

# *Your Story in His Story*

**The 2015 Evangelicals Concerned Autumn Weekend in Ocean Grove**

**October 9 – 11, 2015 Thornley Chapel**

**Commemorating the Centennials of Anna Bartlett Warner, Fanny Jane Crosby,**

**William Howard Doane and Booker T. Washington**

**Including Three Teachings by Dr. Ralph Blair**

**“The Bible Tells Me So”, “This is My Story” and “To God be the Glory”**

## **“The Bible Tells Me So”**

On the weekend after this summer’s EC retreat, an Australian ex-Catholic priest, now “theologian in residence” at Kirkridge, gave a workshop called, “In Memory of Jesus”. Advance publicity asked: “How would Jesus have wanted to be remembered?” Whoa! What’s with the *subjunctive*, the *conditional* and *hypothetical*? Does this ex-Catholic priest think Jesus didn’t make his intentions quite clear? Does he imply that Jesus was just another sage who got killed and vultures ate his rotting carcass, as another ex-Catholic priest, with the discredited Jesus Seminar, contends?

The publicity’s question disregards what Jesus told his disciples on the night before his crucifixion. It discounts their accounts of that memorable night in the upper room. It discounts their amazing accounts of his having been raised from the dead – an utterly unexpected outcome so far as they’d been concerned.

Postmodern “progressives” pretend to know *better* than *eyewitnesses* whose lives were completely changed after their encounters with the *risen* Jesus. These Jews then submitted to torturous deaths rather than recant their witness that Jesus is the *risen Messiah*, the everlasting *Lord*.

Clearly identifying with the Paschal Lamb, Jesus pointed to the *sacrificial significance of his death*. This was *nothing* his disciples expected. So, they didn’t make it up out of *nothing*.

Jesus, himself, told them to *remember* him, as *he, himself, intended to be remembered*: as the Innocent Substitute, Ultimate Sin-Bearer, God’s Sacrificial Lamb, as he began to disclose this to them, there in that upper room, in his discourse over bread, “*my body*”, and wine, “*my blood*”.

Of course, there in that upper room that night, what he was saying was not all that clear to them. But they sensed something strangely significant that required subsequent events to flesh out – literally – when they would later touch his resurrection flesh.

*After* despair and fear experienced over Calvary, *after* his resurrection and their fellowship with the *risen* Christ, they began to grasp the fuller meaning of his words and something of the eternal implications for them and for the whole wide world.

But a “bloody gospel” of sacrificial substitution is *not* what religious progressives wish to tolerate. This is what they despise. They insist that that’s all now so unacceptably out-of-date.

Well, they’re more right than they realize, they’re more right than they want to be and they’re right for the wrong reason.

When Jesus, alone on his cross, cried out, “It is finished!”, the long history of blood sacrifices for sin came to an end in his own sacrifice of himself for the world’s sins. It was by God’s sovereign grace, that the Temple’s sacrificial system pointed to fulfillment on that day at Calvary and, “at that moment, the curtain of the Temple was torn in two from top to bottom.” (Matt 27:51) No more sin-bearers were ever to be required. God in Christ is the only One who, alone on that cross, *could* bear, *did* bear, the adequate penalty for the sins of the whole wide world.

Just before Yom Kippur, the *New York Post* ran an ironic photo of what the writer to Hebrews belittled as “the blood of bulls and goats” – or, here, the blood of white chickens in Brooklyn. Chickens didn’t qualify in the ancient Temple rites, but at least, these chickens’ *color* fits Isaiah’s metaphor of “white as snow” (1:18).

Animal-rights activists were on hand to protest the Hasidic ritual of *kaparot* in which, feared harsh decrees of the coming year get diverted to chickens that Hasidim swing above their heads three times, then slice off the chickens’ heads. In the photo, as one of the other animal-rights activists points her camera at an Hasidic, he gets ready to swing the bird in his left hand while, with his right hand’s middle finger extended at her, he “flips the bird” at her.

What an odd juxtaposition of gestures – trying to duck decreed misfortune on himself in the coming year while directing misfortune on her posthaste. By God’s grace, this guy reminds us of ourselves.

The writer to Hebrews says: “Christ shed *his own blood*, not the blood of bulls and goats. Christ went into the Most Holy Place and offered his sacrifice *once and for all to free us forever.*” (Heb 9:12)

Jesus’ words on the night he was betrayed were not a call to “recall” him, to sit around *missing* him, to mourn over a mistaken martyr, given that, “well, you know, things just didn’t work out. Judas betrayed him. And those priests and scribes were always against him. Besides, Rome’s just too strong.” No! It never was able to get to that point before everything got turned upside down.

