

THE BIBLE, ITS USE AND MISUSE

In 1966 the Church Council of this congregation appointed a committee to make a study and then draft a statement on "The Nature and Purpose of Christian Education for the First Congregational Church of Wauwatosa." A highly qualified group of men and women worked for many hours developing such a statement of educational philosophy which still serves as our guide, and I would like to quote three brief paragraphs from it this morning:

"We look upon the Bible as an inspired history of man's developing understanding of God. It was, however, written by men, and to it men ought to bring their highest spiritual and intellectual knowledge. We do not treat the Bible as being literally dictated by God, but it is nevertheless an inspiring record Of God's dealings with men.

"We do not seek to indoctrinate our people with any one interpretation Of scripture, but seek to motivate them to think and seek and learn that each of them may grow in their understanding of, and fellowship with God.

"All that we do and teach should be done to the glory of God. We praise God, serve God, and pray to God (not Jesus). We come to know God best through the knowledge of the life and teachings of Jesus as they are recorded in the New Testament."

If memory serves me correctly, I wrote most of that and twelve years later I still agree with it. It has become increasingly important for those who believe in the fellowship of the church to understand what approach any particular church has toward the Bible and not assume that the approach is the same in every church. More and more articles are appearing on this whole subject of Biblical interpretation, and recently even the Wall Street Journal got into the act with an article entitled, "The Battle Over Inerrancy", in which the author drew a distinction between the inerrancy and infallibility of the Bible.

Harold Lindsell, editor of the conservative magazine Christianity Today, argues for inerrancy. His approach is very simple. Says he, "Either you believe the Bible or you don't." Those who follow his position argue that every word and idea in the Bible is literally true, even where those words and ideas may contradict each other.

Mr. Lindsell's argument seems to be that once the Bible's authority is questioned on any point, no matter how trivial, it's only a matter of time until the entire book is being questioned. But if we are not allowed to question the Bible one is tempted to believe that God wasted his time and energy in giving us a brain. Jesus himself in the New Testament argued that we ought to love God with our mind as well as with our heart.

Other authorities, including professors in theological seminaries, argue that it is preposterous to assume that the Bible is inerrant in the sense in which Mr. Lindsell holds it to be inerrant. They claim that, like the Pope, in matters of faith and morals the Bible may be infallible but not all of its details are to be blindly accepted. For example, when Jesus called the mustard seed the smallest of all seeds, he was obviously in error for there are other seeds which are smaller. On the Other hand anything Jesus said about faith and morals is absolute. But even in this area we face contradictions in the Gospels. For example, Luke has Jesus absolutely prohibiting divorce while Matthew has him permit it for the cause of adultery!

Well, it is the position of those who have leadership responsibilities in this congregation that the Bible is neither inerrant nor infallible. We believe it is history's greatest source of truth regarding the nature of God and his will for mankind. We believe it is a great history of how mankind's concept of God and understanding of God has developed through the ages. We believe every Christian ought to be thoroughly acquainted with its teachings, as well as being acquainted with the Bible as literature. But

we do not believe that every word and idea in it was in some mysterious or mystical way dictated by God.

As an example of my own attitude toward the Bible, I firmly believe what John wrote in his epistle when he declared, "God is love." But precisely because I do believe this assertion of the Bible, I cannot believe that God is or ever was a God of vengeance, as portrayed in much of the Old Testament, a God who ordered Moses and the Israelites utterly to destroy their enemies. Jesus himself, in the Sermon on the Mount, contradicted the teachings of the Old Testament and laid down new and more enlightened truths which we today believe to be in harmony with God's will:

"You have heard it said, An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, but I say, resist not evil but whosoever smites you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also."

"You have heard it said, Ye shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy, but I say, love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you."

No, it seems to me impossible for a rational person to take literally every teaching and precept in the Bible without becoming schizoid. Such an attitude, furthermore, can and does easily lead to that form of bigotry which declares, "I have all the truth and if you don't agree with me you are not a Christian." If Christians truly believe in love they should not seek to rule each other out of the faith on the basis of narrow Biblical interpretations. It is another case of Christians spending more time fighting each other than fighting the real and common enemies of our culture.

