

ITCHY EARS AND INK-STAINED HEARTS

JEREMIAH 31:31-34; 2 TIMOTHY 3:14-4:5

LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH

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To be a Christian in the twenty-first century is in many ways to have a problem with authority.

The problem has a long history, going back at least to Genesis 3, when the first humans pondered those fateful words, “Did God really say...?”

But our culture’s unique expression of this problem with authority has more recent causes, as well.

We could point to the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century where people began to read Scripture for themselves, to move out from underneath the authority of the *magisterium*, represented by the Roman Catholic church and the pope.

We could look to the Enlightenment of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which steadily began chipping away at the foundations of Scripture and elevating human reason above revelation.

We might consider the rise of postmodernism in the twentieth century, and the dawning awareness of the “situatedness” of *all* of our readings. We all read the Bible from a specific perspective that is influenced by many factors that we have little control over and are often barely aware of—our cultural context, our gender, our race, our social location, our economic status—these things affect our reading of *any* text, never mind Scripture.

We could even look to the rise of industrial capitalism and the endless forms of individualistic consumerism that it has spawned, the way that it has in many ways trained us to treat everything as a commodity, to believe the lie that the consumer is always right and is the only arbiter of value.

How often do we hear something like this: Well, that might be true for you, but it's not true for me. Those two little words—"for me"—could serve as the epitaph of our age once it's gone.

There are other factors, no doubt, and the threads could probably be traced in other ways from other directions.

But it seems undeniable to me that our cultural moment is characterized by a complicated and mistrustful relationship with anything or anyone that claims to be an "authority."

Like the bible, for example.

The Protestant reformers proudly declared *sola scriptura*—Scripture alone would be the authority for faith and practice.

But it turned out that people interpreted this authority differently!

It's hard for us to just read the bible and say, "that settles it."

There was perhaps a time, probably, when a preacher could get up on a Sunday morning like this one, and count on the "the Bible says" to do some heavy authoritative lifting.

But now, we instinctively say, "Well, you say that's what the Bible says, but..."

We know that the church has been wrong about "what the bible says" in the past. We have often seen the bible used and abused by those seeking power and influence, those seeking to condemn some and to justify others.

And we've seen that the Bible contains some weird, even shocking stuff!

Some passages in the bible seem morally problematic at best, offensive at worst.

To take just one example that was sent to me this week from Deuteronomy 22, a passage that seems particularly chilling in light of some of the predatory sexual language that has been used by a certain candidate for president of the USA:

If a man happens to meet in a town a virgin pledged to be married and he sleeps with her, you shall take both of them to the gate of that town and stone them to death—the young woman because she was in a town and did not scream for help, and the man because he violated another man’s wife.

The word of the Lord... Thanks be to God?

There are many others. If you were so inclined, I could provide you with a long list of head-scratching passages from Scripture.

And so this is where we are. This is where we live. And we bring all this to our Scripture passage this morning.

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

Paul exhorts Timothy to continue in what he has learned from the Scripture since childhood, to proclaim the truth whether it’s popular or not, in season and out of season.

This passage could easily be read as saying, “If we could just get back to the Bible, everything would be all right...”

Indeed, many do read it that way—as a justification for the Bible’s authority. This passage has been in countless Bible wars, very often when someone or some group is using a part of the bible to condemn someone else and their failure to read and apply the bible the way that they do.

But let’s look at the words that Paul actually uses to describe what Scripture is for.

God-breathed/inspired by God.

Useful. For reproof, for correction.

And for training in righteousness. So we'll be equipped for good works.

Paul doesn't say, "These sixty-six books comprise a perfect book that must be seamlessly harmonized as the final authority for all of life (indeed, for Paul, "Scripture" probably would have meant the Law and the Prophets).

Rather, Scripture is *useful* to steer us on course, so that we'll contribute goodness to and for the world.

And the thing is, even in light of all the factors I discussed earlier that make us suspicious of authority, we still *need* to be corrected. We still *need* to be trained in righteousness.

As much as the last five hundred years have shown that we are skeptical of claims to authority, they have also shown that we are not reliable authorities on our own.

It's not as though once we freed ourselves from the shackles of external oppressive authority, the church instantly became wonderfully harmonious and united.

The human heart is not so easily changed. Our wills are and have always been bent inward rather than outward to God and neighbour in love. We are prone to wander, as the hymn famously says.

We have itchy ears. All of us.

We all read selectively, we all have parts of the Bible that function more authoritatively than others. Not many of us would consider, say, the book of Judges to be as authoritative or authoritative in the same *way* as the Gospel according to Luke.

Indeed, Mennonites and Anabaptists more generally have unapologetically privileged the gospels above all other parts of the Bible. When in doubt, we defer to Jesus. Which seems a good enough strategy for Biblical interpretation to me!

To say that Scripture is "useful" as Paul says doesn't mean that each part is useful in the same way or for the same reasons.

But we *all* tend to read the Bible in ways that support our own biases and assumptions, our own hopes and fears, our own need to be right, and to bolster our own identities and the ways in which we are constantly seeking to fortify and defend these.

