The Good Book

Reading the Bible with mind and heart (a summary by Pat Evert)

My apologia is an argument in favor of taking the Bible seriously, and it is addressed in part at least to those who either trivialize it or idolize it, and who thereby miss its dynamic, living, and transforming quality. The first part, “Opening the Bible,” is didactic; it discusses what the Bible is and how it came to be as it now is. The second part, “The Use and Abuse of the Bible,” is more polemical. It is concerned with the interpretations of scripture, as well as with the reappropriation of scripture on the part of those who feel excluded from it. The third part, “The True and Lively Word,” has a pastoral function and seeks to discover the relationship between the human condition and the biblical witness.

Part One Opening the Bible

1 - What's it all about? What we should know, pretend that we know, and wish that we knew, we don’t. It is increasingly clear that the rate of biblical literacy has gone down rather than up. Reading the Bible is an intimidating enterprise for the average person. General knowledge is of a less and less biblically literate Christian population. “The church is in bad shape when the only person who knows anything about the Bible is the pastor.” It involves a certain amount of work, a certain exchange of informed intelligence, a certain amount of discipline. The Bible is not a book but a collection of books, in fact, a library of books. Jewish scripture seeks to ask and to answer the fundamental questions of human existence. Who am I? Why am I here? What is the purpose of life? What does it mean to be good? What is evil, and how do I deal with it? The Reformed Tradition, and in more modern times, the Evangelical branch of Protestantism, has generated what is generally known as a “high view” of scripture. But its fundamental identity is as a resource, a treasure for the people, the Bible too is the “gift of God for the people of God.” The text actually adapts itself to our capacity to hear it. “What they sought” seeks us, and in fact, “what they sought” is apprehendable to us in terms and times that we can best understand. The Bible is also inclusive, that is to say, it has the power to draw all people unto itself. As Jesus himself included among his own companions winebibbers, prostitutes, men and women of low degree, people who by who they were, by what they did, or from where they were excluded, so too does the Bible claim these very people as its own. Your story is written here, your sins and fears addressed, your hopes confirmed, your experiences validated, and your name known to God.

2 - A Matter of Interpretation. This relationship among author, text, and reader is known in the literary trade as the “interpretive triangle.” Proper interpretation requires the interpreter’s personal freedom, yet some degree of external, corporate authority appears imperative. There were two options available. One was to regard Jesus and his teaching, now seen through the experience of the resurrection, as discontinuous with the Hebrew scripture. A new order of reality
had been created which was out of harmony with, and therefore superior to, the old. To be a
follower of Jesus was to repudiate Moses. The other option was to see in Jesus the fulfilment of
all that had been promised and expected in Hebrew scripture and Jewish prophecy. Thus Jesus is
not antithetical to Moses; he is the successor to Moses and to all of the prophets, and it is
therefore through the apparent discontinuity of the experience of Jesus that we are able to make
sense both of Jesus and of Hebrew scripture. Jesus himself is not always the clearest teacher, and
his closest listeners, the apostles, so often seemed not to get it. We trust the text not because it is
“true” in the sense of fact, but because in its infinite variety it points to the truth and
communicates truth because it comes from the truth which we call God. Bibliolatry is the
worship of the Bible. The inherent risk in symbolism is that the symbol becomes a substitute for
what it is meant to represent. Neither Moses nor God, however, took a benign view of what the
people had done, and the golden calf and the worship and sacrifice that went with it were
denounced as rank idolatry. The controversy was settled by the Council of Nicaea in 787, which
permitted the placement of icons in churches as aids to devotion but made the useful distinction
between authentic worship, which belonged only to God. Clergy had a monopoly upon the
interpretation of scripture, which was thus an inaccessible book, its truths and riches unavailable
to the average Christian. The Bible is not God, nor is it a substitute for God, but authority was
now removed from the community of the church to the conscience and mind of the reader.
Rather the authority of the literal text to which the reader submitted himself. Literalism was the
key to this newfound freedom; the sovereignty of words now replaced the sovereignty of the
church’s interpretation of scripture. The doctrine of original intent, is what the authors, the
framers, had in their minds when they wrote what they wrote. By virtue of natural intelligence
the text is apprehensible and therefore sensible. “When the missionaries came,” it says, “they had
the Bible and we had the land. Now we have the Bible and they have the land.” In the American
South in particular, it was Bible- reading, churchgoing Christians, chiefly Protestants and largely
Baptist, who could and would lynch, castrate, and horribly mutilate errant black men on Saturday
night, and pray and praise all day in church on Sunday, without a hint of schizophrenia or even of
guilt. Relationship between the Bible, which remains the same yesterday, today, and forever, and
a culture that is forever changing and evolving. “A surplus of virtue,” it says, “is more dangerous
than a surplus of vice.” “Why?” we ask naturally. “Because a surplus of virtue is not subject to
the constraints of conscience.” They understood themselves to be good and faithful people who
were simply doing God’s will. Arrogance in reading these texts is perhaps an even greater sin
than unbelief.

