

“When Logic Leaves Truth Behind”

Proverbs 30:1-6; 2 Timothy 10:3-17

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One time, moving stuff to Atlanta I rented a U-Haul. Goodness, those things can be disasters sometimes. Well, I got one that looked pretty good. It was only when I got it out on the highway that a problem arose. The thing had a governor on it. You know, some kind of device that won't let you go over a certain speed limit.

Well, this U-Haul had one. And, even though the speed limits had changed, going up to 70 this one's governor was at 58 mpg. Here's how I know. See, I thought governors merely capped the throttle. Like, you'd hit whatever speed it was set on and, even if you were mashing the gas, it just wouldn't accelerate any further.

Not how they work.

You hit the limit speed on the governor and it shuts down the throttle, entirely. As it, you can't accelerate until it releases which, in the case of this U-Haul, happened at 50 miles per hour.

That meant that, should the truck ever hit 58, it would shut down until you were under 50. On that highway, it was dangerous. Getting going only to slow back down confuses other drivers and makes for an anxious trip. To be honest, in the U-Haul, I was a danger to myself and others.

I use that as an opening because, well, right now, Christianity in the West isn't going so great. Our numbers are dropping as they have been for decades now. I see a lot of churches trying to turn the tide but, just like that U-Haul, they get to a certain speed, and then, to use a different image, the wind drops out of their sails. They slow down. Some even die.

It's like they've got a governor on. They can only go so far and so fast.

If I were to guess the nature of what prevents the church of really getting going in the face of current events, I wouldn't call out some of the usual suspects. Instead, what keeps us from really going all out, our governor, so to speak, is the laity's knowledge of the Word.

The Word is akin to an infinite palate of colors which we God's children can use to paint glorious testimonies of praise to our Lord. Some colors are as bright and sunny as a summer day, warm and inviting. Still other hues strike dark and ominous. All of them, from Aquamarine to Magenta to midnight black, are the primary and certain means by which God is revealed to us.

But there's an important caveat.

Our interpretations of God's Word are, and always shall be, dynamic. But don't miss this, *the source material stays the same*. This is a blessing to the faithful for we can look at something solid. Rock upon which to build. But that fixity, certainty, well, it doesn't easily yield itself. The Bible is 66 books, written across hundreds of years by different authors in diverse settings.

That is to say that I am not unaware that reading the Bible and truly living in it is an easy proposition. No, your journey with the Bible isn't always going to be sunshine and roses. Getting to truly know the Word can honestly feel difficult. So many of our presuppositions, our faith beliefs even, aren't as in align with the Word as we may think. Reading the Word can jostle you around.

But the opposite, remaining ignorant, we can find ourselves unwittingly participating in the greatest con-job the world has ever known. Because you see, if you listen to the voices of the world around us, the Bible is a silly thing, filled with great errors and backwardness. It isn't sufficiently progressive, I guess you could say. Worse, if you take someone else's word for what the Bible actually says, as opposed to knowing the source material, so to speak.

Imagine, for example if somebody hands you a Clifford's children's book. Clifford, in case you didn't know, is a Ginormous (think house-sized) "Big Red Dog." Then, they ask you to summarize the book for an audience. So, you read the thing and, yes, true to the title, it is indeed a book about a big, red dog. When it's time to share your interpretation though, you begin by saying, "Well, to ME, this was a story about a microscopic blue cat."

Well, clearly if others in the room had read the same book what do you think their reaction's gonna be? Some, charitably, may make some passing-kind comment about you, like, "you've got a creative mind." But surely, others would cry out, "Hang on a second, your description is exactly the opposite of what the book is about!"

Now, imagine that nobody else in the room had read the book, Clifford the Big Red Dog. Further, the audience knows very little about the subject matter you're presenting. In fact, they don't even know the book's title. This time, when asked to synopsise the book, you make the exact same, highly questionable claim, "This book is about a microscopic, blue cat."

Now, however, everyone oohs and aahs over your knowledge.

