

1 Peter 1:22-25
(Isaiah 55:6-11; John 17:14-19)
“The Living and Abiding Word of God”

Introduction

This past week I had the privilege of joining four thousand Christians from all around the world who gathered together in Cape Town, South Africa, for what has been called the most diverse gathering of Christian in history. Together, we worshiped, prayed, sang, studied, were challenged by great preaching and teaching, and enjoyed simply being together for the sake of the gospel of Christ and the evangelization of the world.

What is it that brought such a diverse group together in unity? Surely it was our common faith in Jesus Christ. And yet many others around the world of the two billion people – one-third of the world’s population – who profess to believe in the Christian message, would not have chosen to be identified with those of us who gathered in Cape Town, or with the teaching that stirred our hearts, or with our passion to obey the Great Commission of our Lord to make disciples of all nations. Why? What sets apart those of us who call ourselves “evangelical,” a word derived from the New Testament Greek word that means “good news”?

We might say that it is the gospel of grace, the belief that we are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, and are called by God to declare that good news to the ends of the earth. Certainly such a statement would be true. But it raises the question how it can be the case that not everyone who claims to be a Christian agrees with that statement of the gospel or feels under constraint to be a part of the universal mission that Christ has entrusted to his church. The answer is found, I believe, in the source from which that view of the gospel and of the church’s disciple-making priority is derived: namely, the belief that the Bible is God’s Word written, and thus the sole trustworthy and authoritative guide in matters of faith and practice.

In that crucial moment when history was transformed by an evangelical Augustinian monk from Saxony named Martin Luther, the ground on which Luther took his stand against both the Pope in Rome and the Emperor seated before him, was the plain teaching of the Scripture. When charged with heresy for opposing Rome’s sale of indulgences on the ground that we are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone and ordered to recant what he had written, Luther answered:

Unless I am convicted by Scripture and plain reason – I do not accept the authority of popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other – my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not recant anything, for to go against the conscience is neither right nor safe. Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise. God help me. Amen.

One reason that so many of us looked forward to this great gathering of Christians in Cape Town was to share the week with representatives of the unregistered churches in China, representing the tens of millions of Chinese Christians who, like Luther and the Reformers, refused to bend the knee to human powers and let them dictate the terms on which they will serve the living God. However, one-by-one and in small groups trying to leave the country for the Cape Town conference, the China delegation members were stopped, had their passports taken, and were ordered not to try to leave the country.

Tomorrow, I fly to China, where I am scheduled to meet the following week with the leaders of the delegation and spend four days together in study and prayer. I am probably not wise to speak of this in a public setting such as this, but feel constrained to ask you to pray over the next two weeks that, if the Lord permits these meetings to take place, that he will meet us in power and help me to open to them what Peter here calls “the living and abiding Word of God.”

Why is this Word foundational to everything that we believe and practice? And why are so many who identify as evangelical so ignorant of what the Bible teaches? Critical scholar Bart Ehrman, professor of New Testament at the University of North Carolina, asks incoming freshman, “How many of you have read the Harry Potter series?” to which most respond with raised hands. He then asks, “How many of you believe that Bible is God’s Word?” to which, again, nearly all raise their hands. Finally he asks, “How many of you have read all the way through the Bible from beginning to end?” to which very few respond with raised hands. What is wrong with us? If we believe that the living God has spoken to us and still speaks to us through the Bible, why do we not all read it carefully and meditate daily upon what it says?

In these verses, Peter shows us three reasons that the Scriptures are crucial to our life-in-Christ.

Body

1. It is through the living and abiding Word of God that we are born again.

Peter wants us to understand the imperishable nature and power of God’s Word. In a world that is passing away, in the midst of lives that we know are hastening toward death, we have been born again through something that is imperishable. Sometimes we preachers and teachers wonder why we should keep on teaching and preaching the gospel to people who have heard us for years and seem unmoved by the message. Or as parents, we wonder why we should trouble our children with Bible teaching on top of all else they have to do. Or we wonder whether it is worth our time to study the Bible with a group of men or women who are trying to work their way through a difficult portion of the Scripture.

