

“The Word of the Lord?”
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Readings: Psalm 119:97-105

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2 Timothy 3:14 - 4:5

The Word of the Lord?

“All those with skill among the workers made the tabernacle with ten curtains; they were made of fine twisted linen, and blue, purple, and crimson yarns, with cherubim skillfully worked into them. The length of each curtain was twenty-eight cubits, and the width of each curtain four cubits; all the curtains were of the same size.” (Exodus 36:8-9)

The Word of the Lord?

“When the donkey saw the angel of the Lord, it lay down under Balaam; and Balaam’s anger was kindled, and he struck the donkey with his staff. Then the Lord opened the mouth of the donkey, and it said to Balaam, ‘What have I done to you, that you have struck me these three times?’” (Numbers 22:27-28)

The Word of the Lord?

"You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be

liable to the council; and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire." (Matthew 5:21-22)

The Word of the Lord?

"Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent" (1 Timothy 2:11-12)

The Word of the Lord?

Some of these verses make you want to think twice before you respond "Thanks be to God," don't they? They may make us shift uncomfortably when we read them, or simply close our Bibles and shake our heads. And yet, after reading Scripture, we routinely say "The Word of the Lord." In this response, we're saying a lot. We are claiming the biblical text not just as an important book to which we open each week in worship, but as words that are somehow connected to the divine. We have the audacity to say that these words, which we know were written by men in a certain time and place, are the Word of the Lord. That's right, God's words.

Individuals and groups have spent hours upon hours trying to figure out what to do with this collection of 66 books we call the Bible. Seminarians are trained to analyze scripture texts through a process called exegesis, a critical interpretation that "leads out" of a particular

text. We are trained to look at translation issues, working with Hebrew and Greek texts, parsing verbs, and reviewing translation choices. We look at the historical setting and context in which the text was written, and the literary genre it represents. We consider the key theological issues at play, and dare to dream how the text might be applied to our lives today. Clearly laid out steps that should allow any trained theologian to dissect even the most complicated text with scientific precision.

And yet, even with all of these steps, and all of the resources available, we sometimes still end up scratching our heads in bewilderment or pulling our hair out in frustration. If only we could pick and choose what verses and passages of the Bible we held up as “the Word of the Lord.” In seminary, my New Testament professor Frances Taylor Gench often would joke about the temptation she felt to take out her trusty pair of scissors to her Bible, and cut out those troublesome verses and passages in the Bible, and creating a version that was more agreeable to her. She isn’t the first with this idea.

Have you heard of the Jefferson Bible? In the early 1800s, Thomas Jefferson made an intellectual and reasoned attempt to clarify the gospel message by extracting what he believed the doctrine of Jesus to be from the four gospels, removing any references to the

supernatural or what he believed were “misconceptions” added by the evangelists who wrote them.

And then there’s the Jesus Seminar, a group of around 150 individuals in the 1980s who spent years debating and deciding which things were *actually* said and done by Jesus. They even produced a color coded copy of their results, pulling apart Scripture based on historical evidence.

It’s a tempting thing, isn’t it? But of course, we know we can’t edit everyone’s Bibles to our own liking. And if we think about it, that probably isn’t the best plan anyway. So we better stick with what we have. And as good Reformed Christians, the Bible is central to our identity. After all, one of the classic refrains of the reformation is “sola scriptura”, or “Scripture alone.” Virtually everything we do as Presbyterians involves scripture in one way or another. Take our order of worship. We gather around the Word, hear it read and proclaimed, respond to it, are sealed by it, and are sent out in to the world by it. Just in case that isn’t enough, we hear echoes of Scripture in our calls to worship, our hymns, the call to confession and assurance of pardon, the words that envelop our sacraments, in our affirmation of faith, in our prayers, and even in the last words of the benediction. The Word surrounds us in this time and place. And

worship isn't the only example. Education classes for all ages revolve around the study of Scripture together, not only on Sunday mornings, but throughout the week, with coffee cup studies, brown bag lunches, and youth gatherings. We have ample copies of the Bible around in classrooms. They're even conveniently in your pew racks. It's such an important book that just a few weeks ago we presented personal copies to our third graders, with the hopes that they would read it, mark it up. It's a book we have copies of in our homes. Some well worn and passed on through generations, others with spines barely cracked. Given its prevalence in our lives of faith, it's pretty clear that the Bible is one important book.

