

AUGSBURG COLLEGE



2007 SUMMER

THEOLOGY INSTITUTE

JOURNAL

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HERMENEUTICS!

Welcome to the 2006 *Summer Theology Institute Journal*! This journal is the culmination of a week of study for 13 senior high school youth. All were participants at the Augsburg College Summer Theology Institute in June 2006. These brave high school youth gave up a week of their summer to read, study, debate, and learn more about scripture and its use today.

We gathered under the theme “Hermeneutics!” The exclamation point was an important part of our theme, because we were very excited to dive into how we view and use scripture. The youth came to the Institute having already read *The Good Book*, by Peter Gomes. They were armed with questions and opinions on how scripture shapes their lives.

The task of teaching this group fell to Dr. Beverly Stratton of the religion department. She guided the students through questions like, “How do we read the Bible?” and “How do we apply the Bible to our daily lives?” She introduced a variety of methods to reading the Bible, some devotional, some academic.

In addition, youth participants visited a synagogue and heard a rabbi talk about hermeneutics. They practiced devotional reading in urban environments. They even listened to musicians demonstrate how they present scripture in their music. But the conversation did not end there. The youth were mentored by Augsburg College students in their exploration of the meaning of hermeneutics. These college students engaged the youth in conversations about the Bible, faith, life, and a variety of contemporary topics.

The culmination of the Summer Theology Institute was a writing project, prepared by each of the participants. This journal is a compilation of the final papers submitted by the participants. Some students reflected on their understanding of hermeneutics, while others chose to apply hermeneutical principles to a particular issue or topic. Their thoughts and ideas are here for you to explore. These essays were edited based on grammatical, mechanical, and structural errors only. The essence of the writings and the voice of the youth were preserved as they were expressed.

The Summer Theology Institute seeks to expand the theological imagination of youth in the church. We tell students *how* to think, not *what* to think. As you read, please understand that the Summer Theology Institute was a primary place to ask questions and explore ideas. You will find in a few instances that students chose to write about the same topic, but they took completely opposite viewpoints. The opinions expressed in this journal are the voice of the youth and do not necessarily represent those of Augsburg College or the Summer Theology Institute staff.

Please use this journal as an entry point to understanding the hermeneutical lens the youth in your life and work are using. Have a conversation with them about how they understand the Bible and its role in our lives. Likewise, if you know youth who demonstrate good theological imagination, consider nominating them for the 2007 Summer Theology Institute, June 24-29. You can get information, nominations, and applications from Ross Murray, Summer Theology Institute Program Director, by calling 612-330-1151 or e-mailing <murray@augzburg.edu>.

Happy reading!

Ross Murray
Program Director:
Summer Vocation Institute

SELF-INTERPRETATION

by Alex Scharber, Minneapolis, Minn.

“Her-me-neu-tics, n. the science of interpretation and explanation, especially pertaining to religious texts.” This definition was one of the few things I was armed with heading into Augsburg’s Summer Theology Institute. Among the rest of my preparatory materials was, *The Good Book* by Peter J. Gomes, a set of readings from the Bible, and a couple packets of readings. With about five pieces of material to read, I was under the impression that this week was going to be very close-minded and never stray from one path. Let me first start by saying that I was wrong. The material we discussed during my week at Augsburg College covered a wide range of topics and left room for further debate. Of everything that we learned and talked about, the one thing that was always on my mind was the question, “How do we interpret the Bible?”

This question alone promotes a never-ending discussion. The main question I would like to address, however, is, “Should each person be able to choose how he or she interprets the Bible, or should every person have to interpret it the same way?” In my conclusion, the Bible is a book of stories that help us create our own values, including an explanation of the life of Jesus and the key to heaven and promotes a belief in Jesus as God’s son and our redeemer. So everyone should be able to use the Bible however it helps shape his or her life. This may not be the “perfect” answer yet I believe it gives people the power to choose their own life, and the chance to figure out their faith for themselves instead of being force-fed the Bible. By the means of self-interpretation, one is in charge of creating one’s faith and one’s relationship with God.

There are many pros to having a choice on how one interprets the Bible. One pro of having the choice of interpretation is that one is able to make one’s own faith and draw one’s own conclusions about what to believe in. There is a key difference in being told what to believe and being taught how to make decisions about what to believe. If one is told what to believe and what to have faith in, that is not one’s faith — it is someone else’s. But if one is given the chance to learn how to draw one’s own conclusions from the Bible and from daily life, then one is creating one’s own faith.

Think about it like this: if you went to church, believed everything your pastor said, and followed the Bible strictly to the word, just like everyone else, how would your relationship with God be personal and special? You would be experiencing a plain, monotone relationship with God, rather than having a luminous, self-led relationship. That is by far the most important part of deciding your own faith. The personal relationship with God that I create is the one thing that makes me feel a special bond with God that nobody else has. The Bible is one of the many tools that helps me create my wonderful unique relationship with God.

I have learned about the Bible through confirmation and church. This teaching was an opportunity to read the stories and learn what they mean, not just read as much of the Bible as we could. The question "What does this mean to you?" came up quite often. Under this learning environment I have developed the opinion that I can create my own faith from the Bible and what other people think does not have to influence it. Yet at the same time I know there is nothing wrong with agreeing with or taking a little bit of someone else's belief and adding it to my own.

Take for example the parable of the prodigal son. This story could be interpreted many ways. Is it wrong to interpret the final meaning of the story a little differently than someone else? I believe the parable of the prodigal son teaches us that we are all welcomed equally into heaven, where as my friend might believe it to show that someone can do whatever he/she wants and as long as he/she returns to God he/she shall be saved. Is either of these answers correct? Or are they both wrong? The beauty is that if someone doesn't think either of these are right he/she can still draw whatever meaning he/she would like from the story and apply it to his/her own life, or if someone believes one of them is right he/she can agree with it and use it to create more of his/her own faith.

There are also some cons in allowing someone to choose how he/she interprets the Bible. What if someone decides to take the Bible to the extreme, and uses it as his/her motive for what you and I might perceive as terrorism? The terrorists interpret their sacred texts according to how they see fit. I think that they are "perverting" their sacred texts and using them to their own means. Unfortunately someone can't say, "interpret it my way or you are wrong," because then one is force-feeding someone one's faith and he/she is not developing his/her own. This is where I say to myself, "If I am allowed the right of creating my own faith, they are as well." We will all meet our Maker in the end, and then the consequences of people's interpretations will be decided. We cannot pick and choose who is allowed to interpret the Bible and who is not. Either everyone is allowed to create his/her own faith by means of his/her own interpretation or everyone should have to follow a single version.

In conclusion, I know that there is no way there can be a middle ground between self-interpretation and a lone translation of the Bible. Either everyone can be allowed to interpret the Bible on his or her own, or everyone has to follow the one interpretation. I believe self-interpretation to be the best way to go about using hermeneutics on the Bible. My personal belief of equality and fairness leads me to believe everyone is allowed to call his or her own shots when it comes to interpreting the Bible. I am constantly using my own power and mind to make my own judgment call about the Bible and its message. It feels right to me to create my own faith. The beauty of self-interpretation is great; I alone choose what I believe and nobody else can come between "my" God and me. By drawing my own conclusions from the Bible, I form a special bond with God that nobody else has, and that is what makes my faith strong.

COMMUNICATION, EXPERIENCE, AND THE BIBLE

by Peder Garnaas-Halvorson, St. Paul, Minn

This summer I have met many interesting people: a peer who told me that I was not going to heaven, a Sunday school teacher who told me (and 30 other 5- to 12-year-olds) that we are all born with a black heart, and a friend who was against subjective truth. At first glance I could not understand how others could see things so differently from me. But the more I conversed with them, the more I communicated with them, and the more I learned about others and about myself. I was able to recognize the experiences that led these people to conclusions so different from mine.

My peer wanted to change my views so he would see me in heaven, the Sunday school teacher was trying to rationalize a world that sometimes seems so wrong, and my friend wanted something concrete to hold on to. None of these experiences are wrong; it was only through communication that they were distorted into ideas that seemed wrong to me. But this distortion opened new doors within me, and by trying to understand what I saw I delved deeper into myself than ever before. It is because of some of these experiences this summer and the questions they have forced me to ask that I have written this paper.

Every day in everything we do, whether it is looking at a tree, talking to a friend, or reading a book, we experience. But what is meant when we use the word "experience?" Webster's dictionary tells us that experience is "the act of living through an event or events; personal involvement in or observation of events as they occur." Another Webster definition is, "the effect on a person of anything ... individual reaction to events, feelings, etc." One can hardly disagree with either of these definitions, they are straight from the dictionary, but I think one might be able to go deeper, shed more light.

"Personal involvement or observation of events as they occur." This is what I would call the first stage, or objective stage of experience. In this stage the person observes the event; the word "observes" implies that objective concepts are attributed to the event. I see a tree, it is about 50-feet tall, the leaves are spade-shaped and green, the bark is white and peeling. What kind of tree is this? Probably a birch. How can you tell? You have, in the past, observed a birch tree and it fits the description that I gave. We observe birch trees in the same way. This is the objective stage.