3 - The Bible in America - America believes in God at a higher proportion of the population
than does any other country in the West, and what is even more striking is that Americans believe
that God believes in them! He actually believed that the nation wished to be a nation under God,
that it wished to live up to the moral ambition of its founding documents, that it wished to find a
way to do right and to be right. The Bible is a book for the future, about the future, and written
with confidence in the future. It embraces the future not out of disgust with the present or with
the past but out of the conviction that God is in the future, and to be where God is, is to know
fulfilment, purpose, and bliss. It is the account of a faithless people and a faithful God who seek constantly to renew their relationship each with the other.

Part Two The Use and Abuse of the Bible

4 - Hard Texts and Changing Times - The Bible, then, does not simply have a public dimension; it is a public book, and those to whom it is given and who take it seriously are meant to order their affairs from it. This public fidelity preserved them as well as distinguished them. But rather than wait for the society of heaven and the rule of God, they seek to establish here on earth as much of that divine society as possible, kingdom of God on earth and hence the coming to earth of the kingdom of heaven— the Bible, when rightly understood and applied, could. The Bible wasn’t set out to be a textbook of morals and philosophy and political economy.

Prohibition as a national policy had been dead twenty years, but with the Baptists among whom I was brought up, drink was still irrigation for the fields of sin. We were encouraged to “vote dry” members pledged their Christian duty to one another, among the promises made was this one: “…To abstain from the sale and use of intoxicating drinks as a beverage.” “Lips that touch wine will never touch mine.” Paradoxically, the Bible proved to be a rather shaky platform upon which to base a campaign against drink. Everything that the Bible describes is not necessarily to be permitted or approved of. The patriarchs, for instance, practiced polygamy and required circumcision. Christians no longer approve of the one nor require the other, but the authority of scripture is not compromised. So goes this argument, “impossible to suppose the wine fermented and yet leave the character of the holy Savior unscathed.” Any unforced reading of the word of God must conclude that at best the Bible is itself indifferent to the prohibitionist principles. But like the spirit which is superior to the letter, the principles rather than the precedents are meant to guide Christian living. The confrontation between our social and moral presuppositions is what we bring to the text, and what we find in the text and in its context is something we will have to face. That conflict, if it is to be resolved, must be done not on the basis of expedience but on the basis of the Christian principles with which we interpret biblical practice.

5 The Bible and Race: The Moral Imagination - What is asked of Philemon by Paul is that he treat his slave as a Christian brother. Their peculiar institution was built upon a firm biblical foundation. The principle that what is not prescribed in scripture is permitted is the principle. In many ways this was the first battle for the Bible and the conflict between its letter and its spirit, exposing its interior contradictions and pitting biblical ideals and principles against biblical practice and example. This was a dispute about the authority and morality of the Bible itself, and about how it ought to be read, interpreted, and applied. Principle in the hands of the reformers took precedence over practice, and claimed for itself the sanction of the Bible. This Iberian conquest of what we now call Latin America, “After we had abolished idolatry and other abominations from among the Indians, the Almighty blessed our endeavors and we baptized the men, women, and all the children born after the conquest, whose souls would otherwise have gone to the infernal regions.” The American version of slavery was far more brutal and unacceptable than the biblical one, and hence the clear teachings of the New Testament did not apply. Those who “won” won the right to view themselves as on the right side of the battle for
the Bible. Those who “lost,” however, contrary to all logic, neither capitulated their reading of the Bible to their victors, nor abandoned the Bible for themselves. No one in contemporary America, except perhaps the most hard-bitten white supremacist, would read scripture with regard to race in the same way as Southern Baptists read it a century ago, or even thirty years ago; and no one feels that some travesty of scriptural integrity has happened because of that fact. Of all people, Christians should be the most active in reaching out to those of other races, instead of accepting the status quo of division and animosity. In that same moral imagination it is never too late to be right, or to be good.

6 The Bible and Anti-Semitism: Christianity's Original Sin That “pain” was not the suffering of Jesus. It was rather the pain that Christians, in the name of that suffering Jesus, have imposed upon the Jews. The sign and symbol of all that was true and good and holy, was not merely a “stumbling block,” to use Saint Paul’s freighted phrase in his letter to the Corinthians, but a gallows—a sign of all the perversity of which this fallen world is capable. For you, brethren, became imitator of the churches of God in Christ Jesus which are in Judea; for you suffered the same things from your own countrymen as they did from the Jews, who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out, and displease God and oppose all men by hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles that they may be saved, so as always to fill up the measure of their sins. But God’s wrath has come upon them at last! Staff who conducted the daily work of the prison camp at Auschwitz received communion weekly in the Catholic parish church. He takes theology out of the seminary, and even outside the church, and into the popular discourse of our age. There are constant confrontations between Jesus and “the Jews,” failed to see Paul’s basic assumption, the good news for the Gentiles has become bad news for Jews.” Paul never doubts the inclusion of the Jews in the providence of God, and he is inclusive of Jews without requiring them to become Christians, that is, to put their faith in Christ. The promises of God are sure, and so too ought to be the status of those to whom the promises are made. Paul embraced a God who also embraced both Jews and Gentiles, providing Torah for the one and Christ for the other. The Bible is too important to be left solely in the hands of the ignorant and the powerful, and after Auschwitz we should know better than to do so.

