

Why Read An Old Dusty Book?

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July 7, 2019

2 Timothy 3:10-17

Several weeks ago, during a Saturday spring clean up work day, we had 13 people here at the church. We went about clearing out old things in the building that have been sitting around for a while that we no longer need. Some of those things have not been used in decades and yet we have kept them around for some reason anyway, and they have been taking up space.

We said enough is enough and we moved them out. These things include the organ that has been sitting unused in the Parlor for quite a long while along with several cabinets and dishes and other items.

We also went through some of the bookshelves in the library and found some children's books and educational materials from the 1950s and even older. My guess is that some of those books have not been looked at perhaps in 30-40 years or more. Those dusty books are filled with teaching methods and even language that was useful

in their day, but are now far outdated.

They simply will not work for children's ministry today or in the foreseeable future, so we got rid of them.

We cleared space for newer decorations, newer books, newer resources — and it felt good!

We believe that updating teaching styles and materials as well as organization structures is a good practice. New materials and structures are needed to replace the old stale ones that no longer work.

When we get a notice that there is a new update to our computer software, we download it because the developers have fixed bugs, fortified firewalls, added new features, streamlined the user experience and in other ways have made the software better than it was.

In our church we are looking to update our structures and teaching styles based on research and solid current-day practices that are proven to work in the world in which we now live.

We can point to an assortment of compelling evidence that the new ways are better than the old.

So, why is it that we still read every week from a very old and dusty book we call the Bible? In fact, we more than read it, we center every worship service around it! We say that even though this book is very old, it still is relevant today.

If a person who has never read it were to look at it, they might consider it a book of jumbled up pieces of poetry, history, folk tales, ethical teaching, strange stories, and some even stranger people. Could this book really hold anything relevant for our lives today?

Here is a Bible that was printed in 1901. Bud Page gave this to me before he moved to Connecticut a year or so ago. I brought up some Bibles from the archives that were printed around the time that this church was founded in 1870.

So why, if we throw away teaching materials that are 60 years old, do we keep reading and using a book that holds ancient writings, the newest of which is nearly 2000 years old?

Isn't there an updated version?

Haven't people built on the learning of those ancient people and written a Bible, version 2.0, or 3.0, or maybe 28.0. There has been plenty of time to do it! Haven't

people gained more wisdom since those days and produced something better?

Are we like the Amish who have fashioned their life template from an older day (for them the 1800s) and refused to advance our wisdom and learning?

I want to read for you something from this old dusty book. It is a letter to a man named Timothy from his friend and mentor, a man named Paul.

Paul wrote this letter probably about 60 some years after Jesus' birth, so nearly 2000 years ago. He referred to the "sacred writings" and the "scriptures," which at that time were already ancient. Some of them were more than a thousand years old in Paul's day.

We now call some of those writings the "Old Testament," but for Paul and Timothy, they were the Jewish scriptures which they cherished and looked to for guidance in their lives.

READ 2 TIMOTHY 3:10-17

Paul was saying that these old dusty writings were not to be thrown away. Instead, they were helpful to learn and study because there was a deeper quality to them. They were unique.

Paul and other Jews believed these were not static stories from the past, but living texts with many layers of meaning being added through time.

He understood them as access points for people to see how God worked in the past, continued to work in the present, and could be expected to work in the future.

These old writings require that people have patience to read them with the imagination that the Holy Spirit provides.

There is a keyword to the passage. Paul said that all scripture was “inspired” by God. In other translations it says that all scripture was “breathed” by God.

What was Paul saying?

First, how do we understand the word “inspired”? Sometimes we talk about individuals who have faced the challenges of life and overcome them. We say that their story is inspiring. They did something out of the ordinary and it leaves us feeling inspired.

I think about a man named Nick Vujicic from Australia who was born without arms and legs. He struggled mightily and overcame a lack of limbs to become a motivational speaker. He’s written

books, starred in movies, even got married. He swims, plays golf, and does many things people told him he would never be able to do. Nick’s life is inspiring. It boosts our spirits.

However, this doesn’t actually get at what Paul means when he talks about ancient scriptures being inspired by God. There is something quite deeper.

Some people talk about the Bible being written by people who went into a trance-like neutral state becoming a vessel for God to speak through their hands onto paper or parchment. These “inspired” people functioned like God’s keyboard, or dictation assistant writing what God literally told them to write word for word.

This is where we get the idea of the Bible being the “Word of God.” However, the book of John is clear, it wasn’t the writings of scripture that were the Word of God, it was Jesus himself.

This trance dictation idea doesn’t work so well either because we see a whole lot of personality of Paul in his writing. This also true of the prophets in the Old Testament and other writers throughout the Bible. The circumstance of their lives were not flattened out, but actually

prominently accentuated and shaped how and what they wrote.

A third more nuanced way that some people think about the Bible being “inspired” is by presuming that the Bible is going to support their particular way of seeing God and the world, and support their agenda, whatever that may be.

However, these ancient texts have a way of disrupting any system of theology. In fact, the Bible often frees us from human-made systems or frameworks of thought and allow us to see a larger world.

The Bible simply can't be co-opted for political purpose like Hitler attempted to do in the 1930s.

It cannot be cast in the corner of the Republican or Democratic party in the United States.

Neither can it be harnessed for the purposes of only one branch of Christianity, like the Methodists, Catholics, or Baptists.

No, the Bible is much bigger than all of those structures that were crafted by people. It includes great unity and diversity allowing the stories to use us, rather than us use them.

In this letter, Paul said that these ancient writings were as powerful

for his day as they were the day they were written.

Perhaps they also have power to transform our lives and make us wise, seeing things we had never seen before, to think in new patterns, and to live in new ways.

If we allow these old dusty stories to have their way with us, we can discover that they are not so old and dusty after all. We may even find ourselves inside those ancient stories that are coming to life in our day.

When we open ourselves to these inspired stories, we find it wasn't only those ancient people who were freed from slavery, but we ourselves have been freed from addiction, from abusive situations, from the mindset of despair.

It wasn't only King David who was forgiven for adultery, murder and self-centeredness, but we also find grace and forgiveness from the burdens of judgement and discrimination that have burdened our hearts.

We find we are forgiven through grace and are even now part of God's new, unfolding creation.

This all happens as we allow the stories, poems, and letters to sink

into our subconscious and re-pattern our lives.

Paul said that scripture teaches us. Perhaps that is simple to understand, but it also says scripture is good for “reproof.” This means scripture can reprimand us when we are off the path and out of step with how God made us.

Perhaps you have had that experience when reading scripture. You find that it is convicting you to change. That’s how the Bible sometimes comes to life for us.

Paul said that scripture was also for training in righteousness. This is about the long-game, a life that is continually transformed by God’s Spirit. We read something that we perhaps have read many times before, but now we hear a new layer of meaning that takes us deeper, closer to the heart of God.

This isn’t about squashing people into an unnatural mold that doesn’t fit.

No, honestly and faithfully reading scripture will help us to become more fully what God created us to be and to do in this life — that each of our lives might be more full, reflecting God’s image of splendor.

If this old dusty book holds that kind of power, do you think it is worth keeping around and reading?