

The Bible: God's Word in Human Hands

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In 1989, evangelical leaders from around the world were at the Second Lausanne Congress for the evangelization of the world (the third is to be held this fall in Cape Town, South Africa) to reaffirm the Lausanne Covenant (1974), and at the very beginning, the representative from Manila solemnly declared, "We confirm that in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, God has given us an authoritative revelation of his character and will, of his redemptive works and their meaning, and a commission. . . that the good news of the Bible is God's enduring message to our world which we choose to defend, proclaim and realize."

A fundamental principle of the evangelical approach to the Bible is that in it, we find the living and active Word of God (Heb 4:12) because "All Scripture is inspired by God ("God-breathed" *theopneustos*)" and therefore "useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness, that the person of God may be perfectly equipped for every good work" (2 Tim 3:16-17). Even though it was written long ago by people from different historical contexts and cultures, and in various literary forms, the Bible, with its "God-breathed", lifegiving and wisdom-filled message, is inspiring and powerful for every generation. In its documentation of the history of salvation, the Bible provides measures and guidelines within universal human history, God's plan for humanity, with special emphasis on the chosen and redeemed people of God. Therefore, in apostolic-based Christianity, the holy Scriptures are not perceived as a dead letter, but as the living word of God which carries power and the gift of new life within itself. The message of the Bible is God's universal, but always pertinent address to all people in all times; it is God's directive letter for people journeying towards their final destination. The culmination and summary of this Good News (*euaggelion*) is embodied in Jesus Christ, the message having been substantiated by the redemption of the cross and confirmed by the power of resurrection, transformed by a love and power that lights up the world and enlightens people. Evangelical authenticity, therefore, in our era of ideological meandering, moral relativism and theological disorientation, requires faithfulness to the original intentions of the holy text, as well as to its contextual-cultural relevance and authentic application in contemporary life. The Word of God needs to be continually and correctly understood; it must be personally accepted in obedience of faith, and transformatively applied.

It is always worth repeating and emphasizing that the Bible is a Christological book because the revelation of Jesus Christ is at the heart of it. In the written word, we find the living Word. The Old Testament predicts, promises and prepares for the coming of the Messiah who summarizes the culmination of the Hebrew Bible with the comment, “I did not come to abolish the law and the prophecies, but to fulfill them.” The New Testament is all but preoccupied with Jesus’ life and work, with his teachings and proclamation of the kingdom of God, with his redemptive death and triumphant resurrection, and with the Spirit empowered and missionally committed apostolic church established by him.

Biblical theology assumes a knowledge and proper understanding of Scripture with the help of competent exegesis and the proper application of hermeneutical principles. Christ-centered evangelical Christianity must be solidly grounded in Scripture and formed by biblical theology in order to seriously grapple with reliable biblical knowledge and to resist the popular temptation of fruitless speculations and excessive subjectivity in areas that are not of central importance for the experience and practice of the Christian faith. Ignoring or insufficiently dealing systematically with the important and central themes of biblical history and biblical messages results in immature faith and unstable communities which lack the long-lasting fruits of new life, and lack the “salt and light” influence on the world. In this, we can learn from the Protestant Reformation, which was protected from error, and from turning to either rationalism on the one hand or mysticism on the other, by its understanding of the Bible. The Reformation strengthened its biblical orthodoxy without letting Christianity be reduced to metaphysics by emphasizing that only the Holy Spirit gives life, and on the other hand opposing formless mysticism by emphasizing Scripture as the only inspired word, and therefore a reliable source from which one can meet God and recognize his plans. In a healthy Christianity, faith in the reliability of the written Word and an openness to the working of the Holy Spirit are inseparable partners. Historic Christian orthodoxy emphasizes that the supernatural intervention of God in the history of revelation has found its permanent and normative expression in the written Scriptures. This significant message is communicated through a limited canon of reliable records as God’s authentic address to humanity. Scripture is, therefore, a fundamental and integral part of God’s saving activity within history; it is God’s word in contemporary human language which, above all, serves as an intelligent and understandable message about God’s acts and intentions for humanity. Scripture is, therefore, not only the foundation and basis of the Christian faith, but is also necessary for shaping a biblical mind and conscience in those who follow Jesus Christ. This is in agreement with the classical defense given to the Council at Worms by the reformer, Martin Luther, when he said, “I cannot recant, unless it can be proven by the testimony of Scripture that I am wrong. My conscience is

tied to the Word of God.”

