

Inspired as God's Remnant

From Strife to Space

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The abiding authority of the Bible

“When the foundations are being destroyed, what can the righteous do?” (Ps 11:3)

Churches worldwide are experiencing conflict over the enduring authority of the Bible for our lives. There are major differences about the authority of the Bible in ethical issues, especially around marriage and sexuality.

This makes believers and congregations ask the following questions:

- Can Jesus' teaching that marriage is only between one man and one woman still be maintained (Matt 19:1-12; Gen 1:27; 2:24)?
- Can Paul's teaching that same-sex relationships be rejected still be maintained (Rom 1:24-27; 1 Cor 6:9-11; 1 Tim 1:8-11)?

Sustaining versus relativization in ethical matters

Some say yes, these teachings about marriage and sexuality should be upheld because they are universal and absolute truths. It is a vital foundation of the Christian faith that is being destroyed.

Others say, no, this cannot be sustained, and change or reject the meaning of the texts and thereby relativize the authority of the Bible for our lives. They look at these ethical issues as non-foundational.

These different interpretations obviously stand directly opposite each other. Those who accept Scripture's authority on marriage and sexuality as absolute are in conflict with those who do not and relativize the Bible's message about it.

Benevolence versus confrontation

If we look at the broader picture of Christianity in the world there are different ways in which churches choose to manage this conflict.

Some choose a **benevolent** way of dividing amicably into separate institutions based on their views on the authority of the Bible, as many churches especially in the USA have done (Presbyterians, Methodists and Anglicans). This is especially the choice if there is significant support for both positions.

Others choose an accommodating path in which room is made for differences. This is especially the choice if the leadership is mainly on the relativizing side. Believers who want to maintain the Bible's authority on marriage and sexuality absolutely, however, experience such a path as compromising, because it relativizes their absolute position (as in the NG Church locally).

The experience is however that accommodation soon turns into intimidation and **confrontation**.

For example, individuals are allowed to leave the church, but congregations that want to do so are restrained in numerous ways from making independent decisions about this with, for example, the threat of legal action regarding status and assets.

What do we do with dogmatic differences?

However, the problem goes even deeper, because the accommodation of ethical differences inevitably also leads to the acceptance of dogmatic differences. Where a church allows differences on an ethical level, it is inevitable that the differences will also be allowed on a dogmatic level.

We already see this in the accommodation of a relativization of what the Bible teaches us about God and his Son Jesus.

- Recently, a theologian was in the news about his view of Jesus. He argues in various articles that we should not overburden Jesus with divinity, because this causes theological limitations. We cannot speak of Jesus as Theos (God) which means that according to him, Jesus is not divine by implication.

Because this position goes against the confession of the church of the ages that Jesus is true God and true man, based on the Bible (John 1:1-14; 1 John 4:2; 5:20), one would expect that

the leadership of the church would reject such a position. However, the church he is a part of chose not to act against him after an investigation.

- Another theologian wrote in a recent column in the newspapers that God in Christ chooses against all violence. According to him, this means that all the texts in the Bible that connect God with violence are relativized by Christ on the cross. All people are now recognized by him as God's property and his chosen ones.

Such a point of view relativizes large parts of the Bible, not only in the OT, but also in the NT. For example, Jesus declares in his prophetic speech that sinners will receive eternal punishment from the Lord in hell and those who did the will of God, eternal life (Matt 25:46). Jesus is not only the Savior after all, but also the One who executes the judgment of God.

Further debate and objections?

The question now is what are congregations to do that are already discouraged because of the ethical debate if, in addition, the core of our confession about God and Christ and eternal life in the Bible is relativized?

- Should we lay complaints against the theologians at the ecclesiastical bodies that supervise them?
- Should we have some more debates at synods about this with letters of objection?

Experience shows that such a strategy does not bear lasting fruit. It did not help in the DRC. Nearly a thousand pages of complaints were sent in and rejected, mostly without even having read them or bringing them to deliberation.

Something else is needed.

The story of Isaac

Perhaps we can find a way forward in the narrative of Isaac in conflict with his neighbors as a metaphor in Genesis 26.

The narrative begins meaningfully with the Lord giving a clear command and promise to Isaac that from here on controls his movements.

This command is that he should not go down to Egypt in times of trouble, for instance when there is a drought, but should stay in the land the Lord designated for him. The promise is that everything belongs to him and his descendants in any case, even those parts that will be argued about in the course of the narrative.

