

Why I Love the Bible

Beyond distinctions of intellect and spirit, an ever-transforming affair of the heart.

by Krister Stendahl

I CHOSE TO SPEAK about why I love the Bible, but when I came to think about the title, it got a little complicated. To give reasons for one's love feels awkward. You might be able to give reasons for your choices, but before I fell in love with the Bible, I never went to the library to read the Holy Qur'an, or the Bhagavad Gita, or even the Book of Mormon. That's not how love happens—because love does happen; it happened to me. What else can one do—what else can I do—but to tell my story, the story of my love for the Bible: how to read, to study, to ponder, to preach the Bible; how it became my professional, even professorial, career, as that study watered, even lubricated, my soul.

For the longer I live, the less adequate and less useful become all those stifling distinctions between academy and church, faith and reason, the intellectual and the spiritual. There is such an interplay between those fabricated distinctions that one cannot live without the other. So here is the story, the story of my love relationship with the scriptures.

Somehow it did not start with the Bible. In my home, the Bible was supposed to be a little too Methodist. It started with Jesus, mainly as he had come to me through the hymn book, which is used as a spiritual guide in the piety of the Church of Sweden, and which we read a hymn from on Sunday morning. To go to church was a dangerous sliding into Phariseeism, as I was brought up. Somehow, what I had gathered about Jesus spoke to me, fascinated me. The image I had was of an incredibly interesting mixture of strength and kindness—strength so different from the bully world of the schoolyard.

Jesus became not my hero, but rather my friend. I guess I was 12 or so when I sneaked away to church on Sunday mornings—in spite of the risk of Phariseeism—to be where Jesus was supposed to be. But then in fall 1935, I was invited to something called a Bible study group. And I was given a pocket New Testament, both as a symbol and as a text, and I was told to read it as if it was all about me—my life, my conscience, my duties to God and to neighbor. I was hooked, for life.

The old principle *tua res agitur*—it's all about you, or, it is your case—carried me for a long time. And I got a language for my faith; I got words for my feelings; I got pictures for my dreams. And my image of Jesus became more multifaceted. When I thought I understood, there was always more and more and more. I had begun to feed on the mysteries of God. And it was intellectually a most stimulating awakening. That way of reading served me well, for a while. This was the time when I was naïve and arrogant enough to identify with the people I read about, or whose writings I read. I felt like Peter and I felt like Paul—especially when they had negative feelings. I felt like all the disciples. I felt like the Prodigal Son—I had not yet learned that the story in Luke 15 was actually about the older son, who is the one who is like church people, those who stayed on the farm (somebody has to), but couldn't take it unto himself to be grateful when his brother came home. I wanted to become more like Jesus, wondering what he would say or do had he been where I was.

That way of reading lasted for a while, and who would say that it isn't the way I still read and feel from time to time. But my love for the scriptures led me to ways of reading that were so much less ego-centered. The Bible was really not about me. It was about many other things—in the long run, much more interesting things. It was about many things in many distant lands, from many distant ages. I came to read it more and more like a book, perhaps more as a "classic." Now it spoke to me from a great distance, of centuries and cultures deeply different from my own. And it began to be, just by its difference, that the fascination grew, that it had a way of saying to me, there are other ways of seeing and thinking and feeling and believing than you have taken for granted. And it just added to my love—for love is not just fascination. When I short-circuited my reading in those earlier days of having it just be about me, I slowly learned that this was a greedy way to deal with the richness of the scriptures.

So let me share with you as a tribute to the Bible—and perhaps in a strange way—five "no" statements. It is usual when one is describing love to describe it in positive and glowing terms. But my friendship with the Bible gave me the joy, and the courage, to express my love in five statements of "not." The first is the one I have pointed at: It is not primarily about me. Second, it is not always as deep as we think. Third, even Paul isn't always totally sure. Fourth, don't be so uptight. And fifth, it is probably not as universal as we think.

It is perhaps odd to express my love in such negative terms. But it is also perhaps in the line of that wonderful word of Jesus in chapter 15 of the Gospel of John: I do not call you any longer servants, but I call you friends. Somehow I became friends with the Bible. In the biblical tradition, and in the Jewish tradition, to be called the friend of God, you had to be one who argued with God. Abraham, arguing about Sodom and Gomorrah, was called a friend of God. Job was called the friend of God. To me, Jesus is the friend of God, because he argues with God. And so, these five "no's" of mine I bring to you as a sign of love and friendship.