What Jesus told his disciples, as preserved by Luke, the historian, and repeated by Paul, former persecutor of Jesus’ followers, but now their friend, colleague and apostle, was this: “*Do this* in remembrance of *Me*”. (Luke 22:19; I Cor 11:24) The *emphasis* is on *Jesus*. Remember *Me*! And it’s on their *doing* something. *Who* Jesus is and *what* they’re to do about it is crucial!

Who is *he, now*? The *emphasis* is on the *presence* of Jesus, not on a mere memory or a *recalled* Jesus. The Hebraic sense here is of their *active participation in the past, in the present*. Partaking of bread, *his* body, and wine, *his* blood, we are *participating now* in the Jesus of *history* as well as in the risen, *living* Savior and *living* Lord.

After all, after his resurrection from the dead and forty-days of visits with his disciples, he left them in only *one* sense. Even in his *parting* words, he assured them that he’d *never* be *apart* from them. He’d continue *in the present tense* to be *with* them, though not *physically, not visibly*. “Be certain of this”, he said, “*I am with you always*, through even the end of this age.” (Matt 28:20) This was their experience after his resurrection.

*In remembrance* of him, in this mysteriously mystical *reassembling*, as it were, they’d be especially close once again, and even more than ever before. It was no mere recalling of a lost friendship. It was not a memorial service for a dead teacher. *Again, together,*

they'd always be in *his Loving Presence* in *continuing Companionship and close Communion*. How do we know about all of this? We know, “for the Bible tells us so.”

The ex-priest's press release claims: “For two thousand years the Christian religion has remembered Jesus primarily in the context of a God who denied access to Himself”. This statement is nonsense. It does *not* represent two thousand years of Christian teaching. Nor is it biblical. It's a caricature that revolts at the *primacy* of God's unique revelation in Jesus of Nazareth, God's incarnate Word, God's Son. It's a sop to the marginalizing of Christ Jesus as but another guru in an interfaith pantheon of world religions.

It rebels against Paul's statement: “*In Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting people's sins against them.*” Paul said that believers in Christ were called to proclaim this amazing message of God's Good News of *reconciliation*. (II Cor 5:19f)

Christians have long preached from the old Hebrew texts as well as from the New Testament, together comprising the historic story of God's love. And the scriptures, for two thousand years, tell us that God has always revealed Himself through His creation, too, and through His calling of a chosen people through whom He would bless the world.

Isaiah, relayed God's words, declaring of gentiles: “I revealed myself to those who did not ask for me” and, of Jews, “All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and obstinate people”. (Isa 65:1f) The people kept on sinning and God kept on forgiving.

And Paul references these ancient Hebrew texts in his letter to the Romans. (Rom 10:20f)

God revealed Himself to humanity from the time we were made in God's image. And after our first disobedience, God came to the disobedient and clothed their shame. The Lord rescued His people from Egypt and then called to Moses, on the basis of His having already rescued them: “Come up to Me on the mountain and I will give you stone tablets with the commandments I have written for the people's instruction.” (Ex 24:12) As the writer to Hebrews reminds his readers in his very first sentence: “God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at *many times* and in *many different ways*.” (Heb 1:1) Among other prophets, the writer has Habakkuk's instruction from the Lord in mind: “Write down the revelation and make it plain on tablets so that a herald may run with it”. (2:2)

And Paul, preaching among pagan philosophers in Athens, called their attention to their own poets' sense of God's coming very close, “not far from each one of us, in whom we live and move and have our being”. (Acts 17:27f) Christians have always known this, for the Bible told them so. We, too, know this, for the Bible tells us so.

Except for brief, essentially superfluous, confirmation on Jesus in a few pagan documents and in antagonistic Jewish rhetoric, *historical* awareness of Jesus *depends* on the *historical biblical* witnesses. These witnesses risked their lives and were often killed for reporting what they knew to be true from their experience with Jesus. Without their reports, coming from their transformation following his *resurrection*, the world would never have even *heard* of him. Yet, there are those who insist on making stuff up about Jesus, out of their own self-serving, disbelieving imaginations.

After his crucifixion and before his resurrection, Jesus' disciples were distraught and dejected over what they concluded was *his failed mission* and now *their fearful fate*. They tried to lay low, hide out, and try to get back to their old routines.

