

Isaiah 55:6-11 2 Timothy 3:14-17 February 23, 2014
What Matters Most: The Authority of Scripture
Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

AN INVITATION TO GOSPEL LIVING

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

“Good evening. My name is Philip Gladden. This class is Religion 212, Introduction to the New Testament. If you’re in the wrong class, now is the time to leave.”

For nine years, that is how I began the first class in early January when I taught the Introduction to the New Testament at Wallace-Rose Hill High School for James Sprunt Community College. Then I would say, “I am the minister of the Wallace Presbyterian Church. I have particular beliefs about God, the Bible, and Jesus Christ, and I will be glad to talk with you about those beliefs during our class break or after class. However, during class, we will be learning about the New Testament as an important book in human history. This class is not a weekly worship service, a Sunday School class, or a devotional Bible study.”

The required textbook for that New Testament course was *The Harper/Collins Study Bible (New Revised Standard Version)*. Students were free to read from their own personal Bibles as a supplement to the required readings. However, the **study** Bible was required for a reason. According to the class syllabus, “This course is a survey of the literature of first-century Christianity with readings from the gospels, Acts, and the Pauline and pastoral letters. Topics include the literary structure, audience, and religious perspective of the writings, as well as the historical and cultural context of the early Christian community. Upon completion, students should be able to use the tools of critical analysis to read and understand New Testament literature.”

Student grades were based on four tests on all assigned readings and material in the Bible and class presentations, a take-home assignment on the apostle Paul and his letters, and a five-page paper on John the Baptist. Every semester, my hope and goal was that the students would know more about what is in the New Testament **and** how to use certain tools to understand better the New Testament. Although I always had very interesting discussions about the Bible, the Christian faith, and life in the church during class breaks and after class, the purpose of the class was not to evangelize (even if a student’s faith was deepened or challenged by what he or she studied).

In his book about the art of spiritual reading called *Eat This Book*, Eugene Peterson writes, “Not everyone who gets interested in the Bible and even gets excited about the Bible wants to get involved with God.” How true that is! While it is helpful and important to know as much as possible **about** the Bible (what’s in it, how it came to be, how to find particular verses and stories, how to interpret), our use of the Bible in

the church is not to get us ready to pass four tests, finish a take-home assignment on Paul, and write a five-page paper on John the Baptist.

When the apostle Paul, at the end of his ministry, wrote to Timothy, at the beginning of his ministry, he gave the younger pastor some good, practical advice about life in the church and life as a pastor. Paul encouraged Timothy in his own faith, as he led God's people in the church: "But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work." (2 Timothy 3:14-17)

One person has said, "This tradition and good teaching is not to be simply equated with correct doctrine. The issue at stake is not being able to recite one's catechism by heart or be able to explain the doctrine of the Trinity. It is not about passing an exam! That which is to be continued, that which is to have continual influence on the life of Timothy and the community, is the salvation through faith in Jesus Christ."¹

Last Sunday afternoon, I met with the elders at the Grove Presbyterian Church in Kenansville for some elder training. As we worked our way through the *Book of Order*, we looked at the "Directory for Worship." One of the questions we talked about was: What are the five major actions of worship? The answer we found says, "The order that follows is presented in terms of five major actions centered in the Word of God: (1) gathering around the Word; (2) proclaiming the Word; (3) responding to the Word; (4) the sealing of the Word; (5) bearing and following the Word into the world.

Take a minute to look at our order of worship in the bulletin. You won't find all five of the headings printed in our worship order, but they are all there. "Centered in the Word of God" doesn't mean the sermon is the most important or controlling element of our worship service. God's Word is proclaimed in the hymns we sing, in the choir's anthem, in our prayers, and in our offerings that are used to spread God's Word and love beyond these four walls. We Presbyterians emphasize God's Word in our worship because we believe our entire lives are to be centered in God's Word. That's another way of saying we believe God's Word in the scriptures has authority for all of life, not just in our worship services and Sunday School classes and Bible studies.

What role does the Bible play in your life? What image best describes how you think of the Bible? A road map for life? A rule book? An interesting piece of literature? A confusing book? A source of good quotations? A treasure chest of ideas to pick from to support preconceived ideas? The inerrant Word of God? The inspired Word of God?

Think about an eminent New Testament scholar — a man with four degrees (three advanced) from Queen's University of Belfast, Ireland; an instructor, professor of Divinity and Biblical Criticism at the esteemed University of Glasgow in Scotland; the Chair of the Religious Studies department; a well-respected scholar and author. You might think such a person would be most interested in describing God's

Word in an academic and intellectual way. While Dr. Ernest Best contributed greatly to our knowledge and understanding of the New Testament through his scholarly work, he also said, “The gospel is not a set of abstract truths to be announced but a way of life to be lived.”

