

What about the Bible?

The fifth Sunday after Pentecost

A religion professor at a church college began his course with a twenty-question quiz, asking such things as: When did King David live, give or take 200 years? Most of the students, almost all had grown up Christian, did not get any answers right.

In 1970 another Bible professor, James Smart, wrote a book, *The Strange Silence of the Bible in the Church*, because we've lost our knowledge of the Bible.

If you want to understand our culture and our history, you have to know something of the Bible, such as the suffering of Job, the Exodus, and the Ten Commandments.

On Sundays we normally read four lessons, but this may be totally useless. A lot of the time it becomes one of those **EGO** moments, "Eyes Glaze Over." People wait until it's over. What should we do?

We could read one lesson that one might then preach on. Then one could reduce the length of the service. Or just have one Bible verse. But then one loses the context. And one doesn't get to know what the Bible is about. The lessons assume you have some knowledge of what is going on. Like: What's going on in the Book of Job, for example. Or what's going on in 2nd Corinthians. So when you hear the reading, you say to yourself: Yes, I know that. Let's see what develops. As it is, people don't know, and I wonder if it's a waste of time.

I can imagine people saying: How much do I have to know? Do I have to memorize it? The whole Bible? Is that what is necessary? Isn't what is important is that I am sincere? Then, of course, the question is: What kind of sincerity? How much sincerity? Or that it's in my heart. Then the question is: In what way? To what extent? Or the important thing is that I am led by the Holy Spirit. The question is: How do you sort out spirits? How do you know this is the Holy Spirit and not some other spirit?

Are we left in the hands of the scholars? A layman challenged his pastor: Don't you understand that the Bible has to be interpreted? Anyone who has been in seminary knows about interpretation and how to sort it out. But the reason this person said this was because, after all, if the Bible has to be interpreted, then it can be made to mean anything. In fact, some people say one way; others say another, even pastors disagree. You can go somewhere else and hear another interpretation. Even among Lutheran pastors. How do you sort it out? After all, it's obviously all relative. There's nothing set for sure. And so I can ignore it. That's really the way it works.

If you've followed the last few weeks, as we've been doing something that is basically practical, that is, we're asking: How does it really work? Not some hifalutin' talk. It gets down to a very practical point, just as with worship, we do not set up a rule and say, as Catholics do: You have to be in church unless you're ill. And you have to go to confession once a year. We don't set up

rules like that. Nor do we say about prayer, as the Muslims do: You will pray five times a day at certain times and face Mecca. We don't set up rules. We also don't say about the Bible: You have to know so much. You have to know certain things.

The answer to that is, of course: A five-week old infant who is baptized is not questioned about worship, about prayer, or about knowledge of the Bible. Then what do we do? How do we sort that out? It gets to be a question of priorities.

I used to know a teenager who could sleep anywhere. He could sleep on the floor, and you could vacuum around him. He didn't have a clue. Then he joined the Marines. Right away when the bugle blew in the morning, he was up.

A young woman who has slept through everything gets married and has a baby. She's awake at the tiniest cry of that little one because these are important things.

We also know there are other kinds of importance things that occur in our lives. Some people know everything about cars. Some people know everything about rock stars. Some people know everything about baseball. People have their enthusiasms.

Suppose some member of your family was in the military in Iraq, and you received emails and you read them over and over again, and you read the map and watched the news because it was important.

And the same thing with love letters which are kept and cherished.

Here we have something similar: The Bible is God's last will and testament. He has made us his heirs. You would think we would want to know what are the various things in this Testament. What does it have to say about why? And what does it include? What does it mean for the future? Because it's important. Sometimes the only way the importance comes alive for us is when some kind of tragedy comes. Or some kind of loss.

In France over a century ago there was a short story called, *The Last Lesson in French*. It's about the German take-over of two French provinces, Alsace and Lorraine, as a part of the settlement of the Franco-German war (1870). The story tells of a young French boy who hadn't done his homework in French grammar and dreaded going to school. But when he arrives at school, his teacher announces that today will be the last lesson in French because the Germans are taking over. All of a sudden French became very important to this boy. He realizes that he does not know his own mother tongue.

One of the most striking verses in the Old Testament is in Amos 8:11, where the Lord says: You're worried about famine? You're worried about lack of bread? Lack of water? I'll tell you what real famine is: Famine is the loss of the Word of God.

How does one restore this perspective and focus? At the end in the twinkling of the eye everything is over, and what does it all mean? There is value in knowing cars and music. There

is value in knowing about the stock market and baseball. There are values in all kinds of things. It is important that we work and we play. But always with perspective.

In the Sermon on the Mount it says: Consider the lilies of the field. Even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed as these (Matt 6:28-29). If you think the Lord only cares for the lilies and does good things for them, you have not understood it. He takes care of the grass. He takes care of the birds of the air. He also takes care of you. We have perspective. We see what it's really about. What's at stake is: Forever. We get caught in what is Now.

How then does it really work? The way the Bible doesn't work is illustrated by a cartoon of a package descending from the sky suspended from a parachute. The label on the package says, "Holy Bible." We know this is not how the Bible came to be. It did not drop from heaven. We know of no prior miracle, no inerrant book. But rather, as Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15:17-20, the key to the Bible is **the resurrection**. The Bible is centered on this event of God in Christ rising and dying for you and me.

We Lutherans are often misunderstood by those who think that Luther said that everybody can interpret the Bible for himself. That is not what Luther said. Luther made clear that where we find Christ, we find the truth. That's how we sort out the Bible. We test the spirits, as in 1 John 4: "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits. . . ." As Luther said: What does not teach Christ is not apostolic, even if Peter or Paul [or the Pope] taught it; what preaches Christ is apostolic even if Pilate or Herod did it.

The Bible is the foundational document of Christianity. Christ himself is the foundation upon which everything rests, and no other foundation is possible (I Cor 3:11). This foundational book, which is God's last will and testament, is about what God is doing – past, present, and future.

This is our perspective, the gospel. Death is over, forever. We have this new focus: We have life forever, the future, but also now. "It is finished" (John 19:30). Christ is the truth. "Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life'" (John 14:6). That sorts out the Bible. The gospel sorts out what the Bible is about. There is nothing more important than the treasure of the gospel. Amen