

SERMON TITLE- Confession Of Faith- People Of The Book

TEXT- Acts 17:10-12

PREACHED AT- Neighbourhood Church

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Last week Ryan did a good job of giving us an overview of our series. We have gone through a series of what could be called doctrinal sermons dealing with the topics of who God is.

Ryan shifted us over to another aspect of our CoF- that aspect is its application and expression in the Church.

For very good reasons there has been very little that is controversial about what we have talked about so far. What we believe and what our CoF states is what Christians have held to since the very earliest days of the Church.

But there is an important thing that needs to be understood along side of this- there are also differences of expression between various Christian churches.

In fact the difference between various Christians is one of the big topics of controversy when we talk about our faith. If Christians all follow Jesus then why are there so many different types of Churches? You will face that question many times. It can be a tough question but I think that it also has a very good answer.

The answer is- there are all kinds of different ways from which to look at Jesus just as there are different way to see Nanaimo. All the different ways are not equal. Some give better overviews, some give very narrow overviews and frankly some, taken alone actually distort a balanced understanding of our city. One of the things that anyone who hikes quickly realizes is that it is very easy to be confused as to where one is.

The illustration that will guide our next 3 sermons is that of a view from a particular mountain- the mountain from which our CoF was written. For each of the next 3 sermons I want to spend a little time on that perspective so that we can understand why, as an Anabaptist church, our beliefs have taken the shape the way they have.

Hopefully it helps clarify why we say certain things- and also help in a small way for us to understand how things might look from different mountain peaks- or valleys.

Today we look at the topic of the Bible.

Anabaptists have been given the title- The People Of The Book. Where does that come from?

A History Lesson

As with many things in the Christian world a lot revolves around what has been called the Protestant Reformation. On Oct 31, 1517 [this Sunday!] Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses to the door of Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. That set in motion what was probably the most significant single event in European history.

For Christians its significance is that the idea of a single church in Europe came to an end and 1000s of sects sprang up. From that day forward the question, “Why are there so many churches?” had meaning. Before that it had not. There was only one church, in the eyes of most people.

The 95 Theses were a list of abuses that Martin Luther had identified in the RC Church of his time. 3 types of abuses were, the practice purchasing indulgences which

were supposed to let people shorten their time in purgatory, the whole idea of purgatory, and the collection of relics [objects supposedly connected with the saints and were supposed to have miraculous power.]

Why did Luther think that these things were wrong? Because he claimed that they were not in the Bible. Luther and the rest of the Reformers came up with an idea they called, Sola Scriptura. This was the belief that if something wasn't in the Bible- then it should not be talk as spiritual truth. The only spiritual authority was the Bible.

Martin Luther said-

"a simple layman armed with Scripture is greater than the mightiest pope without it".

"The true rule is this: God's Word shall establish articles of faith, and no one else, not even an angel can do so."

Statements like this characterized the Reformation view of the Bible and that with the invention of the printing press some 70 years earlier [1441] meant that suddenly Bible reading became something that far more people were able to do.

For about 1000 years, during what has been called the Dark Ages the average person had not had access to the Bible and even when the Bible was read- it was read in Latin, which very few people understood. Therefore their only source of Bible teaching is what a priest would tell them. It is not hard to see how all kinds of peculiar ideas had become commonplace.

Everyone now seemed to be reading the Bible for themselves and coming up with meanings on their own. This caused its own challenges.

Within the Protestant Reformation there were 2 major groups- the first was the Magisterial Reformation which was the Lutherans and the Calvinists. It was called this because this part of the Reformation involved the magistrates or the governments of the nations of Europe. The churches that emerged from this were the state churches. Note: Between the early Lutherans and Calvinists the distinctions were very minor and mostly along language lines. The Lutherans tended to be German and Northern European while the Calvinists were French, Dutch and later English. The English wing of the Magisterial Reformation was the Anglican Church.

The other side of the Reformation is called the Radical Reformation. This part of the Reformation was not connected to the state. This included the Anabaptists.

The Anabaptists however were distinct because they went one step farther- they also called for the actual separation of the Church from the state. That is something that the Puritans who founded the US would later make as a key part of their theology.

Our church, for the record comes out of the Anabaptist wing of the Reformation. So that is our history lesson.

The People Of The Book- From Our Place On A Hill

They also became known as "The People Of The Book."

Why would they be called that when all of the rest of the Reformers also held to Sola Scriptura?

The answer is that without a preset structure in place they really had to rely on the Scriptures to define their theology. There really was no other authority. Within both the Calvinist and Lutheran traditions the role of the teacher [as opposed to the pope] had a

very high level of authority. Among Anabaptists that was far less the case.

