

“Words, Words, Words”

Deuteronomy 6: 1-9; 2 Timothy 3: 16-17; John 20: 30-31

September 8, 2002

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Sing: “The B-I-B-L-E, now that’s the book for me. I stand alone on the Word of God,
The B-I-B-L-E”

“Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so. Little ones to Him belong, they are
weak, but He is strong. Yes, Jesus loves me. Yes, Jesus loves me. Yes, Jesus loves me.

The Bible tells me so.”

(PRAYER)

It’s amazing sometimes how much truth can be contained in simple children’s
songs. On this the first Sunday of the new Church School year—the day we start new
Sunday School classes for children, teens and adults of all ages—we recommit ourselves
to studying and standing on the Word of God—the B-I-B-L-E! We also return to the
central truth of the Bible—that Jesus does indeed love us. A great theologian who wrote
complex tomes on theology was once asked to summarize his theology. Those who asked
expected a lofty answer. Instead, the great theologian paused for a while and then said:
“Jesus loves me this I know for the Bible tells me so.”

The Bible. The Word of God. At the heart of our faith tradition in the
Presbyterian Church is a strong and firm belief in the Bible and a strong emphasis on the
Bible being taught and preached in the church as well as taught and studied in the home.

My mother, a Presbyterian now for 46 years, used to get really fired up when
she’d have someone who wasn’t a part of their church say to her, “We go to a Bible-
believing church.” Mom would say afterwards, “What do they think **we** believe in, *The*

Ladies Home Journal? We believe in the Bible, the minister preaches from the Bible.

Aren't we a Bible-believing church?"

We are indeed. But, admittedly, we have not always appreciated the treasure we have in the Bible—in God's Word. We have not always delighted in God's Word. Frankly, we've often found it boring, irrelevant, incomprehensible. Sometimes we've found it too challenging, too "out-there" to want to really study it. Some of us feel like Mark Twain who said: "It's not the parts of the Bible that I **don't** understand that bother me, it's the parts I **do** understand." The Bible seems so controversial. For some of us, the Bible is just a bunch of words, words, words that seem distant and lifeless.

What a contrast that is to what we read in Deuteronomy! "Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. 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 are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates."

What a contrast between the Bible as just "words, words, words" to what the choir has sung for us: "Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path." What a contrast to "The B-I-B-L-E, now that's the book for me. I stand alone on the Word of God, the B-I-B-L-E."

With all our mixed feelings about the Bible, it may be helpful to examine why we have the Bible. What does the Bible say its purpose is?

In my former Presbytery, as in all Presbyteries, candidates who were becoming ministers had to be examined by the other ministers and elders. Not a real fun experiences

for those being examined, I assure you. One time, someone asked the candidates (and there were several that day) “If you were on a shipwrecked on a deserted island what books would you most want to have with you?” (Not one of the deeper questions I’ve heard asked). The first candidate said well, of course I’d want the Bible, and John Calvin’s Institutes and the Presbyterian Hymnal. The next candidate answered similarly. When they got to the third guy, he said: No offense, but I’d want to have a book with me called “How to Survive on a Deserted Island” or better yet, “How to Build a Boat to Get Off the Deserted Island.”

Part of the problem with the Bible is understanding what the purpose of the Bible is. Some have been frustrated that the Bible isn’t a complete “how-to” book. But is that the Bible’s purpose? Some have been frustrated that Bible isn’t a more complete and thorough history book. But is that the purpose of the Bible? Some have been frustrated that the Bible does not provide complete scientific information and explanations. But is that the purpose of the Bible? Some have been frustrated that the Bible isn’t a recipe book—just put these ingredients together in your life and it will all turn out just right. But is that the purpose of the Bible?

Presbyterians affirm that: “Scripture provides the knowledge of what is necessary for the glory of God and for human faith, life, and salvation.” (p. 14, *Presbyterian Use of Holy Scripture*)

In John’s gospel, John says (of that particular writing) “But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.”

We have been given scripture primarily to lead us into relationship with the Triune God—to lead us in the way of salvation. The scriptures are our rule for faith and life. The word of God is a lamp for our wandering feet and a light for our crooked paths. The scriptures provide us “correction and instruction” and “equip us for every good work.” But first and foremost, Gods’ Word helps us “come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the son of God, and that through believing we may have life in His name.”

Story of orator reciting the 23rd Psalm “The Lord Is My Shepherd.” Applause. Another man (not a trained orator) spoke and there was silence/awe. The orator was asked later what made the difference. He replied, “I know the shepherd’s psalm, but it is clear that that man knows the shepherd.” The purpose of the Bible is to guide us into a knowledge of and relationship with the living Lord, the good shepherd, God in Jesus Christ.

Well, if its goal is to point us to Jesus, then do we really need to bother with the Old Testament? After all, it’s so BORING. After all, it’s so violent. And it has all those “begats.”

Presbyterians have always emphasized that we study the whole Bible. The Old and the New Testament go hand in hand. To understand the New Testament we need the Old Testament. To understand the Old Testament, I believe we need the New Testament.

