

How to read the Bible ... like a Quaker!

Love Your Neighbour

BY TIM GEE, Friends World Committee for Consultation (FWCC)

Quakerism was born during the scientific revolution, growing up alongside such innovations as the microscope, telescope and barometer. While this context may have only indirectly influenced Quakers' relationship with the Bible, it is nevertheless unsurprising that in a time of questioning people were drawn to a movement which asked questions too.

One of the most famous lines from the journal of Quaker co-founder George Fox is 'this I knew experimentally', that is to say, by experience. There are some things that I know experimentally too, through going to Quaker Meeting.

One is that I sense something inside me linked to something outside me. Another is that when someone gives ministry, it can resonate or have relevance in a way the person speaking couldn't have realised. A third is that through study of scripture, I've found my way to a deepened connection with the Divine, through accounts of other people's encounters with the same Spirit.

Surface meanings

I began reading the Bible with the Gospel of Matthew which rapidly leads to the Sermon on the Mount. Here we find many of Jesus' famous proclamations: 'Blessed are the Peacemakers', 'I tell you not an eye for an eye', 'turn the other cheek', and the Golden Rule: 'In everything do to others as you would have them do to you'.

When Tolstoy read these same words he asked why Christianity was not organised according to these principles. Why would people who claim the Bible as their guide not enact the plain message of the longest recorded passage of Jesus' words that there is?

This is the first way to read the Bible – read what it says and take it at face value. Before I had read the Bible as a whole, I took the same view. In respect of the words of Jesus, I still do. But what are we to do with those passages elsewhere in the Bible which on the face of it seem to justify, for example, slavery, discrimination, war crimes, or cruelty to animals?

An approach to the Bible based entirely on surface meanings can lead to frustrating debates consisting of salvos of isolated 'proof texts', leaving the listener none the wiser, and perhaps alienated by each side's commitment to a seemingly self-contradictory text.

The Quakers of history who helped progress causes such as antislavery, gender equality and peace have tended not to focus on isolated passages. Rather, they often took the message of the Bible as a whole, seeing social reform as part of God's divine providence for humanity.

But, even then, the version of the Bible we read can radically shape the perceptions we develop. The worldview of the people who have edited and translated each variation may influence us as much as the underlying message of the text.

Historical-critical approaches

This recognition has led to a second set of approaches which could broadly speaking be categorised as 'historical-critical'. As a community concerned for truth, many Friends are drawn to this.

An historical-critical mind-set tries to glean what we can from other ancient texts, archaeology, and the languages and cultures of the ancient world, in order to shed light on insights that might not be obvious from the Bible alone.

I've found these approaches fascinating, illuminating, spiritually deepening and more. They are also inherently inconclusive, and any honest conclusion is by necessity tentative. Often I sense that – even via circuitous and scholarly routes – authors end up affirming what they thought anyway.

There's also no escaping that there's no point in studying Christian history without reference to the Bible itself. For all it has been edited and translated, it remains the best-preserved set of written sources about the early church and its context.

Research claiming to have uncovered through historical method the true intent and meaning of any Biblical author is tantalising. At the same time, it's worth remembering that there is little academic consensus even on who the true authors of most of the texts are.

Even if we could uncover both the identity and the intent of every Biblical author, another question emerges. Could it be that, as in the experience of meeting for worship, a divine message has a meaning for its hearer that its speaker may not have been aware of?

This is modelled in the Bible itself: for example, Paul finds meanings in scripture which are different and deeper from those that would have been immediately obvious. He of course followed Jesus who taught in parables, with metaphor and with questions, encouraging his followers to search within.

What can you say?

This leads to a more personal method. One of the leading scholars of how Quakers read the Bible, summarised that we seek to do so with empathy – seeing ourselves in the text and the text in our lives.

On the basis that each person has access to a measure of the Light, that Light may illuminate different aspects for each person. If God is infinite, then God's word too could have infinite depth of meaning.

Margaret Fell theorised that the story of the exodus from Egypt symbolises the Light seeking to escape the cage many keep it in. She also wrote eloquently on the scriptures from a woman's perspective.

I am a white, straight, largely non-disabled man, born in England. Reading Biblical commentaries and reflections from the perspectives of people with other experiences has given me access to insights I couldn't have known otherwise.

The advantage of approaching the Bible personally is that we can each say with confidence what is true for us at that moment. By sharing the measure of the Light given to us, that Light shines more brightly.

The disadvantage is the question of where the limit is. If someone says, 'Well the way I read the Bible, I think it is OK to kill or maim or torture', are we to believe that that is what God has revealed to that person, or should we suggest that that view has come from some other source?

Reading in the Light

All three approaches above can be found among Quakers, although none is unique to Quakerism. What is distinctive to Quakers is the belief that Christ exists as inward Light and teacher. As the Light and Christ are understood as the same, then the way we are led should be consistent with Jesus' teaching.

Jesus is recorded four times in the gospels as saying 'Love your neighbour as yourself', as well as the similarly worded Golden Rule noted above. To read the Bible with Jesus then is to ask of every passage 'how does this show love of neighbour?' If any passage seems to point to anything else, we can hold it in the Light until an interpretation emerges which points towards the rule of love.

That might mean researching how words have been translated or would have been understood in their cultural context. Sometimes it means listening to how people with other experiences understand certain texts, especially if they have been used to harm people from those groups.

Yet, there is a lot that can be done simply by sitting still with the Light, and letting it interpret for us. Without access to university libraries that is what the earliest Friends did, setting an example for the rest of us.

What can you say?

This approach to the Bible is where I have found myself, informed by meeting Quakers from many different walks of life, and studying the Bible together.

In this I can speak only for myself. Quakers worldwide are very diverse, and there are many approaches to scripture. Many lean towards a more literalist approach, whilst others feel wary of Biblical language at all, noting ways it has been misused to justify injustice.

Both science and religion have been and can be used to good or bad ends. My experience is that when illuminated by the Light, faith can and should point towards love of neighbour.

And this I know experimentally.

World Quaker Day 2025 is themed 'Love Your Neighbour'. Find out more at fwcc.world/worldquakerday

Tim Gee is General Secretary of the Friends World Committee for Consultation (FWCC) and will be present at the Whanganui Settlement 27-29 June for 'Walking cheerfully over the Earth': a weekend of fellowship, singing and reflection on global Quaker priorities and how Aotearoa Friends can engage and contribute.

