

# WITH THE BIBLE TOWARD THE YEAR 2000: SCRIPTURAL ENGAGEMENT AS BAROMETER, BEACON AND BELLWETHER

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## Abstract

*Through the centuries, engagement with the Bible has served as a barometer (recording and reflecting the history of shifting circumstances), as a beacon (constituting a source of light illuminating theological reflection and guiding human conduct) and as a bellwether (leading the way in setting new agendas for the Church, her theology and her encounter with the world.) Against this background, the history of biblical engagement through the centuries is briefly traced. The main focus of the article is, however, to reflect on the role of the Bible in the next millenium. The author foresees an even stronger ecumenical engagement, an enhanced focus on a critical faith and a self-critical rationality, a stronger rejection of absolutist claims, renewed respect for the diversity of voices in the biblical canon, the emergence of biblical study to an attentive dialogue partner within other fields of human knowledge and a renewed search for wisdom in the Bible in future in order to face the problems which will confront humankind. Against the background of these developments the study of the Bible will, in the third millenium, become even more an interconfessional, international, interdisciplinary and intersocial enterprise, sustained by the conviction that the Bible is a holy and privileged word, both about human existence and humanity's relation to God, society, history, and the cosmos.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

To ruminate on a *theology for the third millenium* calls for no small dose of prophetic imagination. According to a venerable Chinese proverb, prophecy is very difficult, especially in regard to the future. As a biblical theologian who, like Amos, is "neither a prophet nor the son of a prophet," I shall take my cues from the Bible itself which consistantly imagines the present and future in terms of the past. Moreover I also propose that a focus on the history of engagement with the Bible will provide us with a perspective on theology in general and something of a map for the uncharted road

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ahead. For throughout the centuries, engagement with the Sacred Scriptures as the ultimate source and norm of truth has consistently played a central role in Christian theology and spirituality and serves as a reliable index of the Church's pulse in every generation. Or to shift to a typical US metaphor, as we barrel toward the year 2000, let us keep at least one eye on the rear view mirror.

To shift metaphors once again, I propose to reflect on the manner in which the Bible through the centuries has served in a threefold fashion as as barometer, a beacon, and a bellwether of the Church's theological developments and her encounter with the currents of the times. The phrase *engagement with the Bible* is meant to include reflection on and response to the Scriptures at all levels of the Church's life, clerical and lay, academic and popular.

With the term *barometer*, I wish to suggest that engagement with the Bible is always influenced by prevailing currents and shifts in its historical and cultural environment. Engagement with the Bible, like theology in general, never takes place in a vacuum but always in a social cauldron. *How we read the Bible and what meanings we discern* is always conditioned by who we are and our *social location*: when and where we live, how we have been educated and socialized, what's happening politically, socially, and culturally, how we conceive of ourselves, our society, our history, our place in the universe, our ultimate sources of meaning, identity, and commitment (Malina, 1981; 1986). The regular changes and massive shifts in both the social and conceptual maps of world history since the Bible's origins have all had their impact on biblical understanding as on theology in general. As a *barometer*, biblical engagement records and reflects this history of shifting circumstances and intellectual perspectives and paradigms (Küng, 1988; Küng & Tracey, 1989).

In addition to functioning as a barometer, biblical engagement with the Bible has also served as a *beacon*. Through the centuries it has constituted a source of light illuminating theological reflection and guiding human conduct as people confront the dilemmas and challenges of their age. So as a beacon we shall consider the contributions which biblical study has made in the past and present as a clue concerning its contribution in the decades ahead.

Finally, a *bellwether* is a male sheep which leads the flock. Under the category *bellwether*, we shall consider how engagement with the Bible in the past has led the way, set new agendas for the Church, her theology, and her encounter with the world. In all major periods of western history, engagement with the Bible has generally served

in all three capacities. And we have every reason to expect it will continue to do so in the millenium ahead.

Tracing the full course of the Bible as barometer, beacon and bellwether through two millenia can hardly be undertaken here (for historical surveys see Ackroyd, *et al.* 1981; Grant & Tracy, 1984; Hahn & Hummel, 1966; Hyatt, 1965; Kümmel, 1970; Morgan & Barton, 1988; Neil, 1961). Rather let me select particular moments of the distant and recent past to illustrate the threefold role I have outlined and then conclude with some reflections on current trends and future prospects.