Today’s sermon title is taken from an article about these verses from 2 Timothy 3. The author says, “The Scripture invites us into a pattern of gospel living. It does not provide ‘yes’ and ‘no’ answers to every situation, every question, every dilemma . . . The proper use of Scripture and tradition leads us to ‘every good work.’ It leads us to a life that is lived in remembrance of Jesus Christ, a life that embodies this remembrance . . . the one Scripture we are to continue is the one that has been nurtured in us, which points to only one thing: salvation through faith in Jesus Christ.”²

Presbyterian Christians have always valued the Word of God as having authority and a central place in our church’s life. Presbyterian Christians have always emphasized educating believers so they can read and interpret God’s Word for themselves and be faithful to God and committed/active/knowledgeable citizens. One of the beauties of our Presbyterian emphasis on reading and knowing and valuing and using God’s Word in worship and life is this: we can read God’s Word for ourselves and hear it speak directly to our lives. That is our privilege. And with that privilege comes the responsibility ***to read God’s Word, to interpret God’s Word, and to check out our interpretation with our fellow believers.***

We try to provide many opportunities for you to do that here at the Wallace Presbyterian Church. We have four adult Sunday School classes, all of which are dedicated to learning more about God’s Word and how it speaks to our lives. We have a weekly Wednesday morning Bible study where we talk about the scripture lesson for Sunday’s sermon. Our Presbyterian Women’s circles have a monthly Bible study. Presbyterian Men enjoy a meal together on the first Tuesday night of the month (September - May) and then study God’s Word together. During the season of Lent in March and April, you have the opportunity to “pray the psalms in Lent” in a time of sincere reflection, prayer, and fellowship. Your elders and I spend time at each session meeting reading scripture and talking about what it means for our work together as a session and as people who seek to be more faithful disciples and servants of Jesus Christ. Every Tuesday morning, a group of folks spend time together in our SonRise Worship service, talking about a passage from the Bible. After one month of the SonRise services, I took a simple survey and asked what people liked best about the new worship opportunity. Two answers jumped off the page: (1) the chance to be quiet and be with God and (2) the chance to read and talk about God’s Word with fellow church members.

We Presbyterians say God’s Word has authority because it is from God, not because we decide to give it authority. However, it’s hard to understand how God’s Word can have much authority in our lives if we don’t take the time to read God’s Word and talk with our fellow believers about what it means for our lives. The Bible is God’s gift to God’s people — “The Word of God for the people of God.” In his version of God’s

Word which he calls *The Message*, Eugene Peterson puts it this way: “There’s nothing like the written Word of God for showing you the way to salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. Every part of Scripture is God-breathed and useful one way or another — showing us truth, exposing our rebellion, correcting our mistakes, training us to live God’s way. Through the Word we are put together and shaped up for the tasks God has for us.”

You might wonder how church leaders from five hundred years ago could possibly have anything relevant and meaningful to say to us 21st century Presbyterians. But they do. Heinrich Bullinger, John Calvin, and Martin Luther all dedicated themselves to helping God’s people hear and understand God’s Word for their lives. All three of them gave advice to their fellow believers about how to listen for and live out God’s Word, just as the apostle Paul encouraged young pastor Timothy in the first century A.D.

In a sermon in the early 16th century, Heinrich Bullinger talked about how we can/should interpret the scriptures. He said we should interpret scripture (1) by using other scriptures to clarify and explain, (2) by learning about the history and language and context and intentions of the Bible writers, and (3) by checking our interpretation with what the church has said through the years. His most meaningful advice is that an authentic and faithful interpretation of scripture will always lead us to love God and our neighbors more and speak to our hearts so we will seek to do God’s will (or as Paul says, “so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.”)

John Calvin compared the scriptures to a pair of glasses. Just as glasses correct our failing eyesight and help us see things more clearly, so the scriptures correct our vision of God and what God calls us to be and do in this world. The “spectacles of scripture” help us see God at work in Jesus Christ for our salvation and at work in all creation.

Finally, Martin Luther wrote these words in his *Table Talk*: “The Bible is alive, it speaks to me; it has feet, it runs after me; it has hands, it lays hold of me.”

It may seem to be nothing more than the substitute of one word for another, but there’s a reason I invite you to “listen **for** the Word of God” every Sunday morning, rather than to “listen **to** the Word of God.”

You can listen **to** the Word of God without getting involved with God.

But when you listen **for** the Word of God, it’s “an invitation to gospel living.”

[Hold up a Bible and say, “The Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God!”]

NOTES

¹Dirk G. Lange, “Commentary on 2 Timothy 3:14 - 4:5,” at www.workingpreacher.org.

²Ibid.

Let us pray: God of mercy, grant that the Word we have heard today may take root in our hearts, and bear fruit to your honor and glory. You have made us so we cannot live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from your mouth. Give us a hunger for your Word, and in that food satisfy our daily need; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.



The Children’s Sermon will be about how our Presbyterian seal shows what we believe. I will ask the children to tell me what they see in the seal. I will point out the open Bible on the pulpit and talk about how important God’s Word is for our church and our lives.