The first "no" is the one which became the watershed in my love story with the Bible: It is not about me. In Galatians 3 it says that the law became, as many people translated, the tutor unto Christ. And I had learned, in good Lutheran theology—and John Wesley was on that line, too—that the law was for the preparation of my conscience. The law was the tutor, and tutored me so that I could fully understand not only what I should do, but also that I couldn't live up to it, and hence needed a savior. The law was a tutor unto Christ, preparing, tendering my conscience, so that my need for forgiveness would become so great.

Then I learned Greek. That sometimes has its value. And it seemed to me very clear that the text actually said something quite different. It said that the law for the Jewish people had been a kind of harsh babysitter who saw to it that they did not raid the kingdom until it was Gentile time, so that the Gentiles could also be in on the deal. That's what the text actually said: The law had been the tutor until it was time for the Gentiles to come in. That was confusing. Then I looked in my concordance, and I found that what all the preachers had been preaching about when they preached about Paul, the forgiveness of sins, was never mentioned by Paul in either Galatians or Romans.

I started to recognize that when Paul spoke about justification by faith, he was really giving the argument in favor of his Gentile converts. He had to come to grips with how, in God's word and God's mind, his mission to the Gentiles fitted into God's total plan. It was about the Jews and the Gentiles and not about

me. What an awakening. And I read in Romans 7: I cannot understand that I act as I act, because the good things I want to do, I don't, and the bad things I do not want to do, I do. I, wretched human being—who is going to rescue me? And I thought that at least it was about me. I mean it was psychologically sound and easy to show that that's the way it is. But then I found that Paul said: If I act as I do not want and I do not act as I want, then it isn't I who do it. That's what the text says. Then he said: Then I agree to the law that it is good. This sounded strange. He wasn't very bothered, was he, by this inner conflict. He described something quite different. He used this wonderful psychological example to prove that the holy law and the commandment was holy, righteous, and just. I hadn't cared about that, because I thought it was about me. And then I read: We have the God who justifies the ungodly. And Abraham believed, and it was counted him unto righteousness (Rom. 4). And I thought that this had to do with God's grace, by which we are forgiven. But it seemed that the point here was quite simply that Abraham was a Gentile when he believed, because the circumcision didn't happen until chapter 17 of Genesis and we were only in chapter 15.

So, Paul had found a wonderful exegetical key to the mystery of his Gentile mission. It wasn't about me. And I read in chapter 11 in Romans where Paul says: You Gentiles had gotten a little uppity toward the people of Israel, and I'll tell you a secret, lest you be conceited, and that is that all of Israel will be saved, so that's none of your business. So it was about Jews, about people.

And, imagine, I read these things during the end of the Second World War, when the camps in Auschwitz and Dachau opened up, and I still thought that Romans was a theological tractate about my soul. And I didn't feel that it was about people. And I didn't feel that Paul had fathomed that this Gentile condescension toward the Jewish people had started to happen already in his own time. How come the greatest missionary of the Bible warns his converts of missionary zeal? Isn't that strange? Or, is it not so strange? Paul had been burned once. It was out of religious zeal that he had committed his only sin—no, perhaps not his only sin, but the only sin he ever mentioned that he committed, namely, that he had persecuted the church. And he saw that now perhaps it started all over again with the Christians toward the Jews. Oh, that we had listened to him instead of to the tradition that didn't see the Jews, but just made them a kind of brick in the game of interpretation.

I LEARNED THAT IT WAS NOT ABOUT ME, but it was teaching me about God's way of dealing with the world, with people, with tensions between people of different faiths. What an insight. What a wonderful book that I had claimed for my own soul game instead of feeling the big drama of God, in which I was very little.

Second, it's not always as deep as we think. Of course, because it is the word of God, it is going to be bottomless, and the deeper you can make it, the more honor to God. I think about that passage where Paul says in Romans 14 that everything that is not done in faith is sin—and any theologian who reads that statement gets the existential quivers. What a wonderful statement. But when you read it in context, it seems to mean that whatever is not done out of conviction, but just to play up to somebody else's opinion, lacks authenticity and is sin. Or, when Paul says that we should work out our salvation with fear and trembling, for God works in you both to will and to work—that's what they call a paradox. But it's no paradox there in Philippians 2—Paul is just saying: You were pretty good when I was with you, but now I'm gone; but remember, God is with you, so there is no reason why you should not work just as hard.

But we like it to be so terribly deep. One of the best rules for reading scriptures is the very same as for preaching: It should be light, it should be quick, and it should be tender. It should not be ponderous, it should not be labored, and it should not be heavy.