7 The Bible and Women: The Conflicts of Inclusion “Inclusive language,” a concept once exclusive to this same circle, now generates the language of liturgy, scholarship, hymnody, and even the language of Holy Scripture itself. Women’s ordination in the Roman Catholic Church, as women could not be the founders of synagogues, what is impossible for Lydia as a devout Jewish woman becomes possible for her upon her conversion to the religion of Paul, and she is described as the founding member of the Christian community, which begins to meet in her house. Sapphira, the wife of Ananias, is a woman of property and financial acumen. Some were persuaded, and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women. (Acts 17:4) Many therefore believed, and not a few Greek women of high standing as well as men. (Acts 17:12) But some men joined him and believed…and a woman named Damaris and others with them. “I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the Church at Cenchreae. Their job was to provide for the care of the Lord’s Table, and to be
devoted to acts of charity and kindness, but unlike their husbands, they were not to “bear rule” in
the church. Prisca, also known as Priscilla, is accounted “the most prominent woman of the New
Testament,” their proximity to Jesus, and their precedence and participation in the earliest
Christian communities is nothing less than revolutionary in its time, and still astonishing to us in
ours. The examples of Lydia, Phoebe, and Priscilla, to name only a few of the New Testament
women, are subordinated to later biblical and cultural practices that repudiate the transformative
character of the gospel and reinforce the prevailing habits and customs of a culture fearful of too
much change. (1) Looking carefully at the received tradition; how has this text come down to us
in the history of interpretation? (2) Operating out of a feminist sensitivity to the contemporary
context; how is the text received now? (3) Finally, pointing out how “the dynamics within the
text” can achieve significance within the community that now reads and hears it. These then are
Paul’s instructions to put these troubles in those places, and at that time, to rest. These
instructions are situation-oriented, and are not meant to be normative, and they certainly are not
meant to inhibit the work of the Lydias, the Phoebes, and the Priscillas, and they do not negate
the “equality principle” enunciated in Galatians 3:28, where all distinctions are leveled in Christ
on the basis of baptism. The overwhelming consensus of the vast literature on these texts since
1970 suggests that they are meant to be understood situationally, contextually, and not
normatively. Those who worry that a Bible diminished by interpretation is no Bible at all? Such
people will fight for the Bible and for the right to read themselves into it rather than to be read
out of it.

