

*By Rev. David N. Glesne, November 22, 2009*

Title: Living By What Authority?

Text: John 10:34-35

Following the last worship service this morning in the Activity Center, we will be holding a second informational meeting as we move down this road of responding to the ELCA's historic vote on human sexuality this past August. In addition to updating you on my visits to Indianapolis and Fargo and the options before us as a church, I'll be making a specific recommendation as to what steps we as a church take from here. I hope you will return for that important meeting.

Leading up to the recommendation, I've devoted last Sunday and today to addressing issues we need to consider as we make a congregational response. Last Sunday, we brought the light of the Scriptures to bear on the issue of the new ELCA teaching on blessings same-sex unions and allowing non-celibate same-sex persons to be in positions of leadership in the church. On Tuesday evening, we held a Q & A session that was very well attended and I trust helpful for those who participated. Today, I want to address the deeper underlying issue facing this church. In the ELCA in the last few decades a boil has been festering underneath the surface which has now broken through the surface for all to see in the form of the sexuality issue. The deeper issue is what authority the Bible has in this church and in our lives as to what we believe and how we live.

There is a crises of authority today. According to a recent poll by the Gallup organization, only a third of Americans believe the Bible is the actual Word of God and is to be taken at face value. One in five believes that the Bible is a book of ancient fables, legends, and history concocted by human beings. Closer to home, the REVEAL spiritual life survey we as a church took reveals that only 45% of us live with the understanding that the bible is completely authoritative for us. That means that 55% of us live our lives under some other final authority.

Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson has articulated this crisis of authority in the ELCA in a slightly different way. He says that there are two different and irreconcilable hermeneutics in operation in this church. There are two different ways of interpreting Scripture. In other words, there are two fundamentally different lenses through which people read the same Bible. Each lens brings a different understanding and meaning.

Think of it this way. When one travels east and west across the western half of the United States on I-80, at an elevation of 7000 feet in the Colorado Mountains between Rawlins and Rock Springs, Wyoming, one crosses a great watershed. It is imperceptible to the human eye. Outwardly, during the winter months, the snow lies there in a seemingly unbroken unity. However, the unity is an illusion, for it lies along a great divide, the Continental Divide. When the snow melts, one portion of the snow flows westward making its way through valleys and streams and rivers and finally to the Pacific Ocean. The snow that lies close beside meanders its way eastward and southward through valleys and streams and rivers toward the Gulf of Mexico. When water begins

flowing in each direction, it ends up literally a thousand miles apart. So it is when people read the Bible through the two different lenses. In the area of what one believes – doctrine - and in the area of how one lives - ethics, people can end up a thousand miles apart.

I am often asked with regard to the homosexuality issue, “Dave, the Bible seems to speak clearly and straightforwardly about homosexual behavior. There is not one positive comment in the entire Bible about homosexual behavior. Everywhere it speaks of it as sinful behavior. How then can people read the same Bible and end up approving of same-sex behavior in certain relationships? How can we end up disagreeing on this issue so completely? How can people end up a thousand miles apart in their understanding?” They just stand their totally perplexed.

Let me share with you something that has helped me and which I think helps bring some clarity as to why we disagree. On the screen you see what we call different hermeneutical scales. One is the Church’s Historic Scale and the other the Revisionist Scale. This comes from Robert Gagnon, Professor of N.T. and Ethics at Pittsburg Theological Seminary.

The Churches Historic Scale

Scripture  
Philosophic Reason (Nature Argument)  
Scientific Reason  
Experience

The “Revisionist” Scale

Experience  
Scientific Reason  
Philosophic Reason (Nature Argument)  
Scripture

These are two different lenses through which Scripture is read. Why do we disagree? Imagine playing a card game with each team operating with a different trump or a different priority of suits. If Team A operates with hearts, diamonds, clubs, spades in that order of priority, it doesn’t matter if you throw out an ace of spades because it will get trumped. At the same time if Team B operates with spades, clubs, diamonds, and hearts, i.e. with an inverted priority, it is very hard to play the game, isn’t it? And that is what we have going on here with regard to the sexuality issue. There are different lenses.

The first lens is the way the Church historically has approached Scripture. Scripture is at the very top. Scripture has preeminence over every other argument. This was the cry of the Lutheran Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century. Scripture alone was the final authority for belief and practice. As Martin Luther said, “What Scripture says, God says.” What Scripture says has the authority of God behind it. Scripture is an objective authority – the final authority. Then comes philosophic reason. For example, reasoning from nature – the complimenarity of our structured bodies - in the homosexual debate. It is a valid way of arguing but does not rise above the Scriptures. Then comes scientific reason followed by experience. Now some people don’t like experience going last but this is not to discount experience - only to say that experience is not self-interpreting. You always have to use a lens of interpretation when you go by experience and how you weigh that experience depends on the screen you use to interpret.

