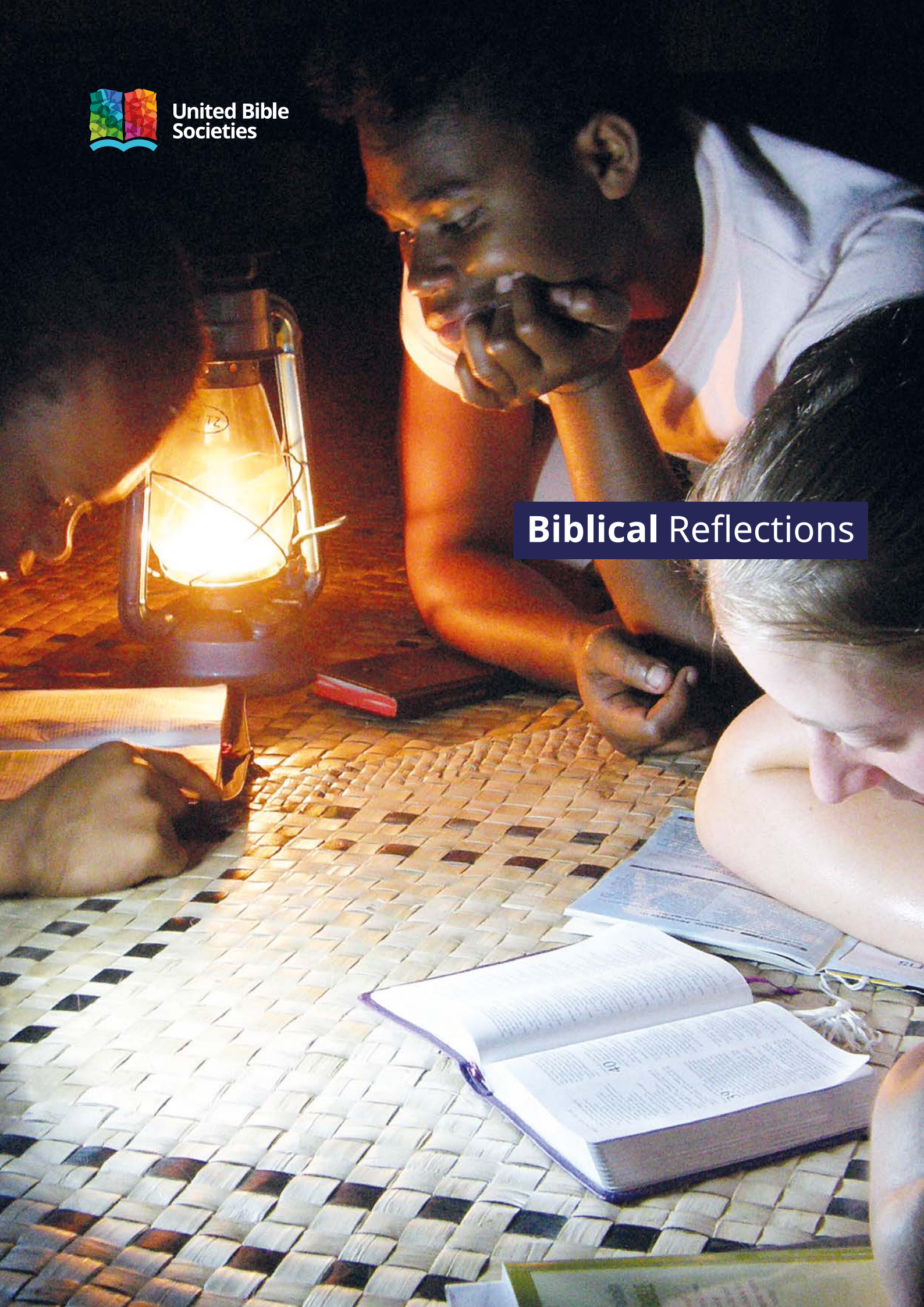




United Bible Societies

Biblical Reflections





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Reading the Bible as the “Word of God”

*Introductory observations by
Alexander M Schweitzer,
United Bible Societies Head
of Global Bible Translation*

This collection of ‘biblical reflections’ was prepared for the United Bible Societies World Assembly held in May 2016 with the theme *God’s Word: Living Hope for All*. The ‘biblical reflections’ are not intended to offer comprehensive studies on biblical topics; they rather aim to stimulate thought, discussion, and perhaps action in view of some of the hot topics of our times. Globalisation and its consequences, such as migration, the overlap of cultures and religions, and huge issues like ecology and economics, present unprecedented challenges – both on individual and societal levels. The Bible can offer help, not in the manner of a handbook but in the deeper sense of giving orientation based on ethical principles and, more than that – for those who find in the Bible the Word of God – orientation based on God’s revelation throughout history and in his incarnated Word: Jesus Christ.

By way of introducing this set of ‘biblical reflections’, I would like to briefly ponder the question of **how we read the Bible**. While the ways to deal with texts, especially canonised texts, greatly vary between cultures, religions and denominations, an encouraging tendency in many Christian churches and communities can be observed: the tendency to self-critically assess our ways of reading Scripture individually and collectively. This self-critique is healthy and urgently needed. Fundamentalist and purely spiritualistic interpretations of the Scripture are a growing phenomenon. There is the danger of instrumentalising Scripture, of misusing and even abusing biblical texts to further one’s own positions and judgments. Those involved in Bible ministry have the urgent task of offering an alternative to a sectarian and fundamentalist reading of the Word, which builds walls of separation and discrimination.

Contextual hermeneutics and a **dialogic reading** of the Word of God, mysteriously present in our world, will let the echoes of the various religious traditions, scriptural or otherwise, enrich our experience of the Word. It is necessary to read the Scriptures within the context of the life of the contemporary reader: The Bible is the book of life in as much as it deals with life in all its manifestations.

The Bible, in its canon as well as individual books, is a pluralistic phenomenon, an outstanding example of unity in diversity, a symphony of many voices. The different ways of reading the Bible are not equally apt but at the same time no one method captures the richness of the meaning of the Scriptures. Therefore, a **plurality of methods and approaches** is needed, helping to unearth more of the riches available in the biblical text.

The Bible is the **book of the community**, an expression of its faith experience, and a tool for building it. Since the Bible is the communal treasure of the entire body of believers, all the members of the Church have a role in the interpretation of Scripture. Christian communities must read the Bible from the **perspective of the poor**. It is the poor who can bring to its interpretation and to its actualisation a light more penetrating, from the spiritual and existential point of view, than that which comes from a learning that relies upon its own resources alone.

The Bible needs to be read in its **cultural context**. The conviction that the Word is capable of being spread in different cultures springs from the Bible itself – in the blessing promised to all peoples through Abraham and his offspring (Gen 12:3; 18:18) and extending it to all nations. An inculturated, contextualised reading presupposes a respectful and in depth encounter with a people and its culture, and starts with the translation of the Bible into the heart language of the people.

The Bible as the Word of God can only be welcomed if we approach it also as the Church’s basic source of prayer and if we cultivate its **prayerful reading**. Among the many forms of prayerful reading of Scripture is the ancient practice of *lectio divina*, inviting the reader to acknowledge and bridge the gap between the biblical text and his/her personal reality, to read, study, meditate, ruminate, pray and put into practice the biblical message.

By exploring topics like ecology, migration and solidarity, by examining the role of the Bible in a secularised world, in interconfessional contexts and the ways in which Sacred Scripture is used and misused, the following essays aim to stimulate reflection. The authors of this collection – linguists, exegetes, theologians – all read the Bible as Christians, i.e. with an understanding of the Bible not only as an important historical-cultural document but as Sacred Scripture, containing the Word of God.



The Bible and ecology

Read Psalm 8

The greatest crisis to be faced by humanity through the twenty-first century will be the ecological crisis. Far greater than war, or terrorism, societal breakdown or economic collapse, and in fact contributing to all of these other more obvious and clamorous crises, the collapse of the magnificent system which sustains our life on this planet challenges our very existence. We are facing, in our lifetime, the greatest period of species extinction ever. Each species a unique expression of the mind of God, chiselled and crafted over millions of years, their exquisite life forms are disappearing, in many cases before we even know them or the part they play in the web of nature or in sustaining our wellbeing.

In the long history of life on earth, species have always been going extinct but this time there are two significant differences. Never before have so many species disappeared so fast.¹ And all of this is due to just one species – our own! We are exhausting earth's resources, polluting the fresh water, turning fertile land into desert and replacing riotously rich landscapes with noxious monocultures.

