Some Thoughts on Scripture

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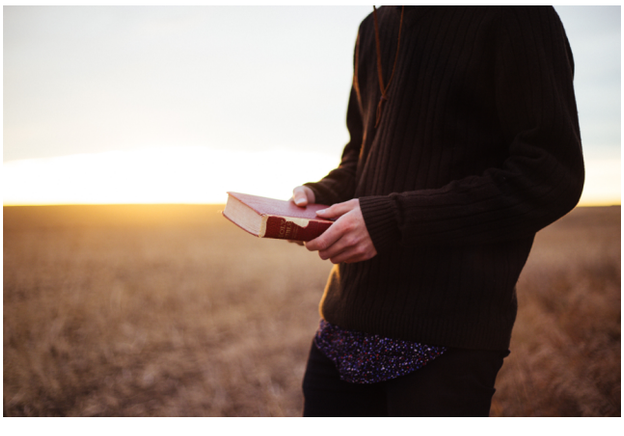
The Bible is an all too neglected book, and its power remains largely untapped in our Christian world. Some tend to think so poorly of the Bible that it become little more than a self-help book. It has no more to offer us than the latest trends in psychology, spirituality, or personal coaching. Indeed, considering how "outdated" it is, and how seemingly removed from life, perhaps it can offer up only far *less*. This strand of Christianity is in desperate need of recovering the convictions about Scripture which have always been the historic position of the Christian church. This book is *God's* word, and in it we hear *his* voice. As Augustine famously said, when the Bible speaks, God speaks.

Paul's Enduring Words To Timothy



When Paul wrote his first letter to his good friend Timothy, Tim was facing some of the roughest conditions in serving the church that we see anywhere in the NT. Paul had left him in Ephesus to stem the tide of the false teachers sweeping like a wave over the people of Ephesus (I Tim. 1:3). As if the presence of such false teaching were not bad enough, the pervasiveness of this teaching made it all the more difficult. People were simply eating it up (II Tim. 4:4). Their itching ears couldn't get enough of this tickling teaching.

But perhaps most painful of all to young Timothy, these teachers were the very men who had once faithfully proclaimed the gospel, and to whom Tim had looked early on, when he had been here before, as great heroes of the faith (see Acts 20:22-37). There is little that is more painful than watching a hero and mentor fall. Yet here was Timothy, stuck in the middle of it all, charged with the task of bringing wayward souls back to the gospel. One can only imagine that every insecurity and feeling of inadequacy must have come to the fore in Timothy's heart at such a point. And yet, Timothy is not unprepared for the work.

> Timothy has spent years of preparation, not in a monastery, but in public life as a servant of the gospel while under Paul's direct or indirect influence. He does not need to learn a new language, at least in the short term. Moreover, he is grounded in the same Scriptures from which Jesus taught and to which Paul constantly appeals. Both of these factors and more should buoy Timothy with hope, even though "evildoers and imposters will go from bad to worse" (v. 13). Whatever his feelings of inadequacy, Timothy has the equipping he needs.
> - Robert W. Yarbrough, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*, PNTC, pg. 417–418.

At some point not long after, Paul became imprisoned again, for what would be the last time. And as he wrote his second letter to Timothy (urging him to come quickly to his prison in Rome for a final and tearful farewell - II Tim. 4:9), his words to Timothy take on a new kind of gravity. The Apostle is soon to step off the scene of this life, into the next, and Timothy must carry the banner of faithful preaching of the gospel. In some ways, these are the same words Paul had written to Timothy in I Tim. 1:3-2:13, but now invested with a greater weight. As part of his track to embed his own convictions about the power of the gospel into Timothy's heart, Paul again rehearses his own ministry pattern (I Tim. 4:11-16) to Timothy (who knew it well after over a decade of traveling with his mentor and friend). Paul urges Timothy, in the strongest terms possible, to let his ministry center on Scripture. Scripture alone has the power not only to work in Timothy's own heart and life, but to work through him to bring those around him to maturity of character. In contrast to the false teaching around him, he must call to mind the history of how God has worked in his own life, (through Scripture) and the pattern of ministry he has inherited from the apostle Paul, and realize that it is Scripture alone that can empower his current seemingly hopeless ministry to others.

