

Inspiration of Scripture

2 Timothy 3:14-4:5

October 21, 2007

I.

As you can tell from your recent mailings, and the banner in Johnson Hall, we have begun our annual fall stewardship campaign. I could preach another sermon on stewardship, and today's Gospel reading would be a good point of departure.

But I talked about stewardship last week, and will have other opportunities in coming weeks, so instead I would like to focus on today's New Testament reading from 2 Timothy.

Even so, you still will hear a little bit about stewardship because today's sermon will be shorter than usual so that when I finish Paul Montjoy, Chairman of our Stewardship Committee, can share some thoughts with you.

II.

Paul's letter to Timothy was written in the later part of Paul's life, probably when he was imprisoned in Rome. He was preparing a younger generation of leaders to take up his work, and Timothy was one of those younger men. As a result, Paul focused on things that preachers, disciples, and church leaders should know, although in some cases the message was equally applicable to everyone.

Today's message is one of those broad instructions. Let me quote a part of the reading. "All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness . . . I solemnly urge you: proclaim the message; [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, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths."

So, we see the difficulties we have in the church today are not new things. It always has been so. For centuries people have tried to read scripture in ways that satisfy their own desires. That's part of human nature. But our natures also can be our downfall because sometimes our faith calls us to do what does not come naturally. Our faith can require obedience and perseverance when other paths seem more appealing.

And scripture is a source of strength and guidance to us. Scripture is one of one of the constants that always has been the beacon to show the way of truth. The Bible undergirds and explains our faith in this life, and our hope in the next.

Many people, however, even some who profess to be Christians, do not look at the Bible in this way. They regard it principally as a history of the times, but not as the authoritative Word of God. They believe it has some good ideas, and accept that it is helpful in leading people to get along with each other. At most, perhaps, they are willing to treat the Bible as a self-help manual from which they can pick and choose what they really wish to believe.

III.

Today's reading from Timothy does not permit that. The teachings of the Bible are not consumer items that we can purchase or pass over as we choose. And we cannot treat the Bible like a can of concentrated orange juice that first must be diluted before we even put it into our systems.

That's what Paul meant when he said "All scripture is inspired by God." He wanted people to know that even though scripture was written by human beings, their words were inspired and guided by the Holy Spirit, and should be understood as such. God was using the Holy Spirit to lead biblical writers to compose their works in accordance with God's will.

Some people point out, however, that when Paul made this statement there was no New Testament, only the Hebrew Scriptures. This is correct. A few of the New Testament books, including John's Gospel, had not yet been written. In addition, those New Testament books that existed separately were not treated by the church as a single unit of scripture until almost three centuries later. As a result, those people claim that Paul only was referring to the Old Testament, and that we cannot consider the New Testament as being similarly inspired.

This is a narrow interpretation. To treat Paul's reference to "all scripture" as meaning only such scripture as existed at the time restricts Paul's theology in a way he never intended. Paul would have intended "scripture" to mean "scripture," whenever the Holy Spirit acted to inspire it.

Other parts of the Bible support this conclusion. Psalm 36:7 proclaims that "all people" may take refuge in the shadow of [God's] wings. Could we say that only applies to people who had lived when the psalm was written? Of course not. And John's Gospel says that Christ is the light of "all people" (1:4). What about people born centuries later? Christ certainly is their light also. In Matthew, the disciples are told to go out and "make disciples of all nations" (28:19). Was Jesus excluding nations that might have come into existence later? No one would seriously claim that. And there are many other examples.

In the same way, Paul would have included scripture in whatever form it might eventually have taken when he said scripture is inspired by God. I certainly can believe Paul might not have foreseen that some of his letters later would become part of a Christian New Testament, but that does not make them any less inspired. And I can believe that when the Gospel writers were writing their Gospels, and when Paul was writing his letters, they all prayed that God through the Holy Spirit would lead them and guide them in their work.

To make an artificial distinction between God's inspiration underlying the Old Testament and New Testament is to deny the role of the Holy Spirit in shaping the New Testament. That is not consistent with the work of the Spirit.

IV.

So, what does this reading mean for us today? I would suggest it means that we should take the Bible seriously, as something to be part of our lives. It is not just some famous history book, like *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, which we might or might not have read with little lasting consequence either way. And I don't mean to dismiss Edward Gibbon's great work, but history is one thing and the user manual for our faith is another.

And it means we are called to read and study the Bible on a regular basis. At times it is not an easy read, and it come to us across the centuries from a different culture with practices and customs that might seem alien to us. But, take heart. The Bible, all of it, is inspired by the Holy Spirit, and if we read it, and study it, and ask the Spirit to help us, those scriptures will start to be opened to us and we will know the truth. We will be able to discern the false doctrines and teachings that Paul was talking about in today's readings.

I would like to mention one more thing. Many people, well-meaning Christians, have heard an especially and inaccurate false doctrine about our Bible. They have been told that the Bible has been translated so many different times, or that the church has changed so many things, that today's Bible cannot reflect its original meaning. Perhaps this is a theological application of the childhood game of "telephone," which I'm sure we all remember.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Yes, the Bible has been translated into hundreds of languages, and churches throughout the world have authorized their own versions. But that does not imply that the text has been corrupted.

The New Revised Standard Version many American churches use today traces its origin to the King James Version of 1611, which closely followed earlier English and German versions that proliferated after invention of the printing press. Another popular Bible, the New International Version, went directly back to the original Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic texts.

And those minor changes in the Bible over the years have made it more accurate rather than less so. That's because the changes did not come from attempts to rewrite history or new theological agendas, but rather from discoveries of additional ancient biblical manuscripts and advances in understanding ancient languages.

As a result, when scholars compare today's various versions with those early texts they find a remarkable consistency rather than notable variations. Certainly there are some differences, but these are on the margins. Experts agree that the Gospel message, the faith handed down by the apostles, and the teachings of the early church have remained intact.

V.

So I urge you. Read the Bible. Study it. It's the real deal. At times it can be difficult, and that is why we have Bible studies, and commentaries, outlines, and all types of other things to assist us in our study.

Someone once said that the word "Bible" is an acronym. It means "Basic Instructions Before Leaving Earth." In an important way that is correct. It is perhaps life's greatest user manual. As Paul said, it is inspired by God, and that makes it something to be taken seriously. *Amen.*