

Voices: When you want to tear a passage out of your Bible

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Recently, I was asked if I would fill in for the teacher of my church's college Sunday school class. I gratefully accepted the opportunity; they're a great group of thoughtful students. Because my church uses the lectionary, the teacher typically chooses one of the passages from the church calendar for that day as the topic of discussion.

On Thursday, I pulled up the list of texts for the following Sunday. The Gospel reading was from John 10, which I already covered with that class before. The second reading was from Acts 2, but the same group already discussed it during Wednesday night Bible study. That left me only with 1 Peter 2:18-25, a passage that begins, "Slaves, in reverent fear of God submit yourselves to your masters. ..." Oh boy, I thought. No wonder the regular teacher was "out of town."

I considered choosing a different passage. Our church uses the lectionary but isn't bound to it. While I was thinking about other passages to go over, I realized this represented the purpose of using the lectionary. No matter how uncomfortable it makes me, 1 Peter 2:18 is in the Bible. The lectionary is supposed to keep churches and individuals from creating a canon-within-the-canon, in which we focus on the parts we like while ignoring the parts that are uncomfortable.

Stuck with the tough one

So, I stuck with "Slaves, in reverent fear of God submit yourselves to your masters ..." as the text for that Sunday morning.

We had a good discussion. We talked about slavery in Ancient Greece. We talked about other passages in the New Testament that challenge the

slavery system, like Galatians 3 and Philemon. We talked about unearned suffering and redemption in biblical theology. We didn't "solve" the passage, and I think we all remained somewhat uncomfortable with the passage. It was a good conversation over a difficult topic.

I was glad we didn't switch to an "easier" topic for the day. The Bible says lots of difficult things. Some things are difficult because they are challenging personally—sell what you have and give it to the poor; love your enemies; cut off the hand that causes you to sin. Some things are difficult because they seem difficult to reconcile with the message of the gospel—slaves, obey your masters; women, keep silent in the church; and so on.

Granted, I think difficulty with a number of passages from the second category are eased when we study the text more closely. But this doesn't mean we don't come across things in Scripture that are genuinely uncomfortable and difficult to deal with.

How to respond ...

How should we respond to these? Like I said at the beginning of this article, I don't think the answer is pulling them out of the Bible or ignoring them altogether. The Bible is the church's book, and these passages are in the Bible. I ultimately didn't want to choose to ignore the passage, because to do so would be to make me an arbiter of divine truth in a way that makes me uncomfortable

The Christian church historically has claimed God, in some form or fashion, has spoken through this collection of writings we now know as the Bible. If I reject certain parts of it, I claim that the church has been incorrect in where it has heard God. I stand against the church, claiming to know the voice of God better than two millennia of believers. That just isn't a position that leaves me comfortable.

When we come to the Bible, we certainly need to understand its writings have a definite human component, in that they are products of specific people writing in their particular context to an audience that existed in that place and time—far removed from us.

Joining the Christian community

But at the same time, we must understand joining the Christian community means submission to the founding principles of the church—God’s self-revelation in Jesus Christ, as attested to by the witness of Scripture.

You don’t have to like passages such as 1 Peter 2:18, but church unity means we have to avoid building personal canons. Amidst all of our diversity, the Christian church can stand as one because we agree on this core of authoritative teachings. We may disagree on what they mean and what we should do with them, but we foster unity when we try to live faithfully according to the same set of teachings.

When you come to a difficult passage of Scripture, don’t tear it out of your Bible. The only page of Scripture God can’t speak through is the one we’ve removed.

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