

This Little Light of Mine

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Psalm 119:105-112

“Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.”

Prelude

You should be warned that every time I attend something with the Baptists, the following sermon invariably has something to do with being a Baptist. To be a Baptist means that things will get messy, will be difficult, and will be blessed. The problem is the Bible. The holy word, the sacred book, which connects us with our story, gives us identity, and sends us into the world. The problem is people take the Bible very seriously, or not seriously enough, and conflict emerges. So here we go – a Baptist perspective of the Bible, and may God help us all.

The Dangerous Bible

The Bible is one of the most dangerous books in human history. The noted theologian, Stanley Hauerwas wrote in, *Unleashing the Scripture*, “Most North American Christians assume that they have a right, if not an obligation, to read the Bible. I challenge that assumption. No task is more important than for the Church to take the Bible out of the hands of individual Christians in North America. Let us no longer give the Bible to all children when they enter the third grade or whenever their assumed rise to Christian maturity is marked, such as eighth-grade commencements. Let us rather tell them and their parents that they are possessed by habits far too corrupt for them to be encouraged to read the Bible on their own. North American Christians are trained to believe that they are capable of reading the Bible without spiritual and moral transformation. They read the Bible not as Christians, not as a people set apart, but as democratic citizens who think their ‘common sense’ is sufficient for ‘understanding’ the Scripture. They feel no need to stand under the authority of a truthful community to be told how to read. Instead they assume that they have all the ‘religious experience’ necessary to know what the Bible is about. As a result the Bible inherently becomes the ideology for a politics quite different from the politics of the Church.”

You may disagree with such a statement, you may feel that Hauerwas is being overly cautious, and almost tyrannical, but remember that the Bible was used to justify the Third Reich in Germany and the Holocaust of the Jews. Remember that the Bible has been used as a justification for the systematic destruction of Jewish communities in Europe throughout its Christian history. Remember that the Bible was used to justify the method and form of slavery in our country that still haunts our consciousness and our history in a very real way. The Bible is used to purport this “prosperity gospel,” suggesting that if you are rich it is because God favors you, and if you ask God, then you will receive great riches. The Bible has been used to support violence, hatred, and exclusion.

In American church history, the Bible has been used as justification for the oppression of women. Women belong in the household, women should not be allowed to read from the pulpit or even preach – or so we were told. A misquoted passage from Ephesians, taken out of context is constantly launched at women looking to follow God’s call into the ordained ministry. The Bible has been used as a roadblock for those who are trying to be the person God has call her to be. Many have taken the writings of Paul, a person who worked for inclusion, and have used those writings to relegate the rights and freedoms of women in the church and the world. Women in our denomination are still struggling to be accepted into the Good Ole’ Boys Club of ordained ministry.

Let’s face it folks, the Bible is a dangerous book. With angry agendas, we have used the Bible in our own search for power, like a bully with his fist, the Bible has fallen on the heads of the oppressed and marginalized again and again, taking their God given rights away from them. Misinterpretation can lead to dangerous, hurtful action. The Bible is a dangerous book.

The Hopeful Bible

Yet the Bible is also one of the most hopeful and helpful books in human history. Hear the words in the

Psalm read for today, “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.” To a world that is looking for hope, a world that is looking for direction – here it is in the scriptures. God’s word, a word associated with hope and salvation illuminates the Way, shows the path, which we are called to walk to experience salvation. Paul Tillich describes the Bible as the original document upon which the events of Christianity are based. It is the source of the story of Christ – a story of hope, of forgiveness, of divine love, and of salvation. It is, in the ultimate understanding, “Life’s Little Instruction Book.” This is a powerful book.

In the movie, *The Mission*, the character played by Robert DiNiro undergoes a transformation. He was a slave trader and mercenary, who experienced the profound Christian witness and compassion through some Jesuit priests. As his eyes are slowly opened to the grace offered by Christ, he asks the head Jesuit priest (played by Jeremy Irons) for more information about God. The priest hands DiNero’s character a Bible and says, “start with this.” The former mercenary reads and is drawn through the gospel stories, through Paul’s letters, through the powerful writings in 1 Corinthians 13, all the way to the end. In his reading, 1 John 4 – “God is Love” sticks in DiNiro’s mind and transforms his heart. Such power, such grace is the Holy Scripture. The Bible is a source of hope, a revelation to God’s love, and a window to God’s forgiveness through Jesus Christ. It is our story; it is our heritage. From Christmas to Easter to Pentecost – the Bible offers us hope. From Creation to the Flood to the Passover and Exodus, the Bible offers us hope. From the Psalms to Proverbs, to the Prophets, the Bible offers us hope. It is our heritage, it is our identity, and it is the beacon on the path to the heart of God. The section from the Psalm sums up the scripture and how we hold and live it; our ordinance, our light, our path.