## 2. ENGAGEMENT WITH THE BIBLE: A HISTORICAL RETROSPECTIVE

From the ministry of Jesus onward, engagement with the Sacred Scriptures in the Church remained as central an activity as it had been throughout Israel's past history. For Jesus, as for Paul and the earliest Christian followers, a fresh reading of the Torah, Prophets, and Writings reflected an acute awareness of the signs of the time, (Rome's subjugation of Palestine, excessive taxation, widespread violence, institutional oppression of the poor and powerless), and provided a sacred basis for a call to repentance and a prophetic critique of the *status quo*. When this sacred text was subsequently read through the prism of faith in Jesus as God's messiah, a pattern of Christian scriptural reading was established which continues to the present day. From this point onward, the Church has regarded Jesus Christ, his death and resurrection, as the fulfilment of the prophetic expectations and God's promise to Abraham. In Abraham's seed, Jesus, all the nations of the earth have been blessed.

In the following period of the Church Fathers, an elaborated allegorical method of Bible reading enabled the faithful to construe the unity and continuity of so-called "Old" and "New" Testaments and to see themselves also as heirs of the divine promises to father Abraham, Gentile though they mostly were. At the close of late antiquity, the barbarian invasions and the fall of Rome, it was once again the Bible, now Paul's letter to the Romans, which that vascillating refugee from North Africa, Augustine, was encouraged to "take and read." The ensuing conversion of this pivotal figure of history and his synthesis of Jewish biblical and Greco-Roman intellectual traditions in the allegorizing mode set the standard of biblical reading and preaching for the next thousands years.

A millenium or so thereafter, once again an engagement with the Bible unleashed forces which reshaped the map of the Church and the course of western history. In the

course of his Wittenberg lectures on the Sacred Scriptures, it was the Augustinian monk, Martin Luther, who like Augustine, heard in the revolutionary words of Romans the good news of a gracious God who forgives and makes righteous apart from futile attempts to fulfil the demands of the Law. In addition to his personal spirituality, Luther and the biblical revolution he fostered was a product of the times. Within the Church, the extent of abuses and the absence of a church council to deal with them had produced a crisis over authority. This crisis Luther and his fellow Reformers sought to confront by insisting upon the Sacred Scriptures rather than tradition and papacy as the ultimate authority for the Church. The Bible, they asserted, is the ultimate norm of faith, teaching, and conduct by which all other norms were controlled and judged. The meaning of Scripture is determined not by arbitrary allegorical interpretation but by Scripture itself, its own literary, historical, and canonical context: *Scriptura ipsius interpres*.

External forces, however, also contributed to the new ascendancy of the Bible in theology and popular piety. Luther was a child of the Renaissance, the beneficiary of the newly recovered Greek and Roman heritage. He was educated to read and translate the original biblical languages. He produced a translation of the entire Bible in the German vernacular and thereby put the Bible into the hands and hearts of the people. Erasmus, his Dutch colleague, had recently produced a Greek text of the New Testament (1516) which Luther then proceeded to translate (1521-34). His German prince protector, Frederick the Wise, Elector of Saxony, like other German princes of the time, eager to get out from under transalpine political domination, afforded the excommunicated priest and scholar the protection he needed to complete his translation and promote the movement of reform now underway. Johann Gutenberg's recently invented printing press, in turn, provided the necessary means for the Bible's wide and unprecedented dissemination. The role which the Bible was now to assume for the next half millenium was thus a consequence of a constellation of factors political, technological, and ecclesiastical.

As a *barometer*, engagement with the Bible reflected and was fostered by these converging forces. As a *beacon*, this biblically orientated theology was shedding a liberating light on the primacy of divine grace, on the nature of Christian faith as fervent belief active in love, and on the Church as incorporating laity as well as clergy as the total people of God. As a *bellwether*, this accentuation of the primacy of Scripture embodied a fundamental shift in the manner of doing theology and wrote a new and enlivening script for Christian spirituality.

In the ensuing period of the Counter Reformation and Protestant pietism, the Bible among proponents of the Counter Reformation and Protestant Orthodoxy remained captive to scholastic proof-texting, while at the hands of Protestant pietists it became a vehicle for nourishing the inner life of the spirit but not a basis for continued theological scientific reflection as it had been for the original Reformers.

This temper of the times, however, was to radically change with the onset of the European Enlightenment in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Engagement with the Bible, as theology in general, in this epochal period took on a new critical character. Massive eruptions on the political, economic, social, scientific, and philosophical landscape of Europe continued to help dissolve a unified world and a unifying worldview. A so-called "Age of Reason" marked by advances in the natural sciences and political theory, new critical philosophy, and American and French revolutions discovered the exhilarating power of human rationality to liberate individuals from the captivity of centuries of establishment domination and ecclesiastical dogmatism. Scriptural study and theology in general began to subject the Bible to scientific inquiry.

