

2 Timothy 3:14-4:5

2Tim. 3:14 But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, 15 and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. 16 All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, 17 so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.

2Tim. 4:1 In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I solemnly urge you: 2 proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching. 3 For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, 4 and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths. 5 As for you, always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully.

“All scripture is inspired.” I want us to think about that one statement this morning. And I want us to carefully define each of those words.

WHAT IS SCRIPTURE?

First, what is scripture? The word translated “scripture” can also be translated “the writings”, and it usually referred to the Hebrew Bible, what we call the Old Testament.

Certainly this was part of what Paul meant when he said that “all scripture is inspired by God”. Paul was a scholar of the Hebrew Bible before he became a Christian. He studied under the best rabbis and was a prominent leader.

However when Paul was confronted by the risen Christ on the road to Damascus his interpretation of those scriptures changed dramatically. Instead of being a persecutor of the church he became the church’s chief evangelist.

The old story, the Old Testament of God’s grace toward his chosen people became the new story, the New Testament of God’s grace and salvation for the whole world.

Earlier in this chapter Paul tells Timothy to continue in what he has learned, both from Paul and from the sacred writings that he studied as a child. (See 2 Timothy 3:10,14) Though Paul never claimed that his letters were to be considered scripture, he came close to it, asking that his letters be read by all the churches, no doubt alongside Old Testament readings. (Colossians 4:17; I Thessalonians 5:27)

2

In some instances Paul claims to be speaking in the name of and with the authority of Christ, and he calls his message the Word of God. (2 Corinthians 2:17; Galatians 4:14) Paul claims his words are not taught by human wisdom but by the Spirit. (1 Corinthians 2:13) Peter in his second letter talks about the writings of Paul as scripture and refers to the Old Testament as the “other scriptures.” (2 Peter 3:16)

In 1 Timothy 5:18 Paul couples a quotation from Deuteronomy 25:4 with a saying of Jesus recorded in Luke 10:7. Apparently Paul and the early church already considered the sayings of Jesus to be scripture and there was a common oral tradition that was taught to new Christians.

So, when Paul says that all scripture is inspired, he is referring to what we call the Old and New Testament.

So there is no misunderstanding on this point the Westminster Confession of Faith even lists the 39 books of the Old Testament and the 27 books of the New Testament. These writings are the Holy Scriptures. These writings and no others are to be considered the final word when it comes to faith and practice.

This of course was one of the big doctrinal points of the Reformation. How do you settle disputes when it comes to faith and practice? According the Reformers, Scripture alone (and not church tradition) was to be the final judge when it came to matters of faith and practice. We are to be a people of the book, and that book is the Bible.

Now does that mean we ignore all other books? No. We believe that all knowledge comes from God and that we should learn as much as possible. But, when it comes to matters of faith and practice, what we believe and what we are to do, then the Bible takes precedence over all other knowledge.

Paul put it this way. He said that all scripture is inspired by God and “is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.” Teaching refers to the teaching of doctrine and reproof refers to the correction of heresy. Training in righteousness is about moral formation and correction refers to forbidding certain immoral practices.

In other words what are leaders in the church called to do? They are called to teach sound doctrine and right living. The Bible is our guide.

ALL SCRIPTURE

But, some of you might rightly object, “The Bible might be inspired by God, but not all parts of the Bible are inspiring! Some parts of the Bible are hard to read and understand. Some parts of the Bible even seem to contradict the essentials of the Christians faith.”

If any of you have tried to read through the whole Bible you know what I mean. There are parts of the Bible that will curl your hair. How do we know which parts of the Bible to use when deciding a difficult doctrinal or moral issue?

The answer is this. We use the whole Bible.

Paul told Timothy, “All scripture is inspired by God.”

The key word is “all.” In other words every scripture passage is important in its own way. But, in order to understand the bigger picture when it comes to faith and practice, we must use another important principle of the Reformation. Scripture interprets scripture.

When the Reformers found a passage of scripture that was troubling or hard to interpret, they turned to other passages of scripture on the same subject that were easier to understand.

Let me give you an example of how this works.

A few weeks ago I read a passage from the Old Testament, Psalm 137 that had some disturbing things to say. The Psalmist cries out for revenge and asks that the children of his oppressors be killed in the most horrible way.

How could a terrible statement like this be the word of God? It seems to directly contradict the words of Jesus when he says things like love your enemies and do good to those who persecute you.

The Psalmist was in exile in Babylon. He had probably seen children murdered in a horrible way. It looked like they would never go home again. He is filled with rage and a desire for vengeance. But, he does not act upon that rage and desire for vengeance. Instead he remembers that the Bible says that vengeance is not ours to take. It is the Lord's.

So the Psalmist in an act of faith takes his rage to God, and leaves it there.

