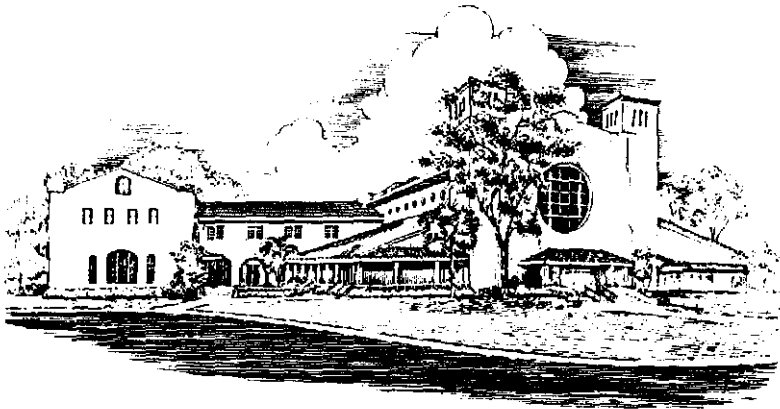


First Church Pulpit

"THREE WAYS TO READ THE BIBLE"

Text: "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name." —(John 20:30-31)



FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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As we get into our sermon entitled "Three Ways to Read the Bible", I want you to suppose that a group of reputable scholars came to us, Protestant, Catholic, Jewish... and somehow, in a miracle beyond comprehension, they had all agreed that a new manuscript, discovered in a hitherto unknown desert cave in the warm Judean hills, was proven to be an absolutely authentic new Gospel record of the life of Jesus, written by one of the Disciples. There would be no question in their minds, none whatsoever.

Now, rather than having Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, we would have Matthew, Mark, Luke and John...and Richard, O.K.? (I like that as a new name of a Gospel. The Gospel according to Richard is what I am trying to get across anyway. If you do not know me, that is my Christian name).

Then, say that the Gospel according to Richard, to make it more interesting, all of a sudden began to tell you stories and parables, sermons and sayings of Jesus, which you had never heard before. Suppose further that it challenged some of the time-honored stories and sayings and miracles of Jesus, hinting they were untrue. For example, it might say Jesus never said to turn the other cheek, or Lazarus was not really dead. I know it sounds heretical...but...bear with me. Maybe it would say that he never turned the water to wine at Cana of Galilee, or that he taught his disciples to have

greater self-assertiveness, and that they should stand up for what they believe. Or suppose it said he never lingered on the earth for forty days following his resurrection from the dead, but that it told clearly how he ascended directly into heaven on the first Easter morning.

O.K.?...What would it do to your faith? More especially, what would it do to your understanding of the Word of God within the pages of the Holy Bible? Would it no longer be the Word of God, or at least not all of it? And what about the Church which, for two thousand years has believed in it, or for 1,700 of it anyway, for the most part. People's lives have been changed and moved by what our Bible says. What if it became true that it were false, or part of it? Just suppose...What would it do to your faith, and where would you turn?

Now that might be a trifle puzzling and over-dramatic for some of you (I well realize it is blasphemous for others). But exaggerated and condensed in our introduction, that is exactly what has been happening to the Bible for well over a hundred years. Somehow in our advancing, modern, materialistic, scientific world, the atheists outside the Church have taken shots at the Bible, saying it cannot possibly be true, because it does not measure up on the one and only scale in use in our time, the scientific method. It cannot be empirically verified, for example, that the ax actually

floated on the top of the water, or that Jesus walked on water, and dead men never rise to tell new tales. Right? The scientific method from those outside the Church has been in constant conflict with the Bible for over a century, maybe more, hinting that there is much of authentic Bible background left out, and much included which does not belong.

That is bad enough for those of us who are trying to preserve the integrity of the Scripture, but also from among the theologians of the Christian Church, there is an uneven response to the issue of what the Bible is. In what is called "Form Criticism" or "Higher Criticism", some Biblical scholars have applied the scientific method to the Scriptures, and they come out sounding as if they do not believe it either. For example, Rudolph Bultman, who was widely known in the middle decades of this century, and in a few quarters still, taught that the Gospel Records are so filled with revisions and opinions, and faulty recollections, that the only thing we could be absolutely sure of, finally and scientifically verified and certain, was that "A man called Jesus of Nazareth probably lived"...Hmmm...Others have joined in and refined that approach and attitude.

Now, not that honest study of the Bible is in error. We need to know and understand in truth. And there are important insights and issues to be gained, e.g., in the four Gospels, 70% of the first three actually

reproduce themselves in varying degrees of overlap, and they all tell but a small portion of His "Life". They certainly did not cover the 33 years that Jesus Christ lived on earth, right? There are a lot of other things I would love to know about Jesus, and his family: his relationship with his parents, how he was trained, how he came to believe the things he believed. We know practically nothing about him, except the major coverage of the last three years of his public ministry. I would love to know what John means when he says in Chapter 20: "There are a lot of other things he did." Would to God that we knew them. And, to return to our original suggestion, if we ever found them out, and they differed, what would that do to your faith, and mine? It is easy enough to say that this is God's Word...but when we see it all in the modern setting, we need to search the Scriptures, and our response.

