

Dusting off the Bible IV

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2 Corinthians 3 *Scripture inscribed on the heart: the birth of the New Testament*

For many years I have been intrigued by the highly provocative text read (and performed) earlier. It is one of the most radical in the New Testament. It has animated the minds, sparked the imaginations, and set the hearts of countless readers ablaze over the centuries, including of our Anabaptist forebears. With this text we are on a path that takes us to breathtaking heights.

The Scene

At the same time, it comes from one of the lowest moments in Paul's apostolic ministry. Let me set the scene. Paul is in a rather cranky mood; Corinthians have been accusing him of tooting his own horn, when it's obvious to them he falls rather short in comparison to other traveling Jesus-missionaries. No "Saint Paul" for them. Now they're demanding letters of reference. He can't believe it. His own Corinthians! Folks he and his associates have brought to faith in Christ, are wondering about his credentials!

Our text comes right from the middle of this fight. Just before the text read earlier Paul this astonishing claim at the end of chapter 2: unlike some who are in it for the money (presumably those other apostles with whom Paul is being compared, who at another point he calls rather disdainfully "super-apostles") "*we speak from God before God in Christ*" (2:17). No prophet, no evangelist or apostle ever located his authority any closer to God than that. And no self-respecting first century person would toot his own horn like that. And we can just see the Corinthians rolling their eyes. You have to pity the poor Schmuck who has to read this letter out loud to the Corinthians. No doubt Paul anticipated their response. "Are we boasting once again? Do we need letters of reference either to you or from you?" (3:1).

In 2 Corinthians 4:7 Paul makes this well known claim: "We hold this treasure in earthen vessels," or "clay jars." We're used to seeing warts and all in the Old Testament. Here these warts are again on full display—earthen vessel, indeed. As I said yesterday, in the Bible the Word of God is as often as not embedded in human words. It turns out, it is sometimes embedded in injured relationships and testy remarks.

Paul's argument

Listen to Paul turn tables on the Corinthians: "YOU are our letter!"

It looks very much like Paul is playing to their own sense of self-importance: I don't need letters of recommendation; I've got you! What more recommendation do I need?!

But that's only the surface. This is not just a nifty maneuver, a crafty debating tactic. Let's keep listening. To paraphrase verses 2 and 3: "You show that you are a letter of Christ, written on your heart. You are a living public letter, penned by the risen Messiah himself, to be read by everyone."

Paul has turned tables on the Corinthians in a most astonishing way. They are questioning his competence and trustworthiness as an apostle. What does he do? He redirects their attention to themselves, not to scold or shame them, but to get them to see the wonder of what is going on in their lives and in their life together: they are a living public letter of the Messiah to the world. They are nothing less than New Testament in the making. “And you want letters of recommendation!?”

We could stop here and exploit this for all its missional worth—the church as living letter of Christ to the world—but that is not our topic. And we could explore this tactic for church fights. A word for pastors: when you’re attacked, belittled, humiliated, make sure your church members know how special they are in the sight of God. That too is, however, not our topic.

Jeremiah 31 and 2 Cor 3:2-6

I want us to stay with the topic of the weekend, namely what we can learn about the Bible. What appears at first sight as a reference to letters of reference is actually a riff on one of his favourite texts: Jer 31:31-33. Listen to a few relevant excerpts from that great prophet:

³¹ The days are coming when I will make a new covenant (or testament) with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. ³² Not like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant they broke, ... says the LORD. ³³ But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel: I will put my law within them, and *I will write it on their hearts*; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

Paul knows Scripture well. More importantly, he knows it well enough to “translate” it, as we said yesterday, to “interpret” it in a way that illumines his and the Corinthians’ moment in time. “Don’t you know that you and I are living in the realization of biblical promise? Don’t you know that the New Covenant, the New Testament, which Jeremiah foretold, is coming true in you—Jew and Gentile alike!? The risen Messiah is writing it on your hearts! And you’re worried about my letters of reference? I’m not the centre of this story,” says Paul in effect. “I am nothing more than a ‘servant of the New Testament’ (vv. 3, 6), a ‘servant of the word,’ to use Luke’s phrase, helping the author of this letter. I’m the scribe; *you* are the letter; Christ is writing *you*! Not with ink, but with Spirit, the Spirit transforming and shaping lives into a visible, readable letter to the world.”

Verse 6 reads: “the letter kills, the Spirit gives life.” That pretty well sums up Jeremiah 31: the “letter”—Torah written on tablets— “killed” in that when Torah, shorthand for “covenant,” was broken, judgment and catastrophe befell the people. The Spirit, in contrast, gives life. That is, the breath of God, the life-giving energy of God is inscribing his will into the hearts of his people, in effect fusing God’s will with theirs. In other words, the great day of God’s visitation has begun! The messiah is writing New Testament!

And here is an astonishing twist in the story for this old Pharisee: the Messiah is writing the “New Testament” not only onto the hearts and into the lives of his ancient people, the Jews, as Jeremiah had anticipated, but onto the hearts and into the lives of

those hitherto counted as God's enemies—strangers, aliens, ungodly and unrighteous Gentiles!