This story of a God who loves us, of a savior who died for us is a positive and powerful story. The Bible is one of the most hopeful and positive books in human history.

The Bible is dangerous, and the Bible is saving. Are you torn yet?

How to Read the Bible?

We find ourselves torn between two possible views of the Bible. We are sobered by our sad history of misuse and we are encouraged by our history of hope. We are pulled, challenged, and confused on how to handle this thick revelation – the Holy Scriptures. One individual who lived in the second century, Marcion, saw the dangers of many of the Bible passages, and proposed cutting them out. He offered a bible that only focused on the Gospel of Luke and some other aspects, but it was a Bible that left much out that we have today. That is one way to solve the tension, to leave out the difficult parts. And we do that in our own way sometimes. We read what we like, and stay silent about those passages, which make us uncomfortable. Like the skeleton in the closet, sometimes we try to pretend that certain passages of the Bible aren’t there – but they are. Israelites massacring women and children, Jesus speaking of war and division, Paul and his views of women are just some of the examples of scriptures we tend to shy away from.

Some groups argue over interpretation, suggesting that a correct interpretation would avoid misreading the Bible. Liberals read the bible with a soft lens, always looking at historical context and how ideas change. Conservatives read the bible with a hard lens, looking for the literal truths that can be found within the black and white of the text. Both are flawed. Liberals are too willing to dismiss the uncomfortable text to historical context, and conservatives are too willing to claim dogmatic doctrine within the text, confining the divine love and Holy Spirit.

Some throw up their hands in distress, walk away from the arguing and shouting liberals and conservatives, and ask others to interpret the Bible for them. Wouldn’t that be easier? At least that way, you won’t be responsible of misreading and misusing the Bible. Katherine Boone, in writing about biblical interpretation, says, “All interpreters of texts must struggle with the issues of authority in interpretation; all readers must trust that their leaders and teachers will not abuse that authority” (from *The Bible Tells them So*, 108). Is that a risk we want to take? We could stand with our hands outstretched, waiting for the interpretation to fall upon us from some hierarchy. Wouldn’t that be easier, to just let some individual in the pulpit tell you what the Bible means? Then you wouldn’t have to worry about misusing the Bible, and would hope that the grace and love of the Bible would be known through your guide and leader.

But not here.

Stubborn Baptist Individualism

In the Baptist tradition, we put the Bible in your hands. In the Baptist tradition, we recognize that the Bible is indeed a powerful work, that it holds much depth, and much hope. Our tradition recognizes how serious reading the Bible can be. Thus, no one should be able to make blanket interpretations for all - because the Bible is bigger than that. No one should be able to write off your responsibility to read that holy text where you may be at one time or another; to do so could skew and unduly influence your encounter with God. No, in the Baptist tradition, we recognize the awesome responsibility of reading scripture, and understand that it is a responsibility, which can only

be placed in the hands of the individual. This is Soul Liberty - a Baptist distinctive. The historian Henry C. Vedder once wrote in 1844 that, "the glory of Baptists was that they were the first to advocate religious liberty for all people." According to Vedder, such a stance rejects human authority and asserts the right of all persons to interpret the Scriptures for themselves, as inspired by the Holy Spirit. (Taken from "Doing Freedom Baptist Style: Document for Faith and Witness" by Charles W. Deweese). Listen to the scripture for today, "I hold my life in my hand continually, but I do not forget your law... your decrees are my heritage forever; they are the joy of my heart." The scriptures, God's decrees are placed in your hands, for you.

No one can claim God's place for you in your life. No one can show you how the Word of God will lead you, how God's ordinances will guide you. The scriptures are in your hands, for you to read, for you to study, and for you to live.

Take the Bible, walk away from the fears of misinterpretation, walk away from those who may be controlling the Holy Scriptures and feel your freedom wash over you like rain. This is your story for you to read, and no one else's. The freedom falls on you like rain as you wrestle with the text, as you are moved with the text, as you allow the Holy Spirit to guide you through the text.