Fundamental to this shift from a pre-critical to a critical perspective was the awakening of a historical consciousness, an acute awareness of the conditionedness and contingency of human experience and knowledge, a questioning of supposed absolute truths and absolute authorities, and a realization of the relative and relational nature of all reality. As a *barometer*, engagement with the Bible reflected this optimistic confidence in human reason as the scientific means for unlocking the secrets of the biblical texts, for exposing their historical conditionedness as well as their human message, and for likewise exposing the errors of uncritical, literalistic use of the Bible as a quarry of dogmatic proof texts.

The result, of course, was a mixed blessing. On the one hand, a mode of biblical reading was given birth, the so-called historical-critical method, which has as its goal the understanding of the biblical texts in the light of their own original and particular historical contexts. Proper to the task of a "historical-critical" method were research operations which enabled the scholar to scientifically examine all the determinative features of the biblical writings, their textual history, their literary features, their sources and traditions, their historical contexts, and the diversity of their theological messages (Hayes & Holladay, 1987). Accordingly, the Bible is read and studied as the human witness to God's self-revelation within the contingencies of human history and culture. The scientific and critical nature of this reading was intended to liberate the Bible from its dogmatic captivity so that it might once again become the living and liberating Word of God.

The downside of this development, however, must also be recognized. For the consequences of this development, the negative as well as the positive, continue to shape the role of the Bible in the church today. For one thing, it now became evident that an enormous historical, geographical, and cultural chasm separated modern European readers from the ancient biblical texts and their Near Eastern and Mediterranean worlds. The Bible, it now became clear, was neither addressed to nor immediately comprehensible to distant modern readers. Intelligent biblical study thus became a task of attempting to bridge these yawning gaps so that its content might somehow continue to have meaning and relevance for a different time and place. Interpretive bridge-building, in turn, required specialized training in ancient languages, ancient history and culture, a training which was to separate biblical experts from the non-experts in the pews. With this distinction in competency came further distinctions and tensions between biblical scholars employing historical criticism and systematic theologians and ecclesiastical authorities who did not, between liberal, conservative and fundamentalist camps, between the university and the Church. The nature of the relationship between the technical students of the Bible and the community, tradition, and authority of the Church had now become a questionable one. Both the positive gains of this scientific approach and its accompanying tensions were harbingers of things to come in the final two centuries of the second millennium.

In the nineteenth century, advances on a score of fronts contributed to an optimistic sense of progress and an unlimited confidence in the canons and tools of the historian's craft to unearth the past, including the biblical past *wie es eigentlich gewesen is* ( as it actually was ). In the light of the artifacts and monuments of antiquity uncovered by archeologists, the stages of community formation and development suggested by social scientists and Darwinian evolutionary theory, the idealism of Hegel, the historical determinism of Marx, and the psychological theory of Freud, the history, religion, and culture of the Bible seemed to be emerging from the mists of the past - or at least to Protestant scholars. For in Roman Catholic circles the first Vatican Council of 1870 marked the total victory of an entrenched neo-scholastic theology where a scientific study of Scripture was out of the question. Liberal Protestantism, on the other hand, with Adolf von Harnack at the lead (1902) was busy using its scientific laboratory to distill from the Bible a supposed "essence of Christianity"; namely the Fatherhood of God, the brotherhood of man, and the immeasurable value of the human soul.

### 3. TWENTIETH CENTURY DEVELOPMENTS

The cataclysmic events of the twentieth century brought to an abrupt halt the optimism of this earlier period. The vacuousness of a liberal marriage of Church and culture was laid bare. A depressing record of events revealed the dire need for an engagement with the Bible which could enlighten an age which had expanded man's inhumanity to man unprecedented and monstrous proportions. Two-world scale wars, an unleashing of atomic devastation, an unimaginable holocaust, genocide, racial conflict and apartheid, an undeclared Vietnam war, capitalistic expansion and colonisation, the recurrent incidence of ecological contamination, and the everpresent threat of nuclear annihilation all have demonstrated the need for a thoroughgoing of theology, including its engagement with the Scriptures. In this century, too, biblical engagement has functioned as a barometer, a beacon, and bellwether.