It's historically irresponsible to try to explain away and reject the 1<sup>st</sup>-century eyewitnesses and replace them with allegedly more “reliable” – or isn't it, more *pliable*, more *palatable* – 21<sup>st</sup>-century revisionism.

Deciding the case by what “fits” the backwaters of *our* cultural corner, *our* fleeting moment in time, *our* self-servingly elitist opinions, is an untrustworthy point of view for getting at what really happened some 2,000 years ago in what’s, to us, indeed, a foreign land, a strange culture and a very different time. But it was *theirs*; *they* knew it, *they lived* in it, day in, day out. And all of those folks knew very well that the dead don’t rise. Yet these disciples of Jesus reported his *resurrection* as the *shockingly singular* event of *singular significance* that it was. And, separated and alone, they were arrested and willingly died to witness to this.

So, like it or not, in style or not, without the *biblical* witness, we simply can’t understand who Jesus was then or who he is now.

But, it’s important to know *how* “the Bible tells us so”. As biblical scholar Leon Morris observes: “The Bible was never intended as a handbook of Christian doctrine, a compendium of Christian knowledge.” He explains: “It is the *record* of God’s saving *acts* [and] it leaves much unexplained.”

So, for example, just where in the Bible did Anna Bartlett Warner get her *proof-text* for her line: “Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so”? She claims, *the Bible says*, “Jesus loves me”, doesn’t she? She says, “the Bible *tells* me so.” But *where* does the Bible *say so*? What’s the chapter and verse? *Show* me! *Show* me where the Bible tells me, “Jesus loves me”! *Show* me!

Exactly! Jesus *showed* his love. The Bible tells us so. He *lived* his love. The Bible tells us so. He *showed* his love to *all*, and that includes *you and me*. It would make no sense of the data to say otherwise. He *showed* his love to the man who was born blind, to the woman accused of adultery, in the exorcism of the desperate Gerasene, to the marginalized woman of Samaria, with the embarrassed host at the wedding at Cana, when he wept over dead Lazarus with the mourners at his tomb, and when he called out, “Lazarus, come forth!” It was out of his love for them that he wept over the disbelieving people of Jerusalem. Over and over, Jesus *showed* his love. And the Bible tells us of many such instances. The Bible also tells us, in John’s gospel, that many examples of Jesus’ *lived love* were never recorded. (21:25) Finally, his love was on public display in the shame and agony of his bloody cross at Calvary. Jesus lived his love down to death.

The Bible is also packed with portrayals and parables that show us the love of God the Father, lived out in Jesus. The Warner sisters knew the potency of stories. They knew how to get through to folks with a powerful picture, a metaphor or simile. And so, too, did the biblical writers. And Jesus, himself, directed tableaux of instruction, featuring little kids and birds of the air and grain in the fields on the Sabbath. He told many stories to illustrate the love.

Jesus loves us, this we know, for the Bible *shows* us so! That’s a lot better than lots of “just talk”. Jesus was *God’s love in action* – *showing* us that we’re loved – over and over and over again.

Today, demands for verbatim proof-texts come from ignorant *antigay* Christians and ignorant *pro-gay* Christians. “*Show* me where the Bible says, quote: ‘gay marriage is right!’ Chapter and verse! Gotcha!” “*Show* me where the Bible says, quote: ‘gay marriage is wrong!’ Chapter and verse! Gotcha!” Hold on.

Jesus challenged the literalist scribes and legalist religionists of his day. They were incessantly “searching the Scriptures” for proof-texts to prove *them* right and *others*

wrong, yet they refused to see him, not only living in their midst but all through those very scrolls. (John 5:39f)

Are we so busy with our proof-texts to footnote our prejudice that we, too, miss the living, loving Word within the words? Jesus points beyond all those lines of letters that blur as one builds a case for self and builds a case against others, and he says that *all* the words of *all* the Law and *all* the words of *all* the Prophets are *all* summed up in *one word*, as it were: “In *all* things, treat others as you would have them treat you.” (Matt 7:12) That’s the handiest, most reliable model for interpersonal ethics, for all know how they themselves want to be treated. Ergo, extrapolate! Extrapolate!

Jesus, the *incarnate* Word, *lived love* unto *death* and he told his disciples: *Love one another as I have loved you.*” (John 13:34) We’re given this heads-up in the Bible. We get the context of this in the Bible. We get it shown in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Loving each other as he’s loved us? That’s what we do?