"Individual reaction to events, feelings, etc." This is the second stage, or subjective stage of experience. In this stage the person has an individual reaction to the event, or has feelings which are caused by an event. I see a tree, I begin to blush with embarrassment. What kind of tree is this? You probably don't know. Why not? It's obviously a birch, because once I asked a girl to a dance under a birch tree and she just laughed at me. To me it makes perfect sense what kind of tree it is but to you it doesn't. This is because the meaning which I attach to an event or object is completely personal, totally subjective. It also transcends both me and the object and resides in the realm of the infinite. Paul writes to the Corinthians, "Because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal," (2 Cor. 4:18 NRSV). The meaning which we attach to an object is what "cannot be seen," what is "eternal." We look not at the tree, but what it reminds us of; not at the person, but our relationship; not at God, but what God means to us.

It seems to me that one of the biggest problems in today's world is the communication of experience. People often communicate in a confusing way or misunderstand the communication of others. This quickly leads to animosity when the one misunderstood and the one who doesn't understand alike feel a reciprocal lack of respect. When my friend sees me blush beneath my birch tree, he asks me the reason for this uncontrollable show of emotion. After explaining, my friend laughs and tells me how dumb that is. First I feel angry because he does not understand my experience. If he did he would console me, not laugh. Then I feel angry because I misunderstand his laughter and his comment as mocking when he is only trying to assure me that it is not a big deal, I have no need to feel embarrassed. How do we fix this problem of communication? Or, is this a problem to be fixed? Maybe it is a misunderstanding of communication itself. For now we will look at the best ways to communicate.

In his essay "The Art of Religious Communication," Joseph Kupfer argues that art is the best mode of religious communication. He says this is because art, like God and experience, forms a unity without fitting under a concept. One can apply concepts to different pieces of the unity "but no concept covers the whole ... art is suited to religious communication because it partakes of the transcendent," says Kupfer. In short, art can, to a certain extent, recreate an experience, but it is not the experience itself. No matter how good art is, it still remains in the objective realm. Even if it "partakes of the transcendent" it is not itself transcendent, it is only a means of communicating an experience.

Russian Philosopher Nicolai Berdyaev discusses this in his *Ethics of Creativity*. He writes that art is a "cooling down" of the creative fire, which is analogous to the transcendent part of experience. Speaking of art he observes that, "It has to interpret to the world its creative vision, and in so doing submit to the laws of art and technique." So it seems that if the objective of communication is to recreate our experiences for others to understand as we have, then we are sure to fall short. Even if this is accomplished, others are forced to experience our communication in a unique, subjective way. In order to communicate, I have to reduce my experience to art, poetry, or words, and then someone else has to experience these objects in his/her own personal way. Communication is like a game of telephone in which the primary experience, after being passed around the circle, comes out as something completely different.

This is a real problem if, by communicating, we are trying to make people see things our way; but this is not the objective of communication, it is the objective of an argument. I turn once again to the dictionary to find the etymologies of the word communicate. It says that it comes from the Latin word *communicatus*, which means to share, impart, literally to make common. When I make common the story of my life I do not expect, nor should I expect, everyone to see it in the same way. When I argue that my life is the best life, I do expect people to agree. Arguments can be a means to the end of communication, but as soon as they become the end, all we can do is fight each other.

I was recently on a mission trip to Charleston, West Virginia. During our time there our church group had many wonderful discussions on various topics. One night we were talking about serving others while still recognizing the beauty of those we serve. I observed that as soon as one helped another, the distinction is made between helper and helped, and the helper inevitably rose to a higher social position, making it hard to recognize the beauty of the helped that has been pushed to the bottom. This brought up some controversy and many people had

things to say for and against me. Afterward my friend came up to me and told me that he really liked my arguments and he wished that more people, namely those who disagreed, had been able to understand my point. I objected, pointing out that by sharing my experience of service, others were able to make their own conclusions, which went far beyond my own. If they had only understood instead of experienced my point of view, the communication would have ended.

“Art is suited to religious communication because it partakes of the transcendent.” With our new understanding of communication, this takes on a different meaning. Communicating through art, music, poetry, or literature is most effective because it leaves the most room for experience. The chroniclers of the Pentateuch knew this; the poets of the Psalms knew this; the biographers of the gospels knew this; Jesus, with his parables, knew this. The Bible is a piece of literature, a work of art; it is not a text book. The Bible is a library of books written by humans long ago to communicate to the world their unique experience of God. It does not contain the truth. The truth is in you, the Bible just helps you find it. This can be done by experiencing the stories which are communicated through it. The subjective, unique meaning which you attach to it is where the “truth” can be found.

I do not mean to disregard the stories of the Bible by saying this. I am not saying that Moses did not split the Red Sea and Jesus did not die on the cross. I am saying that these pieces are absolutely necessary, but they are not sufficient. One piece is missing, and that is the subjective stage of experience.

Paul Tillich sums this up in his essay “Symbols of Faith,” “The man whose ultimate concern is a sacred tree has both the ultimacy of concern and the concreteness of the tree which symbolizes his relation to the ultimate.” To put such importance in the objective facts of biblical stories as to negate the relationship or meaning, would be as fallacious as to place the same kind of importance in the bark of the tree. If the Bible, and consequently God, is one’s ultimate concern, then one has the concreteness of the Bible and the word “God.” It is these concrete things which symbolize the relationship, or meaning, that one has with one’s ultimate concern (The Bible and God). If I read that Jesus was crucified on the cross the actual crucifixion is not what is important; however, it is necessary as a base on which to build the meaning which I attach to the crucifixion. The crucifixion is the concrete which symbolizes my relationship.

In this way, the Bible is a living text, for inside, the characters and their stories live on for us to experience. If we are to interpret the Bible we must do so with our entire heart, mind, and soul. The only way to do this is to experience, and if we are to enter into the texts of the Bible, get to know the characters, and experience them both, we will all without exception come to different conclusions. How could we not? We are all unique people created by God and therefore we all have our unique relationships with God. If this was not true, God would not be God, because God is infinite, and to only be able to see something in one set way makes it finite. For these reasons we should accept, and even embrace the subjectivity of others, because even if we do not experience things in the same way, we can still learn through communication.

The process of experience and communication does not, however, end with the Bible. Just as the authors of the Bible were inspired by the majesty of God, so are we. Every day, in everything we do, we experience God, and it is our duty and privilege as Christians, as spiritual people, as citizens of the earth, to continue sharing these experiences through communication.

REFUTING RELIGIOUS RELATIVISM

by Elise Peterson, Prescott, Wis.

In the United States we are exposed to many differing ideas about God. America has been called the most religiously diverse country in the world. How are American Christians to respond to these many different religions that they see around them?

Many have acquired a belief called “religious relativism.” This term has been defined in many different ways, but for the purposes of this paper, religious relativism is the belief that all faiths hold validity and truth. One of the main reasons that so many people put stock in religious relativism is the fact that many atrocities have been carried out in the name of religion. Throughout history, many have used their exclusive view on religion as an excuse to persecute people who do not agree with them. The Crusades are poignant examples of religious zeal gone awry. Some relativists take the view that different religions are just different, legitimate relationships with God. Others say that God can never really be understood, and that all religions are equally seeking the unattainable.

In this paper I am arguing that religious relativism is unbiblical and false; Christianity is the one true religion. This can be proved by looking at individual Bible verses, and by viewing the broad message of Scripture. Furthermore, Christians should view Christianity as exclusively true because of the effect it will have on the way they live their lives.

First of all, there are several verses in the Bible that show that Christianity is exclusively true. One of these verses is probably the most well-known verse in the Bible: John 3:16. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.”¹ This verse states that the way to salvation is through faith in Jesus Christ; and faith in Jesus is the defining characteristic of a Christian. Another verse from John follows along the same lines: “Jesus said to them, ‘I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me.’”² This verse refutes the idea that all religions are equally valid ways to understand God. Jesus is the only way. A third verse comes from when Jesus is on trial and being questioned by Pontius Pilate. “Pilate said to him, ‘So you are a king?’ Jesus answered, ‘You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Every one who is of the truth hears my voice.’”³ God’s word to us through all these verses is that Christianity is the one true religion.

In a broader sense, religious relativism undermines the overall message of the Gospel. God was doing something big when he sent Jesus. Jesus was a unique, one-of-a-kind human. He is God, and He is perfect and holy. The message of Scripture is that God was doing something amazing and incomparable when he sent Jesus. Jesus came to bring life and truth to the world, and to be the ultimate atonement for our sins. To say that Christ is just one of many ways to know the Father completely undermines how important and amazing Jesus really is.

Thirdly, a belief in religious relativism negatively affects how well a person can live for God. This is because relativism accepts that other religions could be and are true. I must admit that this viewpoint is fairly logical. You can’t really know, logically speaking, that Christianity is the absolute truth, as opposed to Judaism or Islam. For example, Christians and Muslims have a very fundamental difference in the way they view God. Both believe in one God, but Christians believe that God is a triune being and Muslims do not. One of these religions must be wrong. I cannot give a logical argument that states that Islam is wrong and Christianity is right. My only

proof is what God has told me through the Bible — and if I use the Bible to prove Christianity, that is a circular argument.