It is important to note that this happened before the Philistines and Canaanites give him trouble in the narrative. The Lord is also clear that his stay in Canaan is a stay as a foreigner because the fulfillment of the promise of the physical land is still in the future.

It is also important to consider that the place he goes to next, Gerar, is still counted as part of Canaan (Gen 10:19), although it later became known as Philistine territory. So, Isaac remains in Canaanite territory during this entire narrative.

When Isaac experiences conflict with the Philistines during his visit to Gerar because they closed his wells out of envy, he realizes that he has to move, because his relationship with the Philistines has really become stalled.

He then moves to a plain still in the region of Gerar and there digs open the wells of his father Abraham, but in the process discovers a special water vein that provides permanent water. However, instead of being happy about it with him, the inhabitants of the land demand it from him. "It belongs to us", they say, even if they did nothing to discover this water.

Isaac therefore calls the well **Esek**, in Hebrew "Dispute" or "Strife", because the source of water that he himself discovered is denied to him and taken from him.

However, he still remains in the vicinity of Gerar and digs another well in an attempt to provide water for his people and their livestock. But, again, when he is successful, the inhabitants of the land revolt against him and drive Isaac away from this well as well.

Isaac therefore calls this well **Sitna**, in Hebrew "Complaints" or "Enmity", because this source of water is also denied to him and taken away from him.

After the third conflict over water, Isaac decides to move a little further away and digs a well in the south-east of the country, interestingly enough in the part where his father Abraham stayed in Beersheba and worshiped the Lord (Gen 22:19).

It would also later be given to Judah as tribal territory. Mercifully, no one tries to steal this well from him and his people.

Isaac therefore named the well **Regoboth**, in Hebrew "Space", because it was finally a place where he could live in peace with his people and prosper.

In the provision and freedom that this well gives him, he can even dig another well in the south which he calls **Seba**, in Hebrew "Oath", which would remind him of the promise of the Lord that one day the whole territory of Canaan would belong to him and his descendants, as he later passed the blessing on to Jacob (Gen 28:3-4; Heb 11:20).

The town by the well, Beersheba, thus becomes the center where not only Abraham could flourish, but also Isaac, and later also Jacob.

It is also here that the Lord would later repeat the promise to Jacob that his descendants would return to take possession of the entire land (Gen 46:3-4).

Elijah also receives here the support he needs to hear the voice of the Lord again (1 Kings 19:2-8).

The Lesson

Perhaps there is a lesson to be learned in this story of Isaac. Not that there are not great differences in the circumstances and situation of Isaac's time and our circumstances and situation today.

However, the story of Isaac moving **from "Strife" to "Space"** may point a way forward in the current conflicts in churches over ethical and doctrinal matters.

Paul in the NT

This gives a different perspective on the many instructions that Paul gives in the NT regarding false teachers. We find one such instruction in Romans 16:17-18:

¹⁷ I urge you, brothers, and sisters, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them. ¹⁸ For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites. By smooth talk and flattery, they deceive the minds of naive people. (Rom 16:17-18 NIV)

Calvin says in his commentary on these verses that the people who cause divisions and obstacles will pretend to be for peace and unity but hide the fact that the unity they advocate is based on lies and wicked dogmas.

He specifically targets the Catholic-minded people who accused the Protestants of splitting the church, and expresses it as follows:

"Paul clearly shows, that he did not condemn all kinds of discords, but those which destroyed consent in the orthodox faith."

Of course, it is about getting away from the heresy and their advocates. But the real reason is that believers can only fulfill their calling in this world if they agree on the truth. One can only abide by the truth in love if you agree what that truth is.

That is why Calvin broke away from the Catholic church, first just resigning from his ecclesiastical posts at the age of 21, beginning to write his Institutes, until he was forced out of the country and fled to Switzerland and began ministering to the refugees, publishing the first edition of the Institutes 6 years later when he was 27 years old.

We are the Remnant

We have to remember that true believers are called the remnant right through Scripture.

From Genesis right through to Revelation God **separate** people. He makes a distinction between those who serve Him and those who reject him.

As with Noah. God makes a distinction between Noah and mankind. The righteous Noah and his people are delivered through the ark. The wicked men of his time perish through the judgment of the flood.

