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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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## SPEAKERS

Tony Chvala-Smith, Carla Long, Josh Mangelson, Charmaine Chvala-Smith

### 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 00:34

Hello, and welcome to the *Project Zion Podcast*. I'm your host, Carla Long, and today you're listening to "Percolating on Faith", a series where we talk about all sorts of theology, and like I've said before, you end up feeling a lot smarter after you listen. So, thank you so much for listening. And I'm here with our guests, Charmaine and Tony Chvala-Smith. Hello, Tony. Hello, Charmaine.

### Charmaine Chvala-Smith 00:54

Hi, Carla, good to be with you.

### Tony Chvala-Smith 00:54

Hi, there. It's very nice to see you today.

### Carla Long 00:56

It's always great to be with you two. So, I pitched an idea to Tony and Charmaine on what we should talk about today, and of course, they ran with it because it was a brilliant idea.

### Charmaine Chvala-Smith 01:07

Of Course.

### Carla Long 01:07

But before we jump on what it is, I'm going to tell you why this idea emerged. I have been Community of Christ my whole life and there are times when I feel like I might have been living in a Community of Christ bubble. I don't totally understand everything that goes on outside of my Community of Christ

bubble. So, I have a YouTube channel where I do like really small, short, little sermonettes, like three or four minutes, and I talk about all sorts of things, and I have some of them on TikTok as well. And I was, and have been, completely shocked by the comments I've received on TikTok about my little sermonettes. These are things that are fully Community of Christ, that I've been taught my whole life. Hardly any Community of Christ person that I would talk to would say, "This is completely wrong," or, "I don't agree with that.", But, oh my gosh, the comments on TikTok, they are astounding with things I don't even think about, like the things that they say, blow my mind. I have just been completely shocked by how wrong I am in some people's eyes, and I've talked to Tony and Charmaine about. I'm like, so it seems like the big problem is the biblical literalism. Like, people take the Bible literally, and I don't take the Bible literally, and I think that's just an enormous disconnect that they and I will never be able to breach ever, like, ever, because the disconnect is so big. And a friend of mine's like you should comment back. And I'm like, I don't even know where to start, because I feel like we would just get into a fight because we're coming at it at such different angles. I was curious, Tony and Charmaine, if you could talk about biblical literalism? I don't know where you want to start. Where does it come from? Or where did it, all that stuff? So, could we just talk a little bit about why those people are wrong and I'm not?

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 02:55

Yes, yes. Well, we're looking at some of the comments...

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 02:57

Well, yeah, so, so...

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 02:58

...that you sent us from TikTok and they're all highly predictable and ....

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 03:05

I love this one. "Can we all chip in and buy this lady a Bible?"

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 03:13

Yeah, that's pretty funny, yeah...

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 03:15

That's great.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 03:15

...and...

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 03:16

Or this other one up here...

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 03:17

Yeah.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 03:17**

...that says, "Humans do not have the mental ability to understand what and who God fully is." Well, I could agree with that, but the next line is exactly what biblical literalism is. "The Bible tells us just what He wants us to know." And that's like, oh...

**Tony Chvala-Smith 03:37**

It's like the most oxymoronic statement ever. Some of these things that you've received regarding your TikTok videos are classic quips from fundamentalists, and fundamentalism and literalism go hand in hand, basically, is what we'd want to say. One of the places we want to start, is you want to start by making a distinction, right. So, we want to distinguish literalism from some other things,

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 03:58**

Right. So, the first thing is to distinguish literalism from a proper exegetical concern to understand the literal or literary sense of a text. So, when we're talking about literalism, we're going to be using the term to refer to situations where users of scripture take things as literally from God, literally true, or literally actionable. Literalism is, in this sense of assuming, that just what's on the page is literally either from God true or actionable. You should act on exactly what it says. And this is often associated with fundamentalism, which, fundamentalism you can find in any religion in the world, but we want to make the distinction between literalism and literary reading. So that's the two terms...

**Tony Chvala-Smith 04:57**

Right.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 04:57**

...that we will use. So, when we're talking about a proper exegetical concern to understand the literal sense of a text, we'll say, "literal reading" or "literary reading" of scripture. But when we're talking about this idea that somehow what's there is just exactly what is to be understood and there's no need for interpretation or to see if it's metaphor, or sarcasm...

**Tony Chvala-Smith 05:25**

Yeah.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 05:25**

...or hyperbole, or whatever, when it's assumed that it's just exactly what it says, or what God thinks, then that's when we'll use the term "literalism".

