

The Bible as Propaganda

Exodus 14:22-31

Mark 15:8-15

Propaganda. Let that word swim around in your mind for a few seconds.-----Propaganda.
Propaganda.

When we hear the word *propaganda*, typically, normally, on average we have a negative reaction to it. Propaganda, to us, is a bad thing. Propaganda, in our way of thinking, is the wrongful manipulation of information to bring about a wrong end.

Propaganda manipulation can include, but is not limited to, the following.

Name calling, like terrorist, liberal, conservative, fundamentalist, commie. Call somebody a name and you give them no credit, no relevance, no worth. Call someone a name and you dismiss them completely, totally.

Another propaganda technique, what some have called “the Glittering Generality” is name calling in reverse. While name calling seeks to make us form a judgment without examining the evidence, the Glittering Generality device seeks to make us approve and accept without examining the evidence. A glittering generality involves the use of a word or an idea that we all support, but in actuality the word or idea can mean different things to different people. For example, words like patriotism----freedom-----motherhood-----fatherhood-----health-----love-----family values----democracy. These words can indicate a variety of things to a variety of individuals. A speaker may tell us what must be done to preserve democracy, but what he or she means by democracy may not be what we mean by democracy. A politician may rally the citizens to free the citizens of another country, and what American among who would be against freedom?, but we might argue about just how free the freed people are.

Glittering generalities.

A third propaganda technique is the use of euphemisms, that is, substituting an agreeable or inoffensive expression for one that may offend or suggest something unpleasant. In the wake of the first world war, traumatized veterans were said to be suffering from "shell shock." After the second world war, people began to use the term "combat fatigue" to characterize the same condition. With the Vietnam War, people referred to "post-traumatic stress disorder". Collateral damage, negative patient care outcome, kicked the bucket, bit the dust, pre-owned, and revenue enhancement (tax) are all examples of euphemisms, all are examples of propaganda.

Sometimes propaganda can be the manipulation of information, it can be deception or camouflage, and sometimes propaganda can be an outright, bald-faced lie. Recall, for example, the recent words of Iraqi Information Minister Mohammed Saeed al-Sahaf. The Iraqi Information Minister denied reports U.S. Army and Marine forces were in the Iraqi capital. A U.S. Central Command spokesman said U.S. forces had moved into the heart of Baghdad from the south and the southeast, a day after securing the airport, west of the Iraqi capital. Al-Sahaf

denied that report, saying the Republican Guard had control of Saddam International Airport after fighting a fierce battle. "Today we slaughtered them in the airport. They are out of Saddam International Airport," al-Sahaf said. It was a lie. It was----propaganda.

So-----so I know you have a negative reaction to the word *propaganda*, and I am aware part of your negative reaction is that you have witnessed propaganda in the recent U.S./Iraq war, and that includes propaganda on the America side. And I know you've, more than likely, never thought of the Bible as propaganda. Such a thought may seem way out of line to you. It may seem like heresy, but I'd like to suggest that one way to think of, or to read, our Scripture is to think of it and read it as propaganda literature.

Stay with me now. Don't close your minds. Wedgewood prides itself on being a church that encourages a thinking faith so keep the gates to those brains cells wide open.

When I use the word *propaganda* with respect to the Bible I do not use it to refer to something like what the Iraqi Information Minister did. I do not mean it is a bald-faced lie, that it is deliberate untruth, made up misinformation. At least I don't believe that on a good day. On a bad day, well, on a bad day my theology and biblical interpretation goes all over the map. But---my point is the Bible is propaganda in the sense it has ideas and stories which further a cause or damage an opposing cause.

Let me lay it out for you. There is a fine line between rhetoric, which is the art of speaking or writing effectively----there is a fine line between rhetoric and propaganda. One person believes a speech is wonderful, a great example of rhetoric. Another person hears the same speech and concludes it is nothing more than propaganda.

Let me spell it out. All of us, every last one of us, when we communicate use propaganda, that is, we say what we say, we share information and omit certain information, in a way----in a way that supports our viewpoint or our interests. We don't tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth so help us God. And that's the truth. And so---and so there is no such thing as pure truth, objective fact. There is always a perspective, always an angle, and no one perspective; no one angle has all the truth. And that would be true of sermons too, I might add. They too are propaganda. And the propaganda of this sermon is to convince you the Bible is propaganda.

I have a boatload of examples up my sleeves, at my disposal, but this morning I'd like to share just two examples of biblical propaganda. The first example has to do with the escape of the Hebrews from Egypt. It is a defining moment in Israel's history. They have been slaves in Egypt for four hundred years. But God hears their cries. God hears their cries and sends a deliverer in the person of Moses who tells Pharaoh, "Let my people go." Eventually, he does. The Hebrews cross the Red Sea but Pharaoh changes his mind and the Egyptian army pursues. The waters part. The Hebrews go through. The Egyptians enter. The waters close. The Egyptians drown. It's a great story, if you are Jewish, that is. It's a great story if you want to believe you are God's people. It's a great story if you want to feel special. But it is not great story if you are one of the Egyptian soldiers who drowned. And it's not so wonderful if you are the wife or the son or the daughter or the mother or father or brother or sister of the Egyptian soldier who drowned.

