

PASTOR'S NOTES. Understanding the Bible, part 2.

“We also constantly give thanks to God for this, that when you received the word of God that you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word but as what it really is, God’s word, which is also at work in you believers.”
(1 Thessalonians 2:13, NRSV)

Usually when we talk about the “Word of God” today, we are talking about the written word, the Bible. However, if we were to do word search for “word of God” in the New Testament, we would find that in 3 instances (Matthew 15:6; Mark 7:13; John 10:35), it clearly is talking about the Old Testament, while 8 times it seems to refer to the word that is coming directly from God or Jesus (Luke 3:2, 5:1, 8:11, 8:21, 11:28; Romans 9:6; 2 Peter 3:5; Hebrews 11:3), and the remaining times (I count more than 20) it is the word that is communicated to the people by the apostles. In other words, it is more oral than written, more experienced than reasoned. This should make sense to us, since the message about Jesus was first spread by witnesses telling their stories to people who could barely read, and almost all of the books of the New Testament were written later.

The Word of God was understood to be something living and moving in the community, as the scripture passage at the beginning suggests, and Paul says further here:

“Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Surely we do not need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you or from you, do we? You yourselves are our letter written on our hearts, to be known and read by all; and you show that you are a letter of Christ, prepared by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts. Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are competent of ourselves to claim anything as coming from us; our competence is from God, Who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of letter but of spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

Now if the ministry of death, chiseled in letters on stone tablets, came in glory so that the people of Israel could not gaze at Moses’ face because of the glory of his face, a glory now set aside, how much more will the ministry of the Spirit come in glory?”

(2 Corinthians 3:1-8, NRSV)

Let me further add these two passages, that present the idea that the Word of God is the Spirit of Christ Himself:

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen His glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.”
(John 1:1, 14, NRSV)

“He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and His name is called The Word of God... On His robe and on His thigh He has a name inscribed, ‘King of kings and Lord of lords.’”

(Revelation 19:13, 16, NRSV)

I recently was talking with a young woman who is now an atheist. She said that her faith started to falter the more she studied the Bible. She grew up being taught that every word in the Bible is the actual word of God, and when she read parts of the Bible that didn't sound like God's words, she didn't feel she was allowed to question it. Eventually, she came to abandon the Bible and God entirely.

But I wonder if part of the reason she lost her faith is that she never had a personal faith in the first place. I realize that though I have directed most of my life to become a more Bible-centered person, what actually brought me to Christ was not the Bible, but a personal experience of God (what some people call a "born-again" experience). At that point I had heard about God all my life, and I had already read through the Bible at least once. But it was this encounter, where I felt the presence of God and heard His voice, that began a real relationship. I have occasionally had other divine encounters, and they are a reminder to me that my faith is more than obedience to the written Word. I didn't sense in my conversation with the young woman that she had ever had this kind of experience. Perhaps she was never encouraged to seek it.

Though I have had these experiences, the written Word has still been invaluable to me in making sense of them. I can see myself in the experiences of early believers. No doubt if I grew up in a different place with a different religious background, I would see and talk about the experiences differently: perhaps I would either deny them as crazy dreams, or trying to explain them in terms of other gods. But while I might live with these ideas, it is hard for me to imagine that I would be satisfied. These fit in my mind with Christian experiences. From all I have learned about other religions, none offer a better explanation than the grace of our Lord and the work of the Holy Spirit accounting for the way my life has turned out. Without writing a lot more about the details of my religious experiences, I can generally say that a personal *EXPERIENCE* is what began my personal journey of faith, but *SCRIPTURE* has been the primary lens I use to understand it and to grow in my faith in Christ.

There are many today who, while still being Christian, have given up on the Bible. For them, it no longer seems relevant. And there are many who insist that the Bible should be our guide to everything we do. And the greater irony is that most of the people who hold either of those positions do not know the Bible well. I want to encourage everyone to not give up on the Bible, but not expect from it what it was never intended to offer. In the next article I will try to provide a workable answer for how we can best understand and use the Bible today. My answer may not exactly work for you, but I believe it could be close enough that you can tailor it to your own experience. This is always my prayer.

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be the name 'Ken' written in a cursive, flowing style.