The "Say-ings" of God

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Introduction

The Supreme Court of Canada has become increasingly involved in determining which of the laws that the Canadian Parliament has passed are constitutional. The authority or standard by which they judge Canadian law is The Constitution Act, 1982 (containing the Charter of Rights and Freedoms). If a particular law is deemed contrary to the guarantees of The Constitution, then the Supreme Court nullifies that law. If a particular law is considered to uphold the guarantees of The Constitution, then the Supreme Court upholds that law. All the laws of Canada are interpreted through the authority of The Constitution Act, 1982.

The use of written materials as an authority or standard by which we judge other writings or even behaviors is a common feature in our world today. Christians, for millennia, have operated in a similar vein. Christians use the Bible as the authority for living an obedient and faithful life. In particular, Reformed Christians have historically been known as "people of the Book." The formula of Declaration for Ministers of Word and Sacrament read by all Reformed Church in America candidates during their ordinations or installation services declares, "I accept the Scriptures as the only rule of faith and life."\(^1\) The Bible (or the Scriptures) is central to our Reformed heritage and faith. Thus, we believe that the Bible is the final authority by which we judge our beliefs, our patterns of thinking, our motives, our behaviors, and our attitudes.

In the Reformed Church in America we believe that our confessional standards are "historic and faithful witnesses to the Word of God."\(^2\) Therefore, we affirm the words of the Belgic Confession of Faith, Article 5, "We receive all these books and these only as holy and canonical, for the regulating, founding, and establishing of our faith."\(^3\) It is nothing other than the Bible, the Word of God, which founds, establishes, and regulates our faith. The Bible is central to our beliefs and to our practices.

Why is that? Why do we believe that the Bible is authoritative? What use is there in having such an authority? The authority of the Bible is rooted in the inspiration of the Bible. We believe that the Bible is the Word of God. When we read the Bible, it is as if God is speaking to us. This belief is adequately stated in the Belgic Confession, Article 3:

We confess that this Word of God was not sent nor delivered "by human will," but that "men and women moved by the Holy Spirit, spoke from God," as Saint Peter says. Afterward our
God . . . commanded the prophets and apostles, God's servants, to commit this revealed Word to writing. The Bible is authoritative because it is the very Word of God. The Apostle Paul calls it, "God-breathed" (2 Tim. 3:16, NIV, here and throughout). All Scripture comes from the very mouth of God and therefore, we believe it is authoritative; it is the standard upon which we base our faith and life.

The Word of God is not only authoritative; it is effective. Consider the image that God uses in Isaiah 55:10-11 to describe it:

As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.

God's Word is life transforming. Just as rain transforms a dry and parched land into a fertile garden, so also God's Word transforms dry and parched hearts and minds into fertile hearts and minds. Rain performs a specific purpose in the cycle of precipitation, and it is always effective in accomplishing its purpose. God's Word has a specific purpose and it also will be effective in accomplishing it.

Because the Bible is inspired by God, it is authoritative and effective. This is the belief of Christians around the world, and this is my belief personally and pastorally. When I feel drained by the stresses of life in the twenty-first century, I surrender myself to the Word of God so that God's Word can fill me full of:

- strength to walk the path,
- courage to face another day,
- grace to show to people,
- peace to calm my soul,
- hope to inspire my future, and
- joy for the journey.

When I am confused in my pastoral ministry, I turn to God's Word to give me the vision for

- what to teach,
- what to preach,
- how to give pastoral care,
- where to lead, and
- how to inspire faithfulness.

The Bible is inspired by God and so it is inspiring for all who read it. We are all on a journey in life. The journey I am on seeks to understand the Bible better so that both I and the flock God has placed under my care may grow to spiritual maturity.
My own journey with the Bible has been one of increasing desire. Psalm 119 is a wonderful psalm about the Word of God. The psalmist states unequivocally, "I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you" (v. 11). The Hebrew word translated by "word" is 'imrah and finds its root in the verb 'amar, "to say." The psalmist is stating that what he hides in his heart is nothing less than the very "say-ings," utterances, or speech of God. Doing that protects him from sin. I too am beginning to appreciate the importance of hiding in my heart what God is "say-ing." Not only does it protect me from sin, but it also provides strength when I am weak, comfort when I am perplexed, and encouragement when I am stressed out.