Early in this century on the heels of the first world war and the collapse of liberalism, a theological giant of our age, Karl Barth, produced a commentary on the book of Romans whose aim was to expose once again with theological passion and clarity the condemning and healing power of the word of God. His commentary and its censure of an arid exegesis devoid of theological substance came roaring out of Switzerland like an avalanche. His German contemporary and colleague, Rudolf Bultmann, likewise was concerned with recovering the relevance of the biblical text for modern humanity. But in contrast to Barth's christocentric biblical theology, Bultmann sought to make the ancient text intelligible to moderns through stripping a supposed core meaning of its ancient, cultural and mythic trappings and interpreting it in the categories of philosophical existentialism. At base here and throughout the rest of our century has been the overarching and still unresolved question concerning the appropriate conceptual framework and method for interpreting the ancient texts and exposing their transformative power. Barth's agenda enjoyed a more enthusiastic reception in the United States than did Bultmann's program of demythologization and existentialistic interpretation. However, Bultmann's introduction of form criticism, the analysis of the forms of communication constituting the biblical texts, their history, and their social setting, and the refinements of the historical-critical method by Bultmann and his students, has shaped the course and the focus of the exegetical discipline across the globe.

Until mid-twentieth century one would have to add the qualifier "Protestant globe", for until the appearance of Pope Pius XII's encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (1943) and then the momentous Second Vatican Council (1962-65), Roman Catholic scientific engagement with the Scriptures had lagged far behind that of their Protestant colleagues. Earlier historical critical efforts on the part of such scholars as Ernst Renan and Albert

Loisy had provoked their condemnation as "modernists". The results of Vatican II, however, dramatically demonstrate the rapidity with which Roman Catholic scholars have closed this gap and illustrate the positive contributions which a historical critical approach to the Scriptures can make to the theology and life of the Church in general (Brown, 1981, 1989; Collins & Crossan, 1986; Fogarty, 1989.)

Among all the developments, detours, and refinements of scientific biblical study in the twentieth century, two major concerns continue to animate the enterprises. The one involves an interest in constantly improving the methods for ascertaining the meaning of the original biblical texts within their original historical and social contexts. The other is a concern for communicating the meaning and implications of the biblical writings to modern readers so that the Bible as primary expression and norm of Christian faith might continue to illuminate and inspire the thought, theology and life of the contemporary Church and its service to the world.

The progress towards these ends has by no means been a smooth or uncontested one. Voices have been raised from various quarters lamenting the current "crisis" in biblical studies, particularly the alleged failure of biblical scholars to have produced a body of work which is coherent with the Church's theology and contributive to her ministry and mission (Childs, 1970; Wink, 1973; Frei, 1974; Smart, 1979; Green, 1987; Neuhaus, 1989). Such criticism, as part of theology's self-correcting function, dare not be ignored. On the other hand, it also should not be allowed to obscure the remarkable contribution which scientific biblical study has made to contemporary church life (Brown 1975, 1981). In my experience with scriptural colleagues representing all denominational affiliations, the number of those whose study is intended as a ministry in and to the Church and Synagogue outweighs by far those for whom biblical research is just a meal ticket and a career. To illustrate how modern scholarship has enlivened Christian faith and theology in our day and has set a course for the days to come, let me review some of the major advances and contributions of contemporary biblical study.

#### 4. MAJOR ADVANCES AND FUTURE PROSPECTS

First, in this century we have witnessed an ecumenical engagement with the Scriptures unprecedented since the sixteenth century Reformation. This common engagement across denominational lines has led to a common agreement concerning the theological primacy of the Bible. The Bible is now recognized by all Christian communions as

the primary exposition and norm of Christian faith, teaching and morality, the norm (*norma normans*) which serves as a basis and qualification of all other theological norms (*norma normata*).

Secondly, as a result of this common engagement with the Bible, faith and reason, Scripture and tradition and are no longer regarded as mutually exclusive entities but as partners in mutually critical dialogue. The focus is now on a critical faith and a self-critical rationality. The Bible is now seen as primary and privileged tradition with historical and cultural traditions always normed by the biblical norm.

Third, a commonly shared historical consciousness has led to a questioning and critique of all absolutist claims, be they political, ecclesiastical, race, gender, or culture based. Biblical study, as theology in general, recognizes the relative and relational nature of human existence and productions of the human spirit.