It's an intimidating task, interpreting the Bible. If nothing else, we know what NOT to do with it, though, don't we? We are all too aware of the dangerous and hurtful ways in which the Bible has been used. The news is full of stories of "Christians" proclaiming God's message in ways that I imagine make most of us shudder. Scripture verses painted on the side of bombs and missiles. Condemning signs marched in protest, proclaiming messages of hate in the name of God. Scripture has been used to rationalize slavery, and to justify discrimination based on race, gender, or sexual orientation. Even within our own denomination, Scripture is used to draw theological lines in the sand on a variety of issues. Phrases like "Bible thumping"

and “Bible bashers” conjure all sorts of images in our mind that can make us want to steer clear of anything to do with citing Scripture, particularly when it seems to relate to a hot button issue. In “Why the Bible,” Tom Long speaks to this issue that faces many of us when it comes to Scripture. He says, “this is a strange condition. We have a book we revere but rarely read, call holy but do not really know, claim to be authoritative but treat as stranger. As a result, the Bible often functions for Presbyterians like some classified military weapon – powerful, hidden, full of secrets, understood only by experts, and brought out mainly when we do battle.¹” If, as Christians, we truly claim the Bible as God’s Word, we have a lot of work to do to prove Tom Long’s assessment wrong.

Fortunately for us this morning, the writer of 2 Timothy has some ideas. He reminds Timothy that these are the texts which he has known since he was a child. They are what have grounded him in his life and assured him salvation, and it is this foundation on which he should build. “All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” we read. “inspired by God” – or perhaps better translated literally as “God-breathed.” A living, moving text through which God speaks

¹ Thomas G. Long. “Why the Bible” in *Conversations with the Confessions: Dialogue in the Reformed Tradition*, Joseph D. Small, editor

and inspires, just as God breathed life into Adam and Eve, and continues to breathe to Timothy and even to us today.

More than just what it is, though, our text this morning gives pretty specific instructions on what to do with Scripture; “proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching.” Verse 2 of the fourth chapter is a Christian educator’s dream. It exhorts Timothy, and his community, to engage in learning together. The writer doesn’t promise that it will be easy, in fact, he reminds Timothy of all of the distractions that may keep this community from focusing on what is really important. And yet, against a world and culture that pushes against its very ideals, they are to open those sacred writings and LEARN. Second Timothy’s writer doesn’t mince words, or wax eloquently about the task at hand. Instead, he is direct and to the point. And we could take it in and nod, acknowledging the importance of Scripture and learning the Bible and go on our way. But we know it’s just not that simple

First of all, we have all of those pesky Biblical facts. Part of our ordination process in the PCUSA even includes a “Bible Content Exam.” One hundred Bible “facts” to assess whether those who wish to be ordained ministers of word and sacrament do, in fact, know

something about the Word. “Knowing the Bible” is a big task. The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life recently conducted a survey on U.S. religious knowledge with quite interesting results². The survey asked 7 questions about Biblical knowledge, such as “what is the first book of the Bible” and “Where, according to the Bible, was Jesus born?” Out of these 7 questions, the average number correct for Protestant Christians was 4.5. It seems that these biblical facts are a bit tricky sometimes, perhaps like playing trivial pursuit or Jeopardy. Naturally, if questions come up, we might get a little uneasy, worried that our own Biblical knowledge will be insufficient.

However, as Tom Long reminds us, “the objective of gaining knowledge of the Bible is not to master biblical facts or to score well in Bible Lotto but to be shaped continually by Scripture. Being a Christian, Presbyterian style, does not mean being able to prattle on incessantly *about* the Bible, but to allow the biblical story to influence all that we say and do.³” When we begin to look at the Bible as more than a book full of facts to know, we begin to open ourselves up to reading a book that can transform who we are, and perhaps inspire us to grow.

