



THE AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE

At our January gathering three Teaching Theologians joined us to speak on the topic of: *The Authority of Scripture* as we continue to ponder the aftermath of our 2009 Churchwide Assembly. Our presenters were: The Rev. Dr. Wally Taylor (Trinity Seminary), The Rev. Dr. Marty Stortz (Augsburg College) and The Rev. Dr. Ralph Klein (LSTC).

Dr. Taylor represented the ‘traditionalist’s’ view on behalf of those who are displeased with the action. Dr. Klein represented the view of those who are satisfied with the action. Dr. Stortz offered interpretations from a more moderating perspective.

For me, Dr. Taylor’s assertion, at the beginning of his lecture, brought great hope. He was asked simply: “*Why do you stay if you are displeased?*” (The question was asked out of loving curiosity and not as a challenge.) He answered:

Three things: #1-This is my family and my home. Family love holds us together even when things are tough. I love this church even when it’s wrong. #2-If I leave it diminishes the diversity of this church and lessens my ability to express faithful dissent within the church I love. I can model diversity in mission by staying. #3-Our ELCA, with all its flaws still does ministry that is second to none in its scope and importance. (He spoke of hunger programs, social ministries, seminaries and mission work as examples.)

HIGHLIGHTS FROM DR. KLEIN

- ~The question of the authority of Scripture is not just a question for times of crisis but for all times.
- ~The authority of Scripture, for Luther, was affirmed as anything that preaches and leads us to Christ.
- ~He commented that Carl Braaten has taught him that the Bible can be studied as Holy Scripture within the context of the church. The authority of the Bible is clearly framed by what leads us to Christ within the community of the church.
- ~We must remember that the authors of our books of the Bible reflected the facts and sciences of their day. Many have changed and shifted since they first wrote. EX: We know the earth revolves around the sun and not vice-versa. They had no idea about DNA and genetics) They also shared sociological views that we would no longer accept. i.e. polygamy, slavery, blood vengeance, capital punishment, holy war, genocide and patriarchy.
- ~Luther understood that some laws in Scripture were outdated and did not apply to the church of his day. EX: Saturday as the ‘Sabbath.’
- ~The central authority of Scripture is announcing God’s grace to all of us-that seeks to transform us into a vital, saving community of Christ.
- ~God loves us to be transformed and transforming people.
- ~The Word of God in the Biblical text is refracted through many authors. Human refraction makes the hard work of study necessary. We need to faithfully discern between human and Spirit inspired instruction.

HIGHLIGHTS FROM DR. TAYLOR

- ~I am here to give voice to those who are troubled by the role of the Bible in our recent decisions. Giving voice to those who are troubled so they know they are heard and no marginalized is important.
- ~I feel that this decision lacked a positive testimony from Scripture.
- ~We need to remember that every document in the Bible was written for the ‘ear’ as it was an oral communication culture. It reminds us that listening in community’ is still a key to understanding God’s Word for us. (Note: Echoing why he stays in ELCA: We need to listen in community-not apart from each other. What binds us is the ‘need’ of the neighbor and not the ‘wants’ of ourselves or our neighbors. We are bound in conscience-not to our own way of thought-but to the ‘need’ of our neighbor.)

- ~We need to remember when we observe the Apostle Paul that he shaped his world-view around the belief that the world would end soon. It flavored many of his comments and observations on ministry.
- ~Biblical writings are a means to an end and not vice-versa. We do not believe in Christ because we believe in the Bible but because the Bible is a powerful tool that reveals Christ to us.
- ~For Luther, Scriptures are the windows and doorways to the living Christ. The Bible is a written standard for our church. The Bible, in its own way, is an incarnation of the Word of God. No individual validates Scripture-Scripture validates itself. The church does not validate Scripture-Scripture validates the church.
- ~The locus of the search for God's Word is in community and in worship and not in one's private chamber.

HIGHLIGHTS FROM DR. STORTZ

- ~Conscience ought always be captive. The key question is "*to what?*"
- ~Let's be honest, the travails around human sexuality and how we deal with Scripture is not a glass that was broken in 2009. We have been walking on broken glass for quite some time now as a church.
- ~What is the difference between the 'spoken' and 'written' Word? The 'spoken Word' is always in and to community. It absolutely requires an 'other' or 'others' in order to have any affect at all. Mutual conversation and consolation is a public act...not a private one. You can see or sense inflections and emotions when one is speaking the Word but not when it stands only in written form. Speech supplies the connections in communication that written communications cannot. The 'spoken Word' needs timing. It is a Word offered in a moment that may not be translated into other moments.
- ~Luther seemed committed to seeing the Gospel as a discourse or story about Christ. He is riveted by what Jesus said. Jesus didn't write things down he taught and preached. (Many believe Luther's best works are in his public sermons and teachings as well.) Luther was more interested in the words of Jesus which is why he preferred the Gospel of John above the others.
- ~For Luther, there are three ways of dealing with Scripture. #1) As a specific direction. (Do this. Don't do that.) #2) As a map (A planned out direction set by road-marks along the way.) #3) As a compass that points to 'true north', the place that guides us when the others fail. Each tool does something different just as Scripture. How we are oriented at the time influences us.
- ~There are three ways to question a text. #1) What is the word behind the text? #2) What is the word of the text? #3) What is the word in front of the text? When these three worlds collide better Bible study happens!

It was refreshing, necessary and community-building to hear these three perspectives. It was good to consider our reactions in a public setting where all the views of our church are represented. We had time for small group reflection. We worshiped, prayed and studied in community. As Dr. Taylor reminds us, we do better around God's Word when we do it in community with a diversity of views represented. Keeping only to our private chambers and to those who see it 'our way' will not lead us to our best decisions along the way.

It is my hope and prayer that you will seek to find communal ways to process your feelings about our church and how God's Word shapes our mission. It is my hope that you will gather with others who see things differently to refresh your heart and soul for ministry. It is a needed example in our polarized society as well.

