

News and Good News by Tom Wagner

The Swiss Reformed theologian Karl Barth (1886-1968) advised his students to read both the Bible and newspapers. I find it to be wise counsel. Reading these texts in tandem can help Christians apply our values to our daily interactions in the broader society. However, consumption of news media requires considerable discernment, especially today. In a 1963 interview, Barth noted he regularly included journalists in his prayers, due to the news media's powerful influence on public opinion. He had lived through the rise of the Nazis in Germany and numbered among the leaders of the opposition Confessing Church movement in the 1930s. The experience gave him firsthand experience of how media and institutional religion can be manipulated for propaganda purposes.

There is at least a threefold value to reading the Bible and news together: historical, ethical and narrative. The historical value is in turn twofold. One, awareness of current events helps dust off the ancient text and releases it from stained glass captivity. Acts of God recorded in scripture took place in the broad shouldered world of ancient Middle Eastern shepherds, fishers, carpenters, tent makers in addition to priests, monarchs and yes-even soldiers. In the 1960s, Clarence Jordan skillfully integrated the gospel with Civil Rights era southern culture to create his "cotton patch" translations. Two, the scriptures themselves can help us look at current events in the broader context of faith in human experience. We can read examples of men and women responding to God's call. It is a way of finding community with those who went before—"the cloud of witnesses".

The ethical value of this approach integrates our professed values with analysis of current trends. Given the biblical imperatives for justice and reconciliation, how do we respond to a world of violence and concentrated wealth? How do we move beyond band-aid solutions to root causes? How are we to live the love of God and neighbor daily as individuals and communities? While the news can help us see "what is", scripture grants us a vision of "what should be". People of faith have much to offer the ongoing development of social ethics and public policy in a secular pluralist society, without attempting to dominate. Sadly, white American Christians are particularly susceptible to messianic pretensions. One corrective is confession, accepting how our privileged position has caused many problems in the world. When Christians live up to the standard of embodying God's love in the world, we can help build a more tolerant, just and compassionate society.

The narrative value is an interplay of a common text with the variety of perspectives from which it can be read. The Bible, with some minor qualifications, remains a common source of instruction and inspiration for the Christian community around the globe. It provides a common set of stories, images and metaphors, which in spite of linguistic and cultural differences, offer a common "language" in which to discuss matters of faith. Good journalism plays a similar role in broader society, contributing a common text to the conversation, which in turn can help us work together toward the common good. Admittedly, different life experiences may give us different understandings of the same text. Dunker historians often state that 17th century wars in central Europe likely sensitized our forbears to the peace and nonviolent themes in the New Testament. Central American refugees I met in the 1980s had a strong sense of the economic and social implications of Mary's song in Luke 1:46-55. Listening to differing voices is an exercise in empathy and learning.

As we enter a new election season, it's a good time to list some concerns about news media. One long time concern is that most news organizations are owned by for profit corporations whose primary business is entertainment--cleverly capturing our attention on behalf of their sponsors. Instead of substantive public policy discussions, the public is fed a steady diet of sound bites, personality cult and hyped controversy. It is a poor foundation for public policy discussion or for theological reflection. In my student days, we were advised to consult a variety of news sources, heavy on print media and lighter on broadcast forms. However, in the digital age, news organizations have consolidated and drastically shrunk, especially print media. Today's media environment makes informed decisions more challenging. Jesus advised his disciples to "be as wise as serpents and as harmless as doves" (Matt. 10:16). It remains good counsel.

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