² http://pewforum.org/uploadedFiles/Topics/Belief_and_Practices/religious-knowledge-full-report.pdf

³ Thomas G. Long. “Why the Bible.” *Conversations with the Confessions: Dialogue in the Reformed Tradition*, Joseph D. Small, editor

Now, there's something we can hold on to, isn't there? A "go-to book." We live in a culture with countless books and articles giving us advice on everything from how to invest our money to what to eat for dinner to the most effective diet and exercise plan to obtain our perfect figure. Going deeper, we rely on wisdom in literature to inspire us with moving stories, fiction and non-fiction. We rush to read the latest New York Times bestseller, or what is next for Oprah's book club, hoping for a new nugget of wisdom, an opportunity to connect with others in meaningful conversation, or just the chance to get lost in a story. And yet, when we think of great books we've just read, the Bible doesn't often make its way on to the list. But maybe it should. Olive Elaine Hinnant notes that "when we place our faith in the latest book on Oprah's list, we will always be waiting for the next "new" message to come along and save us. Even though we seek the new and novel, it is God's grace that satisfies our longings. This is the sound doctrine that is referred to in this letter to Timothy."⁴

There is certainly value in reading other books, don't get me wrong. As an English major in college, I can attest to the value of the written word! We don't read Scripture in some sort of vacuum. We read it in conjunction with the many other voices that are happening

⁴ Olive Elaine Hinnant. "Pastoral Perspective: 2 Timothy 3:14-4:15" *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C, Volume 4*. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, Editors.

in our lives, as well as those contextual voices which influenced the biblical writers years ago. The work of theologians, scholars, playwrights, poets, and novelists enhances our understanding of ourselves, of each other, of the world, and even of God and Scripture. But we are remiss if we treat the Bible like just another book. After all, this is the book we call “The Word of the Lord.” Frederick Buechner notes “To read the Bible as literature is like reading *Moby Dick* as a whaling manual or *The Brothers Karamazov* for its punctuation.⁵”

So what makes this book so different? John Calvin said it well, “Now this power which is peculiar to Scripture is clear from the fact that of human writings, however artfully polished, there is none capable of affecting us at all comparably. Read Demosthenes or Cicero; read Plato, Aristotle, and others of that tribe. They will, I admit, allure you, delight you, move you, enrapture you in wonderful measure. But betake yourself from them to this sacred reading. Then, in spite of yourself, so deeply will it affect you, so penetrate your heart, so fix itself in your very marrow, that, compared with its deep impression, such vigor as the orators and philosophers have will nearly vanish. Consequently, it is easy to see that the Sacred

⁵ Frederick Buechner. *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC*

Scriptures, which so far surpass all gifts and graces of human endeavor, breathe something divine.⁶”

It simply isn't just any other book. It is a story of faith. It is our story. It is God's story. And it has the potential to blow our minds if we let it. If we have the nerve to actually open it and read. Karl Barth says that “reading the Bible is like looking out of the window and seeing everybody on the street shading their eyes with their hands and gazing up into the sky toward something which is hidden from us by the roof. They are pointing up. They are speaking strange words. They are very excited. Something is happening which we can't see happening. Or something is about to happen. Something beyond our comprehension has caught them up and is seeking to lead them on 'from land to land for strange, intense, uncertain, and yet mysteriously well-planned service.' To read the Bible is to try to read the expression on their faces. To listen to the words of the Bible is to try to catch the sound of the queer, dangerous, and compelling words they seem to hear.⁷”

⁶ John Calvin. *Institutes of the Christian Religion. Book I Chapter VIII.*

⁷ Frederick Buechner. *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC*

Yes, the Bible is a tricky and complicated book. It can bring out virtually every emotion under the sun. It can make us want to cling to it fiercely and throw it against the wall in disdain. It's something that we can't ever fully figure out. Thousands of years later, we are still wrestling with these texts. But maybe, just maybe, that's some of the point. And perhaps that's the good news of it all. That even after thousands of years and infinite skeptics and critics and questions, God continues to speak to us through these words. As Calvin and Barth, and countless others have said, it transcends something deep within us that moves us towards something more – towards a closer relationship with God. It is here where we find the story of God's people. Here where we read of God's love, where we are challenged with what it means to respond to this love in lives of obedience and discipleship, where we are reminded of what it means to love one another, and where we hear the good news of salvation. Here, in this book, that has the ability to transform us in radical ways. To breathe new life into us if we open ourselves to the presence of God's Spirit. Because, at the end of the day, it is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.