Then, perhaps the next day, maybe the next week or year, you run into someone talking about the same exact book. Only they state something in opposition to your faulty understanding. That other person says, "This is a book about a Big Red Dog." To which the person who heard your assessment (and wants to look smart,) says, "No it isn't, it's about a Microscopic Blue Dog!" Next thing you know, these two are arguing.

One last addition, promise. In this scenario, two people meet. Both have been given very different but equally wrong assessments about Clifford the Big Red Dog. On top of that, man both have gone all-in on what they'd heard about the book, from a knowledgeable or trusted source. Maybe one's even the President of the World-Wide Microscopic Blue Cat Society with the other, I dunno, believe it's about Thermodynamics and it just as convinced he's right. How y'all think that one works out? I can guarantee they'll be at loggerheads. Who knows, maybe their conflict will even lead to fisticuffs.

There's an irony here. Here you've got two people getting angry with each other over a matter that's been explained to them wrongly. Man, that's like error squared. Too bad it's not like two negative numbers getting multiplied, they turn positive. No, error squared is just double the suck.

Okay, here's where I want it to end up. That's almost precisely what's happened when it comes to a good many Christians and their knowledge of the Word.

Answer honestly in your heart, "Have I read the Bible?" "Do I study it everyday, or even at all?"

Now, some of you may be thinking, "Jason, that's why we have you!" You'd be absolutely right, of course. But there's a deeper problem nobody's talking about. Let me tell you a story...

The Presbyterian Church (USA) requires a Bible content exam. The system may have changed but if it has, it's been a recent change. So, the Bible Content exam is taken some time after the END of your first year in seminary. Makes sense, right? Give future-pastors at least a year of in-depth coursework and they'll be ready. I mean, you probably assume people being called to become pastors would probably enter seminary already quite knowledgeable. Some, no doubt are. But a great many others, like myself, were largely ignorant on a lot of it. Here's how it went at Duke. I got one full year of Old Testament and one semester with an admittedly world class New Testament teacher. Sounds good, right?

Not so much. The Old Testament professor, a Christian environmentalist who was in the process of writing a book about the importance of the environment in the Old Testament. This translated into an entire class dedicated to reading out every nuance of this in books of the Bible. I'm that one year, I learned a lot about the land. Unfortunately, I remained largely ignorant of the greater portion of rest of the OT. Sure, by the end of that year I'd read the entire Old Testament, but you couldn't say anyone taught me much about most it.

To some greater or lesser degree, academics have an area of interest that inevitably bleeds into all their classes. For example, I could've taken a class on Isaiah with a professor who concentrated on the role of race in it. Or maybe I should've taken a class in Esther and Feminism or how about one on gender-fluidity in 1st Samuel. I'm exaggerating here but not by nearly as much as you may think.

So, what about that world-class New Testament scholar's class? Surely, we learned a lot in it. I did, but not nearly as much as you'd think. Because while Dr. Richard Hays provided two amazing lectures a week, the bulk of our pedagogy was performed by grad students who each was formulating an area of academic interest that they were going to pursue once they completed their degree. My own, Brian Bantum, was a nice guy, but he was already working on a book about what it was like to be a biracial Christian so that came in a lot.

And that, my dear friends, was it. 3 Bible classes. Now look, we did take a lot of theology in various ways and forms.

Are you starting to see? Your pastors could very easily be getting told that the Bible is about a Big Red Dog and, not having sufficiently studied the thing, just take their professor's word about it.

I confess, I ended my seminary experience largely ignorant of the actual Word. I wasn't the only one, by any stretch of the imagination. How do I know that? Let me return us back to that Bible Content exam.

The Bible content exam is the only means by which the denomination will ever know if their future pastors are Biblically proficient. I mean, I've been a Presbyterian pastor for over 13 years, and I can tell you, it's not like the denomination gives us Bible pop-quizzes. I'm 1000 times more likely to have to attend a seminar on inclusion or sexual ethics than anyone concerns themselves with my faith-knowledge.