The Word of God which the psalmist hides refers to the Torah. Later in the psalm, he proclaims, "Oh, how I love your law! I meditate on it all day long" (v. 97). Here the English word "law" represents the Hebrew torah, a word derived from the verb yarah, "to guide, to direct, to make straight." This verb is used to describe archery. As a guide, the archer uses the bow to "make a straight path" for the arrow. Torah is also the Hebrew title of the first five books of the Bible. What we call the law of God the Hebrews called "God's guidance." The Torah was life to the Hebrews because in reciting it, meditating on it, and living by it, God's people could have a new life of freedom in following God's way.

God's words were written down in the words of the Bible. The Torah is the inspired guidance given to God's people so that they may live in abundant freedom. Because my own perceptions of God's Word have changed over the years, I no longer disregard the Torah. I no longer read a short verse here and there, avoid the difficult passages, or am afraid to memorize it. As I now walk down a new path with God's Word, I rejoice with the psalmist, "Oh, how I love your law! I meditate on it all day long." The psalmist's testimony has become my testimony: "I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you."

There is life transforming power in the Bible (cf. Isa. 55:10-11). This means that the more I allow the Word of the Lord to live in me, the more I am able to live by it. If I only read a passage once or twice, then I control it and I decide what it means. But if I memorize the passage, then God's Word controls me and shapes who I am. I have found great joy and freedom in opening up my soul to the life-transforming power in the Word. To memorize Scripture is not an arduous task. It is a joy-filled opportunity to listen to the very "say-ings" of the God who created heaven and earth. It is an opportunity for God to speak to me, to guide me, and to make my paths straight.

My pilgrimage represents an increasing desire for God's Word to live in me. Why? Because there is goodness in God's Word. As the psalmist says, God's Word refreshes us and tantalizes the desires of our hearts: "How sweet are your promises to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!" (119:103). Honey sweetens the taste buds. Just as one taste of honey cultivates a desire for
another, so also one taste of the sweet "say-ings" of God creates a desire for more.

My first hope for the people I am currently serving was that they too would have this desire for God's Word, that they too would find the "say-ings" of God to be sweeter than the honeycomb. Throughout my years in university and seminary I grew in my appreciation of and desire for the Bible. It took me ten years to grow the point where I crave the Word of God as much as I crave the tantalizing taste of Baskin Robbin's Mississippi Mud ice cream. Now I long for the people in my church to have the same experience. Today, some certainly do have it, but if I want their experience to be authentic and permanent, I must be patient. As I preach, teach, and pastor with the authority of the Word, I hope that I am creating a new or renewed desire for the very "say-ings" of the living God.

The Pastor's Use of the Bible

As people of the Book, Christians use the Bible in every aspect of their ministry. It is the authoritative basis of all that we do as the church. Therefore, the Bible, the "say-ings" of God, is the basis of my preaching, teaching, and pastoral care.

Preaching Ministry

The preaching of God's holy Word is central in the lives of most churches. Every Sunday God's people gather to worship the Lord as king of the universe. They praise God for who God is and for what God has done. They present their burdens and ask divine providence to carry those burdens for them. They bring gifts to glorify God and to build up Christ's church. And they come to hear the Word of God addressed to them.

As their preacher, I have the awesome weekly task of proclaiming to them the very "say-ings" of the creator of heaven and earth. To prepare to preach is to sit on holy ground; to preach is to stand on holy ground. Although Sunday morning is the main event between God and God's people, the daily waiting is the main event between God and God's preacher.

Sermon preparation begins with reading the biblical text. During the week I read it in English translation at least five times a day. The more I read, the more the "say-ings" of God live in me, and the more they live in me, the more they mold and shape me. The more I am molded, the more clearly I hear God's voice speaking to me. Whenever I fail to practice this ideal, my spiritual maturity suffers.