Third, in the scriptures, sometimes it ain't as sure as you think. St. Paul—I like him, but he was arrogant. He had a lot of human flaws, but he was great. He was a great, great theologian. A theologian is someone who sees problems where no one else sees problems, and sees no problems where other people see problems. Once, when he is speaking (1 Cor. 7)—it happens to be about family matters, divorce, and sex, and things of that kind—he says: On so-and-so, I have a word from the Lord, but then on so-and-so, I have no word from the Lord. I think he was the last preacher in Christendom who had the guts to say that. New situations come, really new situations. What shall we then do? And Paul says: I have no word from the Lord, but I'll give you my advice. I'm doing as well as I can. And I think I am right. . . . That's a wonderful insight. What a lovely Bible that tells us that sometimes we might need to think, and not just to think that it is all settled.

The fourth "no": not so uptight. Apologetics, defending the Bible—defending God, for that matter—is a rather arrogant activity. Who is defending whom? I love to use the old Swedish expression, "It is pathetic to hear mosquitoes cough." I don't know why that is funny, but in Swedish it is funny. And apologetics is mosquitoes coughing. It kills so much of the joy in reading and practicing the love of the scriptures.

It is always a little moving when believers want to help God. There was a man in the second century of the Christian era whose name was Tatian, and he was so terribly bothered that, in the various Gospels, Jesus seemed to say things a little differently. And some things that were described in one Gospel were described otherwise in another—not to speak about the Gospel of John. So he thought he should help God by creating a unified Gospel. It's called the Diatessaron. And it was very tempting for the church, because those who wanted to attack the church said: What is this? Jesus says that, and then Jesus says that. And the apologists tried to say: Of course he said it more

Well, that wasn't quite convincing. So we got four Gospels, which are valuable to have the richness of the four than the streamlining of one when it comes to telling the story; rather, God wants it told a little differently in four portraits of somebody you love very much, you don't make them all the same. It is the Gospels, but still blur. You look at one portrait at a time. You say: If you get the apologetic devil in you, then you get bothered. I'm more loving my feelings for them have become. The more I read, the more and as many perspectives as possible.

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renaeus, blessed be his memory, decided that it was more important to have the four Gospels are wonderful lessons in the fact that God is not pedantic in aspects as possible. As I like to say, when you have four portraits and the light through—that becomes blur, holy blur because it is different is usually where the artist has something important to say. And the more I have lived with the scriptures, the more I have seen them as different as possible, in order to catch as many insights

ULTIMATELY, I CAME TO LEARN THAT there are at least three quite distinct symbol systems, or paradigms, for Christian theology coming out of the Bible. One is dominated by the idea of God as the judge, and what is going to happen to us on the day of judgment. Everything circles around God's judgment, and sin and forgiveness and redemption and the cross—that's Western Christendom in Catholicism and Lutheranism. Then there is God as Lord. And that has to do with God as Lord and we as subject, and the world is full of covenants—that's Calvin and also the Jewish tradition. And that model gave the basic model for the federal structure of the United States; *foedus* in Latin means covenant. It's the sociopolitical model of God.

And then there is the third, the Johannine. It's all about life. Sin is sickness, not primary guilt. It's not about obedience and Lordship. It's life: He came that they should have life, and have it abundantly. In him was life. Out of his innermost parts, streams of living water will flow (John 7). And everything is to be born anew, born out of water and blood (John 3). That's John, and that's Eastern Christendom. There is no crucifix in an Eastern church; there is the icon,

where the divine life shines through the human image.

These are three different ways of thinking about God. What a richness. And you don't see them until you lay them apart. Of course they flow into one another, in all our traditions. But it is by studying the scriptures to get the integrity of each of these that they come to life. It is a little like the Gospels: if you mix them, you don't get the feel of how many theologies there are in scripture. It's like with homogenized milk: when you homogenize the milk, you can't make whipped cream anymore. And for sermons, that's a deadening thing. So when the preacher preaches Luke, it should sound like Luke. And even the Lutherans should not mix in a little Paul to make it kosher. So, not so uptight. Let a thousand flowers bloom. Richness. Plurality. Plurals. Yes, meanings is better than meaning. Isn't that, in a way, what the Trinity is about? Isn't that odd, these confused monotheists who speak about the Trinity: We couldn't quite settle for something which was just oneness, we had to have more of a fullness of an interplay, of a giving and receiving. Do you remember how it is with the oneness in John 17, where Jesus prays that they all be one? And you, father, are in me, and I am in you, and they are in us. It's like the biological world: Everything is interdependent. It's a giving and a receiving. It's a oneness that is not a glob, but a living interplay. Plural.