But many now have inverted the hermeneutical scale in the church. It is what we call the Revisionist Scale. On this scale top priority is given to experience and frequently people think this experience is self-interpreting. They will say, "I've seen something. This can only be interpreted in the way I am interpreting it. Therefore it will have priority over everything else." For example, let's say somebody witnesses a caring, committed, loving homosexual union. They think, "Well, that is good, who can be against that. That changes everything for me. That changes the way I read Scripture, the way I operate with scientific reasons, the way I look at philosophic data." So he makes the case. If a relationship is between adults and it is caring and loving and consensual and monogamous and intended to be life-long, we should support it. But then I tell you that the two participants are a man and his mother. Does that change anything for you? I hope so. If I tell you it is a man and his adult sister, does that change anything for you? What I am saying is that experience is not self-interpreting for when you introduce an element of too much familial sameness in which sex is involved, it changes your whole evaluation.

Or take a man who has always experienced himself as homosexual. His earliest memories as a child are, "I was not like other boys." All he knows is that he is different and strange and he doesn't know why. All through adolescence and young adulthood, he never had feelings for girls but along the way developed feelings for other men. That is the experience of his life and it is real. He concludes that he was born gay. That experience then trumps everything else. Scripture says that God made us male and female – heterosexual. But his life experience has only been homosexually oriented and so Scripture must be wrong. Science gives him no evidence that people are born gay, but his life experience has only been homosexually oriented and so science must be wrong.

Maybe I need to press pause here and briefly address one of the myths of homosexuality. There may still be lingering in minds the popular notion that people are born gay. Let me try to clarify. Contrary to the writings and voice of popular culture, no "gay gene" has been identified up to this time. Most geneticists now believe that if the cause(s) of homosexuality is ever determined, it will be a much more complex matter than a single genetic factor. Even gay-activist researchers who themselves have been desperately searching for a genetic element to homosexuality have openly admitted their failure to do so. Dean Hamar, a molecular biologist and self proclaimed homosexual has said, "There is not a single master gene that makes people gay...I don't think we will ever be able to predict who will be gay." Simon LeVay, a neuroanatomist and gay-activist researcher who became well-known after researching and publishing the study of hypothalamic structures in men most widely-cited as confirming innate brain differences between homosexuals and heterosexuals, commenting on his work says, "I did not prove that homosexuality is genetic, or find a genetic cause for being gay. I didn't show that gay men are born that way, the most common mistake people make in interpreting my work." Lesbian philosopher and activist Camille Paglia is quite blunt in her assessment of the "born gay" theory. "No one is born gay. The idea is ridiculous...homosexuality is an adaptation, not an inborn trait." So being "born gay" is a myth that must be exposed. But human experience is tenaciously strong and convincing. You end up revising what

the Bible says in order to make it fit your experience. So experience stands atop the Revisionist Scale.

And just in passing, note that people in both camps say they hold to the authority of Scripture. So it comes down to what is meant by authority.

We choose, however, to start in a different place than experience to make sense of our lives. We choose to start with Christ. How does Christ look at the Scriptures? Let's look very briefly at Jesus' attitude and mindset. What authority did he give the Scriptures. In John 10:34, Jesus is arguing with the Pharisees who accuse him of blasphemy and he quotes from the Psalms and says, "*Is it not written in your law, 'I said, you are gods'?*" Now for Jesus the Scriptures were the Old Testament for the New Testament, of course, had not been written yet. In the Jewish mind the entire Old Testament was contained under the headings: the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings. Christ constantly quotes from all parts of the scripture alike as the Word of God. From the time of his temptation in the wilderness until after his resurrection, Jesus says over and over again, "*It is written...*" And he uses this phrase when referring to all three segments of the Old Testament. What is so striking here is that he calls the Psalms "*your law*" and treats it as having binding authority. If he had quoted from the Pentateuch – the first 5 books of the O.T. known as The Law it would have been strong. But in speaking of the Psalms in this way, it is stronger still. "This is your law," says Jesus, and in so doing it is finished in his mind. For Jesus the discussion is over because in this setting he has quoted the authority of God.

More than this Jesus rebuked the Jews as foolish and slow of heart for not accepting all that the prophets had written. In Matthew 12:3 Jesus says to them, "*Have you not read what David did when he and his companions were hungry?*" This expression "*Have you not read...?*" is the exact same mentality you find in Martin Luther and the Reformers who quoted Scripture and then understood the matter to be settled. You can discuss further, but the authority has been stated. This is the mentality of Jesus.