8 The Bible and Homosexuality: The Last Prejudice raises disturbing questions about our
own sense of identity, of morality, and of the nature of settled truth. The very discussion of which
violates all our conventional taboos. homosexuality is seen not only as a social practice or
condition upon which good hearts and minds may differ but as an issue so central to right
conduct and belief that compromise or sweet reasonableness is thought to be capitulation to
error, and therefore unacceptable. Thus, the debate is almost undebatable. it is the last moral
absolute, and we compromise it at our own peril. The legitimization of violence against
homosexuals and Jews and women and blacks, as we have seen, comes from the view that the
Bible stigmatizes these people, thereby making them fair game. based of course upon a reading
of the Bible, that allowed the nasty work of the Holocaust to be done not only by military
specialists but by people whose attitudes were based upon centuries of Christian teaching. When
the Bible speaks of homosexuality, does it mean what we mean when we speak of
homosexuality? The creation story is the basis and not the end of human diversity, and thus to
regard it as excluding everything it does not mention is to place too great a burden on the text
and its writers, this so-called Holiness Code is designed to provide a standard of moral behavior
that will distinguish the Jews from the Canaanites, whose land they have been given by God. The
price of the land, as it were, is a new standard of behavior. We can understand the context:
cultural identity, protection, and procreation. In this context homosexual conduct is a risk to all
three of these necessary frontier ambitions. We have, however, long since ceased to live as God’s
frontier folk in the promised land. Homosexuality in Leviticus is condemned as ritually impure,
the key to this conclusion being the fact that the word abomination does not usually describe
something intrinsically evil, such as rape or theft, but something that is ritually impure, like eating pork or engaging in intercourse during menstruation. Once again the “clear meaning” of scripture in the matter of homosexuality seems more expedient than compelling. In other words, the creatures ignored the Creator, and they themselves became the objects of their own worship and veneration. They became worshipers of self, caught up in their own egos, and they gave to created things the glory and dignity that belong to the Creator. Dishonorable passions refer to the worship of sexual pleasure, an excess to be condemned with all other excesses. Does not describe the conduct of homosexuals, but rather of heterosexual people who performed homosexual acts. What is clear is that what is “unnatural” is the one behaving after the manner of the other. All Paul knew of homosexuality was the debauched pagan expression of it. Such as I Corinthians 6:9–10, the vices listed are “understood by Paul to be symptomatic of sin, not as its roots and essence.” “Sodomite,” as we now know, refers almost exclusively to a male prostitute, and is not a Pauline synonym for “homosexual.” Thus the Bible has relatively little to say that directly informs us about how to address the issue of homosexual Christians today. And that both the Bible and the God who inspires it may be more gracious, just, and inclusive than they can presently afford to be. The biblical writers never contemplated a form of homosexuality in which loving, monogamous, and faithful persons sought to live out the implications of the gospel with as much fidelity to it as any heterosexual believer. All they knew of homosexuality was prostitution, pederasty, lasciviousness, and exploitation. The “problem,” of course, is not the Bible, it is the Christians who read it. Most of whom were conservative Roman Catholics, argued that homosexuality was bad for the individual, bad for society, and should be condemned on religious and biblical grounds as well as on the empirical evidence of the unhappy lives of homosexuals. Fears and anxieties were raised where few had been before, discourse was inhibited rather than stimulated, and the moral climate of the community was poisoned. That there was more than one way to read the Bible and to understand the imperatives of the Christian faith, to a view of the Christian faith which in dispute valued charity and humility over mean-spiritedness and arrogance. The Christian message is of reconciliation in diversity and equality in Christ. Celibacy became the badge of moral authority. Marriage was a concession to human weakness and the need for companionship, children, and sex. And sex within marriage was tolerated not for pleasure but for the morally worthy purpose of producing more Christians—the difference branded the homosexual a threat to the moral order, the equivalent of a heretic in the church or a traitor to the state. and the source again is not the Bible but the moral assumptions of the Church Fathers with which they then read the Bible. Since the only purpose of sex is to procreate, when that is by definition not possible, the sexual activity is also by definition “unnatural” and proscribed by church teaching. To say that homosexual conduct is wrong because the Bible says it is “is not to answer but to dismiss the question.” “Sexual intercourse is not by any means the only language of earthly love, but it is, in its full and right use, the most revealing…. It is a giving and receiving in the unity of two free spirits which is in itself good…. Therefore it is utterly wrong to say that…such intercourse ought not to be engaged in except with the willing intention of children.” The Lambeth ruling makes it clear that the procreative does not take precedence over the unitive, and in fact the unitive is an equally valid context in which the sexual act may take place. “Sex can be productive without being reproductive.” “Have same-
sex relationships the same potential for sacramental meaning and power” as heterosexual relationships?

Part Three The True and Lively Word

9 The Bible and the Good Life. The Bible is an important book and that it is significant in helping them learn about the good life, Do I have to be a fundamentalist or a biblical scholar to answer these questions? What they wanted could be summed up in three words: The Good Life. “Is this all there is? Isn’t there more to life than this?” and those of us in the religion business should pray to God that we are able to help them in their search for the living waters. the search for the good life and the Bible’s ability to help in that search. Am I the Only One Who Is Confused? it is filled with people very much like the reader, people who are confused and confusing, who are less than exemplary but who nevertheless participate in a developing encounter with God. Bible stories tell our story, the human story in relationship to the divine, they are true. None of the prophets took on their assignments willingly or gladly. They were ordinary people for whom God had a use. The apostles of Jesus never seem to understand what is going on, and yet he loves them. They finally do “get it,” and we rejoice that they do. They are to grow and change and become something and somebody other than what they now are. What “born again” in the gospel means, however, is literally to begin all over again, What Can I Trust? not so much for what the worshiper does not give God, but for what the false gods cannot give the true worshiper: an infinite concern,” and it was replaced by the sense of human achievement, power, and progress, The Bible, if nothing else, a book about the dangers of false trust: But as for me, I will look to the Lord, I will wait for the God of my salvation; my God will hear me. The God of the Bible in whom we find someone, something, worthy of our loyalty, No human being could bear a steady view of moral solitude without going mad. people are seeking companionship, fellowship, in their pilgrimage, and that the sense of community, of being in a place that cares, where people are accountable to and responsible for one another, the Bible is about the formation of a fellowship, a community of men and women who are reminded over and over again that they are not alone, not on their own but part of a communion, a company of both the living and the dead in which is to be found the living presence of a loving God. “That is happiness; to be dissolved into something complete and great.” That is what the Bible is all about, and the good life to which it points. Can I Feel Good About Myself? Image building, that activity that engages us from our earliest years onward, is designed not so much to impress others as it is to protect ourselves from the discovery on the part of others that we are not all that we appear to be. We live in constant fear of exposure. We live all our lives fearing that we are going to be found out, and in a way we are all little Wizards of Oz. it is that we are better than we think, and better than we deserve to be. Why? Because at the very bottom of the whole enterprise is the indisputable fact that we are created, made, formed, invented, patented in the image of goodness itself. But they cannot take away from you the fact that you are a child of God and bear the impression of God in your very soul. You cannot be destroyed, God has given us by his very creation of us a capacity to image, to imagine what is good, what is true, and what is beautiful. If the denial of the image of God is the problem, the affirmation of the image of God in self and in others is the solution. To realize that our image is the image of God, and that we are better than
we are right now. Upward mobility became first an expectation and then an entitlement, and is now a disappointment, and that disappointment has fueled what can be called the politics of disappointment and bile. Institutions such as colleges, industry, even the government, all once thought to be essential to the solutions of our problems, are now, in this climate of anxiety and recrimination, seen to be the problem. but it is just hope that people require in facing their futures; and hope’s greatest power is that it enables the present by embracing the future. The essence of the good life for which this age seeks is that hope is worthwhile, worth living for, worth waiting and working for. Hope does not deny the circumstances of the present, and hope doesn’t help us get out of our difficulties. Hope doesn’t get us out, but it does get us through. Contrary to the street smarts of the age, hope is not the enterprise of last resort, it is the quality that transcends both failure and success, for it substitutes the ultimate for the temporary. Hope is not stoical endurance, although it does help us to endure, but whereas endurance has a certain almost fatalistic quality to it, hope itself goes beyond that which must be endured. Hope allows us to transcend definition by mere circumstances and appearances. Job is often cited as an example of unconquerable hope, and if we remember his story we will recall that he did not use his hope to deny the reality of his present pains and circumstances. The hope that was his was of the same essence as confidence, and that confidence was not in himself or in anything that he did, or could do, or was. Hope thus always points away from the one who claims it to the one who is its source. Thus hope is not solipsistic and self-centered, but directed invariably to that which is worthy of confidence. This is what Job 11:18–19 makes clear, thus enabling Job to look beyond himself and his circumstances: And you will have confidence because there is hope; you will be protected and take your rest in safety. You will lie down and none will make you afraid. This is also the direction of hope in Psalm 27:13–14: I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living! Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; yea, wait for the Lord. And again in Psalm 43:5, we read: Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God. Hope therefore is what connects the present to the future; it is the mother of courage, confidence, and endurance. The good life is not that for which one hopes; hope is that which makes the good life possible, Hope then is the opposite of both fear and anxiety. It does not operate out of ignorance as is so commonly believed, but out of knowledge: The consequence of such a hope is indeed the good life, and the only life worth living.