I digress. Now, guess what I made on that Bible Content Exam? Not too good, right? Nope, I made a 97. Answered 97 of those 100 very general questions correct.

How did I do it?

I, along with a large number of others, went to a website where someone had posted 15 years' worth of Bible content exams and their answers. And here's the thing, they only added 10 new questions per year. So, we went into the exam knowing the answers to 90% of the questions we'd see. Which meant that every one of us crammed those questions until we could click through them correctly with our eyes half-shut.

Here's the thing – Guess who directed us to the site. No kidding, it was the sitting dean of a nearby Presbyterian seminary. The denomination showed us how to “get around” the system. The system was rigged and most all of us took advantage of it. Not one of my colleagues that I'm aware of did differently.

Now look, I spent the first year of ministry panicked that such ignorance would come out. I knew I wasn't Biblically proficient and figured my congregation would be. Now, thankfully, I was learning some of the Bible simply from having to preach every week and I did try to read through it again several times but rarely made it past Numbers. See, I didn't grow up in the church and I truly assumed that whatever congregation I ended up with would know a ton more about the Bible than I would. There were maybe two or three in mine, as it would run out, but not many more.

All I'm trying to get at is this – if you make the assumption that a pastor knows the Word just because they get up and preach from it on Sunday, think again.

This foundational ignorance of the Word is what's killing the church. Nothing more, nothing less.

Y'all, I've seen it play out in real-time. I've heard things from pulpits, heck I've said things from pulpits, that are the equivalent of saying that the Big Red Dog book is about a Microscopic Blue Cat. see.

Take for example what happened at a church I was serving? So, we were in the middle of a capitol campaign. Some folks were selected to share with the congregation, *from the pulpit*, exactly how much they'd given. I mean, to the dollar. The pastor and their spouse also stood up at that same pulpit and announced exactly how much money they'd contributed.

Now look, I'm sure that's a suggested move for secular fundraising. But you know, it just may NOT be appropriate within the church, the body of Christ. Look, there are numerous passages by which one might, in good faith, derive a Biblically valid reason why that's a bad idea.

Take Matthew 6:2, as a starter. It teaches us NOT to sound a trumpet as we give like the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others.

No one made any objection to the announcements.

Over the course of my ministry, I've formulated a thesis. Don't assume a pastor knows the Word.

Hey, listen, it's not like I'm telling you something Bible tells us this is going to happen, in case you were wondering...repeatedly.

In **Luke 6:39**, Jesus says – “He also told them a parable: “Can a blind man lead a blind man? Will they not both fall into a pit?”

Matthew 7:15 – “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves.”

2 Peter 2:1-3 – “But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction. And many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of truth will be blasphemed. And in their greed, they will exploit you with false words. Their condemnation from long ago is not idle, and their destruction is not asleep.”

2 Timothy 4:3-4 – “For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths.”

Acts 20:28-30 – “Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them.”

2 Peter 3:14-18 – “Therefore, beloved, since you are waiting for these, be diligent to be found by him without spot or blemish, and at peace. And count the patience of our Lord as salvation, just as our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters. There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures. You therefore, beloved, knowing this beforehand, take care that you are not carried away with the error of lawless people and lose your own stability. But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen.”

There are more passages. We simply don't have time to read them all.

Pastors, heck Christians, who aren't dwelling in the Word are like clouds without rain. They might be puffed up and pretty to look at but they're not going to do much for your crops let alone drench a dumpster fire into submission.

Thankfully, I'm energized about the solution. Cause it ain't that hard, not really. Here's what I believe. Strike that, here's what I know. If everyone hearing the sound of my voice right now would just live in the Word. Read it, learn it, return to it, study it, pray over it, we will change the world. We'll turn the whole thing right upside down. I mean, change falling out upside down.

It's not surprising to me that there is such widespread apathy towards the word. Now, before I begin this next part, I'm going talk about liberalism. Now what I'm talking about isn't being a liberal in a modern American context. If you're a blue voter, this isn't about you. Please know, a whole lot of this advocated by modern, American liberals are, to my thinking, quite in line with Jesus' clear spoken words.

