

James Dobson accuses Obama of ‘distorting’ Bible

In September of 1987 at the ripe old age of twenty I began my formal post-secondary education at an Evangelical Bible school. I believe I received a good education and through the expert teaching of caring and personally engaging professors learned to think critically about my own faith and fairly about others. James Dobson’s writings were a favourite among many students and some faculty, though I must confess to reading very little of his stuff.

I have since completed two graduate level degrees in biblical studies and engaged in pastoral ministries in conservative evangelical churches. I have found that while I enjoy the milieu of scholarly evangelicalism, I am not a good fit. I often wonder what many of my colleagues and friends think of my musings and if they really know what I believe. If they did, I don’t know if they would still be able to accept that I am sharer with them of Christ Jesus.

Conservative evangelical Christianity focuses a great deal of its attention on what goes on in a person’s head. Salvation is directly connected to what is believed so that having proper belief is important. Confessions and creeds have always had some kind of roll in the Christian church – i.e., Apostle’s Creed (*ca.* mid second century CE), Nicene Creed (CE 381), Athanasian Creed *ca.* CE 500 – yet it was the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century that gave rise to the proliferation of creeds and confessions.

Today there is hardly a protestant sect or church that does not have some kind statement of faith, a “these things we believe” list published somewhere and attached to their formal organisational papers. Most common are the Thirty-nine articles for the worldwide Anglican Communion, the Westminster Confession of Faith used by many Presbyterians, The Heidelberg Confession of the Christian Reformed Church, and the 1689 Baptist confession to name only a sampling.

The belief emphasis can be simple or complex depending upon the social dynamics of any given community and the particular need that it feels to distinguish itself from others. Conservative groups generally have an acute need to be different; it seems to be part of their DNA, their constitutive identity. This leads to more and more mundane things becoming tests of belonging. Often to be a member of a conservative church one must confess to belief in a literal seven day creation of the entire cosmos, the virgin birth of Jesus of Nazareth, a literal bodily resurrection of Jesus from the dead and his subsequent ascension into heaven, in a literal fiery hell where non-repentant unbelievers are condemned to an eternity of conscious torment, and to a complicated scheme of events that will mark the end of the world.

Many of these beliefs are supportable from the Bible. Of course, to say supportable is far from saying that they are taught there. Some of them are taught there, but to say this, is not to prove that they must be believed as doctrine essential for Christian identity. With

Dobson and Obama, we have a clear example of how two people who are obviously identifiable as Christian, and therefore in some way beholden to this common pool of knowledge called the Bible, can be distinguished by how it they feel and are governed by the authority of this Book.

Dobson claims that Obama distorts the Bible. I would argue that Dobson also practices biblical distortion. Reflecting upon my own journey I can see a movement away from literalism to a reading of the Bible that is more concerned with submission to its message of righteousness. I don't understand righteousness in strict terms of legal conformity, but in the sense of faithfulness to the expectations of covenant relationship. God embarks upon a number of different relationships in the Bible and righteousness is what characterizes the proper mode of existence within those relationships.

Dobson's approach focuses upon private obedience to specified behaviours as conditions of righteousness. This is in keeping with the conservative notions of faith as belief, which is also a private and personal thing. Much of conservative religious morality focuses on very private affairs, especially sexual morality. Divorce, pre-marital and extra-marital sexual liaisons are prohibited as are those that are not ideally procreative. I can't say what Obama's personal beliefs might be on many of these items, but I would suspect that in many cases he would agree that these are ideals. I doubt, however, that he would define them as righteousness.

Alternately, righteousness can be expressed in more communal things. By drawing upon a number of biblical references that speak of social justice, care and compassion for the poor, imprisoned, orphaned and widowed, there is a substantive movement in the broader Christian community to see Christianity as not primarily concerned with personal ethics but with community ethics. I believe these things are very consistent with what the Bible is concerned about when it talks about righteousness. Martin Luther King Jr. touched on a number of these themes in his ministry and leadership-righteousness and justice in the broader society.

Dobson and Obama's visions of righteousness clash. It is not so much that one is correct and the other wrong, as Dobson suggests, but that the situation in which each is discussed will determine which one is most appropriate. I believe Obama's emphasis is more appropriate in the national context, the context of a national election and that Dobson's in the private context of the pastoral office. Obama is not presenting himself as a Christian Priest but rather as a civil servant who also happens to be a Christian.

