

The Subversive Word of God

1 Thessalonians 2:13-16

Last Tuesday night at Alpha we heard the statistic that an American household contains on average 6.8 copies of the Bible. Always eager to confirm that I'm "above average," I went home and counted the number of Bibles in our home. I counted 29 bibles and I'm sure I missed a few. We decided to give a bunch of them away to trick-or-treaters (just kidding).

I suspect that some of you have lots of Bibles too, maybe even some as historic and weighty as my grandmother's bible. My question is, "What are we supposed to be doing with all these Bibles?" Really. What are we supposed to be doing with all these Bibles on our bookshelves, nightstands, and desks?

The church has a long, rich history of referring to the Bible as the "word of God." If you've gone to church for a long time, the idea that the truth about Jesus (or the Bible) is the "word of God" may be ho-hum to you. But think about what is being said here. Words reveal. Words communicate things that we otherwise wouldn't know. For example, as I look at you this morning, most of you look like you're paying attention. But I may be completely wrong. You may be thinking about something completely different. You may be thinking about something you did last night or something you need to do this afternoon. You may be thinking about a conversation you had on the way to church. You may be thinking about football or politics. My point is that I simply can't know those things unless you tell them to me. You could draw me a picture or let me read your body language, but the best way to tell me what is happening inside you is through words – either written or spoken.

In the same way, we simply wouldn't know what God thinks or what God is planning to do unless He tells us. God communicates to us in numerous ways (e.g. in creation), but the most explicit way that He speaks to us is through words – either written or spoken. God accommodates our human limitations by speaking to us in human language. God's words tell us things that we simply wouldn't otherwise know and couldn't figure out. The word(s) of God is therefore the most precious, powerful, and valuable information that humanity possesses.

If the Bible is the word of God, we can restate the question, "What are we supposed to be doing with *the word of God*?" If the Bible really is the word of God that is more precious and more powerful than anything else, the answer is, "We are supposed to hear and accept the word of God and allow it to perform its work in our lives."

Today as we continue our study in 1 Thessalonians, we are going to see how the Thessalonians received the message about Jesus as "the word of God" and how it transformed their lives. As we look at their example, we are going to be challenged to do the same.

Accepting the word of God "for what it really is" (2:13-16) Let's notice first how the Thessalonians accepted the word of God:

13 For this reason we also constantly thank God that when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe.

Paul is reflecting back to the time when he, Silas, and Timothy showed up in Thessalonica and communicated the gospel. They initially went to the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews; then they went to the general population (which included many who worshipped idols). A mix of people – both Jewish and pagan – came to faith in Christ and comprised the church at Thessalonica. The thing that made such a deep impression upon Paul was that when they communicated the truth about Jesus, the Thessalonians received their message as the word of God. They didn't think, "Out of all the human philosophies we've heard, this one is the best. . ." Rather, they consciously accepted the truth about Jesus "for what it really is, the word of God." Paul thanked God that the Thessalonians had received the truth about Jesus as the word of God.

Paul mentions that the word of God "performs its work in you who believe." Those who accept/receive the word of God find that it transforms them.

Over in chapter 4 after Paul teaches about sexual purity, he communicates what's at stake by saying in 4:8,

8 So, he who rejects this is not rejecting man but the God who gives His Holy Spirit to you.

As one of the original apostles, Paul spoke with the authority of an OT prophet. What he taught wasn't merely good advice or his own personal opinion (when it was he made that clear – see 1 Corinthians 7:25). Paul communicated the word of God. Consequently, rejecting Paul's teaching was "not rejecting man but the God who gives His Holy Spirit to you." This and other Scriptures confirm that the writings of the original apostles were "the word of God" (see also 2 Peter 3:16 in which Paul's writings are considered to be "Scripture"). The Thessalonians had accepted Paul's original teaching about Jesus as the word of God.