At the same time, liberalism begins as an intellectual response to a rigid, inflexible understanding of the Word. Interesting to note that the cause of that rigidity is, itself, not really Scriptural but I digress. Liberalism was bolstered as greater archeological exploration was done by scientists. These scientists, and you can never doubt them, right, began to discover that perhaps the past wasn't exactly as the Bible put it. Remember, this is largely pre-electricity so it isn't like they were using really advanced methods. These “discoveries,” like the idea that the Flood in Genesis never happened, have since been very credibly challenged but that doesn't matter, what was birthed was loose. Liberalism, again, as a 19th century was loose. Liberalism, again, liberalism as a 19th century intellectual movement began as a systematic program to somehow “prove” that the Bible was entirely false.

Having been broken free from believing the Bible presented Truth, intellectuals had an absolute field day from which I think it's safe to say, the church has never recovered from. It remains, to this day, a foundational premise of all secular, academic institutions. Which is interesting because guess which institution “certifies” a seminary instructor in most mainline denominational seminaries. Yep, the academy. In fairness, all of them would've attended seminary first but you're going to tell me that there's not a serious bleed from intellectualism into the seminary I'll just laugh at you. Ever noticed that the primary interests of most mainline denomination pastors are in lockstep with the kinds of things you hear out of academics? For heaven's sakes, many of them trained together. Listened to the same lectures, read the same articles.

And then, one day, some seminary is going to hire them and BOOM, now they're teaching your future pastor. And what a great many of them are teaching us goes a little something like this. See if it sounds familiar out in the greater society.

“Sure, the Bible's got some real gems in there. BUT it was written by men who were obviously more attached to patriarchy than to God and they made a lot of it up.

Karl Barth, analogized the Bible in this fashion. It's like an old record of opera great Caruso. But as it spins, you can't help but hear its age. There are cracks and pops. They're not Caruso, are they? No, surely not, those are just human words. Again, note where a great many of these “pops and cracks are located? I feel like Goner Pyle here, “Surprise, Surprise, Surprise, the clergy's focus has, yet again, landed upon the same exact side and f most social hot-button issues that academia's glommed onto. Wonder how that happened...Not.

You're being conned, and a great many of you don't even know it.

And, you know what, you never will, unless you do the one thing that's going to change both you and the world. Not your world, the world. You're never going to know how you're being deceived, until you pick it up and begin a daily, life-long journey with living in the Word.

If you think you can't. Do it anyway. You can.

If you believe you'll never understand much of it. Do it anyway. You will.

If you think you just don't have the time, cancel something. This world needs you informed, maybe now more than ever!

And here's how I know you can. I began my journey with the Word just 5 years back. If I can, boy I know you can. And, here's the thing, I'm your pastor, I am here to help you in any way I can.

One word of warning. The Scriptures have the tendency to be shocking. The Word has a way of lovingly knocking some sense into us, thanks be to who'd. But even bumped and bruised, you're going to have the best, darned time.

I want to close with a story. Yesterday, I had the blessing of taking one of my children to their very first ice skating lesson. Did you ever try to ice skate? makes roller skating look easy.

While a couple of the kids took to the ice like fish to water, most kids spent the greater portion of the lesson either on the ice or falling on to it. I was worried y'all, because sometimes, you know how it is. You see how hard a thing is actually going to be to accomplish and you think, no, it's not worth this. Then, what do you do? You give up, sadly.

Look at what made my weekend. One kid, one of the kids who'd struggled, that kid came off the ice, flashed the biggest brightest most honest smile in the world and loudly declared, "That was AWESOME."

You know what, when you dive in, go whole hog on the Word. Maybe your first couple of sessions of Scripture study, it feels like you spent more time on the ice than skating on it.

Here's a bet, you're gonna say the exact same thing. Closing the cover on your Bible after completing it (again), you too WILL exclaim, that was AWESOME."

