

PASTOR'S NOTES. Understanding the Bible, part 1.

Two months ago in this column I mentioned my personal choice to be a "Bible-first" person. It is also my observation that most people (including those who call themselves Bible preachers and teachers) are not, instead living first by some combination of tradition and experience. In addition, I have also argued that the way we look at the Bible is largely through tradition and not true to the Bible itself. It will take me more than one article to do this.

Let me first give a broad historical sketch: After Jesus died, rose again, and ascended, His disciples (students) were now apostles (sent out) and they proclaimed the message of His resurrection and God's plan unfolding. This message was spread by the preaching of the witnesses and their stories that were circulated orally (remember that most people of the time could not read or write). To the Jews who received this message, they did have written scripture they could relate to the message: the Law (the first five books of the Old Testament), the Prophets (the Old Testament books of Prophets and history) and the Psalms. At that time the last portion of the Jewish Bible, the writings (Proverbs and other Wisdom books and the extra books of the Catholic Old Testament) were widely read and many considered them sacred, but they were not yet officially recognized as part of the Bible until some decades after Jesus.

*"For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then He appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, He appeared also to me."*

(1 Corinthians 15:3-8, NRSV)

The text above appears to be the basic message that was spread among the first believers. It refers to the scriptures (the Law and the Prophets of the Old Testament), but the message is grounded in the living witnesses to Jesus and his resurrection.

Our best historical guesses so far are that Jesus died and rose sometime around the year 30, and the text that Paul quotes above he received around the year 35. Paul's letters were mostly written about 15 years later. While most of what Jesus said and did was written down in bits and pieces from the early days, the four gospels as we have them were probably completed between the years 66-90. When "scripture" is mentioned in the New Testament letters (2 Timothy 3:16; 2 Peter 1:20-21, 3:16), this would mean the Law, the Prophets, and maybe some of Paul's letters.

From other writers in the early centuries, we have been able to piece together how the Bible came to be. No book of the Bible was called scripture when it was first written. The books and letters of the New Testament and many other books were copied and circulated to many churches. Over time, certain books were seen as inspired by the Holy Spirit, and many others were not, though this was not unanimous. It could have happened much earlier, but by the year 144, ten of Paul's letters are in a collection and many seem to treat them as scripture. By the year 170, out of about 30 gospels, four

(Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) are recommended as inspired by God. Acts and the other three letters of Paul (Titus, 1 & 2 Timothy) were added around that time. Over the next two hundred years, Christians debated about whether the remaining letters, Revelation, and some other letters should be included in the Bible. The first list we have of the final 27 books of the New Testament comes from Athanasius in 367.

So the process of the Bible coming together took many years. In the year 382 Jerome completed a Latin translation of the Bible (New Testament and Catholic Old Testament), and it gradually became the official written Bible for the church. However, even by then, fewer people could read Latin, and so the people depended on the priests to tell them what the Bible says.

Probably by the 600s, the common person believed the Bible (which he could not read) just came down from heaven as a single revelation from God. When the Muslims swept through the area near the end of that century, they claimed that God had sent a new revelation through Muhammad called the Qu'ran. Some were convinced and some were not, but since they couldn't read Latin or Arabic they depended on their leaders to tell them what to believe. Christians and Muslims have argued this ever since.

In the 1500s scholars began to translate the Bible into the languages of the people. Now anyone could read the Bible, and by the 1800s we see the rise of many critical scholars. While Christians had assumed the Bible to be truthful and trustworthy, with this challenge some began to argue that the Bible is infallible or inerrant (without error). This could mean one or more of these things:

- The Bible has come to us every word 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.
- The Bible is the direct word of God, in its original language and manuscripts.
- 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.
- 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.

This is only a general list of the way that persons argue about the Bible. I should note that the official historical position of the United Methodist Church and most of the older denominations (Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Episcopal) would be most like the last on the list above.

That historical sketch took up all my space. In the next article(s) I will try to relate this to what the "Word of God" means and how to understand the Bible today in the light of our current world.

Yours in Christ,

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