We are filling the atmosphere with carbon dioxide, the waste product of our insatiable hunger for more things, more travel, changing as never before the fragile blanket of air that surrounds our planet, melting our ice-caps and drowning the coastlands and their inhabitants, human and non-human.² And we are cutting down the forests as if there was no tomorrow when we might need the oxygen they supply.

Statements such as these are often met with disbelief. The problem is that none of us, in our individual locations, can see the dimensions of the crisis. But watch or listen to the reports accumulating from the scientific community, critically analyse the news, examine the workings of the global economy, listen to the voices of those who speak up for the voiceless – oppressed, disadvantaged, marginalised people as well as animals and plants. Listen to Church leaders, notably Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, or the Lausanne Movement, or, most recently, Pope Francis in his encyclical *Laudato Si*, a call for "dialogue with all people about our common home." The picture becomes frighteningly clear: our planet, our only home in the universe, is already a not-so-friendly place.

Does the Bible have anything to say about this crisis? Ecological and consequently economical stress caused by human greed was by no means unknown in biblical times. But the dimensions of our problem are quite unprecedented because of our twin "successes" – population and technology. Yet precisely because the Bible is the story of God, humanity and the world, there are significant guidelines, warnings, and grounds for hope. In this biblical meditation we want to focus on some of the main themes, as brought to us by Psalm 8 (NRSV).

¹ Scientific estimates vary. The lowest reliable estimate is that the present rate of extinction is 120 times the natural background rate. Other credible measurements put it at 1000 times, or one species every few hours

² Reliable scientific projections suggest that we have already locked in a least 5 metres of mean sea level rise – the only argument is as to how fast this will occur. If we can keep the average atmospheric temperature rise to 2 degrees, there will be a 1.2m sea level rise by the end of the century. Most scientists believe we will struggle to keep the temperature rise to 4 or 5 degrees, and only drastic and immediate action will prevent a 20m sea level rise.

The earth belongs to God the Creator

Psalm 8 begins, as does the Bible, with an affirmation of the supremacy of God the creator.

*¹ Oh LORD, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!
You have set your glory above the heavens.*

We can look out at the night sky and marvel. The nearest star other than our own is 4.2 light years away – about 40 million, million kilometres. Our galaxy alone contains over 100,000 million stars and is one of millions of galaxies – some of them much larger than our own. With our naked eyes we look up and wonder. With our telescopes we look up and are left absolutely speechless.

Or we can look much closer to home – at the rich tapestry of life on this small, insignificant planet. Scientists estimate there are about 8.7 million different species alive today, only 1.5 million of which have been described and categorised.

Every single one of these things, from galaxies to microbes, is described by our Psalm as “the works of God’s fingers....the works of God’s hands...”

*³ ...the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars...*

⁶ ...the works of your hands...

*⁷ ...all sheep and oxen
and also the beasts of the field,*

*⁸ the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea,
whatever passes along the paths of the seas.*

This planet, along with the entire universe, belongs to God as Creator. We do not own one square inch. As Psalm 24:1 puts it:

*The earth is the LORD’s and all that is in it,
the world, and those who live in it;*

Every human claim, individual, ethnic or national, to any part of the soil, the sea, the biological or mineral resources, is radically challenged by this perspective, which permeates the whole of Scripture.³

Humanity occupies a position of privilege and responsibility

In our psalm, the poet moves from wonder at God’s creation to amazement at the privileged position we humans find ourselves in.

*⁴ ...what are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them?*

*⁵ Yet you have made them a little lower than God,
and crowned them with glory and honour.*

*⁶ You have given them dominion over the works of your hands;
you have put all things under their feet...*



³ Psalm 104:24 from another wonderful creation song, states: O LORD, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures. In Job 38-41, God removes Job from the centre of attention and we get a glimpse into the sheer delight that the creator takes in untamed creatures of the wild and the physical earth itself, without any reference to their importance to human beings.



In our amazement at the intricate beauty and magnificence of God's creation, our thoughts turn to ourselves. Despite our insignificance in the scale of the universe, when we read the creation narrative, echoed here by our Psalm, we are struck also with the unique and powerful position of humankind. This Almighty creator has entrusted us with responsibility over all his works! Little less than God!

But before we get carried away with pride and self-importance, we must pause here a little longer.

*⁶ You have given them dominion over the works of your hands;
you have put all things under their feet*

*⁷ all sheep and oxen,
and also the beasts of the field,*

*⁸ the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea,
whatever passes along the paths of the seas.*

If God has made us in his image, and has given us the rule of his handiwork, of the things that he owns as maker, then that tells us something about how we were intended to exercise that rule: like God, acting for God! So all our interaction with things God has made, animate or inanimate, are intended to be acting like God – and God is love. God acts for the greatest good of his creatures, of his creation. The second chapter of Genesis explains humankind's task as "to guard and to serve" the garden. And just here we have done precisely as we have in every area of our lives – gone our own way. We have usurped the rights that are God's alone, treating our delegated position as one of absolute ownership. And so we are currently presiding over the wholesale destruction of our planet's network of life – its natural habitats, and the plants and creatures that fill them.

As a species, are we guilty of both pride and dereliction of duty? Are we playing a high-stakes game of chicken – gambling that someone else will take the initiative to pull over, to slow down, to put a brake on resource exploitation and atmospheric carbon pollution, so that we can just forge ahead with making ourselves richer and more comfortable? The best science

tells us that this is a problem for our current generation. We will either solve it, or the earth we leave to our children and our grandchildren will be a very different and much less hospitable place. It's no wonder the biblical texts that speak of humanity's "dominion" and the charge to "fill the earth and subdue it" have been seen by the conservation movement as criminally responsible for the damage Western societies have caused.⁴

Jesus fulfils the role that humanity has abandoned

But Psalm 8 has yet more insights to offer us, because already this Psalm was taken up by some of the earliest Christians, and applied to Jesus. Hebrews 2:6-9 states:

*But someone has testified somewhere,
"What are human beings that you are mindful of them, or mortals, that you care for them?"*

*You have made them for a little while lower than the angels;
you have crowned them with glory and honour,
subjecting all things under their feet."*

Now in subjecting all things to them, God left nothing outside their control. As it is, we do not yet see everything in subjection to them, ⁹ but we do see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honour because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.

Jesus is the one who, as a human being, fulfils God's purpose for humanity. He is the one fit to rule all things in God's name and with God's nature. But for Jesus, the road to this glory led through the cross.

The New Testament is full of affirmations that in Jesus, the one who is all that humans were intended to be, God's rule of the whole world will bring about reconciliation and renewal. John 3:16 tells us that:

God loved the cosmos so much that he gave his only Son...

⁴ Of course there are other societies, not influenced by a Christian world-view, that exploit nature mercilessly, and without these particular biblical injunctions to do so. This does not nullify the critique that in the so-called "Christian" West, and the wider culture which has flowed from it, we have taken our cue as "masters of the world" from these texts.

Or hear the words of St. Paul:

...in Christ God was reconciling the cosmos to himself...(2 Corinthians 5:19)

For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross. (Colossians 1:19-20)

In Jesus, all the old “dominion” language finds its intended fulfilment. Jesus is the second Adam, the start of a new line of humanity, who reasserts the dominion of life and the grace of God, in place of the dominion of death, which the first Adam and we his successors have wielded.

...he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all. (Ephesians 1:22-23)

If because of one man's trespass, death exercised dominion through that one, much more surely will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness exercise dominion in life through the one man Jesus Christ. (Romans 5:17)

God's purpose is to restore the heavens and the earth

Contrary to the old song which claims “This world is not my home, I'm just a-passing through” the Bible affirms that this world is our home, and it has a future and a hope.

Romans 8:19-21 speaks of the present frustration of the creation and its future this way:

For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God. For the creation as subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

Creation's future hope is intimately tied up with our discovering who we really are. The model for our future and that of all creation is

the resurrection of Jesus, as Paul sets out in 1 Corinthians 15.

When we read in Revelation of John's vision of the end of all things and the coming of the reign of God, we don't read of people flying up into the sky to sit on clouds playing harps. Rather:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth... I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God...and I heard a loud voice from the throne saying: “See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them and they will be his peoples and God himself will be with them. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more, mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.” (Revelation 21:1-4)

This is the Christian hope. This is the future of our planet. This is the purpose and the reign of God. This is what we pray for when we say, “Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” And this is what we work for when as God's people, as people already made new to some extent, we take up our very first God-given responsibility, to guard and serve the garden-planet we live in. Christians, of all people, should be in the vanguard of ecological action and conservation.