Once the passage begins to live in me, I translate it from its original language, whether Hebrew or Greek. That privilege makes me grateful to seminary professors who inspired me to love the biblical languages, and to God who blessed me with the gifts to acquire them.

I translate to gain a fuller understanding of the biblical text. I learn how words are used both in the passage at hand and elsewhere in the Bible. I learn the force, impact, and direction of the verbs. For example, in 1 Samuel 30:6,
David is in great danger because his people are ready to stone him. What does he do? According to the NIV, "David found strength in the Lord his God." The NRSV reads, "David strengthened himself in the Lord his God." Which did David do? Did he go looking for strength or did he strengthen himself? In Hebrew, the verb employed is in its intensive, reflexive form. Thus, the proper translation is, "David strengthened himself." In tough times this leader of God's people did something: he strengthened himself. By taking care of himself, David was able to go back into the fray and lead the people. In my sermon, then, I would highlight the importance of self-care in the midst of adversity. This insight is based on careful study of the words of the text.

Another vital element in sermon preparation is an understanding of the world we live in. Preachers must study contemporary culture in order to gain a better appreciation of where, when, and how the Bible complements or contradicts our culture. Effective preaching involves an interaction between the world of the Bible and our world. For example, the prime time television show Felicity is popular among teens. In one episode, viewers learn that Felicity has been dating her close girlfriend's ex-boyfriend. When her girlfriend discovers this relationship, she is so furious that she cannot stand to be anywhere near Felicity. She even goes so far as to write a song about Felicity's betrayal. No matter how much Felicity humbles herself and asks forgiveness, her friend will not give it. Finally, Felicity hears the cutting words, "I will never forgive you!" Jesus said, "For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins" (Matt. 6:14-15). Here we witness the stark contrast between how television and Jesus teach us to respond to people who have hurt us. Preachers must know what is going on in our culture in order to know the forces that are shaping the people of God. In preparing to preach, I study the Word of God very intensively and our world very closely. From doing both activities I gain a better sense of what God's Word then is saying to God's people now.

**Teaching Ministry**

In seminary I learned that the Bible's language, culture, and geography impact the meaning of its stories. The words of Jesus at Caesarea Philippi (Matt. 16) offer an excellent example. Caesarea Philippi was the capital city of Herod Philip the Tetrarch. Its principle feature was the temple of Pan (god of shepherds, flocks, and forests) with its spring. Because the city's residents believed that the place where water came out of the earth was a gateway to the underworld, it was called the "Gate of Hades." People came from near and far to worship Pan at this apparently "sacred" site. When Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do you say I am?" Peter responded, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matt. 16:15-16, emphasis mine).

The word "living" is important. Peter is in a city that worships Pan. In essence he is saying, "You are the Son of the living God, not this dead god who
is not real. You are real and alive!" Peter's confession takes on additional meaning when we understand its geographical setting. Peter is at the gateway to the underworld. Jesus says, "And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it" (Matt. 16:18). God will build his church in the most wicked and evil places. The mission of the church, then, is to replace the sick, pagan places of worship. Neither the gates of Hades nor even the god Pan will be able to stop Jesus' church. Only by understanding that Jesus' teaching at Caesarea Philippi was shaped by the geography and the cultural beliefs of the day can we grasp the lesson he was teaching his disciples.

One of my passions is to redeem Christian terminology from the corruptions that have obscured its original meaning. For example, the English word "church" is derived from the Greek word kuriakos, which means "belonging to the Lord" (this derivation is seen more clearly in the German Kirche, the Celtic kirk, and the Dutch kerk). Therefore, "church" refers to those who belong to the Lord; it refers to people. Yet, most Christians today use "church" to refer to a building. The recovery of proper usage brings a welcome emphasis on the people of God.

