*2 Timothy 3:16 2 Peter 1:19f.*

Biblical Integrity (*Values of the Evangel* - 2 of 9)

Last week, we discussed the first of the core values of the Fellowship of Presbyterians – a Jesus-shaped Identity. Today, we’re going to discuss the second: *Biblical Integrity*. Really, this value sounds like an echo of one of our own as part of the Confessing Church movement – listen to it: “We believe the Bible is the unique and authoritative Word of God, that teaches all that is necessary for faith and life. The prominence of God’s Word over our lives shapes our priorities, and the unrivaled authority of the Bible directs our actions to be in concert with Christ’s very best for our lives.”

Sounds like a really good, foundational value, right? In one sense, this conviction is nothing new; you’ll find throughout the statements included in our Book of Confessions, you’ll find it as one of the three marks of a Confessing Church, you’ll find it in the history of the Presbyterian Church from the 17th c. to the 20th c. But in another way, if you look at the PCUSA in the 21st c. it is different, because the majority of our denomination no longer follows a literal interpretation of the Bible – now by literal, I don’t mean that when Jesus says he is the gate, we think he’s an actual swinging door on hinges. “Literal” means we believe there is one *main* interpretation to any passage – intended by the original author. But a great deal of the PCUSA no longer uses an objective approach to the Bible; they look at Scripture subjectively; that means they ask, “What does this Scripture mean to me?” instead of “what did the original author mean when he wrote it – what was the *intended* message?” The Bible is being interpreted in many different ways, and many of those ways are conflicting, even contradictory.

I’ll give you one example … I know of one pastoral candidate that was approved by their presbytery to become the minister of one of their congregations. This individual - *on the floor of presbytery* - indicated that 1) he didn’t know if Hell existed, 2) that there were equally valid ways to God other than through faith in Jesus Christ, 3) that good works are an essential part of securing one’s salvation, and 4) that the Trinity really is not really three distinct persons, but 3 different facets of one God – 3 different sides – like I’m a pastor, a husband, a father – 3 faces instead of 3 distinct persons.

Let me tell you that each and every one of those beliefs are unbiblical – they do not line up with Jesus’ teaching on Hell in the gospels, the apostles’ teaching on salvation in Acts and the epistles, Paul’s teaching on justification by faith alone in Romans, Galatians and Ephesians, and the whole New Testament’s differentiation of Father, Son and Holy Spirit as 3 distinct persons … Now, you might think, “Yeah, Brian, but I’m sure that happened in one of the more liberal-progressive presbyteries of the PCUSA …” (*pause*) Nope … it happened in one of the five most *conservative* presbyteries in our denomination … out of ***173!*** I’m not making this up, and I’m not embellishing. This is something we need to deal with.

Most Christians say the Bible is their authority. But saying the Bible is our first authority is easier said than done – b/c sometimes the Bible isn’t easy to follow – sometimes it puts forth values that are *very* politically *incorrect* – sometimes it calls us to be *so* counter-cultural that it makes us wince inside. But if we’re honest with ourselves, that’s the cost of biblical integrity. We can’t say it’s our #1 rule of faith and practice, and then renege when it gets sticky. But there are blessings that come, even when not compromising makes things difficult.

Let me give you an example. One of my greatest joys during my field education in seminary was when I was helping to lead a retreat for the church I was interning at. But you probably wouldn’t think it would bring me joy. We were studying a passage together, and the church members disagreed with what I was presenting … because I overlooked a truth in the Bible. It was a little embarrassing, but then and there I understood that my credibility as a pastor would rely heavily on correctly teaching and leading God’s people. And I also understood that my success as a pastor does not come from people’s submission to *me* or *my* ideas, but from people’s submission to the Word of God. That realization has been a blessing in my life. We are not a people or a church steered by perceptions, opinions or trends that show up in our culture, in conferences, in books or in observations, but we believe, live and operate by the Word of God, the Bible.

The Bible is authoritative not *only* because its origin is from God – as it says in both 2 Timothy *and* 2 Peter - but also because its truth has stood the test of time. Obviously, not every book is reprinted and sold consistently over the centuries. Many books go out of print because the contents are proven wrong or their demand ceases to exist. Yet, despite intentional burning and destruction of the Bible by the early Roman Emperors before Constantine, and by Communist governments in more modern times, as well as anti-Christian persecutors today, the Bible remains in print and in demand.  
 Voltaire, arguably the most influential writer of the French Enlightenment during the 1700s, made the promise, "Fifty years from now the world will hear no more of the Bible." Instead, fifty years after Voltaire’s death, the Geneva Bible Society used Voltaire’s house as a print shop to produce more Bibles. Not only has the Bible supernaturally stood the test of time physically, the Bible has stood the test of time historically, archeologically and geographically. We should expect this from God.

And because it has stood such a test of time, it is wholly our responsibility to set forth its relevance in *our* time. So, reemphasis on biblical authority is *also* timely because many segments of our society are not showing the same openness to receive the biblical message that they were even ten years ago. In Ephesians 5:16 and Colossians 4:5, Paul called on believers to "redeem the time." This is another way of expressing the Christian’s responsibility to care for and witness to the people of our own generation and thereby capture that generation for the Lord. That’s not going to be easy with the current one we’re faced with. Today the future rushes toward us so rapidly!