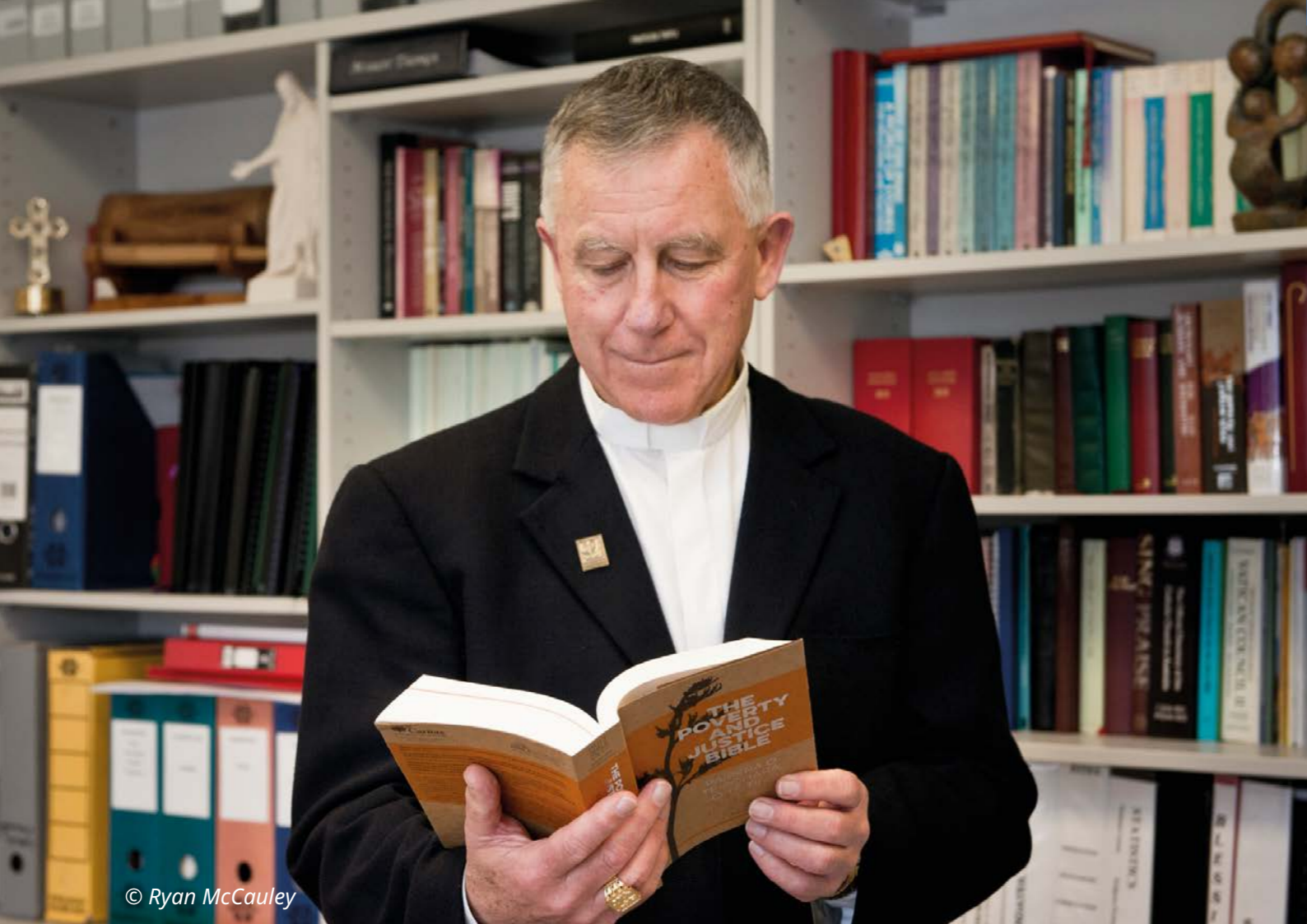
Think globally, act locally

This well-known precept for living with integrity in a globalised world has special relevance to our responsibility to live as agents of God's grace on the planet. And it should have consequences for our commitment as a fellowship of Bible Societies.

Individually, let us commit ourselves to living with restraint, living sustainably, living with thought and compassion for the human and non-human world around us:

- Can we reduce our consumption?
- Can we eliminate plastics? Recycle more?
- Can we use less fuel?
- Can we become agents of a greater awareness for His creation?





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The Bible in a secularised and globalised world

Many people in our time doubt whether the Bible is authentic and has any relevance to daily life. Young people in particular struggle with its language and are baffled by its stories of strange rituals, bizarre laws and violence. In a secular world, the Bible seems outdated.

At the same time, young people are deeply interested in social justice and ethics. Pilgrimages are increasingly popular, showing a certain interest in spirituality. Novels by authors such as Paulo Coelho are popular worldwide. There is a need of mystery among young people, but they are suspicious of authority.

How can we, personally and as Bible Societies, bring the Bible closer to (young) people who struggle with the Bible? How can we present the Bible in our time? What language would be helpful for us to use when we speak about the Bible?

To help us reflect on this it is good to look at the place of the Bible in today's culture and media, and its place in the Church in a secular and global context. How do people see the Bible? How is their view of the Bible affected by their outlook on life?

The Bible in our culture and the media

By looking at how the word 'bible' (with a small b) is used in the media we can learn something about the associations people have (or are expected to have) with that word. When, for example, a book on cooking is called a 'bible', it is implied that it is an authority on that subject, that it is exhaustive and complete, that it offers inspirational ideas and that it is based on specialist knowledge. It seems that, apart from the aspect of authority, the media take this as a model for how the Bible is regarded.

The Bible is often seen as a cultural classic, like the works of famous authors – a sign of culture and civilisation. The Bible is not, in the first

place, seen as the property of the Church or the Synagogue, but it is out there in the open, as public property. Everyone's interpretation of the Bible becomes relevant; why would one be better than the other?

Many people, certainly in Western cultures, want to have their own, independent, point of view, based on personal insight, not on the authority of society or the Church. They look at the Bible critically according to their own standards. And they ask why, for example, the position of women in societies in the Old Testament was so weak and why the Bible seems to accept this.

The Bible is used by many of our societies, for example in education, because of the values it teaches. The Bible, or parts of it, are very much present in literature, art and music. But does this really mean that the Bible is influential in our culture and in the lives of people?

In many societies the Bible does not have the status of moral authority. The Bible is not allowed to say anything that society does not want to be said. It is expected that the Bible's moral values coincide with the values of our time and culture. Still, in many cultures, the Bible in general is appreciated. Creation, the flood, genocide, Saul and David, exile ... these are regarded as intense expressions of the human condition, even though the Bible is often considered as a book with personages, not real people. In the words of one person in an interview:

"The Bible isn't 'truth' for me. It's literature – helping to understand the world and life. The book of Exodus stands for the searching journey through life."

So there is a downside to how the Bible is sometimes used in our cultures. It is easy to use the Bible mainly as a book of quotes; the variety of the books in the Bible and their messages are not well known. Society often thinks that it has the Bible on its side, even though the Bible

As Bible Societies, let us commit ourselves to action by producing resources – Scripture selections, Scripture engagement materials – and speaking boldly to challenge and help all Christian communities to live lives of radical environmental stewardship and discipleship:

- Can we become agents of change in the service of God's good earth?
- Can we use our mandate for advocacy to support and encourage lives of radical earth-friendly discipleship among all Christians?
- Can we reflect our responsibility for His creation in our programmes and business plans?
- How efficient are our buildings, our vehicles, our regular activities?

As a Fellowship let us take stock of the way we use this planet's resources:

- How much carbon dioxide do we generate through paper purchase, in our printing and shipping, and above all, our travel?
- There are many well-audited projects through which we could offset our contribution to the carbon burden the atmosphere carries.
- Can we become more credible advocates for a responsible way of treating creation – by our word and by our example?
- Can we become an advocate for the protection of His creation on world scale?

These steps are costly. But the cost of doing nothing is much greater.