Believing in Christianity requires more than logic; it requires faith. “What is faith? It is the confident assurance that what we hope for is going to happen. It is the evidence of things we cannot yet see.”⁴ Faith is knowing the unknowable. This verse in Hebrews is followed by a host of things that people of God were able to accomplish through the assurance that God is who He says He is. Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph — all accomplished great works through doubtlessly believing the truth about God. True faith is necessary for living out the Christian life.

For example, Abraham grew up in a place called Ur, where he was only exposed to pagan gods. When God called him, Abraham had true faith — he believed that this God was the one and only God. God asked Abraham to take a big step of faith — to leave the only country he had ever known and travel and settle down in a land that was completely foreign to him. If Abraham had thought that the religions he was exposed to before were equally valid to believing in the true God, why should he risk anything for this new God he had found? The fact is that if we completely believe — if we fully base our lives on the truth of the Bible — we can live rich lives working for the Kingdom of God, and God will bless us abundantly as He blessed Abraham.

A counter example to this life-changing faith was the decision of Pontius Pilate when he was questioning Jesus. After the verse quoted earlier in which Jesus told Pilate that He came to bring truth to the world, the Gospel of John reads: “‘What is truth?’ Pilate asked. Then he went out again to the people and told them, ‘He is not guilty of any crime.’”⁵ Pilate did not believe that Jesus was guilty. But he also thought that truth was relative — thus the question “what is truth?” He did not have the conviction that Jesus was an innocent man. He therefore did not stop him from being killed. He saw the truth, but did not give it enough importance to let it dictate his actions.

In conclusion, Christianity is the one and only true religion. The Bible tells us this, and we must believe it on faith in order to live out rich lives of service to God. All that remains is this question: How are we to relate to and treat members of other religions? As previously mentioned, many absolutists carry out their exclusive beliefs by persecuting people of other religions. But the belief that one’s religion is the absolute truth does not mean that one can or should persecute non-believers. It boils down to the same principle as “love the sinner, hate the sin.” In this case, “love the non-believer, not the non-belief.” Christ came into the world to bring the truth; therefore as Christ’s disciples it is Christians’ job to continue His mission: it is Christians’ calling to spread the truth to all those who do not yet know it.

1 John 3:16, New Living Translation

2 John 14:6, New Living Translation

3 John 18:37, New Living Translation

4 Hebrews 11:1, New Living Translation

5 John 18:38, New Living Translation

BOOZE AND THE BIBLE

by Dave Madsen, Edina, Minn.

Alcohol: a substance that, since the dawn of recorded history, has been portrayed as a delicacy, is part of a common diet, and is a means of celebration and an acceptable pleasure. Historic records and our current culture also recognize that alcohol has the power to transform a seemingly “normal” person into an addict. As Christians, many feel confused as to whether or not their religion would condone such a substance. Confusion is natural considering that the role of alcohol in the Bible is anything but subtle. In fact, alcohol is mentioned well over 200 times in the Bible. In some instances, the use of alcohol is shown in a positive light. For example, both Matthew 15:11 and Luke 7:33-35 portray Jesus drinking wine. In other cases, the Bible is very clear to point out the dangers of the abuse of alcohol. Proverbs 20:1 states that, “Wine is a mocker, strong drink a brawler, and whoever is led astray by it is not wise.” By no means do I claim to be viewed a religious scholar, nor do I wish to impose that I am a hermeneutical expert. I am simply a person who wishes to explore a question that has troubled my religion for countless years: Is it a sin for Christians to drink alcohol?

In hopes for the Bible’s view of alcohol, I opened up my New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) translation and I immediately found that the Bible is very critical of intoxication. For example, Ephesians 5:18 clearly states, “Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit.” I then became confused when I found Psalm 104: 14-15, which seems to contradict the passage in Ephesians with, “You (in reference to God) cause the grass to grow for the cattle, and plants for people to use, to bring forth food from the earth, and wine to gladden the human heart.”

As I continued my exploration, I became frustrated with the observation that almost every Bible verse about a certain stance on alcohol had an opposing and equally valid view. It seemed as if there were two types of wine: alcoholic and non-alcoholic. This idea seemed flimsy at best, but to my surprise, I found that many religious scholars swore to a similar theory. The “two-wine” theory that many agree with, suggests that when the word “wine” is used in the Bible, it is referring to either unfermented grape juice or alcohol. The most common word for wine in the Old Testament comes from the Hebrew word “*yayin*.” The translation of this Hebrew word is debatable because the root can mean either “boiled up” or “treaded.” Boiling implies a fermentation process to make wine, where treading implies a simple way to make fresh grape juice.

The same linguistic approach applies to the New Testament but the translations are less debatable. The New Testament is written in Koine Greek and has two main words for wine. One word, “*gleukos*,” is referred to in the New Testament as an intoxicating, “sweet” wine. The other word, “*oinos*,” is used significantly more and is translated to mean unfermented grape juice. Does this mean that we should stop serving alcoholic wine during communion and that all Christians should be encouraged to live a life of complete abstinence from alcohol? Not in my opinion. I do not see the “two-wine” theory as evidence that we should vow away alcohol consumption. I see the theory precisely as what its name suggests: I see it as a theory.

The reason that I view many hermeneutical theories and interpretations in such a way has a lot to do with a theological course I attended at Augsburg College in Minneapolis. The course was composed for about 15 students from around the Twin Cities who had an interest in theology. For six days, I found myself immersed in a program that encouraged spiritual growth through intense studies of hermeneutics, exciting activities and mind-opening discussions. I found that the most valuable experiences I had in the Summer Theology Institute were a series of late night talks that the students organized. The students, myself included, would discuss our views on religion and spirituality until about two or three o’clock in the morning. I was amazed to see how a group of

teenagers could have such profound and yet very different views on certain subjects such as the Bible, homosexuality, and drug addiction. Going into the study, I knew little of biblical interpretation, but coming out of it, I felt confident and open-minded about hermeneutics.

In preparation for the course, we read a book by Peter J. Gomes titled *The Good Book: Reading the Bible with Mind and Heart*. Gomes' book challenged the traditional view of the Bible by giving his thoughts on a number of topics, one of which was alcohol. His experience with alcohol in his Baptist church was nothing short of an anti-drug advertisement you may see on TV. He describes, "On the platform he had put a jar of what he said was alcohol, and into the jar he dropped a large beefsteak. Instantly the alcohol stripped the flesh from the bone, and while we stood there amazed, the lecturer told us that this was what drink would do to our bodies and sin to our souls," (76). He then tells the reader that he was given a pledge card to take a vow of abstinence from alcohol.

Among Gomes' personal experiences, I found that his view on what he calls the three temptations of interpretation to be the most interesting and applicable to the matter of drink. The first temptation, bibliolatry, is described as "The worship of the Bible, making of it an object of veneration and ascribing to it the glory due to God," (36). To worship the Bible as a god is something that many Christians do subconsciously. For example, many believe that alcohol is a symbol for evil and intoxication is inviting the devil into your soul. This symbolism exists because we are seeking to apply the symbol (alcohol) in substitute for what it is meant to represent (evil). Gomes places the "two-wine" theory in this category.

The second temptation, literalism, is described as, "The worship of the text, in which the letter is given an inappropriate superiority over the spirit," (36). Gomes explains that the Bible has been endured a rigorous translation process from ancient Hebrew to a "corrupted form" of Greek, then into Latin several times over and finally to "very archaic" forms of English. Literalism is especially dangerous because the reader's own interpretation becomes the word of God. Literalism could certainly justify condemn or support the use of alcohol just as Gomes explains how it was used to support slavery.

The third and final temptation, culturism, is described as "The worship of the culture, in which the Bible is forced to conform to the norms of the prevailing culture," (36). We live in a very different time from when the Bible was written but to say that God is confined to our physical world and that God adapts to our man-made culture is to place God below us. Many believe that justifying intoxication with scripture is a form of culturism and a good example of putting ourselves ahead of God.

For personal reasons, I am completely abstinent from alcohol and other intoxicants but that shouldn't suggest that I believe abstinence should be considered the only way to approach alcohol. I would like to be considered a Moderationist. because I believe that the problem does not lie in a substance but rather within the will and deed of the one who abuses it. I do not believe that the Bible doesn't blatantly condemn or support alcohol use. I do, however, view intoxication as a means of wrongly manipulating upon God's creation and therefore a sin.

In conclusion, I would like to reemphasize the fact that I'm not an expert on scripture, I do not intend my opinions to be a means of persuasion and, above all, I do not claim speak for any Higher Power. I am simply a person who wishes to seek God's will for me and the power to carry that out.

Sources

1. The Holy Bible, New Revised Standard Version
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MY OWN BIBLE

by Elizabeth Dery, St. Paul, Minn.