My friend is a Bible translator in the Philippines. The phrase, “The Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world” is a familiar phrase to the Filipino people with whom Steve works. Many have heard those words used in the context of worship. But when Steve, in his translation work, asked some of the people, “Who is the Lamb of God?” They didn’t really know. We cannot fully understand the power of the words

“Lamb of God” as referring to Jesus unless we have understood the sacrificial system of the Old Testament in which animals were sacrificed to God to seek forgiveness for sins and a right relationship with God. These sacrifices had to be made repeatedly. Jesus then becomes the sacrificial Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world once and for all. It’s impossible to understand the Good Friday and Easter readings that refer to Jesus as the Passover Lamb unless we’ve read the Old Testament story of the Passover—the deliverance of God’s people out of bondage in Egypt to freedom in the promised land, deliverance secured for them when the blood of an unblemished lamb was placed on their doorposts so that the angel of death would **pass over** them. How much clearer it becomes that Jesus is our Passover lamb—the perfect, unblemished one sacrificed for us—whose blood guarantees that death will also pass over us. We need to understand the Old Testament in order to fully understand the New Testament.

I also think reading and understanding the New Testament helps us better appreciate the Old Testament. For me, the story of Abraham and Isaac (where Abraham is commanded by God to sacrifice Isaac—ram provided by God, Abraham’s son Isaac is spared because God provides) becomes ever more powerful for me in light of the New Testament, knowing that God did sacrifice his own son Jesus. What Abraham was spared, God didn’t spare himself. When I read the story of Abraham and Isaac in the Old Testament in light of the New Testament, it has even greater power and meaning for me.

Well, Ok, you might be saying. Old Testament, New Testament, it's all the same. I still don't have much use for the Bible because it's been used to support all sorts of positions and views. And even if I do read and study the Bible, it seems there is so much that is still so unclear. How in the world do we interpret scripture?

Well, we always try to keep in mind the purpose of Scripture—to guide us toward God and salvation through Jesus Christ.

Second, we try to interpret Scripture in light of other scriptures, not in isolation.

1) The interpretation of Scripture by Scripture (see page 21 in *The Church Speaks Curriculum*)—example of Mark 16: 17-18 – “says that those who believe in Jesus Christ will be able to pick up snakes and drink poisons without harm. There are groups of Christians who take these verses as commandments and use rattlesnakes, copperheads and poisons in their worship. However, there are no other texts supporting the argument that Christians are to expose themselves intentionally to snakes or poison and no evidence that the early apostles did so.” It is important that we try to interpret Scripture in light of other scripture. And by the way, if any of you are contemplating adding snake handling to our worship you'll have to count me out! I don't care what the Bible says!

Third, we interpret the Bible in light of “The Rule of Love”—meaning that the “fundamental expression of God's will is to love God and love neighbor.” We test out all interpretations asking ourselves “does that express love for God and love for neighbor?”

Fourth, we interpret the Bible in light of “The Rule of Faith.” We take seriously the wisdom of the community of faith past. Many wise people have studied and interpreted the Bible. We have much to learn from them. And, we have much to learn from each other in the present.

Fifth, we approach scripture with humility and with reliance on the Holy Spirit to guide our interpretations.

Like many of you, I have throughout my life had a love-hate relationship with the Bible. I've used it in many different ways.

Mrs. Jeans' SS Class—Bible cards, loved stories, repeated them, taught my dolls
(enjoyable)

Book with picture of Deborah (from the Bible) - I became convinced that I was Deborah reincarnated (adventure)

Mr. Harold –devotional books (daily life, life-giving)

Middle School - comfort “charm is deceptive and beauty doesn't last but a woman who fears the Lord will be praised.” (Living Bible “The Way”)

High School –good luck charm (debate tournaments)

College—text book, A way to prove I was right,

Comforter (my surgery, woman who asked me to read scripture to her)

Confronter (pride) (story below if time)

Distant Friend,

Present Enemy (women in ministry issues)

Throw out the window

Scientific Experiment (dissect in Seminary)

Tool of my trade (sometimes 2-3 Bible studies a week and a sermon; read it, study it, find something to say, because contrary to popular belief there isn't a “sermon fairy” that shows up Saturday night with a sermon!)

Today, sometimes still a mixture. Source of life, source of hope, knowledge of Jesus Christ. The Bible is more than words, words, words to me.

Portia Nelson in her book *There's a Hole in My Sidewalk: The Romance of Self-Discovery*:

Step 1: I walk down the street. There is a deep hole in the sidewalk. I fall in. I am lost. I am helpless. It isn't my fault. It takes me forever to find a way out.

Step 2: I walk down the same street. There is a deep hole in the sidewalk. I pretend I don't see it. I fall in again. I can't believe I am in the same place, but it isn't my fault. It still takes a long time to get out.

Step 3: I walk down the same street. There is a deep hole in the sidewalk. I see it is there. I still fall in. It's a habit. My eyes are open. I know where I am. It is my fault. I get out immediately.

Step 4: I walk down the same street. There is a deep hole in the sidewalk. I walk around it.

Step 5: I walk down another street."

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