

2 Timothy 2:8-15
The Word Unchained
WRCoB 10.13.19 Bible Sunday

While I was attending Eastern Mennonite Seminary
I met a young man from Switzerland
Who was also in the M.Div. program.

He shared his testimony.

During his college years
He and his friends liked to party.

At the time they were not believers.

They lived to party.

On one occasion they had gathered around
In someone's apartment and were quite drunk.

One of them grabbed a Bible off the book shelf
And thinking it would be good fun
Started to read from it

The others began to mock it
And they all laughed

And so he continued . . .
But something happened . . .

As he continued to read
(my friend doesn't remember the text) they got quiet.

My friend says the mood changed
From mockery to something akin to sacred.

They felt themselves lifted up
Out of the darkness of their condition
And into the light of God's Word.

The truth of the words
Had a startling and sobering effect.

He stopped reading and they looked around
As if the very heavens had descended upon them
As if God himself had entered the room.

The words struck them
Like no other words had ever done before.

They quietly went their separate ways that late night
Each changed by the encounter of the reading.

And they gathered again the next night
And the night after that . . .

Not to get drunk but to read the Bible.

Many gave their life to Christ
And a few entered the ministry.

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I'm reminded of this story
As I read the words of Paul to his colleague Timothy.

God's word cannot be chained!

You can put the messenger in chains
But the message has a way of getting out.

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I've another friend from seminary
Rev. Hailue from the Mennonite Church in Ethiopia.

During the communist takeover in the 70s
All the leaders of the church were arrested
And put in prison.

And the 8,000 member church went underground.

It became illegal for the church to practice their faith.

The ministers knowing they were to be arrested
Memorized portions of the Bible.

During their incarceration, after dark, when things got quiet
Each would recite vast portions of scripture
Not only for their personal edification
But as witnesses for Christ.

Rev. Hailue said you could hear the words
Echo down through the halls of the prison
For everyone to hear.

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When the church resurfaced 10 years later
After the communist regime was defeated

The membership increased from 8,000 to 80,000 members.

God's word will not be bound.

The Apostle Paul writes to Timothy
While under house arrest in Rome.

Along with Philippians, Ephesians, and Colossians
The Apostle Paul wrote two letters to Timothy
While imprisoned.

Most scholars agree this 2nd letter
Was the last letter Paul wrote before he died.

And so this letter to Timothy
Is a final blessing to a good friend and colleague.

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There is power in the Word of God.

It has transformed lives with its truths for centuries.

The Bible contains words written by humans
But within these words God speaks his Word.

Hebrews 4:12 (NRSV) Indeed, 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.

The Bible is alive . . . it speaks to you.
It has feet . . . it runs after you.
It has hands . . . it lays hold of you.

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As I said last week,
I think one of the problems with Christianity today
Is the fact that people don't read their Bibles.

The Christian faith is becoming Bible illiterate.

According to Life Research poll, *almost nine out of 10 households (87 percent) own a Bible, according to the American Bible Society, and the average household has three.*

About half of Americans (53 percent) have read relatively little of the Bible. One in 10 has read none of it, while 13 percent have read a few sentences. Thirty percent say they have read several passages or stories.

Those of us who do read the Bible
Often read verses or passages
In a devotional way.

Which is good.

Much of Scripture provides nuggets of truth
That can be encouraging and uplifting.

But by reading it in little chunks
We fail to grasp the larger picture
The overarching work of redemption.

However, many of us don't even read the Bible devotionally.

The only Scripture we might read and hear
Is the scripture used in Sunday morning worship
Selected by the pastor or worship team.

Therefore, we rely on preachers
To convey the truth found within the Bible's pages.

And consequently, believers can be easily swayed
By the preacher's personal interpretation.

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For example, for years Benny Hinn
Preached what's known as the prosperity gospel.

The prosperity gospel is a misleading form of preaching.

It pushes the idea
That believers will flourish with good things
Because of their faith.

The more faithful one is
The more they pray, trust, and give to God
The more they receive in return.

The proponents of prosperity gospel
Encourages believers to give lots and lots of money
To their ministries

So that in turn God will bless their generosity
With more and more personal wealth.

But now, Benny Hinn is declaring that he was wrong

"I am correcting my own theology and you need to all know it," the televangelist told his studio audience and those watching online. "The blessings of God are not for sale. And

miracles are not for sale. And prosperity is not for sale (Christianity Today).”

Of course he says this now

After accumulating a net worth of 42 millions dollars.

But seriously,

Anyone who has read and studied the Bible

Could have questioned his biblical interpretation.

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People rely on preachers to interpret the Bible for them.

From a Newsweek article written in 2014

Entitled, *The Bible: So Misunderstood It's a Sin*

The author, Kurt Eichenwald writes

The Bible is not the book many American fundamentalists and political opportunists think it is, or more precisely, what they want it to be. Their lack of knowledge about the Bible is well established.

A Pew Research poll in 2010 found that evangelicals ranked only a smidgen higher than atheists in familiarity with the New Testament and Jesus's teachings.

"Americans revere the Bible—but, by and large, they don't read it," wrote George Gallup Jr. and Jim Castelli, pollsters and researchers whose work focused on religion in the United States.

The Barna Group, a Christian polling firm, found in 2012 that evangelicals accepted the attitudes and beliefs of the

Pharisees—religious leaders depicted throughout the New Testament as opposing Christ and his message—more than they accepted the teachings of Jesus

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I believe this is why so many Christians
Support so many unchristian things.

They preach prolife
But support the separation of children
From their parents at the border.

They speak of peace
But support an escalation of war
On the border between Turkey and Syria.

They speak that humanity is created in the image of God
But support actions and policies that continue
To feed racial and cultural prejudices.

They turn to their Bible to support their position.

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The Christian faith has been twisted and turned
By certain Christian leaders
To sway a whole populace.

When I read what Christian leaders say, like

Jerry Falwell, Jr. of Liberty University
Franklin Graham of Samaritan's Purse
Or Robert Jeffress of the First Baptist Church of Dallas

I have a hard time understanding
How we read from the same Bible
But have hugely diverse interpretations.

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I believe Paul's passage in Ephesians
Specifically speaks to today's conundrum.

Ephesians 4:14-15 (NRSV)

¹⁴ We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. ¹⁵ But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ,

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I believe to get the Christian faith back on track
We need to encourage people
To read the Bible for themselves.

I have witnessed a huge change in knowledge and attitude
In spirit and perspective

When the whole church, with all of its programs
Devote themselves to reading through the Bible.

There are many guides out there
That can help a congregation

From Sunday school class curriculums
Weekly Bible studies
And Sunday morning worship experiences

Go through the entire Bible in one to three years.

Imagine what new perspective we might attain?

What new spiritual insights could we gain collectively
By such a communal process?

I would encourage us to consider this.

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The Apostle Paul while he was in prison and in chains
Marveled at the power of the Word of God
Calling God's word unchained, off its leash.

Rev. Hailue literally saw its transforming power
In the prisons of Ethiopia.

I firmly believe a corporate Bible study
Incorporating all the church's programs
Can have the same transformative powers.

God's Word is unchained

It has the power to convert and transform

Unleash its power and let's take it down from the shelf
And read it, individually and collectively.

I guarantee you will not be the same person.

For the glory of God
And our neighbors' good.