**Tony Chvala-Smith 05:36**

So, when we teach exegesis, right, we want people to pay attention to the words on the page. We want to understand what these words meant, in their original setting, how the first readers would have taken these words. And we're not treating the words as though they don't mean anything, or that they can mean whatever we want. They had a meaning, or series of meanings, and so we want to pay attention to that. And that requires a careful reading of the literary sense of this passage, right. But one of the things you'll hear literalists say is, quote/unquote, "God wrote the Bible." And that pretty much came up in some of those comments you got. "God wrote the Bible." It just comes to us straight in English, and it

just means what it says, and why these people don't own slaves or, or, that gets more complicated, right. Because, because actually, one of the problems with literalism, is it always takes some things literally, and then doesn't pay attention to other things, right. It's always highly selective. Yeah, yeah. So, we've got literalism. Don't confuse that with a proper, literal, literary reading of the text, and then don't confuse it with something else.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 06:40**

So, the other distinction that we want to make is between the personal devotional use of scripture and the public use of scripture. So, the personal devotional use of scripture is more about exploring how scripture can help us make connections to the Spirit, or to God, or to Jesus, or to the Holy, or Goodness, however we might name God or the Holy, and it can be fairly streamlined. You don't need to have a whole lot of background if you're trying to simply be open to scripture to see how it might speak to you, or how it might be a meeting place between you and God. And so, we can be fairly uncomplicated, because you're trying to be open to connecting with God. You're not using it to control other people or manipulate other people. However, the public use of scripture for teaching, or preaching, or training, any kind of public setting in our culture particularly, scripture kind of has an outsized importance to many people. And so, it becomes the situation in which using scripture gives you some kind of authority and is the big hammer. And so, there has to be a different level of responsibility about knowing what scripture is, and how to use it to understand what its background is, so personal, devotional study, prayerful meditation. It's like doing a literary reading of it that might help you connect with God is very different from how you use scripture in public settings. And it's real easy to go to the literal place when you're using scripture in public settings. And so, but we wanted to make that distinction, so that people who are saying, "Oh, no, I can't sit down, like read a Psalm and meditate on it, because that's literalistic, because I'm thinking that this is talking about the..." No, that's not what we're saying. We're saying, scripture is a reliable place, to have encounter, to be reminded of, to be open to the Spirit. But public settings hold a whole different weight.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 08:55**

Different modes of use require different rules, right. So that's the big part of that. So, let me give you a quick example of what literalism sounds like, why it's so dangerous, and so damaging. And I'm going to give you the short version of this story. A Community of Christ person shared this story several years ago, and the short version of the story is this Community of Christ person had become friends with women in another very kind of fundamentalist church. And this woman had a horribly abusive husband, and she was in the process of leaving him, but she wanted the Community of Christ person to come to church with her once. So, the Community of Christ person went to church with her and from the pulpit in that church, the pastor started quoting scripture directly to that woman in worship service, about how you mustn't leave your husband, it's against the Bible, and you need to stay in that relationship, this will win him to Jesus, blah, blah, blah, when in fact, this was dangerous for her. And so that's why literalism needs to be identified and countered. It's a dangerous, dangerous, almost cruel use of scripture. And by the way, Jesus countered it too, if you see how he just pushed back on the literalistic use of scripture by religious authorities in his day. You see him pushing against that too.

**Carla Long 10:06**

But like I said before, it kind of feels like it's not even worth it to get into an argument with someone who is a biblical literalist, because they will always say, "But the Bible says...", and that's their final argument. "That's what the Bible says. That's what God says." I don't even know what to say to that, honestly. And I don't know if you know what to say to that either.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 10:27**

I really do think in those kinds of settings, you need to be completely open to the possibility that it isn't useful to engage.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 10:34**

Yeah.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 10:35**

It just isn't. It's only going to make someone dig in their heels even more. And I think that's one of those places where we have some internal work to do, as far as personally, to not be hurt or to be angry, because this is their way of interacting with scripture or with God, and to sometimes let that just be what it is. It's when people don't know that they're being literalistic, that it is most useful to engage.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 11:02**

Right.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 11:03**

It's to help people see that they're making some assumptions about scripture that may not realize they are and that they might not agree with if it was brought to the surface. Do you realize you're saying that this passage is right from God, like God quoted this? Or somebody wrote this down. Is that what you really think? And to name it, to name it as that's being literalistic. You wouldn't do that with some other passages in scripture. So, you're already obviously making some distinctions between what is useful and what isn't. Those are the places I think it's useful, like in your TikTok things, showing people that you can use historical backgrounds, context, to help scripture speak, without having to hit them over the head with, "This is what God says and thinks." That's so freeing to people when they see it. And again, so that's, it's worth being non-literalistic, and even naming that you're being non-literalistic, in order to help some people see that what they're receiving and appreciating is intentionally informed and studied and all of that.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 12:15**

And I agree with all that. I just think the best line I've ever read in response to, "The Bible says... The Bible says... The Bible says...", is from the theologian Paul Van Buren, who in one of his books says, "The Bible doesn't say anything, because the Bible doesn't have a mouth," quote/unquote. That means that we make it say things by what we choose to quote, what versions we use. I mean, we're the ones making it say things, right. Otherwise, the text lies their inert unless it has a reader, and a reader who's already formed by different ways of thinking about stuff, so.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 12:45**

Here's one of the comments from your TikTok collection here. This one says, it's obviously talking about the Bible here. "Blasphemy is trying to say that God is whatever you want God to be. God has told us who He is," obvious reference to the Bible. "You don't have to believe it, but it doesn't make it wrong." It's like, oh, my.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 13:11**

Here it is today. Apparently, this person has never read Exodus 3, "I will be who I will be." So, I mean. That might be a helpful text for them to read. But yeah, I think when we look at the comments you've gotten on TikTok, Carla, and this whole, the response of literalists, there's a whole other dimension to this which has to do with faith development and faith formation. And we'll mention a little bit later James Fowler's stages of faith, because that plays into this too, right. You know, how eight year-olds respond to things is quite different from how 19 year-olds respond to things, versus 35 year-olds, typically.