Vengeance belonging to the Lord is not only an Old Testament theme. It is also a New Testament theme as well. For example, in Romans 12:19 we read, “Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, ‘**Vengeance is mine**, I will repay, says the Lord.’” You can see how in this case I used a broader view of scripture to interpret a particular passage.

Some of you told me that this sermon was very helpful to you. You were dealing with anger and a desire for revenge in your own life. The answer to that problem was not to push it down but to honestly bring it to God and trust God to deal with the injustice.

THE CLIFF NOTES OF SCRIPTURE

So, if all scripture is inspired by God, we have been given a big task. How can anyone know all scripture except perhaps for the religious professionals who study scripture for a living?

Well, in the Presbyterian Church we have our own biblical version of Cliff Notes.

(Most of you know about Cliff Notes. Your literature teacher wanted you to read Moby Dick, but you were behind in your reading. So, you went to the bookstore and bought a summary of the book, the Cliff Notes.)

My teachers encouraged the use of Cliff Notes because reading those notes as we read a good book helped us understand the important points and could even aid our learning. But, of course in order to get maximum benefit from the Cliff's Notes we had to actually read the book.

Our confessions of faith are the Cliff Notes of the Bible. Our confessions neatly summarize the great themes of the Bible. When church officers are ordained and installed must answer this question in the affirmative,

“Do you sincerely receive and adopt the essential tenets of the Reformed faith as expressed in the confessions of the church as authentic and reliable expositions of what Scripture leads us to believe and do, and will you be instructed and led by those confessions as you lead the people of God?”

We have a minister in our Presbytery who says that when we ordain officers the first thing we ask them to do is lie! We have so many confessions from so many different periods of history that it is difficult for new officers to read and understand them all, much less sort out the “essential tenants” of the faith from their reading.

But, though most of us can't understand everything, we can understand something. Most of us know the Apostle's Creed. That's one of our confessions and that confession speaks of essentials that we believe.

And if you're serious about the Bible study, pick up a copy of our Book of Confessions. (I'm sure we have some copies in the library. You can also download a copy from the PCUSA website.)

But, don't start reading the oldest confessions in the front of the book. Read the more modern confessions in the back of the book, especially A Brief Statement of Faith and the Confession of 1967. These statements of faith will give you a broad overview of what scripture says. They are the Cliff Notes of the Bible.

Of course as my literature teacher said these notes are to be used only as a guide. We are to read the real thing, the Bible. And the confessions remind us that if what the Bible says and what the confessions say differ; we are to always go with the Bible.

But, the confessions do help us interpret scripture with scripture. They remind us of the broad themes of the Bible and put any particular passage within the context of the whole message.

In fact if you are having trouble reading the Bible, I would suggest that you get a copy of A Brief Statement of Faith and read it. Then go through the Scripture references in each section.

Read the references in context. In some cases that may mean reading an entire book of the Bible.

Use a brief devotional commentary to help you. I would suggest Barclay's Daily Study Bible for the New Testament and the Daily Study Bible Old Testament series. Both of these are in our library.

In this way you can begin to discover of using all of scripture as a guide to faith and practice.

GOD BREATHED

So scripture is the final authority when it comes to faith and practice. All of scripture is to be used when we are deciding questions of morality and doctrine. And third all scripture is inspired.

What do we mean by inspiration? Inspiration is often in the eye of the beholder. Inspiration can be a very subjective matter.

For example, some of us might be inspired by the performance of a football team. Some of us might be inspired by a good book or a good movie. And yet others could care less about the latest book or who is playing whom in football.

That's not the kind of inspiration we're taking about here.

In fact John Stott in his commentary on this passage suggests that instead of talking about inspiration when it comes to the Bible we should talk about "spiration" or "expiration".

The Bible is not something that we take in and then decide whether it is inspiring or not. The Bible is something that God breathes out. The Bible is the Holy Bible because it comes from God. It is sacred. We do not judge it. It judges us.

A literal translation of the Greek word, “theopneustos” is God-breathed. This hearkens back to the creation story. God spoke and the universe came into existence. God breathed into the first human beings, and they were given life.

In the same way, scripture is the breath of God. It is God’s way of touching the world. It is the means by which the Spirit of God comes into our lives and into our hearts. According to Paul the purpose of Scripture is to instruct us for salvation through Jesus Christ.

A MANUAL OF SALVATION

This is important. This is why we read the Bible. It is a manual of salvation.

I took a course called “The Bible as Literature” in college. The course was okay. I learned some interesting things about the Bible.

But, as a believer in many ways that course was not very satisfying. I grew up in a tradition where we thought the Bible was God’s word, and we didn’t read the Bible as literature. We read the Bible as a roadmap to salvation.

