

The Bible: A Special Book, Part II
2 Tim 3:16-17, Yr. B., September 13, 2015

Revisit last week's message

I am in the midst of producing a TV series, it is also live. It is about the nature of the Bible. It has three parts, today is part 2. Any person interested in having the original text of the first episode and is able to read Chinese, please go to the Fellowship Hall and get a copy. Last week, I said the Bible is the result of editing and collecting, at those times when the Jews entered an uncertain future of their country. The preciousness of the Bible does not depend on whether each sentence comes from God, or we comply. But rather, it was God's ancient people showcasing their experiences, it is a record of humanity meeting God in written form. Last Sunday I said: To love God and to love the Bible, are not the same thing.

"Biblical Inerrancy"?

In order to explain this idea, I give you this message. This message will separate us from other Chinese Churches. Many Chinese Christians, especially those who call themselves Evangelicals, subscribe the doctrine of biblical inerrancy. Together with many mainline churches such as Lutherans, Anglicans, Presbyterians, the United Church of Canada does not support the talk of "inerrancy." If we do not subscribe to "biblical inerrancy," then does it mean we say the Bible contains errors? Definitely not! Let me explain.

Throughout the Christian history, Christians have never advocated the idea of biblical inerrancy. It is created in the 1980s. Even before the 1980s, because of the changing times, the authority of the Bible has been severely tested. For one, societies have adopted scientific reasoning. Second, there was a trend of secularization. The Bible gradually lost its well-respect status of the past. Some conservative Christians believe that their beliefs are being challenged. In order to restore it, they responded. Biblical inerrancy is also used to denounce those Christians who do not adhere to the traditional understanding, the literal meaning of the Bible.

The most obvious example is in the 80 and 90s, when the church debated the controversial topic of the time: woman ordination. In the height of the debate, all who supported women ordination were dubbed unfaithful to the Bible. The United Church of Canada is one of the early denominations to ordain women. It paves the way for other Christians from other denominations to announce us heretics. They said we were not biblical Christians. 30 years later, I don't think there is anyone today interested in debating women ordination with us.

The most important point Biblical Inerrancy is to say that the teachings of the Bible is without error. If we pursue further, which version of the Bible is without? The Chinese version? The English? Then which English version? German version? Latin? These are all translated versions. Biblical Inerrancy says the original version of the Bible (original manuscript) is without error. Have you ever seen the original version of the Bible? I haven't! I believe no one has ever seen the original version of the Bible! I believe the church has never possessed the originals. So how can we verify and compare?

When we understand how the Bible came into being, we will know that there is no "original version". From oral traditions to written words, the processes from which the Bible came into being is the result of multiple editing, modifications and addition. I ask: When Amos spoke the words of condemnation against the people in power, were those words were the words of God, or later when someone else wrote on behalf of him, and those words that were edited and arranged, and the word of God? To say the original manuscripts contain no errors is simple an assumption.

Why then the "original manuscripts"? The real motivation behind the talk of biblical inerrancy is to protect the integrity of God. Those who promote it will say: God doesn't err, so the Bible doesn't err. Behind this is to protect the Word of God. It doesn't allow people to use and different opinions to say things different from the past teachings of the Church. But from the perspective of faith development and the progression of theology, it is basically impossible.

But God doesn't err and the Bible doesn't err are two different ideas, they belong to two different domains, and aren't comparable. To love of God and to love the Bible, they aren't the same thing. And again, God doesn't need us to be God's guardians, for the simple reason that we aren't qualify. God does not need an err-free book to guide people to know God's truth. People comes to know the truth because of the calling of the Holy Spirit and not because of a perfect, inerrant book. The United Church of Canada doesn't say the Bible contains error. The idea is beyond us.

However, we know that God from ancient time to the present has used and keep using weak, imperfect human beings to accomplish great things. Abraham is called the father of faith, but he and his wife when they went to Egypt, Abraham lied. King David was a man after God's own heart, but when he saw a women bathing on rooftop, he designed a murder plan to get rid of Uriah, the woman's husband. Brothers and sisters, through history, God keeps using imperfect human beings. These flaw human beings when placed in God's hands, God turn imperfection into blessings. The Bible, too, is the way that God uses to change us. Even if we believe that God good and is without error, this God does not need an inerrant book to change our lives. Biblical inerrancy is simply human imagination that can't be verified or certain.