**Carla Long 13:42**

Sometimes. I was gonna say sometimes.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 13:45**

So, we probably should go to, where does this kind of literalism that we're talking about, where does it come from, right? And it does come from someplace. It comes from several places. We'll go there next. And one place we could start with is that in the 1500s, the Protestant Reformation, at least at the start of the Protestant Reformation, theologians like Luther and Calvin found the Bible a liberating text, helped them think themselves free from, from medieval Catholic traditions that seemed oppressive to them, right. But people like Luther and Calvin had a very fluid and thoughtful use of the Bible. I mean, Luther, for example, though he's the one who first articulated scripture alone as a theological principle, he recognized there were different levels of what one could use in scripture. In fact, when he translated the Bible into German, he put some books in the New Testament into an appendix because it's like he said, these are not all that helpful, really. So, sola scriptura did not mean, for someone like Luther or Calvin, that the Bible is just literally God talking to us, right. They understood you had to do interpretation with it.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 14:46**

But a really important part of the whole Protestant movement was making available to people the scriptures, in their own languages, so that there wasn't a dependence on the clerics, on trained ministers for interpretation. So, there's a sense that we are freeing all these people to read the Bible for themselves.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 15:10**

And that starts off good, and eventually what happens is, this is a later development, is the assumption that the biblical text, translated into whatever language we've got, is immediately clear and understandable to any reader, without any training, without any background, and so on. You just read it off the page and that's your theology. That develops later. Now, that was not Luther. That's not Calvin. That's not Melancthon. That's not the mainstream reformers. So, that develops later and that idea becomes highly problematic when it gets mixed up with a particular kind of philosophy called Scottish Common Sense philosophy that developed in the 1700s. And so, if you want a good little background

on Scottish Common Sense philosophy, there's a section in Jack Rogers book, *Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality: Explode the Myths, Heal the Church*. That's a 2009 book. He has a great little, very clear section on this philosophical movement in the 1700s that created a framework that people began interpreting the Bible with. So, Scottish Common Sense philosophy basically said something like this: that words are facts. And it's interesting that this philosophy grew up at the same time modern science was growing up, that was interested in facts. So, words are facts. They have single meanings. This is implied. And the things that are written are self-evidently true, right. So, Rogers, in his book, quotes Jefferson's line in the Declaration of Independence, "We hold these truths to be self-evident..." That is an 18th century idea that says that truth was just basically plain to all people. Well, to most people.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 16:45

Well, there's one, one truth. There's only one way of understanding everything, and it's not a coincidence that this is a white, male, power structure...

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 16:54

Right.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 16:54

...way of understanding things. And so that's the sense that whatever is on the page is absolutely clear.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 17:02

And so, Rogers goes on to describe how this philosophy that develops in, you know, 1700 Scotland. It further says that all people, in all times, in every place, at least those people who are, "...of the better classes," quote/unquote, they see things the same way. Now, this isn't the 1700s and this is before people in the western world really started to understand how different other cultures could be. Scottish Common Sense philosophers are basically saying, all the smart people think the same way everywhere and so therefore...

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 17:35

They agree with us, obviously.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 17:37

...if you have these words on this page, which in the case of the Bible, which is there in English, then it just means what it says, right. So, it's a very kind of simplistic understanding of truth, a very simplistic understanding of language, and there's a non-understanding of cultural context and differentiation there. So, the Scottish Common Sense philosophy shaped the way that theology and the Bible were taught in the United States, even when we were still colonies, right. That was being taught in seminaries here.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 18:05

There were certain authors, their works were encouraged by people who felt like this was the way to understand reality, but also scripture.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 18:14

And I am very sad to report that my beloved seminary, Princeton Theological Seminary, back around 1812 or so, was teaching this stuff. Oh, my gosh.

**Carla Long 18:25**

Well, weren't you a, you, back when you were a student then, right, Tony?

**Tony Chvala-Smith 18:30**

Well, I, it was a few years later, Carla, not 1812. Come on. Give me a break. And, some of the theologians who taught there then, and a whole bunch of theological writers who were shaped by this Common Sense philosophy, they said, well, the Bible does not categorically prohibit slavery, and slavery is practiced everywhere in the world, therefore, slavery is God's will. It's just a fact of life. I'm basically quoting Rogers here. And that, yeah.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 18:58**

They would use the same logic as far as women being less than men, or being used, or being oppressed, or, yeah.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 19:07**

So essentially, essentially, behind your TikTok posts is a 300 year-old philosophy which says, hey, words just mean what they mean, and every literate person knows what they mean, so don't confuse us with context. Context doesn't matter. This is God talking to us in plain English, and literalism gets its steam from that old philosophy. That's a philosophy that can be quickly falsified, just by paying attention to cultural differences.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 19:31**

A fact I've proven wrong, but, yeah.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 19:33**

Yeah, yeah. But that is the underlying intellectual underpinning of literalism and fundamentalism.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 19:41**

It also draws on the hyper-individualistic tendency of American culture, that we all have our own interpretations, and so, however I read it is obviously the truth.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 19:55**

And so, one of those comments you got that, one of those first ones that Charmaine read about how God's too complicated to understand?