Science and technology are developing so rapidly that each year – heck, each month - we are confronted with a flood of newly invented devices and gadgets which often create problems never before faced by people. Satellite communication, fiber optics, and computer technology are improving so rapidly that no one seems able to keep up.  
 Changes are revolutionizing family life, social structures, and basic values. But instead of condemning the tools of progress, we should use them in service to the Kingdom. Since much of this technology makes up the language people speak today, the church is called – *each one* of us is called - not only to *know* the language, but also *use it* for the sake of communicating the gospel.  We can show people how to get the Bible on their Kindle, or other electronic device, for free. In this confusing time, secular minds who otherwise would discard biblical truth as worthless, are ready to turn – albeit in desperation - to the Bible with its changeless truths – and they’re just as true whether they’re on a gilded page or monitor screen. People are searching for a source of enduring stability to which to anchor life in the midst of change.  
 Out of this climate of groping for solutions to the onslaught of crises, many in our generation, some for the first time, are recognizing that they can no longer control their environment. Really, in many places in life, we depend on *other* people’s authority – if we’re sick, we trust what the doctor says. If our car breaks down, a lot of the time we trust what the mechanic says needs done. And sometimes, if we don’t know a solution to something, we just try to go with the flow, or stick in the middle of the fence. Yet, when you face the questions of meaning and purpose in life, the questions of sin and forgiveness, the questions of eternal life or eternal loneliness, you can’t settle for others’ opinions and you can’t go with moderation. We can’t pick a little from Buddhism, a little from Hinduism, a little from New Age and a little from Christianity, and hope that moderation is our answer. God’s Word, the Bible, offers no other solution to rival Jesus Christ and his work. Without the Word of God, in Jesus Christ and in Scripture, we can’t know God with clarity, accuracy or unity.   
 Let me share a story before I make my final point. Dr. Louis Evans was pastor of Hollywood Presbyterian Church and he had both the Old and New Testaments memorized. On one occasion, after preaching on the virgin birth, he declared if you weren’t going to accept the Bible as the Word of God, then you should just go ahead and tear that section out of the Bible. As he stood there in the pulpit, he said, “If you don’t believe in the virgin birth, tear it out.” With that statement he literally tore out the pages of his Bible and threw the pages over the pulpit. “If you don’t believe he raised Lazarus from the dead, then tear that out.” So, he tore out it and threw it over the pulpit. “If you don’t believe in the resurrection, tear it out.” And once again, he actually tore the pages right out and crumpled them and threw them over his shoulder. With those tattering pages floating down from the pulpit, he said, “What do you have left? All you have left is the Sermon on the Mt., and it’s not worth anything unless a divine Christ preached it.” And with that he said, “Let’s bow for the benediction.” But as soon as he bowed his head, in that sedate, vast congregation, a man stood up and said, “No! No! We want more! More!” Then another fellow said, “Yes, we want more!” So Evans picked up his Bible and preached another fifty minutes. And then gave the benediction.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Do we want more of God’s Word? – The *world* needs more, even if they don’t know they need it. Will we give it to them? And that brings me finally to my concluding point: now is the right time to reassert Scripture’s authority because of the challenges before us to *win our community to Christ*. *This* effort tends to lead us *away* from just *talking* about the Bible to the more vital task of putting it into practice in daily life. This series on core values will be worthwhile if it succeeds in leading us to explore more carefully the truth of biblical authority and to take more seriously its *practical* implications, with the result that we are challenged to a deeper commitment to evangelism and mission.

[***Slowly***]

God did not and *would* not leave his message to humanity in a form that can only be understood by a handful of 21st c. professional scholars, who can’t even agree among themselves on the theories that they *assume* explain what the message is. The Bible is God’s gift to the *world*, through his Church, not just to the scholars. It comes through the life of his people and nourishes that life. Its primary purpose is *practical*, not academic. A careful, intensive but straightforward reading … is what it requires to direct us into life in God’s kingdom.

[***Long pause … then conclude slowly***]

I would like to close by quoting the *first* essential tenet from the *Theology Project* of the Fellowship of Presbyterians – and there’s a copy of this document on the table in the foyer for you to borrow by the way – this is first tenet: “God’s Word: The Authority for Our Confession – The clearest declaration of God’s glory is found in his Word … and we glorify God by recognizing and receiving His authoritative self-revelation, both in the infallible Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments and also in the incarnation of God the Son … We are *happy* to confess ourselves *captive* to the Word of God, not just individually, but also as members of a community of faith, extending through time and around the globe.”[[2]](#footnote-2) ***I*** *am* happy … to confess being captive to God’s Word as well; and may that be the case for Christ’s church, not only here, but throughout the world. Amen.

*Extra fact*:

* 72 percent of Americans now deny the existence of absolute truth, and few have confidence in the historical accuracy or ethical authority of the Bible. Two-thirds of the population does not know what John 3:16 refers to, and less than four out of every ten Americans have any idea what the term gospel means.

1. Henrietta Mears, *The Christian Circle*, as in *The Tale of the Tardy Oxcart*, 52. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *The Theology Project*, p. 5 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)