10 The Bible and Suffering How does one deal with unscripted death? Death is somehow unfair, and in this country it is culturally unconstitutional, violating our right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. In this world virtue and suffering are not opposites, as we would find it so convenient to believe; suffering is the consequence of, not the opposite of, virtue. Without Paul we have very little that is authentically Christian, and thus the great irony, for many of us at least, and certainly for women, blacks, homosexuals, and Jews, is that the source of our liberation from this life, and our endurance and perseverance within this life, is the very Paul who has been used in various ways and in various times to oppress us. If suffering is the fate of life in this world, and for Christians in particular, then Paul is our tutor in suffering. We belong therefore to an unconquerable realm, to a place that is immune to the ultimate assaults and
ravages of this life. There is a profound paradox at work of which Paul is fully aware, however, and that is that death does its work on us before we die. If in life we are attached to more than the mere form and vessel of life, the body, and if we do recognize that the body is merely the temple of the spirit, the dwelling place of that God who is in us, when we really believe that because of this, death is not to be feared and the body not to be worshiped, then we have been given life after death without having to die. I am often asked why it is, considering their experiences, that woman, blacks, and homosexuals still cleave to the church and still fight for the Bible. Rewriting hymn texts is not the issue; rereading and rediscovering the gospel in the Bible is. God is always where suffering is to be found. The faith that is formed out of such a travesty of the gospel is one that is unfamiliar with suffering, incapable of enduring it, and unable to recognize the work of God in it. The reason that the dying ask to see the cross before they die is to be reminded that Jesus has been where they now are, and that by his grace they are now to go where he is. Suffering, of which death is the ultimate expression, they know by the cross is a means, and not an end. They know that he was not rescued in the nick of time. That cross represents suffering not set aside from life but suffering that springs from life, and is found within life itself. It is not simply that we expect now, as the result of our raised consciousness and improved scholarship, to find a place for blacks, women, and homosexuals within the household of faith, and perhaps even in the Bible. It is that the place for creative hope that arises out of suffering is most likely now to be found among blacks, women, and homosexuals. “Unearned suffering is redemptive,” then those who have suffered most, particularly at the hands of other Christians, have the most to give to a world of tribulation.