So, where did Anna Warner get “Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so”? She didn’t get it in a mere proof-text. She found this loving action of God demonstrated all through the biblical accounts of the life and death and resurrection of Jesus.

She, herself, knew better than to depend merely on a proof-text out of context. She was reminded of this when, in 1881, she wrote *Tired Church People*, her little book on “Christian amusements”.

She writes: “I suppose one never goes heartily into any bit of Bible study, without finding more than one counted upon. And so, for me, searching out this subject of Christian amusements some curious things have come to light. As for instance, how very little the Bible says about them at all. It was hard to find catchwords under which to look. ‘Amusement’? there is no such word among all the many spoken by God to men. ‘Recreation’? – nor that either; and ‘game’ is not in all the book, and ‘rest’ is something so wide of the mark (in the Bible sense, I mean) that you must leave it out altogether. And, ‘pastime’? ah, the very thought is an alien.”

What Anna Warner learned she was not to do if she wanted to write a book about *the Bible and amusements* was to simply smuggle into the Bible what came from *her* Victorian world and not from the ancient world of the text. The Bible, she learned, doesn’t use some of her everyday words or even her everyday concepts. Still, there are biblical references to amusements in *biblical days*, in terms of that ancient culture.

Though she couldn’t find, “game” in her King James Bible, Jesus did mention games children played. He spoke of, “children sitting in the marketplace and calling to one another, ‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not weep.’ ” (Luke 7:32) And Paul had Corinth’s Isthmian games in mind when he wrote to the Corinthians: “Don’t you know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? So, run to get the prize!” (I Corinthians 9:24)

But today, don’t look in the Bible for “Galaxy Trucker” or “The Indianapolis 500”. And, for that matter, don’t look in the Bible for “gay marriage” or, for that matter, our Western “traditional” marriage. Neither is there in those ancient texts.

*That* “the Bible tells me” is crucial. But *what* the Bible tells *me* must not be merely a matter of *my self-centeredness*. It must relate to what writers could have meant to tell their original readers within their own cultural milieu and what their readers could have comprehended then and there, and then, how that may apply to me and my life, or not.

Booker T. Washington reported that many of the freed slaves sought refuge from all the manual labor of slave days by claiming now to be “called to preach”. It was certainly a tempting “calling” – so soon after being freed from the backbreaking labor of slavery.

Washington explained that one of these illiterate preachers “tried to convince me, from the experience Adam had in the Garden of Eden, that God had cursed all labour, and that, therefore it was a sin for any man to work. For that reason this man sought to do as little work as possible.” Washington said that, during the traditional work-free Christmas week on the plantation, this man had always been “supremely happy, because he was living as he expressed it, through one week that was free from sin.”

Twisting the curse on *humanity* observed in workers’ “sweat of the brow”, into a curse on *work* itself, is what antigay preachers do by twisting the abusive intentions of men in Sodom or sexual abuse of slaves into the loving intentions and commitment of a same-sex couple today. It’s what anachronistically “queer” Bible readings do to David and Jonathan or Naomi and Ruth. It’s what Christian slave owners’ self-serving readings of scripture did in keeping men, women and children bound in slavery for life, what they did when they split up slave marriages for their own vested interest and what Christian segregationists did in using Bible verses to forbid mixed-race marriage and prop up Jim Crow. The Bible didn’t tell them to do any of that. It’s what they told themselves.

All of this is why we need a “correctly handled” *Bible* to “tell us so”. (II Tim 2:15) Otherwise, we talk to *ourselves*, reading *into* the Bible what *we* think *we want* or *need* it to say. Have you ever noticed, for example, that whatever the controversy, those who say “yea” so readily find proof-texts for “yea” and those who say “nay” so readily find proof-texts for “nay”. Strange, how this habit strains against the Golden Rule!

What God has to say is not anything we can come up with on our own. It’s not what anyone has ever come up with by himself or herself. How come? All our self-centered agendas get in the way.

When we *read* with only *ourselves* and *our agendas* in mind we scribble over and scratch out what God has to say to us, for us and for all whom we owe love, and we miss out, and so do they. When we *listen* with only *ourselves* and *our agendas* in mind, we mumble while God is speaking to us, for us and for all whom we owe love, and we miss out, and so do they.

It is God who has spoken! It is God who speaks! Does this not bring us to our knees, speechless in awe of God and God’s Good News? He has revealed Himself most fully in two witnesses, as it were: His written Word and His Word made flesh. Both testify to God’s love shown in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. And it’s there for us in the light and love that shines from the Bible that tells us so. Amen.