Psalm 8 ends as it began:

⁹ O LORD, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

is only used when it coincides with the culture and when it confirms general ideas that already exist, for example about the human condition, human relations and tolerance. The Bible is seen as a human book. What is often ignored is that the Bible's central concern is the divine.

The 'return' of religion

In our global world, religion has been on the increase again (after the atheism of socialism and communism). Some Christian circles have welcomed this with a feeling of triumph. There is a new generation of young people who do not bear a grudge against the Church. Religion has returned. However, perhaps as a result, religious intolerance, warfare and fanaticism have increased also. For this reason, many people in secular societies are quite sceptical about organised religion – any religion, including Christianity – and sacred books, including the Bible. They are indifferent to organised religion, preferring their own spirituality and 'self-help' as well as the freedom to choose and interpret.

The Bible and the Church

These widespread views are very different from how the Churches speak about the Bible. According to many Churches – especially but not only, the Roman Catholic Church – the Bible should not just be interpreted by individuals, isolated from a community and tradition. Instead, the Bible stands in need of interpretation by the Church. It was the Church that shaped the Bible, so it is the Church's task to interpret it. In this way, the Church community is a subject of interpretation and shape the traditional teaching of the Church about the Bible.

Even those Churches that do encourage believers to study the Bible for themselves and draw spiritual lessons from it will still put stress on the Bible as the final authoritative Word of God.

In short, the Churches either see themselves as the authority that is responsible for interpreting the Bible or they point to the Bible as the final authoritative Word of God.

In our secular and globalised world all this is often perceived as an authoritarian and intolerant approach. Many people today would rather prefer a plurality of interpretations and people's freedom to choose. So in our Bible advocacy endeavours, what language would be helpful for us to use?

Our language about the Bible

If we start our conversation on Bible in terms of its authority or in terms of the authority of the Church to interpret it, many people in the so-called secularised societies are not likely to be open to the Bible and its message. They will look at the Bible as a collection of rules and commands which they are expected to obey.

Instead, (young) people might be much more likely to be receptive to the Bible and its message if we let the Bible speak for itself:

- about the lives of the people in it
- about their struggles
- about how their life with God changed them
- about injustice in societies.

Then the Bible becomes an account of how people like us have lived through faith and have coped with questions and problems together, with God's help.

Take, for example, the book of Job. Job and his friends discuss if there is any way to make sense of his suffering. Among other things, Psalms and Ecclesiastes search for the meaning and purpose of life. The text becomes a conversation and readers become involved in this conversation. Amos offers a compelling critique of social injustice. In many cultures, particularly in the Muslim world, prophets and their life with God are regarded as very significant. In such contexts, biblical narratives about key persons (for example, Noah, Abraham, Joseph, Moses, David, Solomon, Mary, Jesus, as well as the prophets) can really speak to people.



Does this mean that reading the Bible will be more comfortable? No! Through its authenticity, the Bible will also confront us with our own shortcomings, thoughts and intentions. Are they pure, or do we have ulterior, selfish motives?

Does this mean that reading the Bible individually, outside a community context, is enough? No! Reading the Bible as a lens or mirror of my own life will inevitably bring the reader to the social dimension; the Bible itself is about community experience, progress, faith. But a personal approach to the biblical text with no 'authority obstacles' to start with might be the door-opener for many (young) people of our times.

Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. (Hebrews 4:12, NRSV)

A few more questions

- Do you recognise (some of) these developments in the countries where you work? What do people think about the Bible? What do they think about the Church?
- Are there differences between views on the Bible in your society and the Bible's own view or the Churches' view of the Bible? How can these different views be communicated?
- Which books of the Bible would be particularly helpful to use when you try to bring the Bible to your people?
- What should an approach to a secular or secularised audience look like?
- Does your Bible Society run programs or provide material to specifically approach the young generation?
- How to reconcile a more 'individualistic' approach with our mission to serve the Church(es)?

The use and abuse of the Bible

Those of us involved in the Bible cause, in translating, producing, and distributing the scripture in many different formats, are well acquainted with the many good and positive uses to which the Bible has been put at both the individual and community levels. We have seen countless examples of changed lives and changed communities. We have witnessed first-hand the transformation of people and groups who have decided to commit themselves individually and collectively to the truths contained in scripture. But unfortunately not all uses of the Bible have been benign. Scripture has often been put to uses which are antithetical to its essence, to its core values and teachings. We will return at the end to the more positive use of the Bible, after looking at some abuses of it. Perhaps it is best to begin at the level of ideas, since that is where many get off to a false start.

The Bible is not the Word of God

To begin with, the Bible is not the Word of God. It is not even the words of God. It is rather the words of men inspired by God to lead us to the Word, who is Christ (John 1:1). The fact that the first two sentences above often are at first shocking to good people of faith, or that we have to quickly add the third sentence to reassure such good people, illustrates a good bit of the problem facing us regarding the issue of the use and particularly the abuse of the Bible, both throughout history and up to the present.

For too many Christians, a kind of unconscious tendency toward bibliolatry inherent in equating the Bible more or less directly with the Word of God makes almost any interpretation of scripture immune or at least resistant to criticism. If the Bible is said to have said it, who are we to question it? After all, it is God's Word or words, and we should not risk opposing something that sacred.

All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.

2 Timothy 3:16-17, NRSV

Yet we all know the Bible has been used and abused, and often misused, to oppress, exploit, to wage wars and carry out horrific acts in the name of that Bible and ultimately in the name of the God of that Bible. And to make things more complicated, many times the Bible itself seems to encourage and approve of such practices. But perhaps we should begin by enumerating what most people will agree are some of the more obvious and egregious abuses of the Bible in relatively recent times.

Slavery, domestic abuse, genocide...

The Bible has been used (most people would now say abused and misused) to justify slavery. And some of the texts that have been used seem at first reading to support the practice: Ephesians 6:5 (*"Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, as you obey Christ;"*) and Titus 2:9 (*"Tell slaves to be submissive to their masters and to give satisfaction in every respect; they are not to talk back..."*) were commonly cited by slaveholders to justify their owning slaves. But 1 Peter 2:18 goes further yet: *"Slaves, accept the authority of your masters with all deference, not only those who are kind and gentle but also those who are harsh."* And of course the Old Testament in many places takes slave ownership for granted.



The last of the Ten Commandments prohibits coveting one's neighbor's man- or maid-servant, in this context obviously slaves. Such a prohibition surely at a minimum implicitly tolerates the practice of slavery. And behind many of the uses of the texts cited above is an interpretation (utterly without merit) which takes Ham, Noah's son, to be the progenitor of all dark-skinned people on earth, who consequently are all cursed as an extension of the curse on Ham's son Canaan in Genesis 9:25: *"Cursed be Canaan; lowest of slaves shall he be to his brothers."*

Almost no one today would use any of these scripture passages to justify slavery. In fact, the Bible has also been used by those opposed to slavery to try to do away with it and to promote the freedom and equality of all people. Paul's famous statement in Galatians 3:28 that *"There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus"* is the cornerstone text for the belief and value that the Bible, in spite of the many apparent indications to the contrary, actually stands for the freedom and equality of all. That there seem to be fewer texts to support this argument than those which support the practice of slavery are nowadays usually taken as evidence that biblical texts need to be weighed, not just counted, and that the original cultural contexts of the biblical texts need to be

taken into account before applying any text to any particular issue, and in particular to issues which at some moment in time are controversial.

The Bible has also been cited by some to justify domestic violence. This time the texts used are clearly extended (and most would say abused). The text of Ephesians 5:22 (*"Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord."*) has been used along with Proverbs 13:24 (*"Those who spare the rod hate their children, but those who love them are diligent to discipline them"*) to justify husbands and fathers physically beating their wives and children.

While there is not yet unanimity across cultures on the value and validity of corporal punishment of children, at least spousal abuse (and the real harming of children as well) would now hopefully be questioned in virtually most Christian communities worldwide. But there are still too many places where these verses and others like them are at times cited as support for a husband's and father's right to hit and hurt his family members.

Those opposed to domestic violence who want to use the Bible to support them must depend on the more general language of biblical texts such as Ephesians 5:25 (*"Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her,"*) and Colossians 3:19 (*"Husbands, love your wives and never treat them harshly."*) Still, these general principles are sometimes favored over the more specific texts, which can be more easily relegated to having relevance only to their specific cultural and social contexts.

A specific text sometimes used to combat child abuse is Ephesians 6:4 (*"And, fathers, do not provoke your children to anger,"*) though the rest of the verse (*"but bring them up in the discipline [or nurture] and instruction of the Lord"*) has been used on both sides of the argument.