11 - The Bible and Joy. I wish simply to claim joy as one of the elements of religious experience by which people make sense and meaning out of what John Habgood calls “undeserved happiness bubbling to the surface in thanksgiving.” The Yankees, among whom I was brought up, used to say that firewood warms twice: first when it is chopped, and then when it is burned. So too is it with joy, in experience and in recollection. That “still, small voice” has always intrigued preachers and commentators. It is clear that the writer of Kings wishes to contrast the noise and power of nature, with its capacity to terrorize and intimidate, with the real power of the Lord, which is displayed in a quite unexpected, unanticipated way. Nature intimidates but God empowers; Baptism is not only the sign of the new life, a new identity. It initiates one into a new order of being, whose destiny is not death, the end of the natural order, but new life in which one lives in the world but is not of the world. Baptism seals Christians as essentially foreign and outsiders to the place in which they live, aliens and strangers, it is a renunciation of the citizenship into which we are born. It is a rejection of all that we understand to be real and powerful. it is taking out citizenship papers in another place, as opposite and far distant from this place as can be imagined. There were many who may have thought that such a message was not for us, the “colored” people, but we knew that the message of freedom and encouragement in Christ, despite every attempt to pervert and to keep it from us, was meant for us; it had our name on it. Surprised by Joy, C. S. Lewis” he calls joy “an unsatisfied desire which is itself more desirable than any other satisfaction.” the fact that anyone who has experienced it will want it again. To make certain that we understand that joy is not merely pleasure or
aesthetics, or self-induced diversion or delusion, we must realize that the context of joy is not
delight but deprivation. It means that because the Lord has come to fulfill the promises of God,
all that was separated and disparate is now united and whole. Suffering is the context of joy even
as darkness is the context for light and silence for hearing. Joy that is complete and full
transcends, indeed overcomes, its context, and is not bound by the limitations of the context. Our
eyes are opened, and having seen wholeness once we will want to see it again and again. Those
who have had this experience are restless for another. This is what Augustine means, in his
famous collect, when he prays, “Thou hast made us for thyself, and our hearts are restless until
they find their rest in thee.” glimpses of holiness at the thin places that remind us that we are
neither our own nor on our own.

12 - The Bible and Evil. The effective point of communication in the Bible between the
divine and the human is that the Bible takes evil seriously and recognizes the reality of evil in the
human condition. In the Bible, evil is not an illusion, not a state of mind, not a mere moral
inconvenience; evil is real. The Bible, however, never speaks of “curing” evil, and nowhere does
it speak of “conquering” evil. If the Bible is about anything, it is about the subtle, ruthless,
remorseless persistence of evil. They are intrigued to know where it came from, how it got into
the world, how a good and powerful God allows rampant evil and its attendant sufferings and
sorrows into the creation. Most of us are “miserable offenders.” We are made miserable by the
offenses we commit and by their consequences. Sin and evil make us miserable. That does not
deny the dignity of creation; Happy are those who can relieve suffering with prayer. Happy are
those who can rely on God to see them through. They can wait patiently for the end. Evil in
America tends to fall into two apparently mutually exclusive categories, under the common
rubric of moral evil: social sins and societal sins or, if you prefer, sins of the flesh and sins of the
system.
Sins of the Flesh - Once upon a time we were much more intimately acquainted with the seven
deadly sins than we are today; that is simply to say that we knew their names and could list them
as Pride, Lust, Gluttony, Anger, Sloth, Envy, and Greed. The sins of the flesh are troublesome
and therefore condemned because their pleasure diverts us from virtue and makes us want to
satisfy ourselves rather than God or others.
Sins of the System - One of the great acts of transference in modern times is the transference of
the responsibility for evil and sin from individuals to institutions and to society at large. Social
sin, or what I am calling sins of the system, is understood to be the sinful, fallen nature of the
institutions and social systems that are created, managed, and manipulated by sinful men and
women. Spanish Christians who fueled the fires of the Spanish Inquisition with their unspeakable
tortures. The Puritans of Salem, Massachusetts, in the summer and autumn of 1692 were
convinced that they were doing God’s will by hanging those whom they believed to be witches.
Nazi Germany was by no means all thugs and Brown-shirts and Bavarian drunkards, and the
great moral problem was how so great a civilization could perpetrate and tolerate such immense
evil. Thus racism was not only the collective acts of violence on the part of racists but the system
that encouraged and supported a culture of violence and discrimination. Individuals might repent
and change their ways, but no real change would happen until the systems themselves were
Racism was such a system. The misery of the sinner is the knowledge both of the wrong and of its inevitability. The Bible is filled with vivid images of people caught between the knowledge of what is good and what is evil, and the inability to avoid the easy wrong and to affirm the difficult right. They could not prevent themselves from acting on their passions even despite their knowledge. Ignorance is not why good people do bad things, and knowledge itself does not prevent good people from doing bad things. Good people do bad things because by themselves they are not able to manipulate their knowledge of what is good in behalf of goodness and over against what is bad. The first and most basic reason the good do bad is that the good are weak and are not fully in control of themselves or of their circumstances.

Evil is real.

