

2 Timothy 2:1-15

Words can be dangerous. We have to handle them with care. It's easy for rumours to spread misinformation. Idle chitchat can have major consequences. And sometimes, when we are dealing with words in the Bible, we run into trouble because it can be tricky translating an idea from one language into another that has no word for that idea. When you add in the problems that come with translating an ancient culture's language into today's terms, it gets even worse. Words don't mean the same thing they did even a hundred years ago, let alone 2000 years ago.

It's hard to know which interpretation of these ancient words we call scripture, is the best interpretation. It's hard to know who to trust. Next week, we will read that "all Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness." But, how do we know if a particular version of that scripture accurately represents what God was breathing then, as it applies to us now?

Words can be dangerous. We have to handle them with care. This is what Paul's 'last will and testament' is talking about in today's reading from Second Timothy. Paul writes: "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved by him, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly explaining the word of truth."

What does it mean to 'rightly explain the word of truth?' Great

theologians of the past engaged in shouting matches over the meaning of certain passages. Now we have social media, where scholars who claim to be Christ followers attack one another in 320 characters or less. Is this what Paul means by rightly explaining the word of truth?

That's doubtful. It sounds more like wrangling over words, and engaging in vain chatter. And it is so easy to fall into this trap, especially when we are convinced that we have figured it out, that our prayerful examination of scripture has brought us to the only possible interpretation of God's word. We know we are right. And that's exactly when Paul tells us we couldn't be more wrong.

Not even elevating scripture will rightly explain the word of truth, if it means ignoring the central reason God gives us the Bible in the first place. The Word of God is not chained. Today's verses from 2 Timothy respond to the challenges Timothy was facing in Ephesus, where Paul had appointed him to serve as pastor. Reading the text on either side of this passage, we discover that Timothy was dealing with deep division in the church. People were arguing about whether or not Jesus had been human, and whether or not the second coming of Christ had already occurred.

Theologian John Frederick writes that the tension Paul is addressing "is that of innovative and incorrect – or in some cases foolish, ignorant, and controversial – teachings that are distracting people's attention from and

disturbing people's faith in the truth of Jesus' gospel."

What false teachings do we face? What are the inconsequential ideas that cause people to stumble? There are people who won't come to a particular church because they have a woman pastor. There are people who won't come to church because they don't like the music. There are people who don't feel like they would be welcome because of who they are, or what they've done, or what they wear, or what they display - piercings or tattoos.

What words, what false teachings, get attributed to us? What rumours are we spreading about what we believe? How do our dogmas and ideologies attempt to chain the Word of God, and keep people from hearing that Jesus Christ is the good news? Some would actually chain the Word of God by placing scripture above all other aspects of faith.

A number of years ago, one of my confirmation classes had two girls, Angelika and Brianna, who were friends and were in church every Sunday; two sisters, Lauren and Maren, whose Oma wanted them to be confirmed, and Stephen who showed very little interest in confirmation. Angelika and Brianna came from very religious families. Angelika's grandfather had been a pastor. Brianna's family was very active in the church. Both girls assisted in the worship services; one read Scripture and other read the prayers.

The two sisters, Lauren and Maren, questioned everything and brought up all sorts of scenarios and wanted to know if they represented sins or just bad behaviour. I think their Oma would have been shocked by some of the questions. They were challenging me and the church, but they showed more interest in learning and understanding than the others. Stephen was just there. No questions or opinions.

The four girls car-pooled to the classes. One day, only one of the two sisters, Lauren, showed up for class. Maren didn't come. She quit.

I asked Lauren what happened. Apparently Angelika told the sisters that if they didn't believe A, B, C as per scriptures, then they would surely be going to hell. That definitely sounds like a false teaching. I am sure that many people have been victims of this and other false teachings.

Martin Luther was just as eager to lift up scripture to the primary place of importance, in his doctrine of Sola Scriptura, Scripture Alone. And while we affirm the Bible as the Word of God revealed through the Old and New Testaments, and the only perfect rule for faith, doctrine, and conduct, we can run into trouble when we place more value on scripture than the One it reveals to us.

