

**Josh Mangelson 00:17**

Welcome to the Project Zion Podcast. This podcast explores the unique spiritual and theological gifts Community of Christ offers for today's world.

**Carla Long 00:31**

Hello, and welcome to the Project Zion Podcast. I'm your host, Carla Long, and you're listening to Percolating on Faith, a series where we discuss...well...pretty much whatever we want to. Pretty much whatever we want to talk about today is being allergic to something. Yes, specifically being allergic to the Bible—having a Bible allergy. Now you're thinking “What the heck?” So to help us understand this idea, are my guests, Tony and Charmaine Chvala-Smith. Hi you two—welcome back to the show. How are you two?

**Tony Chvala-Smith 01:09**

We're doing fine, Carla. The doctors are in, so to speak.

**Carla Long 01:15**

Oh, the allergists...

**Tony Chvala-Smith 01:17**

...the allergy doctors, you betcha.

**Carla Long 01:20**

Very good. I'm very excited to hear about this idea. Tony and Charmaine discussed this idea with me, and at first I totally did not get it. Then they discussed it a little bit more, and like they are so good at doing, they helped me understand exactly what they were talking about. So Tony and Charmaine, I kind of want you two just to take it away. What do you mean by being allergic to the Bible or having a Bible allergy?

**Tony Chvala-Smith 01:46**

Well, the first thing we mean is a kind of conditioned aversion to the Bible. Maybe even to hearing scripture texts read, or to the phrase “the Bible says...” (which is a horrible phrase). It's this reaction to scripture that's conditioned by all of the ways the Bible is misused in our culture and in church life: used to threaten, to judge, to measure people as unfit or unworthy. And typically, it's connected to views people hold about the Bible as though it were some kind of fax or text message directly from God. Basically, we're talking about an aversion to the Bible.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 02:33**

Yeah, one of the ways that I've tried to explain it was say that you live in a city with some air quality issues, and Carla, you know what that's like,...

**Carla Long** 02:46

Yeah, Salt Lake City, baby...

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 02:48

...there you go. If, when you go out, expose yourself to the world around you, you end up not being able to breathe well, being uncomfortable, hurting—we have ozone problems here, it hurts when you go for a walk and you're breathing. If you have that kind of an experience, then you're really less likely to go out—to go outside—and let that happen to you. It's very much the same with uses of the Bible. If, when the Bible is used in worship or in conversations, you end up being hurt by it, you're going to be very careful about making yourself vulnerable to it again. I think that's part of what we're wanting to do, is maybe clear the air a little bit in this analogy. Say “you know, there are some really safe ways that you can get something out of scripture.” If your reaction to scripture is because of the way it's been used in our culture or in your own past, whether that's in church or in family or relationships of any kind, just to assure people that there may be...there's some ways to filter the air, to not be afraid of going out or making yourself open to scripture. That's kind of what we want to look at a bit today. Some tools, but also acknowledging this is a very real problem in our culture in this time; the rampant misuse of scripture, whether by politicians or by pastors or by individuals in conversation.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 05:06

So Carla, I don't know if this is part of your experience, but Charmaine and I speak a lot. Sometimes we preach together and sometimes we preach individually. One way we can spot the allergy to scripture is when, for example, we're up at the pulpit and we're about to read the scripture text for a sermon. Charmaine and I always use the lectionary, so we're working with the lectionary texts, and as we start to read the scripture, one can notice people's...not everybody...but one can notice faces starting to turn off. The OFF switch goes on like, “yada, yada, blah, blah...this is scripture—I don't need to listen to this.” We can actually see that from the front. We can...it's the Eye of Sauron sees all, so to speak.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 05:58

Sometimes it's not just a matter of people shutting down or shutting it out. Often there is a tensing of some people, a wariness. You can see their jaw set, and a look of suspicion come over their face, like “What are they going to do with that scripture? How are they going to, you know, judge me with that scripture?” So it can be either way; either the kind of “Ugh, not that again...,” or a wariness.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 06:32

Actually, there are two casualties because of this problem. One casualty is people not paying attention to the Bible itself. The Bible is rich, and of course in Community of Christ we see scripture as a giant library. This is a very rich and vast library, and there's so much of depth and beauty and power in it. One casualty is simply not being willing or open to listening to it at all. Another casualty though, is what we turn off in our own spiritual life. Scripture is scripture partly because it has a centuries-long track record of helping people connect to God. So if we cut off that avenue, that can be, I think, harmful to our spiritual life and rob us of things that would be really valuable.

But we understand why there's this allergy. There's so much irresponsible use of the Bible in American religious culture, that I have to admit once in a while I kind of want to throw my hands up and say, “Ugh,

this is not even worth it anymore.” You know...“The Bible says this,” “The Bible says that”—honest to goodness Carla, the Bible doesn't say anything! As the theologian Paul Van Buren once wrote, “The Bible doesn't say anything because the Bible doesn't have a mouth.” It's people who make it say things, and who misuse, and misread, and damage people with it.

