

Much on the order of Bishop John A.T. Robinson's *Honest to God* some 50 years ago, it hit the book stands like a bombshell. The media was delighted. Headlines splashed across the newspapers on the order of "Bishop Questions the Bible" and "Bishop Accuses the Bible of Sin!" "It's against all Christian orthodoxy," Fox network's Bill O'Reilly assured his audience, continuing, or "almost all of it." Not for the first time in his life, Retired Newark, New Jersey Bishop John Shelby Spong's *The Sins of Scripture: Exposing the Bible's Texts of Hate to Reveal the God of Love* created a media feeding frenzy. Those who dismissed the bishop's efforts as a wholesale attack on the Bible and the Christian faith, however, either did not know the bishop or had not bothered to read the book.

As a committed Christian who has spent a lifetime studying the Bible and whose life has been deeply shaped by that study, I was not interested in writing . . . a negative, Bible-bashing book. I have passed the point in life when I find fulfillment in doing deconstruction [*Sins of Scripture*, xiii-xiv].

What he was interested in, Spong insists, was rescuing the Bible from "those who first literalize it and then so badly misuse it." He was interested in introducing people to a proper way of handling the texts.

The Bible, Spong recognized, is often used to oppress others—those others whom some believers consider as being defined in the pages of the Bible as somehow subhuman. The bloodiest wars, the cruelest torture and violence against racial minorities, women, Jews and homosexuals have through history been instigated under the banner of faithfulness to the Bible. "Slowly I was forced to acknowledge," Spong admits, that every great battle that I had joined both as a priest and as a bishop, to call the church into being what I believed the church had to be, were ultimately a battle against the way the Bible had been used throughout history. It was out of the Bible that pious and devout people drew the definitions they sought to impose on powerless people and to justify the oppression that those powerful and religious voices seemed eager to impose. It was strange and uncomfortable to come to the awareness that people who quoted this book most often were opposed to the justice issues that I found so compelling" [11].

How we read the Bible impacts not just the church but broader society as well. In the United States, Marcus Borg observes, about half of American Protestants belong to churches that understand the Bible as the inerrant and infallible revelation of God. Those holding this view most often collide with science as they affirm that the earth and the universe are less than 10,000 years old. They insist that all events in the Bible happened just as they are described. Relying on the Bible, they oppose gender equality and same sex relationships. They recognize Jesus as the only way to salvation, and Christianity as the only true religion. And, Borg observes, they are "the most visible form of American Christianity today" [*Speaking Christian*, 23].

Lest we dismiss efforts to find a better way to read the Bible as mere evidence of modern liberalism, we should recognize that reading the Bible as the literal, inerrant Word of God is a relatively new phenomenon that made its appearance in the last half of the 17th Century. Despite the *Sola Scriptura* battle cry of the Reformation, the Reformers themselves did not hold that view of the Bible. Luther, who argued that the books of James and Revelation should be stricken from the Bible, certainly didn't. The Enlightenment, Borg suggests, moved both Christians and non-Christians toward equating truth and reality with hard, observable facts. For some, that meant dismissing the Bible altogether. For some within the church, it meant literalizing the Bible and moving away from the symbolic and parabolic reading of scripture that emphasized meaning to a hard, cold, rigid reading of scripture that scripture itself does not support.

A more appropriate reading of scripture recognizes the Bible as a product of history. It takes into account the fact that the Bible was written over the process of about a thousand years. It recognizes that no one actually sat down to write Bible but that with time, even centuries, writings came to be recognized and used as scripture. Not until 100 C.E., for example, were the Writings in Hebrew scripture (Esther, Job, Psalms, Proverbs) finally included in the canon of the Jewish Bible; and not until 367 C.E. do we have a list of the 27 books now included in our New Testament. The book of Revelation was the last book to be accepted, and it was not accepted by the Eastern Church until the 8th century.

The Bible was written *by* people of faith and *for* people of faith. Unlike the view of inspiration that holds that words passed from God through the writer and his quill like water passes unchanged through a straw, scripture reflects both the wisdom and insights of the writers and the writers' limitations, blind spots and misapprehensions. Through the centuries, the church has spoken of the Bible as the *Word* of God, not the

words of God. This does not deny God's inspiration of scripture, but it does give us room to ask whether passages of scripture reflect timeless truth or time dated, limited, human understanding that can and must be put aside in the name of truth. Must the church for all time, for example, defend slavery, the subordination of women, the abomination of people who are homosexual, the rejection of marriage after divorce, the stoning of adulterers and disobedient children, and the second coming of Jesus with the accompanying destruction of the world and the incredible suffering and death of most of humanity? Relying on a rigid interpretation of scripture, defenders of the Bible have opposed every major step toward justice and humanity in recent history and probably beyond. If a literal reading of scripture tied to the ethical mores of society reflected in those scriptures was the only way to faithfully read scripture, I would be looking for other scriptures or another religion. But it is not. Faithfulness to the God of both Hebrew and Christian scripture and a sense of responsibility and compassion for the world in which we live points us in another direction.