Well, it is in that surrounding that we turn the page, and go on to the sermon. Recently, I read a wonderful new book (I encourage you to read it), by Leslie Newbiggin, that great leader of the world-wide missionary movement of our century. For forty years, he pioneered missions in the country of India. He saw through the revolution and the change and the independence. Then he began to travel, and thankfully for all of us who have not met him, he began to write. Foolishness to the Greeks is the name of his newest book. There he is writing about the confrontation between Christianity and other cultures of the world. One point of intersection is the Bible and the word of God which we Westerners take with us when we go around the globe.

Out of his personal experience Dr. Newbigin discusses certain ways that people have responded to Westerners in general, and to the Bible in particular. Seeing it from a cross-cultural vantage point has enlarged my own vision, and I hope it does the same for you. In the light of the barrage of the modern scientific world against the literal reading of the Scriptures, how shall we respond as Christian people? That is the question we have to answer. Dr. Newbigin suggests several ways in which others have responded. I mention three principal ways for your meditation here.

I. In the first instance, it is what I will call a retreat, i.e. a retreat back a century into a pre-scientific world. There are large groups of Christian people, mainly in the evangelical conservative wing of the Church, who retreat to a previous age, and more or less pretend that the new critical age is not here.

Now, in Protestant Christianity, everybody has a right to do what everybody wants to do (Right?), for God alone is Lord of the conscience. I do not want to tell you what to believe, any more than I want you to tell me...But it seems to me that to jump over the whole of the modern scientific investigation into the sources of the Scripture, which in many cases is carried out with honest integrity, and in a truthful search for God's presence...I have to remind you that truth is truth, wherever it is found. And when honest people search honestly for God's guidance and presence, and come up with ideas that are new and challenging, and compatible with what we

know about other areas of our interest, it is archaic and uninformed to pretend that it never happened. They seem to me to have their heads in the sand.

To be more specific: A very selective reading of the Scripture happens in most evangelical places. It reminds me of the time when Jeremiah came to King Jehudi. He came and brought the Scroll. He began to read it to the King. And Jehudi listened, and when he did not like what he heard, he tore that portion of the Scroll off, and threw it away. Can you imagine? When the "Word of God" agreed with what he wanted to hear and agreed with, he kept that piece. If it demanded too much, he was done with it, forever: "I take these two little parts I like, and that will become my Bible, and I will defend it to my dying day."

I am being a little silly, but that is what actually happens too many times. People select the portions of the Scripture which they want to hear, and defend them as "What God Said." Interpretation becomes a literal reading of what the text has always seemed to say, in English.

It has long worked that way in the Christian faith. It was frequently a matter where, if you wanted to know what the Church taught, you went and asked someone to tell you: whether it was the Pope at Rome, or the Evangelist on the stage, the preacher in the tent, the father in the home, the professor at the college, or whoever, you never had to think for yourself; you accepted what he said, and lived with it.

Now as to the popularity of that posture in our times, perilous times, I might add... I don't have to tell you how strange and awful it can be for some to live in this world. I don't need to tell you what we are all up against, and our children too. I don't need to tell you to adopt this defensive position, as they did in Kafka's story about the Castle. They locked themselves inside, protected by a moat. And then nobody could get in, and worse, no one had to go out. There you could (can) believe what you chose to believe, and not be bothered having to think it through.

That is the first view of the Scripture I want to discuss with you, I see and hear it often: the literal, infallible, and inerrant Bible, which was verbally dictated to the people who wrote it by God Himself, in words that you and I are to accept because they are there...

II. The second view of the Bible, after the Retreat, is the opposite, and that is the Rejection.

Many who have gone to college, and that includes many of you listening, came across a professor who began to tell you that the Bible cannot possibly be true, because it contradicts the scientific view. Having eyes opened for the first time to the academic approach to the Bible, the student buys it hook, line and sinker. By the way, we in local churches, who failed to prepare the student by an honest study of the Bible, are equally to blame.

When I walked in to my first philosophy class at the University of Pittsburgh, thirty years ago, the professor took his Bible and threw it across the room. He bellowed: "Does anyone here object to that?" One freshman stood up. He was skinny back then, and tall (It was I). I said: "Yes, Professor Armstrong, I object." I passed the course anyway. The Professor had a problem, because a few years later he threw himself out of a thirteenth story window at the Cathedral of Learning...to his own death. The poor man was struggling, and the Word of God could not get through to him, because in throwing it across the room, he was acting as if he were free. I prayed for him the night he died.