When I think of the Bible, I think of stories. I think of stories that are very complicated yet simple. Sometimes when I look at the Bible and look on the pages, all I see are words staring at me. I feel as if I'm the only person in the whole world who doesn't understand some of the messages and the scriptures. I feel that I don't understand it and I can't interpret it. If I had my own way of interpreting the Bible, I would interpret it through my own book. I would design a book for people like me who don't really understand the Bible, who can't see some of the messages or things that the Bible explains. My book would be called *The Bible and Then Some*. My book would contain three sections:

SECTION ONE: The Summer Theology Institute

SECTION TWO: My Own Bible

SECTION THREE: Interpret This!

The first section of the book takes a look at a day of a Summer Theology Institute camper. The camp inspired me to want to write this book. This camp took place at Augsburg College in Minneapolis. Throughout the week we had a theme: Hermeneutics. Every day a group of campers met in a classroom for about three hours. During this time we would discuss topics that relate to the book we had to read and to topics that are discussed in the Bible. The book we had to read before we came to camp was called *The Good Book* by Peter Gomes. In this book Gomes breaks the Bible down into topics that are addressed in the Bible. Some of the topics that he mentions in his book are homosexuality, science in the Bible, and even mystery in the Bible.

Each day we would have a daily scripture reading and following that an activity that would help interpret the reading for better understanding. Usually after the activity we would have worship. These worships weren't average worships — one night we had a talent show and another night we did a silent worship. Both nights were very cool. Then we had devotions that would wrap up the day. There will be a lot more to the section when my book gets published.

The second section in my imaginary book would be my own bible. Now it's kind of strange having one's own bible. When I say my own bible, I mean the Bible would be more explained through my words. This part would explain the different stories and passages in text that would be easy to comprehend. The stories or scriptures then would be broken up into sections such as characters in the story scriptures, the message behind the scripture, and how to put it all together. With each book of my bible there would be suggestions on how to interpret each part, ideas to look for, and some main points that are explained in this story.

Take for example the story of Zaccheaus. In this story the characters are Zaccheaus the tax collector and Jesus. Zaccheaus was the chief tax collector and a very wealthy man. But back then, tax collectors were very much hated because they were collecting too much tax, or more than they should. In the Bible, people saw tax collectors as cruel people. Jesus saw tax collectors as people who could be taught and were ready to repent. Zaccheaus was a very short man, and he could see only in front of the crowd. He came up with an idea that he would climb up a sycamore tree and get a front row seat. When Jesus came to the tree, he saw Zaccheaus and told him to come down. Jesus wanted to go to his house. Zaccheaus was so excited. But the people were upset with Jesus that he was going to a sinner's house. Zaccheaus was ready to repent and felt so bad, that he gave back half of his possessions to the poor. He told Jesus if he

cheated anyone again, he would have to give back four times the amount. Jesus was pleased with the man and said, "Today salvation has come to this house."

The message that I see through this story is that when one faces a problem, one shouldn't be quick to give up. One should try to think of all the ways one can solve that problem. Some of one's ideas might not work at all, but one should keep trying to find one that will work. That's just a little taste of section two and now I will go into section three.

Section three of my book is the final section. This helps getting ideas to help interpreting the Bible through one's own talent. Some people interpret the Bible through music. Or some people think that the Bible is kind of a poetry book. Some even find just going to church and getting involved in church is a good way to interpret the Bible. Sometimes it gets hard to think only about the Bible from a day-to-day basis. The way I find that helps me interpret the Bible is going to camps and doing youth activities.

An example of a camp that helped me to interpret the Bible is the Summer Theology Institute, which I attended this year. Our theme for the week was interpreting the Bible in today's era. We did activities such as going on a prayer walk through the city, making a stepping stone, and even meditating. The meditation was really good for me because it made me feel one with God.

My last section of my book would also contain some inspirational quotes and words of wisdom to help with finding one's own way to interpret the Bible. It will also contain some experiences and stories that people would share on how they interpret the Bible in today's busy world.

When I think of the Bible, I think of stories. I think of stories that are very complicated yet simple. Sometimes when I look at the Bible and look on the pages, all I see are words staring at me. I feel as if I'm the only person in the whole world that doesn't understand some of the messages and the scriptures. I feel as if I don't understand it and I can't interpret it. If I had my own way of interpreting the Bible, I would interpret it through my own book. This book would be a beginning to a huge chapter in my life. I really feel that I could help a lot of people. It would be so simple to pick up a book that explains everything to a reader. But just reading it wouldn't be half the fun. Actually doing some of the things and experiencing God would be the best.

THE RASTAFARIAN BIBLE

by Dylan Nelson, St. Paul, Minn.

Black people in Jamaica have lived with the legacy of slavery and the cultural imperialism of the white race ever since slavery was abolished in 1834 and the pretense of equality was set forth as official policy. Slaves and even free black men grew up robbed of their African identity and fitted to a new, European identity, one which implicitly condemned the color of their skin, the texture of their hair, and the beat of their music in its aesthetic standards. The religion and cultural phenomenon known as Rastafari emerged from this atmosphere. Rastafari is a semi-Christian sect which accepts Haile Selassie I, the former President of Ethiopia, as the living Christ. Their philosophy is deeply rooted in Black Nationalism and the spiritual rebellion against Western society and all its trappings, and considering the aforementioned social climate, it is easy to see why. Rastafari, in many ways, represents the efforts of black Jamaicans to carve out a place for them selves in a society controlled by Europeans.

From the beginning, Rastas¹ consciously rejected white Christianity, calling out against ministers and preachers as thieves who have nothing to offer to the people. However, for as long as they could remember, they had been turning to their Bibles for comfort and guidance, so early leaders like Athlican church and Leonard Howell simply rejected the traditional way of interpreting the Bible and decided to read through truly African eyes. Thus, the hermeneutics of Rastafari are very Afro-centrist, focusing on Africans as the chosen people, and Ethiopia as the chosen land. The evil in the Bible is represented in modern society by the West, and Christ, or at least a holy prophet, is one of the great black leaders of the century, Haile Selassie I. Rejecting Western Hermeneutics is a form of rejecting the Western paradigm of life and the Western legacy of exploitation and oppression.

Africans as the Chosen People

The 1920s and '30s were an important era for black rights and black pride. Marcus Garvey was one of the strongest leaders of the black movement. Garvey's campaign, simplified, was for the economic independence of African citizens of the world everywhere. His organization, the Universal Negro Improvement Association, was one of the progressive leaders of the era, and Garvey even started an infamous all-black shipping company, which never took off. The Rastas consider Garvey a prophet and a very holy man. And although Garvey himself never endorsed the movement personally, it is rumored that Garvey and Leonard Howell were good friends. Howell is generally accredited with founding Rastafari. Born in Jamaica, he started preaching on street corners in Kingston in 1932 after returning from Harlem and absorbing the atmosphere of the Harlem Renaissance in New York.

Although it seems that multiple black leaders came to the realization of Haile Selassie I's divinity after his coronation on November 2, 1930, Howell is generally viewed as the first. He is a somewhat mythical figure; imprisoned twice in jail and once in a mental institution, he is also the founder of the first Rastafarian commune, the infamous Pinnacle plantation in the hills of Jamaica. Garvey's ideas certainly influenced Howell, as did his time in Harlem, where African Americans had cultural capital like never before. The rejection of European culture and the celebration of African independence was an important and groundbreaking idea to ethnic Africans everywhere.

Garvey was encouraging blacks to do something they had never been asked to do before: embrace their African heritage as a good thing and celebrate African culture. This rejection of

traditional Euro-centrism is reflected in Howell's writings on the Bible. One of the key tenets of Rastafarian biblical interpretation is the idea that the people enslaved in Egypt and then turned out into the desert were in fact Africans. 1 Kings 10:13 claims "And King Solomon gave unto the Queen of Sheba all her desire, whatsoever she asked, beside that which Solomon gave her of his royal bounty. So she turned and went to her own country, she and her servants." "Rastas interpret this verse as meaning she conceived his child, and from this, conclude that African people are among the true children of Israel, or Jews."

First, "Zion" is the nation of Ethiopia. Ethiopia is the most important nation in Africa because of the role it plays in the Bible; "Ethiopia" was the word given to all of Africa. Psalm 68 gives the continent biblical significance: "Princes shall come out of Egypt; Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God," (Psalm 68: 31). Second, this verse is also important for the Rastafarian belief in Ethiopia as a sort of Promised Land. In fact, there are many parallels between Ethiopia and Israel in Howell's writings. He claims that Ethiopia acted as a harlot, obviously imitating biblical authors who criticized Israel.

Third, Howell takes this traditional condemnation and takes it a step further to apply to Africa. He writes that Ethiopia was too generous with other nations and slavery was a punishment by God upon them. Howell writes that although God punished Ethiopia's weakness, the time has come for her to rise up and reclaim the earth which is rightfully hers. The Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1935 drew comparisons to the invasion of Jerusalem by Rome. The invasion resounded in Jamaica, especially with the leadership of Howell, who preached about the war with holy connotations.

