



Seeing the Word of God

2 Timothy 3:16-4:5

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Happy New Year and welcome to 2020. As Charles Hatcher joked with me a few weeks back, this is to be a year of great vision. It is, after all, the year 2020.

Though we celebrate the change in the year, I would be remiss if I did not at least name that the coming year will be a year of great challenges and changes. The United Methodist Church is scheduled to have a General Conference in May this year, and it has been in question for a while now what would happen with the global denomination given our differences in opinion over the inclusion of the LGBTQ Community within the orders of clergy, and in the full-participation in the life of the church, specifically marriage. If you did not see the news that broke on Friday morning, the Washington Post gave an overview of a path forward that has been formed by a diverse mediation team of United Methodist leaders that calls for planned separation in the denomination. This path forward would provide financial support for a new denomination that would maintain our current disciplinary rules, which do not allow for same-gender weddings, or allow for the ordination of LGBTQ siblings. With the formation of a new denomination for those who do *not* desire LGBTQ inclusion, this path forward would also allow the remaining United Methodist Church, which would maintain its current structure, to change the Book of Discipline to allow for same-gender weddings and the ordination of LGBTQ siblings.

To be clear, and to clarify the Washington Post article: this recommendation, which is supported by leaders from across the globe, representing both the traditional and progressive views on LGBTQ inclusion, will still require a formal approval by the General Conference. These are not forgone conclusions, and have not yet been affirmed through the proper policy changing channels in the UMC. I will continue to do as much studying as I can on these proposed changes, and will do my best to keep you informed in the weeks and months to come. As I have offered previously, I am available to speak with anyone who has questions regarding the work of General Conference and the possible implications of such a division in the church. As this plan was just announced on Friday, I don't have much more to definitively offer about how this will be received by the greater United Methodist Church. While the prospectus of the path forward that was released on Friday outlines the major points of the plan, I expect in the weeks to come, more details, a better timeline, and further financial and resource implications of this path forward will be shared as our General Conference delegates prepare to meet in May.

There is still much that is unknown regarding these plans in the making. It's been named that these plans allow for central conferences, annual conferences, and local churches to decide with which future denomination they want to be affiliated. These decisions will take prayerful

consideration, and if and when such a decision is asked of us, we will take on the task of answering with a focus on God's call for us as a local church. As we proceed through the coming months leading up to General Conference, I invite you to hold the Methodist Church, and its global witness, in your prayers as we discern, prepare for, and move into a season of challenges and change. It will after all, be a year of great visioning, right Charles?

In the midst of all that is happening at the global level, one thing that is not in question is our call and our focus here at the local level. We are clear in our mission here at Washington Street UMC: *We believe God is love and we are making a place for everyone to know that love.* This mission defines our shared work as the body of Christ. It is the foundation for our community focus, our call to discipleship, and our invitation to respond as participatory members of a shared desire for a more just world, ordered and guided by God's grace.

When we look at the great disparity of beliefs, practices, and theological opinions held by the greater denomination ... when we consider the divisions amidst the greater witness of the Christian diaspora ... when people are confused at how much bickering and disagreement there is between people of the Christian faith, they often ask, why is it that the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church is so divided? How can the witness of the Christian church be so fractured?

These are good questions to ask, and worthy of a lengthy lecture in the history of the Christian church. From creeds and councils, to heresies and philosophies, there are many reasons we could identify through the history of the church – dating back even prior to the first day of the church at Pentecost – to explain why the church is as divided as it is across the global witness of the Christian faith. However, as much as I know who we are is built upon the history of who our people have been, what we need is not a historical lecture. (You're welcome.) Instead, what we need is a English lesson. Almost all of these splits, disagreements, divisions, fractures, and separations ... when boiled down to the very foundational root causes ... come from a disagreement in how we interpret and understand the Biblical text.

When we peel away all the layers of division over the past two millennia of a Christian witness, what we find at the center of almost every division in the church is a difference in how people interpret the Biblical text and, because of differences in interpretation, the resulting variance in belief regarding what it is the Biblical text states.

That the Bible can be interpreted in multiple ways is a challenge in and of itself to many Christians. There's a popular saying among some Christians that, "God said it, I believe it. That settles it." This opinion claims that the Bible is so black and white in its writing that there is no reason to question what it has to say. Among the many issues I have with this, the snark comes across first: what if my Bible is a red-letter Bible? Does that still count as being black and white? ... But more seriously, which version of the black and white text are referring to? The NIV or the NRSV? Or what about the CEB, or KJV, or NKJV, or the Message Bible, or the Young's Literal, or the NLB, or ASV, or TLB? Did you know that there are 450 *different* translations of the English Bible in print today? 450. So, when you say, "God said it, I believe it? That settles it," which

version of the Bible are you reading? There's some pretty significant differences in how these English versions read, so, which one should I be reading?

The greatest challenge in interpreting and reading the Bible today is that the Bible was written in ancient Hebrew and ancient Greek. Though Hebrew and Greek are still languages written and spoken today, the ancient languages had variances from the modern languages, and there are no native-linguists of the ancient languages still living. We have no direct sources to ask for advice when doing the work of translating these ancient languages into modern-day English.

As none of us are fluent in ancient Hebrew and Greek, we can't just read from the original texts. We need the ancient texts translated to have a chance at understanding the Bible today. And we aren't the only ones – ancient Hebrew and Greek are by-gone languages. They aren't used anywhere in the world outside of ancient manuscript interpretation. Everyone needs the original texts translated to be able to read the Biblical text. If you thought the 450 English translations of the Bible caused an issue for Christians disagreeing on what the Bible says, how about the full Bible being translated into nearly 700 different languages across the globe? And if that wasn't enough, the New Testament has been translated into an additional 1,500 languages.