Do you understand what I am saying? Let me give you an example: if you talk about the Creation story in the Bible, the first group would say: "It must be literally and exactly what it says in the Bible. In seven twenty-four hour days, God created the Heaven and the Earth, four thousand years ago, and there was one Adam, and one Eve. Later, there was an actual flood. Methuselah lived his 969 years, and Noah's Ark is out there somewhere...etc.

The second group would say: "Not quite. After all, the Bible is a book as many others. It has good ideas in it. It might help you if you read it, but it is not really to be set aside and apart from any other important ancient book.

III. The third group is the one I would like to spend a couple of minutes on, for I find great meaning in it myself. I do not subscribe to either of the first two. I remember the day when my professor in seminary said to me: "I want you to read Karl Barth." Karl Barth is the leading theologian of the Twentieth century, no doubt. He is gone now. He was born before the turn of the century, and grew up in the early years of the Twentieth century, say 1900 to 1920, at a time when liberal theology was literally tearing the Bible to pieces, almost like Jehudi ripped apart the Scrolls, and threw away what he did not like.

Karl Barth was taught that Genesis could not be true, because Darwin is true. And it cannot be that there is one Isaiah, because there are at least Three. Matthew could not have written Matthew; and John never wrote John; and Paul could not have seen a vision in the sky (he conjured it up psychologically, and projected it out, and then saw it coming back), neither did Paul write the Book of Hebrews, and the Book of Revelation, when it talks about Heaven with the streets paved in gold and jewels, it is just a fragment of someone's imagination.

Then came Karl Barth to say in 1917 (Now mind you, Karl Barth is one of the brightest men I have ever come across. He is not easily duped...He does not crucify his intellect, as some suggest. He is alive and vibrant in everything he writes), and he said: "I went back to my study in Safenwil, Germany." There he came across people whose lives were broken in two; whose wives were dying of cancer; whose sons have run away,

or were killed in the war. "I never saw so many incongruities in the world, I did not know what to do." Then Barth added: "I opened up the Bible and began to read it. And in spite of all that the scholars in the world have taught me, I found God's Word within the words. There was a mystery", he said, "I guess I knew that there were at least two Isaiahs, maybe more. I guess I was certain that the Gospel of John has some great difficulty, if you weigh it against the three Synoptic Gospel writers. I agreed that Paul probably did not write Ephesians, but...every time I went back to my study in my home and began to read the Scripture, I felt the presence of God in Jesus Christ in a way that I never felt it anywhere else."

"So", he concluded, "In spite of what you have learned anywhere else, take the word and evaluate it as God gives you the power to evaluate it, but do not close the door on anything!" Herbert Spencer would not read a book unless it agreed with what he already thought. That is crucifying the intellect! Dr. Barth said: "It is like walking on a tightrope, i.e. living the Christian life. You need to take one step, and then another...and where you need help, God will give you His word, through the words of the Scripture." Read the Bible, and you will receive the guidance you need to take another step on the tightrope. **YOU HAVE FOUND GOD'S WORD WITHIN THE WORDS.**

And so you don't have to believe totally

that God made the world in seven days; or that a Tower of Babel literally was there. The author of Genesis is trying to tell us that two things happened: God made the world...and He made it good. And anything that is bad about it, you cannot blame on God. Blame people. God made the world and He made it good, and if it took Him fourteen billion years to do it, what of it? The Word you need to hear is that God made the world, not how He accomplished it. And the word you need to hear is: He really made it good.

Let me close it with a little illustration. I used to have a friend...I still do, though I do not see him much any more, a friend who was one of the great concert pianists of all time, Van Cliburn. If you are my age or older, you know all about Van. He is not playing any more; but I met him when he was in his prime, through Mrs. John Nelson. He was a great concert pianist, but he was even greater in the practice room. When you are practicing you have to learn the notes. Right? You have to become a slave to the timing, the phrasing. And, you have to make sure you know when the pedals are pushed, and what pedal, and how hard, for how long. Cliburn had to make sure the seat was the right height. In the practice hall (Are you listening?) he was worried about the notes, and the phrasing, and the tone, and the pedals, and the seat... etc., etc.

But when he got to the concert stage, he

no longer worried about the notes. Oh, I mean he surely played the right ones. The Emperor Concerto would be a disaster if the pianist forgot the notes. But a hundred other players knew the notes! At the Tchaikovsky Festival in Moscow, he won the competition...and do you know why? Because, in addition to the notes, he was looking for what is called The Glory of the Music. That quality of "Glory" does not come from the notes. You have to know what the original composer wrote. You have to know the score...(In our case, you have to know the words...I mean, I don't want anybody pretending to know the Word of God, if he doesn't know the words of the Bible).

But, in addition to the "words", there is a Glory of the Music...and a greater Glory of the Word which transcends the reading of the words. Right? Right... For now and evermore. Amen.