It is hard to imagine worse crimes than genocide, rape, and infanticide, yet the Bible has been used directly and indirectly to justify such acts. Perhaps the most famous passage concerning genocide is I Samuel 15:3 (*"...kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey."*) But there are also such texts as Numbers 31:17-18, where Moses scolds the Israelite troops returning from battle for not following their orders to *"...kill every male among the little ones, and kill every woman who has known a man by sleeping with him. But all the young girls who have not known a man by sleeping with him, keep alive for yourselves."* And for infanticide one only has to look to the well-known verse from Psalm 137:9: *"Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!"* Crimes such as the genocide of Native Americans (and the infanticide of their offspring) were at times defended precisely with the verses cited above.

Hard questions

These few examples of the abuse of the Bible and other similar examples force us to ask ourselves some hard questions:

- What are those issues today for which we cite the Bible in our defense and for which our children or grandchildren will be ashamed someday, just as some of us are ashamed

about our forefathers' use of scripture to defend slavery, domestic abuse and genocide?

- How can we go about *"... rightly explaining the word of truth"* (2 Timothy 2:15) for our time?
- And doesn't the fact that we no longer can support so many things that were defended from the Bible in former times perhaps mean we really are simply following our cultures and not the Bible?

God-given conscience and the imperative of interpretation

Christians generally believe that as human beings we have been made in the image of God (Genesis 1:27), which usually means we should be guided well by our presumably God-given consciences. Put another way, if something largely taken for granted in our culture or in our communities' interpretation of the Bible makes us uncomfortable, we should probably explore why this is. It could be diagnostic. We may find that the Bible does not really say what we have been told it does, or that we can no longer follow what our culture or sub-culture tells us is right, even when they cite the Bible in their defense.

It may help us to be reminded that at all times and all places there have been those who have opposed the evils of slavery, domestic abuse, and genocide. And many people have used the Bible to build up and defend those not able to defend themselves. Today it is almost unthinkable to use the Bible to defend the obvious crimes and evils spoken of above, outside of isolated communities in parts of the world cut off from outside contact. We usually prefer to cite scripture texts that speak of mercy (*Psalm 119:156: "Great is your mercy, O Lord..."*) and tolerance (*Luke 6:37: "Judge not..."*) and love (*John 13:34: "love one another..."*). We give preference to these texts as they reflect the essence of our Christian belief, they speak of the God of Jesus, and they offer a hermeneutical lens through which Christians from the beginning have read the Bible – including the Old Testament – as "sacred scripture".

In the future Christians may take us to task for not pointing out more clearly some of the anti-biblical evils of our own time. For example, biblical texts about caring for the widow, orphan, and stranger may well be eventually (and rightly) cited against the incredible income and wealth inequality of our time. And the "dominion" language of Genesis 1:28 may finally be generally read as a judgment on our present generation for our lack of care and stewardship of the earth and its resources.

We will not be able to convince those who we consider to be abusing the Bible to stop doing so completely. What we can do is to try to use scripture constructively ourselves, and speak out firmly against what we see as its misuse. And perhaps most importantly, we must try to find those areas in which we may be abusing the Bible ourselves without realising it, and repent of these. Only then can we grow and develop, stop ourselves from abusing the Bible, and allow it to transform us rather than the other way around. That is the best use of the Bible there is.

Further questions

- What is our own idea of the Bible? How do we speak about the Bible? Are we careful and conscious about the language we use? E.g. Bible – Word of God?
- We are being seen as specialists for the Bible. Do our staff have sufficient knowledge about the Bible? Do we as Bible Societies give importance to biblical formation for our own staff?
- Does the message of the Bible influence our lives? Do we have an existential relationship with the Bible or rather a 'business relationship'?
- How do we ourselves use the Bible, e.g. using biblical quotes, which ones, in which context? Are we aware of our own cultural conditions and do we allow for a (self-)critical dialogue between these and the biblical message?
- Are we aware of misuse of the Bible in the communities we work with? What is or could be our role as Bible Societies there?



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Solidarity in the Bible

Solidarity and compassion are fundamental themes in the Bible. They arise from a deeply-felt love and empathy for other people's suffering. As the Word says, God is love, and he expects his creatures to reflect that love by loving their neighbour. 1 John 4:20 says that if we say we love God and don't love each other, we are liars. On the other hand, *"But if we love each other, God lives in us, and his love is truly in our hearts."* (1 John 4:12, CEV). The Holy Scriptures are radical regarding this topic. We often fail to see this, but the Bible itself says, in Mark 12:33, that the commandment to love God and our neighbours is more important than all the sacrifices and offerings that we could possibly make. The prophets had already said this in reference to living in solidarity with the needy (Isaiah 58:5-8).

The Letter of James: Solidarity – expression of a salvific faith

In this biblical reflection we will concentrate on the Letter of James. This is a letter that is frequently forgotten, but one that we need to rescue because of its relevance to this topic. It seems that, in our world, people dying from starvation is no longer a scandal. The Letter of James is written to the Jewish migrant communities that live dispersed, outside Jerusalem. Their situation is not easy, because they live in a society that is hostile to them for being Jews, Christians and foreigners. It is also a society that invites people to follow values that are contrary to Jesus' teachings. Among its members there are people undergoing financial hardship (James 2:15-16), and there are others who are continuously plotting to gain more profits (James 4:13). James, as leader of the Church in Jerusalem, writes a letter to these communities motivating and, at the same time, urging them to follow the values of the Jewish-Christian tradition.

One of the core themes in the letter is solidarity and compassion as an expression of a salvific faith. James announces it in 1:27 and elaborates it with concrete examples in Chapter 2. In 1:27, he states, *"Religion that pleases God the Father [that is, true religiosity or spirituality that is valid before God] must be pure and spotless. You must help needy orphans and widows and not let this world make you evil."* In the Bible, orphans and widows are representatives of the poorest people, as they do not have anyone to provide for their needs or protect them. Back in those times it was the man of the house, the husband and father, who was in charge of the family. It is interesting that James puts God as Father here, that is, as the person in charge of looking after them. Here, to "visit" means to help, to provide what is necessary to live well. James is radical; for him, this type of solidarity is an expression of a genuine spirituality. It is consistent with tradition, when the prophet Isaiah says, *"to share your food and home with the orphans and widows, is it not to worship me?"* (Isaiah 58:6-7)

Radical solidarity

This call for solidarity in Chapter 1 is elaborated by James with a theological foundation in Chapter 2. This chapter presents two concrete examples of solidarity, related to compassion. The first has to do with disdain for or discrimination against the poor (2:1-5) within the congregation. James encourages us not to show favouritism. If a well-dressed man with a golden ring and fancy clothes becomes a member of the congregation, along with a poor person with shabby, filthy clothes, James encourages not to discriminate against the poor person. That is, failing to offer a seat to the poor or telling him to sit on the floor, while giving a prominent seat to the rich person. This attitude was common in Greco-Roman society. They followed a paradigm called honour and shame. Important individuals were to be honoured. Not giving them the prominent seat was disapproved of, as it meant

putting them to shame. These values were the values of the world, of the society in which they lived. However, these were not values in Jesus's teachings. They were contrary to the Jewish-Christian tradition that claims that we are all equal in the eyes of God and where the humble are favoured (James 1:9-10; 2:5; 5:1-6). For James, they have to remain unpolluted by the values of the Greco-Roman society in which they live as immigrants.

Another concrete example is given in James 2:15-16. It is about solidarity between brothers and sisters within the congregation. For James, if a brother or sister doesn't have any food to eat or is unprotected from the cold, and another brother wishes him/her the Shalom, saying "Go in peace", bundle up and eat abundantly, but he does not act in solidarity with their needs by providing for them, this brother does not reflect a true saving faith, his faith is false, it is useless. James is radical: for him, this insensitive person is not a brother in faith even if he calls himself a Christian.

For James, genuine faith goes hand-in-hand with good deeds such as solidarity with the needy. At the beginning of verse 14, he states: "Brothers, what good is it to say that one claims to have faith if you don't have deeds? Can such faith save you?" This text makes us understand that good deeds, such as the ones carried out in solidarity, are not simply an appendix of faith, or something just important to be done by a Christian, but rather something inherent to our faith. James' radicalism is based on that. And it can be applied to all individuals, people such as Abraham, father of faith (James 2:23-25) or Rahab, a foreign woman with a bad reputation (James 2:25). To the eyes of God, true faith that counts is the one which goes far beyond professing "I believe in God, the only God". James says that also demons believe and shudder (James 2:19). That is why, he points out, a faith that is not accompanied by concrete deeds, by an attitude of solidarity, is a dead faith (James 2:14, 17, 26). And a dead faith is not salvific, not a saving faith.

