

## *Word of God*

**Deuteronomy 6:4-9**Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. <sup>5</sup> You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. <sup>6</sup> Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. <sup>7</sup> Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. <sup>8</sup> Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, <sup>9</sup>and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

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

**Matthew 7:11-12**If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him! <sup>12</sup> "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets."

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Last week we noticed that, "The Bible tells Christians how our spiritual ancestors . . . saw things. The Bible includes their experiences of God, their stories about God, their understandings of life with God, and how we should live. It includes their wisdom, insight, and convictions. It also includes their limitations, blind spots, and misapprehensions."<sup>1</sup>

Most people own a Bible, but spend little time with it. Many plan to read it, but seldom get around to it. Others start to read it but find the language hard to understand, especially if they are reading an older translation that uses English of the time of Shakespeare. Still others find the diversity of literary styles and the ancient cultures to be confusing. In addition, we face three temptations: "1. The worship of the Bible, making of it an object of veneration and ascribing to it the glory due to God. 2. The worship of the text, in which the letter is given an inappropriate superiority over the spirit. 3. The worship of the culture, in which the Bible is forced to conform to the norms of the prevailing culture. We may call these three temptations *bibliolatry*, *literalism*, and *culturism*."<sup>2</sup> Each one can be subtle and creep up on us so slowly and softly that we're unaware.

Culturism, forcing the Bible to conform to the surrounding culture, sometimes seems almost unavoidable. We can't help but read and understand the Bible through the lens of our life and the society in which we live. The royalty of England, France, and other countries in Europe once claimed that they ruled by divine right. As the monarch on the throne, their authority was given to them by God. Times changed, and many people today equate democracy with God's will. Cultures that were very male dominated claimed that was the divinely mandated order of things. Cultures with slaves insisted that such was the will of God. Foreign invaders claimed that the land was God's gift to them as the chosen people. Uncomfortable change has been resisted, seen as contrary to God's will for us to lead modest lives. When bras were introduced to the realm of women's clothing, those who wore them were brazen hussies. In the 1960s, those who went without bras were called tramps and worse. On both occasions, Bibles were waved and quoted to support the current cultural viewpoint.

We can worship the text of the Bible. We refer to the Bible as the "Word of God." Actually, that phrase has two meanings. Christ is the Word of God. John's gospel begins, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. <sup>2</sup> He was in the beginning with God." Jesus is the Word become flesh. Jesus is the living message of God, the life that is the example of how God would have us live. We often say, "actions speak louder than words." Christ's life is the lesson

we need to learn. In Jesus, we see God's character and passion more clearly than anywhere else. But we also refer to the Bible as the word of God and it's a real temptation to worship the text. In John 8:3-11, the scribes and Pharisees brought a woman before Jesus and referenced **Leviticus 20:10**: "If a man commits adultery with the wife of his neighbor, both the adulterer and the adulteress shall be put to death." They knew the text exactly. They challenged Jesus to see if he would uphold the text. Of course, they also ignored the history of how this text had not been enforced by their own predecessors. You may remember the story of King David and Bathsheba. Despite their adultery - with murder thrown in - neither of them was stoned to death. One should also note that the woman, but not the man, was brought to Jesus. Jesus adds an interpretive slant to the situation before him, saying, "If you are sinless, then you're qualified to enforce punishment on this woman." And then Jesus refuses to condemn the woman. When the Bible and what we see in Jesus conflict, Jesus trumps the Bible.

We call the Bible the word of God. "Word," not "words." When I was in school, if my teacher said that he wanted to have a word with me, I knew that there was some message that he wanted me to hear. After the scripture lessons are read in worship, the reader says, "This is the word of the Lord." The claim isn't that God has been quoted, but that by careful reading and prayerful interpretation we can find God's message to us.<sup>3</sup> Sometimes we can overlook the fact that the writings in the Bible weren't seen as sacred scripture when they were written. Paul is a clear example. Paul wasn't sitting down to write scripture. He wrote correspondence, letters to people and churches. Sometimes he made a point about whether he was writing God's will or his own opinion. **1 Corinthians 7:25** "Now concerning virgins, I have no command of the Lord, but I give my opinion . . . " **1 Corinthians 7:39-40** "A wife is bound as long as her husband lives. But if the husband dies, she is free to marry anyone she wishes, only in the Lord. But in my judgment she is more blessed if she remains as she is." **1 Corinthians 7:10** "To the married I give this command-- not I but the Lord-- that the wife should not separate from her husband."