Fourth, this has resulted in an appreciation of the diversity of voices within the biblical canon and, in turn, a respect for differing intellectual, ecclesiastical, and cultural perspectives in the larger theological conversation. Common study of the Bible from divergent ecclesiological perspectives has resulted in a welcomed theological shift from disputation to dialogue, from conflict to conversation involving all levels and sectors of the Church.

Fifth, this advance toward respectful sharing of diverse experiences and perspectives has also involved a conversation of theology and biblical theologians with non-theological academic disciplines. Emerging from its academic isolation, theology and biblical study is seeking to be an attentive dialogue partner with other fields of human knowledge. Like theologians in general, those engaged with the Bible have shifted from a position of alleged "objectivity" and aloofness from the realm of daily life in all its political, economic, and social complexity to a position of programmes and agendas which reflect the spirit and principles of the biblical message in our time.

Sixth, under the pressure of the cataclysmic events of the twentieth century, biblical scholars have been prompted to seek anew in the Sacred Scriptures wisdom for addressing the horrors and possibilities of an atomic age.

The apocalyptic events of this century of war and devastation on a planetary scale have fostered a resonance with the eschatological and apocalyptic tenor of the biblical writings and the coming of the Day of the Lord. As a result, biblical readers have been sensitized to the import of the eschatological character of the message of the early Church as never before.

The complicity of the Church and institutional religion with these events has prompted biblical readers to a re-examination of the relation of Church and State and religion's often neglected prophetic function.

In the face of discrimination and dehumanization on a grand scale, we have reclaimed from the New Testament witness the human dimension of God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ, *the Man for Others*. In this century, Jesus as the suffering and vindicated Christ has re-emerged as the living centre of biblical proclamation and human hope for a suffering humanity.

In response to Hitler's Holocaust and the annihilation of six million Jews, an earnest dialogue between Christians and Jews had been inaugurated which has led to a reconsideration or discovery on the part of Christians of their own Jewish roots and the Jewishness of Jesus, their Lord.

Seventh, within the Church, the theological dialogue fostered by collaborative biblical scholarship has uncovered numerous points of theological consensus. Thus Roman Catholics and Protestants have been found to agree on such issues as the primacy of divine grace in the process of salvation and faith as primarily a response to grace active in love. Together we have rediscovered in the Scriptures the humanity of Jesus and the human face of God, salvation and reconciliation and cosmic renewal, the Church as the body of the faithful inclusive of laity and clergy alike, the ministry of the Church, whether lay, priestly, episcopal or papal, as one service to Church and World, Peter as chief exemplar of human frailty and divine forgiveness and model of apostolic leadership, and Mary as biblical model of humble faith and constant discipleship.

This list of areas of new consensus and removal of former roadblocks to ecclesial unity could be expanded but the point, I hope, is already clear. An ecumenical engagement with the Bible in this century has resulted in an astounding recovery of our common Jewish and Christian heritage and encouraging strides in tearing down the Berlin walls of ignorance and animosity which have previously divided us. The unity-within-diversity which biblical scholars have discovered in the Scriptures has become a model and an inspiration for the Church today and tomorrow. In this century, that diversity also includes the participation of new voices previously excluded or ignored: the voices, perspectives, and experiences of women challenging the patriarchal controls of a male-dominated Church, of Afro-Americans and minorities of colour challenging the blindness of white ecclesial and political establishments, of Southern hemisphere and

Third World Christians challenging a Eurocentric vision and version of engagement with the Bible and the world.

Finally, in the realm of education and Church life, liturgy, and personal spirituality biblical engagement has likewise left its momentous mark. In parochial elementary and secondary catechesis, study of the Bible thrives as never before (Buckley, 1987). In Christian liturgy and preaching, the service of the Word and biblically-orientated sermons are the norm for all Christian communions. Ecumenical biblical scholarship has produced not only a common original text used throughout the scholarly world, but also new lectionaries in the vernacular and new translations of liturgical texts based on current biblical research. In universities and seminaries of the United States, the study of the Bible is no longer a denominational but an ecumenical undertaking where Catholic biblical scholars teach in Protestant schools, Protestants teach Catholics, and Christians and Jews team-teach courses together. In the professional societies of biblical scholars, membership is no longer determined by ordination or prayer book but by vocation and competence. In the area of personal devotion and group reflection, fresh Bible translations and guides for popular study are serving the needs of individual readers, Cursillo movements and base communities around the globe. Ever increasing numbers of laity are enrolling in courses of biblical instruction.

In sum, engagement with the Scriptures, both popular and scholarly, is flourishing as never before and has played a major role in altering the focus and face of modern theology.

