

The truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth
Series: Reformed School
2 Timothy 3:14-17
November 8, 2009

Why do we make it such a big deal when we give Bibles to children who attend our Sunday School? Here's why: We want it to be very clear to them, to their parents, and to all of us that we believe that "God has something He wants to say to you through the Bible." We believe that the Bible contains the very words of God. We believe that there is no writing like it, no book that has the same authority and wisdom and power for living. We are careful to make sure that our children have all the school supplies they need: pencils, paper, dictionaries (does anybody still buy printed dictionaries these days? I just use dictionary.com.) We provide them everything we think they will need to learn what they need to learn, to be successful in school, and therefore, we hope, in life. In the same way, we give them Bibles because we believe that the Bible contains everything these students need to learn about themselves and about God, everything they need to know to be *truly* successful in life.

This is the third message of four in our series on some of the foundational concepts of the Reformed tradition, some basics of what Presbyterians believe. We've talked for the last two weeks about the doctrine of justification by grace through faith: That we are made acceptable to God – perfectly aligned with God – not by doing enough good stuff, but only by God's gracious commitment to love us just as we are. And only if we believe in Jesus. Not just believing that Jesus was the Son of God and that He died for the sins of the world. Believing that Jesus died for *your* sins, personally. Believing that *my* forgiveness and *my* salvation and *my* relationship with God is available only through my faith in Jesus. This is not a seemingly abstract or unimportant issue. God says in the Bible that what you do with Jesus is everything.

And how do we know about Jesus? How does one learn the truth that Jesus really lived, really died on the cross, and really rose from the dead? "Jesus loves me, this I know," how?? "For the _____ tells me so." This is not just a cute kids' song. A song we learn as little children and sing in Sunday School. *This* is how we know who God is. *This* is how we know what faith is. *This* is how we know the meaning and purpose of life – the meaning and purpose of *our* lives. *This* is how we know God loves us and desires a relationship with us. *The Bible tells me so.*

I want to be very clear about this today. This is most important. This is what changed my life forever. And I believe it can change yours. The Bible. In some ways, the whole Protestant Reformation was really a battle over the authority of the Bible. So I want to speak with you today about what we Presbyterians believe about the Bible and its authority for our lives. Our *Reformed School* topic for today is the authority of the Scripture.

Now, most Christ-followers agree that the Bible is authoritative in some sense. But what does that mean? *How* is the Bible authoritative for us? Is the Bible one authority among many? Or is it the *only* authority? Is the Bible authoritative only in matters of faith and doctrine? Or is it also authoritative for the more practical matters of how we live our everyday lives? So we're going to turn to the Bible, to the second letter Paul wrote to his protégé, Timothy. This is one of the personal letters Paul wrote. Timothy was like a son to Paul, who never married.

2 Tim. 3:14-15. Paul is encouraging Timothy to stick with what he knows to be true, rather than getting caught up in the godlessness of the culture around him. Vv. 1-4. Vv. 16-17. The first thing Paul says here is that ‘All Scripture is God-breathed.

The Bible says and we believe that the words of the Scriptures were breathed out by God, they come from God’s mouth. They are the very words of God Himself. One commentator has said it this way: “The entirety of Scripture comes from the mouth of God. To read it is to hear Him speak. It is therefore true, and it can therefore be trusted.”¹ When we read the Bible, we hear God speak. This is why the Bible is authoritative. Because to read the Bible is to hear God Himself speak. All through the Bible, we see the power of God’s spoken word. “In the beginning, God created...and God *said*, “Let there be light. And there was light.” And God *said*, and God *said*, and God *said*. And the universe and all that is in it came into being. The word of God – words spoken by the mouth of God – have power. Power to create, power to give life, power to *change* lives.

When God sent prophets to communicate with His wayward people, the prophets spoke this way: “Thus says the Lord.” “This is what the Lord says.” When Jesus was tempted by the devil out in the desert, when He was tempted to show off His power as the Son of God, tempted to satisfy His hunger, what was His reply? “It is written....” Jesus used Scripture to defend Himself against the very real temptations of this world. The God-breathed Scripture. The word of God.

Presbyterians – really *all* Christians in the Reformed tradition – maintain the authority of the Scripture. This means that all the words in Scripture are God’s words in such a way that to disbelieve or disobey any word of Scripture is to disbelieve or disobey God.²

Not only is all Scripture God-breathed, it is useful, Paul says: Beneficial, helpful. Practically, not just theoretically, not just theologically, not just abstractly. Paul says that all Scripture is useful for teaching. Now, this word specifically refers to teaching about matters of faith. Scripture teaches us what is true about God and about ourselves, and teaches us what is right to believe. For example, some folks see God as harsh and judgmental, like some kind of cosmic police officer just waiting to catch them doing something wrong. But this is not how the Bible describes God at all: Psalm 103:8, 10.