Here is first reason, then, that we should press on: It is “through the living and abiding word of God” that God’s Spirit places the imperishable seed of new life in

the hearts of those who are born again. “Since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God” (1:23). We are given new life through the Word of God. If our churches are built on exciting programs and marketing techniques, we may attract a lot of people and have an appearance of spiritual life, but it is only “the good news that was preached to you” that is able to place the imperishable seed of God within a human soul, and bring a sinner from spiritual death to eternal life.

2. It is through the living and abiding Word of God that we mature in Christ.

We are not only born again through the Word of God, but we are increasingly conformed to the image of Christ through the Word of God. Note the first verse of our text: “Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart” (1:22). How are we to purify ourselves? Haven’t we tried that and failed over and over again? We purify ourselves by living increasingly in conformity to the truth, which is revealed to us through the Word of God. As we read this morning in our gospel lesson, in his prayer the night of his betrayal, a prayer that was heard by Simon Peter, the author of our text, Jesus prayed these words: “Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth” (John 17:17).

These words harken back to the words of the Psalmist, “How can a young man keep his way pure? By guarding it according to your word ... I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you” (Psalm 119:9,11). God’s Word has power when we take it into our heart and unleash it to begin eating up the weeds of envy, pride, lust, anger, and all else that is contrary to God’s will. Too often we approach the Word as if it were merely an object of study, rather than the lens through which we are to see and understand everything else. It sets the terms and establishes the parameters of our understanding, willing and doing.

3. It is through the living and abiding Word of God that we endure to the end.

It is God’s Word that God’s Spirit uses to keep us living and abiding unto the day of the Lord. While our bodies will grow old and die, our spirits are kept by God’s Word. Jesus said, “If you abide in me and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish and it will be done for you. By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples” (John 15:7-8).

So Peter drives this point home with a quote from Isaiah 40. The prophet is called to comfort God’s people and to prepare the way of the Lord. The prophet asks, “What shall I say? How shall I bring comfort to the people? How shall I prepare the way of the Lord?” And the answer comes, “Say this: All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord remains forever” This tremendous passage ends with the familiar words, “they who wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they

shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint.”

In a world that is passing away, in a culture that changes its values as quickly as people change clothing, in an intellectual milieu where truth is denied and despised, God’s Word is unchanged and unchanging. “Those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion, which cannot be moved, but abides forever” (Psalm 125:1). You simply cannot trust in the Lord without trusting his Word. It is through the living and abiding Word of God that *we* also live and abide to the end in confidence that we will see the Lord and hear him say, “Well done.”

Conclusion

Peter concludes our text with these words: “And this word is the good news [or “gospel”] that was preached to you” (1:25). The heart and essence of God’s Word is the gospel, and the gospel is the proclamation of the life, death and resurrection victory of Jesus Christ over everything that would separate us from God. It is the life-transforming declaration that Jesus Christ is Lord! Only those who receive that tremendous, life-transforming truth, not as a datum to be filed away or an aspect of reality to be dealt with, but rather as the single defining truth against which every other claim, passion, desire and dream must be tested – in other words, those who receive Jesus gladly as Lord – have the promise of eternal life through the living and abiding Word of God.

God’s Spirit will take God’s Word and build you up into the person God created you to be. With God’s Word abiding in you and shaping your view of life, transforming your hopes and desires, and shaping your heart affections, you will have the confidence, the living hope of which we have been reading and studying. You will have the power to look at a world that is passing away and say with growing gratitude and wonder, “All flesh is grass and all its glory like the flower of the grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord remains forever” (1:24-25).

With Martin Luther and the Reformers, with our brothers and sisters in China, and with all those around the world who refuse to bow the knee in worship of any one but Jesus, you will say in the face of whatever comes: “My conscience is captive to the Word of God ... and to go against the conscience is neither right nor safe. Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise. God help me. Amen.”

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