

## Scripture as It Was Written

### *“Who correctly handles the word of truth”*

Reflection 23 in the series “A New World in the Morning”

Here’s a memory I have from over a decade ago. Debbie and I were driving down the Interstate into Charleston, South Carolina in the late spring of 2005 when our eyes were struck by a billboard declaring, “You shall not lie with a man as with a woman. It is an abomination (Leviticus 18:22).” This, on a billboard. In large letters. Where “Welcome to Charleston” should have been. I was stunned by the unkindness and insensitivity. Maybe most people just drove by and paid it no attention at all. Some probably liked it. But some others – gays and family and friends of gays – had to be deeply hurt, and scared, so much the more if you were gay and no one knew.

What I call your attention to is the truly horrible handling of Scripture and how such mishandling of Scripture hurts the church. Here’s the problem. More and more people today, and more and more who are just entering adulthood and figuring life out for themselves, find the church’s understanding of Scripture to be archaic and inconsistent. They know that Scripture is not a law code. They know that every text has a living context. And they know that churches, many churches (not all), use Scripture selectively to condemn certain behavior patterns and not others. Going back to the billboard, they wonder why slander and greed are not the big issues churches take on. It’s not like there are no slanderers or greedy around. And so they know that when churches pick and choose from the very same texts precepts they will use to oppress or exclude people, while disregarding precepts of equal seriousness directed to other people, it is not exactly Scripture that is driving those churches. And knowing all this they give up on churches.

Now I realize that there are other people who go to churches and are pleased to have their prejudices supported and affirmed, but that only makes matters worse. With this in mind, I remember Paul’s instructions to Timothy, “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a craftsman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth” (in 2 Timothy 2:15). It’s a section that begins in the verse before, “Keep reminding them of these things. Warn them before God against quarreling about words; it is of no value, and only ruins those who listen.” And so we picture Paul late in his life, chained in a prison in Rome perhaps awaiting execution or maybe dying of the cold and hunger, and disease. And now this once passionate Paul, a brilliant, even dazzling, controversialist, capable of hurling anathemas and suggesting emasculation, urges Timothy to not have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments (2 Timothy 2:23) and to correctly handle the word of truth. I will note in passing that “the word of truth” in this text refers most likely to Hebrew Scripture and perhaps to the early records of Jesus’ life and teaching and a handful of letters by Paul and others, not to Scripture as we have it today.

Still the principle remains clear. And it begins with understanding that following Jesus is based not on a law code but on a heart change: that the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath (Mark 2:27); that we are to be most reluctant in judging our brothers and sisters (Romans 14); that where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom (2 Corinthians 3:17); and that we are not to let anyone infiltrate our ranks to spy on the freedom we have in Christ Jesus (Galatians 2:4). So Paul will state emphatically that we are not under law, but under grace

(Romans 6:14); that Christ is the end of law (Romans 10:4); that the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life (2 Corinthians 3:6); and that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, not in the old way of the written code (Romans 7:6). On nothing else was Paul more emphatic. When he resorted to hurling anathemas and suggesting emasculation, it was over this matter.

May we then for the sake of all the people who recognize mishandling Scripture when they see it commit ourselves to doing better.

May we understand Scripture “as it was written.” May we understand narrative as narrative, prose as prose, poetry as poetry, letters as letters, what is clear as clear, what is complicated as complicated, what is mystery as mystery, and always what was originally intended as what was originally intended. May we even understand what was tribal as tribal – that if a text were written from a tribal perspective, if for instance a conquest narrative follows the pattern of conquest narratives in the Ancient Near East, this may represent an adequate understanding of God in their time but not for all time.

May we understand Scripture in context. May we recognize that all communication of any kind has the built-in assumption that it arises out of a situation of some kind and is best understood in the light of that situation – its literary, personal and historical context, which is, in fact, how Scripture understands itself.

As we read Scripture, may we always seek original intent, understanding to the best of our ability the original intent of the author, determining as best we can what the writer was responding to and why, including figuring out what the horizon of possible meanings were for both the writer and the first readers, asking for every text these age-old questions: who, what, where, why, when, and to whom.

May we recognize multiple perspectives within Scripture, that Scripture often offers point and counterpoint, inspiring us to find the transcendent idea, the higher idea, and so learning to think, wrestling with the text, wrestling with God and God wrestling with us.

May we see Scripture developmentally, progressively. May we see it not just for what it says as for what it morally implies over time, perhaps centuries. May we see it as moving along a moral trajectory from Leviticus to the Gospels and beyond, so that to draw on the example of slavery, slavery which was still very much a part of the economic fabric of the first century no longer is a legitimate part of our economic fabric because of the moral trajectory found in Scripture.

May we apply Scripture consistently. May we approach Scripture and doctrine in ways that are always consistent. Regardless of the topic under discussion – and whether we are for it or against it, or whether one view or another makes our lives harder or easier – may we act credibly, so that specifically we will not pick and choose, often from within the very same passage, what we will take seriously (and draw hard lines on) and what we will dismiss with a shrug as just-the-way-things-are.

May we come to Scripture with integrity and love, so that whatever approach we take to Scripture and doctrine will be one we are prepared to live by and will be one we will realistically

be able to live by in still loving ways, even “if it’s my child who’s involved.” May we think through our beliefs, and discuss them, in ways that are true to real life, that embody loving concern for others, and that are not impersonal and abstract.

May we take faith as our principle of interpretation. Whenever reasonably possible may we give preference to those understandings of Scripture that encourage people to trust God, that is, those understandings that depict God as one who is utterly trustworthy. And may we resist those conclusions that make it all but impossible to trust God

In the end, may we understand Scripture with heart. May we do all that we can to get into the lives, minds and hearts of the church at first and once again see the real-live people, our brothers and sisters, in their real-life situations finding real-life solutions; hearing what they really said because we can see what they saw, hear what they heard, and feel what they felt, so that Scripture really comes alive.

If we do these things wounds will heal, and trust will be rebuilt.

And one more thing: many, many unchurched people still seek God, but more and more they seek to worship not the words of the text but the God revealed through the words. We could dismiss this as modernist thought, except for this – that Jesus himself agrees with them. In John 5:39, Jesus observed of many religious people in his time: “You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. Yet you refuse to come to me to have life.” He says this because it’s possible to read Scripture not to find God but to find arguments to bolster yourself. It’s possible to love not God but our own ideas about God. It’s possible to have a literalistic “reverence” for the letter of a text but never penetrate to the great truths it reveals. And it’s possible to worship the words over the Word, to miss the truth (as Jesus says) that life is not so much in the words as in the one to whom the words bear witness.

– Dale Pauls