**Carla Long** 07:55

Yeah, I've seen the Bible be used as a weapon, more often even lately than in the past. I also want to maybe add a third reason why people kind of shut down. You know, the Bible is hard to understand, right? It should be hard to understand—it was written in an entirely different culture 2000+ years ago and it should be hard to understand, and maybe it's just an exhaustion on the people's part. It's like: I don't want to have to do this. I don't want to have to explain this, or listen to this again, and see what I think of it. I just want you to tell me what it's about, you know, and I'll listen to the rest of the sermon, but I'm not going to listen to what scripture is read. I'm not going to listen to that scripture. Basically, that's...maybe that's another reason.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 08:40

Oh, I think that's really very insightful, because for lots of people, entering into scripture is like entering into a maze. It's full of dead ends. Especially if it's being read in a kind of English that isn't even what we normally speak...

**Carla Long** 08:59

What dost thou you talking about? [laughter]...

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 09:04

...is this thou is speaking of. Exactly, and so it's like a maze, and it's like, “Oh, I don't know what this means, and if I don't know what this means, how can I trust that the next thing I read, I'll understand?” Yeah, it gets...it's like walking in a muck bottom, where you just keep taking on more and more weight, and it's like—I'm just gonna stop.

I think there's another...just going to...expand a little bit on one of the things that Tony was saying. Maybe it's a third one as well, as far as one of the detrimental things that happen when we aren't able to engage scripture for whatever reason. That is that for our church, scripture is the place where we find the examples of what the kingdom looks like, especially in the gospels in the stories of Jesus, but also glimpses of it in the Old Testament, and some then also in Paul's writings. What is this kingdom of God? What is this reign of God that Jesus is about, and is talking about, and that we're as a church trying to help make room for in the world? If we disconnect from scripture, we disconnect from the reality that that's what God is calling us to do, and then the reality of what it can look like in Jesus' words and actions, and what it can look like in community...some of the early church story. That's another place where we lose because scripture can be such a hard thing to hang on to, or to get into.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 10:59

Charmaine and I spend quite a bit of our work in our different forms of ministry, trying to help people recover, or discover for the first time, a healthy way to use the Bible. For me, as a theologian, this is really important because the Bible especially... I mean we've mentioned the Book of Mormon and

Doctrine and Covenants in Community of Christ, I see those texts as in some ways dependent upon the Bible. The Bible is foundational; it gives us a language for encountering God and the world, in a way different from how we normally encounter it. It's really important theologically, for us not to lose our language. Also, the Bible gives us lenses for interpreting reality in some very creative and liberating ways. Yeah, are there texts in the Bible that are horrible—of course there are. Any library has books that are difficult, and even not to be desired, but the question here has to do with use—with responsible use—and careful reading and taking the time that scripture deserves, to understand and listen and discern and find our way. Part of what we want to do is help people recover some better ways of using scripture, and also to let scripture become a healthy place for us to learn about people's experience of God in the past, and also to be a meeting place for us with God in the present. We have lots of experience seeing how that can be a very positive thing in people's lives.

**Carla Long** 12:54

I feel like we...this is like maybe a three-part kind of podcast. We talked about the acknowledgment of this biblical allergy. Maybe we talk about what is happening as a result of this biblical allergy, like what do we see happening in the church or with other people or even in the greater public...like you mentioned, politicians, so on and so forth. Then maybe we can talk about some tools that people can use in order to...as an anti-histamine for this biblical allergy. Am I taking that biblical allergy a little bit too far?

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 13:31

I like it...

**Carla Long** 13:33

I have allergies, I know them well. So I feel like we've done a good job of acknowledging that this is an issue in our culture. Is there anything else you want to mention about that?

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 13:45

I think I would say that a particular way of reading the Bible is sort of the default setting in American religious culture. We've talked about that before, and that's this kind of...I'm going to call it "shallow literalism," where you grab a passage and hurl it at an issue as if it were somehow the final answer. For example, not long ago the Attorney General of the United States used the passage from Romans, I think, to kind of...to justify what ought to have ethically horrified most people: that is this miserable separation of children from their parents at the border when they were detained. That kind of use of the Bible to justify...actually evil, ought to give us pause and make us say, "Gosh, there's got to be a different way to use the Bible than that." One feminist biblical scholar I know, Phyllis Trible, wrote a book a few years ago called *Texts of Terror*, in which she analyzed four different stories from the Old Testament or Hebrew Bible, that actually described the victimization of women and she tries to give careful and alternative readings of those stories. Lots of people like to use the scripture as "texts of terror"—that is texts to terrorize other people. We especially see that with our LGBTQ friends who've been literally abused, pummeled, mistreated by really bad uses of the Bible. It's all around us, and yet Community of Christ, among other churches, has a different way. We think it's a very good and healthy way for approaching scripture.