Such recovery also points us to the proper term for the building. The people of Israel called their temple in Jerusalem, "the house" (habbayit) or the house of the Lord (bet yhwh). Therefore, it is best to refer to the building as God's house, or the house of worship. What happens on Sunday morning, then, is not that Christians "go to church," but that the church gathers in God's house for worship.

Pastoral Ministry

Pastoral ministry is the ministry of providing pastoral care. It takes the form of home visitations, hospital visitations, counseling sessions, impromptu telephone calls, and conversations with drop-in visitors. Here the challenge is to use Scripture in ways that are genuinely relevant and that attend to context. Thus, in pastoral ministry too, my personal pilgrimage with the Bible continues. As I allow God's "say-ings" to live within me, I am shaped, molded, challenged, confronted, comforted, and given peace. The more my reservoir is filled with God's "say-ings," the more I have to offer to those in need of pastoral care and comfort. Because I am young, and only recently ordained, my reservoir of Scripture is still growing.

I do not want to offer empty exhortations void of a context to persons whose current life experience is debilitating their spiritual growth. So I resist saying, "Jesus told his disciples, 'Trust in God; trust also in me' (John 14:1). I know it seems like this situation will never end and may only get worse, but just trust in God." Nor do persons struggling with an addiction need a simple "three-step process" to freedom. So I resist the urge to say, "The Apostle Paul wrote these words to his friends at Corinth: 'Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!' (2 Cor. 5:17). Don't worry about it; it's all gone now."
Although these two New Testament texts are wonderful statements about living out Christian commitment, the way in which they are shared is vitally important. In ministry to broken and hurting people, biblical stories help them deal with their wounds and their pain. They should feel the pain and find God in the midst of it; they can see Jesus guiding them through their woundedness to healing. Offering short exhortations which do not empathize with their pressing concerns only creates further unresolved issues, unmet needs, or unhealed wounds. People need to walk the pathway of suffering as Jesus did. They should neither ignore their suffering nor pretend it does not exist. Pastoral ministry should use the Bible in a way that connects with whatever crises one's parishioners are experiencing.

The People's Response to the Bible

In order to provide an accurate report of how my use of the Bible affects my parishioners, I interviewed several of them. The following sections reflect their responses.

**Preaching Ministry**

Preachers read, pray, study, translate, memorize, and meditate all week along. On Sunday they stand and proclaim, "Hear, O church of Christ, this is the Word of God." After preaching, they wonder if the sermon has made a difference in the congregation's lives. Usually, preachers stand at the door as the people leave. What does the preacher say to the people? What do the people say to the preacher? Following a biblical precedent, I usually speak a word of blessing to them. "The Lord be with you," or, "Blessings on your home," or, "May God bless you this week." In response, most people offer a generic hello or goodbye. Some look me in the eye and say, "Thank you. I was challenged"; others share a tidbit from their lives.

Then one day the unexpected happened. Before I could say anything, one parishioner said to me, "I didn't like your sermon today . . . ." There was a slight pause. In that moment, with her looking deep into my eyes, I panicked. She had always been supportive and encouraging. Her comments had always been insightful and inspiring. But now, but now, but now . . . that was all gone. The anxieties and insecurities of my past rose to the surface. My search for acceptance and validation was over. I was out; she did not like the sermon; she did not like me. Then she continued, "... but I needed it." Whew! "Be still, my soul: the Lord is on thy side!" It was not about me; it was about her. What an arrogant fool I was to think that it was all about me.

How much those words spoke to me. They affirmed that God's message gets through to confront God's people. It touches on the traumatic experiences of their lives. The "say-ings" of God push their buttons and engage them emotionally. When this woman told me, "I didn't like your sermon today, but I needed it," I thought, "Wow! Here is a spiritually aware person." Our culture tells us to deny our pain, to repress our woundedness, and to pretend that we are
Strong. But then God speaks and suddenly it hurts. We do not always like God's message, but we need it to challenge, to comfort, and to heal us.