## 5. TOWARD THE YEAR 2000

So where does all this leave us in terms of the third millennium? Through the first two millenia of the Church's history, I have suggested, engagement with the Bible has served as a barometer, a beacon, and a bellwether of the Church's engagement with the world and her articulation of her own self-understanding, theology, ministry, and mission. As this century draws to a close, certain trends have become evident which appear likely to shape the nature of biblical engagement in the millenium ahead. Four deserve particular note. All involve communal and collaborative dimensions of biblical engagement.

For one thing, engagement with the Bible has become and will remain an *interconfessional* enterprise. As such it will continue to reflect and animate the larger ecumenical movement and the goal of ecclesial reconciliation. Sustained interconfessional study of

the Scriptures will likewise continue to foster the recovery of our common roots and our Judaeo-Christian heritage. Further exploration of the Bible's unity-within-diversity will also strengthen our appreciation of the richness and blessings of our ecclesial diversity.

Secondly, engagement with the Bible is now *international* in scope and will remain so in the decades ahead. The Bible now exists in all the world's languages and is studied from a host of different cultural perspectives. The collaboration of Protestant, Roman Catholic and Jewish biblical commentators is matched by the conversation involving inhabitants of the First, Second and Third Worlds. No longer is a Eurocentric perspective on the Bible dominant or desirable. This development in transcontinental, trans-hemispheric and transcultural conversation around the Bible is resulting in new and at points revolutionary insights into the meaning of Scripture and gives every indication of continuing in the years ahead.

Third, a newly developing *interdisciplinary* study of the Bible, particularly with the aid of the social sciences, is shedding increased light on social systems and cultures which do not only shape the biblical writings and their communities but also the different perspectives, values, and worldviews of contemporary modern readers (Elliott, 1981, 1986; Gottwald, 1983, 1987; Malina, 1981, 1983, 1986). Awareness of these differences in social and cultural perspectives is enabling today's Bible readers to listen more accurately to these ancient and foreign texts without distorting or domesticating their meaning and potential power. Such interdisciplinary study of the Bible is slowly advancing around the globe and promises to shape the nature of biblical study for years to come.

Fourth, a related *interclass or intergroup* reading of the Bible has also emerged in recent time. This entails a critical scriptural reading involving not only male but female participants, not only whites but blacks and people of colour, not only mainstream but marginalized participants. The result is a recovery of the Bible's prophetic and critical power and the discovery of Scripture as a source of personal and social empowerment. This feature of current biblical study likewise appears destined to shape the nature of engagement with the Bible across the globe and through the decades ahead.

The issues likely to shape biblical study as barometer and beacon, as in the past, will be the pressing problems of our time: addressing the dilemma of human estrangement in an increasingly alienating, nihilistic, and materialistic society; confronting institutionalized greed and corruption in high and low places; struggling with the

constant threat of nuclear war and self-annihilation; eliminating discrimination by class, gender, creed, and race; developing a cosmic theology for the care rather than the rape of the planet; being a serving Church in a suffering world; taking up the cause of the poor and the powerless; coping with the epidemic of abortion and AIDS; offering sanctuary to the refugees and the homeless; providing models of integrity, morality and community to a generation which has lost its moral compass; incarnating the gospel of reconciliation in a fractured global village; celebrating the presence and power of the sacred for a humanity yearning for empowerment (Rasmussen, 1988; Cobb, 1989).

Biblical engagement with these issues will be interconfessional, international, interdisciplinary and intersocial in nature and will be sustained by an enduring twofold conviction that the Bible is a holy and privileged word both about human existence and humanity's relation to God, society, history and the cosmos. This word, we have learned in the past two millenia, is a powerful cargo contained, however, in fragile human vessels. No generation of history, no philosophical school, no intellectual giant, no denomination or religious confession, no single theology, no nation or class of persons has ever captured forever its elusive meaning. Like the God to whom it bears witness, the Bible communicates a familiar but also a foreign word which defies our categories and shakes our very foundations. Like the event of salvation it rehearses over and over again, it challenges our structures and *status quo* and criticizes our self-serving priorities. Like the memories and hopes of God's people which it records, it weds to a conditioned past and a contingent future - no absolutes, all relatives, no certainty only confidence. And like the communities of faith in which it was born, the Bible will remain a human yet a faith-filled word. Its meaning and transformative power will ever be recovered and realized anew in communities of faith engaged with its message as they engage with the challenges and opportunities of the moment.

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