Perspective

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I once had the mother of one of my best friends say to me, “I simply don’t understand how anyone could call themselves a Christian and not be a Republican.” In my own mind, I thought, “I’m not sure I understand how anyone could call themselves a Christian and not be a Democrat.” More recently, you are probably aware that *Christianity Today,* the most well-known and respected journal representing evangelical Christianity, publishedan editorial that called for Donald Trump’s removal from office. The response was swift and predictable. Billy Graham’s son Franklin said, for example, "For *Christianity Today* to side with the Democrat Party in a totally partisan attack on the President of the United States is unfathomable.” Graham was not alone, as nearly 180 leaders from the religious community signed an open letter to *Christianity Today*'s president condemning the editorial. On the other hand, Jim Wallis, editor of the progressive evangelical journal *Sojourners*, said that the editorial was a "huge, watershed event,” indicating that the removal of Donald Trump from office “is now a matter of faith, not politics,” and reveals “a crack in the wall of white evangelical support."

Needless to say, this is a very controversial issue, and my reason for bringing it up is not to cause dissension or turmoil or incite arguments, but to point out what I’m sure you already know, that good, faithful, spiritually sensitive people hold to radically different views, not just in respect to politics, but interpretations of scripture as well. How does this happen? How are we to understand the process that shapes our own views and those of others? How should we as Christians respond to others, non-believers and believers alike, who hold views so different from our own?

Scripture itself provides some clues that help answer these questions. For example, in 1 Corinthians 15:3, Paul writes, “For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures.” Here, in its most succinct expression, is the essence of the Gospel message, a proclamation that Paul says was passed on to him by unnamed others, which he now is proclaiming to his readers. Every Christian, from the first century until today, affirms this belief. But it reveals something important about the process by which one’s perspective, or, we might say, their interpretation and theology is made. The question this statement raises is why everyone, most notably, the Jews, did not come to the same conclusion that the death of Jesus resulted in the forgiveness of sins and was foretold in their Bible. Paul’s statement contains three components. First, the historical fact of Jesus’ death; second is the theological conclusion that the forgiveness of sins was directly connected to Jesus’ death; and third, the “scriptures” anticipated, or prophesied that such an event would occur. The scriptures mentioned here, of course, refer to the Hebrew Bible, the Christian Old Testament, since the New Testament documents had yet to be written. Those who had become followers of Jesus and those who did not, all read the same Bible but came to radically, diametrically opposed, conclusions. Why?

In what follows, Paul makes clear what the answer is. He describes appearances of the resurrected Jesus to multiple individuals and groups. He even dramatically recounts his own encounter: “And finally as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me” (1 Cor 15:8). In other words, those who had become followers of Jesus had an encounter with the resurrected Jesus. Those who had not become Jesus’ followers, had no such encounter. What differentiated the two groups, therefore, both of which had read the same scriptures, but who had come to radically different conclusions, was their experience.

Herein lies an indication of the process that results in the formation of our perspective, or, it might be said, our interpretation, theology, or even our world view. Perspective is the product of the interaction between the traditions we inherit and our experiences. The tradition, of course, is fixed and stable; it is unalterable. But our experiences are our own, unique, and individual. And it is our unique experiences that lead us to interpret our inherited traditions in ways that speak in personally meaningful ways that answer our most pressing questions and concerns.

Another dramatic example of this process is reflected in stories concerning the fate of Jerusalem in the 8th, 7th, and 6th centuries. In 2 Kings 18, for example, we read the story of King Hezekiah and the prophet Isaiah and their response to the pending Assyrian threat to the southern kingdom of Judah and its capital Jerusalem. In 701 BCE the Assyrian king Sennacherib besieged Jerusalem, the destruction of which at the hands of the far superior Assyrian army was imminent and inevitable. In response, the prophet Isaiah intervenes at Hezekiah’s most desperate moment, mocking the Assyrians’ show of force, prophesying their own destruction, while exhorting Hezekiah to trust in God alone to save them, declaring God’s promise to “defend this city to save it for my own sake and for the sake of my servant David” (2 Kings 19:34).

What does Isaiah mean when he says, “for the sake of my servant David?” At least in part, he is referring to God’s promise to David, given about 300 years earlier and spoken through the prophet Nathan, that “Your [i.e. David] house [i.e. the Davidic monarchy] and your kingdom [i.e. the southern nation of Judah] shall endure before me *forever*; your throne shall be established *forever*” (2 Samuel 7:13).  True to that promise to David and his heirs, and reiterated now through Isaiah, “that night the angel of the Lord went forth, and slew a hundred and eighty-five thousand in the camp of the Assyrians; and when men arose in the morning, behold, these were all dead bodies” (2 Kings 19:35). The Davidic monarchy was saved, and the promise of its continuation imbedded firmly in tradition.

Fast forward a hundred years. The Assyrians have been defeated by the Babylonians and it is now Nebuchadnezzar who threatens Jerusalem as Sennacherib had a century before. This time around, it is Habakkuk who calls upon God to save Jerusalem from the Babylonian armies. For God to do anything other, would be to “ignore the law” and to “pervert justice” (Habakkuk 1:4). In challenging God to act on Judah’s behalf, Habakkuk seems to ground his hope in the very same promise God made to David, confirmed by Isaiah and the experience of Hezekiah a hundred years before, that God would abide by the promise to keep the Davidic monarchy intact *forever*. But not this time. Instead, God tells Habakkuk, not only was God not going to destroy the Babylonian army, God would be “doing something in your days you would not believe if you were told” (1:5), that would cause Habakkuk to be “astonished” and to “wonder” (1:4). For indeed, God was “raising up the Chaldeans [i.e. Babylonians]” (1:5-6) to judge and destroy the very monarchy and kingdom he had previously promised to sustain *forever*. In three successive waves, the Babylonians descended on Jerusalem, razing the city, enslaving and deporting the king along with the majority of Judah’s population, ending the Davidic monarchy *forever*.

The very same tradition about God’s promise to David and the continuity of his monarchy had been interpreted in two completely different ways. In the 8th century, Isaiah prophesied the survival of Jerusalem and Hezekiah, firmly believing that God would abide by the promise made earlier to David. In the 7th century, however, God’s obligation to that promise no longer held, and the destruction of Jerusalem was prophesied to Habakkuk. This was made possible because Hezekiah and Habakkuk had two different experiences. They lived at two different times. And the differences in their historical contexts required the same tradition to be interpreted in two completely different ways; in other words, tradition interacted with experience to produce unique perspectives.

Reflecting on this process should help us better understand why we think the way we do, cause us to relate to others with greater sympathy and humility, and help our church to become a more relevant witness of the Gospel to our world. Our view of the world is shaped by the experiences that either confirm or invalidate the traditions that others have passed on to us. Being aware of this process means that we need not be constrained by only one way of thinking throughout life. As our experiences and contexts change we need to be ready to adapt to those changing circumstances. This is exactly what it means to learn, to be open to the possibility of changing our mind. It also should produce humility in respect to our relationship with others. The process of perspective formation means that people have interpretations different from our own simply because they have had experiences that are different from our own. The effect on our relationships should be to promote dialogue and not dissension.

But this dynamic relates not just to the relationships between individuals, but to the way in which institutions interact with the world. This is especially true for the church which the world so often sees as irrelevant, intransient, and inept. Each generation must read its authoritative tradition in light of its own place in life, its own questions, and its own necessary interpretations. Failing to do so, whether it be in respect to our relationships, our church, or our own self-awareness, confines us to the past and undermines the opportunity for real growth, meaningfulness, and an abundant life.