When we forget why we have the Bible in the first place, we run the risk of making the Bible an idol, and when we do that, we find ourselves once again trying to chain the Word of God. And it will not be chained.

We need to handle it with care. Not because it is fragile, but because we are. Not because we might break it, but because we need to be broken. Scripture has only one purpose: to reveal God to us through Jesus Christ. That's why Paul starts this chapter with the words, "be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus." It's the same idea that we hear again in a later verse: "Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, a son of David – that is my gospel!"

What is your gospel? What truth matters so much to you, you would be willing to suffer for it? If that truth has any other words in it besides, "Jesus is Lord," can you really call it good news? Wrangling over words, even words of scripture, can only cause harm.

Nearly a decade ago, Theologian Dirk Lange wrote: "When our remembering Jesus Christ is reduced to concepts, doctrine or ideas, when it is boxed in then, quite simply, Jesus Christ is no longer the centre of remembering. Then, our own invented notions are the centre. Here lies the danger of all doctrine, no matter how important ... For doctrine has always the tendency to turn itself into the truth rather than merely pointing towards the truth, who is not an idea or a concept but a person, Jesus Christ."

The good news of salvation can only be found in the person of Jesus Christ. Knowing Jesus is all that matters. Loving Jesus is all that counts.

So, at the heart of this testament to Paul's faith, we find a hymn of the early church. It isn't a hymn to scripture, or a hymn in praise of words. It's a hymn to Jesus, and what it means to live with Christ at the centre of our lives.

"The saying is sure," Paul writes, but we can be pretty certain that these next lines were not only said, but sung as a hymn in the early church:

*"If we have died with him, we will also live with him;
if we endure, we will also reign with him;
if we deny him, he will also deny us;
if we are faithless, he remains faithful—
for he cannot deny himself."*

This simple hymn consists of two positive statements, followed by two negative ones, and a final reminder of Christ's sovereignty. If we die, we will also live. If we endure, we will also reign. But, if we deny him, he will deny us. Yet, even if we are faithless, he remains faithful, because he cannot deny himself.

We all need to know which voices to listen to, whose words are true, especially when so many voices seem to be loudly trying to get our attention, so many conflicting ideas claim to be Truth with a capital T. In this final testament to Paul's faith, we find the one thing we can depend on, the one thing that will never change. Christ will always be faithful, even when we are not.

The key is in the subject of the sentence. When people lift up doctrine or legal stances as the subject, they are merely wrangling with words. Even when those words are lifted straight out of the Bible, they can bring ruin to those who are listening, when they are not handled with care.

But when the subject of the sentence is Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, you can depend on that sentence to be true. When the statement is simply, “Jesus is Lord,” nothing else matters. Doctrines may come and go. Interpretations of scripture may change with the times. But this one thing is sure: Jesus is Lord. Jesus Christ is arisen.

Jesus Christ reigns in glory. Jesus Christ overcomes sin, death, and all our wrangling with words, to bring us to this one thing we can depend on, world without end: God’s love for us is so vast, any suffering we endure in this world because of our faith in Christ Jesus will only be made into glory, because he is the first and the last, the beginning and the end.

“Remember Jesus Christ!” This is quite a command. And we are certainly in for a surprise if we think that remembering is simply “calling to mind” or looking at a painting of Jesus or contemplating a cross in our sanctuaries. It also will not be particularly helpful if we attempt to imagine what this “remembering” meant for the community to which it was addressed.

One of the important aspects of the pastoral epistles is their attempt at

translating Paul's teaching, the Gospel, into a new context. They give us a model for such a translation. The result — the product of their translation — is not and cannot be ours. We are called to translate the Gospel anew, perhaps, even, every day. Reformulating the Gospel for our present communities of faith begins with "remembering" Jesus Christ. This is the source and the goal of all translation. And remembering has certain attributes, as we can see in this text.