Returning to John 10, we see Christ's whole attitude towards the O.T. Verse 35, "*If those to whom the word of God came were called 'gods' – ad the scripture cannot be broken....*" In other words, for Jesus it is finished. "Has the scripture spoken? Well, then it is settled. The scriptures cannot be wrong." The entire scriptures – the Law, the Prophets, the Writings – the whole of the O.T. as to its unity and content cannot be wrong. To Christ, the written O.T. was self-evidently God's Word, and that is what gave them their total authority. This is the attitude of Jesus.

On a number of occasions our Lord emphatically stated that the scriptures must be fulfilled. This would be another way of saying it cannot be broken. Listen to just one of those places in Matthew 5:17-18. Read vv. 17-18 what Jesus says. Look at how Jesus puts the law and the prophets together. Is there anything God has spoken in the law and the prophets? Did Jeremiah prophecy that the Jews would go back after 70 years? Well, they went back. Are there portions of scripture that are not yet fulfilled? "Don't worry,"

says Jesus, “they will be fulfilled.” The scriptures cannot be broken or changed. The scriptures cannot be wrong.

Although it may not be quite as striking, it is nevertheless intriguing how Christ deals with the historic details of the O.T. In Luke 11:51, Jesus reaches all the way back to Abel and says, “*from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, who perished between the altar and the sanctuary.*” He is saying, “Don’t you remember? Sure you weren’t there, but isn’t it written? Didn’t Abel die? There is this historical detail of the blood of Abel. Read Luke 17:26-27 in what Jesus says. Here is the detail of the flood. It is just stated in this sort of off-handed way – he just assumes the history. This is the way it is going to be when I come back. He expects them to have the same certainty of history.

In John 8:56, Jesus mentions the Jews’ ancestor Abraham. In Matthew 10:15 he is dealing with a little detail and mentions Sodom and Gomorrah as an historic situation. In Luke 17:28 he references the days of Lot. In Matthew 8:11 he speaks of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. In John 3:14 Jesus speaks of Moses lifting up the serpent in the wilderness just as the Son of Man will be lifted up. In Matthew 12<sup>3</sup> it is David. In Luke 4:25 he speaks of the many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah when the heaven was shut up three years and six months and there was a famine in the land. In Luke 4:27 Jesus speaks of the time of Elisha the prophet and Naaman the Syrian. It is the same with all these person and these historic situations. “Do you remember Lot: Do you remember the famine in the land?” It’s the very quietness and yet the certainty of it that is so strong. It shows his attitude toward the Scriptures.

We can say this is Jesus’ methodology. Christ’s methodology is completely contrary to the methodology of modern negative criticism of the bible. It is as though Jesus is choosing these minute details just to give us the feel of the framework. Now, surely that is not the reason he is doing it. It is rather because each one leads on to what he wants to say and yet this is this methodology, his mentality. It makes a fabric which if you don’t treat it honestly and simply overlook the methodology and mentality of Jesus, you end up smashing Jesus mentality. Jesus just reaches back to whatever it is – Abel, the serpent in the wilderness, widows in the time of Elijah, Naaman the leper – and says, “*it is written*” which speaks of an historic situation that you just use as an absolute base for talking on very gently. “Don’t you remember?”

Christ himself presented the O.T. as completely and totally authoritative, not just in matters of faith and morals but in the area of history as well. For Christ, the Scriptures cannot be broken because they have the authority of God behind them.

But what about the N.T.? The N.T. was written after Christ. Can we be as confident of its trustworthiness? We believe there is a within the N.T. itself a predicting of the writing of the N.T and its trustworthiness. Read John 16:12-15. Just as the Spirit of God was active in the writing of the O.T., so here it is prophesied that when the Holy Spirit comes in all his fullness at Pentecost, there will be another writing written under the Spirit’s guidance as well.

There are two very well-known teaching statements in the N.T. that are used widely to speak of the absolute reliability of the Scriptures and the confidence we can have in God's Word. They are usually put first. I'll mention them here in closing. The simple truth is, as wonderful as these two passages are, we don't need them. When one sees Christ's mentality towards the Old Testament it would be enough. If these two teaching statements could be destroyed, nothing would change. But we do have them and so we value them.

