

The Word-Centered Life
John 1:1, 14; 2 Tim 3:14-17
John Breon

I once attended an event called “The Word Explosion.” John Wimber, a pastor from California, was preaching. At one point, he held up his Bible and shouted, “Jesus is more than this book!” The crowd responded with a very uncomfortable silence.

Think about this: Would you rather have Jesus or the Bible?

It’s a trick question, isn’t it? How can we know Jesus without the Bible and how can we really know the Bible without Jesus?

We’re starting a series on core values of the church. We’ll explore six streams of Christian faith and life that nourish and guide who we are as the church. They are Word-Centered, Spirit-Empowered, Compassionate, Incarnational, Committed, and Prayer-Filled. Today we’re looking at the *Word-Centered life*. As part of full and balanced Christian living, each of us needs to be a Word-Centered person and the church needs to be a Word-Centered church.

To be Word-Centered is to be Christ-centered and Bible-based. This involves a commitment to study, preach, teach, and live by God’s Word in the power of God’s Spirit.

The idea of these six streams and ways to understand them come from Richard Foster. His book *Streams of Living Water* introduces and explains each of these ways of seeing Christian faith and life. He summarizes the Word-Centered Life this way:

A life founded upon the living Word of God, the written Word of God, and the proclaimed Word of God. ...through it we experience the knowledge of God that grounds our lives and enables us to give a reason for the hope that is in us. (233)

Every one of us is called to a Word-centered life. As God’s living Word, Jesus is with us—teaching, guiding, ruling, comforting, correcting, nurturing, and strengthening us. Through the Holy Spirit’s ministry

enlightening and guiding us, the Bible as God's written Word is our trustworthy guide for faith and practice (what we believe and how we behave). We also have the teachings of the early Christian witnesses to summarize what the Bible teaches and to help us understand what God has done in Jesus Christ. And we have the good news of the gospel, which is God's Word proclaimed. Obeying Christ's Great Commission and trusting the Holy Spirit's power, we call all people everywhere to come back to God through Jesus—his life among us, his death on the cross, and his resurrection. This leads to a life of following Jesus, learning from him and becoming like him (*Streams* 233).

How do we experience the Word of God and allow God's living, written, and proclaimed Word to shape our lives? First, we recognize that *Jesus Christ* is the Word of God. He is the Father's self-expression, the Word made flesh.

But we wouldn't have known to expect the Messiah without the Hebrew Scriptures. And we wouldn't know about Jesus without the witness of the New Testament Scriptures. As the Bible records God's actions and God's words, as it tells the story of God's dealing with people, as it bears witness to Jesus Christ, it reveals God—it's God's Word for us.

I once heard the outline of a sermon about the Bible. The preacher used images from the American West—cowboy movies or Western novels—to describe the Bible. He said the Bible is like a *treasure*, it's like a *treasure map*, and it's like a *trading post*. Those images stuck with me and I want to use them to outline what I'm saying today.

First, the Bible is a *treasure*—it has value in itself. God inspired the written Word. Because all Scripture is God-breathed, it's useful for teaching the truth, rebuking error, correcting faults and training in righteousness (2 Tim 3:16-17). 2 Peter 1:19-21 also speaks of God as the source of the Scriptures: "Prophets spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit." The same Holy Spirit who inspired the writers of Scripture guides us and helps us understand and apply the Scriptures. I like how Luke describes what Jesus did for the disciples after the resurrection:

"he talked with us...and opened the Scriptures to us" (24:32)

“he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures” (45)

Jesus said that he came to fulfill the Law and the Prophets (a way of speaking of the Hebrew Scriptures) and that the Law would stand until all of God’s purposes are accomplished (Matthew 5:17-20). Jesus also spoke of how his own teaching endures: “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away” (Mark 13:31).

Paul said that Israel’s experiences in the wilderness are examples to keep us from evil and they were written down as warnings for us (1 Cor 10:6, 11). He also said that, “everything that was written in the past [referring to the OT] was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope” (Romans 15:4).

Hebrews 4:12 says that God’s word is living and active. It’s sharper than any sword and it penetrates into our hearts to judge our thoughts and attitudes.

These are just a few NT references to the value and effectiveness of the Scriptures. Though the NT writers were talking about the Old Testament, we can apply their words to the entire Bible as we have it.

The OT repeatedly emphasizes the value and power of God’s Law or Word. Psalm 119 is a celebration of God’s Law. A classic text is Isaiah 55:11, “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.”

When Billy Graham was just starting in ministry, he had a friend named Chuck Templeton. They were both dynamic preachers. But Templeton had been exposed to teaching that challenged the Bible’s authority and inspiration and he bought into that skepticism. He confronted Billy and called into question the things he believed. Billy struggled with this for a time. Finally, he went out by himself to pray. He laid the struggle out before God and prayed, “O God! There are many problems in this book I do not understand. There are many problems with it for which I have no solution. ...Father, I am going to accept this as Thy Word—by *faith!* I’m going to allow faith to go beyond my intellectual

questions and doubts, and I will believe this to be Your inspired Word." The battle in his soul was resolved. His faith was energized. This focus on the Bible characterized Billy Graham's ministry and was a source of the power and effectiveness of his preaching (Foster 210).

The Bible is a big, complex book. But it tells a big story, a single overarching story that shapes our lives, that nurtures and guides us. Sometimes we call this the "grand sweep" of Scripture. We see and understand the various parts of the Bible in light of that big story. It centers on Jesus and his call to align with God's kingdom, to let our hearts be aligned with God's, to have our intentions in line with God's intentions.