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 20:02**

Yeah.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 20:03**

"Humans do not have the mental ability to understand what and who God fully is." That's a great statement. Ancient and medieval and early modern theologians would all agree with that. The next



statement is the really problematic one. "The Bible tells us just what *He* wants us to know." That could have been written in 1795 by somebody just trained in Scottish Common Sense philosophy. That's what it is. That's, that's exactly it right there. And so, when people are going around saying, "The Bible says... Here it is in black and white on the page.," they're not reading the Bible. They're actually reading Scottish Common Sense philosophy into the Bible, right. And so, that's the source of literalism.

**Carla Long** 20:37

So, that's what I should comment back. Don't bring your 17th century Scottish Com-, whatever, philosophy here, friend.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 20:44

Yeah, yeah, yeah. Keep your exegetical haggis to yourself.

**Carla Long** 20:49

This is fascinating. I actually had no idea that biblical literalism was so steeped in quote/unquote, "academia from 300 years ago." I am kind of blown away by this.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 21:01

Back then, it paralleled where science was at the time. Science is interested in facts. Facts equal truth, and so in this philosophical approach, words equal facts equal truth. It's just a parallel development, and also how history was practiced then in its early stages. History is interested in only the facts of the past, right. Interpretation doesn't really count. You just want to repeat the facts. But it turns out that the facts are actually pretty slippery.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 21:27

Well, and the other part of it is that there's no sense of having to be responsible to be informed. You simply take off the page whatever it is you want to use in a particular setting. So, there's no intentional work being done, which makes it, it's one of those tempting pieces, so.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 21:46

We're still looking at some of your comments, Carla.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 21:48

Here's one...

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 21:49

And listeners should know, Carla sent us the comments, and we're looking at them on screen here.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 21:53

"Have you ever read the Bible? You are sharing Satan's lies." Oh, my. Or, "Either live for Jesus Christ or go to hell." That's interesting.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 22:05

Yeah, yeah. It's interesting, too, that a number of these comments have repeated the one view of the atonement that's the fundamentalist view. Jesus died for your sins instead of you. You should have. Jesus died for your sins.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 22:16

Yeah.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 22:16

You've got to believe that or you're not saved and you're going to hell. And they're just simply repeating what they're getting from their churches, their churches being steeped in this very thing we're talking about, and there's no way to critically push back there. Usually, the only way to critically push back is when some life experience shakes people free from that. It shows it up for what it is. But so, we've talked about kind of the historical and intellectual underpinnings of this, but there's also personal things that go into why people are literalists or why people like this, and stages of faith things, right, where people are in faith journey. Early stages of faith are very literalistic and naive, right. There was an ark, right, and there were animals that went on it. And there's a stage of faith where it doesn't feel even right to raise any questions about that. You just do a flannel graph picture of it, right, or whatever. So, there's things like people often have the need for absolute security and this whole approach to religion offers that.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 23:13

Yeah, a literalistic approach.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 23:14

Yeah.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 23:14

Yeah, and I think that's important that there's just a percentage of people are people who have difficult lives, who are looking for something absolute and solid. And so, if they've been told that the Bible has all your answers, it's a blueprint for your life, then that's a solid thing. And so, they can get very defensive if, you know, talk about metaphor, or we talked about, they're short stories that are trying to make a point in scripture, they are not historical. Then it's like unsettling their foundation. An improper use of scripture can harm people. The arguing about the proper way to read scripture can also do harm to people at certain stages in their faith development. And so, the important thing is to keep pointing to Christ, to keep pointing to God's love, and affirming that those things can be found in scripture. And that's...

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 24:06

Yeah.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 24:06

...a common place that you can stand.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 24:08

I think when Jesus says, "Love your enemies," it seems like half the time, or maybe more, they may be other Christians that one has to learn to love. If you allow for different developmental stages of a faith journey, this would be more tolerable. The problem in American culture is that people who are using scripture this way, and have not been given any alternatives, and who are at whatever stage of faith that is, they also want to make it public policy, right. And so, this is where the problem is. That's like saying, you want people with an 11 year-old's understanding of astrophysics to go make laws about physics. It's really not helpful but, but that's the way things currently work in our democracy. And so, but in other words, if we could just work with it as stages of faith, it would be a lot easier. It's hard too, because this has a public voice and so it does deserve to be pushed back on because it's so dangerous.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 25:00

I love this comment. There's this, you really pushed somebody's buttons here, Carla, because they've responded quite a lot. But this one, it's like, "Wait, wait, wait, wait, did you literally just say, Jesus didn't come here to save us from hell???" Question mark, question mark, question mark. "Wasn't that like the whole point!?!?!!" exclamation, question, exclamation, question, exclamation, exclamation point.

**Carla Long** 25:23

I remember that comment, and I was like, I'm not engaging with that. I can't prove that wrong in a comment. I can't.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 25:30

Boy, and it's like, well, this person hasn't really read their Bible as a whole very much, because Jesus doesn't say very much about hell, and certainly doesn't indicate that that's what he's about any how...