Which leads me to the fifth point: Not so universal. And here I come full circle. I said in the beginning that I read the Bible as if it was just about me. And now I say, the Bible, my beloved Bible, it is indeed *my* Bible. There might be other holy scriptures—and that might not be as threatening as some people think. Not to claim universality and uniqueness? I always felt that to speak about the uniqueness of Christianity or the uniqueness of Christ does more for the ego of the believer than it does for God. *Has God Only One Blessing?* is the wonderful title of a recent book. How can I sing my song to Jesus with abandon, without telling negative stories about others? What one religion says about another religion, what one beloved scripture claims to be over against other scriptures, comes pretty close to a breach against the commandment "Thou shall not bear false witness against your neighbor." What we say about the others is usually self-serving. We say, Is it self-serving? Oh no, it is just giving God honor. But think about it. Think about the scriptures themselves. Jesus said, "Let your light so shine before people that they see your good deeds and become Christian." That's not what it says. It says, "Let your light shine for people so that they see your good deeds and praise your father who is in heaven" (Matt. 5). *Your* father—so that people have a reason to be happy that there are Christians in the world, instead of getting irritated at them, if not worse. Jesus said, "You are the salt of the earth." But who wants the world to become a salt mine?

We are born as a minority religion, as a religion among religions. And we are heirs to the Jewish perspective on these things: that's what I learned from the scriptures. It says, to Israel, that Israel is meant to be a light to the nations. That's what Jesus speaks about: a light to the nations. The Jews have never thought that God's hottest dream was that everybody become a Jew. They rather thought that they were called upon to be faithful and that God somehow needed that people in the total cosmos. What a humility, but we called it tribalism. From the enlightenment, everything had to be universal. But when Christianity started its universal claim, and got power, it led to the Crusades. We couldn't really think that it was not God's hottest dream that everybody be like us. So I say, no, the Bible is *my* Bible. This is the breast that I, as a child of God, have been nourished from. And for the little child, when the child is born that's the whole world, the mother's breast. But maturing means to recognize that other kids have sucked other mothers' breasts. That belongs to growing up.

Now this is *my* Bible. It was given to me as a gift, and it is full of love, for which I am deeply grateful. If I have found a doctrine, that is my doctrine. I don't need to bad-mouth all others. This is the lesson in a plural world, which is the new chapter in Christian theology for the next generations. Paul was on to that. Paul, late in his mission, had to learn to deal with plurality.

WE HAVE SPOKEN ABOUT LOVE FOR THE BIBLE. But let me lift up the larger aspect of this love and refer you toward the end, to one of the most beloved passages in the beloved book: I Corinthians 13, the Ode to Love. Here Paul has to deal with the question, How can diversity and pluralism be an asset instead of a liability? How can we learn, as some of the feminist theologians have taught us, to turn the old statement around and say, How much diversity do we need? How much unity can we afford? We are used to asking, Can the center hold? How much unity do we need? How much diversity can we allow? Paul has an image that love is measured by how much diversity we can handle. And he had to learn it hard, because in Galatia, in an earlier part of his ministry, he thought that by stamping his foot, he could get it his way. You remember what he says in Galatians 1: If anybody preaches and teaches otherwise than I do, be it so an angel from heaven, damned be that one. That's chutzpah. But now he knows in Corinth that he is one of the many, and he is even, perhaps, low man on the totem pole, so he gets ecumenical.

It's so moving. Oh, how I love that book which tells me these things. It's so moving: he says that we now see like in an old-fashioned bad mirror, in a glass, darkly. And now our knowledge is only partial. That's called relativism. It is when he thinks about the diversity that he has to tell us: Don't be so cocky about truth. You have your insights, but you are just at the beginning. And then he ends by saying, so there remains those three: faith, hope, and love, and greatest of them is faith. Well, that's what he should have said, according to his own thinking. The basic line: He is the apostle of faith, everything depends on faith. But here, suddenly, there is a breakthrough in his thinking, and he says: And the greatest of these is love, *agape*, esteem of the other, not "insisting on its own way," as the RSV puts it. So, it is proper for me to end these five points where the Bible teaches us to deal with it—as a friend, not to give it honor by just inflating it, but to hear it as that strange way in which the divine has broken in through human thought and human words and human experience.

Finally, let me leave you with a word which is the one that, in my own long love relationship to this book, I want to have in my mind when my end comes. It reads, in 2 Corinthians 3:18, like this: "And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit."

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