

Bibliolatry Vs. the Scripture that Leads to Life

II Corinthians 3:1-6; John 5:39-40

As we seek the greening of our faith this Lenten season we consider today the place of scripture in our faith and life. For our garden to grow we need first to clear away some weeds, rocks, a stump, some invasive plants.

Paul says in today's text: "The letter kills but the Spirit brings life." He was talking about how the letter of scripture can be death dealing. But, he says next, "the Spirit brings life."

First, let's consider the things we need to clear away.

I

I'll begin with *bibliolatry*: the worship of the Bible. *God* is to be worshipped, not the Bible. The Bible is the human word of the living God, not God. Someone said, "Worshipping the Bible is like climbing the signpost rather than following directions." Worshipping the Bible is easier when closed. In the 1980's the Fundamentalists took over the Southern Baptist Convention, declaring that the Bible was "the inerrant, infallible Word of God." Their slogan was, "I believe every word of the Bible is literally true." That easier to say if you don't read the Bible.

So one weed to clear away is a belief in *biblical literalism*. Biblical literalism closes the Christian mind to science and history. It makes every verse of scripture equal to the next.

The Bible never claims for itself such inerrant infallibility or literal truth. It uses for itself the word “inspired”, which means, “God-breathed”, God’s Spirit, filling human writers that they can convey God’s communication to us. The Bible describes itself with metaphors: the word of God is a light, a lamp, a path, living waters.

What we see as we open the Bible is not one book, but a library of books, sixty-six of them, bound as one. [Someone gave me this replica of the Bible as a set of books.]

These books were written over a period of around 2,000 years to people living in dramatically different historical contexts. It was not delivered one day on golden tablets.

Moreover, it is comprised of many different ways God sought to communicate through human writers: history, myth, long narratives, short stories, sturdy law, prophetic visions and utterances, comedies, poems, songs, parables, a brand-new thing called “gospels”, letters, and a kind of writing called

apocalyptic, which means “unveiling”, writing that sought to reveal the sometimes hidden meaning of history and its end.

And the Bible is full of symbol and metaphor: God as rock, fortress, shepherd, mother, father; Jesus as light, path, vine, door, Lamb.

Literalism forces us to read the Bible as if it were all the same. Literalism expects us to worry about how Jonah could have survived the digestive juices in the belly of a whale! It robs the Bible of its power and richness.

Our church abandoned a belief in biblical literalism long ago. That freedom from biblical literalism has helped free us from the patriarchy of the Bible, and the way the Bible has been used to subjugate women. A woman minister colleague years ago was so angered by a passage in the Bible that oppressed women that she threw the Bible across the room, against a wall and broke its binding. Sometimes we need a Bible with a broken binding to get to its truth.

Abandoning biblical literalism has freed us from those passages that have been used to harm others and ourselves. For example, the passages used by some to kindle hatred against LGBTQ persons. Passages that have led to the death of gay people and the oppression of black people. Yes, as Paul says, “The letter kills.”

Another thing to be cleared away is what is called *biblical triumphalism*—the use of the Bible to gain power and keep power. It’s a belief that uses the Bible as a political tool and a political prop. I hate this. They’ve taken the Bible I love and used it as a weapon, as propaganda.

Those who believe in it use the Bible to justify hatred, baptize bigotry, and amplify fear. Such Christian triumphalism prefers a theocracy to democracy.

There are many in America who want to encode into law their own interpretation of the Bible—as if they were the infallible interpreters of scripture, as if our nation were not a pluralistic democracy, with many religions and citizens of no religion.

While living in Charlotte I went to a County Commissioners meeting to speak on behalf of a motion that would protect LGBTQ people from discrimination. First, each Commissioner spoke. One stood and read aloud every negative biblical passage he could find about homosexuality—and he found most of them. Another Commissioner was rifling through a Bible on his lap. “What is this?”, I thought: civil magistrates arguing biblical interpretation?! I felt I was in the church business meeting from hell, not a civil magistrates meeting.

When it was my turn to speak, I stood and talked about the Baptist principal of separation of church and state. I quoted the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights.

There they were, arguing over biblical interpretation, and there I was, a minister quoting the founding documents of our nation.