In verses 14 through 16 Paul explains how the word of God was performing its work in the Thessalonians. Their willingness to suffer for Christ was evidence that the word of God was powerful in their lives:

14 For you, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea, for you also endured the same sufferings at the hands of your own countrymen, even as they did from the Jews,

Back in 1:6 Paul had pointed out that the Thessalonians had imitated both him and Jesus Christ in their willingness to suffer. Here he mentions that they also became imitators of the churches in Judea (which included Jerusalem and surrounding districts). Specifically, the Thessalonians suffered at the hands of *their* countrymen the same things that churches in Judea suffered at the hands of the Jews. Persecution has its similarities in every culture and in every generation. Paul commended the Thessalonians for standing in the strong tradition of suffering for Christ well.

Paul recounts in verses 15 and 16 how the Jews persecuted the churches in Judea:

15 who both killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out. They are not pleasing to God, but hostile to all men, 16 hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved; with the result that they always fill up the measure of their sins. But wrath has come upon them to the utmost.

By trying to hinder Paul and the other apostles from telling the Gentiles that Jesus the Messiah came to save them too, the Jewish authorities were setting themselves against God and His purposes. In a sense, Paul says, they were “filling up the measure of their sins.” If sin is an offense against God, they sinned about as fully as they possibly could when it came to persecuting followers of Christ. Consequently, God’s “wrath had come upon them to the utmost.” Each of us deserves the wrath of God for our sin. The Jews in Judea who conceived and participated in this persecution of the infant church there invited God’s wrath in a most egregious way.

Remember the point of Paul recounting all of this: the Thessalonians had experienced this same type of opposition. Acts 17 records how the Jewish authorities in Thessalonica had stirred up the population to persecute the infant church there. And the Thessalonians responded just as the churches in Judea; they suffered well. Their endurance was evidence that they had accepted the message of Jesus as the word of God and that it was performing its work in their lives.

I’m sure that the Thessalonians didn’t listen to Paul’s message thinking, “We’re tired of living calm, comfortable lives. What we really want is for our neighbors and our city officials to harass us and persecute us because of our faith. We want to learn how to endure that type of opposition joyfully!” That probably wasn’t their ambition. But that’s the work that the word of God performed in them. It did a work in them that they couldn’t have predicted.

That’s what the word of God always does when it’s accepted for what it really is. It undermines the life that we’re living and escorts us into the kingdom of God. The word of God isn’t magic; you aren’t going to experience the kingdom of God by sleeping with a Bible under your pillow. The word of God transforms us as we read/hear it and ponder it.

We all know what a travel guide is – like the “Lonely Planet’s Travel Guide to Switzerland.” A travel guide describes hotels, restaurants, tourist attractions, and lots of information about another land. The Scriptures aren’t merely a travel guide for the kingdom of God. They don’t merely give information about what you can taste, see, and experience there. The Scriptures can actually usher you into that land/kingdom. The word of God doesn’t merely tell you *about* the kingdom of God; it can actually *take* you there. In other words, the word of God “performs its work in you who believe.”

Some of you have heard me tell about my experience with Scripture. When I was a kid (probably in 3rd grade) a Sunday school teacher made the comment that if you had a stack of books and one of them was the Bible, the Bible should be on the top. I’m sure she was communicating a reverence for the Bible, but I came away with more superstition than anything. I think I came away believing that something bad might happen to me if I put another book on top of the Bible. As I got into high school and college, I retained a sense that it’s good to read the Bible. It didn’t matter what I’d been doing that night, I almost always read a few verses from the Bible before I went to bed. It was just something I did (like brushing my teeth and eating breakfast); I didn’t give it a lot of thought.

But my sophomore year in college I got to know a group of students who were walking with God, who talked about Jesus like He was a real person, and who invited me to study the Bible. The fall of ’79 I did what the Thessalonians did: I accepted the truth about Jesus as the word of

God. And the word of God began performing its work in me. I began to be nourished and challenged and encouraged by the Scriptures.

The following year I changed schools (from Southern Miss to LSU) and really started a new life. I got in a Bible study that was studied through 2 Timothy. You have to take my word for this, but I have never recovered from the time I spend in 2 Timothy 28 years ago. It continues to shape and inform my life. Let me explain.