Haile Selassie: A Black Messiah

Religion had always been an important weapon in fighting the oppression of slavery and racism in Jamaica. Before the abolishment of slavery, some of the most violent rebellions in the nation's history were led by preachers. Churches were a place for slaves and peasants to gather and unite in a way not possible in a European-dominated society. Thus, through the tradition of rebellion, the ideas of Christianity and early African religions were passed on to the Rastas; many striking elements of the movement were pre-existent. Ennis Edmonds explains, "Though Rastafari rejects certain elements of African and Afro-Christian religions, Rastafarian Afro-centricity, messianism, predilection for biblical apocalypticism, and militancy are all influenced by the tradition of resistance in the African and Afro-Christian religions."

All Rastafari ideology is aligned to overcome the myths and the negativity surrounding Africanness. The mysticism of early African traditions affects Rastafarian hermeneutics, and they often draw from Revelations and other more symbolic chapters. Messianism in the movement is born out of the religious (and Christian) tradition of resistance and rebellion in Jamaica. In fact, the spark which ultimately founded Rastafari was Howell and others' discovery of a black messiah defiant of European oppression.

The crowning of Haile Selassie I was an immensely important event for Rastafarian philosophy. At an elaborate commencement ceremony, Haile Selassie I was crowned as "Emperor Haile Selassie I, King of Kings, Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah." According to Howell this fulfills the prophecy of Rv. 5:5 and Rv. 19:11-16.4 Selassie was the perfect figure, and one who fit the almost mystical description eerily well. One of Howell's most passionate points about Selassie's coronation ceremony was the role of the English representative. Howell writes, "In 1930, the duke of Gloucester undertook one of the most interesting duties he had

ever been called up on to execute. The occasion was the coronation of his Majesty Ras Tafari, King of Kings and the Lord of Lords, the Conquering Lion of Judah, the Elect of God and the Light of the World. The Duke bent down on his knees before his majesty Ras Tafari the King of Kings and Lord of Lords and spoke with a loud tone, 'Master, Master, my father has sent me to represent him, Sir. He is unable to come, but said that he will serve you until the end, Master,'” (Psalms 72:9-11, Genesis 42: 10).

Howell then emphasizes the splendor of the ceremony and the regal, elegant dress and manner of the Ethiopians. Selassie's divinity and the images of his royal entourage are important to many of Rastafari's central concepts, including some of its most striking iconography. Rastas like to think of themselves as lions after the fashion of Selassie's title and the architecture surrounding Selassie's palace; their dreadlocks, allusions to the mane of a lion, are just one example of the symbolism. The image of the lion also upturns the Western idea of Africans as being meek and conniving, such as the popular Jamaican folk hero Anancy, the spider who plays tricks on people to get out of sticky situations. Rastas are most concerned with overcoming the idea of blacks as “Anancs,” who must back stab and lie to get ahead because they are in a compromising social position.

The further significance of Selassie is his role in global politics, and of course, his race. Selassie was a strong voice against the aforementioned Italian invasion in 1935, crying out against the cutting up of Ethiopia “like a cake” to world powers. Selassie has both religious and political significance in the motif of Rastafarian rebellion.

Babylon and the West in the Bible

In a western hemisphere dominated by Euro-centrist ideas and lifestyles, Rastas have struggled constantly to find a niche for their true African selves. This is an overwhelming effort in a society ultimately built by Europeans, for the entire system is built to fit a European identity. The categorical oppression of the African, (and true, divine) identity, is thus labeled as “Babylon.” Rastas understood that they needed to stand out and resist Western influence, but the ideas of cultural imperialism and capitalist exploitation are vague notions, and not tangible entities or symbols which are easily resisted.

Edmonds writes that by setting aside all these negative forces as Babylon, Rastas can begin to create a truly original identity, one independent from the assumptions of Western civilization. “As part of the effort to construct new ‘patterns of meaning’ to bring coherence to their existence, they have unleashed an ideological assault on the Jamaican and Western establishment by dubbing it ‘Babylon.’”

The term has obvious biblical implications. According to Genesis 11, the inhabitants of the city of Babel built a tower to heaven; in order to (according the Rasta view) usurp god and take control over the earth for themselves. As a result they started to babble in different tongues and dispersed across the earth. Edmonds writes, “The city-state was later revived and became Babylon of Mesopotamia, a world power that dominated the Near East. On one of its military campaigns, it ransacked Jerusalem, killing many Hebrews and taking many others into captivity.”

The New Testament then refers back to Babylonian civilization in Revelations, making the connection to Rome, and the oppression of city-states under Roman control. Rome was also the government that crucified Jesus. This idea of Babylonian continuity in the form of Rome is

important, because Rome in many ways was the precursor of Western civilization. Howell himself was the first to make the biblical allusion to Babylon as he writes in *The Promised Key*:

My dear Readers you can see that all their foundation of the earth are out of course. Allow me to say that there is no throne for the Anglo Saxon white people, they must come down and sit in the dust on the ground there is no throne for them. See Isaiah 47 chapter.

Howell was also the first to write about the very “Anglo Saxon” who so inappropriately sat on the throne — the pope. The Italian invasion of Ethiopia was the current atrocity only a few years into Howell’s religious campaign, and many progressive writers criticized the pope for complicity in the Italian scheme.

The geographic connection between Rome and modern day Italy was not lost on Howell. The influence of Babylon in the modern day world was obviously strong if an invasion of Ethiopia was imminent, and the prominent religious ruler of the west ruled straight from the heart of Babylon. These biblical interpretations show the African understanding of oppression as passed down through history; after all, slavery was an institution supported and structured by the world’s economy for hundreds of years. The oppression of Africans seems to have been systematic and almost moved by some larger force, and this force is dubbed Babylon.

The goal of Rastafari is to defeat Babylon and live independently and freely, finding an authentic (and necessarily African) identity which defies the culture of oppression and constriction. All Rastafarian principles seek to turn the world order upside-down, bringing to importance all the beliefs and practices which have for so long been stifled by the establishment of Jamaica and of the Western world. Thus, Rastafarian hermeneutics represents a refocusing of the Bible itself, from African eyes, and a rejection of Western hermeneutics. Where traditional Europeans see Jesus as a bearded white man, Rastas find an Ethiopian king in his image. Where Christians see ambiguity and perhaps triviality, Rastas find evidence for holy lineage and prophecies for the glorious future of Ethiopia. Certainly both factions are reading the Bible earnestly and hopefully, turning to the book out of faith for redemption and hope for the future, but as our dreams, fears, and ambitions change, so do the parts of the Bible which come into focus, which lose and gain meaning as time moves on.

Notes:

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I It is telling that the Rastas, who are fond of wordplay, hate any ideology or idea labeled with the suffix ‘-ism’. For this reason there has been some historical conflict between the Rastas and the scholars who try to document the history of the movement, for they insist upon using the term, ‘Rastafarianism’, while Rastas do not like the binding institutional connotations given to ‘ism’ words. Thus, I will use the term Rastafari generally to refer to the movement. If you take away anything from this essay, let it be that.

FALSE ACCUSATIONS OF SILENCED PEOPLE

by Jordan Cook, Maple Grove, Minn.

When asked to state views on homosexuality based on a Christian perspective I once heard someone state: “Even if it was a sin I couldn’t think of a less hurtful one. How could God condemn someone for love?” This statement left me dumbfounded. I had never thought of anything like that before. What this person said was true, nonetheless. Should it really matter who someone loves as long as the act of loving is in occurrence? One of the most powerful verses about love in the Bible is 1 Corinthians 13. Does it matter who we love as long as we are loving as the passage states — loving kindly, honestly, and whole-heartedly? I once asked a girl her views on sin. She said, “Sin, to me, is anything that brings you away from God so I avoid those things.” In other words — sins are distractions. Is loving someone of the same sex more of a distraction from God than loving someone of a different sex, or in that case is loving someone a distraction at all? In my paper I am going to talk about what the Bible has to say regarding homosexuality and also personal views from myself and others regarding homosexuality and the Christian perspective.

To make an informed decision on how the Bible views homosexuality one must first know how he or she interprets the Bible. There are two main ways to read and extract information from the Bible: one way is the literal reading of the Bible and the other is the historical-critical reading of the Bible. The literal reading of a text is to read it exactly as it is written. This view makes the Bible miraculous in every aspect. For example, in Genesis when the Bible states that God made the world in six days and used the seventh day to rest, a literal reader would take it to mean that the world was created in six days’ time. This way of reading the text makes the Bible simpler to understand, but also poses a few problems. This way of thinking allows for people to come to a million different conclusions based on how each person understood the text. This creates a mass of confusion with no visible solution. With a literal reading of the Bible comes selective use of the text as well. To make a point some people will emphasize certain parts of the Bible while completely ignoring others. If we took the entire Bible literally, we could never wear two different kinds of cloth and we would all own slaves.

