

THE BIBLE IN CHRISTIAN LIFE

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10; Psalm 19; 1 Corinthians 12:12-31a; Luke 4:14-21

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IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

The Bible, for Christians, is like the United States Constitution for Americans. Just as the Constitution is the final secular authority for a U.S. citizen, the Word of God in Holy Scripture is the final authority for all Christians.

Yesterday we witnessed the peaceful exchange of presidential power with the inauguration of President Bush. Bill Clinton, a Democrat, peacefully handed over the reigns of power to Republican, George W. Bush. We're so fortunate as a nation to have a Constitutional system of Government that, for 250 years has peacefully turned over the reigns of power – often to opposition parties.

The first time the president of one party handed over the reigns to the presidential candidate of another party happened with the election of President Thomas Jefferson in 1800. Jefferson, the candidate of the Democratic-Republican party, narrowly won over the Federalist incumbent, John Adams. But the results were complicated when each of the Democratic-Republican electors divided their votes between Jefferson and his vice-presidential running mate, Aaron Burr. As a result there was a tie in the electoral college. The House of Representatives settled the election by deciding on Jefferson on the 36th ballot.

In his first inaugural address Jefferson alluded to the bitterly contested election when he said to a divided nation, “every difference of opinion is not a difference of principle.” The principle that united Federalists and Democratic-Republicans was the authority of the Constitution. Conservatives and liberals, now as then, will interpret the Constitution differently (we have differences of opinion) but we're united in principle to the authority of the Constitution. In the same way Christians who hold differing opinions are united in principle to the authority of Holy Scripture. Whether liberal or conservative every elder, deacon and minister, answers in the affirmative: *Do you accept the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be, by the Holy Spirit, the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the Church universal, and God's Word to you?* We have differences of opinion but “every difference of opinion is not a difference of principle.” We are united in the principle that the Bible is the Word of God.

Let this be an introduction to our Old Testament lesson. The people of Israel gathered before the Water Gate (not the hotel in Washington but one of the many gates into the walled city of Jerusalem). Ezra stood on an elevated platform and read the Constitution of the people of God. He probably read the law of God from the book of Deuteronomy. He began reading as the sun came up and continued until the sun stood overhead and “the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law.

Now I have learned four lessons from our Scripture lesson.

First, the Bible is meant to unite people like the Constitution unites Americans. Today, I’m afraid the Bible is more apt to divide. When the Bible becomes a source of division rather than unity we do a disservice to the God who speaks to us in the written Word. Churches too often have split over biblical interpretations. A good rule for Presbyterian to follow is a slogan first used to unite Lutherans and Reformed Christians in Germany years ago: “in essentials unity; in non-essentials liberty; in all things charity.” The Word of God in Scripture is meant to bring God’s people together as it did in the days of Ezra.

Second, our Old Testament reading reminds us that biblical illiteracy is epidemic. Ezra knew God’s people had little knowledge of the Word of God—so he read the Word to them. ~~Americans have little~~ knowledge of the Bible. About 92 percent own at least one Bible. Two-thirds say it holds the answers to the basic questions of life, and yesterday President George W. Bush took a solemn oath of office on it. It remains unrivaled as the world’s all time best seller. During the presidential campaign both candidates quoted the Bible as often as their parties platforms. Yet so many Americans are biblically illiterate. Fewer than half of Americans can name the first book of the Bible. Only one-third know who delivered the Sermon on the Mount (many named Billy Graham rather than Jesus). One quarter do not know what Easter celebrates. Despite the talk about how important the Ten Commandments are to the moral health of America, six out of 10 Americans can’t name half of them. 12% of Christians think Noah’s wife was Joan of Arc. 80% of so-called Born Again Christians believe the Bible says, “God helps those that help themselves.” George Gallup, the pollster, says, “We revere the Bible but we don’t read it.” Biblical illiteracy had reached epidemic proportions in America. This church offers so many opportunities for all of us to overcome our biblical illiteracy.

A third lesson our Old Testament reading teaches is that the Bible needs to be interpreted. Nehemiah says, "they read from the book, from the law of God, *with interpretation*." The Bible is not self interpreting. We need the aid of the Holy Spirit so we pray for illumination. We need to use our minds. We need to use the tools of scholarship. It helps to know the cultural and historical background of a passage. It helps to know the commonly held beliefs of the people to whom the Word of God was originally preached. It helps to listen to what other Christians (and non-Christians) hear when they read the Bible. And it helps to know our own prejudices. We all read the Bible through lenses which prejudge the Word.

For example, my dad was a socialist. He used to vote for Norman Thomas the candidate for the Socialist Workers Party. My dad was also a devout Christian. I can vividly remember how he interpreted the Bible through the eyes of a socialist. The apostle Paul wrote, "If anyone does not work, let them not eat." My dad believed work meant hard, physical labor. People shouldn't eat unless they physically *work by the sweat of their brow, not by the seat of their pants*. When I left home I discovered politically conservative Christians who used the same Biblical passage to oppose food stamps for the unemployed. Both believed in the authority of Scripture but how differently they interpreted it. ~~If only they could've gotten together around the Word of God~~ in Scripture and listened to one another. We need to help one another interpret the Word of God in Scripture.

The Presbyterian Church encourages a wide diversity of interpretations while, at the same time, affirming the Bible as the Word of God. I very much like that about the Presbyterian church. I'd be very unhappy with attempts to narrow the breadth of biblical interpretation permitted in the church. I'm so thankful for warm, intelligent, devout Christian men and women who've helped me interpret the Bible. I went to Wheaton College, a very theologically conservative Christian college. I went to Princeton Seminary, a theologically moderate Christian seminary. I'm so thankful for conservative and liberal professors who encouraged me to listen closely when fellow Christians interpreted Scripture in a different way than I did.

A fourth lesson

~~Finally~~, our Old Testament reading encourages us to rejoice and be glad that God really speaks to us in Holy Scripture. God is not silent. God loves us and wants us to know him. God is the source of all love, of all life, of all truth. When Ezra finished reading the Word "all the people wept." They wept, perhaps, in fear of

God's judgments. But Ezra reminded them that God's grace is greater than God's judgment. He said, "Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine... for this day is holy to our Lord and do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength." Ezra knew that the word of God is primarily a message of grace, not of condemnation; a message of joy, not of sorrow; a message of promise, not of threat.

Furthermore, Ezra instructed the people to *send portions of (food) to those for whom nothing is prepared*. In other words, respond to the Word of God but looking beyond yourselves and your own needs to the need of those around you. Feed the hungry in the land!

Finally, the central content of Holy Scripture is Jesus Christ. We go to Scripture not to learn how long a cubit is or what gopher wood is or whether the great flood was universal or local but to meet Jesus Christ. We know about the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ through the Holy Scriptures. ~~Jesus is mentioned in secular writers of his days but grace and truth come through Jesus Christ.~~ We read the Bible not to gather ammunition against those who differ from us but in order to deepen our love, knowledge, and service of Jesus Christ. If we hope to make steady progress in our Christian pilgrimage, probably nothing is more important than the discipline of listening to God's Word in Holy Scripture -- in daily readings -- but especially in worship and study with God's people. Through the Bible I know of a God who has declared his salvation in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, and with deepest gratitude I embrace that saving truth and stake my life on it.

Let us pray: Blessed Lord, who caused all holy scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.