**Teaching Ministry**

In gathering responses to this part of ministry, I asked people to focus on a program I offer entitled, "The Land, the Culture, and the Book." This ninety-minute teaching session uses a five-volume video series produced by Focus on the Family in conjunction with That the World May Know ministries, and features Ray Vander Laan. In addition to the video presentation, participants view maps and pictures of Bible lands, hear lectures, join discussions, and make personal applications of the materials.

One interviewee acknowledged that the program meets a need for increased biblical knowledge and understanding but neglects the need for participants to share their personal lives. In some ways, that is by design. When I came to this church, not many members were receiving any adult Christian education. Therefore, I designed a seminar approach with lectures that is suitable for a large number of participants. Our church has a place for small groups alongside of this style of teaching ministry, and I pray that their number will also grow.

Another participant in this program said, "The teaching in the course is making the Bible more relevant to our times for me." The question of relevancy is very important in a post-modern culture. People want to know the answer to the questions, "So what?" and "Who cares?" By looking at the failures and successes of the heroes and heroines of the Bible, they learn about living as faithful and passionate followers of Jesus. The ancient cultures surrounding the nation of Israel were just as pagan, immoral, debauched, and deluded as today's postmodern culture. The Old Testament stories of the Israelites teach God's twenty-first century people how to confront a pagan culture without being conformed to it.

**Pastoral Ministry**

Pastoral ministry is my major growth area. I am still learning how to provide spiritual care for people. I believe that I will come to care for people properly as I understand them better and allow more of God's Word to live within me. Not having received much feedback in this area, I can only relate one situation that continues to bring joy to my soul.

The occasion was a hospital visit with a woman about to have surgery. After greeting each other, we exchanged the normal chitchat about our daily lives. She shared her hopes and fears with me. Her hope and faith in God far outweighed her fears and anxieties about the surgery. "Can I read you one of your favorite Bible passages?" I asked. "They are all favorites. You choose," she replied. "How about one of my favorites?" I offered. "Sure," she said with a smile. "Psalm 91," I said. At this point it was not her words but the expression on her face that struck me. Her eyes lit up like the stars in the sky; her countenance
glowed like a candle; her lips hinted that a warm feeling was coming over her. "Oh, I love that one," she exclaimed.

Were my responses profound in this ministry moment? Probably not, but the Spirit of the living God was upon this woman, filling her with all the grace and peace that she needed. It was a sacred place and a holy moment. It was a moment when God's grace was abundantly displayed. It affirms the belief of the psalmist: "I am still confident of this: I will see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living" (27:13).

Conclusion

That God speaks is a central belief of Christians around the world, and it is a belief I hold dearly. I would not be able to fulfill my calling as a parish pastor without the living Lord of hosts speaking to me. Although it might seem presumptuous to believe that God speaks to me, it is the truth. If God were not to speak to me, and if God never spoke throughout history to the prophets and apostles, then I would not be serving Christ's church. It is the very "say-ings" of God that give life to my soul; nourish my spiritual longings; and give direction to my preaching, teaching, and pastoral ministries. The Lord has spoken in the writings we call the Bible, and the Lord still speaks to us today through those "say-ings." God is wise, understanding, compassionate, holy, loving, just, and much more. In love, God has blessed us with the guidance about how to live in righteous ways that will glorify the One who created us and that will edify the ones who live next to us. It is an honor to serve the God whose self-revelation has been preserved in the Bible. God's inspired Word is still the arrow that effectively guides and transforms our lives.

Praise the Lord, O my soul; and my inmost being, praise his holy name.
Praise the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits (Ps. 103:1-2).

ENDNOTES

1 The Book of Church Order, RCA, 2000 ed., 126.
2 Ibid.
3 Liturgy and Confessions, RCA (Reformed Church Press, 1990).
4 Ibid.
In this volume, Kistemaker provides a comprehensive look into one of the most intriguing books of the Bible.

"He has a 'feel' for the text and a 'heart' for its content, so what he writes will prove helpful for preachers, teachers, and earnest students."

—Richard Longenecker, on Kistemaker's work