

WHAT DOES IT MEAN, GOD IS STILL SPEAKING November 5, 2006
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What comes to mind when you see or hear, GOD IS STILL SPEAKING? We have been saying and reading it for a few years. Our neighbors who pass by have read it at least once or heard IT ON THE Radio: I wonder what they take it to mean.....What does it mean to them or do they care?

Another way of putting it is “DON’T PUT A PERIOD WHERE God has put a comma—God is still speaking!

What does it mean to you? Does it make a difference to your faith, your life? What do you say if your neighbor asks what it means?

For it to make sense to me, I have to begin with Bible study – and not just to determine what a particular verse or story may mean.

Some of this may be a surprise to you: If you have ????, please talk to me. Or borrow one of the books I laid out in Fellowship hall.

I begin by asking What is the WORD OF GOD? For most it means BIBLE. Jewish Bible—our OT—was finally closed around 100 in response to those CX upstarts! The various books were important to their faith and worship, but were not considered Bible, except the Torah—the first five books. They chose the 39 we have today.

Our whole Bible not a Bible until 4th century. Constantine wanted to unite his world militarily and religiously. CX was named the religion. But there were so many groups saying that what they believed was true and others were wrong. Each had its own set of “books.” So Connie called the bishops together and told them to decide which books would make up our NT. When they argued and could not agree on the Book of revelation, he said put it in. A group of 27 letters and writings were chosen among many.

Paul’s letters were written first—he never met Jesus, quoted only twice—he wrote these letters from about 50-65. slowly they were collected and shared with other congregations, but Jewish scriptures were still used.

Our 4 gospels (written to counter Paul?) Why only four of many? Only 4 directions: North South East and West!

HEARD OF OTHERS: Judas, Peter, James, Thomas Philip, Mary.

Probably written no earlier than 70 CE, was Mark. Mt & Lk copied Mark and then added from other sources. What is interesting is how they changed what Mark had written to what suited their purposes. You can see it for yourself when you read a harmony of these three gospels. Between them they copied about 97% of Mark.

The first Christians were Jews. As Paul traveled, he went to the local synagogues and found his first converts. And as Christ followers, they continued worshipping in the synagogue as well as in their own fellowships called church. By the 70’s, before Matt & Lk, the Jews were getting a little upset with these CXs especially for their use of Jewish scriptures to “prove” what they believed about Jesus to be true. So they kicked them out

of the Synagogues. The temple in Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans in 70 and the CXs were quick to say, See God is punishing you for not accepting Jesus as the Messiah. With being ousted from the synagogues we begin to read in many places of their growing animosity toward the Jews who did not accept Jesus in the same way.

The Jews were accepted as a religion among all the pagan practices—Pagan=many gods. The Christians had no national Roman acceptance and had to keep proving that they were not a dangerous group. Not cannibals for eating body of Jesus—that is a part of our remembering the life and death of Jesus; not dangerous—love at center of faith; not atheists because they refused to pray and sacrifice to the many gods—they prayed only to the one God. They wanted to get on the good side of the Romans—can you blame them?!

So Pilate is said to have said this of Jesus: I find no fault. Romans are not to blame for Jesus' death, but the Jews! The Christians beginning in the 70's were the first anti-semitics! But it was an inner family argument/fight! As we read the gospels, esp MT LK, the Jews are the killers-or at least responsible for Jesus' death. We do know that the Romans were to blame: they had no compunctions in crucifying as many as 3000 at a time. What we know of Pilate, is that he was not a nice man as these gospel writers picture him.

And Christians across the centuries who have bought into this argument of the 1st century and found it in THE WORD OF GOD, continued over the years to be against the Jewish people, discriminating and killing.

But those Christians who in a sense have believed that God is still speaking, have refused to discriminate and tried to accept Jews as bros & sisters.

The Bible must be read in context! In the context of the times and the culture. The NT must be read in the context of what Jesus said and did.

The Bible testifies in itself as to what the word of God is: John said that the WORD became flesh and lived among us! Not paper and ink! Not ideas and theology! But in a person who lived and breathed. And part of the meaning of resurrection is that that same word, that same life is still among us. That resurrected word has continued to challenge people across the ages as to what was most important for life and living! The Bible itself testifies that we should be open and receptive: Jesus said that the spirit would lead us into all truth.

What did Jesus say and do? Well, here we know that after 40 or 50 years the writers did not remember all that Jesus said and did. They also wrote so as to get people to believe. So they used ideas and pictured with words what pagan peoples could best understand. But what they wrote must be read with the plumb line as to what was most important in what they did remember. ?? Our lesson from Mark 12.28-34: Love God and neighbor. If other scriptures cannot meet that plumb line of love, don't we have to question it?

What did Jesus do? He welcomed outcasts. He welcomed women—in public! He welcomed children. He reached out to the poor and the sick. And the sinner. And to

Gentiles-the non-Jews. Even the Roman enemy soldiers. This is the Word of God—in the flesh!

Although Paul had never met Jesus, he caught this idea! He writes about love being at the heart of life: I Cor 13 is only of many references. In Romans 8, he goes on to say that nothing shall separate us from that love! He too welcomed and was supported by women. He said that there is neither male nor female, ...you are one in Christ! So if we read anything different, should we not at least question whether or not that came from Paul? There seems to be proof in many places that copiers changed or inserted words to suit their own ideas, prejudices or theology. (I Tim. Written decades later, not by Paul) As scholars find earlier and earlier manuscripts, they have discovered that later ones do not in every word agree with earlier ones! They can only say that someone changed the words or added words to agree with their theology, their beliefs. An excellent book by BART EHRMAN, MISQUOTING JESUS, traces several key passages as to how they were changed over the years. (this is why there have been so many translations of the Bible—better and better MSS have been discovered that go back to earlier centuries. And this is how King James tr. was found to have over 30,000 errors) Could the “Word of God” have so many errors?