While most languages have some shared and similar words, so too does every language has specific nuances that do not translate well to other languages. These nuances can be significant in interpretation and understanding. Again, these differences in translation are at the root of our division throughout the Christian world.

Now, you may be asking, if we are all interpreting from the same ancient Hebrew and Greek texts, why are there so many translation problems? ... Good question. ... The first answer is, we aren't all translating from the ancient Greek and Hebrew. Some translations of the Bible are based on other translations. These versions of the Bible are like a theological game of telephone – the translator is authoring based on another person's translation. But, there are number of translations that use the original Greek and Hebrew for their translations. Even these translations have translating errors. Let's look at some English translations to give examples.

The first English translation was written in the mid-14th Century by John Wycliffe. At the time, the Bible was not a widely publicized book. Up until the 16th Century, it was believed that Christians should be getting their Biblical education primarily, if not entirely, from the church and the priests. So, while the Wycliffe version was the first English translation, the first English Bible that was mass produced was the Tyndale Bible, which was printed around 1530. It was translated directly from the original Greek and Hebrew by William Tyndale, who was, like Martin Luther, very skeptical of the Catholic Church. His outspoken disagreements with Catholicism led him to be condemned by the Catholic Church, and he labeled a heretic. So, yes, the first English translation of the Bible that was mass produced was translated by a man labeled a heretic and condemned to death by the church. The Tyndale Bible is still in print today.

The most popular English Bible ever translated was the King James Version. This Bible was ordered to be written by King James I at the turn of the 17th Century. The King had nearly 50 scholars working on the translation, again using the original Greek and Hebrew texts for the translation. The King James Version of the Bible is still labeled by many in the Church the one “true” translation. Though, to anyone who makes this claim, it’s worth asking if they mean the original 1611 version, or the 1769 re-write, that sought to make the language easier to read? Or do they mean the New King James? Or the Modern King James? Or perhaps they mean the 21st Century King James Version? Each of the variations has their own, well, variations.

(Side note, did you know the King James Version is still under a copyright owned by the Royal Crown of England? The Crown owns the King James Bible in perpetuity, and still profits on every copy sold.) ... I digress.

The biggest problem with the Tyndale Bible and the King James Version is that these Bibles were written prior to the advent of language theory and modernity. There are a number of places where the King James Version translates a Greek or Hebrew word directly, but in so doing, misses the nuances of the word in its original form. On top of that, the Bible was written in Old English, which does not read the same way as modern English. Some of the English words 400 years ago had very different meanings than *the same* word today.

For example, in Isaiah 43:13, the King James Bible reads, “Yea, before the day was I am he; and there is none that can deliver out of my hand: I will work, and who shall let it?” In its Old English form, the whole sentence is a bit confusing, but specifically this final phrase: “I will work, and who shall *let* it?” What is Isaiah asking? ... 400 years ago, in Old English, the word *let* meant “to prevent.” For those who have any tennis knowledge, this is the origin of a “let point.” When the ball hits the net on a serve before landing in the service box, the point is prevented – it is a *let* point – a *prevented* point. ... Yet, in modern English, we all know the word *let* to mean, “to allow.” For example, “I’m going to let you go to the game tonight.” ... So, in Isaiah, is the author asking, “Who shall *allow* it,” or is the author asking, “Who shall *prevent* it?” It depends on your understanding of the translated word, *let*.

Another challenge in translating the Biblical text is that the ancient Greek and Hebrew scrolls used no punctuation, and the Greek scrolls used no spaces between words. Translating ancient texts into modern languages requires the translator to make judgement calls as to where punctuation, spaces, and thoughts shifted in the text. Two translators with the same education and knowledge of the ancient languages could come up with two different translations, simply because they put a period, or a comma, or an apostrophe in where the other one left it out.

Through language theory and modernity, we have found that, though etymology, sentence structure, and linguistic comparisons can *help* in translating the Bible, the most reliable way to translate the Biblical text is to read the text in context. Context matters more than etymology. Context matters more than sentence structure. Context matters more than simple letter-by-letter translations.

Going back to Isaiah, the context helps us find that the author here is asking, “who shall *prevent* it?” We know this because the question has an answer. The rhetorical answer is, no one ... no one shall prevent the Lord from delivering the people. No modern translations use such a confusing word as *let* in place of the word *prevent*. And while technically the King James got it right, not everyone understands the difference in this Old English word. And that’s just one example of why translations matter. How we read the text matters.

These difficulties in translating the text will guide our focus for the coming two months. We’re going to be looking at some individual words and phrases, and how the translation into English of these words and phrases affects our understanding of faithfulness, salvation, and of our ministry as a church in the world today. And this is an appropriate time of the year to be diving in to Biblical text searching for clarity.

Today is Epiphany Sunday, the start of the season of Epiphany. The Epiphany, often marked by the Magi searching for clarity regarding the star in the sky, is the claim that through Christ, God’s Word is made known to the world. In Christ, through Christ, because of Christ, God’s Word is expressed and made visibly known to the world. That will be our focus in this season of Epiphany leading us up to Lent. Our desire will be to have God once more enlighten us with the Word – with the Biblical text that gives life.

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, once wrote, “The Spirit of God not only once inspired those who wrote [the Biblical text], but continually inspires, supernaturally assists, those that read it with earnest prayer.” In this season of Epiphany we will seek to learn from, to be corrected by, to be inspired by, and to be filled with God’s Word, sought and read in the context of God’s covenant and Christ’s witness, that we might claim anew for the world God’s grace, and the justice of God’s love, that calls all of creation to new life. I want to invite you to journey with me. Let us struggle together; let us learn together; let the light of Christ fill us once more *together*. That as one body, as one church, we may be united with God’s word that proclaims the good news of great joy for all people.