Unfortunately, there are significant stages in church history marked by a lack of emphasis on the importance and relevance of the Bible as God’s word. After four centuries, the second Vatican Council (1962-1965) did what the reactionary Counter Reformation’s Council of Trent (1545–1563) failed to do. A recent analysis made by the Catholic Church succinctly summarizes, “The biggest winner of the Council of Trent was the papacy, which then became the political center of Europe. The biggest loser, however, was the Bible itself. . . . The Bible has been defeated and has disappeared from the Church as God’s people” (*Concilium: International Journal of Theology*, no. 2/April 2010, pp. 56-57). The great reformer, Martin Luther, with his own revelation of the Bible, was actually “admitted” into the Second Vatican Council, at which the carefully measured Dogmatic Constitution on the word of God (*Dei Verbum*) explicitly pointed out, “Followers of Christ should have wide open access to Sacred Scripture” (DV, 22). Within Roman Catholicism, the rediscovered emphasis on the importance of the Bible in people’s native languages, and the necessity of modern translations, has born substantial fruit in the renewal of liturgy, in the theological education of clergy, and in stimulating charismatic and other renewal communities by engaging both the clergy and laity in evangelism. Evangelical Christians have, with great interest, followed the recent XIIth regular session of the Synod of Bishops in Rome, held in October, 2008 with the theme, “The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church.” The Synod was attended by senior representatives from ten non-Roman Catholic Christian churches, among whom was the widely known and prolific writer, the Anglo-evangelical New Testament scholar, N. T. Wright. In order to obtain a more precise insight into the current understanding and application of the Bible within official Roman Catholicism, the Synod’s “55 Propositions”, a document created as a guideline to be applied in all local parishes, should be subjected to detailed evangelical and comparative analysis. Pauline Viviano, a professor of theology at Loyola University in Chicago wrote an analytical article, “Biblical Experts, People in the Pews and the Synod on the Word of God” in which she expresses surprise, “in as much as the Synod was on the Bible in the life and mission of the Church, very little was said about the study of the Bible among Catholic believers” (*Concilium*, *ibid*, 86). This is consistent with the conclusion of an interview with the esteemed Croatian biblical scholar, Adalbert Rebić, given at the anniversary of the Zagreb Bible, in which he commented regarding the Synod by saying, “The Bible does not yet have a central place in the Church” (portal *Cross of life*).

In conclusion, the post-Council openness resulted in a real Bible boom which has greatly enriched even the minority evangelical Christianity in our region. Of particular importance is the emphasis on Bible publishing and translation, as well as the preparation of supporting literature for the proper interpretation of the Bi-

ble. Of epochal significance is the Croatian publication of the monumental “The Dictionary of Biblical Theology” (1969) by Xavier Leon-Dufour. It was organized concurrently with the most important endeavor of biblical translation, the Bible which was edited by the politically apt Jure Kaštelan and the doyen of Croatian biblical scholarship, Bonaventura Duda. Impressive inventory and analysis of those biblically productive times was made (during the aforementioned Roman synod) at the symposium, “40 years of the Zagreb Bible.” This author gratefully remembers the meeting, discussions and initiatives that took place at the publishing house called Kršćanska sadašnjost at the address, Marulićev Trg 14, Zagreb. At that time, Croatian biblical scholars, foremost of which were Bonaventura Duda and Jerko Fućak who, with great sacrifice, and with the encouragement of the theological visionary, Tomislav Šagi-Bunić, and the enterprising strategist, Josip Turčinović, advocated not only for the professional translation of the biblical texts, but also for the production and distribution of the Book above all books in various editions, as well as for the preparation of Bible manuals and other technical aids for understanding God’s Word. It is noteworthy that on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the Council it was confirmed that the Zagreb Bible (so named by B. Duda), printed in the Croatian language, has 300,000 copies in circulation, and the New Testament translation done by Duda-Fućak has 260,000 copies in circulation. This is a partial, but exceptionally significant answer, and circulations today are even more impressive, in response to Duda’s well-known diagnosis that, “the Croatian nation is biblically malnourished.” Josip Turčinović then testified at a public tribune, “Kršćanska sadašnjost has, since its inception, considered one of its fundamental tasks to be to serve in the broadening and deepening of people’s understanding of God’s original words.” Evangelical Christians owe a great debt of thanks to them, as well as to the deceased Jerko Fućak, Celestin Tomić, Ljudevita Rupčić, Ante Kresina and other professional workers and promoters of the Bible as the Word of God.

Translated by Juliana Kovačević