

Making Sense (Part One)

“Will guide you into all truth”

Reflection 38 in the series “A New World in the Morning”

Now in our series on “A New World in the Morning,” I’d like to talk a bit about “Making Sense.” I’d like to do this because many, many people have weighed religion in the scales and have found it wanting. They have sought compassion, decency, common sense and inclusiveness but have not found it in churches, mosques and synagogues. They have sought to make sense of a God they still believe in but have struggled to find religion that makes sense. And they wonder about a lot of things in churches: why the defensiveness, why the fear of questions, why in places of “trust” so much suspicion and fear, why the dogmatic certitude about things we all know or should know are beyond our comprehension, why the patterns of discrimination and prejudice still sanctioned as “the will of God,” why the depiction of God as an angry, capricious tyrant acting in ways we train our children not to, and why the doctrines that just flat-out make no sense at all to thoughtful, caring people.

So they wonder about the ways in which many churches read and understand Scripture, the letter-of-the-law approach to Scripture when even Scripture itself warns the reader against this and – here’s a big one – the very selective use of Scripture, how we pick and choose from the same texts precepts we will use to oppress or exclude certain people while disregarding precepts of equal seriousness directed at other people. And it doesn’t make sense. And they wonder about certain understandings about the death of Jesus, about notions of a God who is so outraged and angry at us that he can only be satisfied by the death of his son. And for sure they wonder about a God called “loving” who consigns millions, in fact, billions of people, to excruciating torment in Hell, unimaginable pain, blistering, peeling, broiling, baking in the fires of Hell, being consumed by maggots and yet not consumed, forever and ever and ever – not just for a minute or so (though that would seem eternal), not just for ten minutes, or an hour, or a day, or a week, or a year, or ten years, but excruciating pain, torture beyond belief, forever and ever and ever – and then this God asking people to trust him.

And so on further reading of Scripture and reflection on God and the ways of God it comes as great good news that these kinds of things never made sense, centuries of church teachings on some of this notwithstanding. It comes as great good news that the word of God is always very near us (Deuteronomy 30:11-14). It’s not too difficult for us or beyond our reach. It’s very near us. It’s in our mouth and in our heart. It’s what we already know in our hearts to be true. Or in the words of Jesus in John 16:13, the Spirit of truth will guide us into all truth. It’s a remarkable promise. It tells us that even when we are feeling confused and unsure, muddled, even just plain stupid, the Spirit of truth will – in some sense – still guide us into all truth. And that of course is great good news.

This promise is part of a sustained teaching section by Jesus that we find in John 13-17. It’s Jesus talking at length to his closest circle of disciples the night of his betrayal and arrest; he knows the next day he will die. So he’s looking for some way to reassure them, something to get them through the horror of the next twenty-four hours, and then to prepare them for his eventual departure some weeks later. For three years they’ve been the closest of traveling companions, together day and night, always talking, always there for one another, but all that will end in just a

few weeks. And what he says to them is: I will not leave you alone. In 14:16 he tells them, “God will give you another counselor – the Holy Spirit – to be with you forever.” The Spirit of God will be with you when you’re lonely and feeling abandoned, when life turns dark, when you’re down and out, and confused and weak, and you don’t know what to think or believe. In fact, that’s precisely when he will be with you. But you will never be alone.

I want you to picture yourself alone in a big empty room maybe as afternoon shadows fall, or laying in bed in the middle of the night wide awake because you can’t sleep. You’re worried and confused. Life has thrown another curve at you. And you don’t know what to do or what to think. Nothing really makes sense. And you feel very alone in all this. I want you to picture the Spirit of God entering that room, at first, maybe way up high in the corner of the room. Sense him spreading through the room, bathing the room in warmth, coming closer and entering you. Feel the love, the peace, the wellness, something that feels like strength, right there in the center of you. Sense him healing whatever is hurting in you. Be still and aware of God’s presence now within and all around. Feel the healing, the warmth, the cleansing, the companionship of God. You are never alone.

Now in that context Jesus promises that when the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide us into all truth. But what does it mean to be guided into all truth? First, what it doesn’t mean. It’s not just talking about back then. It’s not just talking about something that only a very few can experience. It’s not just talking about knowing some more cold, hard facts. The world has more than enough know-it-alls already. There are more than enough smartest people in the rooms of our lives. If you’re one, just as an aside, quit it! Jesus is talking about heart knowledge, knowledge that makes sense down on heart level, because that’s always what’s most important in Scripture.

And, yes, that truth will come to us in many ways, through Scripture, yes, emphatically through Scripture, but also through other scholarly pursuits, through wise reflection on life, through life experience, and from listening to our hearts. But wherever it comes from, it all comes from God. And it can all be attributed to the Spirit of God who is, in fact, the Spirit of truth. Now the first Christians were masters at this: they attributed all that was good, all that was truthful, and all that was beautiful to the Spirit of God, and that perspective changed everything. So now they could live their lives confidently, expectantly, with flashing eyes and untiring enthusiasm. They lived every day surrounded by grace, and with this heightened state of consciousness, they could always see – and know – so much more than those who do not believe.

Now of course we want this. We want to be like this. We want the Spirit of God to be with us and to guide us into all truth, and especially when we’re lonely and feeling abandoned, when life turns dark, when we’re down and out, and confused and weak, and we don’t know what to think or believe.

And that same night – the night before his crucifixion – Jesus told us how.

– Dale Pauls

Part Two (of two) next week