**II Timothy 3:16-17:** *“All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.”*

Here we see **nature of Scripture** and the value of the bible. The Scripture is profitable for teaching, reproof, correction and training in righteousness because of its source, because it is inspired by God. But the English word “inspired” can be misleading because it is capable of many different meanings. It is not used here in the sense of an ‘inspired’ performance; as though the writers are really high - really inspired. It is not as though when I read the bible, I get a lift. Now that ought to be true, but it is not the primary meaning. It is not an inspiring book in this sense.

Literally, the word is “God-breathed”. Now by “God-breathed” we don't mean that it was somehow there and then God breathed upon it or God breathed into it making it a Spirit-filled book. We could say this of a lot of good Christian books that the author was really led of God in this writing and that God really breathed into the book. We mean something much stronger. When the Scripture asserts that it is “God-breathed” it means that it is the product of the creative breath of God.

All through the Scripture, the breath of God is a figure for God's creative agency. In the O.T. God created man by forming him from the dust of the earth and then breathing into him the breath of life. It was a creative act. Or in Psalm 33, speaking of creation, verse 6 says, *“By the word of the Lord, the heavens were made. And by the breath of his mouth all their host.”* This is always the figure for God immediately and directly creating something. So when we say that all Scripture is “God-breathed” it is an assertion that the whole Scripture is a created product of the divine mind. The Scripture as a whole owes its existence to an activity of God. It is in the highest and truest sense – His creation. This is the strongest summary statement on the nature of the Bible.

We have already seen what Christ has said about the quality and **extent of that inspiration**. Jesus in John 10:35 you remember said, *“The Scripture cannot be broken...”* His mentality is that the Bible down to its smallest detail is reliable.

**II Peter 1:20-21:** *“First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.”*

This is the strongest summary statement we have on the **mode of inspiration**, that is, exactly ‘how’ the Scripture was inspired. The Greek word translated here “*moved*” means “borne along” or “carried along”. Men carried along by the Holy Spirit spoke from God. If you want to think of this visually, one could think of a little cart carrying along somebody. “*Men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.*” They were borne along by Him as they spoke. The passivity of the prophets is stressed here. They are not the movers but were moved. It didn’t come by the will of man. They were borne along and spoke – in contrast to their own will. It isn’t man groping upward. It is something different. It is a verbalized communication. What is being said is that the Holy Spirit so led the human authors, that when they wrote down what they wrote down, it was exactly what God wanted them to write down. They “spoke” as his mouthpieces as they were moved by the Holy Spirit. Without abrogating their unique personalities, vocabularies, writing styles, etc. - which are amply evident in their writings – the human authors were carried along in their writing. A careful reading of the Old Testament reveals that this is exactly what occurred. What we see there could not be described better than the picture of them being carried along by the Holy Spirit.

How does all this relate to forming Redeemer’s response to the ELCA’s actions this last August? The deeper issue lying behind the vote to allow gay marriage and accept non-celibate same-sex person into leadership positions in the church, is the view of Scripture that allows such approval. That view is the “Revisionist” view which at the end of the day has experience as the trump card. But what this view ends up doing is smashing Jesus’ mentality concerning the Scriptures. I believe then a response faithful to Jesus Christ would include the following:

- We will stand on Jesus’ view of the Scriptures for he viewed the Scriptures as being completely authoritative in all that it says because the Scriptures have the authority of God behind them. We will continue to stand in the Reformation stream of Word alone, grace alone, faith alone. We too value human experience but God’s Word makes sense of and interprets my experience, not my experience interprets God’s Word.
- The Scriptures then are our final authority for what we believe. Scripture says Jesus’ birth was a virgin birth, that the Holy Spirit conceived Jesus in Mary’s womb. So Jesus is fully God and fully man at the same time. We believe in the virgin birth. Scripture says that Jesus is the only way to the Father, that he is *the way, the truth and the life*. In this post-modern world which says that are many ways to God, we believe Jesus is the only way. Scripture says that after Jesus died on the cross and was laid in the tomb, he rose bodily from the grave on the third day. It wasn’t just a spiritual resurrection but a physical resurrection. We believe Jesus is the resurrection and the life and because he was raised bodily from the grave we too will be raised bodily from the dead one day. The Scriptures are our final authority for what we believe.
- The Scriptures are also our final authority for how we live. The Scriptures tell us that we are to have no other gods before God, that we are not to take God’s name in vain, that we are to remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy. This is how we are to live in relation to God. The Scriptures tells us we are to honor our father

and mother, not to kill another, not to commit adultery, not to steal, not to bear false witness against a neighbor, and not to covet our neighbor's wife nor servants nor anything that is my neighbors. This is how we are to live in relationship to one another. The Scriptures are our final authority for how we live.

Prayer