**Carla Long 15:43**

Since this has definitely been happening, and you have said that you've noticed that it's happening; I have noticed that it's happening as well. In fact, I get a little bit nervous when I'm preaching and I'm like, "Okay, it's time to read the scripture," because I don't like it when people start to turn off immediately. They want the stories, they want to hear...you know what people like to hear...so it makes me uncomfortable as well. So what is happening as a result of this? Are people less Biblically literate? Are people deciding "I want to prove that my side is right, so I'm going to pull this tiny little passage out," like the Attorney General did? What is happening as a result of this?

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 16:26**

I mean, yes, I think in many cases, scripture is becoming a barrier—walls between people—intentionally so at times. I probably have shared this one before, but it's such a good example you have to forgive me for revisiting it. It was several years ago at Graceland and I was talking with a young adult and we ended up talking about homosexuality in scripture. He was using all the regular scriptures that get pulled into that conversation, even though they're not really relevant. I talked to him about how anyone's theology has the four voices in it: scripture and reason and experience and history or tradition...tradition is the fourth. I explained each of those, and...from our conversation it sounds like scripture is the one that's most important to you. He said, "No, actually experience is, but scripture is a bigger hammer." Here's a young adult who is growing up with that awareness that scripture throws an extra-weighted punch, and that's how it's useful.

If you're using scripture in those ways, where do you go to find a loving God? You're probably not going to go to scripture. As we talk about spiritual formation, and the many ways that people over the centuries and millennia have known God, we're cutting ourselves off, or only going to the violent passages for violent purposes. We're making ourselves immune to a God of love, to the message of Christ, for the least, and the lonely, and the last. We're leaving all that behind and really looking only at power—how can scripture be used to have power over others. It builds very thick walls between people, but especially builds thick walls between some of the attributes of God that can bring hope for the world, that can bring equality, that can bring peace, that can bring a valuing of each one...it kind of blinds people to that, because they're looking for the hammers.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 19:35**

Misuses of scripture like that, then actually deafen us to some of the most beautiful and profound things we know about God, which come to us from scripture. For example, from 1 John—"God is love"—perhaps one of the single most clear and lyrical statements about God's identity and nature that comes from scripture. I notice too that people who are turned off by scripture sometimes gravitate towards the literature of Christian mysticism, like from the Middle Ages. I think that's fabulous. I think reading Julian of Norwich and Catherine of Siena and these mystical figures can be really enriching for faith. But here's the thing that one might not know: these mystics were themselves deeply, deeply connected to scripture; they practiced Lectio Divina, their day—especially if they were in any way connected to a monastic order—their day focused around chanting the psalms; their being was saturated by the images and language of scripture. They knew that there were difficult parts in scripture too, but they let scripture be a way into uniquely Christian mystical experience of God. So just going to the mystics to get away from scripture, you're not actually not getting away from scripture, you're just trying to do an

end run, when in effect the mystics are themselves powerfully shaped by their daily use of scripture. We think that it's really important for us and Community of Christ today to find as many healthy ways as possible to let scripture be texts that can liberate, not texts that can imprison us.

**Carla Long 21:26**

Yeah, I was kind of going to go along those lines, Tony, I was thinking about that. I remember when I took your class when I was an undergrad at Graceland. It was really tempting to just read the textbook that you had given us, rather than to actually read the scripture and the textbook, because you know less reading is good for a college student, because there's so much fun to be had. I remember specifically either you or Charmaine, who said, "You know, it's really, really important to read the actual text rather than just to read about the text. Even though that is faster and easier, reading the actual text is really important, because you do not want to lose what that text says. You don't want someone else to tell you what that text says, you want to see it for yourself." I think that's probably something that we're losing as well. It's like: I just want someone to tell me about the text rather than or I want to read about the text rather than actually reading the text. I think that's probably an issue as well.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 22:35**

Carla, that's a really good observation you made. Yes, people kind of stop reading the biblical text itself, and a danger for us when we stop reading the biblical text itself, then we become captive to what the commentators say. Even worse, we become captive to what public uninformed readings of the Bible say. So we don't want to stop reading the text itself, though good commentaries and secondary literature are really important for getting at important background aspects of the Bible. That's a good observation.

**Carla Long 23:15**

Are there any other results that you can think of that's happening because of this biblical allergy, anything else that's happening in the church or in the larger culture that you can think of that is something that is kind of negative, that's not good when we let the Bible just be and not even think about it anymore?

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 23:37**

Yeah, and again, this is just maybe tweaking a little bit of the analogy. As with respiratory problems in foul air, the more you're exposed to it the higher sensitivity your body has to it, the more reactive, the less healthy, even when you're not in the air. I think that there's this kind of growing resistance to the use of the Bible and a hypersensitivity to it, which then doesn't make people just want to ignore it, but they want to sometimes actively denounce it, or show its weaknesses, or destroy it so that other people can't use it. It has kind of a domino effect, I think.

**Carla Long 24:42**

Absolutely. Absolutely. So what are...you mentioned some tools, what are some tools that can help us make the Bible more liberative rather than a "text of terror?"

