

And God Said, "Let's Babel": The Bible as Cross-Cultural Communication

Philip McCarty

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"No single culture has all the answers" when it comes to understanding God's words. That is Philip McCarty's bold thesis in *And God Said "Let's Babel": The Bible as Cross-Cultural Communication*. Like a scholar of the Reformation, McCarty believes that there is more than one way to interpret scripture and that "you do not have to be a member of a particular culture for God to communicate to you through the Bible."

The author is refreshingly open to encouraging people of different nations, cultures, languages, and experience to find their own meaning of the Bible rather than accept someone else's dictates. "As a cross-cultural book," he writes, "the Bible must allow for a variety of interpretation." This is an unusual stance, perhaps unexpected from someone who has degrees in religious studies. It is a direct challenge to popes, prophets, and preachers alike who have declared their interpretations to be the one true and only path to understanding and abiding by the word of the Lord.

The book is divided into twelve chapters grouped into three sections, with more than half the chapters gathered in the second part under the heading "Communication." The first section, titled simply "The Bible," recounts who wrote it and when and in what languages, while the second offers a variety of methods for interpreting the stories and messages of the Good Book. Part three relates to the Bible being both the "pillar" of the church as well as the "key to diversity within the church."

McCarty's point in the second, and most meaty, portion of his book is that "the Bible was written by humans but it was not authored by humans," as "God is the original author." Those who over the course of fifteen hundred years contributed to this compilation of what McCarty believes is the revealed word were nevertheless influenced by the times and cultures they lived in. Just as they brought their experiences to their work, so must modern readers evaluate what is written in the context of their own lives.

This is why the Bible has been, and still needs to be, constantly updated and rewritten, the author believes. As McCarty explains, "It is much harder for people to see relevance in something that is not communicated in their own language." By that, McCarty does not mean simply translating the Holy Bible into different languages; those doing so must use the vernacular to explain and to bring to life its words in ways that are relevant to the audience.

McCarty admits that because of the limitations of language, not all readers will "understand my precise meaning," but he makes a solid attempt to get his point across by presenting models and offering examples of how different groups take away different lessons from selected biblical stories. For some, for example, the story of David and Bathsheba is all about the evils of lust, adultery, and murder, while for others it is primarily a cautionary tale about the abuse of power.

McCarty's slim volume has barely one hundred pages of text, a few more if the short introduction is included in the count. There is a terse index, a small bibliography, and a three-page list of footnotes, all of which only cite sources; none offer any sidebars or explanations of any concepts. The cover is pleasantly evocative of the theme of the book, that even though the Bible can mean something different to people in different parts of the world, it also can serve to

bring them together.

MARK MCLAUGHLIN (May 9, 2013)

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