I immediately had an affinity with Timothy: he was a young man whose mom was a Jewish believer in Jesus (as is mine); his dad was a Gentile (as was mine); he was somewhat sensitive (just like me). As I immersed myself in 2 Timothy (and then 1 Timothy) I heard the voice of God. Paul wasn't merely writing to Timothy; it became God saying *to me*, "Fan into flame the spiritual gift within you," and "Study to show yourself approved . . . as a workman . . . handling accurately the word of truth," and "the Lord's bondservant must not be quarrelsome," and "Let no one look down on your youthfulness." Eventually the part of the word of God that we can in 1 and 2 Timothy captured my heart and mind. God used these writings both to shape my life and to give theological definition to how He had gifted me and to what He was doing in my life.

My experience points out just how subversive the gospel and the word of God really is. I never would have guessed it, but God used 2 Timothy to turn me into a pastor.

A Warning: The word of God is subversive. If you receive the word of God for what it is – not the word of men but the word of God – all bets are off. There's really "no telling" what God will do in your life through His word. If you like your life just the way it is or if you really, truly don't want to live outside your comfort zone, then I would recommend that you *not* listen to the word of God. I say that because if you hear and receive the word of God, you will be drawn into a whole world that you never knew existed. The Scriptures invite us to participate in the kingdom of God itself.

A Perspective: It's not what you do to the word of God; it's what you allow the word of God to do to you. Eugene Peterson is so very insightful when it comes to American Christianity. He makes the following observation about how we tend to approach the Scriptures:

I am not the only one to notice that we are in the odd and embarrassing position of being a church in which many among us believe ardently in the authority of the Bible but, instead of submitting to it, use it, apply it, take charge of it endlessly, using our own experience as the authority for how and where and when we will use it.

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It's not what we do to the word of God; it's what we allow the word of God to do to us. So often we use the Bible like a manual to troubleshoot our lives. But the sobering reality is that God isn't committed merely to troubleshooting our lives. He isn't committed to solve our problems (especially the way we formulate our "problems"). In reality, He wants us to experience a type of life – a type of reality – that is so much richer and fuller than we have ever wanted for ourselves. He wants to give us things that we don't even know about. He wants us to participate in things that never expected.

Think about it this way. If you go to City Park you'll find three pools: a baby pool, a little kids' pool, and the big pool. Sometimes we experience the word of God like an adult stepping into the infant pool; we really only want to get ankle-deep. Sometimes we experience the word of God like the little kids' pool; we're knee-deep in truth. But sometimes we're "feelin' it" and our experience the word of God is like jumping off the deep end of the big pool; we're way over our heads. We think that we are experiencing everything we possibly can. But you need to understand this: the word of God isn't like the big pool at City Park. The word of God is like the *ocean* where you can't touch the bottom, you can't see the shore, and there are no life rafts. The kingdom of God is just that vast and terrifying and wonderful.

Additional Note: As an aside, Paul's comments in these verses that the Jews "killed the Lord Jesus" and that "they are not pleasing to God" have been misconstrued and misapplied down through the centuries. They have sometimes been used to justify anti-Semitic attitudes and actions. The reasoning is that since the Jews killed Christ and are not pleasing to God that any punishment they receive is justified. People have carried out unspeakable evil against Jewish populations in the name of Christ.

Of course such reasoning is completely foreign both to the spirit and actions of the apostle Paul. After the crucifixion of Jesus, Paul himself was among the Jews who persecuted Christians. He was in complete agreement with the Jews who killed Stephen by stoning. When Jesus confronted him on the road to Damascus, blinded him, and then revealed that He was indeed the Son of God, Paul became a new creature in Christ and an apostle to the Gentiles. But in Romans 9 Paul expressed that he had "great sorrow and unceasing grief" for his fellow Jews who hadn't yet come to Christ. He held out hope that if he – a Jewish man one who once hated and persecuted Christians – could come to Christ that other Jews could as well.