

PASTOR'S NOTES. Understanding the Bible, part 5.

“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 3:16-17, NRSV)

This will be the last part of an article on how I recommend that we use the Bible. Way back in June, when I started it, and then last month, I presented a list of the different ways Christians have understood the Bible regarding truth:

1. The Bible has come to us by the hand of God forcing the writers to write the words they did; every word is directly from God – it is therefore the authority on all things it mentions: about God, about salvation, about history, chronology, biology, sociology, psychology, politics, physics, math, art, etc.
2. The Bible is the direct word of God, in its original language and manuscripts.
3. The Bible is the result of divine action in its original form, as well as in 1611 in the formation of the King James Version.
4. The Bible is without error in its primary purpose: revealing God, God's vision, God's purposes, and God's good news to humanity. On other matters, it reflects the views of its time.

Does anyone else see what looks to me like an obvious problem with the first three ideas? Fundamental to our faith is that Jesus Christ is fully human and fully divine. The church spent centuries arguing this out, with many people insisting that Jesus could only be one or the other. But they realized that the message of salvation only makes sense if a real human being is saved, and if God Himself is making the sacrifice. This is what the historic creeds (Apostles Creed, Nicene Creed) were written to express.

But while we grant that Jesus is both HUMAN and DIVINE, the first three ideas in essence are saying that scripture is ONLY DIVINE. This has led to a number of issues:

- Lack of focus. Every part of the Bible is equally important: the creation story, the flood, the sun standing still, God demanding the extermination of the Canaanites, and Jesus rising from the dead. If you have a problem with any one of those, you can discard all the rest. You could argue (and I heard this from some atheists) that since they cannot accept that Jonah lived three days in the belly of a fish, then likewise they cannot accept that Jesus rose from the dead (even though the two are unrelated).
- When later scriptures (the Qu'ran and the Book of Mormon) claimed to be the direct, uncorrupted Word of God, there is no argument you could use to choose one over the other, except for the family in which you were raised. (One could argue that the biggest reasons Islam spread so quickly in its early years was because of its military power AND the claim that it was a NEWER revelation of God.)

- In these later scriptures we see that by being the direct DIVINE revelation of God, it is no longer necessary to ponder how God can become human. The Qu'ran sees Jesus as another of the prophets, HUMAN, and the Book of Mormon presents Jesus as a DIVINE being.
- By insisting on scripture as the perfect revelation of God, we have had to argue about how what look like differences in the Bible are not really, and we have been able to explain many of these. But sometimes the differences are intentional, such as:
 - Did God want to test Abraham's faith by calling for the sacrifice of Isaac, or is that what Abraham heard? Genesis 22:2, 16-18 says it was God's real intention; Jeremiah (7:31, 19:5, 32:35) vehemently argues that God never had such an intention.
 - Who convinced King David to take a census? Was it God (2 Samuel 24:1) or Satan (1 Chronicles 21:1)? It is clearly the same story, but with two different interpretations.
 - How can Jesus overrule scripture, like in the case of "an eye for an eye" (Exodus 21:23-25, Leviticus 24:19-20, Deuteronomy 19:21, and Matthew 5:38-42)? We could say that Jesus had the authority to do so, because He is God, but then why have the earlier commands in the first place? We can make reasonable guesses, but no answer is given in the Bible.

I am insisting instead that scripture is both HUMAN and DIVINE. I don't fully understand what that means, because I can't know what divine means, since I am not God. But I can appreciate how generations of Old Testament writers, New Testament writers, and faithful Christians since have sacrificially witnessed to the power of God in the world and in their lives. None of them could know the mind of God (Isaiah 40:13, Romans 11:34), but they could witness to how they saw and heard God.

So, as I started this long article, I stated my intention over the years to be a Bible-first person. But I guess I really mean that I am to be a Christ-first person, remember that He is the Living Word of God. But above and beyond any tradition or experience, the Bible is the witness to this Living Word. I believe it is best understood in reverse:

- The essence of our Christian Bible is the Living Christ, born, died, and risen from the dead.
- From this we are led to study the New Testament to learn all that we can about Him.
- From this we are led to the Old Testament, the earlier witnesses that give us a fuller picture of God Who has been continually working in and through creation.

With this in mind, then the words of 2 Timothy 3:16-17 (see the first paragraph) are a working model for living our lives here and hereafter.

Yours in Christ,