Across the years the Bible has been used to prove many negative things that cannot stand up to the plumb of love, the plumbline of acceptance and inclusiveness. It has been used to OK slavery, denigrate women (NY pastor ousted SS teacher using bible), attack Jews and Muslims, beat children (spare the rod and spoil the child). Anti environmentalists because Jesus is coming soon and it doesn't matter—even tho that has been said in every century. And in the current time, to condemn homosexuality.(The one place where Paul's words are translated “homosexual,” the Greek words refer to teenage boy prostitutes and adult males who pay them.) How long it has taken for Christians to listen and to finally say, That is wrong to any of these misuses of scripture.

So what does it mean that GOD IS STILL SPEAKING? How important is it to know that GOD IS STILL SPEAKING?

1. for me it means to read scripture with the plumb lines of love, mercy, forgiveness, acceptance, inclusiveness . Even the Hebrew bible (OT) has the story of Jonah and Hosea and Ruth. Ruth? Non Hebrew woman who was grandmother of King David. Written centuries later when there was the attempt to deny interracial and inter cultural marriage!
2. It means that just because Constantine demanded that a set of books be chosen and accepted as THE only acceptable scriptures and THE TRUTH FOR ALL TIME it does not follow that we have to shut our minds to new discoveries in science, archeology. The scores of MSS, books not chosen, are fascinating reading and offer insights not available elsewhere. THE FORMATION OF THE CHRISTIAN BIBLE by Lee Mc Donald was written for those of us who are Biblical scholars.
3. It means for me to be open to the spirit that will lead me into all truth. And I believe that all truth will measure up to the plumb lines that Jesus adhered to. My

minister while I was growing up said many times: we Christians do not have all the truth, but we are committed to all the truth!

4. Jesus lived a life of prayer, of trust in God and in his ministry. Those parts that are meant to scare us, must be read in the context of what Jesus said about the Kingdom of God: like a child, like a seed, within you and among you. Remember these gospels we have were written 40 to 70 years after Jesus' life. No one had taken notes. Stories, parables, and events were written to get people to believe. The writers just might say anything even to frighten!
5. We are 1975 years after Jesus' life. Their's was not a scientific age! We continue to learn about our universe, our bodies, our history. So glad that they have decided to fix Hubble! Research in so many areas has helped to make life better.
6. GOD IS STILL SPEAKING means that we are not listening enough! Why? Scared of finding anything that challenges our present thought? Even Plato told the parable of the Caves—people afraid of the light, of knowing, preferring the darkness.
7. In Genesis, one creation story says that on the 7th day God rested. It does go on to say throughout the Hebrew bible that God was still active in all of their journeys. God did not disappear after a day of “rest!” They understood that God was still speaking thru the prophets and involvement in the nation's history.
8. Jesus prayed that all of his followers would be one. We are not there yet. Our motto united and uniting reminds us of an ongoing challenge. God is not thru with us as individuals, as a congregation, as a denomination, as a worldwide faith!
9. In the words of the hymn we shall sing and of an early Pilgrim: “God still has more truth to break forth from God's Holy Word.” That Holy Word, that Word made flesh, that Resurrected word that we celebrate in each communion worship that we believe is ever with us!
10. I don't have to worship the Bible. That would be idolatry. I trust God to speak thru the human writers to lead to truth and understanding. I don't have to take it literally or as infallible or as the last word. God is still speaking!
11. As our denomination enters its 50th anniversary year with TV ads, we have discovered so many who have been hurt by the church, who have dropped out of the church as irrelevant and yet looking for a place to call a faith home. And as congregations have taken seriously welcoming they have found a place.

So what do you think when you hear or read that GOD IS STILL SPEAKING? One of your neighbors might ask you! May we be good listeners of God and neighbor!

Some reflections on Stewardship

Dale asked me to fill in for Tom: he had no problem with my asking for \$\$!

#1

I am told that the average giving to churches is around 2.7% of income. I have no idea what it is at Mayflower. This is certainly a generous congregation. Not many congregations choose to underwrite a Habitat House by themselves!

#2

But for the past two months, we have heard that all budgets must be cut for next year. I wonder if that is what you really want....Christian Education said at their meeting, "How can we cut anything from our small budget?" In some ways they would have liked to increase it!

#3

Did you hear about the congregation in Chicago that was facing a budget deficit? They were asked to bring in their lottery ticket stubs on a particular Sunday? When they were totaled it came to around \$5000 worth of stubs! Where do we choose to spend our \$\$? How much faith do we put in the ministry of Mayflower and the influence we have in this community?

#4

What if we chose to increase our pledge or giving by another 1%? From 2 to 3; or 3 to 4, or 5 to 6%?(If you don't know get out your last tax return.) Of course, some may not be able to do that, and some may even have to reduce their giving. But what if we as an act of trust in God's generosity dared to challenge ourselves? As Tom has gotten to know you in these past two years, I have heard him say that a budget of \$300,000 is not out of the realm of possibility!

Can we stop thinking of how we can cut our budget and rather think of all the possibilities that God is calling us to believe in?

The generous gift of a noon meal awaits us for next Sunday. Let us Surprise the Board of Stewardship when they count our estimate of giving cards while we eat! Let us shock them!

As Dr. Phil says, "I just want you to get excited about your life!" Or as every pastor tries to say in one way or another, "I just want you to get excited about your church!"

I'm Kenneth Crouch and I approve this message.