

The Word of God

Hebrews 4: 12

The question, “why should we worship God?” seems to lie behind the following question, posed by a congregational member: “The Bible is clear that vanity is wrong, yet it requires us to worship and praise God. If God is perfect, then wouldn't he not need or encourage us to worship him?” Now, I don't know if God is vain or self-absorbed, but I'm reminded of a poem

Since no one really knows anything about God,
Those who think they do are just troublemakers.” (trans. Daniel Ladinsky)

Vanity and self-absorption are mostly negative qualities that seem to be inconsistent with the nature of God. I'm reminded at this point that *God* is really a description more than a name. To impute vanity and self-absorption to God feels more like a projection of known human negative qualities onto God.

Our language about God seeming to need our worship reflected the cultural and religious flavor in which most of the Bible was written. The predominant belief was in gods who were not necessarily benevolent. These were gods who needed to be appeased and who, in many cases, really needed the worship of people to thrive. An imperative to worship God probably came from people who wanted people to keep life in proper perspective. God needs to be first. It also came from the perceived human need to seek meaning in life and address our ultimate concern.

When we talk about God requesting the worship of people, I see it as our human need to ascribe worth to what is truly worthy of it. Faith may tell us that the impetus comes from God through human beings, but it is not to meet a need of God.

There was a second “Ask Jack” question asked that is somewhat related to the first. Essentially the question is, “Did God write the Bible?” Specially, this was the question: “If the Bible is the Word of God, without flaw, and also that it was written by men, how do we know that God truly led 100% of their efforts?” In other words, how big a hand did God play in writing the Bible?

The New Testament says that “the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.” (Hebrews 4:12) That raises some questions. What did the author of Hebrews mean by the Word of God? Is it identical to the New Testament? To the Hebrew Bible? To any written document? What do we do with such an audacious statement and how does it affect how we approach biblical interpretation?

When we look at Bible, we have to note its several forms--Hebrew, Catholic, and Protestant—and many, many translations and versions. It does not take a lot of searching to find that there are a large number of contradictions in the Bible. There is material that just seems so inconsistent with the clear message of Judaism and of Jesus--love God and neighbor.

It is fairly self-evident God did not literally write Bible. Few people even claim this. The question is how and to what extent its books are inspired. To what extent are they reliable and what does reliable even mean? In other words, to what extent do we consider the Bible the Word of God? What do we even mean by phrase, Word of God?

It was my first day of seminary and the professor of my Introduction to the Old Testament class challenged us with these words: “What do we mean when we say the word of God?” How we answered that question, he told us, would affect our experience in that class and, likely, throughout seminary.

In the opening of the book of Genesis, the text tells us, “God said.” What is conveyed is that the creative force of God calls creation into being. This same idea is expressed throughout the Bible. Sometimes it’s call *word* or *logos* and sometimes *wisdom* or *Sophia*. Christians attribute this idea of Word (logos) to Jesus, who is considered the living Word of God. John’s Gospel reworked a passage from Proverbs 8 to depict this Word made flesh in Jesus as pre-existent, eternal, and ultimately identical with God. Jesus was a living example of God’s creative energy, the force of God’s Spirit.

Only centuries later was a written document considered the Word of God. That shift was a product of the tension arising during the Enlightenment between the new scientific method that seemed to rival scripture for authority. Many modernists saw science as an absolute authority. In reaction, many sought to make the Bible authoritative, and later inerrant, to compete with inerrant science.

The Bible is the *Word of God* not because God wrote it or because God controlled its writing even in original language, but because it reflects the honest experiences and the authentic journey of people inspired by faith in God. The Old Testament canon was collected over hundreds of years. It was only after the emergence of Christianity that the Hebrew Bible canon was closed to new additions. Still there are some questions about books we call the *Apocrypha*. And there are significant differences in format between the Hebrew Bible—often called the TANAK—and the Christian Old Testament.

The New Testament canon was originally collected based on a belief that all its twenty-seven book were written by apostles or by by others who had actually known the historic Jesus. We now know, through biblical criticism and archaeological science, that this was not factual. The New Testament is still scripture for us, however, because of its long-term value to the Christian community. As scripture, it is not to be followed mindlessly, but with the wisdom of faith.

The Bible has its own internal conversation. It contains a thick truth and says different and sometimes contradictory things about the same subject. To find truth, literally to find God’s Word in scripture, we must have the inspiration of God’s Holy Spirit. We must enter into the Bible’s own conversation with our most honest questions. We must enter its story with our own stories. There are two key questions when approaching the Bible. “What did it mean to those who heard it originally?” “What does it mean to us today?”

To make the Bible a rule book is to subvert its true nature. To do so is to risk losing the dimension of *Word of God* it has to offer us. We are told that, “The Word of God” is like a two-edged sword, cutting to the heart.” It cuts both ways! It is always revealing truth. One perspective is to say that, if it’s not cutting to the heart, maybe its not functioning as the *Word of God*. And if the *Word* we’re listening to is not revealing truth, then perhaps it is not the *Word of God*!

Theologian Marcus Borg described Jesus as the living Word because he reflected nature of God clearly in human life. His life pointed others to God. His story points us to God. The New Testament is the *Word of God* because it points us to Christ, the living Word. Let me offer this

suggestion: that the Christian Church not spend much time and energy debating if or how the Bible is the *Word of God* and more time getting our lives in synch with the living Word that creates new life in us and through us.

Of ultimate importance is to find where the *Word of God* present in our lives--where new life is breaking into your life, even when it's hard. The *Word of God* is creative and life giving--always transforming chaos into form and shape, transforming darkness into life. We are the creation of God and also co-creators with God of new life. We are shapers with God of a world characterized by *Shalom*: peace, wholeness, compassion, justice, and love. What will you create with your life? How will you help shape a world of *Shalom* on your journey now?

- What vision do you see for yourself – even if it's not practical?
- What will we create at / through Crossroads Church over the next few years?
- What vision do you see for this congregation – even if it's not practical?

Creating new life takes vision, some courage, and training. The Call to Action for you is very specific and time sensitive. It includes two questions and an invitation. The first question is, "How many of you have had a 1-on-1 conversation with me? If you haven't yet, I want to talk with you as soon as possible. Please see me or contact me to set up a time

If you and I have had our 1-on-1 conversation, then this second question is for you. I asked you, at the end of our conversation, to have similar conversation with someone else. How many of you have had that follow-up 1-on-1? It's not too late – do it!

This is the invitation. There will be a training event for a new work group at Crossroads Church. We're calling it the Core Values Work Group. It will take place Saturday morning, Sept. 11, from 9-11:30am. There will be time and help for you to focus on what matters to you, to clarify how you want to spend your valuable time, and to make some choices about how you'll invest your time & energy. Come and you'll find it worth your time and effort.

It is really important how you invest you time, energy, and money. Your life really matters in the life of God. Remember that your life is *your* story, not someone else's. Your gifts are uniquely yours. The poet has said:

God sends each person into this world
With a special message to deliver
With a special song to sing for others
With a special act of love to bestow.
No one else can speak my message,
or sing my song,
or offer my act of love.

These are entrusted only to me. (John Powell, *Seasons of the Heart*, 326)

The *Word of God* of God is within you and flows through you. Live so that others read it clearly.