That is the way in which God ensures a future for his people. By choosing Noah and his family as a remnant and saving them from the flood, God ensures a future for the people of God.

As Raymond Dillard puts it:

"The holy, pure, and true people of God will survive his judgment on sin as a faithful remnant and will become the nucleus of a renewed, chosen people. The purposes of God are not frustrated but are effected among that true and renewed people." (Professor of Old Testament Language and Literature, Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania)

That is why we can say that the remnant and the true church are exactly the same. The remnant and the elect, the called, are exactly the same.

But that is also why the remnant, the true church, will experience **conflict** and strife, because of this separation.

And God's command to the remnant is always, as Jesus wrote to the congregation in Smyrna: "Be faithful unto death" (Rev 2:10). And to the church in Thyatira and Philadelphia: "Hold fast what you have, until I come." (Rev 2:25; 3:11)

And his command to their leaders, as Jesus wrote to the leader of Sardis: "Strengthen the hands of those that remain." (Rev 3:2)

Why?

Because they are also **targeted** in the big war of the ungodly against the Lamb, as John tells us in Revelation, but with the promise: "the Lamb will overcome them, because He is the Ruler of rulers and the King of kings, and with Him are the called, chosen and faithful." (Rev 17:14)

We thus live with this tension that every true follower of Jesus encounters today.

And we have to ask ourselves: "**How do we stay faithful to the word of God as a creative minority?**"

We have to ask ourselves: "**How do we confront our culture's idols with the boldness of the Spirit and the authority of a message of life?**"

Well, on the one hand we have to pray that God will give us the courage and boldness to **speak truth** to those in places of power.

But on the other hand, we also have to remember what American professor and author, Carl Trueman wrote in his book *Strange New World*, saying:

"The church protests the wider culture by offering a **true vision** of what it means to be a human being made in the image of God."

We have to **speak up**, and we have to **cast a vision**.

Practical steps

How this should look practically, each believer and each faith community must decide for themselves. I think there are three avenues to explore.

1. Speak up and let your voice be heard

On the one hand we should speak truth to power. That is what Faithful Witnesses do.

Like Prof. Johan Janse van Rensburg this week in Netwerk 24 with an article *Should we be silent about the synod's decisions?*

“Although the general synod of the NG Church made a number of decisions that contradict the Bible, these decisions were accepted wordlessly by many church leaders and members.

Is the Word then no longer important?

The Scriptures were then given to combat error and correct wrongs (2 Tim. 3:16).

Perhaps the consequences of such errors are not realized. Therefore, an analysis of one fallacy is pointed out here.

The general synod (October 12, 2011) decided: "There is room for members who believe in the real and personal nature of the devil and demons, and there is room for members who interpret the biblical discourses about evil and demons differently."

According to this decision, members are welcome to ignore or interpret metaphorically all the texts in the Bible that are written about the devil.

This decision is dominated by the perception that the Evil does not really exist and only refers to the evil that is in every human being.

The relativization of texts about the devil confronts us with the dilemma about the integrity and identity of Jesus Christ.

How did the Son of God talk about Satan and deal with demons if there are no demons or Satan?

He cast out demons, sent the disciples out to cast out demons and warned "that this generation cannot be cast out except by prayer and fasting" (Matt. 17:21).

The defense of some that Christ joined the prevailing view of his time about the Evil One holds no ground or water.

Would Christ have then only pretended to cast out demons, simply to impress the crowd? Another defense is that the possession of the Bible is known today as some kind of disease. Was Christ then ignorant of it? Is this how the church wants to misrepresent Christ?

This writing is an appeal to every Christian who regards the Bible as the Word of God, not to accept the error of the synod with abandon or to despise the struggle of those who have objections.

There is deep mourning over a church that no longer respects the authority of Scripture in its decision-making.

Shouldn't we object to that then? We are then Protestants!"

2. We are called to evangelize the nations

Remember Isaac...

Where we are drawn into the conflict, and become part of the debates, and it does not end with the truth being embraced, our own testimony is also limited and at risk.

After all, we are called to go into the whole world to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ everywhere. That is the Great Commission.

I think we forget our calling in the midst of all the conflict and think that by resisting liberalism that we are actually fulfilling our calling.