Paul also says that all Scripture is useful for rebuking. Now, this is not a word most of us use too often, I suspect. What the word means here is that Scripture points out wrong belief, incorrect doctrine. For example, many people believe that membership in the church is optional, that they can be faithful followers of Jesus all by themselves, without any involvement in or connection to the church. And if you’ve been around here very long you know what I think about that. *Because* that’s not what the Bible says. Rom. 12:5. Heb. 10:25 John 13:34-35. It’s pretty hard to love people you have no relationship with. Scripture teaches us what is true and correct to believe about God and humanity and the world and life, and also shows us when what we believe is wrong or false, according to God.

¹ William D. Mounce. *Pastoral Epistles, Word Biblical Commentary, Vol. 46.*

² Wayne Grudem. *Systematic Theology, p. 73.*

Paul then moves on from the arena of faith to the area of conduct. The Scripture is not only authoritative for what we *believe*. It also has authority regarding how we *behave*. He says that all Scripture is useful for correcting, that is, correcting wrong or inappropriate behavior. For example: Perhaps you have a tendency, as I do, to have a bit of a sharp tongue. A harsh and judgmental spirit that sometimes, *somehow* comes out of your mouth. Eph. 4:29 can correct that for you, if you take it to heart. Or maybe you're a worrier. Phil. 4:6 is meant to help you correct that.

And finally, Paul says that all Scripture is useful for training in righteousness. The Bible trains us to live God's way. For example: Matt. 5:39: Turn the other cheek. Matt. 5:44, 6:33.

So, if the Bible contains the very words of God – if God spoke and still speaks through this book, why don't we read it? There is an unprecedented level of biblical illiteracy in this country. If to read the Bible is to hear God Himself speak, why aren't people banging down our doors to get one? Why don't we have a waiting list of hundreds of people for Bible study? Here's the problem we have with the Bible as the ultimate and only authority for faith and life: We don't like what it says some of the time. We don't like that God tells us that sexual expression should be reserved for the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman. We don't like that God tells us that everything belongs to Him and that He expects us to give back to Him 10% from our financial resources. We don't like that Jesus says we have to forgive somebody who has sinned against us over and over and over again. We don't like "turn the other cheek," "love your enemies," or "Do not worry"; pretty much the entire Sermon on the Mount.

And not only do we not *like* what it says, sometimes we don't *understand* what it means. And worse than that, sometimes we *do* understand what it means, but it doesn't make sense to us. Mark Twain: "It's not the parts of the Bible I don't understand that bother me, it's the parts I *do* understand." And so, very often, when we don't like it or don't understand it or it doesn't make sense to our very intelligent, scientific minds, we decide we can just reject it or ignore it. We take our little exacto knives and just cut those parts out of our Bibles. We can't do that. Either it's all authoritative, or none of it is. The Bible says and we believe that it's all authoritative. "All Scripture is God-breathed..." You know, I looked up that word all.....

I've said this before: If there are things in the Bible that you do not accept because they seem contrary to your understanding or experience of the world, the trouble is not with what is in the Bible. The trouble is with your experience, OR with your interpretation or understanding of your experience. Listen: God is not under any obligation to make sense to us. He is not under any obligation to conform to our understanding of the way things ought to work. How arrogant we are! He is God, we are not. Sometimes, I really think we just need to get over ourselves.

You were created to live in a relationship with God through which God promises that you will experience blessing, comfort, joy, help, wisdom, power, purpose, and peace. How do I know? *The Bible tells me so*. The Scriptures provide a knowledge of God that can be gained in *no other way*, through *no other source*. Listen to me very carefully: You cannot have a relationship with God without the Bible. You cannot really *know* God in the intimate, personal way He intends for you to know Him, without the Scriptures. Maybe that sounds harsh. But I believe it is true, to my toes.

Joel Osteen. “This is my Bible. I am who it says I am, I have what it says I have, I can do what it says I can do.” The Bible, of course, says much more than that, but it does say *at least* that. What if we really believed that? What if we really lived this way? What if we believed and lived as if we were who God says we are: beloved, children of God, created in God’s image, forgiven, set free, able to do anything and everything God desires us to do. What if we taught our children that they are who *God* says they are, not who their friends say they are, not who MTV says they are, not who TV and music say they are?

See, what I am afraid of is that these students will take these Bibles home and put them on a shelf or in a drawer and not read them very much. See them as old books telling old stories about the way the world used to be in the old days. I’m afraid that they will not see their parents read the Bible, so they will not think of the Bible as what it is: God’s word to them. I’m afraid they will never learn the profound truth that, “God has something to say to you through the Bible.”

I’m quite passionate about this as any of you who have been hanging around here for more than five minutes know. Many of you have heard me say this before: Reading the Bible changed my life, and I believe it can change yours. It’s not just because the Bible is “useful.” It’s not just that the Bible showed me where I was going wrong and taught me how to live God’s way. It did that. But so much more. I met God in the pages of Scripture. I came to know “the old, old story of Jesus and His love” through the pages of Scripture. And I know that many of you could tell the same story. Because the “old, old story” is not just that: old, ancient, out of date, quaint but not applicable in the 21st century.

Heb. 4:12 says that, “the Word of God is living and active.” The Word of God is alive and powerful. Life-guiding and life-changing. *Because* it is God-breathed. *Because* it is God Himself who speaks.

And you know what I always say: You don’t have to take my word for it. [And you shouldn’t.] You can look it up. And I hope you will.