My personal journey is such that the clash between these two continues in my life on an almost daily basis. I still have personal preferences in sexual morality that are very conservative, but yet recognize that righteousness in the broader context does not legitimate the imposition of those preferences on the general population. What makes the struggle so difficult, is that I want to read my Bible literally. Literalism is the way that I was brought up to think and read the Bible, but when I do so now, not only do I find my reading

to be at odds with my heart, it is often also at odds with what I understand to be the primary message of righteousness that is taught by many of those same scriptures. Reading my Bible is a complicated affair, not an easy one.

Dobson has either chosen not to accept the complexity of the Bible or does not see it in the way that I now do. I can't fault him because for much of my own journey I followed a parallel path to the one he espouses. The literal way of reading is easy because it does not require advanced reading skills. To say this, however, is not to say the literalism is consistent even with itself; what is literal is often not as literal as it seems. Here is where I believe Dobson succumbs to distortion. The literal is often only literal in a contingent kind of way.

Contingent literalism is literalism that depends upon a particular system of thinking or organization of one's thoughts in order to make it work right. Conservative Christianity has, since the time of the Reformation and especially since the time of the liberal modernist controversy of the early twentieth century, built up an elaborate system that many are born into and inherit as a cultural framework that shapes their biblical thinking processes. It can be likened to a pair of glasses that are coloured by a particular hue and that alters the way everything looks to the one wearing them.

Conservative Christianity is not completely oblivious to this altered perspective. The hardware that alters their perspective is part of their identity. There is a faith that this system is the only one that correctly reveals the way things really are. Conservatives can honestly believe things that the average person can't imagine believing because they have first accepted that this essential system of seeing things, this system that defines their religious framework and determines what they can and will believe, is given to them as a gift from God. Evolution is seen from within this system as an intellectual aberration of what is known to be true through infallible divine revelation – i.e., that God created the world in six literal days less than 10,000 years ago as the biblical record indicates.

Removing the coloured spectacles does not result in an immediate apprehension that the newly perceived and altered landscape is reality. In many cases it is simply terrifying. Coming face to face with the realization that one's perspective has been faulty requires an act of faith in itself. There is considerable adjustment required to accept that these new things that one sees and understands are not deceptions. After all who can say that the altered view is not the distorted one?

Learning to see things through a new system does not entirely obliterate the old system. There is very often a period of transition during which the various elements of the old and the new clash as each is accepted or rejected as "truth." Sometimes the struggle is never resolved. Of course, for some the paradigm shift is radical and almost instantaneous, sometimes leading to crises of faith or radical reorientations of belief. I envy people who experience this kind of radical conversion, as they seem to be able to quickly adopt a new

vision and run with it as if they always owned it, sometimes seeing things in uniquely gifted ways. Such is not how things are working out for me.

Dobson and Obama represent two sides of the Christian experience. The Dobson side is less likely to admit that there is much good in the world. It starts with a view that all things in the world have been corrupted and that human perception of reality is faulty by nature. This is why the new spectacles are needed, as they that allow one to see where the distortion lies and how to counteract it. Obama on the other hand is more content to see that there is much good in the world and is determined to work deliberately and effectively with the good that he sees. Obama can be more accepting of others because he does not need everyone to agree with him in order for his vision of righteousness to be realized. He does not start with the assumption that everyone else's vision is faulty and needs correction. Obama's Christianity is not about everyone believing the same things, but about each one sharing together in the abundance of God's benediction in the uniqueness of their own individuality and experience of God and the world.

As a conservative Christian who is on a continuous journey, I find that I have more in common with Barak Obama than James Dobson. I do not feel that my masculinity is threatened by his political acceptance of homosexuality nor do I feel intrinsically diminished because he supports legalized abortion. I do not personally have a need for marriage laws that would embrace same-sex couples, but I do think that I am made greater when the society in which I live is more accepting and embracing of human potential than when that potential is limited or rejected by religious ideology—mine or someone else's. Obama's vision is more complicated than Dobson's, but I believe it is the better one. It is the one that can be fitted to the greater number of contingencies that he is likely to experience as a human and as President of the United States of America. It is also the one that is most likely to benefit the greatest number of people. That to me is biblical righteousness. That is not a distortion of the Bible.

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