The good are not as smart as they think they are. The good need all the help they can get; one cannot be good on one’s own. The good need to recognize that they are at one with evil. The reason the church on earth is called the church militant is because it understands itself to be in a state of constant warfare with a real antagonist whose troops are legion and whose resources are without limit. To deny that reality is the first step toward moral defeat. Evil is like cancer; it has a brain and a strategy, and millennia of experience. Secure in the identity of their calling, confident in the honor others accord them, and unwilling to think themselves vulnerable in the work they do so well, they are prime targets for the power of evil over them. They think that they are in control, when in fact they are controlled. Finally, one cannot combat evil, especially the evil within, on one’s own. You cannot be good by yourself. One of the first defenses against evil is to acknowledge that one needs help against it. Confession is good for the soul not only because it performs a therapeutic cleansing of the impurities that clog the spiritual bloodstream but because to address it in confession immediately objectifies the evil and places one in a community outside of oneself. Evil’s greatest ally is solitary silence. Confession of sins helps articulate what the sins are and acknowledges the trespass, it calls upon God and the community to witness the confession and to assist in the amendment of life, and it reassures the penitent that he or she is not alone either in the sin or in the redemption from it. Good people do bad things because good people are not good enough. They have to fight and to outwit a superior enemy, and they need all the help they can get to do it, all the time. The Bible reminds us over and over again that Satan, the personification of evil, is not interested in the wicked, but in the righteous. Therefore those who would be righteous, or hunger or thirst after it, are and always have been Satan’s prime targets. It is to amplify this fact for the sake of our spiritual welfare that the gospels make the first encounter Jesus has after his baptism an encounter with Satan himself. We are meant both to take notice and to take what we notice very seriously indeed. With evil working overtime, virtue cannot be a hobby.

13 - The Bible and Temptation  Thus, temptation is given the form of the serpent; a name, the Tempter; and qualities we will recognize and even appreciate: He is called the subtest of all the creatures. Adam and Eve are thus far morally neutral. First, that temptation is as old as creation itself and is not an exception to the created order but inherent in it. Eden is no corrupt urban environment filled with evil and moral ambiguity. It is the smallest unit of human society,
a suburban paradise without children or neighbors. The first moral decision is impossible to make in the absence of evil and the temptation that leads to it. If our foreparents, uncorrupted by a world not yet old enough to have gone sour, lost their innocence to the beguiler, the old deluder, the tempter, what reason have we as their descendants to expect that we will be spared their trouble? Neither temptation nor its agent, the tempter, have been banished from the created order. To be human, therefore, is to live in daily proximity to temptation. Temptation masquerades most cleverly in areas of moral ambiguity where good people can be tempted either to do good things for the wrong reason, or bad things for a good and high purpose. The nearer one lives in proximity to God, contrary to our expectations, the greater is the influence of temptation. The three temptations that Satan places before Jesus in the wilderness appeal to three ideals of the good life to which Jesus and all who would follow him in holiness would ordinarily be attracted. These ideals are spirituality, power, and faith. Appealing to these demonstrates that Satan knows us better than we know ourselves, Jesus is on a spiritual retreat, disciplining his soul, mortifying the flesh so that the spirit housed within it can flourish. Spiritual pride suggests that if we practice and study, and keep steady in our moral diet and regimen, we will be equal to any force that comes our way. Most of us would not be able to resist that offer, however, and for the best of reasons—“our” God is on our side, and we can prove it. Then, while giving God the glory, we take what really counts in the game, the credit; and people will see our piety, our morality, and our superior spirituality, and admire us for it. It became pretty clear that religion and power do not mix well, particularly when religion has the power. In contemporary America, despite the Bible’s chary attitude toward the state, many Christians cultivate civil and political power in order to exercise a biblical rule over the state. Power to do good and thereby to compel a more just and moral society is the kind of theocratic illusion that has always proved such a tempting ambition to religious fundamentalists who, in the name of God, would seize power to compel others to righteousness. This is the lesson that Jesus teaches when he rejects the power Satan so wantonly offers him in the second temptation. The temptation to do good with that power simply is not good enough. Satan wants two things here: He wants Jesus to prove his own belief in God, and he wants God to prove that God is God. They are tempting because they offer in an instant what it would take a lifetime to accomplish through preaching and teaching disciplined evangelism and slow, steady spiritual growth. One of Saint Paul’s consistent themes is the danger of spiritual overconfidence, a form of moral arrogance that overestimates one’s own abilities and underestimates those of Satan. He reminds one of those fanatical Jewish settlers in modern Israel who, so attuned to the righteousness of their cause, hear God’s instructions in their ears to murder those who stand in the way of their particular vision. It is Paul’s conviction that we are enabled to endure what we must bear, or, as our grandparents might have said, “God gives us burdens, and the strength to bear them.”

