

The Authority of Scripture

Psalm 119:105 (NRSV)

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

Rare and Inaccessible.

They are everywhere – ubiquitous. I imagine that you have several, maybe even hundreds in your home. There are many in nearly every room in this building with the exception of the rest rooms but I imagine some people have carried some of them into those rooms. They are in the children's rooms, youth rooms, adult classrooms and places of worship. Many of us have access to large collections of them either in our pockets or purse.

On college and university campuses many of the largest and nicest buildings are designed to house these common items. Any city of significant size has one or more buildings to house them as well. They are so common place, we often take them for granted. Books, books, books. In my office library here and at home, I have thousands of books. On my iphone I have two major libraries of books. I can go online and access millions of books.

In the centuries leading up to Martin Luther's time (1500's), books were a rare and special commodity in Europe and the world. Access to books was extremely limited to special collections in libraries or owned by people of means. The chief reason why was because the only means reproduce books until 50 years before Luther's time was through copying them by hand which was a painstaking process. It could take years to reproduce some works.

This was not only true about books in general but was true of the Book, the Bible. Even though the Church had agreed upon the various books that should be part of the Bible by the end of the 4th Century, there were few copies available some 1100 years later. They were not found on common people's night stands, seldom found in the studies of pastors and often churches in many communities had not a single copy. In most churches where a Bible was found, it was often chained to a stand so it would not be removed. Usually the great libraries would have only a copy or two.

In addition to Bibles being rare, those that were found in Europe were written in Latin. In 400, Jerome had taken and translated the Hebrew and Greek texts into Latin. This translation became the standard. A few centuries this became a huge issue as Latin faded from common use and various Romance languages developed throughout Europe.

Latin became the ecclesiastical language (church talk) and academic language. Only the highly educated knew how to read and understand Latin. So the Bibles that were available were not accessible to everyday people. If you were not a priest, lawyer or physician, you probably did not understand Latin. The Bible was rare and inaccessible for the vast majority of people. Even when it was read in worship services, few understood the Latin. People were dependent upon priests and bishops to interpret God's Holy Word.

It's hard to imagine that world, isn't it? How many copies of the Bible do you own? How many different translations could you get your hands on this day if you so choose? How many Bible studies will be offered by your church this week?

The psalmist said the Word was a "lamp for his feet." So scripture was intended to be a flashlight that helped us walk the path of life during the dark of night. The problem in the middle ages was the Bible was as elusive a firefly and because of the language barrier was as useful as the firefly's light to illumine one's path.

Discovery.

When the young monk named Martin started his spiritual journey, he was a part of a world where access to scripture was rare and largely inaccessible. Even in the monastery, what he heard of scripture were readings by others. Later when he went the university to continue his studies, he discovered a book there, the Bible. Initially it tormented him but later it came to change him radically and lay the foundation for his understanding and faith that would impact people for 500 years.

For Luther, the scripture became this bright light that illumined his way and understanding. It was the scripture that revealed the truth. Through the Word, God speaks to His people.

As United Methodists, our view of scripture affirms it contains everything necessary for salvation. How we enter into a right relationship with God and deepen that relationship is revealed in this book we call the Bible. As I speak these words I am reminded of the words Paul wrote to his protégé, Timothy. He shared with Timothy scripture was able to “instruct for salvation” and “equip one for every good work.” So the Bible points the way to a right relationship with God and living it out in our world.

As Luther fell more and more in love with scripture, he came to hold an extremely high view of its authority. It was the main source of truth, belief and practice for Christians. There was no higher source.

In Luther’s day, the Roman Catholic Church did have a high view of scripture as the source of truth. But in the official thinking of the church, the scripture was subject to papal and the decision of official church counsels. These were gathering of church officials to discuss and settle matters of belief and practice. It was with this notion of Pope and counsels having as high and higher authority that troubled Luther.

Following Luther’s nailing of the 95 Theses to the church door in Wittenberg in 1517, the heat of angst against him continued to rise as his critique on the sale of indulgences impacted the papal coffers. Two years later, he faced one of the Church’s top debaters in Leipzig. In that contest, Luther asserted that a common peasant armed with the Bible was more powerful than bishops and counsels without it.