Biblical propaganda. And guess what?----- There is no mention of a Hebrew people, no mention of Hebrews escaping through the Red Sea, no mention of tremendous Egyptian army loses, in any Egyptian history. Not one paragraph. Not one sentence. Not one word.

Biblical propaganda.

There is a midrash, there is some Jewish commentary on the Israelite deliverance at the Red Sea which states that when God ultimately drowned the Egyptian army in the Red Sea or Sea of Reeds, the Heavenly Angels wanted to sing praises before God, but God rebuked them saying, "Silence! Would you sing to Me while my children are drowning?!"

The Jew who wrote that midrash knew the Exodus story was propaganda. Whoever wrote that midrash believed God had delivered the Hebrews from Egyptian oppression, but the person also believed God loved the Egyptians as much as God loved the Hebrews. Whoever wrote that midrash knew the Exodus narrative, the crossing of the Red Sea, had its share of truth, but the writer of the midrash knew the Exodus narrative didn't have all the truth.

Propaganda. Who gets to write the history book is extremely important because---history, the telling of history, is propaganda. There are no "immaculate perceptions." There are no perfect recollections.

Example number two, the execution of Jesus. Who was responsible for the execution of Jesus depends on which gospel you read. The culpability, the guilt of the Romans, in the whole affair also depends on which gospel you read. And I'm referring not only to the four gospels we have in the New Testament, but also to the Gospel of Peter.

Turn to your bulletin insert. On both sides of the insert are some pages from John Dominic Crossan's book, *Who killed Jesus?*

Look first at page 150. Look at what I have underlined.

"In the five passion accounts we meet a very different Pilate. In [the gospel of] Peter Pilate removes himself completely from the condemnation and crucifixion of Jesus. In Mark Pilate is more ambiguous. He knows Jesus is innocent but crucifies him to please the crowd. In Luke Pilate thrice announces that Jesus is innocent. Once again, though, Pilate is constrained by twice-repeated cries: "crucify him, crucify him." In John we have a similar triadic insistence by Pilate on Jesus' innocence, but what finally prevails upon Pilate is not the doubly repeated "crucify him" but a political threat, "If you release this man, you are no friend of the emperor." Here Pilate is portrayed as being concerned about his political hide.

Five different portrayals of Pilate. Why the differences?

Turn over to the other side of the insert.

In the gospel of Peter, a gospel that was not included in the Bible, there is an interesting take on the crucifixion, specifically, an interesting twist on who is responsible for it. According to this gospel, the Jewish leaders are responsible.

Look at what I have underlined. “The Jewish authorities now admit that Jesus is the Son of God---(Did you hear that? The Jewish authorities admit Jesus is the son of God.) And the Jewish leaders persuade Pilate to order a cover-up. Most importantly, the Jewish authorities admit that if they told the Jewish people the truth, the people would stone them.

In this gospel, Jews in general are less guilty of Jesus’ death, but the Jewish leaders are very guilty. But in the gospels we have in our Bible, the Jewish people are very guilty and the Romans are very innocent. Why? Why did each gospel writer tell the story in the way he did?

John Dominic Crossan writes that “it is all inspired propaganda”. And then he adds, “and inspiration does not make it any less propaganda.”

Now stay with me. We’re coming into the home stretch.

Why would the gospels we have want to make the Jews guilty of Jesus death? Well, you respond, because they were. Well, not according to the Gospel of Peter. And let’s not forget that it was a crucifixion with Romans standing by the cross. They were the one who nailed the nails.

Crossan provides this insight for us. Those first Christians were relatively powerless. Those first Jewish Christians were marginalized and disenfranchised by Jews. And so, and so they told the story the way they did. They told the story the way they did in response to the way they were being treated.

Now that’s understandable. None of us likes to be treated poorly by others. But here’s the problem. As long as Christians were marginalized and disenfranchised and they told the story that way, they were of no harm. But---when Christians came into power around the year 400 and the Jews became disenfranchised and marginalized by Christians, then---then the telling of the story in the way it was told became dangerous, very dangerous, and for years to come.

Listen to me. If you tell the story in a way that makes all Jewish people of Jesus’ day responsible for Jesus’ death, if you say Jews killed Jesus then---then it becomes easier to kill Jews, then genocidal anti-Semitism becomes, as you know it did become---it becomes a reality. And the darkness at noon happened again.

These are the words of Adolf Hitler.

“It is vital that the Passion Play be continued at Oberammergau; for never has the menace of Jewry been so convincingly portrayed as in this presentation of what happened in the times of the Romans. There one sees in Pontius Pilate a Roman racially and intellectually so superior, that he stands out like a firm, clean rock in the middle of the whole muck and mire of Jewry.”

The words of Adolf Hitler, July 5th, 1942.

What am I saying? That we need to be careful how we read the Bible, we need to be careful how we tell our stories and hear the stories of others. We need to admit our stories, our own personal stories and our faith stories are propaganda. Why do we need to admit it? Because when Jesus was crucified there was a darkness at noon and the earth needs no more darkness.

Unfortunately, an uncritical, unthinking, un-examining type of Christianity continues to contribute to the darkness of the modern world. At Wedgewood, one of our ministries is to encourage Christians to think and as we think to think in a way that fosters, not violence or hatred, but love. I invite you to be a part of this fellowship.