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 24:55**

I do love that contrast. One thing that, as Tony and I were talking about this a few days ago, that really became helpful for me was to think about it as “How is it that we usually think about the Bible?” So if you think about the four moods—is that what is called: four moods?—in grammar. There's the—okay help me figure it out—the imperative, there's the declarative, there's the interrogative, and then there's the exclamatory.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 25:41**

Yeah...yeah.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 25:42**

Right, there's those four. Because of the ways that scripture has often been used in our culture, people tend to use or hear scripture as imperative, giving commands: you must do this...if you are righteous, you must do this, you must think this way, you must act in this way. People tend to import that into their whole reading of scripture, of the Bible, and sometimes Doctrine and Covenants and Book of Mormon as well, as though it's all commands, it's all “this is what you must do.” Instead of thinking of scripture as being that imperative approach/mood, to go to the declarative.

The declarative is simply a stating of what is. The declarative, if you think of it in that way when you're thinking about scripture, is that people are simply describing their reality, in their time, in their circumstance. I think it is—and I thought about this a bit—I think it is always safe to come to scripture reading it as if it is declarative, coming at it as almost like anthropologically. I'm reading this writing that was written so many thousands of years ago. They're describing their reality and their understanding of God in the context of their reality. That allows us to come at it with curiosity and with discovery as our goal. “Oh, I wonder how they thought about that?” “I wonder what their life was like?” I think that's a first tool, to go from thinking if it's scripture it must be imperative, telling us what we must do, and instead thinking of it as declarative. The simple way to say it is: declarative is...it's the difference between telling a story (the declarative), and giving instructions (the imperative). That's the first tool is to say, “Oh, I'm just going to come at this as someone telling their story.”

**Tony Chvala-Smith 28:29**

If you start there, that helps us understand quickly why biblical authors say so many different things about sometimes the same topic—why there can be different ways of talking about slavery. In the ancient Near Eastern world and in the Greco-Roman world, slavery was a fact of everybody's economic life. It's not a fact of our life; it shouldn't be a fact of our life. It's desperately wrong when viewed from the standpoint of both the good news of Jesus and basic, solid ethics. Nevertheless, that was part of their reality. For example, if in Exodus you're reading instructions for how to mark a slave's ear—that's not command. Obviously, it's not a command to us. Obviously, it's not even relevant to us, but it is about their reality. In the same way that we would stand back and try to analyze the reality of a group of people we were studying from a sociological or anthropological perspective, in the same way we can back up from scripture and say, “Ah, this is how they experience life.”

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 29:44**

The thing that can be beneficial to us then, personally and spiritually, is to say: What is it that they knew about God? What is it that they knew and recognized about Christ? What was their experience with the Spirit? That way we see where we are in common with them—that our very human-ness and God's desire to touch us and touch our lives is probably the place where we have common ground with these ancient writers, not in what their social setting was and what their practices were in that culture. In “Who is this God, and how do we discern who our God is, and how do we respond?” We can get that by simply looking at it as their story and their experience with God.

The question will come up too, “Well, what about the places in scripture that do have commands?” I think the first thing is to remember that whoever it is that is in those stories, is not talking to us. They are talking to the people in their time who are sharing their own cultural view, and their own similar experience of God. They're not talking to us. We really need to be able to identify which of those commands may have some universality, and which of them are tied to that time and place. There may be some commands, ... I think about some of the Ten Commandments, that we would say, “Well, these might be helpful to us today.” They may help us live better and be more responsible to other people. Or they might be things that challenge us to go deeper in our discipleship. Which of the commands, the ones that are there in scripture that we take in, that's really best discerned by a community—by a church, by a denomination who are willing to do the hard work of saying: Okay, this is something that was said a long time ago—is it relevant to us? Which part of this is timeless...means good for all time...and which parts of these things are time-bound? I think that's really important that this is a process that a community or a group of people do together to determine which of these passages are intended for all time, and which really were only intended for the original hearers. Because some of the commands—I'm thinking, particularly if you go to Joshua and some parts of the Old Testament—where they're wiping out whole populations, we would see this as completely inconsistent with our society, with God, with what we know of God, with what we know of why Jesus came to break down walls between people, not to create stronger us and them. There's lots of things in scripture that are irrelevant and actually may be dangerous for us to try at home. But first to approach them as declarative, as their story, and see what we can overhear. Then when it actually comes to some things that may sound like commandments, to talk about that together as a group, to say, “Which of these is really relevant to us?”

**Tony Chvala-Smith 33:52**

What Charmaine has just shared points to a couple of other important tools we can use. For example, genre—literary genre. That is, what type of literature are we reading? The Bible is a library; libraries have many types of literature: poetry, prose, proverbs, wisdom sayings, prophetic statements, and there's all kinds of literature there. Trying to understand genre is a really important, big picture tool, so that we don't mistake what's being said for a different type of literature. That would be another one.