The Word of God revealed in Jesus Christ is the lens through which we read the Bible. Enter 2nd Timothy. Probably written by someone in Ephesus around the end of the 1st century, 2nd Timothy is penned in the name of Paul, but it probably was not by written by Paul. Composed in the face of seeming controversy within the church, possibly the threat of Gnosticism, the letter seeks to draw on Paul's reputation and influence to still unrest and restore peace and unity. It is written as Paul's testament, his word of farewell in the face of approaching death; and it is addressed to his young protégé Timothy and by implication to all leaders in the church who took leave from Paul's instruction. The letter is fraught with emotion. It speaks with tender love for young Timothy, "my beloved child," and the strong family of faith represented in Timothy's mother and grandmother. It recalls Paul's laying on of hands, blessing Timothy for his ministry. It speaks plainly of Paul's imprisonment and signals of his approaching death; and it rejoices in the strong heritage of faith that sustains Paul—a heritage that Timothy and all those responsible for the church to come must hold onto and value if they are going to withstand the persecution that will be theirs. "Remember all of this," Paul is writing to say. "Remember and hold onto it. You stand in the tradition of an unwavering discipleship. Do not succumb to fear or the lure of a more fortuitous way. Remember your rich heritage, and learn from it."

Although he doesn't put it in so many words, the writer of 2nd Timothy goes on to say, "Remember this and compare it to the turmoil that is ripping at the church today." Compare it to the terrible, destructive "wrangling over words," which brings only "ruin" and "spread[s] like gangrene." Hold to "the standard of sound teaching that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. Guard the good treasure entrusted to you, with the help of the Holy Spirit living in us." But most of all, "Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead . . . that is my gospel, for which I suffer hardship, even to the point of being chained like a criminal. But the word of God is not chained." It is chained neither by the wiles of the Roman Empire nor the word games that turn brother against brother and sister against sister. The word of God pronounced in Jesus Christ is the power in which the church lives and moves and has its being. It is the norm by which the church serves.

And so it is with us, the living word of God pronounced in Jesus Christ is the lens through which we read scripture. It is not about cold, rigid doctrine. It is not about legalistic word games. It is not about who can read the Bible the most literally; it is about reading the Bible faithfully in light of the light of God we know in Christ and receive through the living presence of God's spirit. It is not about reducing the Bible to be less than it is. It is about taking the Bible, as Borg says, in its more than literal, more than factual, more than historical meaning. It is about more. It is about following the risen Christ.

A church, Walter Bruggemann suggests, whose substance is reduced to "gangrenous chatter" and wrangling over words has little to offer the world around it. Despite how much it may rage, such a church does little more than "echo its social context and defer to non-Easter definitions of reality, thus reducing the church's message to little more than 'religious elevator music.'" But Timothy tells us, "the word of God is not chained."

It is not domesticated by the preacher's timidity, toned down by the culture's ideology or muted by the church's fearfulness. Imagine Easter words unleashed with power and freedom, inviting people to hope, trust, act and spend in sure reliance on God's massive, transformative faithfulness. Without this utterance, the church sinks ever more deeply into a black hole of despair and greed. The word unloosed on the lips of witnesses like us can and does make a difference ["Wrangling over Words," The Christian Century, 1992].

Almost 9 years ago, we came together to form a fellowship that would be guided more by our sense of

calling by God's spirit than by a desire to fit in with what everyone around us already believed. We perceived that such a calling would exact from us a lifetime of discipleship, marked by the discipline of life long learning and growth. Something of that conviction is expressed as part of our self-description on our website. It reads:

“Aware that we know only in part and need others to assist us on faith's journey, we are committed to making church a safe place to raise questions and deal with issues. We speak of ourselves as an unfinished people of faith, as we conscientiously commit ourselves to the lifelong curve of learning inherent in Christian discipleship.”

As I look over our experience together during these 9 years and as I look forward to who we will be in the future. Far from a negative word about who we are, it is a hopeful word, a word responsive to the unchained Spirit of truth we know in Jesus Christ—a truth that is never held hostage to any human understanding but which always leads us forward. Thanks be to God!