A key Anabaptist text is this-

As soon as it was night, the brothers sent Paul and Silas away to Berea. On arriving there, they went to the Jewish synagogue. Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true. Many of the Jews believed, as did also a number of prominent Greek women and many Greek men. Acts 17:10-12

The Anabaptists saw themselves as the Bereans. Notice how they did not just take what Paul said at face value- but checked it out over and over again. This was not understood to be a critique of these people for not trusting Paul- but rather a sign of their noble character.

This is not controversial in any way- especially among the Protestants. With all how hold to Sola Scriptura we hold that-

#1. The Bible Is God's Word

This is something that defines orthodox Christianity and it is the big tent of Christianity. There are all kinds of arguments among Christians about a lot of things. In fact there are even arguments among Christians about what it means to say, "The Bible is God's Word."

Last week at the John Stackhouse lecture, John was very clear on this point. This assumption will be the basis for everything that follows- from a Christian's perspective.

Christians argue it will be around the Bible but at the end of the day the final argument will lean on what the Bible says.

Now like all things that sound simple at first, explanations are needed and I will pick up 2 today.

The first thing to note is-

1. The Bible Is A Book

Is that too obvious a statement? Actually it needs to be carefully noted. There are a couple of areas of confusion. The first is a translation problem.

We have already seen this verse before-

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. John 1:1

What is mentioned here? The Word of God. We realize quickly that Jesus is The Word referred to here and the Greek word "word" is actually "logos."

While it is clear in this case that this is not talking about the Bible- we understand this- but in many other cases it is not as clear. Even more confusing we routinely call the Bible as "the Word of God."

This can be very confusing because sometimes it could sound as if when that phrase is used it refers to the Bible- when it doesn't.

But the Bible is the Bible and it is first and foremost- a book.

Let's look at an illustration of this.

Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside. He taught in their synagogues, and everyone praised him. Luke 4:14-15

He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he

went into the synagogue, as was his custom. And he stood up to read. The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written: Luke 4:16-17

"The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to preach good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to release the oppressed,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." Luke 4:18-19

Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him, and he began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." Luke 4:20-21

There it is. Jesus picks up a scroll, or book, and reads from it.

Why is this important?

1. Because only Christians believe that the Bible is God's Word and when we talk about it to others, assuming that they will agree to this, doesn't make any sense. It is a book and needs to be read like a book.

As a person who studied English literature, the richness of the Bible constantly overwhelms me. It is a book of extra-ordinary beauty and majesty and stands, at least, along side of any great work of literature.

2. Christians really need to read the Bible as a book. I think that many Christians move to the next step far too quickly. The result is that they don't read the Bible the same way that they would read Hamlet or The Odyssey. As a result they miss its natural beauty. Frankly, I believe that Christians who don't start with the understanding that the Bible is a book that needs to be handled like a book are handicapped in their understanding of the Scriptures.

But clearly there is more than this. Our ICOMB CoF says-

The Bible is the authoritative Word of God and the infallible guide for faith and life . . . Since the Holy Spirit is present and active in all believers, we read and interpret the Bible and its demands for today's life in community.

This means that-

2. The Bible Is Not Just Another Book

This is far more self-evident to most of us than the statement that the Bible is a book.

That is a clear statement and tells us that the Bible is far more than just another book. The Bible is the "Word of God." One of the things that we struggle with is adding words and in this case I think more words are added that don't help. If the Bible is the "Word of God" why would anyone feel the need to add "infallible" to this? The reason of course is that this is part of an argument that does take place but unless you are in the middle of that argument adding this word only confuses things. Can the "Word of God" fail? I doubt anyone would want to argue for that.

The bottom line, however is that we see the Bible as a divinely inspired book with a power that derives from its Author.

Let's just look at a couple of examples of how the Bible works in this context.

For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Hebrews 4:12

Here the Bible is described as a sword that cuts through the complicated thoughts and attitudes of our human nature separating out the parts that get all mixed up causing confusion.

I am quite sure that we all understand that kind of confusion and the need to cut through it.

This is the Bible as far more than a book, doing its work. Now does one have to understand that the Bible is more than a book to benefit from this aspect of the Scriptures? I don't think so- and more than a person being operated on by a surgeon needs to understand how the blade works to benefit from that scalpels work. Of course if we refuse to "go under the knife" we cannot benefit from it.

James gives another illustration of the work of the Bible as a divine book- **Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it— he will be blessed in what he does. James 1:22-25**

The Bible is a mirror. This of course is an extension of the Hebrews metaphor. The Bible shines a light on us and show us who we actually are. Does this require us to accept the Bible as God's Word? I don't think it does. The mirror does its job whether or not we accept it. And of course we can choose either to ignore and dismiss what we see, or refuse to look into that mirror at all.