Of course, context is really, really important. We tend to...Charmaine and I tend to think of contexts in kind of three movements. There's literary context, that is, a particular passage is a part in the midst of a whole. How does it relate to the whole? You can't just excerpt a verse and assume that what you think it means is what it meant in its literary context. Gosh, if you think about any kind of literature,



unless you know the whole, just grabbing a line out of it, would lead to...could lead to profound misunderstandings. So that's literary context.

Then there's historical-cultural context. That's a very important item. What did the author and readers assume about the nature of things, about how reality works, about how a marriage works, about how human relationships work, about how God would interact with people, and so on?

The third type of context is our own context—the reader's context today, and what kinds of assumptions do we bring to the text. By the way, in some kinds of settings of profound political and social oppression, minority groups have often found parts of the Bible very, very empowering, because their context gave them new lenses to read. Then they saw and heard things that that others didn't see and hear. So three types of context and paying attention to them are very, very important.

**Carla Long 36:25**

That's really helpful. I think that these are some really good tools to help people understand this Bible allergy that they might have. Really, what we're asking people to do is just to look a little bit closer at how they view the Bible, and to maybe try and figure out some ways that they could use it in a more responsible way, so on and so forth. We're asking people just to take a look within themselves in a lot of these ways. Are there any other steps that we need to think about in order to view the scripture more responsibly?

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 36:59**

Well, I think we've mentioned a few of them. Something that's a good reminder is the statement that's called *Scripture in Community of Christ*. It kind of keeps reminding us of some of these kinds of things: that scripture is a library; that scripture is not intended to be used as a weapon; that Christ came as a servant, and so therefore the stories of Christ should also be as a servant, not as a master over other people. There's all of those kinds of things that are in the Community of Christ—*Scripture in Community of Christ*—that might be really helpful.

One of the things that we thought might be helpful is to take a text that is often used to marginalize some people—to put them in their place, literally—and then do those three things that Tony talked about. Looking at those different contexts and seeing how using those contexts might be able to help us to not be reactive to the scripture, but to let it tell its own story, and to hear what that is. Then to do those other steps of saying, how much of that is relevant to us? Perhaps to say, here's a passage or a portion of a passage that gets used abusively, but what happens if we look at the bigger passage—what's around it and what is really being said there? Are there some actually countercultural things that might be relevant for us to hear?

So we're gonna try that out with a text. I think we're going to do...Tony described the literary context first, then historical-cultural, and then the readers own context, but I think we're going to switch that around and we'll do the historical-cultural context first, then we'll go into the literary context, then we'll consider what is our own context. Sound all right?

**Carla Long** 39:26

Yeah, I think that sounds like a really good idea.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 39:28

All right.

**Carla Long** 39:29

I hope you pick a really juicy scripture.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 39:33

We did pick a ju...

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 39:34

We think it's a good one.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 39:35

We think it's juicy. This is a passage from the fifth chapter of Ephesians. I'll give you the couple of lines that are commonly quoted from this. Holy Mary, forgive me, but sometimes this is used at a wedding and I think "Aaiee, this is not wedding-worthy." Here you go...this is from Ephesians 5:22. "Wives be subject to your husbands as you..." [laughter]

**Carla Long** 40:09

Oh. My. Gosh. I'm so sorry to interrupt. Go ahead.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 40:12

Good, good, good...

**Carla Long** 40:17

Oh, I'm already annoyed...!

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 40:19

"...wives be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord." Then it goes on to say, "For the husband is the head of the wife, just as Christ is the head of the church." Yeah, that one's had a little longer playing time than it probably should have. We hear from time to time from friends that they've gone to a wedding, and honest to goodness, the minister has quoted that text and only that part. That's part of the problem here. So we'll go to historical-social context for sure.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 40:59

So some of the things that we can help bring into focus here is, obviously this has been used against women over time, but here's what we can tell about the historical context. First, we can tell that this is a late first-century male, an inheritor of Paul's traditions, some of them that would go back to Paul. This is late first century, 80 to 90, right around there, who is writing a letter to small groups of Christians. First of all, remind ourselves these are not God's thoughts or words, these are the author's. Is the author a 21<sup>st</sup>-century thinker? No...he's a first century thinker and he's thoroughly shaped by his culture, while

also having a vision of a different way...the Jesus influence at work. I don't think we could, just by our own will, make ourselves first-century thinkers and so we have to be aware that we can't expect the authors in the Bible to be 21<sup>st</sup>-century thinkers. One of the things that we can tell from sociological study and ancient studies is that this view that he is purporting, is actually universally held in his time. It's a Greco-Roman thought, but it's also...it would be the background for even Jewish thinkers. This would have been the way in which male/female, husband/wife...male as the head and women as lesser would have been believed and practiced, since even the time of Aristotle, which would have been...