> *But you, Timothy, certainly know what I teach, and how I live, and what my purpose in life is. You know my faith, my patience, my love, and my endurance. 11 You know how much persecution and suffering I have endured. You know all about how I was persecuted in Antioch, Iconium, and Lystra—but the Lord rescued me from all of it. 12 Yes, and everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution. 13 But evil people and impostors will flourish. They will deceive others and will themselves be deceived.*
>
> *14 But you must remain faithful to the things you have been taught. You know they are true, for you know you can trust those who taught you. 15 You have been taught the holy Scriptures from childhood, and they have given you the wisdom to receive the salvation that comes by trusting in Christ Jesus. 16 All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It corrects us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right. 17 God uses it to prepare and equip his people to do every good work.*
> - 2 Tim. 3:10–17, NLT

A Sufficient Word

The false teachers have a message that ultimately has either a human or demonic source. But Timothy has inherited the very words of God. "The opponents are teaching commandments that come from demons (1 Tim 4:1) through people (Titus 1:14). Scripture, on the other hand, Paul says, comes straight from God, and therefore Timothy can trust it to equip and train him to do his work as an evangelist…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" (Mounce, WBC, pg. 570- Tweet This). And Paul thus encourages Timothy to center his mission on Scripture. As Mounce goes on to explain;

> A large part of the encouragement is to remind Timothy of the role Scripture is to play in his life and ministry. While the opponents are proclaiming demonic myths that tickle the Ephesian's ears with their novelty, Timothy is to make Scripture central in his ministry. He had learned the Hebrew Scripture from childhood, had known the character of those who had taught it to him, had come to understand experientially that it was true, had recognized that its source was the very breath of God, had understood it within the context of the early Christian proclamation of Jesus Christ, and therefore had become convinced that it and it alone was able to equip him fully for the task of ministry. He is therefore to preach it at all times, whether or not he wants to, whether or not the Ephesians want to hear it. Though Timothy may have been tempted to rely on other sources, find other ways of arguing his case, Scripture is the means, Paul tells Timothy, by which he is to combat the Ephesian heresy and to train people in righteousness.
> - William D. Mounce, *WBC*, 583–584.

In these words of encouragement to Timothy, we find one of the most profound statements in Scripture about the nature of Scripture, "all Scripture is inspired by God." We have here, Paul asserts, *a God-breathed book*. Naturally, much debate surrounds these words. It seems to me that Paul is throughout the passage combining an emphasis on the OT and on the gospel message, sort of saying that the OT is meant to proclaim the gospel message, and that this means that it is a word from God, meant to be the standard for all Christian teaching. But whatever else he is saying, he is asserting the divine origins of Scripture.

An *Ad Hoc* Word

To be sure, Paul is addressing in an *ad hoc* way the specific problems that Timothy is facing. The problem with the Ephesian false teachers stands behind all that Paul says. As William Mounce explained, "Everything Paul says [in this passage] is to be understood within the historical framework of the Ephesian situation, especially the value of Scripture and the role it is to play in combating the false teachers" (WBC, pg. 555). Yet, in observing how Paul encouraged Timothy to rely upon the power of Scripture in that harsh moment, and especially watching how these words become more intense as Paul nears death, we realize that this is ultimately bigger than Ephesus. Paul's words to Timothy here have something to say to every Christian, as we handle the word of God in our personal lives, and in our ministry to others. Mounce builds the bridge to the modern world well;

> Scripture is to play a central role in Timothy's ministry and by implication in the lives of all ministers. It is from God's mouth; it is therefore true, authoritative, able to equip fully the minister for ministry. As D. A. Hubbard asserts, "It has binding and absolute authority over what we believe and how we live"...The OT, understood more clearly through the apostolic proclamation, stands in contrast to all human and demonic teachings. No matter how many teachers of myths and human fables come against the gospel, with Scripture one is able to teach, reprove, correct, and train people in righteousness. This is reminiscent of Paul's earlier encouragement to Timothy in 1 Tim 4:6–16 to make Scripture central in his ministry: read it, exhort it, teach it. Ministers of all generations would do well to heed Paul's instruction, especially when encountering opposition or a desire to center one's ministry on something other than that which has come from the very mouth of God. Scripture is sufficient (cf. Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 127–35).
> - Mounce, *WBC*, pg. 584.