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 25:42

Nor has this person read various texts elsewhere in the New Testament that indicate God has redeemed the whole, right, and is concerned for the salvation of all. You can find texts that have a more universalistic implication in them, but this person hasn't read that because they're simply repeating...

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 26:57

Yeah.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 26:58

...the stuff they're hearing in church.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 25:59

And they're saying, "Still wanting some scripture references." Put this on that same sermon, I think.

**Carla Long** 26:04

I actually feel like I should just let you guys look at all my TikTok comments that I, you would have just a heyday enjoying them. There's so much.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 26:12

As Charmaine says, you really did push some buttons there, Carla, apparently.

**Carla Long 26:16**

The thing is, like, I feel like I'm saying things that almost every Community of Christ person would be like, yeah, that's right. So, my Community of Christ bubble was certainly popped when I started hearing more from people outside of Community of Christ.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 26:28**

It's a good lesson that we probably need to be more self-conscious in how we use scripture, and to tell people what we're doing when we use it, so that they know. But man, some of those comments, just, I would be entirely rankled by some of them. But I know Carla and Carla is able to laugh.

**Carla Long 26:45**

I did laugh a lot of them off, and I was reading them to Kuzma, my husband, and Kuzma was like, "Who are these people?" I'm like, I think they're just people. I think they're just normal people out there.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 26:55**

Yes, well, yeah.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 26:55**

Yup, so, I think one of the things to recognize, if you're trying to figure out is someone being literalistic in their use of scripture, one of the ways to kind of identify that is that, quite often, people who are literalistic, or use the Bible literalistically, they often have a list of beliefs that you have to have for, in their mind, for you to be Christian. And the list may change, but they've kind of got their base of what is it that you must believe in order to be right with God? And that's going to always clash with people for whom God is about a relationship, or first about a relationship, and then maybe about responsible choices and ways in which we act. But, so, that's one of the things to understand about people who use, or have only learned literalism, is that for them, it's about the statements that you assent to about God, about Jesus, that matter most, as, in some of those comments, you know, it's about, well, Jesus died for us. And, you know, it's like, you have to say that in a very specific way in order for them to believe that you are Christian. And so, that person I know who was a literalist was, well, you have to say, "Jesus' blood on the cross is what saves you." And if you, as a church, are not going to say that, then you're not really Christian. But it's a very definitive list of things that you must say you believe in order for you to be okay. And so, if people are questioning that, or saying, you know, the way it's worded, or that particular belief is not essential to a good relationship with God, or knowing Christ, or responding to the Spirit, that's going to rankle them. That's going to undo their sense of what is essential for faith.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 28:49**

And you've heard us say many times, Carla, that in theology, there's four voices that contribute, right. Scripture is one, but tradition is one, and experience is one, and reason is one, and literalists typically don't know Christian tradition much at all. So, literalists would not typically know that there is no single doctrine of the atonement, right, of the meaning of Christ's death, that is the Orthodox ecumenical doctrine of the atonement. There may be on the Trinity, but there isn't on the meaning of Christ's death.

There's multiple ways this has been construed and multiple ways in the New Testament that it's construed. But no, their particular religious tradition is focused on one and said, "This is the only one that matters," and that's what they're reproducing.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 29:31**

People who are literalistic are going to be very wary of other life experiences, because they'll feel like well, if I think that your life experience is as valid as my life experience, then I might have to change some of my ideas, or I might have to let go of something on my list. And so, you know, you think about parents who would rather choose their religious list than their LGBTQ child because it's what has given them stability in their life, or power, or a number of other things as well. So, this openness to other people's experience, you know, in those four voices, it's a danger for people. And I think in your, some of your responses, it's kind of like people going, I'm not gonna listen to you. I'm gonna stick my fingers in my ears, because things you're saying can't be true, because they're not what I already believe. Literalism also comes often more auditory than it does by actually reading and so, for some people who are literalistic, they may have read parts of scripture, but it's what they've been told the scriptures mean that usually matter most to them, by an authoritative figure.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 30:45**

Also supporting, you know, this kind of literalistic theology is kind of a self-strengthening circle. You accept a certain belief, right, and then someone that you take to be an authority shows you where that belief is in scripture by proof texting it. And then you take that as absolute because you've already been told that's God speaking to you. Then you find yourself in this circle where you're just constantly defending that position because you can't imagine any other way to think about things. And there, and...