**Tony Chvala-Smith 43:24**

...the fourth century before Christ. Yeah, 350 years...400 years before this text is written, Aristotle the philosopher has already been arguing that the prop-...that society will function best and households will function best if women and especially wives will submit to their husbands. A widespread view, kind of a...we say it's a patriarchal view of the family.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 43:55**

Right. This was the commonplace way of understanding relationship of men and women.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 44:06**

Connected to that too are Greco-Roman views of biology: that females are an inferior form of the male form—an inferior version of the male form. They use that biological view to kind of buttress the idea that women should be in submission to men, so there's that as well. A good study of ancient biology would reveal that, so all kinds of cultural stuff is at play in this text. One other thing is that this kind of teaching, you would find in all sorts of pagan philosophers, but as non-Jewish, non-Christian, any good Greek or Roman philosopher in the first century who's worth his salt—now actually, there were a few women philosophers, but most of them were men. But even the few women philosophers that we have record of, they taught the same kind of stuff. This was considered kind of the standard teaching about family relations in the Greco-Roman Empire. You stop and you think for a minute, why would that be so important in the Greco-Roman Empire? Well, this also supports the Roman preoccupation with order—keeping imperial order on everything too; everything has to be in place, the hierarchies have to be in place. There's a whole political side to it too. But honestly, there's nothing distinctively Christian about that statement in Ephesians; you would find that in Stoic philosophers, Cynic philosophers, all types of philosophers would say it. This is just the common air everybody was breathing. It's not...there's nothing exceptional about it in terms of its time and place.

If you ask a literary question: what is this that we just read? If you just look in...right around in chapter five and then into chapter six in Ephesians, what you have is a literary form called a household code. Scholars devised this term “household codes” to describe how these ancient teachers, whether Christian in this case, or Greek or Roman, how they gave lists of duties for people in a household. That was part of how they earned their money, telling people: this is how you should behave; here's how slaves should behave; here's how children should behave; here's how women should behave; here's how husbands should behave. That was part of what a household code was. We'd have to think for a while if we have any current examples—here's the way you're supposed to do things, that kind of stuff. We probably have examples like that in our culture, too.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 46:53**

Tony had said earlier that there's nothing uniquely Christian about this description, except that the author adds in where Jesus fits, where God and Jesus fit in this hierarchy. So that would be another element here that shows that there's a Christian writer who's using the common everyday understanding and employing it as the base for his own development of a view.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 47:25**

Now, let's go to literary—just back out a little bit and look at the passage in a larger perspective...

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 47:31**

...meaning reading a little bit before and a little bit after it to see: Is it good or accurate to simply read that little part?

**Tony Chvala-Smith 47:43**

Here's the verse that's usually not quoted with this, and it's the verse right before, it's Ephesians 5:21. This is addressed to everybody in all these Christian communities, which in itself is unusual. It would not have been typical in the ancient world to address women as well as men—you addressed men as the heads of household. The author addresses all Christians here, and says: Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. In other words, before anything is said about family relations, the first thing that's said is about mutual submission. Everybody—slaves, children, men, women, husbands, wives—everybody is to be in mutual submission, because that's what's representative of Christ's own attitude and actions. That one is not quoted, because it doesn't serve the function of patriarchy the way the other one does. So you start there and then if you go on to verse 25, "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her." Now some of that language might seem a little odd to us, but the author is instructing husbands to respond to wives with a reciprocal, self-giving, self-sacrificing love. That's rather exceptional in the ancient world. We have mutual submission in the whole community, to each other... showing deference to each other. Then the thing about...

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 49:36**

...that we read initially...

**Tony Chvala-Smith 49:38**

...about women being subject to husbands, which everybody was going to expect the author to say next. Then quite unusually the author says "Husbands love your wives just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her." The author then goes on into a longer description of what this self-sacrificing love should be. In other words, there's no way you can read the whole passage and assume that headship over a wife is the same as lordship over wife. In other words, the author's own language has...the author has taken standard Greco-Roman views about husband/wife relationships, and he's infiltrated them with all kinds of "Jesus language." In doing that, and maybe he wasn't even aware of this, he was deconstructing his own argument. Once you read the whole passage, there is a sense of mutuality and equality that you would never get by just excerpting out, "Wives be subject to your husbands." "Wives be subject to your husbands" here is "everybody's supposed to be subject to each other." The author in essence keeps the form of the code as everybody heard it in ancient world, but then sabotages it with Christian language. By the time you get to the end of the passage, if you're being

attentive to it, you say, “Oh, basically, the Christian household is supposed to reflect the kind of equality we've all experienced in Christ.” I think that's actually a highly subversive act in the text.

Does that make sense, Carla?