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- William Mounce
(Tweet This)

An Ever-Relevant Word

Some are content to leave Paul's words in the past. But not all, and not me. Robert Yarbrough explains, "Despite pessimism in some quarters regarding Scripture's "holy" status, many concur that what Paul says is no less true today, whoever the reader or hearer and whatever the locale" (PNTC, pg. 427). I suspect that in most corners of Christianity, the temptation to have a "low" view of Scripture is actually quite rare. The corresponding danger of having too "high" of view of Scripture, which essentially defies it, might be more common. We have addressed that before. I often echo the words of G. E. Ladd that the Bible is *the word of God given in human words, in history*. Fundamentalists face the regular temptation to deny its *human* nature, while liberals face the common temptation to deny its *divine* nature. (Tweet This)

A Book that Must be Eaten

But while few Christians I know would deny in their *confession* that Scripture is a divine book, far too many deny it in their *practice*. They have a *functionally* liberal approach to Scripture. Whatever they might claim they believe about the divine origins of Scripture, the long periods of time where their Bibles remain unopened on the shelf betray them. When they turn everywhere but to Scripture in times of crisis, the shallowness of their confession is revealed. The Bible becomes only a book used to shore up their doctrinal claims, or to provide proof-texts for their political ideologies, but is never truly and deeply imbibed as a word from God. Far too many have never even read it through - and one wonders how any one can accept a claim by someone to believe that the Bible is of divine origin, when such a person has never even bothered to read it. Eugene Peterson highlights the problem with a story about a friend;

> A friend told me recently of an acquaintance, a lifelong reader of the Bible, who realized one day that his life was not turning out as he thought the Bible said it would. He decided then and there, in his words, to "make my life my authority instead of the Bible." Most of our culture, both secular and religious, supports the man's decision. It has become characteristic of our burgeoning, contemporary spirituality in its various manifestations to take the sovereign self as [authoritative] text. But the results are not encouraging: the groundswell of interest in spirituality as this new millennium has opened up does not seem to be producing any discernible outpouring of energetic justice and faithful love, two of the more obvious accompaniments of a healthy and holy Christian life...In contrast to the self-serving and glamorous spiritualities, ours is a pedestrian way, literally pedestrian: we put one foot in front of the other as we follow Jesus. And in order to know who he is, where he is going, and how to walk in his steps, we reach for a book, *the book*, and read it.
> - Peterson, *Eat This Book*, loc. 184-200

Peterson goes on to develop at length the metaphor, employed by John in Revelation 10, Ezekiel in chapters 2-3, and Jeremiah in chapter 15, of "eating" the book of Scripture. "Eating a book takes it all in, assimilating it into the tissues of our lives. Readers become what they read. If Holy Scripture is to be something other than mere gossip about God, it must be internalized."

