

INFORMED INSPIRATION

Paul R. Powell

St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church, New Orleans

Sunday, October 6, 2013

My cousin's wife who had become quite dissatisfied with her Baptist church in Georgia and had started attending a Presbyterian church remarked that there wasn't a dime's worth of difference between Baptists and Presbyterians. You won't be surprised to know that I responded, "But oh what a dime!" For those of you who grew up Presbyterian, never fear, this is not a slap at Presbyterians. You know my disagreements with Calvinistic theology. However, I am quite grateful for certain points of Presbyterian theology and practice. I have sometimes said that I could never be a five-point Calvinist, but could perhaps claim to be a 2.5 point Calvinist. What I learned during my dozen plus years of working in a Presbyterian seminary is that Presbyterians have a very high regard for the Scriptures. Part of that stems from the doctrine of inerrancy, but there is also the attitude of deep respect and devotion to what the Scriptures have to say. The commitment Presbyterian and other scholars have to determining what the Scriptures actually say is something to be respected and celebrated. Not only is there a deep regard for translating and interpreting Scripture, but at least at Princeton Seminary there was also an interest in reading the Scriptures aloud with great authority. To this day, if there were 10 ministers before me each of whom read aloud the same Scripture, I could tell you which were Princeton Seminary grads. When they read the Bible aloud, you just knew they believed it was indeed the "Word of the Lord."

Dr. Bruce Metzger who taught there and was general editor of the New Revised Standard Version which we use here once spoke to Christ Congregation in Princeton where I was a member about his work with the translation of the Bible. One of the things he said really struck home with me. In responding to a question, he said that we could be assured that we now have translations before us that represent at least a 90% level of completeness and accuracy. That level of accuracy has come through centuries of work and is something to be celebrated.

It has been my belief for a very long time that an informed faith is a strong faith. And how one reads and applies the Bible to their faith determines so much of what faith should be. There was a time when few Baptists left our ranks for other denominations, perhaps because for so long Baptists placed so much emphasis on Bible study and the freedom and responsibility of the individual to read and interpret the Bible for themselves. Only when Southern Baptists moved away from this very strong attitude did there appear a break in the ranks that has resulted in so many of our folks leaving for other denominations, some turning toward more conservative churches who very nearly worship the Bible and some turning toward more liberal churches with very little regard for Scripture. Even within our own church, Bible study has become an activity for the few rather than the many, and that's too bad. We live in an age when media makes it possible to study the Bible more in depth than ever before, but the inspiration to do so has dwindled, and therein lies the real problem.

What does the Bible have to say about itself anyway? In 2 Timothy 3: 16-17 we have these words, variously translated as "All Scripture **IS** inspired of God ..." or "All Scripture **IS** given by inspiration ..." or "All Scripture **IS** God-breathed ..." When these words were written only the Hebrew or Old Testament Scriptures were being referred to, and so if we take this passage to be saying that literally "all" Scriptures or holy writings are inspired of God, then that's a little hard to swallow. Some scholars have said that a better and even a more literal translation of this text might be "**All Scripture *which is inspired of God IS profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness.***" Now that makes some sense and is just one example of why higher criticism in the study of the Bible is so important and so useful.

In today's Gospel lesson, the Apostles ask Jesus to increase their faith. Now remember, these are the same twelve who follow him around everywhere listening to what he has to say and seeing with their own eyes the work that he is doing. Maybe they are expressing a desire to have the same kind of faith he does. But as always Jesus responds differently than they expected. So he says to them, if you just had faith the size of a mustard seed you could tell this mulberry tree to be uprooted and thrown into the sea and it would happen. Or to put it a little more in context, if

you had the faith of an acorn you could tell one of these big ol' oak trees to go jump in Lake Pontchartrain and it would happen. Well now, a mustard seed is pretty small. If you don't know just how small, take a look at those little round seeds in the bottom of a pickle jar. Or think of it as about the size of a pencil point. In other words, whether it's mustard seeds or acorns, it doesn't take a whole lot of faith to trust in God; a little bit will do just fine!

But then Jesus goes on to give a strange illustration to them, particularly as we moderns look at it. He asks them, who among you would invite his slave who's been out working in the fields to come and sit down at the dinner table in "their rightful place?" No, they would be more likely to say grab your apron and serve me dinner, then you can go back to the kitchen "where you belong" and eat your supper out of sight, out of mind. One summer when I worked in Alabama, I had a room at the home of two elderly sisters-in-law who had a maid even older than they were. It never ceased to amaze me that they treated the maid like a sister and thought nothing of standing around in the kitchen eating with her, but would have been absolutely mortified to sit down at the dinner table with her. In the example of Jesus or in this one, thanking a servant for doing what was required would not have been socially acceptable. On the other hand, if the Apostles felt themselves worthless because they had done only what they were commanded to do (as would a slave or servant), then what sort of faith was that? Was not Jesus trying to get across to them that faith is what we do beyond what is required? If we are merely following the commands of Jesus, if we merely believe and don't act on it, that's not faith, that's just following orders. But if after following the commandments we have indeed learned to "trust" as well as "obey" then we have proven our faith in doing what Jesus did and then some. Jesus even went so far as to tell them, "You will do even greater things than I have done."

As we observe communion today, we need to be reminded yet again that faith involves both believing and doing. That's why I like coming down to the Communion Table, because it is an act of "doing" as we respond to Christ's "invitation to dine with him" not as an act of obedience or as something Christ commands us to do, but simply as an act of trust in the One who has saved us. We need to remember that faith must be informed

by the study of Scripture and inspired by the life of Christ. We need to admit that doctrinal orthodoxy is never a substitute for faith. We need to be reminded that when the "First Supper" took place that Jesus, the Master, was sitting at table with his servants, the Apostles, and thereby demonstrating to them and to us that the communion table is Christ's table and that we are here at his invitation and that he is here dining with us. "Do this in remembrance of me" is just as much a plea as it is a command. Do what? Eat together ... commune together ... work together ... as one in Christ and in so doing your faith will indeed be increased.

AMEN.