**Carla Long 51:27**

Yeah, actually, it does it. When you look around the text, rather than just the one text, and you've heard my reaction when you read that one text, right? I mean, it was...I was not thrilled. In fact, I actually have a little anecdote about this. I was at a wedding when this text was being used. I had no idea what was happening on my face, but my friend turned around, saw my face, saw that I was displeased, and she whispered, “Carla, you need to fix your face,” because I was so mad about it. But there's no reason to be mad about it. This is actually a text that says we need to be submissive to each other.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 52:08**

Perhaps there was justification and being mad about how it was being used. I think that's perhaps one of the things that some Christians can work on—is to identify our frustration or anger with the way passages are used. So that there's not this sense that you have to toss it all out in order to be honest and equitable and think of justice.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 52:47**

Yeah, I totally agree with Charmaine. That's like...you know what, there's a good reason to have...I'll just say a snotty face... [laughter]. The minister made a choice. The minister chose those few lines. Why didn't the minister choose from Galatians, “In Christ, there's neither male nor female?” Why didn't the minister choose, “Let us love one another for love is of God” from 1 John. Why didn't the minister choose, “Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ” from right in front of the passage? Of all the texts the author...the minister could have chosen, what was going on in—I'm going to say him, I'm going to guess it was a him—what was going on in him that would make him choose this text for that occasion? Gee, I mean, I guess he could have chosen a text about the Israelites going into Canaan and slaughtering their enemies, too. I mean, it's like...this gets to the spiritual formation part of all this, what's going on in us. So self-awareness is another key to how we use and read scripture. Does that make sense too?

**Carla Long 54:00**

Absolutely, for sure. Was he trying to use that as a weapon against the bride and say, “You need to do what your husband says to do, because that's what I want in my own life.”

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 54:11**

Or I want to have that power over you and tell you how you should live in relationship to your husband, but also in your relationship to God.

**Carla Long 54:21**

Yeah, going back to your young adult and saying “this is a bigger hammer.” He was getting out the Big Dog, the big hammer for this one.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 54:28**

Yeah, yeah, he was, and there's nothing wrong with being angry with the misuse of scripture. In fact, sometimes that helps us to start being able to identify what is a misuse. Then we don't have to just, as I said, toss it all out. But say, Why did you use that? What were you trying to...what did you want everyone to overhear? Who do you think God is? I mean, it comes back to how people use scripture often points to how they see God. For people who want to have God there as a judging presence over everybody else, unless they're just like the person who's using the scripture, we're getting a really huge insight into the person who's using the scripture. That can be helpful. That can be helpful as far as knowing where is it that we want to expend our spiritual energy. Do we want to do it in a place where people see God as angry, judging, punitive God, or in a place where who Christ shows God to be as loving, forgiving, a seeking...always-seeking-us-out kind of God, whose compassion is what motivates, not God's judgment, or wanting to kill people. I mean, sometimes once we get attuned to it, we can begin to see how the misuse of scripture tells us a whole lot about either someone's view of God or someone's view of themselves in relation to others.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 56:27**

Yeah, I mean, an angry, judging, dominating, controlling God, is also potentially a reflection of how a person wants to live life, as trying to control others. That minister in that wedding service was trying to control culture, was trying to control the woman. How we view God is just so important to how we use scripture. These things are inter-related. We don't just get our view of God from scripture—it comes from all kinds of processes, including experience and so on. It's really important then to take our best experiences of God as loving and compassionate and merciful, back into scripture as a lens for reading the whole, and finding our way through the whole.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 57:19**

And the amazing thing is that if you can do that, if you can take your experience of God as being loving and caring, compassionate, forgiving—if you can take that with you into your reading of scripture, you will find resonance there all over the place. You will find that God, even in cultures thousands of years ago, people were shocked and surprised and delighted to find that God that we affirm, that we worship, that we follow. It's not as though scripture is devoid of it, in fact, scripture is quite rich with images of this God. It's what people have chosen, or often what cultures and societies have chosen to identify with—which God they're identifying with. Sometimes it's what their view of power is.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 58:23**

So, Charmaine and I both believe very strongly that it's really very important for the church to reclaim scripture from the angry, hostile, judgmental, and marginalizing use of the Bible that is too common in American religious culture. If we don't try to reclaim it and offer liberative readings of it, then we're basically conceding it to people who are going to use it to abuse and control and dominate others. I don't think I want to do that. The Bible is too rich and provocative and too potentially liberating, to let people who are going to use it for the opposite, have it. I don't want to let them just have it without a fight on this part. I mean...not a violent fight, sorry about my use of non-peaceful language...but it's like “No!” There is a whole other way to use and read scripture, and in Community of Christ we're committed to pursuing that.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 59:32**

So this last piece that we've been talking about, we didn't preface it but it's kind of, what is the reader's own context? What is our understanding of who God is? What is our understanding of culture? We take those—we can't help but take those with us as we're reading scripture. But if we can read scripture as declarative, as that author's attempt to tell their story and their experience with God, then that makes room for our story of God to be of equal value, to run parallel to these other believers' stories. Then we can begin to see where the matches are, where the connections are between their story and our story.

I think it's really important for us to say: In our time and in our culture, it's not okay to marginalize women; it's not okay to say that they are lesser because of their physical makeup or because of some God-ordained strata where they're 'less than'. Cultures have found that that undermines the strength of their culture; to dismiss, to minimize a part of their culture. A culture is stronger when all people are given value and equity. We can affirm that even the people who want to be quite literalistic about the Bible do not walk around in first-century robes, just because Jesus' first followers did. They recognize—selectively usually—that our culture and our time are the time that we're responsible for, and that we're not trying to re-create the church in the first century.