The other way to interpret the Bible is in the historical-critical sense. Reading the Bible in this way is to take the text as whatever the people who wrote it wanted it to mean. To do this is much more complicated than the literal reading of the text. This way of interpreting is nearly impossible for anyone who is not a theologian. This method also leaves many gaps where people couldn’t figure out the historical context in which it was written. On the plus side, this way of interpreting the Bible holds one clean-cut answer which could amount to denominations of Christianity fading. The line of Christianity would be split into those who read the Bible literally and those who read it in a historical-critical text. In this paper, I will use the historical-critical method to communicate my interpretation of the Bible’s view on homosexuality.

There are numerous texts of the Bible that can create arguments for or against homosexuality. The first example is the creation story (Genesis 1-2). Many people have made comments that God meant for the world to be entirely heterosexual or why else would he have made Adam and Eve? In my opinion this is the weakest argument in existence. The fact that something is not mentioned in no way alludes to it not being possible, probable, or even morally correct.

The most famous example used when speaking about the Bible condemning homosexuality is the story of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19:1-9). In the story, God had sent two angels to Sodom to warn Abraham's nephew, Lot, that he was planning to destroy Sodom for its wickedness. Lot let the travelers (the two angels) stay as guests in his house. This hospitality was expected of everyone in this time, but the sin of Sodom was that it had been inhospitable. A mob of Sodomites came saying they wanted "to know" these strangers. The verb "to know" is used 943 times in the Old Testament and only 10 of those times is it meant in a sexual way. This story is said to be one of those 10. Lot, knowing the importance of hospitality, offered his daughters up instead, saying that they had never known a man before. The Sodomites refused and went to break down the doors. The two angels struck them all with blindness, saving Lot and his family.

This story is considered to condemn homosexuality because the Sodomites wanted "to know" the travelers. People assume that was what made the city of Sodom wicked. Nowhere in the Bible when speaking of Sodom does it state its reasons for being wicked to be because of homosexual acts. In fact, the Bible barely even mentions the wickedness to do with anything sexual. If the way the Sodomites wanted "to know" them was even sexually, that in no way means it is condemning homosexuality. The Sodomites would have been raping the travelers, which is condemned in both homosexual and heterosexual situations. The argument made condemning homosexuality in the story of Sodom is one with many gaps and selective use of the text.

Leviticus 18:22 states, "you shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination." This statement continues in Leviticus 20:13, "If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death, their blood is upon them." These verses are seemingly straight forward on the immorality of homosexuality. It is when you take a deeper look and extract out the historical context that you find an entirely different meaning to the verses.

The holiness code is the first thing to consider in these verses. The holiness code was a set of laws and punishments created so Israel would remain holy. This list included many things besides male homosexual acts that would warrant the sentence of death. Cursing your parents, adultery, incest, and bestiality were a few that also "deserved" the death penalty. The holiness code also forbids cattle inbreeding, wearing a garment of two different kinds of materials, round haircuts, and that a man was not allowed to have sex with his wife while she was menstruating. How many of those are followed today? Even Paul stated that the Gentiles have the gift of the Holy Spirit without the necessity of the law of Israel. For Christians to ignore parts of the holiness code and take others as law is to be ignorant to what the Bible is really saying.

The use of the word abomination also needs to be put into context in these verses. The Bible was first written in Hebrew. The Hebrew word used for abomination is *toevah*, which means uncleanness or impurity. This is an interesting word choice considering that they could have used the word *zimah*, which means an injustice or a sin. The differences in word choice are significant. For example, to be unclean is to be dirty; this is a social taboo more than anything. Something is "dirty" in our society if we make it that way. It is something we are uncomfortable with. This does not mean it is morally incorrect. The use of the word *toevah* signifies that the homosexual acts mentioned are not morally wrong, but socially deemed "unclean."

Paul made few comments on homosexuality. The main one he made is found in Romans 1:26-27: "For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. Their women exchanged natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in their own persons the due penalty for their error." Passion is the key word here. To do something out of passion is to lose all self-control and do something in an idolatry way. The people in the verses were worshipping sex and each other instead of God. They knew better and they chose to act out of passion instead. This is the sin. Paul also makes the point that it is heterosexuals doing homosexual acts. They are not homosexuals, so they are doing this out of lust and uncontrolled passion.

What does this mean for homosexuals today? It seems as though all the proof in the world cannot change some people's perspectives. Thirty percent of teenage suicides are among homosexual youth. This figure is at least two to three times higher than for other adolescent groups. The social taboos of this society are pushing a large number of people to silence their emotions. Many homosexuals stay "in the closet" their whole lives because they are afraid of what their family or friends might think. Those who do "come out" face a world of hatred.

A homosexual friend once told me that he lost religion when he came out as a gay man. I asked him why, and he replied, "It's hard to go to church when everyone there disapproves of who you are." I have heard similar things from other homosexuals. How do we change this? I believe it will take a long time and a lot of amazing people to force the social taboos away. Hopefully some day homosexuals won't be criticized for who they love; but rather, embraced that they have found love and happiness.

In conclusion, the Bible truly doesn't say anything to condemn homosexuality. It, in fact, barely even mentions it. My belief supported by my interpretation of the Bible is that it is not a sin to have an emotional and sexual relationship with another person of the same sex. Hopefully the world will begin to open their eyes and hearts to a silenced group of people.

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INTERPRETING THE BIBLE ON HOMOSEXUALITY

by Alex Schmitz, Maplewood, Minn.

Homosexuality seems as if it is the main topic in the Christian church today. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is continually studying homosexuality in the church. I will give them credit for researching the subject but I will not give them credit where they do not deserve it.

The question of homosexuality in the Christian church touches on so many sub-questions: Does Scripture alone still reign supreme for the church faith and life? What role does the church tradition, human reason, and human experiences play in moral and ethical guidance?

Through my studying of the Bible I found that adultery is the greatest sin by nature. It condemns both the mind and body. This still keeps the “law” that all sins are the equal, yet human nature catalogs sins as higher and lower. I find it wrong that all sins are the same, and anyone who claims this is not being rational. Logic and reason can solve most of our problems faced in the church today.

Most people are just as puzzled as me on this topic. I know where I stand yet I get hate mail, death threats, and people considering me “homophobic,” which is not a word at all. A group of well-educated people claims that the expression is slang and proposes the fact that there is a phobia of homosexuals. I don’t believe this but it is not relevant to my topic.

One place that I started looking is at statistics. Over a course of 10 years there has been thousands of studies on homosexuality. A recent study of Massachusetts teenagers, published in the *American Journal of Public Health* (Anne H. Faulkner and Kevin Cranston, “Correlates of Same-Sex Sexual Behavior in a Random Sample of Massachusetts High School Students,” February 1998, p. 264) discovered that self-identified gays were:

- nine times more likely to have reported using alcohol on a daily basis;
- six times more likely to report having recently used cocaine than their heterosexual counterparts;
- nineteen times more likely to report having used cocaine on 10 or more occasions per month;
- five times more likely to report having used other illegal drugs, including cocaine, 20 or more times in their lives;
- nearly seven times more likely to report ever having injected an illegal drug; and
- fifty percent more likely than their heterosexual counterparts to have considered committing suicide.

Another study concluded that the average homosexual of any age is three times more suicidal than the heterosexual (Cameron, Playfair, Wellum, *The Homosexual Lifespan*, Family Research Institute, Feb 14, 1992).

On this topic I feel bad for the homosexual Christians who want to go to church, to exist and get around being gay. Some gay right activists say that “being gay is all right and being gay is your real identity. To stray from that is satanic, to believe yourself is something your not is against God.” This is low and amateurish at best.

Being gay is not right. Does that make one a horrible person? Yes, but one's self is made by God — he loves one and not the things that one does. In one of the hate mails I received "Steve" said "God will love us no matter what we are or who we choose to become." This is entirely not true. Instead, the Bible says that we all fall short of God's expectations (Romans 3:23) and that all of us are under His wrath (Romans 1:18-32), because we try to live life without Him. We are all traitors and rebels at heart. That includes me.

Homosexuality is a sin, plain as day. Leviticus 18:22 states, "Do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman; that is detestable." [Read also verses 24-30.]

Leviticus 20:13 also states, "If a man lies with a man as one lies with a woman, both of them have done what is detestable. They must be put to death; their blood will be on their own heads." Deuteronomy 23:17 states, "No Israelite man is to become a shrine prostitute. No Israelite woman is to become a shrine prostitute." The "male shrine prostitute" was a homosexual. He is called a "dog" in verse 18, a nickname he received from the dog-like manner in which he debased himself with men.

Another example from 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 reads:

Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

But aren't gay people born gay? No, I believe that one is not born gay. If someone believes that he/she is born gay, then that would be a very sad day for his/her parents. "Here's your child, Mrs. Smith, but I am afraid to tell you that he's ... gay." This dialogue probably has never happened. If there were a "gene" that made someone gay, it would be all over the news for three years and on every newspaper's front page.