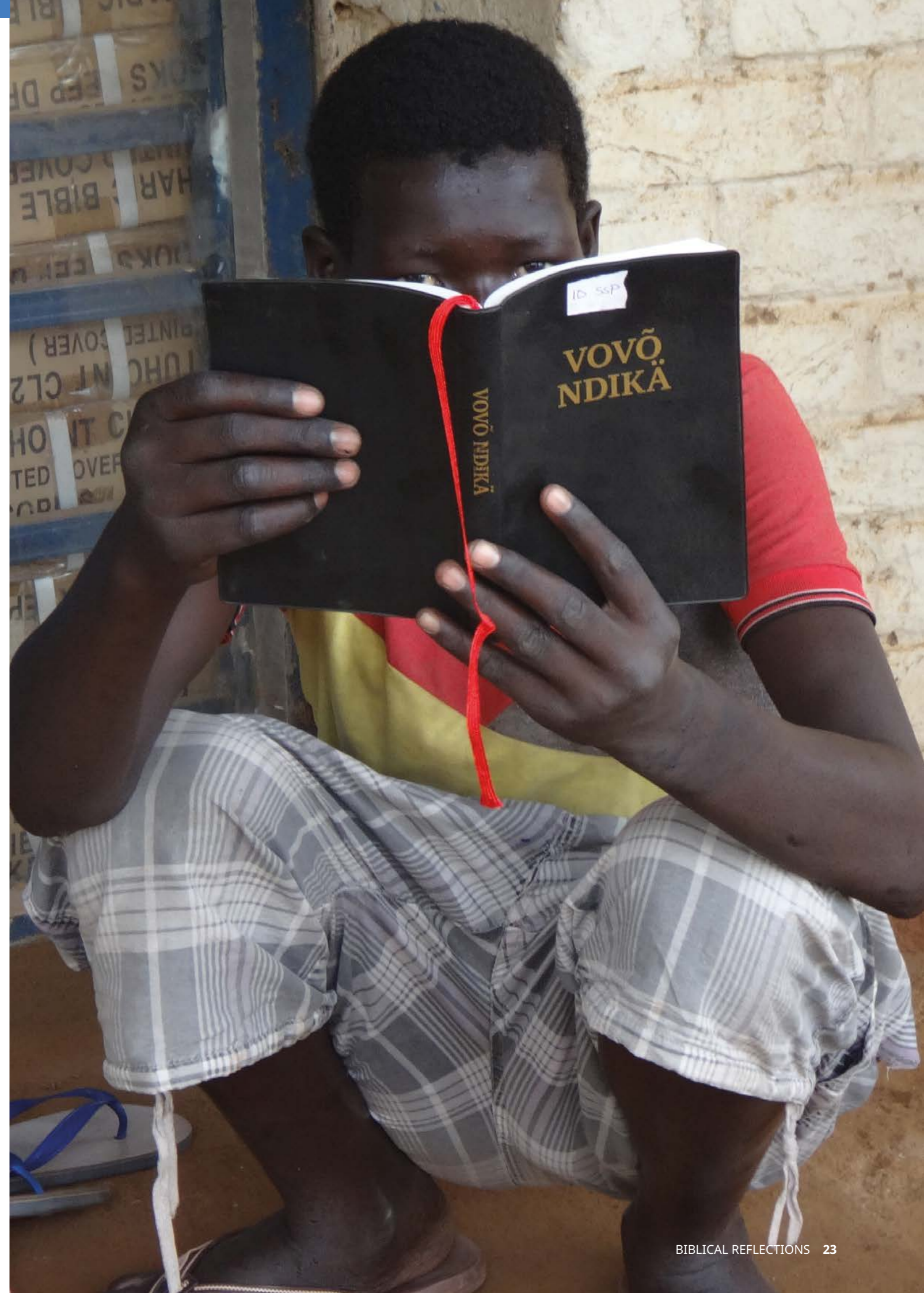
A less radical notion in Paul?

Because of these radical statements, the Letter of James has continuously prompted discussions. The more familiar Pauline statements say that we are saved by faith and not by deeds. Any good deed is seen as something important, but at the same time as optional. But this is an incorrect reading of Paul's words. When Paul juxtaposes faith and deeds, he is referring to the deeds of the law: to circumcision, observance of the days, abstaining from some food, etc., that is, to the ritual law. When James talks of deeds as an inherent part of faith, he refers to non-ritual deeds, to the love for our neighbour (James 2:8). He is making a reference not only to the Torah, but to Jesus' teachings in Matthew 22:39-40. Paul also declares that the whole law reaches its plenitude in one precept only: "*Love your neighbour as yourself.*" (Galatians 5:14)

It is important to observe that James is not juxtaposing faith and law, but true faith and false faith. In this sense, Paul and James do not contradict each other. For Paul, faith works through love (Galatians 5:6) and their fruits, which come from the Spirit, and are seen in good deeds. If we consider that James and Paul write their letters in different times and to different communities and contexts, we realise that the different emphases depend on the situation of their audiences.

Coherence and integrity of faith

The Letter of James also raises the issues of coherence and integrity. Being in solidarity means being coherent with faith in Jesus Christ and being honest. For James, what you say must be seen in your deeds and attitudes. Several texts encourage coherence. For example, if we merely listen to the Word, but do not put it into practice, what is it for? You can't be satisfied with just listening to it (James 1:22); if we say we have God's wisdom, but in practice and in our attitudes we only reflect personal ambition, rivalries and disputes, that wisdom is false. It does not come from God, it is not "from above", but imitates the values of the world (James 3:13-15). If we bless God but with the same tongue





we curse people, we are lying, it is like cursing God because people are created in God's image (James 3:9). This is why he says in James 1:26: *"If you think you are being religious, but can't control your tongue, you are fooling yourself, and everything you do is useless."* And this is because, as James himself says, *"Can clean water and dirty water both flow from the same spring?"* (James 3:11-12).

A globalised society

Today's world is very attractive and enticing, but it is a trap and it moves us away from solidarity. Consumerism has grown to the point that it has unleashed greed, the dark side of our hearts, which leads to sin and death (James 1:15). Having more goods and honours has become a condition for achieving human dignity, without respect for what happens to the environment and to other people.

Frequently, we forget that human dignity is obtained by grace, and that mutual care shows that we are followers of Jesus. James had already warned about this in his letter written in the first century of our era, when he said: *"You want something you don't have, and you will do anything to get it. You will even kill! But you still cannot get what you want, and you won't get it by fighting and arguing."* (James 4:2).

That is why James encourages the community to undergo a sincere and coherent conversion to become true friends of God and not of the world (James 4:4-10). The deplorable situation of this globalised society makes us insensitive and pulls us away from solidarity, God's love and our neighbours.

And what about us?

Thinking of ways for the future of humanity, Edgar Morin, Emeritus Director of the Scientific Research Centre in Paris, includes among the new principles of governance the principle of solidarity and responsibility. According to him, *"everyone, without exception, has to render accounts, in particular, functionaries ..."*¹ We, United Bible Societies, as well as each Bible Society in its country, are not exempt from this responsibility. It is important to examine ourselves with self-criticism about how we are being accountable in terms of solidarity and the responsibility we need to assume, as citizens of the same universal community. As followers of Jesus, let us reflect with sincerity and purity of heart:

- To which extent are we being "polluted with the values of the world", in the terms of James? The values of society put profits as the supreme goal (James 4:13), instead of the mission of sharing the Word that transforms selfish people into people who show solidarity.
- Does our faith transform into concrete deeds, attitudes, into solidarity? Does it go far beyond saying, "I believe in God, the only God"?
- Are there times when we bless God and with the same tongue we curse people?
- As individuals and as Bible Societies, do we put in practice the Word that we listen to, translate, distribute?
- Our world needs mutual caring. Are we – men and women of the Bible – the first who radiate the saving, healing and liberating grace of God that we have received?

¹ Edgar Morin, *La vía para el futuro de la humanidad* (The Way for the Future of Humanity) (Barcelona: Paidós, 2011), 120.