That kind of thing is happening all over our nation today, as politicians seek to make their interpretation of the Bible law and ride Christian Supremacy to power. There is a vast difference between honoring the broad values of the Bible, values shared by many—things like justice, compassion, freedom and fairness—and the imposition of one way of interpreting passages of the Bible on all citizens.

“The letter kills”. For Paul, this verse was all too real: before Jesus appeared to him and made him his apostle, the letter of scripture had made Paul a Jihadist, a killer and persecutor of Christians.

III

“But the Spirit brings life”. And now I turn the corner to the Scriptures that bring life. First, we need a key to understanding this sprawling 1,600 page Bible compiled over thousands of years, a key to its understanding and interpretation, a lens through which to read the Bible.

For me, for us, that key, that lens is Jesus, his life and teaching. In today's text from John's gospel Jesus is addressing the literalists and legalists of his day and says:

You search the scriptures because you think in them you have eternal life, and yet it is they who bear witness to me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have eternal life.

God gives eternal life, not the Bible, and Jesus is the key, the lens.

In the Bible there is a war tradition and a peace tradition. In the Bible there is an exclusivist tradition, where we alone have the truth and God loves only us. And there is an inclusivist, universalist tradition where all people are God's people and God is working for the salvation, healing and wholeness of us all. Some read the Bible seeing how many they can exclude. Others read the Bible seeing how many they can include. Jesus favors the second way.

Which tradition should win? Look at Jesus. The greatest commandment, he said, is to love of God with all we are and love our neighbor as ourselves. So St. Augustine gave us this guidance for interpreting scripture: If, he wrote, your interpretation increases your love of God and neighbor, you are interpreting scripture correctly. If it does not, you are on the wrong path.

Are there other helps I might offer today? Here's one: practice different ways of reading scripture.

One way is *devotional reading*. Just you alone with the Scriptures, nothing, no one in between. David Comer and I both had a professor, Dale Moody, who used to say: "The Bible throws a lot of light on the commentaries!"

As you read ask this simple question: What is God trying to say to me today in these words? We might call this a "meditative reading" of scripture.

Then there is the kind of Bible study that I like to practice in group settings, like Sunday school, called *lectio-divina*, or spiritual reading. We read a Bible passage aloud three times. After the first reading we ask: What words and phrases stood out, almost as if they were illumined? We talk about it. After the second reading we ask: Did new words or phrases stick out, make you pay attention? We discuss.

As we read it the third time we ask: What is God asking of me, calling me to do this week through this passage of scripture?

Another way of reading scripture is called *historical-critical reading*, a method ministers learn in seminary. It begins with two questions: "What do the words in this passage *say*? And what did the author *mean*?" It goes on to ask

questions like, “What was the historical context?” And, “Who was the original audience?”

Here’s another tip: don’t read every story in the gospels as if you are Jesus in the story. Or every passage as if you are the hero of the story. We could be the “baddie” here!

Lastly, we stress the importance of communal reading of scripture. The New Testament warns against a purely personal, individual reading of scripture. We each have our own blindnesses and biases. Alone, we can get way off track.

So we read it together in worship. Jewish and Christian worship from the beginnings included readings from scripture. Or we read together in group Bible study, as in Sunday school. We help each other read and understand.

Conclusion

I close with a self-interview—my favorite kind.

Q: Steve, have you enjoyed this sermon?

A: Yes I have!

Q: Would you recommend reading the Bible straight through cover to cover, from Genesis to Revelation?

A: I don't think so. Most people I know, including myself, get bogged down around the book of Leviticus with its scabs and sores and who needs to be put to death.

Q: Then what would you recommend?

A: I'm glad you asked that question! If you want a good sample of the richness and power of scripture and want to take a year to read the Bible, I'd recommend one selected book of the Bible a month, alternating the Old Testament and the New Testament. I've created a chart for you for such a study. It's in a booklet in the foyer.

I've made another chart I call "Re-habilitating Paul: Paul's Top Ten Hits"; that's also in the brochure.

And a third: "Favorite Sayings of Jesus"

And a fourth: Verses to Carry in your Heart, if Not Your Pocket.

Q: Is that all you have to say?

A: For now. But here's a benediction I leave with you.

May the Spirit that brings life be with you as you read the Bible, light, lamp, path, mirror, song in the night, companion, morning praise, pathway, sweet like honey in your mouth. O taste and see that God is good!