I see such a sick and disgusting thought going on in this sick and twisted world. Our culture says that sex is good, it's fun, and everyone should try it. But why not wait until marriage? In my opinion, Christian sex is the best; it's the sex that lasts for one's life with that person that one will love to his/her fullest extent more than one's self. Love is the thing that can overcome sin and evil.

The gay rights activists really got me started on this subject. They have a six-step plan. This is a true six-step plan carried out by [The Homosexual Agenda](#) by Alan Sears.

1. Talk about gays and gayness as loud as possible.
2. Portray gays as victims, not aggressive challengers.
3. Give homosexual protectors a just cause.
4. Make gays look good. (That's not hard)
5. Make the victimizers look bad.
6. Solicit funds.

Before I get into biblical texts one must see how one approaches the interpretation of scripture with regard to the passages that deal with marriage and homosexual acts. Being a theology nerd I must bring up two words. The first is Exegesis, and it means leading out. The job of

exegesis is to explain the meaning of the Bible or to lead out of the text its meaning. The second word is hermeneutics, which means the science of interpretation. The task of hermeneutics is to discern how the teaching should be interpreted. Hermeneutics involves moving from what the text “meant” in its cultural milieu to what the text means today. The key to the whole idea of hermeneutics is found in two central truths of the Bible. First, the Bible tells us that God is a person. Secondly, the Bible tells us that we are made in the image of God.”ⁱ

Do I take the Bible literally? Yes, and no. When faced with this question how do you answer it? I say, clarify as much as possible. I say, I take the Bible straightforward. I look toward one of my heros for guidance, Martin Luther, “No violence is to be done to the words of God, whether by man or angel; but [the Scriptures] are to be retained in their simplest meaning wherever possible, and to be understood in their grammatical and literal sense unless the context plainly forbids.”

One should not make the Bible say what one wants it to say. Instead, one should become educated and let the Bible twist his/her life. Having an education wrapped around the Bible is a good thing. The Bible can only be wrong if someone has had a bad teacher. Listen to everyone’s interpretations and take in what they are teaching but one should make one’s own conclusions by logic and reason. One will realize the certainties and absolutes.

Yes, the Bible is objective, not relative. I believe that Christianity is obviously an objective religion. I believe that there are absolute truths and the absolute truth here is that homosexuality is wrong. I find no way around it. Someone could dance around it; someone can call me a “homophobic bitch.” Someone can deny it. I do not care, but one should not feed innocent and gullible children lies that it is okay to be gay. One should not feed my culture with the satanic lies and deviant rhetoric about my intolerance. It just encourages me toward righting the world.

Same sex marriages are also a topic of churches. The big argument for “civil unions” but not marriage is that gays are denied ordinary civil rights. This is where gays usually bring up the argument about all the straight couples living in “sham” marriages, but I see no point in dragging the Clintons into this. What the gays are talking about is somebody’s right to be able to visit a loved one in a hospital, somebody’s right to be able to pass on property, somebody’s right to live equally under the state laws as other people in the country. Apparently, health care in this country is better than we’ve been led to believe if so few Americans have ever been to a hospital that they think there’s a guest list. In case you don’t know: Gays already can visit loved ones in hospitals. They can also visit neighbors, random acquaintances, and total strangers in hospitals just like everyone else.

Gays can also pass on property to whomever they would like, including their cats. Every few years there’s a story about some rich widow leaving her entire estate to a cat. It’s perfectly legal. One just needs to write a will. Americans have figured out how to get abortions for 13-year-old girls without their parents’ permission, but we’re supposed to believe that they just can’t get their heads around how a gay guy could leave property to his partner?

As for “living equally under the state laws as other people in the country,” unless gays are referring to the precise thing they claim to oppose gay marriage, gays do live equally under the state laws as other people in the country. There are no special speed-limit laws or trespassing laws or murder laws for gays. There is, however, some evidence of gay profiling with regard to

the enforcement of fashion “don’ts.” “We must have great respect for these people who also suffer and who want to find their own way of correct living. On the other hand, to create a legal form of a kind of homosexual marriage, in reality, does not help these people,” (Pope Benedict XVI).

Homosexuality will forever be a basis of argument for politicians, which makes this problem a burden for facts. People will always be on sides and back their arguments up with writers, or facts from superiors with PhDs. The arguments will go on and on so persuading might not be the way to go. But stay with truth and one shall know where one is headed. For it is not I, but God through me, that works in my life. I see not to offend but to point out the straight path.

i Interpreting the Bible, David N. Glesne, pg. 67

MY JOURNEY THROUGH FAITH

by Michael Videen, Center City, Minn.

When I was younger, I never knew a whole lot about my faith, or what faith even was. I just knew that God loved me and was watching over me, as is explained in my favorite verse of the Bible, John 3:16, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that who so ever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life." I also knew that Jesus was God's only son. My family and I went to church and I was in Sunday School. Sunday School was really fun for as much as I can remember. I started Sunday School at St. John's Lutheran Church in Stacy, Minnesota. I remember that we all planted some trees the first day. Then we moved to Wisconsin and we changed churches. I didn't like that church very much. Every Sunday I would whine and cry just because I didn't want to go.

I also hated seventh-grade confirmation. We had to memorize a new chapter each week and then we were tested on that topic the following week. Our tests were legal-size paper, front and back, memorization tests. They were really hard to pass. They only allowed you two re-tests per test. They were so hard that I almost failed. I kind of felt like a slave in my own church, but I must say I did learn a lot. Another thing I disliked was that confirmation was three hours long.

Then we moved back to Minnesota in Center City. We had to change churches again. Now we go to Trinity Lutheran Church in Lindstrom, Minnesota. I really like this church. I'd have to say that it's one of the best things that has ever happened to me. Plus, confirmation was a lot easier. I knew well over half the stuff since my last church. That would have to be the best thing coming out of that church.

Trinity is like my second home (no lying there). I don't know what I'd do without church. I've met so many cool and nice people there. They love to talk, unlike my last church. The people there weren't very friendly.

I then found out that I had the opportunity to go to Augsburg College for the Summer Theology Institute (STI). I didn't want to pass up this chance. I always love to learn more about my faith and I've never had the opportunity to go to any college before. I was really excited to have this opportunity and felt it was a great privilege.

Before going to Augsburg we had to read *The Good Book*, by Peter Gomes. It's a greatly written book. I'm sure anyone who has read the book would gladly agree. It discusses many topics that have to do with the Bible, such as my favorite "The Bible & Evil." While at STI we did a long list of things every day. I met a lot of fun and cool people. We clicked the very first day. Almost every night we were up really late just talking about random stuff. It was a lot of fun. I just wish that it had lasted longer because I didn't want to leave all my new friends.

The class time was only three hours long each day. I like that a lot. The class was actually really fun. We got to watch a movie. We had a debate on slavery. For example, my team had to fight against slavery and why it's wrong and the other team had to debate *for* slavery. "Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart, as you would Christ, not by the way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart," reads Ephesians 6:5-6. I wished we would have used that in the debate. The other team said it was tough because they were arguing for something they didn't believe in (why slavery was good).

That was the best class because I could use hermeneutics, the study and interpretation of the Bible, to find and use Bible verses to help me argue my point. Such as in 1st Timothy 4:12, "Don't let anyone look you down because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith, and in purity," some people would use hermeneutics to interpret it like this — you can accomplish anything if you put your mind to it; while others would think — kids can accomplish almost anything an adult can do. The only bad thing was that we had to be there at 9 o'clock a.m. Other than that, it was a great and rewarding experience.

One of my most memorable parts was when we went to The Hard Times Café. It was a really cool coffee shop. I like it a lot because while we were there, we talked about our thoughts on women in the Bible. We referred to a few books that one of our counselors brought. Peter Gomes even wrote a chapter on it. Some women were mentioned in the Bible for doing great deeds. Some people thought in the days of the Bible that women weren't treated fairly. Only a few actually were. I think we were there for over an hour long just going back and forth making comments on the sayings and remarks of others.

Before the class, I never knew how much theology is actually used, and by so many cultures. I remember going to the Temple Israel and learning about so much from their rabbi. I just got so much out of this experience. I want to thank everyone who was a part of my experience, both there and in getting me there, and especially Augsburg for having STI for everyone to enjoy.

After this experience, I'll try to use everything I've learned at Augsburg and use it in my everyday life. One can use theology anywhere and that's what I'll try to do for as long as I can. I want to be either a minister or a youth director and this experience will help with that. I know I had a lot of fun at STI and if I could do it all over again I would. After this experience, I want to be a slave, a slave for God. I want to serve him and listen to his words. God is our only master and that's how I want it.

I've also learned that Hermeneutics can be useful in our everyday lives. It can justify our beliefs, and also raise questions about them. It is good to talk about our faith and get different ideas from people. Not everyone believes in the exact same things, which is what faith is all about, but Christianity is based on one God, and that is something I think we can all believe in. If we don't discuss our religion and faith with others, how can we expect it to grow? Our faith is based on our belief in God and why wouldn't we want to expand on that and share it with others. I believe more people should have an experience like I just had at STI. It has helped me put a better perspective on my faith and where I want my faith journey to continue in my future. I have learned so much about interpretations and that not one person is always right or wrong. It will be a challenging, but worthwhile journey for me ahead.