It's important, I think, for readers today to let what we may feel...I believe is God at work in the world. I think the rising equality between men and women, the awareness of gender differences and different orientations, the attempts to eradicate racism—I think these are all ways in which God is at work in the world. We need to embrace that, affirm that—that's part of our declarative story of where God is at work in the world. That is the context in which we can hear and see things in the writers...the many writers that are in the Bible. To see that we are about the same God, we're talking about the same God, we're looking at the same God. We may understand that God differently because of the language we have and the perspective we have that our culture gives us, but we can then begin to see that this is not a different God. That the things that we value in God are there too.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 1:03:11**

That reminds me of something I learned long ago from reading a Swedish New Testament scholar named Krister Stendahl. He taught at Harvard for a long time, and then I think he went back to Sweden and became a Lutheran Bishop there. In one of Stendahl's books he says something I'm going to paraphrase—this is from a long time ago, but I think I can paraphrase it—Stendahl says, “A right relationship with God does not depend on us playing ‘first century Bible Land’.” In other words, he was trying to say the same thing Charmaine just said, but really eloquently: dressing up in first century robes and trying to mimic first century ways of thinking about marriage and family and gender and society, and so on, is not what makes us a faithful Christian. That's a ridiculous concept. It's ridiculously analogous to the Galatians who are full and practicing Christians thinking that, “Oh, gosh, if we just take on circumcision and Sabbath, we'll be even better Christians.” Paul says, “That's nuts. You're totally nuts Galatians!” He actually says that in Galatians chapter three. It's like, no—we have to make distinctions between the message the biblical author was trying to convey and the limited structures within which that author was conveying the message—the worldview, the world concept, the way they understood reality. There's nothing about adopting that worldview that makes us Christians. It's about trying to open ourselves to the deep message of biblical authors, which again and again comes back to some pretty simple things: God is faithful; God is steadfast; God calls us to practice justice; God calls

us to love neighbor, enemy, other; God calls us to live in communities that are filled with mutuality and self-sacrificing love.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 1:05:12**

God's desire is for each person and all of creation to be in relationship with God, God's a God of love and a God of accepting our repentance, but the love is always there.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 1:05:28**

God's big picture view of the world is this divine desire to bring healing and wholeness and mending to the whole creation. We can trust these big picture themes of scripture and sympathize with authors in their particular context, trying their best to capture that and speak that within the limits of their own framework, just like our frameworks are limited today. There's lots of wonderful work to do here. We think it's deeply rewarding and very, very much worth the effort.

**Carla Long 1:06:07**

Well, it definitely is, it sounds like there's been kind of an issue happening and boiling up over maybe in the past hundreds of years—who knows? And I just so appreciate you guys bringing this up to me. You two are the ones who said, “Well, maybe this would be a good podcast,” and I completely agree. It sounds like it's something that people, mostly...I think the biggest first step is just to become self-aware about it—not just to sit there and make a face like I did when you hear, “Hey, I'm going to be reading a scripture”—but understand how you come toward that scripture as well, because I think that above anything, is probably one of the most important things.

I think we're coming to a close of this podcast—is there anything else that you wanted to say that you did not get a chance to say?

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 1:06:53**

Not so much something I didn't get to say, but something I would recommend. Sometimes it's just like scriptures are a maze for people, and it feels like there's always dead ends, they may hear this and say, “Well, yeah that sounds good, but how do we even get started on that?” One of the things that I would encourage—there's a set of Bible studies that are each on a single book, it's the *Interpretation Bible Studies*. Don't go for the commentaries—those are more for academics—but the *Interpretation Bible Studies* do a really good job of taking the historical-cultural information and condensing it down to something that's really accessible. They do some with what is the literary context of these different passages as well. They can be really helpful to start people getting into the practice of not getting bogged down, of not shutting off, of not being skeptical and frustrated, but to start looking a little deeper. These are, I think, really accessible ways of doing that—getting at it. I always would recommend that as you're reading scripture and reading it as a declarative, as a way that someone else has written their attempt to explain what their experience of God has been, who God is to them, that you also take just a moment to reflect prayerfully on “What is my experience of God? Where might it meet this person's experience of God?” Just kind of doing an author to author—I'm the author of my life, but I want to see what this author understood about God. Just prayerfully taking a moment to say, “Where might our images of God meet?” It's another way—a simple way—of letting it touch us spiritually without having to take on all of the cultural questions and discomforts.



**Carla Long** 1:09:17

Okay, well, thank you so much. I really appreciate hearing from you guys, as always. I always learn something and I hope that our listeners have too. Thank you again for being here, and I look forward to speaking to you next time.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 1:09:32

Thank you Carla, it's always good to be with you.

**Josh Mangelson** 1:09:39

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