Look at this section from this Psalm. We all may read the words, but there is such depth, such richness that we all will be pulled through the passage in different ways. Just the first line, "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path." What is your path? Maybe you have been struggling with an addiction - and that is your path. Maybe you have been struggling with oppression and that is your path. Maybe you have tensions with your family, with your work, with your school and your path with God leads you through that tension. Oh my people, I will not stand here and tell you what this Psalm means. I will not offer a universal interpretation that promises to be safe. Instead, I place the Psalm in your hands, and ask you to read it, and allow it to carry you to experience God. This is the Baptist way of approaching scripture. We take that Bible and place it in your hands.

The Baptist Community

But you are not alone. We ask you to wrestle with the Bible in the context of your local church community. I'm not going to put a Bible in each of your hands and then ask you to go to your own corners and read to yourself. No, instead I am going to put a Bible in each of your hands, and then ask you to come into the circle and share. Share what your concerns may be, share what your struggles may be, share your revelations, your hopes and the grace you experience. Someone may relate. Someone may hear your story, and say, "my story is very much the same." Or, someone may not relate at all, and then you know the Holy Spirit is working. Then we dig deeper; we go deeper and understand the richness of this text. This is the church. We come together and together we struggle through the text, through the Holy Scriptures. If someone is going far astray in interpretation, then the community of the church will kindly and gently pull that individual back into the circle created by God's holy people. Come to the circle of the church and know you will be supported, know you will be challenged, know you will be accepted. Part of the gift of the church is that it can be our guide and protector, when all readings are lifted up in the community.

There is a story of an individual, who read the Good Samaritan parable and was struggling with that fateful question, "who is my neighbor." He lived in a comfortable suburban neighborhood and felt Christ was calling him to more. So he prayed, he listened, and then announced to his family that he was moving to India for the sake of mission work. Needless to say, his family was a bit upset. They went to church, they went to Bible study, and the group, the church all wrestled with, prayed over, and listened for God's voice in the story of the Good Samaritan. They heard the man's desire to go to the least of the world, but challenged the location. In the end, the church committed to adopting a missionary in India, and began to serve the poor and the homeless in the local metropolis. The church needed the individual to bring the scripture to the table and the individual needed the church to fully experience God's word within a community.

This is another part of our Baptist heritage, that in the church we gather, we pray, we listen, and then as a body we follow the movement of the Holy Spirit, each church, individually. Some churches are called to march, some are called to sing, some are called to serve and some are called to pray. But, and listen carefully, just as the individual is free to listen to God, so is that local church free to follow God's will. No one but God, can tell us how to serve, who to accept and who to deny. No one can tell us how Christ may be experienced in our service. This Church autonomy is the freedom for each church to worship, serve and fellowship however and with whomever the Spirit moves and guides.

What happens in the Baptist movement is that you have shards of glass, different colors, different shapes and different textures for each church. There is little to no uniformity, but stand back and see that from those shards of glass is stained glass window, which are the Baptists.

This past weekend, our General Secretary, Roy Medley, preached on these two distinctive points. He held

up Scripture as our authority, and left the responsibility to interpret in the hands of the individual guided by his or her local community. It is a controversial stance, because some churches may arrive at readings of the text which others find heretical. Churches may disagree over particulars, churches may not understand other churches - but this is the Baptist way. Our interpretation, our reading, and our experience of the divine come out of our own struggles, our own concerns, and our own experiences at the level of the local church. This is the Baptist way, the Baptist tradition that we each wrestle with the Bible in the context of our local church community, and there ask for God's guidance.

The Glue that Holds the Baptists Together

And here is the crux of being a Baptist – people will disagree with each other. We are human, we are limited, and we will have varying views of scripture. More often than not I find myself in conversation with another Baptist and finding we disagree on how to understand the scriptures. More often than not I have found myself nose to nose with my Baptist brother or sister discussing, searching, and engaging the scriptures. But we remember our story, and that is what keeps us together. We both have entered those blessed waters of Baptism, we both have declared out loud to the world that we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, and we both have committed to following Jesus. We may disagree on everything else, but our love for the Lord, our commitment to Christ unites us. It is the assurance, the blessed assurance that connects us, that draws us together, and that convicts us to continue our conversation. But in the end, we leave by telling the story, by shouting the story, by singing the story – praising our savior all the daylong.

The blessed assurance of Christ is the light for the entire world, is the ground of our faith, and is the core of all of our stories.

This is the light that shines from every church, from every steeple, and from all of Christ's people.

AMEN

Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine!
O what a foretaste of glory divine!
Heir of salvation, purchase of God,
Born of His Spirit, washed in His blood.
This is my story, this is my song,
Praising my Savior all the day long;
This is my story, this is my song,
Praising my Savior all the day long.