The broad outline of the Bible's story is Creation, Fall, Israel, Jesus, the Church, New Creation. God deals with the world in general. Then, in answer to sin and corruption, God focuses on one person (Abraham), one family, one nation (Israel). Out of that nation comes Jesus the Savior. Through his life, death, and resurrection, God is in Christ reconciling the world to himself (2 Corinthians 5:19). The followers of Jesus become the Church, sent in the power of the Holy Spirit into the whole world until God's kingdom comes in fullness and creation is made new.

The Bible's story emphasizes three key areas: mission, community, and holiness. Just like we can use GPS technology when we travel, we can use the Bible's GPS to help us navigate our journey and ask the right questions as we read the Scriptures.

G = Global Mission. God commissions his people to spread the Gospel. Who is our mission? How does what I'm reading in the Bible help me understand God's mission?

P = People in Community. God calls his people to live and serve in community. Who is our community? How do we need to change to live as God's missional people?

S = Spirit Transformed. God shapes his people to be like Christ. What kind of person do I need to become to live out what I'm reading in the Bible?

(Brian Russell, "Relearning the Scriptural Story," *Good News Magazine*, January 6, 2016,

<http://goodnewsmag.org/2016/01/relearning-the-scriptural-story/>; also see Russell's book *Invitation*, onebook.seedbed.com)

So the Bible is a treasure, it has value in itself. But we don't worship the Bible. We don't have a relationship with the Bible the way we do with a person, the way we do with the living Lord. So the Bible is also a *treasure map*. It points beyond itself. It shows the way to something greater than itself. The Bible has been called, "the cradle that bears Christ to us" (Martin Luther) or the lens through which Christians view all reality (John Calvin).

Christ is the center and focus of God's revelation in the Bible. The Bible includes what's called "progressive revelation." God reveals himself and his will to people in ways that they can understand and receive. God leads them along and helps them grow in this process. Without leaving behind the truth that has been made known, God's revelation progresses until it reaches its fullest expression in Jesus Christ.

The Word did not just become words. The Word became flesh. Jesus is the living and incarnate Word of God. He *is* greater than the Bible. But if we'll invest the time and energy to become familiar with the Bible, we'll find it showing us the way to God, to a growing relationship with God, to the way of life in Christ.

This is an important part our faith. We believe that Jesus is unique. He's the only Son of God and Savior of the world. I like how Bob Tuttle says it: "Jesus Christ alone puts us right with God, heals the brokenness of our time, and makes us fit to share the inheritance of God's glory."

When we believe this, we're faced with the challenge in today's world of how to present such a faith without being or seeming bigoted. We're not saying the whole world is wrong and we're right. We're simply affirming what we believe is right. All religions are not basically the same. Tim Keller, a pastor in New York City, tells about being part of a panel discussion at a local college with a Jewish rabbi and a Muslim imam. They discussed the differences among religions. The conversation was courteous, intelligent, and respectful in tone. Each speaker affirmed that there are significant, irreconcilable differences between the major faiths. A case in point was the person of Jesus. They all agreed on this statement: "If Christians are right

about Jesus being God, then Muslims and Jews fail in a serious way to love God as God really is, but if Muslims and Jews are right that Jesus is not God but rather a teacher or prophet, then Christians fail in a serious way to love God as God really is" (*The Reason for God* 4).

Major religions share some truth, but they also make conflicting claims about what is true. If Jesus is really who we believe him to be, who the Bible says he is, then anyone who comes into a right relationship with God has to know Jesus in some way. If they don't know his name, then they somehow know his person. Tuttle tells about going into places where the good news had not been preached, telling people about Jesus and having them respond, "So that's his name!" God is at work all over the world, revealing himself and drawing people to himself.

We know the living Word in large part through the written Word. If you want to know Jesus, one of the things you'll have to do is get to know the Bible—under the inspiration and guidance of the Holy Spirit and in keeping with the best that the church has believed and taught through the centuries.

This leads to the third image we want to look at: the Bible as a *trading post*. It's where you can "exchange a second-hand religion for a first-hand glory." You can exchange the kind of world where you're the center for the kind of world where God is the center. You can exchange your sin for God's forgiveness and Christ's righteousness. You can exchange your emptiness for the fullness of God's Spirit. You can exchange your lack of direction for the meaning and purpose God has for you. You can exchange your hopelessness for a true and living hope.

A little boy whose father was off to war used to look at his father's picture and wish that his father could step out of the picture and really be there with him. Jesus steps out of the pages of the Bible and really comes to be with us (E. Stanley Jones tells this somewhere).

I like to find and share ways to present the basic message of the gospel and how we respond. I talk often about Good News-Bad News-Good News. We've talked about ABC: Admit, Believe, Confess. Here's another one that uses the word GRACE. Each letter stands for an aspect of receiving new life in Christ.

God's grace in Jesus Christ

Recognizing and repenting of sin

Accepting God's forgiveness—accepting that God accepts us

Confessing faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior

Entering into God's reign, the church's fellowship, Christ's way of life,
God's mission

(from *The Faith-Sharing New Testament*, notes by Eddie Fox and
George Morris)

When God's Word confronts us, we have a decision to make. Will we believe? Will we accept or reject God's gift to us? What will you do right now?

Do you know what you believe?

Do you know the One you believe in?

Can you tell someone else how to put their faith in Jesus, repent of their sin, and become a follower of Jesus?

Are you willing to take that step today?