

John Calvin's Glasses

2 Timothy 3:14 – 4:5

July 5, 2009

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through Christ Jesus.

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.

In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I solemnly urge you: proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching. For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths. As for you, always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully.

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This is the word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

John Calvin turns 500 years old on Friday. As Presbyterians, we trace our roots back to this French lawyer, pastor, and theologian who set up shop in Geneva, Switzerland. In the midst of the turbulent Protestant Reformation and at the tender age of 27 years, Calvin published a little booklet called *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Eight editions, 23 years, and 1,500 pages later, the expanded version of *The Institutes* was published. This four volume work became the textbook for training leaders in the Reformed church that gave birth to our own: the Presbyterian Church.

If you have read about John Calvin you know that he was not exactly known as an easy going guy. There is a reason people call us Presbyterians the frozen chosen. We are often considered to be dour; stern; measured. The apple does not fall too far from the tree. We come by it naturally – as John Calvin was all of these things.

Yet Calvin was also known as a gifted thinker, a leader, and was incredibly formative both in the development and growth of the Reformed church and throughout Western history. There is a reason we don't celebrate a lot of 500 year olds on their birthday; it takes a special kind of person to be remembered that long.

One of the things Calvin would probably not like is all of the attention I am giving him now. Calvin believed that the worst sin was that of idolatry – and if he knew that there were masks of his face around the church today, he would likely be rolling over in his grave!

In thinking about what to preach on this occasion – while wanting to honor our forefather in the faith, yet focusing on God who is the true focus of our worship – I chose a text that is at the heart of Calvin's theology. And so I will be reading from the second letter to Timothy, starting at the end of the third chapter. [read scripture]

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Principal among the ways that we experience God in our lives are the words of Scripture. Commenting on this text from 2 Timothy, John Calvin wrote: “We owe to Scripture the same reverence we owe to God, since it has its only source in Him...”¹

As Presbyterians, we do not worship the Bible, we worship the triune God. Yet we do claim that, other than Jesus Christ, there is no clearer revelation of God than through the words of this book.

Calvin was a student of the Bible. The entirety of his theology grew from the pages of Scripture. For Calvin, it was important to remember that Scripture “was the womb from which the Church was born, and not vice versa.”² Such was a cornerstone tenant of the entire Protestant Reformation – that the Word of God needed to be accessible by the people of God: to be read, to be studied, and to be followed as it communicated God’s will.

John Calvin loved the Bible. For Calvin, you could tell the true marks of the Church of Jesus Christ by whether or not the Word was rightly proclaimed and the sacraments were rightly administered. The Word of God was central. If you have ever wondered why we have the Scripture and the sermon in the middle of our worship service, look no further than John Calvin.

The passage we have read this morning from 2 Timothy was written by a teacher to a student of the faith. Many times, this Scripture is used as a proof text to bolster the case of those who believe that the Bible is the inerrant. The verse, “all Scripture is inspired by God (or, God-breathed”)...” is favorite passage of both fundamentalists and literalists.

Calvin interpreted this passage differently. John Calvin was no fundamentalist. He recognized that there were inconsistencies in Scripture. He, even in the mid-1500s, could see that the biblical and scientific explanations of the world could co-exist.

For Calvin, the issue was not the origin of Scripture – how it came to be that these books we call the Bible were written down. The critical

¹ *Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries, volume 10*, p. 330

² George, Timothy, *Theology of the Reformers* (Broadman Press, 1988) p. 197

issue was the Bible's authority. And on this point – Calvin was unequivocal in his belief: the authority of the Bible is paramount in all matters of the church's life and in the life of the believer.

Personal opinion, individual experiences of the divine, religious trends, creative exercises in theology – all of that may be well and good – but all of this was secondary to the Word of God in Scripture.

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By way of a personal story, let me tell you how I have seen the authority of the Scripture matter.

I think I may have told you before that for three years I was in a group of pastors who got together on a regular basis to talk about some of the contentious issues facing our denomination. There were ten of us: five from “each side of the aisle.” We held differing views on some pretty important things; things that threatened (and still threaten) to divide the church.

Before our first meeting, I must confess that I was not exactly sure how it would work. Our agenda was literally to spend most of a week together and talk about things on which we disagreed. Normally, this does not make for an enjoyable time.

Early on in our time together, we talked about the authority of Scripture. How important did we hold it to be? How important did the “other side” hold it to be? What we discovered is that each one of us affirmed Scripture's authority. While we still differed about our *interpretation* of Scripture, we covenanted to let the Bible have an authority greater than any other person in the room. We found that this gave us the space to listen to one another.

It has been a couple of years since I met with this group of colleagues, and I am reasonably sure we all still have differences of opinion. Yet I can say to you now with ironclad conviction that I am grateful that all ten of those pastors still serve in the same denomination. I know that I need those other colleagues with whom I disagree: to challenge me, to sharpen my thinking, to broaden my understanding of Scripture. And they need me.

During our week together, we each under the Word of God – and this process of studying together under the Word gave us a gift of humility that translated into deep friendships and a commitment to serve the church.

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I share this story, not to brag on my group, but to testify, in my own life, to the power and the authority of the Word. I know more about God and about what God wants for this world and the church when I submit my opinions and my preferences to an honest reading of the Bible.

This does not mean studying Scripture is easy, or that studying Scripture will help all of us get on the same page about the matters of faith and life. It is not, and it will not.

Second Timothy talks about “the people accumulating for themselves teachers to suit their own desires...” I believe that congregations like ours are the exception because of our diversity, but too often this describes the current religious landscape in our country, does it not?

The people were “accumulating teachers for themselves to suit their own desires...”

We gather ourselves in like-minded groups who have like-minded interpretations of the Word of God and we wonder why nobody else gets it like we do.

The truth is – I think we can tell if the Bible truly holds a place of authority if reading it makes us uncomfortable. If it challenges us; pushes us; makes us squirm a little. If reading, studying (or preaching) Scripture does these things, then we are giving it authority.

On the flip side, the word of accountability in this passage is that if we find ourselves nodding in agreement with everything we hear from the pulpit or the classroom – then we might be elevating our personal desires over that of the claims of Scripture.

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Of course, ultimately, taking the Bible seriously and studying it seriously is not intended to make us uncomfortable. The Word of God in Scripture exists to point us to the salvation found in Jesus Christ and to reveal how Jesus Christ desires that we follow as his disciples.

It is Good News – better than we can imagine. That is why we give Scripture such authority: as God’s word, it knows us better (and knows what is better for us) than we think we know ourselves!

One of John Calvin’s famous metaphors for Scripture was to compare the Bible to a pair of spectacles. In his words:

Just as old or bleary-eyed men and those with weak vision, if you thrust before them a most beautiful volume, even if they recognize it to be some sort of writing, yet can scarcely construe two words, but with aid of spectacles will begin to read it distinctly; so Scripture, gathering up the otherwise confused knowledge of God in our minds, having dispersed our dullness, clearly shows us the true God.³

In a world with too many choices – and where freedom has been perverted to mean unrestrained individualism – perhaps our most life-giving message as the Presbyterian Church is to acknowledge that there is an authority in our lives that is greater than other person or power.

It is the Bible; and to see the world through its lenses is to see a possibility and love and beauty that extends far past the place where our sight grows dim.

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Pray with me: *God we give you thanks, for your Word that is a lamp to our feet and a light unto our path. In Jesus name, Amen.*

³ Calvin’s *Institutes* (1.6.1) and found in George, p. 193.