When Jesus sent his disciples to the Jews he bid them to enter houses with a message of peace. Then He commanded them: "If someone who promotes peace is there, your peace will rest on them; if not, it will return to you." (Luke 10:6)

We are called to evangelize the world, plant churches, raise up leaders and never stopping before we have evangelized the whole world. When you are not welcomed, you should move on to where the message takes root and bear fruit.

We see it in the mission of the apostles.

In the first segment of the apocryphal **Acts of Andrew**, we read about the allotments for ministry among the disciples:

"About that time all the apostles had come together at the same place, and shared among themselves the countries, casting lots, in order that each might go away into the part that had fallen to him." (Shelton, W. Brian. *Quest for the Historical Apostles: Tracing Their Lives and Legacies*)

This casting of lots as a geographical strategy does not stand on strong historical evidence. Regardless, the commissioning of Jesus to take the gospel to the uttermost parts of the world (Matt. 28:19–20; Acts 1:8) drove them there, whether by the leading of the Spirit, opportunities afforded by historical circumstances, or some decision-making technique.

Brian Shelton gives us an excellent overview of where they went.

1. **Peter** ministered in Jerusalem, Samaria, Antioch, and Rome. He also ministered to the northern parts of Anatolia (Turkey).
2. **Andrew** journeyed to Scythia (Kazakhstan), possibly Anatolia (Turkey), Macedonia, and then to Greece, probably ending in Kiev, Ukraine.
3. **James the Greater**, the brother of John, is linked to the Camino de Compostela, with a ministry in Spain although he was the first of the apostles to be martyred by king Herod back in Jerusalem in 44 AD.

4. **John**, worked in Ephesus, with Paul and Timothy and was persecuted a few times, brought to trial in Rome, and eventually exiled to Patmos where he wrote his Gospel, letters and the Revelation.
5. **Philip** also worked in Ephesus and southwest Anatolia, where they may have intentionally partnered for ministry. He is also linked to Parthia (Iran) and Scythia (Kazakhstan), and maybe Britain and France as well.
6. **Bartholomew** (Nathaniel) was clubbed, skinned alive, or beheaded in Armenia or Parthia. There is also a tradition that links him to Africa and as far east as India.
7. **Thomas** ministered in the Syrian region through Parthia ending up in India where he planted numerous churches that have an unbroken witness up to today.
8. **Matthew** likely ministered and died in Persia, perhaps in the Caspian Sea region named Ethiopia. He is however also linked to Ethiopia in Africa.
9. **James the Lesser** is linked to ministry in Persia and also Egypt and North Africa.
10. **Jude**, son of James, also called Thaddeus, ministered in Syria at Edessa and also in Mesopotamia and Persia.
11. **Simon the Zealot**, worked in North Africa, including Mauretania and Egypt, places where Veritas is very active today as well, and died alongside James the Lesser in Persia.
12. **Matthias'** activities concentrate in Scythia (Kazakhstan) and Palestine, with his death likely near modern Georgia on the eastern side of the Black Sea.
13. **Paul's** journeys are well known, taking him through Palestine, Syria, Cyprus, Anatolia, Macedonia, Greece, and Italy. The possibility of ministry in Spain on a fourth missionary journey is quite likely.

This is the foundation of the church at large!

The apostles embodied a self-sacrificial missionary spirit that sought to glorify a cause greater than themselves. While the Gospels present these men as imperfect and even deeply flawed individuals, something grander than the men themselves transforms them and invites them on a mission to change the known world.

Describing the impossible task of transforming the ancient world, N. T. Wright remarks:

The truly extraordinary thing is that this belief was held by a tiny group who, for the first two of three generations at least, could hardly have mounted a riot in a village, let alone a revolution in an empire. And yet they persisted against all the odds, attracting the unwelcome notice of the authorities because of the power of the message and the worldview and lifestyle it generated.

And whenever we go back to the key texts for evidence of why they persisted in such an improbable and dangerous belief they answer: it is because Jesus of Nazareth was raised from the dead.

So, look for the place where the Lord can be served in freedom, where your testimony is needed, and then "go there".

The world is waiting for the Word of life. New places and peoples have to be reached with the Gospel.

A last practical proposal.

Circles of Unity

The book by Daniel Darling deals with the way in which one works in a church with divisive issues - *Agents of Grace: How to Bridge Divides and Love as Jesus*.

