enough there it is! By cultural veils I mean the ways that the dominant culture has softened or blunted the Scripture's warnings about the dangers of power, prestige, and possessions.

By historical veils I mean the changes in culture and historical context that make the original symbolism and meaning of events or stories obscure to us. Learning and teaching one another the cultural context of both Old and New Testaments so we understand the symbolism of the story and not get stuck in the apparent literal meaning takes real work.

A passage where all three veils have been at work is Matthew 5:39-41: turning the other cheek, walking the extra mile, and giving the shirt as well as the cloak. Historically, we no longer understand the context of these admonitions. Culturally, they have been re-interpreted to encourage submissiveness and passive acceptance of authority by the great majority of the population at the bottom of the pyramid. Personally, the re-interpreted passages ring so false that many persons turn away from such a crazy book. I am grateful to Walter Wink for opening my eyes to these passages during a Bible study in Greensboro, North Carolina.

*If someone slaps you on the right cheek, turn and offer him your left.* Remember those period movies where a back-handed slap was a challenge to a duel? Since biblical times, the backhanded blow has been a sign that the person being struck had inferior social status compared to the one doing the striking. The forehand blow, or punch, was delivered between social equals. That is the first point of context one must remember to understand this statement of Jesus. The second point of context is that in Semitic societies from Biblical times to the present day, the left hand is and has been unclean. To do anything with the left hand, other than certain toilet functions, makes one unclean and requires purification.

Now think about this statement once again. It will help if you can act it out with another person, or visualize it carefully. Because my attacker can use only his right hand, a blow on my right cheek is a backhand blow: a declaration of his dominance and my inferiority. To turn and offer my left cheek is to turn the tables on my attacker completely. By standing my ground I deny the power of the blow itself to defeat me. By simply turning my head, I have changed the circumstances so that my attacker can no longer reach my right cheek with his right hand. He now has the choice of striking my left cheek a backhand blow with his left hand, making himself unclean in the process, or striking my left cheek a forehand blow with his right hand, admitting that I am his social equal!

Jesus is not encouraging us to become victims here. He is telling us to look for nonviolent ways to re-cast the structures of domination that oppress us, to “bind the strong man” (to use Jesus’ phrase from Mark) and proclaim our true dignity and worth. Jesus’ next two statements confirm and extend this theme.

*If a man wants to sue you for your shirt, let him have your coat as well.* Jesus’ audience was primarily the lower half of the economic pyramid of his day. Rich and powerful followers were so unusual that their appearance merited special mention in the gospels. This statement is directed at the poor, who had no funds to pursue a court suit, but did find themselves the object of a court case from time to time - even though they had little that could be taken from them other than the clothes on their back.

The cultural context to remember here has two relevant facets. The first is that men of that time and social class wore only two garments, an inner coat and outer cloak - and to paraphrase Michael Jordan, they were not “briefed”. Undergarments as we think of them were unknown in Biblical times and culture. The second fact to remember is that in Biblical times and culture, viewing a naked man made the men who saw him unclean. This is crucial: it is not unclean to be naked, but it is unclean to look upon a naked man. A man who does so must undergo a purification.

Jesus is making another statement about the use of the judicial system to enforce unfair economic practices on the poor, and his advice is to find a way, by obeying the court’s instructions literally, to re-cast the situation so that the truth comes out. Imagine the courtroom as our poor defendant takes the shirt off his back to pay the rich man who has sued him - and then

continues by removing his coat as well, insisting that the plaintiff receive it, while everyone present tries to avoid looking at him. The defendant has made a symbolic statement about the court itself while obeying its commands literally: a system that takes the clothes off a man's back is indeed unclean and needs purification.

*If a man in authority makes you go one mile, go with him two.* The once-proud kingdom of David and Solomon was, in Jesus' lifetime, the Roman province of Judea - an occupied nation. Roman rule and Roman law was enforced by Roman troops stationed throughout the country. The "man in authority" who could make you go one mile was the Roman soldier, who had the legal right and authority at any time to conscript any civilian and make him carry the soldier's pack and gear for a mile. You could be plowing your field, on your way to synagogue, or rushing to see your dying father before he passed away - when the Roman soldier picked you, everything else had to wait while you carried his pack for a mile and then walked back to where you started.