The Bible and interconfessionality

The “UBS Fellowship Mission, Vision and Values Document” (2013) reads: *“Through service to Churches and Church-related organisations, the UBS fellowship of Bible Societies aims to achieve the widest possible, effective and meaningful distribution of the Holy Scriptures, and to help people interact with the Word of God, in order to meet their needs everywhere.”*

In the same document UBS affirms: *“We value Churches as the primary agents of God’s mission in the world. ... Bible Societies provide resources to equip Churches and their partner organisations; we do not usurp the mission of Churches. Bible Societies affirm that the Holy Scriptures belong to all Churches, recognising that doctrinal interpretation of the Scriptures belongs to them.”*

This interconfessional approach of United Bible Societies is unique: *“We are inter-confessional – we work with all Christian Churches.”*

Scriptural basis for interconfessional work

The interconfessional principles that UBS adheres to are rooted in the desire to serve all Churches and to support Churches in their call to unity. In John 17:21 we read that Jesus prayed for the unity of the believers as a sign of his own missionary work, which was rooted in his filial relationship with God the Father:

I am not praying just for these followers. I am also praying for everyone else who will have faith because of what my followers will say about me. I want all of them to be one with each other, just as I am one with you and you are one with me. I also want them to be one with us. Then the people of this world will believe that you sent me (John 17:20-21 CEV).

John links the relationship between believers to the relationship between the Word incarnate and His unique unity with the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. In the letter to the Ephesians, the Apostle expresses the unity of faith as becoming visible in one baptism and one faith, but having its base in the Hebrew expression of God’s own oneness:

Listen, Israel! The Lord our God is the only true God! So love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and strength (Deuteronomy 6:4-5 CEV).

All of you are part of the same body. There is only one Spirit of God, just as you were given one hope when you were chosen to be God’s people. We have only one Lord, one faith, and one baptism. There is one God who is the Father of all. Not only is God above all others, but he works by using all of us, and he lives in all of us (Ephesians 4:4-6 CEV).

In the Apostle’s theology the believers are the body of Christ in its oneness, harmony and powerful synergy. At his conversion, Paul not only received a revelation of Jesus of Nazareth as the long expected Messiah, but also the revelation that the believers are the body of Christ: *“Why do you persecute me?” (Acts 9:4-7 GNB)*. However, this body of Christ is described as a unity in diversity (1 Corinthians 12). In the book of Revelation, the seer John narrates great visions that express the unity of the Church, the unity between the martyrs and the living believers. This magnificent gathering includes “people from of every race, tribe, nation and language”; in its diversity it sings a hymn to the immolated lamb as one voice:

After this, I saw a large crowd with more people than could be counted. They were from every race, tribe, nation, and language, and they stood before the throne and before the Lamb. They wore white robes and held palm branches in their hands, as they shouted, ‘Our God, who sits upon the throne, has the power to save his people, and so does the Lamb.’ (Revelation 7:9-10, CEV)





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There is a powerful sense of inclusivity here. The seer uses powerful adjectives that describe humanity in its totality, humanity that bows down before the lamb, at least that part of humanity which acknowledges that only God has true salvific power; a power that paradoxically is expressed by the vulnerability of the Lamb of God. The sense of solidarity through diversity is palpable.

One could go on and on in citing passages that elucidate the importance of the unity of the body of believers in the New Testament, a unity which is however always contested, fought, negotiated and at times sadly enough broken – beginning with rivalries among the disciples of Jesus. We

remember the first Church with its dispute between the Hellenistic Jews and the Aramaic speaking Jews (Acts 6,1-2), we remember Paul's sad echoing of the Corinthian's *"One says, I follow Paul; another, I follow Apollos; another, I follow Peter; and another, I follow Christ. Christ has been divided."* (1 Corinthians 1:12-13, GNB). Despite these examples of division, in the New Testament there is a golden thread of unapologetic focus on the other, on the neighbor and the fellow believer as part of me. Christian faith in the New Testament is never a lone ranger odyssey, but always a matter of the individual becoming part of a community, of solidarity, standing next to the other as part of those called out through their trust in Christ.

Unity and diversity among Churches

The different creeds, echoing the creed of Ephesians 4:5-6, not only confess who God is and what his actions in the world are but they confess the fact that: *"I believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church."* (Nicean confession). This Nicean creed reflects the historical situation of administrative and sociological oneness of the Church at that time, but has continued to be seen as a guideline in different denominations, with varying degrees of liturgical, theological or historical appropriation and use. The invisible Church is united across denominational boundaries, across time and space; it is universal, and is based on the teachings of the apostles.

Regretfully, the historical divisions and schisms and the present day proliferation of schisms in the emerging Church has left us with a Christianity that manifests itself in a multitude of witnesses to that same gospel, in different cultural and historical expressions. However, all believers continue to express their desire to reach or at the very least aim at that oneness that can be found in Christ. The Ecumenical movement since the beginning of the 20th century aims to bring various Churches together in prayer, solidarity and steps towards visible unity.

As Bible Societies we are facing the reality of different Churches with their specific history, doctrine, liturgy and their respective acceptance – or non-acceptance – of other Churches as Church. The UBS World Assembly in Newport/Wales 2004 stated: *"Service to all the Churches underpins the way we undertake our task. As Bible Societies we seek to serve and strengthen – not usurp – the mission of the Church, providing a neutral meeting point and common ground for collaboration in translation, research, publishing, encounter and advocacy. Understanding the needs of the Churches and relating well to them are prerequisites of our mission."*

As the United Bible Societies fellowship we are not called to seek a consensus on doctrinal matters. The Holy Spirit allows us to play a role, however small, in the expression that Churches and Christians can work together. Collaboration

across denominational boundaries in scholarly study, translation, publication, distribution of the Scriptures, in the rich variety of canons, presentations and uses which we see in the variety of Christian Churches. Our views might vary as to the need or the desirability of an ecumenical effort to level the doctrinal or organisational playing field, but one thing we all agree on is that there is a profound witness in the *ecumenicity* of the actual cooperation in the propagation of the Bible.

The interconfessional role of United Bible Societies

The Bible Societies movement developed within the context of the "Gutenbergian paradigm" where the printed book was seen as the ultimate and highest manifestation of Scripture. The first pioneers in the Bible distribution movement were Protestants, in England, Germany, the Netherlands and the United States. Over the next decades of the 19th and further into the 20th century the Bible Society movement expanded, including work with the Roman Catholic Church, culminating in the interconfessional statement between the *Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity* and the *United Bible Societies* in 1968 (revised in 1987). A central theme of this agreement is the respect for the Catholic biblical canon and the use and position of the deuterocanonical books in the Old Testament. Interconfessionality has reached a logical next level in the working covenant with the Orthodox Churches, respecting their different canonical tradition in terms of context, sequence and the primacy they give to the Greek Septuagint text and the Byzantine tradition in the case of the NT manuscripts.

UBS defines interconfessionality as a service to the oneness of the Universal Church. Bible translation work can function as a vehicle bringing Churches together in their study and dissemination of Sacred Scripture, and in joint activities without necessarily leading to administrative or doctrinal uniformity. It might be due to the fact that UBS does not attempt to bring about uniformity, but respects the

different Church traditions and constituencies, that our Fellowship has been successful in promoting Scripture across denominational boundaries and has become a significant contributor in the partnering of Churches in providing Scripture, Scripture material and Scripture engagement.

Critical voices sometimes arise from parts of the Church community who are “rigidly exclusivist” in their approach to doctrine and to biblical interpretation. Some believers have difficulties with the diversity in Christian history, especially the diversity in text transmission and canon formation. This has led to well-intentioned but erroneous negations of historical realities that actually do not undermine our common Christian faith, but rather enhance it and confirm its oneness in diversity.

More than two thousand years – including the witness of the Old Testament – of oral and text transmissions, canon formation, liturgical elaborations and doctrinal expressions have left us with a richer Christian witness. The Bible Societies movement has created a place of growing co-operation. It has proven that working together is possible, globally and locally, without believers having to betray their own denomination’s hermeneutics. Working together has helped to see the other as a brother and sister and has opened the eyes of many to realise that the Lord has many more sheep than the flock to which they belong (John 10:6).