He starts by using John Stott's proposal in his book *Evangelical Truth: A Personal Plea for Unity, Integrity and Faithfulness*, as point of departure:

"We need a greater measure of discernment, so that we may distinguish between evangelical **essentials** which cannot be compromised and those *adiaphora* (matters indifferent) which, being of **secondary importance**, it is not necessary for us to follow."

He then uses Gavin Ortlund's distinction in his book *Finding the Right Hills to Die On* and distinguish the following four circles that can help with this distinction:

1. First-rank doctrines are **essential** to the gospel... There are beliefs that are clear from a study of Scripture that were you to deny them, you would put yourself outside of the historic Christian faith. These include important contemporary issues such as the Bible's vision for human sexuality and gender, and the authority and reliability of Scripture. The church has always considered these to be first-tier doctrines.
2. Second-rank doctrines are **urgent** for the church (but not essential to the gospel). These are issues that Christians have disagreed about for much of church history, such as the nature of baptism. This is typically the level at which denominations are formed. But we can still partner with other churches on many gospel initiatives because we agree on the first-tier issues.
3. Third-rank doctrines are **important** to Christian theology (but not essential to the gospel or necessarily urgent for the church). These issues include topics such as eschatology (beliefs about the end times), the role of sign gifts, the age of the earth, what Bible translation is best to use. And while it is good and right to have strong views on even these tertiary issues, we should be openhanded with others who have differing views.
4. Fourth-rank doctrines are **indifferent** (they are theologically unimportant).

Daniel is convinced that true Christian unity must be accompanied by doctrinal integrity. But, he uses **concentric circles** to help one know when to cooperate, and when not to. This is in an article he wrote after the book to elaborate on it

(<https://dandaring.substack.com/p/how-to-think-about-cooperation>):

So how do we think about cooperation?

Let's think of the way we cooperate in terms of **concentric circles**.

The widest possible circle is the **human circle**.

Here is where we live side-by-side with neighbors who might believe radically different things than we do. But we respect everyone as image-bearers of God (Genesis 1) and care about their welfare. You can partner with almost anyone if it's a direct humanitarian operation. If you're working to rescue someone from a natural disaster, you're not first checking their doctrinal distinctives. In your local community, if you are volunteering at a food pantry, tutoring children in schools, clothing the homeless, you can do that with a broad section of people.

Then the circle might get a little tighter when it comes to working on **cultural issues**.

Here you obviously can only work with folks who believe as you do about these issues. And these lines vary, depending on the issue. But you can march in the March for Life with anyone who believes the unborn baby is a human worth protecting. You can march with atheists if it is for life. The same goes for feminists for life, etc.

Other issues require a bit tighter circle, such as **family formation**.

Here we work with folks who understand the creational good of traditional, biblical marriage. And yet the circle can still be fairly wide. This is where we often work with a broad spread of denominations.

Then, the circle gets tighter, when it comes to things like **evangelism**.

Cooperation on evangelism for Protestants would be different from Catholics, because we disagree on things like justification, etc. So city-wide initiatives likely won't include them, though we shouldn't go out of our way to be hostile or mischaracterize their views. This is also the circle where we often partner on defending, protecting, and championing Christian orthodoxy. Baptists, Assemblies of God, PCA, Missouri Synod Lutheran, Global Methodists, and others can and should come together against those who would attempt to revise or reverse "the faith once delivered to the saints." Movements in this circle would be like The Gospel Coalition or parachurch organizations or campus ministries, etc.

Then, however, the circle might get even tighter. This is where we organize ourselves into **fellowships and denominations** with specific emphases and distinctives, as we mentioned above.

Things like church planting, missions, ecclesiology, and theological education often organize at this level, though there are some broadly evangelical institutions of higher education that would locate themselves at the circle above.

Two last ideas to think about.

It is helpful to think of **bounded-sets** and **centered-sets** of values and viewpoints. Bounded-sets are defined by boundaries and our relation to them (in or out). Centered-sets are

defined by a center (e.g. values and viewpoints) and our direction of movement relative to it (advancing towards or retreating away).

Like the Australian farmer that explained to someone why there are no fences on his cattle farm in the semi-desert area. “Sonny,” he said: “out here we **dig wells** instead of **building fences.**”

That is what **Isaac** also did. He dug wells. And when they were stolen, he dug another one a little further down the road.

A last idea – think **federal** and **fraternal**. Independent in terms of **decision making** and **working together** like we do in fraternal in different communities.

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