A couple of years later in 1521, Luther faced his ultimate test from the Church as he appeared before the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V and the Church’s highest representative. He was called on to recant all of his writings. He knew his response could easily cost him his life. In his final response he said:

“Unless I am convinced by the testimony of Scripture or by clear reason (for I trust neither pope nor council alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am bound by the Scriptures I have cited, for my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not recant anything, since to act against one’s conscience is neither safe nor right. I cannot do otherwise. Here I stand, may God help me.”

For Luther, the cry became, *sola scripture* – scripture alone. It was the highest authority that revealed Christ and the truth.

In our tradition as UM’s, we hold to this high view of scripture. John Wesley made the claim of “homo libra” – man of one book. That book was the Bible. The Bible is our highest authority in coming to know Christ and the truth.

In the Common Language.

Imagine this scenario. You had a relative who traveled to China who purchased a lottery ticket in your name but never told you about the purchase. Long after the relative returns home, you go to the mail box to find a strange envelope from China. You open the envelope and it is filled with Chinese characters. You have no clue what it says. What would you do with the letter? Unknown to you, the letter told you had won the jackpot in China and need to claim your prize. But if you could read the letter, it would be useless.

Most people in Luther’s day as well as the time leading up to Luther’s day faced a huge dilemma – there was the great treasure called the Bible which if they had opportunity to read one, they would not understand because it was written in a language they did not understand.

One hundred years before Luther’s birth, an English priest and scholar had come to the conclusion of the high authority of scripture and right for every believer have the scripture in

his/her own language. Armed with this conviction, John Wycliffe began his English translation of the Bible. Three decades after Wycliffe's death, Jon Huss, another reformer affirmed Wycliffe's beliefs about scripture and opposed abuses he saw in the Church. He was burned at the stake as a heretic for his views. Both of these men were heroes of Martin Luther.

Following Luther's trial at Worms, he was "kidnapped" for his protection and placed in forced isolation. While he was there, he undertook translating the New Testament into German that the common people could read. He labored over words to insure it was in the vernacular the people could understand. In 1522 he completed the translation of the New Testament and then a little over a decade later (1534) he completed the Old Testament translation.

There was a piece of technology that was invented in the century prior to Luther's translation that aided in the availability of the Bible. Johannes Gutenberg, borrowing from a Chinese idea of carved wood block printing, devised a printing press of movable metal type to produce in a day what would have taken years to produce. By the time Martin Luther translated the Bible, the German presses were rolling and produced this German translation.

Do you get the implications of what Luther did related to the Bible and its impact on Christians to follow? He passed on to us this high view of scriptural authority and was a critical player in making the scripture available to people. This great treasure inspired by God was made available to common people like you and me.

Implications.

Because of Luther and the other reformers work, we have at our finger tips multiple translations of the Bible which help us to see Jesus more fully and equip us to live out the life He intends in effective ministry. We have been given a great treasure.

Paul Yongi Cho's conversion.

Jesus told a parable of man who found a great treasure hidden in a field. He said the man went and sold everything he had in order to buy the field so he could have the treasure.

The Bible is this great treasure that is no longer hidden in a field. Luther and others before and after have made this treasure available to us. But for it to be of value to us, we must open the treasure chest.

I have often heard people say we are living in a biblically illiterate culture. Unfortunately I must agree. Christians do not engage the scripture on a regular basis. They are not engaged in studying scripture with other believers. It seems the Bible is this beautiful gift underneath the Christmas tree with our name on it we never open.

We have a tendency to have one on our night stand, on our coffee table and altars at church. Their mere presence does us little good. It is not an idol or a charm. It is when the bible is opened, read, meditated on, discussed that the Word of God is unlocked and our lives are transformed.

I so appreciate what Luther did regarding scripture. My prayer is each of us will develop an insatiable hunger for scripture. We will regular read the Book. Study with others. Apply what is revealed by the Spirit.