The same should be true for us. We do not read the Bible primarily as disinterested scholars or historians. We do not read the Bible primarily to understand its role in the history of literature.

We read the Bible because we believe that in the pages of this book we meet the Creator of heaven and earth. We read the Bible because we believe that in these pages we meet our Savior. We read the Bible because we believe that God speaks to us in and through the pages of this book.

I like the way the words of our first hymn put it in the last verse,

“For all the writings that survived, for leaders long ago, who sifted, chose, and then preserved the Bible that we know. Give thanks and find its promise yet; our comfort, strength and call, the working model of our faith, alive with hope for all.”

(Deep in the Shadows of the Past, Presbyterian Hymnal)

HUMAN AND DIVINE

Now the scriptures come from the very breath of God, but they are at the same time quite human documents.

Once again let me go back to the sermon I preached a few weeks ago on Psalm 137. The Psalmist expressed the quite human emotions of rage and a desire for revenge.

In the gospel of John, John the writer of the gospel always talks about the disciple whom Jesus loved, and we think he may have been talking about himself! The vanity of the apostle seems to have seeped into the story.

Throughout the Bible we see this human element. Unlike the scriptures in many other religious traditions the Bible is not a set of pithy sayings detached from any real life context.

On the contrary the biblical faith is set in the real world. When we read the Bible we can identify with the emotions and the weaknesses. The Bible is a human book that in many cases hits us where we live.

In my opinion this does not detract from the divine power of scripture. On the contrary this enhances the power of scripture. As the Word became flesh in the birth, life, death and resurrection of the Jesus, so the Word becomes flesh in the human and divine story of the Bible.

The human/divine struggle is reenacted on a daily basis. We come to see ourselves in the story, and that's what gives scripture its power.

As Jacob wrestled with that stranger (who turned out to be God) by the Jabbok River so we wrestle with God through the intersection of our story with the Story.

NOT A STORY FOR ITCHING EARS

The writer of Hebrews said,
 “Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. (Hebrews 4:12)

This human/divine word is like a surgeon's scalpel. It cuts to the chase. It points out and helps us eliminate those things in our life that need to go.

In this regard the Bible is hard to read. Most of us don't like to have our shortcomings pointed out. And the Bible is especially good at doing that.

Paul recognized this when he told Timothy, “For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires ...” (2 Timothy 4:3)

I like that phrase “having itching ears.” One commentator translated it as an “itch for novelty.”

In the business world the formula for success is to find a need and fill it. That is, we tell people what they want to hear and give them what they want. We scratch their itch.

In attempting to build the church many churches have subtly (or not so subtly) changed the gospel to make it more palatable to the modern palate. And this is a great temptation for us as well.

According to Paul the answer to this is to “be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully.”

When the world is intoxicated with the novel and questionable teachings, it is the job of the Christian leader to remain sober. That word translated sober can also mean balanced and self-controlled.

I have found that when things get crazy in the church, the promises and the warnings of the Bible bring me back to earth. The scriptures enable me to have a quiet confidence in troubled times, and they give me a message of hope and comfort that will still be with us when the current fads come to an end.

A church had this message on its signboard, “Under the same management for over 2,000 years.” I find that to be a comforting thought. In this rapidly changing world there is something that does not change, something that is never outdated, God’s Word.

LIVING ON THE WORD

An English preacher of the 19th century describes studying a beech tree one afternoon. Like a skilled naturalist he noted the color of the leaves, the texture of the bark and the intricacy of the branches. Such study was, for him, a form of grateful prayer to God as rich as any study in the library.

On this particular day, he noticed a squirrel running up the branches, leaping from one to the other, playing in every nook of the great tree. The squirrel moved among the branches as if the trunk were Main Street and the smaller branches country lanes or alleys; somewhere among the branches were his house and daily food.

As he reflected imaginatively on this inquisitive, frolicking squirrel, so wonderfully at home in the beech tree, he drew this analogy to our relationship with Scripture.

“Well, now, the way to deal with God’s word is not merely to contemplate it, or study it, as a student does; but to live on it, as that squirrel lives on his beech tree. Let it be to you, spiritually, your house, your home, your food, your medicine, your clothing, the one essential element of your soul’s life and growth.”

This being “at home” in Scripture is certainly an alternative to the seemingly endless quest for a new philosophy that is going to fulfill our every desire.

Jerome described the Bible as a lake, where one may stay on the surface or choose to explore the infinite depths of truth contained within it. I think God has called us to go deep sea diving!

Remember, the Bible is more like an instruction manual than a novel. You have to give it a try in order to appreciate the message.

I invite you to give God's word a try this week.

Let it truly be a lamp unto your feet and a light unto your path. (Psalm 119:105)

Amen.