This practice eased the load on the Roman soldiers, making their life easier and enabling them to travel farther in a day and arrive less fatigued. It also emphasized to the general population that the Romans were in charge, and that even the least Roman soldier had more power than the most prominent Jew. To prevent abuse of the population, no soldier was allowed to conscript a single individual for more than a mile. The person who was responsible for seeing that this regulation, and all army regulations, was carried out properly was the centurion, who had the power of life and death over the troops in his command.

Imagine now the Roman soldier who conscripts a farmer trying to do his spring planting. After the obligatory mile, the soldier tells the farmer he is free to go home, but the farmer refuses to go! "This is such an honor, I'll go an extra mile, sir! Your pack is really quite light!" The centurion is certain to notice that a civilian has been with the troops longer than usual, and will make an inquiry. The soldier will be hard-pressed to explain why he has apparently broken regulations by keeping a civilian in service for more than a mile. "Well, sir, this civilian insists on continuing to carry my pack - says it is an honor." Honor or not, regulations are regulations and the army must see to it that all are obeyed. Our Roman soldier has broken a regulation and will be punished. If this happened often enough, soldiers might well decide to carry their own packs.

Jesus is again pointing out a way to turn a common, oppressive situation around so that truth and real justice are revealed. The historical and cultural veils between us and the political, cultural, and social realities of Jesus' time make it difficult for us to understand what he is really saying. The dominant system in our own time draws its own veil, teaching us that Jesus wants us to be wimps - willing victims in our own oppression. We draw our own veils over such an outrageous assertion, refusing to engage the Scripture that makes such unreasonable demands. Only when we learn to strip away these veils can we learn what Scripture is really teaching - and we will be surprised and deeply thankful to find such a treasure.

## **My Vision for the Role of the Religious Society of Friends in the Contemporary Use and Understanding of the Bible**

Just as the Bible has a role for us, we have a role in the Church Universal regarding the Bible. Part of this role has been our task for over three centuries: to remind Christians of the proper place of the Bible in Christian life - a secondary authority. We can't give effective testimony about the over-importance given to the Bible in some quarters unless we are willing to give it the importance it deserves, as a unique guide and resource second only to the direct inspiration of Jesus Christ, which is available to all.

A second aspect of our role in the wider arena is to remind Christians of what the Scripture really says. The cultural veils to understanding Scripture affect all Christians; those in strong institutional churches have institutional veils as well. Because Friends are relatively free of institutional momentum and somewhat separated from popular culture, we can provide a bridge back to a clearer understanding of the Scripture message in every generation. If you think Friends can't contribute importantly or be taken seriously by Bible scholars and theologians of other faith groups, first refresh your memory of the contribution of Henry Cadbury to *The Interpreter's Bible*, then consider the contribution of Latin American peasants to the understanding of Christians everywhere in the world of the story in Luke 19.

### **Conclusion - Encounter with the Bible**

Rabinadrath Tagore said, "A tree does not become independent by cutting itself off from its roots." The Bible is an important part of our spiritual root system as Christians and more broadly as people of the Book. We cut ourselves off from a richer spiritual life and from real help and sustenance in our life in the physical world when we allow our connection to the Bible to languish or die. Our lives draw their meaning from their connection to the Big Story - God's cosmic plan for all creation. The Bible is an account of the Big Story to date; without it, we tend to lose sight of the Big Story and try to give meaning to our "little stories" - nations, ethnic groups, or even individuals. We take the little truth of these stories and call it the Truth - take what is really death and call it life.

Why do I still read that old thing?

It helps me stay rooted in the Big Story when so much of daily life is trying to uproot me;

It turns my face toward God when so much of our world is calling me to look elsewhere;

It guides and nurtures me when I would otherwise wander like a lost sheep in the desert.

Could I be a good Christian without the Bible? Of course - but it would be a little like descending a ski slope in galoshes instead of skis. It could be done, but why?

--llw