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 31:09**

So, you're on your own little gerbil wheel of proof.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 31:12**

Yeah. There's psychological dimensions to this too. I mean, we have to be fair, all of us would have psychological dimensions to how we construe faith, there's no way around that, but people who've come from really difficult or abusive backgrounds or backgrounds where there's a really, really authoritarian parent, sometimes they find this kind of religiosity to be the only way they can maintain a stable life, right. Sometimes people who come out of really bad situations, they gravitate to this because it gives them a lot of lights on the runway, right, and so, we have to accept that. At the same time, recognizing that this use of scripture can become very dangerous and even deadly when it's taken to the public square, when it's applied to all of quote "those people". It is why we're still dealing with racism in the United States, because for a couple 100 years, the Bible was used to justify slavery. And so, then it's used to justify misogyny, heterosexism, and so on, and it's really hard to unravel ourselves from all of this.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 32:13**

I think one of the things we've probably been implying, but haven't really said, and that is that literalism typically makes God and scripture synonymous. And so, without even thinking, often what they're doing, they are saying that the Bible is God speaking to us.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 32:32**

Yeah.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 32:33**

And I think it's the most dangerous thing, and it's the hardest to let go of, because of that whole need to know that God is with us. And this is a fairly tangible way of thinking that we know exactly what God thinks of us, of other people. So that's the place where a wedge is needed to distinguish that there's something very, very different about who God is, from these words that people have written about their experience with God, or their knowledge of God, their hope for God. So that's a huge place that can be helpful place to start.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 33:12**

So, in America's current culture wars, the Bible is used, as Charmaine sometimes calls it, as somebody's big club, right, they're their big stick to whack people with. That's become a very deadly and unfruitful use of scripture. And it actually turns people away from what should be a religion based on compassion, that compassion of God in Christ. When people see that that's what Christianity represents, is how it's being represented, as this book that's used as a hockey stick to whack people with, and it becomes very unappealing. And I think properly so. There's too much pain and misery in the world, and when a religion adds more, it has lost its credibility. We need to learn to use the Bible in salutary ways, in ways that are liberating, and in ways that allow the text to help people find life and find hope and find joy and find meaning, rather than this abusive use of scripture that almost always goes hand in hand with literalism. So that's one of the tasks of the Church.

**Carla Long 34:10**

Why do people find this so tempting? Why is it just the go-to? Because, I feel like it might be the go-to more often than not.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 34:17**

Yeah.

**Carla Long 34:17**

Maybe Community of Christ's way of looking at the Bible is the weird way, which is normal for us.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 34:24**

Yeah. I think if you look at Community of Christ's statement on scripture, you would find quite a number of other Christian denominations. United Church of Christ, United Presbyterian Church, ELCA Lutherans, some Methodists, Episcopalians, have very similar ways of approaching scripture. So, it's not a minority approach to scripture, it's just that the default setting in our culture has become this sort of fundamentalist stick evangelical literacy because these people are loud and obnoxious. They get a lot of news coverage. And occasionally, they have a political figure who's never read the Bible, but will

hold it up in public, as an icon, it's a dog whistle approach. And they say, "Oh, look. It's the chosen one who's holding a Bible. We therefore know he's from God." It's a self-circulating kind of pool here.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 35:10**

Well, And I think one of the temptations, too, is that it's kind of egotistical thing, right? You now know more than other people. You now are the one who can determine who's in the good column, who's in the bad column, who's in the heretic column, and you have the power to do that. I'm reading one of the comments here. It's like, "I'm sorry, ma'am, but you are not," all capital letters, "a bishop of the body of Christ, 1 Timothy 2:12, 1 Timothy 3, Titus 1, Titus 2." So, here's someone who's saying, I know what you can be, and you can't be. I am the authority on your value. I can put you on the right level of importance in this world. That's super tempting, right? We can determine who are the good people and who are the bad people, who are the faithful people, and who are not the faithful people. We have power. And so that's one of the ways in which literalism is very tempting.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 36:12**

Yeah. And you could understand that in sociological, psychological terms. We live in a moment of extraordinary difficult transitions, and so, you can understand that people would gravitate to having some sort of final answer, final authoritative answer for dealing with stuff, even though I'm sure the guy who wrote that post that Charmaine just quoted, I wonder what he would do if you said, "Hey, look with me in Romans chapter 16. Look, there's a woman deacon and a woman apostle there. What do you make of that?" Very likely, he'd say that's not really what it means, right. So, literalists are very literal on the text that they love, and very nonliteral on the text that they don't like. They're highly selective in that. So, I have a little working principle that goes something like this: that fundamentalism, which is what we're talking about really, fundamentalism is to religion, what fascism is to politics. Fascism, if you think about it, is trying to exert absolute authoritative control and domination on and over people's ways of thinking and acting. That's what fascism is. And fundamentalism does the same thing in religion as fascism does in politics, only fundamentalism uses the sacred text as the tool and the weapon in that. This is an interesting thing that, because literalists and fundamentalists don't understand anything about Christian tradition, really. They wouldn't know that for 1000 years, the way the Bible was used, for example in the medieval church, was that there wasn't just the literal sense of scripture, there were four senses, right? The way monastics, and theologians in the Middle Ages interpret scripture, they said, we start with the literal sense, we want to read the words on the page, then we want to ask, what's the moral sense? And we want to ask, what's the allegorical meaning? What does this symbolize? And then they would ask, what's the anagogical sense? Anagogical here means, what is it in a text that might lift me to a deeper relationship contemplating God? And it was two, three and four that were the most important meanings, right. They wouldn't know that. And they also wouldn't know that in the ancient Church, one of the theologians who thought a lot about how to interpret scripture was St. Augustine, and that in his book on Christian doctrine, he articulates the interpretation of scripture like this. Lots of people get different readings from scripture, but here's what I'm gonna say. It's pretty clear in scripture that love of God and love of neighbor are the central themes, therefore whatever ways used to interpret Scripture that increase love of God and love of neighbor, those are good interpretive tools. Any ways you interpret scripture that lead away from love of God and love of neighbor, those are not good interpretive tools. So, he says, you know, if you're walking to a city, there's the straight route, and then there's the roundabout route, but both routes might get you there, right. And so there can be other

ways of approaching scripture as long as they lead you to the love of God, the love of neighbor. And I think it's an interesting principle. He's recognizing a certain flexibility in how you read and use the Bible. Somehow it all has to yield love in the end. I think that's a very helpful principle. But literalists wouldn't know that because they wouldn't know much about St. Augustine, if anything,

