

“...And God’s Word To Me”

Luke 11:27-28; 1 Thessalonians 2:13; 2 Timothy 3:14-17

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It is always a good day in the life of the church when we give away Bibles to our children, youth, and young adults. Here at Mason Presbyterian Church we typically do this at two different points in the lives of our young people, ranging from a child-friendly, easy-to-read Bible translation to our rising third-graders, to a more sophisticated Bible with a variety of help topics and study notes to our rising ninth-graders. For the truth of the matter is that the Bible is hard to understand, so some translations err on the side of making the meaning abundantly plain, sometimes at the expense of precision and accuracy; while other translations err on the side of literal accuracy, sometimes at the expense of readability. There is not one translation that stands head and shoulders above any other. The fundamental assumption, of course, is that we want our young people to *read* this book; to *study* this book; to *profit from* this book – and it’s always a joy to me when we have young people who go to the effort of really trying to read it, understand it, and apply it to their daily lives.

But what *is* the Bible? What’s so special about *this* book? The word “Bible” comes from the Greek word *biblia*, which simply means “books.” To say that this book is “the Bible” is to say that it is a collection of *books*. 66 of them, to be precise; 39 in the Old Testament, and 27 in the New. If you’re Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox; if your Bible contains the Apocrypha, a secondary collection of writings between the Old Testament and the New, then your Bible contains another 12 to 15 books, depending on how you count. The Bible, then, whether Protestant, Catholic, or Orthodox, is a *library*.

But why is this library important? Why are these ancient texts, written in foreign languages by a bunch of men who lived two to three thousand years ago nearly halfway around the globe, so significant? Why are they *still* worth reading now, in a completely different culture and a completely different era in human history? What do we hope those boys and girls, young men and women, who received Bibles this morning will *gain* from this collection of books?

To answer those questions, I want to turn your attention to what the Presbyterian Church has historically said about the Bible. A few weeks ago I mentioned a document called the *Westminster Confession of Faith* that was written in London in the 17th century that became the theological centerpiece of the Presbyterian tradition for the next 300 years. That document opens with a three-page commentary on what the Bible is. The language is archaic; let me try to summarize the key points:

First: we can learn about God from nature, from creation itself, and from the way God works in the world, but we cannot learn all that we *need* to know about God from those things alone. They do not teach us about God's will, nor do they teach us about our salvation. So "it pleased the Lord ... to reveal himself" in a special way, a *written* way, so that we can learn his will, and preserve his truth, and share it with others; so that we will be equipped for our struggle against sin, and our stand against evil.

Second: These 66 books in the Old and New Testaments "are given by inspiration of God." They are not just the creation of human intellect or imagination. God used human messengers and human words to communicate to us the divine Word of God.

Third: While the church can tell us how good these books are, how sound the teaching is, how majestic the style, how incomparably excellent they are in so many ways, the only way that we are fully *convinced* of their "infallible truth" and "divine authority" is because the Holy Spirit *continues* to work in our hearts, persuading and convincing us. That is to say, it is not the *Church* that grants the Bible its authority, but the *Holy Spirit*. People like me can talk all we want – but it's not going to do a whit of good unless the Holy Spirit is working in *your* heart, to help you see the Bible's truth and authority.

Fourth: Everything there is to know about the glory of God, the salvation of humankind, faith, and life, is either explicitly or implicitly revealed in these books. But in order to properly understand these things, we need the Holy Spirit to guide us. (That's why we pray for the Holy Spirit to speak.)

Fifth: Some parts of scripture are very difficult to understand. However, those things that "are *necessary* to be known, believed, and observed, for salvation," are very clearly spelled out, so clearly that it doesn't require advanced education degrees to understand them.

Sixth: God gave us the Old Testament in Hebrew and the New Testament in Greek. Whenever there's a dispute about the proper meaning of particular verses, we should check the Hebrew and Greek. (Why is why, in our denomination, candidates for ordained ministry are required to learn *both* Hebrew and Greek.) Also, if you're confused about the meaning of any part of the Bible, use *other* parts of the Bible to help you figure it out. Some places speak more clearly than others.