And even beyond this, we humans are simply limited creatures. We never see fully, understand completely, or have entirely pure motives.

And so we need an authority. We need to be under authority because we so easily abuse and misuse it on our own.

We need a plumb line.

In the bible, a “plumb line” was a cord weighted with lead that was used in building to check that vertical structures are true.

It is used symbolically to refer to the divine standard against which God, the builder of his people, tests and judges, and rebuilds them.

So, what’s our plumb line? Many think that it’s “the Bible,” but we’ve seen that in and of itself, this is problematic if only for the reason that we all read and interpret the bible differently.

The sheer existence of the amount and variety of Christian denominations out there is ample and depressing proof of this. Each one, on some level, came into existence because some people read the Bible differently than others.

I would argue that our plumb line something greater than the bible. The plumb line for us as Christians, the standard of a human life and how it is to be lived, is the one to whom the Bible points, the one to whom it bears witness.

The plumb line is Jesus.

Yes, we can still “read” Jesus differently.

Yes, we encounter Jesus *through* Scripture. It’s not as though saying that Jesus is our judge rather than the bible magically removes every intellectual hurdle in dealing with problems with authority.

We need the leading and guiding of the Holy Spirit and the wisdom of the community as we seek to follow Jesus, to understand who he was and what he said and what it all means. Of course.

But our plumb line is a *person* and a person in whom is said to reside the very fullness of God and God's purposes. This is something that Scripture claims *only* for Jesus, never for itself.

The Bible itself makes it plain that the word of God (written) exists *only* to point us to the Word of God in flesh, Jesus Christ.

And Jesus himself chastised the religious leaders of these days for their desire to turn the Scriptures into something they were never intended to be:

You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life.

This is the "sound doctrine" that Paul urges Timothy to preach. To preach Jesus and his upside down kingdom.

And this remains the task of the church. Not to "defend" every part of the bible or to prove that it's right and other holy books are wrong. But to point to Christ, the fulfillment of every word that its pages contain.

This will keep us busy enough because Jesus is notoriously difficult to squeeze into any of our preferred ideologies. He doesn't accommodate himself or his message to any of our itchy ears.

Conservative Christians who think that the life of faith is mostly about right doctrine and getting our theological i's dotted and t's crossed, need to encounter the Jesus who shattered long-held social boundaries and invited in the despised and the unclean.

Liberal Christians who think that the life of faith is about following Jesus' ethic on the path of peace and becoming social justice activists, need to encounter the Jesus who delivered bracing calls to personal purity and prayer.

We don't get to make Jesus in our image. We need a Jesus who stands over all of our preferences, all the things we would like to be true, all of the things our ears itch to hear.

We all need this plumb line, this Jesus who could judge us and correct us, who can train us in righteousness.

This Jesus who stands over even the Bible.

This Jesus who could consign attitudes and behaviours like the ones I read earlier in Deuteronomy to the dustbin of history with a few simple words:

"Let those who are without sin throw the first stone."

Or, "Go and learn what this mean, I desire mercy and not sacrifice."

And, finally, the goal of the Bible has always been to point us toward a time when the Bible will no longer be necessary.

Similar to the way that the goal of a parent is to kind of work themselves out of a job when their kids become independent, so the Bible is to prepare us for a time when we will no longer need it.

It won't happen this side of eternity, of course, but it's worth reminding ourselves that Scripture's role is ultimately a temporary one.

And the goal? The promise of the future? Well, for this we go back to the prophet Jeremiah whose words we began our service with this morning.

But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: **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.

No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the LORD," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

The prophet looked ahead to a time when his people wouldn't need words written on scrolls or ink typed on pieces of paper in leather-bound bibles or bible apps on smartphones.

He looked ahead to a time when we wouldn't fight and divide over interpretations of Scripture. To a time when we wouldn't try to squeeze the Bible into our own historical and cultural paradigms and force it to answer questions that it was never trying to address.

He looked ahead to a time when we wouldn't turn scriptures into an idol and say things like, "I believe in the Bible" when we ought to be saying, "I believe in the God to whom the Bible points, revealed most fully in Jesus Christ."

He looked ahead to a time when the law, the rule, the standard, the invitation, and the purpose of God would be written on human hearts.

A time when human beings would live and love as we were made to live and to love.

A time when our training in righteousness was complete.

He looked ahead to a time when we no longer had a problem with authority because we finally realized that the God who stands over us and summons us to new life, who rebukes and corrects us, who breaks and mends us, who judges us, is also the God who loves us like no other, who longs to restore us, who forgives us and remembers our sins no more.

In sum, the prophet looked forward to a time when we would know God.

And what else is the point of Scripture but this? What else could it be but to know God? To know God and to have our wills and our very lives align with the purposes for which he created us, the purposes he demonstrated or us in the person and work of Jesus Christ?

To have our hearts permanently stained with the ink of Christ and his kingdom.

May God help us to use the Bible well.

May God help us to live into the story it tells, to heed its call, to respond to its invitation to come to Christ, that we might know God, that we might be proficient and equipped for the good works that we were created for.

Amen.