What then is the Bible and how is it to be used? First of all, it is a tremendous history giving us a marvelous insight into the way in which God and the Hebrew people related to each other for 3000 years.

Secondly, it is a revelation of how our human concepts of God have originated, developed and matured during those 3000 years. This is doubly important when we recognize that we are studying a theocratic society, not a secular one. The people of Israel felt themselves completely under the direction and domination of God, even when they disobeyed or tended to ignore him.

Out of those 3000 years of religious experience came the culmination of their experience in the life and teachings of Jesus whom we hold to be supreme in his knowledge and understanding of the God who is. But even Jesus' teachings come to us from another time and another culture, in a different language, translated by interested parties and handed down for another 2000 years. We cannot be certain that they always come to us in absolutely letter-perfect condition, but the essence is there. We have little, if any, doubt about what Jesus is saying to us and how it is he would have us live.

Let me then repeat those three paragraphs from our congregation's educational philosophy, for they bear repeating:

"We look upon the Bible as an inspired history of man's developing understanding of God. It was, however, written by men, and to it men ought to bring their highest spiritual and intellectual knowledge. We do not treat the Bible as being literally dictated by God, but it is nevertheless an inspiring record of God's dealings with men.

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II

Now, having established what our point of view is, what are we to do about it?

One of the big problems we confront today was expressed to me by a layman not long ago after I had urged the reading and study Of the Bible. He responded, "When you expostulate on the Bible from the pulpit or in a seminar I can understand what you are saying, but when I try to read it by myself, much of the time I can't understand it."

Therein lies one of our main difficulties. The Bible is not always an easy book to read, especially in an old translation. The Bible is, furthermore, a book for adults and we often try to make it exclusively a book for children.

Example: We all want our children to have copies of the Bible, even though our own copy lies in a dark corner of the bookcase gathering dust and is brought out for public display only when one knows the minister is coming to call.

Example: We give every child in our Sunday school a Bible when he finishes third grade. We thereby suggest that he ought to read this massive volume of small print when we ourselves admit we don't read it and can't understand it when we do.

Example: Over and over again parents complain that the Sunday school and the curriculum of the Sunday school does not adequately emphasize the Bible. Parents suggest that they want their children to learn more about the Bible.

But where is that all important thing known as the power of a good example? Parents don't do what they ask their children to do. When was the last time you read and studied the Bible? When was the last time you attended a Bible study class provided by the church—and they are continually being offered, and have been, for the past twenty years. We ask children to read and study a book we ourselves pretty much ignore.

Children want to be like their parents. They start dropping out of Sunday school at an earlier age today because they want to be like adults. They want to grow up and get out of Sunday school so they won't have to study the Bible anymore. By the time they could really begin to understand and appreciate it their religious education is over.

Part of the difficulty is, I suppose, that we today desire and expect everything to be easy. Religion should be easy. The Bible should be easy. Learning and growing spiritually should be easy. Teaching out own children should be easy. And having the Sunday school do it in our stead is preferable to our doing it ourselves. But it doesn't get done that way and never will. The primary responsibility is the parents. If they fail it is unlikely that anything else will succeed.

The point is that the Bible will never be taken seriously by children if it is not taken seriously by adults. The emphasis must shift from children to adults, for it is adults the children wish to emulate.

III

In this church we hold the Bible to be central to our faith. Because it is central, we must not ignore it nor be ignorant of it. We do not believe it to be infallible or inerrant, but we believe in its moral and ethical teachings and believe that the New Testament revelation of God has never been surpassed. But we also reiterate the faith of John Robinson, the pastor of the Pilgrim Fathers, who declared: "God hath yet more light to break forth out of his holy word."

We are still pilgrims searching not for a new homeland, but ever searching for the new and more glorious truth we believe God desires to reveal to us. An ancient prayer sums up our philosophy:

From the cowardice that shrinks from new truth,
From the laziness that is content with half-truths,
From the arrogance that thinks it knows all truth,

Amen.

O God of truth, deliver us.