THEOLOGY AND EVOLUTION: CAN WE GET ALONG?

by Jeff Finlon, Eagan, Minn.

“In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, ‘let there be light’ and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and morning the first day,” (Genesis 1:1-5, NRSV).

Many people know the rest of this story. It is the creation story; the very first story someone reads in the Bible. The discovery of evolution by Charles Darwin caused a debate to break out. This debate is between the first story in the Bible and the discoveries of Darwin. So why can't we just get along so creationist can walk with evolutionist? The answer is that we can, and some do already. In Darwin's first *Origin of Species* he actually asks people to read both *Book of God's Word* and the *Book of God's Works*. We as Christians do not have to believe in only creationism or only evolution; we can believe in both.

Within the debate over evolution there is a spectrum that displays four main views: Darwinism, creationism, intelligent design, and theistic evolution. In order to understand the debate we need to be familiar with each view. Before I state my own view I will briefly describe each of these views.

On the one end, we have the Darwinists, also known as evolutionists. This group believes only in the evolutionist view that everything changes and the cause of this change is natural selection or survival of the fittest. Darwinists are not necessarily atheists. They can be deists, who believe that a God started the world and then took a vacation. Other Darwinists might even be Christian, Jewish, or any other religion.

On the opposite end, we have the creationists. Creationists are known as people who reject the idea of Darwinism, but they also argue that God created every human soul *de novo*, meaning brand new. They also believe that God created the whole natural world. The anti-Darwinian creationism splits into two groups. These two are biblical creationism and scientific creationism. Biblical creationism uses the authority of the Bible to back their side. Scientific creationism uses scientific argumentation to establish the need for a belief that God created the natural world.

Close to the creationist thought is the ideology of intelligent design. The supporters of intelligent design believe that “the observation of design in the natural world is an indicator of the action of an intelligence,” (Hewlett, Peters 202). Believers in intelligent design differ from creationists in that they support the ideas that some species change and that the earth is older than 10,000 years.

In the middle between Darwinists and creationists we have the theistic evolutionists. Theistic evolutionists believe in combining Darwinist theory and creationist thought. This group has the widest range within the group itself.

The debate over evolution mainly takes place between the Darwinists and the creationists. These two sides go at it fist and teeth. On the sidelines sometimes jumping in to support the creationists are those believing in intelligent design. Also on the sidelines are the theistic evolutionists who meekly cheer on the Darwinists.

Scientific creationists attempt to combine theology with science in a way that doesn't work that well. Scientific creationists believe exactly what the Bible says about creation but uses natural evidence to prove their point. Scientific creationists say that Darwinists are atheists for believing in macroevolution. The scientific creationists do not believe in macroevolution but they do believe in microevolution. This differs from the Darwinists in that Darwinists believe in both macroevolution and microevolution (micro being change within one species, and macro being change into a different species). According to scientific creationists there is no evidence of macroevolution and it has never been witnessed. They then do not believe that humans and apes descended from a common ancestor. Stated by Gish, "Today there is only a single species in the hominidae, the family of man — homo sapiens, or modern man. In the creationist view, man has always been separate and distinct from all other creatures, a unique created being," (Qtd in Hewlett, Peters 83). This is not at all what the evolutionists believe. They have the belief that humans came from the same ancestor as apes. One last big difference between the evolutionists and the scientific creationists is that of time. According to scientists the earth is about 4.5 billion years old. This is not what is believed by the creationists. They believe the earth is less than 10,000 years. This argument is explained in two ways: first, they say that the second law of thermodynamics, the increase in entropy or disorder, disproves the big bang theory. This means that the universe would be chaotic and devolve due to entropy. Evolution being a positive process could not occur.

A second argument for the youth of the earth is that of carbon dating (using carbon-14 to date materials). The scientific creationists argue that carbon dating is a fallacious way to date materials and therefore can't be trusted, because it can not date things up to four billion years old. This is why they argue earth is only 10,000 years old.

Theistic evolutionists offer another way of combining theology and science. There are many different views within theistic evolution. These are the people in the middle ground; the people that believe in both creationism and evolution. Theistic evolutionists have the most flexibility on what they believe in. Some theistic evolutionists accept evolution and give it much respect while at the same time holding onto God and all He does. Then there are others who almost reluctantly hold onto the thought of evolution. Some theistic evolutionists claim that God created the universe to evolve the way He wanted and then left it alone. This is a very deist way of thought and does not follow the creation story to its fullest extent because the world is not perfect yet. Others will argue that the first story in the Bible is telling of the past present and future. They will argue that the world is not yet "very good" and God keeps evolving His creation until the earth is "very good."

These two ideas put forth by theistic evolutionists are not wrong but they do have their flaws. What I believe to be the right way to look at the earth is what I will tell you next. God allows the world to change and He monitors this change. God also uses an ongoing creativity to allow change in creatures to make them better creatures. This also can allow new creatures to come from another to form better. God is always changing until He finally gets what He wants. Scientific evidence shows the world took a long time to get where it is now and yet the Bible says that the world was created in only six days. How is this explained? The main thing is

interpretation. We can not take the Bible literally all the time, and so we need to include different stories in our interpretation. The creation story does not tell us that it took about four billion years to get the world where it is now. The Bible, however, gives us some verses that may suggest that how we see time is different than how God sees time. For instance, in Psalm 90 it says, "For a thousand years in your sight is like yesterday when it is past," (Ps. 90:4 NRSV). This verse in the psalm suggests to us that the creation story did not take six days but many more years than we know. Our view of time is very relative to that of God's, so the world was not created in six days but over many, many years. If we are going to believe in evolution we also have to believe that we descended from the same ancestor as apes and other animals.

How do we explain that God created each one of us brand new? We know that God creates each one of us unique so the evolution process was started by God to bring us to how we are today. One more idea I want to make note of is that of created co-creator. It sounds a little confusing but it really isn't. All it is saying is God made us to be able to develop science and technologies, which can be transformed to make the world a better place.

When the summer started I had the thought that science and theology was black and white, I was not able to believe in both. Now I see that science and theology are supposed to be combined and that they make a nice shade of grey. The one thing that does need to be kept in everyone's belief is that God and evolution coexist and that creation and evolution can live together. We need to remember that God made science and evolution so finding out more about science is finding out more about God.

Hewlett, Martinez, and Peters, Ted. Evolution from Creation to New Creation. Nashville: Abingdon press, 2003.

HOW HERMENEUTICS IS LIKE A POLE IN A TREE

by Jacob Peacock, Carlos, Minn.

Hi, I'm Jake and I'm going to explain how hermeneutics is just like a whole bunch of kids trying to get a pole out of a tree. It all started at the Summer Theology Institute (STI) in June of 2006 when a few of my new friends and I noticed a five-foot-long pole in a pine tree. At first we were going to get it out of the tree by climbing up the branches and then by just kind of grabbing it we would be able to throw it down to the ground, but the pine tree was so bushy we couldn't get to the big pole. Later someone came up with the idea of making some kind of human pyramid, building up high enough reach the pole, which didn't work, but while we were using the idea of the human pyramid someone ran into the sanctuary and grabbed another big pole. We tried using just the new big pole to reach the one in the tree. After we gave up on the idea of using the new pole, we decided to use the new big pole and the pyramid at the same time. That still didn't work but after all those different ideas, which took quite a long time, it was time to go into the sanctuary and have our nightly service. We didn't get the pole out of the tree.

Now I know you're wondering, "What does this have to do with hermeneutics when that means the method of interpretation especially in scriptural text, and in this case the Bible?" Well now, I'm going to tell you the reason why there is a resemblance. We never got that pole out of the tree and for all I know it is still there and will be there forever, but everyone came up with new and different ideas on how to get it back. Though none of the ideas were the correct answer to getting the pole out of the tree, all of the ideas had their use in getting us closer to the answer we were looking for. It is the same thing when someone interprets the Bible. Everyone can have different ideas of what scripture means to him/her. However, no one can be absolutely right about the Bible just as no one ever got the pole out of the tree. In the same way no one is ever absolutely incorrect about the Bible, just as we all seemed to help a little bit in closer to getting the pole out of the tree. Everyone who looks for answers in the Bible decides his/her own thoughts and ideas on what the answers are.

I think a person can get caught up in how he/she interprets the Bible as either absolutely correct or incorrect. I believe people should get into some Bible study groups or something of that nature. People should also attend STI, or a mission trip, and listen to speakers, religious leader, and everyday people of different cultures, religion. They should listen to what these people interpretations of the scriptures are. Sharing ideas with others even though one may agree completely or not at all, it is the best way to learn, and possibly create new ideas of one's own. Also, while one is doing this, one can make great new friends such as me at Summer Theology Institute.

These are my thoughts and ideas on the subject. One may agree with all or a part of the story or disagree and that will be one's own interpretation of my story. It's a start, however, at listening to others and that's what this is all about.