The “tent of meeting” (Exodus 33-34) and 2 Cor 3:17-18

I want to take you to the last part of the chapter for yet another surprising “translation” of the Scripture. Some of you will recall that Exodus 33 and 34 informs us that Moses would go into the “tent of meeting” or “tent of revelation” to converse with God. “The LORD used to speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend,” says Exodus, without a veil covering his face. But whenever Moses would reemerge from the tent he would put the veil back on because his face was so radiant from the encounter with God. We might call him “Moses of the radiance.” Listen to what Paul tells the very Corinthians he is fighting with in verses 17 and 18:

“We all, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord Spirit.”

Where Moses once stood alone in the presence of God, now *all of us together*—Jew and Gentile, apostle and the Corinthians he is fighting with, stand in the tent of meeting, says Paul, faces unveiled, communing with God “as with a friend”. All of this, Paul says, comes from the Lord Spirit. (Being a Faithful Church Path #7 in big bold flashing letters?)

Lessons to be learned

I want us to notice a number of things most especially this morning:

One, Paul is able to make these breathtaking comments because he is fully immersed in the Scriptures; he trusts them. They are authoritative to the point where they illumine his and the Corinthians' moment in time. Jeremiah and Exodus ground Paul's approach to the Corinthians: he refuses to view them through the lens of his injured ego, even if the wounds are on full display. He views the Corinthians first and foremost in the light of the death and resurrection of Jesus, which means, in light of the future anticipated in Jeremiah 31.

Two, he and his beloved and troubled Corinthians are living within the unfolding story the Scriptures tell. This troubled congregation of Jews and Gentiles is nothing less than the New Testament in the making, the birth of “new creation.” As Paul says two chapters later:

We no longer regard anyone from a human point of view; ... if anyone is in Christ, there is new creation! (2 Cor 5:16-17)

To stay with the metaphor of the letter Paul uses here, it may have lots of editing marks, words struck out, tear stains, smudged ink, tape holding some pieces together, but it is Christ's letter no less—living New Testament. Paul and the Corinthians are being written by Christ! It is finally not about Scripture. Scripture by itself can easily become a dead

letter, or a letter that kills, that holds up a mirror to us that condemns us. No, as Paul uses it here, Scripture witnesses to, points to, what *God* is doing in and through the living Christ right in the lives of the Corinthians themselves.

Third, remember that Paul says “we all” when referring to who is all in the tent of revelation with him. Like a true “servant of the Word,” with all his skills as an exegete, interpreter, translator, Paul invites the Corinthians—all of them—to join him in the tent of revelation.

The Anabaptists took Paul’s invitation very seriously. They referred to his words in 1 Cor 14:26 and following, and called it the “Rule of Paul.”

When you come together, *each one* has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up. ...²⁹ Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said. ...³² For the spirits of prophets are subject to the prophets,³³ for God is a God not of disorder but of peace.

The same Spirit that breathes life into the words of the Bible, as 2 Tim 3:16 reminds us, gives life to the body in all its members. Being in the tent together demands a profound respect for the gifts of listening, weighing, discerning, and—did you notice?—peace! But it is a peace not of argument stifled, questions silenced, enthusiasm quashed, wrestling banished, but the noisy peace of the friends of the “One who opens and does not close.”

Dusting off the Bible

As we have seen this morning, Paul understood that just as a pointer is not about itself, a sign is not ultimately about the artwork that went into it, a GPS is not an ornament, so the Bible is the pointer to the true New Testament Christ is writing in your and my life and in our life together. Directions are essential, but only useful if you’re actually going to go there. The biblical witness is only useful to us if we actually intend to let it shape us and inform us of who we are in God’s unfolding story of reconciliation. Hearing without doing will be our undoing, no matter how familiar with are with the contents of the Bible.

In no way does that diminish the importance of the Bible, or undermine its authority, nor does it devalue the hard and necessary work of our interpreters, translators, or exegetes. But ultimately the Bible is about the One to whom the Bible is pointing us. And the finger points to the one who wishes to take our lives, individually and corporately, and with them to write an open letter to the world, proclaiming the kingdom of God, the Word made flesh, the new creation.

Conclusion

Let me conclude by sharing an image. When they were little, my kids loved watching the Disney film *Aladdin*. I don’t remember much of it other than when Aladdin’s lamp was rubbed, out came Robin Williams as the genie. My understanding is that they had a terrible time controlling him, and thus gave him free rein, scripting and illustrating after he had gone to town.

I think that’s a fantastic image of the Bible—an earthen vessel, an earthen lamp

holding a treasure. When you dust it off and rub it, out comes Robin Williams. No, out comes the transforming Spirit of God, we will not easily control, but which wishes to control us, take hold of us, and to transform us from one degree of glory to another into God's own image.

Words matter; texts matter. Absolutely. But they are the earthen vessel for the "Word," the Logos, the Lord who is Spirit, as Paul puts it, who does not want to be locked up on a page or in a scroll, who springs out of the scroll, off the page, giving life to our readings, hearings, discernings, and arguments.

So, take your Bibles, dust them off, and rub them, and watch out!

AMEN