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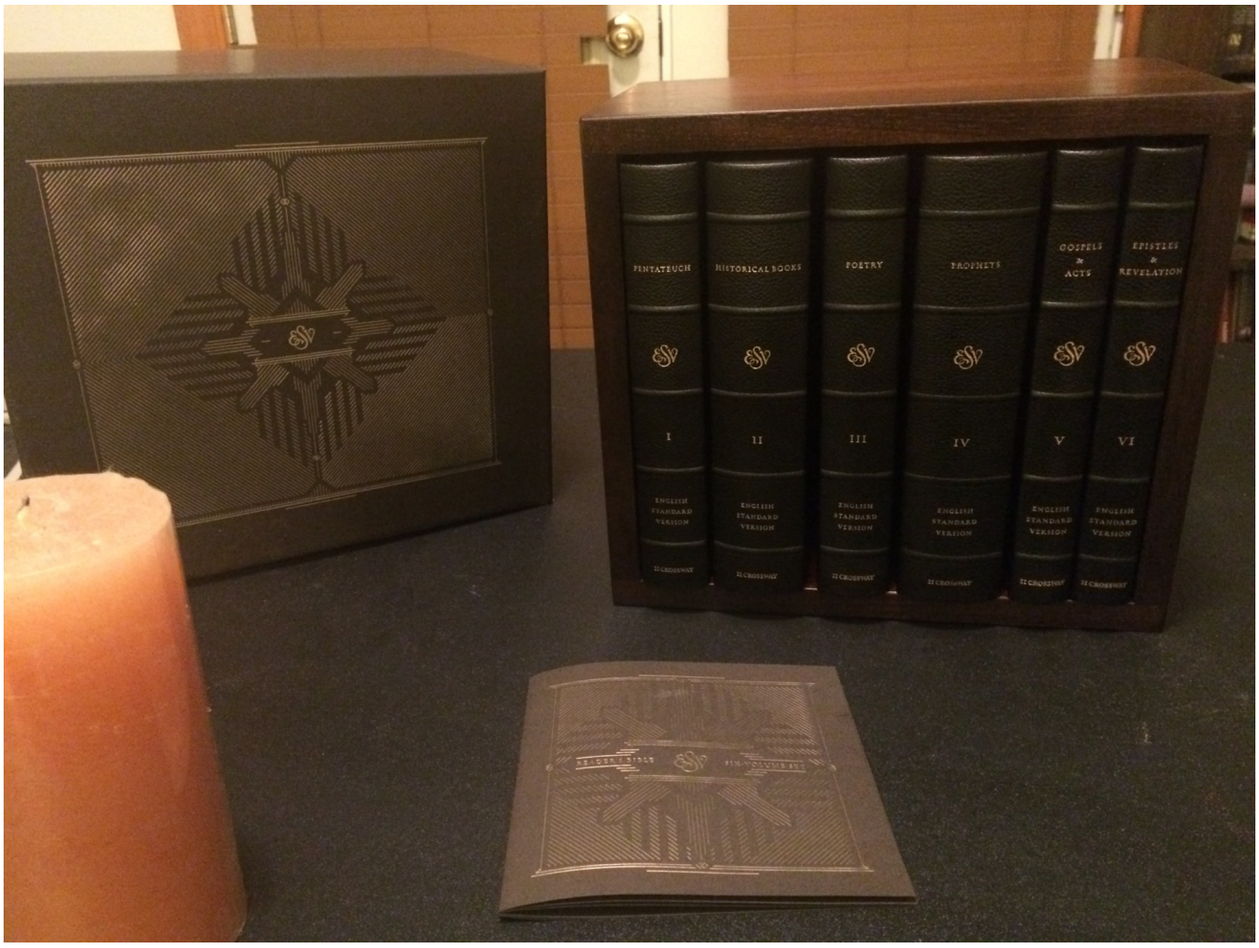
This, he insists, is how Christians must approach Scripture. Not as only a treatise to be heard, or information to be gained, but a meal on which we feast, and by which we are both nourished and changed;

> Christians feed on Scripture. Holy Scripture nurtures the holy community as food nurtures the human body. Christians don't simply learn or study or use Scripture; we assimilate it, take it into our lives in such a way that it gets metabolized into acts of love, cups of cold water, missions into all the world, healing and evangelism and justice in Jesus' name, hands raised in adoration of the Father, feet washed in company with the Son.
> - *Eat This Book*, loc. 218

As I have thought on his words the last few days, I can't help but wonder - what have you been feasting on? And what does your diet reveal about what you actually believe about Scripture? Perhaps its time for a change of diet. Perhaps its time for a feast.



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