Seventh, and finally: None of us are the final authority on *any* matter pertaining to Christian faith and life. There have been lots of Christians over two thousand years, and some of them have been very wise, but even the wisest among them is not as wise as the Holy Spirit. The *final* authority, on *any* matter of Christian faith and practice, is the Holy Spirit, as it speaks to us through the scriptures.

In a nutshell, that has been the official position of the Presbyterian Church throughout most of our four-hundred-year history. Nowadays we supplement that with similar testimony from other confessions. One confession reminds us that "God himself spoke to the fathers, prophets, apostles, and still speaks to us through the Holy Scriptures." Another reminds us that "the Scriptures are not one witness among others, but *the* witness without parallel," and that "the Scriptures, given under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, are nevertheless the words of men, conditioned by the language, thought forms, and literary fashions of the places and times at which they were written," with the result that they "reflect views of life, history, and the cosmos that were then current." Scripture is, so to speak,

fully human and fully divine, just like Jesus. Too many people think these are just *human* words. That is not, and has never been, the official position of *this* church, or any other Christian denomination.

Our confessions also teach us that “God’s word is spoken to his church today where the Scriptures are faithfully preached and attentively read in dependence on the illumination of the Holy Spirit and with readiness to receive their truth and direction.” That is to say, if we want to hear the Word of God, then people like me have to preach the Scriptures faithfully, and people like you have to read them attentively, and *all* of us have to ask the Holy Spirit to help us understand them, *and* we all have to be *ready and willing* to receive God’s truth and direction for our daily lives. That’s a tall order!

So, to come back to the question I asked earlier: Why is this library important? Why is it *still* worth reading? What do we hope those boys and girls, young men and women, who received Bibles this morning will *gain* from this collection of books? Simply put: *knowledge of God. Understanding of God’s will for their life. Faith in and salvation through Jesus Christ. Equipping for daily, faithful living.* All the things that we *can’t* get from reading any *other* book – as good as other books may be. There’s something *unique* here. Something *special*. Something *sacred*. There’s a reason why we call it *holy*.

Every time we ordain somebody to the office of Deacon, or Elder, or Minister of Word and Sacrament, we ask them to affirm two things about the Bible. First, we ask that they “accept the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be, by the Holy Spirit, the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the Church universal.” That’s a fancy way of saying that there’s no other book that points to Jesus Christ the way this one does, and that this book is *trustworthy* in what it has to say about him. If you want to know about Jesus Christ, *this* is the place to go. Candidates for ordination have already said – in a previous question – that they affirm that Jesus Christ is Lord, Savior, and Head of the Church. To understand what those terms truly mean, well, the Scriptures are the place to go.

We also ask Deacons, Elders, and Ministers of Word and Sacrament to affirm that the Bible is “God’s word to you.” The Word of God, *for them*, on an individual basis. The first affirmation is theoretical; the second affirmation is practical. The first is abstract; the second is concrete. The first is universal; the second is very, very *personal*. God’s Word *to you*. The book that guides and directs your daily living. As Jesus said, “Blessed are those who hear the Word of God *and obey it.*” Paul commends the Thessalonians for *receiving* and *accepting* the scriptures as they actually are, not just the words of man but the very Word of God, and for letting the scriptures *be at work* in their lives. For that is what the Bible does; it has a way of *working in us*, getting “under our skin,” so to speak, teaching us, rebuking us, correcting us, training us in righteousness, equipping us for every good work. To say that the Bible is “God’s Word to you” is to say that it *does those things* in your personal life. That it’s *at work* in your life.

That’s what we’re hoping for, in the lives of these boys and girls, young men and women. That this book will be *at work* in their lives. That it will shape them and form them and guide them all the days of their life. That they will learn about *the will of God*, and about *salvation*, and about *faith* and *life* – the things that *really matter*, the things that will bless them, and enrich them, and fortify them. And that this book will truly become for them *the very Word of God*, through the power of the Holy Spirit.

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