Timothy 3: 16-17 say:

All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.

The "Bible" Timothy talks about here isn't our Bible. When the author wrote this letter to Timothy, our Bible does not exist, nor is the New Testament.

The Bible here is referring to some ancient Jewish scrolls. Today, we generally apply it to our Bible. The author does not mention the concept of errors free. The United Church of Canada, though without subscribing to the doctrine of biblical inerrancy, the church doesn't say the Bible contains errors. The church just say that it is not a suitable concept to describe the Bible. Better alternatives are: trustworthy, reliable, useful for teaching. Scripture is useful. We take this

approach because we do not have enough information and knowledge to decide the Bible contains error or not.

Authority of the Bible

Having the Bible doesn't mean believers can solve all problems in life. We do not use the Bible to decide when to buy a house? A car? When to get marry? When to travel? Biblical authority comes from the people who read the book and to confirm its value. Authority isn't about non-thinking. Biblical authority says through these writing, one can experience God.

Wanting to hear the Word of God is good, but how? What do we hear? Come! Listen to speak of God's good or bad? (Pick up the Bible and place it near your ear). What do you hear?

Brothers and sisters, to listen to/understand the word of God cannot do away with "I" - "Who am I, the way I grew up, my situation, my education, my experience, my present situation." – All these are deciding/contributing factors what we know about the Bible when we open and study it.

If anyone ask: "So you are putting your knowledge above the Bible?" I reply: "No! I am not putting myself higher than the Bible." Human beings are meaning making creatures. For human beings to understand Scripture, in the process of seeking meaning, "I" is part of the process that can't be taken away. Just can't do it. Unless we are numb people, lost feeling, and lose the ability to think. Only this kind of person will receive and accept everything from the Bible without asking a single question. I am sure none of you are like that.

Even as simple as "Love your neighbor as yourself." What do you hear? Who is our neighbor? Love them as "myself"? How? Under what circumstances? Possible?

God gave us the mind, we need to use it; and we have all sorts of teachers among us, to help us understand the word of God. The use of reason and experience to understand the Bible is the Bible's invitation to us, it is not diminish the authority of Scripture.

Sometimes, I think some Christians has turned the Bible into an idol, which is to place it higher than it deserves to be. Is it because the God whom we worship is the God we can't see, and we have a tendency to turn a visible, touchable book into a god? The Bible is a way to know God. The Bible isn't God.

God who created heaven and earth, the Lord of all, beyond human words and comprehension is the object of our faith; the Bible is not. Christians must remind ourselves that we are the subject of our worship is God, not the Bible. Believers must avoid worshipping the golden calf as God.

John the Baptist cried out in the wilderness, calling people to repentance. John was asked: "Are you the Messiah?" He answered, "No, I am not the Messiah, I am a witness to the Messiah." To give witness to the Messiah, this is also the role of the Bible. The Bible gives witness to God. The Bible is a way to know God; it is not God. To love the Bible is good, but do not elevate it higher than it should be and turn it into a god.

The Bible and I

Finally, I want to clarify, I appreciate those who advocate "biblical inerrancy" and their love of the Bible. Their love of God cannot be denied. These people are still my friends.

Like I said last week, that the Bible is God's Word, but also human's words.

I love the Bible. This is a special book that has changed my life. The Bible is trustworthy; it gives me guidance. In the Bible, I still find God's truth. The Bible recorded for me Jesus' ministry on earth, those words are my encouragement. But together with ancient believers, we do not need to deal with whether what the Bible contains errors or not.

Those who teach biblical inerrancy may have been overzealous. They say: If we don't believe biblical inerrancy, then we are not true faithful Christians. I think they have crossed the line. Throughout the Christian history, the church did not use the belief of an inerrant Bible as a way to measure Christian spirituality.

I think the idea of a measuring whether a person is a loyal follower or not, first of all, this is God's job, not ours. But I think another factors. I think Micah 6: 8:

He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

I also think the disciples asked Jesus in Matthew, what is the greatest commandment (Matthew 22: 36-40):

Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" He said to him, "'you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.

I do not like to measure others. If we do measure, we measure our own life. Yet, the two passages above provide us the best clues as to what it means to be called faithful followers of God. Lastly, if we really want to live out the God's Word, I can think of four major points, taking from the Bible, as our generally direction for life. To explain it, you need to come back next week.

Let us pray