14 - The Bible and Wealth Drama in the Church. Money, in fact, among Christians is a bit like sex. We know we need it but we don’t like to make too much of it in public. The theory of stewardship has sound biblical foundations, as we shall see, but theory often runs afoul of practice and raises the irksome questions of the relationship between money and virtue, between money and religion, between the material and the spiritual, and between faith and wealth. Our
by Peter J. Gomes

inhibitions in talking about money stem in part from the fear that we will somehow be
manipulated into doing something we would rather not do or cannot afford to do, or that we will
be made somehow to feel guilty because we are unable or unwilling to respond at the level that
we are asked. The impediment is clear: riches. Wealth is not a sin, but it is a problem. In the
New Testament Jesus himself teaches a hard lesson in the advantages of investments over
savings. Wealth is not a sin, but for the living Christian who is interested in wealth, it is a
problem. Do not accumulate earthly wealth, which is subject to the vagaries of the human
experience and is at best only temporary. Invest in heaven, which is eternal. This is perhaps the
ultimate problem with the rich ruler— not that he is wicked but that he is subject to the tyranny
of that which he sees and knows. Upon those who have wealth there is a burden of responsibility
to use it wisely and not only for themselves. The wealthy must be generous in proportion to their
wealth. Giving in this sense of expectation is not optional, it is the requirement of wealth. Their
wealth has given them temporary advantage in this life the dreadful days when they must leave
it. in this life, their wealth gives them much power, some pleasure, and a great deal of anxiety.
Jesus does not so much condemn as pity the rich, and the only way to be sure they will not be
deluded by their riches is to invite them to give the riches up and follow him. it is very hard for
many to accept Jesus premise that the good life is not this life. The Greedy Eighties have yielded
to the Needy Nineties, and materialism is not all that it is cracked up to be. Wealth is not what
you have; wealth is what you have been given that enables you to give to others. This is what the
Bible calls “being rich toward God.”

15 - The Bible and Science. The Bible was merely an effort, and a metaphorical effort at
that, to cram into the human imagination the unimaginable immensity of God. But having said
that, we have said really nothing at all, for scripture does not pretend to be science any more than
science pretends to be scripture. The canons of one simply do not apply to the other, and neither
is challenged or diminished by being simply what it is. If indeed the heavens are expanding, so
too must now our doctrine, our vision of God, for more implies not less but more of God. Is
there a way out of the rivalry between two supposedly opposed systems of truth and, as well, a
way out of the unhelpful argument that says if one is right, then the other must be false? The
Bible, if we understand it rightly, is a book not about limits but about infinity, The Bible has
nothing to fear from science, and science, with its sense of wonder and awe and infinity, has
much to learn from the Bible.

16 The Bible and Mystery. The Bible is valuable to us because it is the record of those for
whom mystery and meaning are not antithetical but a life’s work in the growing knowledge of
self and of God. “Mysteries to be known must be entered into.” “For we do not solve mysteries;
we enter into them. The deeper we enter into them, the more illumination we get. Still greater
depths are revealed to us the further we go.” An essential ingredient in that perspective is
imagination. The women had had an experience; the disciples wanted an explanation, since the
explanation is always inferior to the experience. Perhaps Easter and Christmas are implausible
truths, problems that must be solved rather than mysteries to be entered into. The resurrection
invites us to respond with the only human response available in the face of the mystery of the
divine condescension: adoration. “If it weren’t for the miracles in the Bible, I could take it all much more seriously.” I have heard this view expressed in a wide variety of forms over the years. “If it weren’t for the miracles in the Bible, I couldn’t possibly take what it says seriously.” Their purpose is not so much to do good, although they do that. Their real purpose is to affirm the truth of the proposition that Jesus has within himself and his command the power of God. Miracles, then, like Easter and Christmas, become problems to be solved or at least explained, a place for everything, and everything in its place—and in such a world miracles simply didn’t fit. They introduced a level of arbitrariness and capriciousness on the part of God, and they made of believers gullible dupes who, instead of learning about and sorting out their own problems, would wait and expect God to interfere. Revelation is addressed to us as rational beings. Miracles are not contrary to nature, but only contrary to what we know about nature. Rather than taking things apart to see how they work, and if they work, black preaching endeavors to remove as many barriers between the thing preached and those to whom it is preached as quickly as possible, so that the “objective” story becomes with very little effort, “our” story, or “my” story. Redemption was not a theory; it was an experience. For black Christians, miracles are not theories to be tested, miracles are the stuff of every day, verified in the experience of the people, Problems give us the illusion of power, for in solving them we are able to put them out of the way and to clear the decks for the next problem; but mystery lingers, deepens, and develops—dare we say it?—a meaningful relationship with the one who is drawn into it. The deep things of God of which the Bible speaks in nearly its every breath are not problems waiting to be solved but a mystery into which we are invited to enter, discover, explore, and indeed to enjoy, forever.

Afterword For the marginalized and the excluded—to see that the Bible itself included them and was for them, and that the record of its reading and interpretation was an ongoing invitation to come in. This is an invitation not to guilt, but rather to modesty, one of the more neglected of Christian virtues. I wish therefore to expose lazy Christians, and their even lazier reading and study of the Bible, to their spiritual obligation to use their minds. This means that we cannot afford to leave textual, historical, and theological study to the experts but must take the time, trouble, and imagination to learn not only what the Bible says, but what the best minds of the church say and have said about it. the Bible is more than syntax, doctrine, and interpretation, and that it is one of the most available and extraordinary means by which humans are brought into proximity with the divine.