Peter Gomes once said that, "Scripture is . . . understood to be a human response to the initiative of God."<sup>4</sup> That's certainly true of the Psalms. They're cries of praise and complaint about how the writers saw God's action or inaction. Exodus was written as a response to God's actions in liberating the Hebrews from slavery. The gospels were written in response to what people had heard, seen, and felt when Jesus lived and taught. All through the ages, people experienced God's initiative and had to tell about it. That's a very different thing than reading the Bible like the words on the page are all God's own words, whispered in the ear of each of the Bible's writers. In fact, that's a fairly recent approach to scripture. In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century conservative Protestants developed ideas of biblical inerrancy and by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century proclaimed a doctrine of inspiration and literal interpretation that was stricter than ever before in the history of the church.

In the 1500s, as the Reformation began, a favorite motto of the Protestants was *sola scriptura*, which means "scripture alone." At that time, the Roman Church claimed that its authority was greater than that of the Bible. Church officials claimed that their authority was directly handed down to them from Jesus and the apostles and that therefore, their authority was higher than that of the Bible. The Reformation principle of *sola scriptura* (by scripture alone) was a reaction against the higher authority claimed by the Catholic Church. The Protestant's counter-claim was that the church was subject to scripture, rather than the other way around.

However, if we hear the phrase *sola scriptura*, and we think that scripture alone means that we are to read the Bible without any consideration of history or context, then we slip into Bible idolatry, or bibliolatry. We turn the Bible into an idol when we think that we have the final and complete understanding and interpretation of the Bible. But the God of the Bible is alive and lively, always challenging us to move beyond the ruts that we live in. For John Calvin, the authority of scripture wasn't in the words alone, but in the activity of the Holy Spirit as the scriptures and the believer interact with each other. This is why we pray for illumination before we study the scripture together in the

sermon. And incidentally, "A sermon that does not attempt to address the Bible is in fact not a sermon."<sup>5</sup>

We call it the Holy Bible. But the Bible isn't holy in itself. The word Holy refers to the Holy One found in it. We find God in the scriptures when we look at the whole picture. These days, you hear people use the expression, "The devil is in the details." Well, in the scriptures, we find God in the main themes. Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets." The Golden Rule, we call it. Treat other people like you want them to treat you. And Jesus said, "That's the theme, that's the core, that's the point of the laws, the rules, and the preaching of the prophets. That's what it's all about."

Now, if we had read the texts in the Bible that talked about slavery with the light of the golden rule shining brightly on them, we would have understood that God's message was in some verses more than others. If we had remembered that the Lord requires us to do justice and love kindness, we would have seen that some texts were less inspired by God and more influenced by ideology and culturism. Brothers and sisters, God gave us hearts that we might feel – feel love for each other, feel pain so that we will feel compassion and have empathy, and feel anger at injustice so that we will get up and do justice. And God gave us brains, so that we might reason and think. If we read the Bible without giving it serious thought, if we deal with others without feeling and compassion, then we are rejecting the gifts that God has given us. Many ancient rules about life as a community lose their strength when they're examined in the light of the overarching command of love. When some texts are subjected to the principle of the golden rule, the limitations of the writers and the influence of culturism begins to be seen. Don't leave your brain in the parking lot when you come to worship. Don't shut down your feelings and your powers of reasoning when you open the Bible. In the scriptures you will find God, but only if you go beyond simply reading the Bible. God and God's message is found through study, through reasoning, and through love. Amen.

**John 8:3-11** The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery; and making her stand before all of them, <sup>4</sup> they said to him, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. <sup>5</sup> Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" <sup>6</sup> They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. <sup>7</sup> When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." <sup>8</sup> And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground. <sup>9</sup> When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. <sup>10</sup> Jesus straightened up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" <sup>11</sup> She said, "No one, sir." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again."

<sup>1</sup> Marcus J. Borg, *Speaking Christian* (New York, Harper One, 2011) p 58

<sup>2</sup> Peter J. Gomes, *The Good Book*, (New York, William Morrow and Co., 1996) p 36

<sup>3</sup> Rarely does a writing in the Bible claim to be the words of God. (Deuteronomy 1:1, Hosea 1:1, Joel 1:1, Micah 1:1, Zechariah 1:1, Malachi 1:1, and Revelation 1:1)

<sup>4</sup> Peter J. Gomes, *The Good Book*, (New York, William Morrow and Co., 1996) p 14

<sup>5</sup> Peter J. Gomes, *The Good Book*, (New York, William Morrow and Co., 1996) p 19