**Carla Long** 39:11

It does sound like just a really good rule of thumb. You know, like, if I'm reading a Scripture and it makes me want to do violence, then I might be reading that wrong.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 39:19

Yeah.

**Carla Long** 39:21

Just a good little rule of thumb. If you can't remember anything else from this podcast, if scripture is not pointing you to love, then try again.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 39:29

Right. And then, Community of Christ would say, if, if how you use scripture doesn't square with how Jesus did stuff and what he said, then it's not a good use of scripture.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 39:37

And back to some of the temptations, and then we'll have a few things here at the end, just how do you avoid the temptation of getting drawn in? But one of the other temptations is that if the Bible is seen as an authority in your culture, you want to be able to use it to undergird your own authority. And so, that's kind of a power-seeking kind of thing. So that's another temptation. Also, another temptation is that in our own places of deep insecurity, use of the Bible in a literalistic way gives us a sense of control. That's actually a spiritual, emotional level in which literalism can kind of lead us to that bad definition of self-love. It's all about us, and what we imagine reality to be. And then we can't make room for the reality of the original authors, or what they were trying to say to the people in their time. We're going to make the words say whatever we want them to say, or read the ones that we agree with. One other piece I wanted to mention just before we get into how can we avoid getting pulled into literalism, and that is the latent literalism. And here what I mean, in many, many people who've grown up in a Christian culture, there may be, even as much as we say we're not literalistic, we don't want to take the Bible, you know, and just pull pieces out and use them against other people, or to determine exactly what God is like or what we should believe, there may be this latent literalism. And even people on the progressive side of things, and who wouldn't identify as literalist at all, they may choose to not use certain scriptures because they don't say what they want the scripture to say. And so, there's still that hidden assumption that somehow scripture is supposed to be. We want it to say what we think God thinks. Does that make sense? And if it doesn't say what we think God should think, then we're not going to use it. It's still a kind of literalism. We're using scripture in the same way as literalists, trying to make it say what we want it to say. We need to just realize that we might find that in ourselves at times, when we're uncomfortable with some parts of scripture, we may not be letting the original authors be who they are, and speak to their situations in their time, because we may actually be wanting to use



that scripture in the way we want it, and to think that God thinks just like us. So, I think that's something just to be self-aware of, conscious of, so that we can see we may all have that tendency in us.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 42:09

And one thing about that is that there's an assumption on both sides of the equation there that the Bible was just give you ready made theology...

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 42:15

Yeah.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 42:16

...right. And that ain't true, right. Theology is developed in a much more...

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 42:22

In community, in...

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 42:23

Absolutely.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 42:23

...in the situations of the day and what is needed.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 42:26

In community, in conversation, in, in wrestling with it. So, the idea that the Bible just ought to give you ready made theology, is behind a lot of literalism, on any side of the spectrum.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 42:38

Yeah, it's like going to the store and picking up a ready made theology and not having to work on it. So how can we avoid getting pulled into this very tempting way of using scriptures?

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 42:53

One of the places to start is that we always want to distinguish between who God is and what scripture is, right. Scripture, scriptura, are writings, writings from human beings. God is infinitely beyond human capacity. Even so says scripture, right, so making a distinction between God, and traditions, and scripture, and human stuff.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 43:20

And that can be helped along by defining what scripture is, and what it is not. And then we can begin to see that space between God and scripture, and I think that's a good place to go. Practice being aware of our own insecurities and our desire for absoluteness, for absolutes that we can hang on to, no matter what. Sometimes our desire or maybe our need for those, at times, can lead us there into literalism.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 43:47

Another thing we can do to avoid literalism is to pay special attention to how Jesus used scripture. For example, He rejected moralistic literalism, right. The woman caught in adultery, the man, apparently, I guess, got away. I'm not sure how that went. But Jesus pushed back on the Pharisee's moralistic desire to use scripture. And Jesus focused on justice and reconciliation aspects of scripture. So, another example is in Luke chapter four, when Jesus announces his mission, and quotes from Isaiah. If you go back to see where he quoted from Isaiah, he left out certain things, obviously intentionally, that had to do with retribution and judgment, right. And so, Jesus can give us some ways to use scripture in a more just, and humane, and compassionate way.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 44:28

Another way is to intentionally take classes or read a book on an introduction to the Bible, which can help you learn to see the Bible as a library, not as a single voice, but as a whole collection of books from different authors.

