

The Revolutionary Character of the Bible

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There's a common saying that "History is written by the winners." Up until 30 or so years ago, histories of Canada, for example, were written by men (note the gender) who wrote from the perspective of the conquerors. They focused on generals who won battles, men who decided how to form the nation, explorers who travelled the rivers and unmarked paths, and those who had the power to make things happen.

History written from this perspective ignored the point of view of women and children, slaves, ordinary workers, and those at the bottom of society. More importantly, until very recently, histories of Canada didn't even include much about the Indigenous peoples who lived here long before the British and French arrived to claim that they "discovered" this land.

We can never forget that history is not neutral. It is told from a particular point of view, which is usually that of the winner, the conqueror, the ones at the top of the food chain.

Thankfully, that's beginning to change. In the last few decades, "people's histories" are trying to tell the story of Canada from the point of view of the ordinary people, of women and factory workers and immigrant labourers. More importantly, we are beginning to tell the story of Indigenous peoples who lived in this land long before anyone ever sailed across the Atlantic or Pacific Oceans.

It's not just the history of Canada. It's happening with the histories of other countries, such as the story of slavery in North America. It's also taking place in the histories of the Church and Christianity and other movements. We are beginning to imagine other ways of telling the history of any event or movement, and that's a very good thing.

Long before this was beginning to happen in the contemporary world, however, the Bible told the large story of the people of Israel in this way. If you read carefully, you will see that the story repeatedly lifts up the poor, the marginalized, those who would not even have merited a footnote in traditional ways of writing this large story. Indeed, the Bible is one of the most subversive texts in history in the way it always takes care to focus on the people on the bottom rather than the people on the top.

Mary's song states it very clearly in Luke 1, "God has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly." Indeed, for this reason, some dictatorships banned the reading of this passage in the Bible. They clearly saw the kind of power this might have for the people they oppressed.

This is one of the Bible's overall themes—God chooses the outsider, the marginalized, the "loser." God takes the side of the rejected son, the barren woman, the sinner, the leper, the outsider, the youngest.

A common refrain in the Old Testament is that Israel must care for "the widow, the orphan, and the stranger at the gate." These three groups are at the very bottom of society's pecking order in ancient Israel. They have no one to protect them, no one to speak for them, no one to care for them. They are precisely the ones who need to be noticed and loved. God stands on their side, not the side of the powerful.

The New Testament tells the story of Jesus, born in a barn to an unmarried teenage mother in a backwoods town in an insignificant country on the margins of the Roman Empire.

French philosopher and historian Rene Girard spoke of "the privileged position of the victim" as the unique and revolutionary perspective of the Bible. In South America, liberation

theologians talk about God's "preferential option for the poor." Richard Rohr talks about the "bias from the bottom." It's a revolutionary way of telling our story.

This doesn't mean that God loves the poor more than the rich. God's love is for all, for rich and poor alike. But it does mean that since the Bible takes up the cause of the marginalized, those who follow Jesus, who claim the Bible as their guide and authority, are called to live the same way.

Therefore, when so-called "Christian leaders" and preachers seek to cozy up to those who are in power, they are in fact going against the very clear witness of the Bible. Indeed, they are only seeking power and grandeur for themselves rather than serving as Jesus served.

Patriarch Kirill, the leader of the Moscow Patriarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church, toadies up to Putin as he blesses this brutal war launched against the Ukrainian people in an attempt to eradicate them. Kirill, however, is only the latest in a long line of such leaders who seek to come blasphemously close to those who are in power. We need only remember such folks as Franklin Graham and Paula White and others like them who tried to give a Christian sheen to the last President of the USA, even though he clearly gave no thought to any spiritual sense in his life.

The story of the Bible requires us to stand with the poor, with the disenfranchised, with the immigrant and refugee, with all who are oppressed and marginalized. If we claim to be Christian, we dare not lose sight of this. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer said before another tyrant, Hitler, executed him, "The Church has an unconditional obligation to the victims of any ordering of society, even if they do not belong to the Christian community."

If today's Christians don't stand with the victims, then we cannot call ourselves a people who follow the Bible. As Jesus taught us, "the last will be first, and the first will be last."

When we ignore this way of telling the story, we ignore the Bible's revolutionary power.