Bible work is a friendly way of discovering that there is unity through Christ despite liturgical and doctrinal differences. Pope Francis’ remark

portrays this situation: *“I am convinced it won’t be theologians who bring about unity among us... The science of the theologians will assist us, but if we hope that theologians will agree with one another, we will reach unity the day after Judgement Day. The Holy Spirit brings about unity. Theologians are helpful, but most helpful is the goodwill of us all who are on this journey with our hearts open to the Holy Spirit”.*

Looking ahead

Do we, as a Fellowship, live up to these expectations? How are we dealing with tendencies to exclude rather than to include? Our key task might be to learn and to listen even more in order to get to know the various Churches, their language and their tradition as well as their specific demand for Scriptures better. When Paul arrived in Athens, he took his time to learn about his audience. He approached the people of Athens sharing “common ground” with them, demonstrating them that he cared for them and that he spoke their language (Acts 17: 16-26). Or as Paul himself puts it in his first letter to the Corinthians: *“So I become all things to all people.” (1 Corinthians 9:22).*

The call for greater unity in a world of postmodernism, where fundamentalisms of all kinds are a threat to our societies, is an urgent one. UBS’s commitment to serve all Churches in these ‘post-modern’ circumstances must be “re-invented”. We might be so bold as to say that, in one way or another, the UBS fellowship has been one of the Spirit’s answers to Jesus’ prayer:

This is an immense legacy – and a reason to double our efforts in the field of interconfessionality – as individual Bible Societies and as UBS. Let us ponder the following questions:

- How does the Bible inspire us to work with all Churches?
- Is the interconfessionality of UBS reflected in personnel and volunteer staff of Bible Societies? In our programmes? In our relations?
- How can we as a UBS fellowship foster interconfessionality in new ways that fit our times?
- How can we identify and lovingly deal with the anti-interconfessional forces, thoughts or fears in our Bible Societies, Churches, constituencies?
- What aspect of interconfessional cooperation has not been fruitful or detrimental to the Bible cause? Which specific support is needed in a concrete setting?
- Do we promote prayer for work with the different Churches according to their demands and needs?
- How can we as Bible Societies and as UBS promote and anchor interconfessionality more on the institutional level? In our awareness?

“I pray that they may all be one. Father! May they be in us, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they be one, so that the world will believe that you sent me.”

(John 17:21, GNB)



The Bible and migration

Our Lord, the Refugee

After they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph and said, "Herod will be looking for the child in order to kill him. So get up, take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt, and stay there until I tell you to leave." (Matthew 2:13, GNT)

While the world is waking up to the unprecedented levels of migration occurring as a result of various crises not only in the Middle East, fleeing persecution and seeking refuge in foreign lands is nothing new in Christianity.

Our Lord Himself was a refugee in His infancy when His family fled the persecution of Herod and sought refuge in Egypt, and despite various international treaties and charters put in place to protect humanity since then, many continue to tread that path.

While countries, networks and organisations seek to address the situation in countries of war, turmoil and instability, and the ongoing resulting refugee crisis, it is important that as Christians, we recognise our biblical calling and what we represent in the midst of this crisis.

The Good Samaritan

Suppose there are brothers and sisters who need clothes and don't have enough to eat. What good is there in your saying to them "God bless you! Keep warm and eat well!" – if you don't give them the necessities of life? So it is with faith: if it is alone and includes no actions, then it is dead. (James 2:15-17, GNT)

The humanitarian needs presented by the current refugee crisis are vast, and as Christians we are called time and again to provide for the needy and destitute. It is our calling to work towards safeguarding the dignity of every person we encounter, and to call for the basic God-given rights owed to the countless millions living in unenviable positions of displacement

or exile. All humanity has been indiscriminately made in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:26) and as we witness hundreds of thousands of people crossing borders and seeking refuge on our shores we must not lose sight of our common humanity. It is far too easy to objectify others when they are seen merely as part of a 'phenomenon' or 'crisis', but our Lord says to us: *"Whenever you did it for any of my people, no matter how unimportant they seemed, you did it for me." (Matthew 25:40, CEV).*

A safe passage

The incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ is pivotal to our Faith and is the most powerful demonstration of what it means to provide for the needs of others who find themselves in exile, away from their rightful homelands. As humans, we were all victims of the separation from God caused by the weakness of our humanity, and through the incarnation and salvation, were restored to our rightful place in Him. When God took flesh, He experienced our pain by sharing in it and not merely observing our situation from a distance. Having said that, the incarnation of our Lord was not only intended to make humanity feel comfortable in the world (John 17:14-15), but to provide a safe and viable route back to its rightful original place in His Kingdom.

Likewise, we must also feel the pain of those suffering forced migration, share their burden, and provide for the immediate humanitarian needs of the vulnerable who are both internally and externally displaced. Our longer-term vision must then be to restore them, if that is their desire, to the lands they have occupied for generations, and in which their heritage and identity lie; a restoration that is founded upon dignity, equality, safety and prosperity.



Jesus said: My kingdom does not belong to this world; if my kingdom belonged to this world, my followers would fightNo, my kingdom does not belong here!"

(John 18:36, GNT)

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A heavenly Jerusalem

As Christians, we have everlasting life and the kingdom of God as our concept of nation, as our desire and our goal. In looking at the painful situation of so many who are displaced and forced to leave their homelands, we can find comfort and reassurance in knowing that *"for there is no permanent city for us here on earth; we are looking for the city which is to come." (Hebrews 13:14).* With that said, there is no room for passiveness in Christianity. If we witness the suffering of others, or are aware of those who have been robbed of their God-given rights and freedoms, it is our duty to act.

Christ our Advocate

Looking at the ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ during His time on earth, we clearly see that He was an advocate not only for those who were oppressed, marginalised, and outcast by society, but He made Himself the chief Advocate for mankind as a whole.

At the start of His ministry, He clearly defined His role and mission on earth in the Gospel of Luke 4:18 (GNB) saying: *"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has chosen me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free the oppressed."*

Out of His deep love and concern for His children, God cannot stand to see any of them suffering oppression or marginalisation (Psalm 146:7). Through His love, He calls us to be ambassadors (2 Corinthians 5:20), to follow in His footsteps (John 12:26) to help those in need, the poor, broken hearted and the captive. Based on this calling, it is the responsibility of Christians and the Church to imitate the life of their Shepherd. Indeed, it is our responsibility and calling to advocate on behalf of all humanity, especially those who are in no position to help themselves.

Hope and Prayer

Within the constantly changing dynamics of the Middle East and other places with turmoil and its resulting displacement and hardship, whether speaking on matters of human rights violations, social issues, justice, or basic freedoms and rights of individuals, we as Christians have a key role to play in actively presenting and living the Scriptural values, ethics and principles of our Faith and beliefs. In so doing we make these essential God-given rights and principles manifest, providing a source of hope for all. We are called to be a 'city built on a hill' (Matthew 5:14), giving light to the whole world as the Body of Christ. In being obedient to this calling we become vessels of the light and love of our light, especially for those in their greatest hour of need.

In every aspect of our lives, in good times and bad, we are reminded by Scripture that prayer is essential. We give thanks to God for His creation and all that He has done and continues to do for it, and we also call upon Him at times of trial and tribulation, asking that He either resolve the

issue or grant us grace, power and resilience to act and persevere, bearing in mind that *"We are often troubled, but not crushed; sometimes in doubt, but never in despair; 9 there are many enemies, but we are never without a friend; and though badly hurt at times, we are not destroyed."* (2 Corinthians 4:8-9, GNB).

For reflection

- Do we recognise our biblical calling and what we represent in the midst of this crisis? As Christians and as Bible Societies?
- Do our programmes (Bibles, holistic) focus on those suffering forced migration? Do we provide for the immediate needs of the vulnerable who are both internally and externally displaced?
- Do we have a longer-term vision to restore the internally and externally displaced?
- Which are the challenges in working with migrants, where are the good practices in our fellowship? Is there room for collaboration?



"We are often troubled, but not crushed; sometimes in doubt, but never in despair; there are many enemies, but we are never without a friend; and though badly hurt at times, we are not destroyed."

(2 Corinthians 4:8-9, GNB)





With thanks to the following people who wrote and proofread this collection of biblical reflections: Stephen Pattemore, Lénart de Regt, Robert Bascom, Elsa Tamez, Marlon Winedt, Jutta Henner, Bishop Angaelos and Alexander M. Schweitzer.



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Please get in touch. We'd love to hear from you:
Email address: communications@biblesocieties.org
www.unitedbiblesocieties.org

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