Jesus Christ, as Paul points out, whom we remember, was a historical person. The paradoxical nature of Gospel-remembering is precisely that, yes, we remember a historical person, but at the same time we remember the only person not bound by history. God's Word is not chained to a historical moment, it is not written once and set in stone, it is here and now as living Word, that is historical and yet ever new. "Remembering" is remembering Jesus Christ present in our midst today.

A particular beautiful aspect of our remembering is that we can sing it! Yes, we are not only remembering with words and concepts, but with song. We looked at the early hymn that this community most likely sang. They would have recognized it, just like we recognize the hymns we sing that help us to "remember" that this Jesus, who is present today, is the one who brings life from our deaths, who sustains us even as we struggle to be faithful in our work of translation, who respects us and our work, our context, so deeply that if we deny him, he will not insist on making his presence felt, like a burden, an imposition or law. Violence

is not his way. And if, in our faith, we falter, Jesus Christ remains this historical presence through all time for us.

The admonitions in Paul's hymn only reinforce what has been said about remembering Jesus Christ. Obviously, the writer understands something other than "doctrine" with the phrase "word of truth." Wrangling apparently follows doctrine, ideas, and concepts very closely! The veracity of this recognition is more than exemplified in our own day, especially in church politics. This wrangling does "no good" and leads only to "ruin." When our remembering Jesus Christ is reduced to concepts, doctrine or ideas, when it is boxed in, then quite simply, Jesus Christ is no longer the centre of remembering. Then, our own invented notions are the centre.

Here lies the danger of all doctrine, no matter how important (for doctrine is also one way in which we "translate," one way in which we "remember"): too quickly doctrine binds the word of truth, puts it in chains. For doctrine has always the tendency to turn itself into the truth rather than merely pointing towards the truth, who is not an "idea" or a concept but a person, Jesus Christ. When doctrine becomes the centre of attention, then only wrangling ensues since communion cannot be created by our work but is given through the Holy Spirit.

What matters for the writer to this early Christian community, is that remembering is known through the way they live, before God, that is,

remembering Jesus Christ present today, for them, in the here and now. Presenting oneself “to God,” means presenting oneself to one’s brothers and sisters. The community does not present itself to an imaginary throne but to the world, to the city, to the neighbour, in thanksgiving.

“Rightly” speaking the word of truth? Rightly is one of those words that continually pushes us back to “pure” or “correct” doctrine. Yes, as we have seen, “rightly” has little to do with conformity to doctrine. It has to do with conformity to Jesus Christ. Rightly speaking is remembering Jesus Christ. It is freeing the Gospel for the other. It is suffering in that attempt. It is rejoicing and singing because it knows that this work of remembering is always God’s own work in our lives.

Jesus Christ is the Gospel, not our revisionist ideologies, not our political ideologies, but Jesus. The Gospel is not something other than, or in addition to Jesus, but rather consists in Jesus Christ himself and in his work “for the life of the world.” This is not to say that additional theological inquiries and statements cease to be crucial and valuable; on the contrary they are extremely important and worthy of being cherished.

Yet, denominational doctrinal statements are not “the gospel.” Rather, they are explications and syntheses of a vast number of texts that issue forth from and unpack the core message and person of the gospel, namely Jesus Christ. The gospel is about Jesus Christ.

The gospel is rooted in Jesus Christ. The gospel is Jesus Christ. Thus, when we come to a passage like this, it strikes me that we ought to see it as an opportunity to re-calibrate ourselves and our churches — not around systems and ideologies, not around any thing — but around the one person who saves, namely Jesus Christ, “the gospel.”

Amen!

PRAYER OF THE DAY

Heavenly Father, we pray for your empowerment to live our lives worthy of your divine calling and election. Help us to pursue righteousness with faith, love, and peace from a pure heart. Help us to be gentle, patient, humble, and convict, correct, encourage, and teach the gospel of truth. In Jesus' name ... **Amen.**