

***On Using the Bible as a Weapon***  
**2 Timothy 3:14 - 4:5, Genesis 32:22-31**

**Pastor Wayne Peterson**  
**October 17, 2010**

Paul continues his instruction of Timothy, his younger colleague in ministry, by emphasizing the importance of faithful teaching despite opposition.

*But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.*

*In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I solemnly urge you: proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching. For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths. As for you, always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully.*

You may recall a bit of a kerfuffle in many local church communities in 2003 when the State of Minnesota passed a new gun law that would allow people with the proper license to carry a concealed weapon. The legislation allowed people to carry a handgun into a church unless the church had a specifically worded sign posted at all doors stating that handguns were prohibited on the premises.

I'm sure that we have a variety of opinions among us concerning the appropriateness of this law, but there is one thing that I think we can all agree on, and that is that Christians do not require guns to do lethal damage to a congregation. We have demonstrated on many occasions that we can blow up congregations quite easily just using the Bible as a weapon against each other.

Over the centuries, Christian communities have split over issues of race, the role of women, fraternal organizations, divorce, abortion, sexuality, and whether to serve wine or grape juice for communion. When Christians battle over these issues, the underlying issue is almost always the interpretation of scripture. You can pick just about any issue, and no matter what your point of view is on that issue, you will discover that it is possible to find a Bible verse or two or three to support your side of the argument. And the typical way the debate progresses is for people on both sides of the issue to use these Bible verses like bullets in a gun, firing them off at those who disagree with them.

One of the best known and often-fired of these bullets is from our reading from the Second letter to Timothy. “All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.”

“For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths.”

The folks who typically arm themselves with these bullets tend to have a pretty literal understanding of scripture. As the old saying goes, “The Bible says it. I believe it. That settles it.” From their point of view, any further discussion is unnecessary. They understand the phrase “inspired by God” to be almost the equivalent of “dictated by God.” Any attempt to try to understand the context the passage was written in and how it would have been understood by its original audience is understood by them to be equivalent to having itching ears, seeking to make the Bible say whatever we want it to say.

Our reading from Genesis is the great story of Jacob wrestling with God, with the struggle going on throughout the night with neither able to prevail. (Genesis 32:22-31) This story of persistence was no doubt chosen for today to go along with Jesus’ parable of the persistent widow who relentlessly argues her case before a judge. (Luke 18:1-8) But I think Jacob’s story also can be read as a companion passage to what Paul writes in 2 Timothy and should be the experience of the church and each of us individually as we wrestle with scripture.

On the one hand, let me say that I think it is important that the church be conservative – conservative in the sense that it conserves its teaching and tradition and, if change does come, it comes slowly over a period of years or even generations. There was a gathering of Lutherans just two weeks ago who are of the opinion that the church’s teaching should not ever change, even though it is not hard to see that the church’s teaching has indeed changed over the years regarding slavery, the role of women, the marriage of pastors and priests, and divorce. The theme of this gathering was “Celebrate! Jesus Christ, the Same Yesterday, Today, and Forever.” (quoting Hebrews 13:8)

As we engage scripture, I would point out to these Lutheran friends that this verse is a double-edged sword (forgive the mixed metaphor, starting with guns and bullets and now shifting to a sword – but it’s still a weapon). I understand that when they proclaim Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and forever, they are making the important point that Jesus is trustworthy and truth of his teaching is dependable for all eternity. But I believe they are mistaken if they think that they have Jesus in a box and under control, confident that they know what Jesus would say and do in every situation. To say that “Christ is risen!” is to say that Jesus lives and that he is on the loose and among us today.

When one reads the gospels, two of the characteristics of Jesus that we observe again and again is that 1) he is always prodding and challenging the religious leaders of that day who think they know all there is to know about God and 2) he is always crossing boundaries, reaching out to groups of people with whom good, religious people would properly not associate – people like lepers, the mentally ill, prostitutes, tax collectors, and others the public recognize as “sinners.”

If that is what Jesus was yesterday – prodding the religious leaders and causing controversy by crossing boundaries – and Jesus is the same today and forever, then we can expect Jesus to continue to prod today’s and future church leaders and continue to cross boundaries with the good news that our God is a radical God whose love is for all people.

But how do we tell when God is doing a new thing among us and when a subversive false gospel is being proclaimed that is contrary to God’s kingdom? I don’t know of an easy way to tell. That’s why I like the image of Jacob’s wrestling match. We need to keep a tight grip on scripture, reading it regularly, discussing it with others (for Bible study is best done as a community exercise rather than a private exercise). And as we wrestle with scripture, we ask the Holy Spirit to guide us into all truth and at the same time humbly acknowledge that our most firmly held opinions may actually be at odds with Jesus’ vision of the kingdom of God.

One standard to guide our understanding of scripture and the Christian faith is the creed. The group that gathers for the Theology on Tap discussion each Tuesday evening is currently discussing the creed. We are exploring the questions the church was dealing with in the 4th century which the creed tries to address and eventually we will try to identify the key questions that the church is facing today and imagine what a creed written to address those questions might look like.

We have learned that one of the purposes of the creed is to be a Rule of Faith – a rule as in a ruler or measuring stick. The creed provides a measure or norm for Christian identity. The creed does not exhaust the meaning of Scripture, but it provides a measuring stick for reading that guides one to proper understanding of Scripture as a whole.

As we wrestle with Scripture, the creed helps identify what is non-negotiable in Christian teaching and what things may be things about which we can “agree to disagree” and still be one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church.

This next hymn, written by Martin Luther, is a prayer for guidance. It is our prayer as individuals, as the St. Barnabas community, as the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and the entire Christian community – the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church.

*Lord, keep us steadfast in your word; curb those who by deceit or sword  
would wrest the kingdom from your Son and bring to naught all he has done.*

*Lord Jesus Christ, your pow’r make known, for you are Lord of lords alone;  
defend your holy church, that we may sing your praise eternally.*

*O Comforter of priceless worth, send peace and unity on earth;  
support us in our final strife and lead us out of death to life.*

Martin Luther (1483-1546); tr. Catherine Winkworth (1827-1878), alt.