None the less- the Bible is a mirror.

Another aspect of the Bible is referred to over and over again and is repeated in Psalm 119.

**Your word is a lamp to my feet
and a light for my path.**

**I have taken an oath and confirmed it,
that I will follow your righteous laws. Psalm 119:105-106**

Here the Bible is the direction by which we go through life. In the case of the Bible as a light, it is very clear that a choice to use the light it provides is critical to it function in that way. It also presumes that we want to be on a path "towards the light" as Ryan talked about last week.

Now there is a very simple application that kicks in here. It isn't a point that needs a lot of elaboration but for the Bible to function in our lives-

#2. The Bible Needs To Be In Us

One of the things that we talk about is bringing your Bible to church. This is a very good habit but don't limit carrying a Bible to church with getting the Bible into us.

The ability to carry a Bible around is a very modern thing. For most of history the only way to carry a Bible with us was to memorize it.

The blessing of the printing press, and in the last few decades, computers, is the easy accessibility to the actual written text. We need to use and take advantage of that blessing. However the key is not how well we carry a book with us- but how effectively we get the Scriptures into us.

That is the key.

And one more point- and a place where our particular view from the mountain history has given to us, does give us a identifiable stance-

#3. The Bible Needs To Be Studied In The Church

I think everyone would agree to this statement. What does this mean from our background however?

Placing a person behind a pulpit does not make them more reliable. That is a radical statement but it needs to be understood.

It is not however just a radical statement for its own sake- it comes directly from the Scriptures. John writes-

As for you, the anointing you received from him remains in you, and you do not need anyone to teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about all things and as that anointing is real, not counterfeit—just as it has taught you, remain in him. 1

John 2:27

But you are not to be called 'Rabbi,' for you have only one Master and you are all brothers. And do not call anyone on earth 'father,' for you have one Father, and he is in heaven. Nor are you to be called 'teacher,' for you have one Teacher, the Christ. Matthew 23:8-10

That is a problematic text but one which the Radical Reformation took seriously and the Magisterial Reformation tried to explain.

But it really isn't controversial from our place on the mountain top. Here's what it means-

Positively-

1. It means that every believer has the Holy Spirit as Teacher- and every believer should get God's Word into their beings. It does mean that the preacher/teacher is not the "de facto" authority.

Negatively-

1. It does not mean that we individually have the ultimate insight. That insight is given to the church that studies the Scriptures together, the way the Bereans did.

2. It does not mean any opinion is equal. Those who study carefully with good tools will know more than those who don't.

3. Be careful of argumentative people. Those who study in a balanced fashion are more reliable than argumentative people.

A Radical Statement

"We are not Anabaptists". We look at life through the history of Anabaptism. That is the position from which our CoF was written. If we understand this we will be able to appreciate both the advantages and disadvantages that this perspective gives us. It will also help us understand the advantages and disadvantages that other histories have.

Being unaware of different perspectives just means we think we are the only ones who see the truth.

North American Full Version- The Written Word of God

We believe that the entire Bible was inspired by God through the Holy Spirit. The same Spirit guides the community of faith in the interpretation of Scripture. The person, teaching and life of Jesus Christ bring continuity and clarity to both the Old and New Testaments. The Old Testament bears witness to Christ, and Christ is the One whom the New Testament proclaims. We accept the Bible as the infallible Word of God and the authoritative guide for faith and practice.

Genesis 9:1-17; Genesis 12:1-3; Exodus 6:2-8; Psalm 19:1-11; Psalm 119; Matthew 5:17-18; Luke 24:27, 44-47; John 1:16-18; John 16:13; Acts 8:34-35; Romans 1:18-21; Hebrews 1:1-2; Colosians 1:15-23; II Timothy 3:14-17; II Peter 1:16-21.

The ICOMB Version- People of the Bible

The Bible is the authoritative Word of God and the infallible guide for faith and life. **Worldview. The Bible provides the framework for our understanding of the world. Interpretation. Our interpretation is Christ centered. We read the Scriptures with a New Testament perspective. The person, teaching and life of Jesus Christ bring continuity and clarity to both the Old and New Testaments.**

Community of interpretation: Every believer is encouraged to seek to understand the Bible in order to discern God's will for obedience. Since the Holy Spirit is present and active in all believers, we read and interpret the Bible and its demands for today's life in community.

Scripture references: Ps. 1; 19; 119; Matt. 5-7; Luke 24,27; 44-49; 2 Tim. 3,14-17; Hebr. 1,1-2; Acts. 2,42; 15,1-29; 17,11; Col. 3,1-4; 1 Petr. 1,10-12