**Carla Long** 44:45

I thought you were just gonna say, "Or read a book." I thought that's all you were going to say.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 44:51

Another thing you can do to avoid the pitfall of literalism is learn to do exegesis. And, I know that strikes terror in the hearts of people, but, but learn to do exegesis, and that will help you get deeply into the text, where you begin to see, gosh, these are human authors struggling to articulate their experience and their understandings in different settings. And oh, Paul says this, but Matthew says this, and it's not the same. And it really can help you get into the human side of the text.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 45:18

And along with that, learn the history of the biblical interpretations that you may be hearing. Where did they come from? Why have they become so popular? And why have some parts of the Bible been muted completely, to start acknowledging that that happens. And it's something Tony said earlier was the idea that a theology has four voices. Yes, scripture is one of them, but only one of the four. The others are reason, and experience, and tradition, so to explore all of them.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 45:48

And then another way to avoid literalism is to refocus on the who we worship, not a what, right. Christianity is about a relationship with a living person, Jesus Christ. It's not about a relationship with a book, or library books. We do not have relationships with books. At least in my knowledge or experience, nobody does. But the idea is, keep the relationship with the Living One central, and the book as an aid to that.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 46:18

And along with that is nurturing a relationship with God who knows, loves, forgives and accepts us as we are, and who loves, knows and accepts our enemy. And that's an antidote for the self-righteousness that can sometimes come with literalism.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 46:38

And then here's a simple one; how about read and internalize Community of Christ's Scripture Statement? It's not very long, but it's really, really helpful, and...

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 46:47**

It's not a book.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 46:48**

It's not a book. It's like, it's just...

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 46:50**

A page.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 46:50**

...scant two, a page, a page and a half long. I wish, in our Church, people regularly studied those statements, just to ponder and, and help the same as give flesh and blood to how we use scripture in the Church. That's another place you can go.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 47:05**

So, that's the beginning to talk about liberalism, and some of the ways that we can see it more clearly, not get drawn into it, maybe help people who feel, and many people do feel, trapped by literalistic thinking, but they don't know there's an option, because their tradition. You know, just like you've been in a Community of Christ bubble, other people have been in the bubble of their denomination or congregation that does interpret scripture literalistically, and so, helping them have some choices.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 47:41**

Just a couple of books I would always recommend. This is now a kind of old classic. It's by James Barr, who is a great Old Testament scholar. It's a book he wrote late the 1970s called *Fundamentalism*, and Barr, as a biblical scholar, did some very deep analysis; what is fundamentalism? Where does it come from? How does it approach the Bible. Where is it getting its ideas from? That's a really, really helpful starting point. And you'll begin to understand that the literalism of fundamentalists is always very selective, based on whatever particular *[inaudible]* is.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 48:09**

What they already believe.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 46:11**

Yeah. And then I mentioned the book by Jack Rogers, *Jesus, the Bible and Homosexuality*. And it's not just about that, it has a larger theme about where particular uses and abuses of the Bible come from. So those are some places to start. So, I always believe, in Community of Christ, we can do better. We have some healthy ways to look at things like scripture and tradition, and we deserve to practice them, and articulate them, and teach them.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 48:33**

So, thank you for letting us see some of your comments.

**Carla Long** 48:38

I knew you would enjoy them. I knew you would enjoy them. I enjoyed them as well. So, no, thank you for a really interesting podcast. I really honestly did not know that biblical literalism had been around that long. I really thought it was more of a modern idea, but obviously not, and that it actually comes from a very straight line to where we are now.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 49:00

Yeah, I don't want to blame the Scots here, but there was a Scottish philosopher who thought this up, and then various American figures who liked it, transplanted it, and then it became embedded in seminary teaching in the early 1800s, and...

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 49:13

Has some deep roots here.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 49:15

Yeah, it does. It has some deep and not very salutary roots here at this point. But you are right. Fundamentalism, as we understand, is a more modern phenomenon. You would not have found people using the Bible that way in the Middle Ages, or in the ancient Church. But still, there's a line going back to the late 1700s here.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 49:32

Yeah, and as Tony mentioned earlier, another way and on our list on how to avoid, and it is to remind ourselves that at different times in history, people used at least four different ways of interpreting scripture.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 49:44

Yeah.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 49:44

Any one scripture, they could see using it in four or five ways. It didn't have to have simply one meaning or one approach. So, I think that's helpful to remember too.

**Carla Long** 49:55

Absolutely. Well, I've learned a lot, as I always do. So, I'm just thinking we can blame the Scots for golf and for biblical literalism. That's good to know.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 50:04

No, just some of the Scots. Just...

**Carla Long** 50:04

I was gonna go ahead...

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 50:06

Just some of the Scots.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 50:08

Just some of the Scots.

**Carla Long** 50:09

Yeah, don't start doing horrible things to Scottish people. Yeah, well, thank you so much. I really enjoyed this podcast. Of course, I enjoyed knowing that I was on the right side. I'm just kidding. I should not ever say that. I should never say that. But thanks for enjoying the comments on my TikTok videos.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 50:26

Send them to us anytime you want.

**Carla Long** 50:28

You two are the best. Thank you so much. I really appreciate it.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 50:31

Thanks, Carla.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 50:31

Thank you.

**Josh Mangelson** 50:40

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