

Many things could be said about the Anglican Church, but let it not be said that it is not a Bible church. We have rites and ceremony, we have traditions, we have sacraments, we have the episcopacy. We have intellectual credentials, we have poetry and hymnody surpassed by no other church as far as I am concerned. We have the dominical sacraments, we have the minor sacraments. We have education and spiritual formation, we have feasts and fasts. But let it be known today, that if we have not the Holy Scripture, the Word of God written, then all these aforementioned things are vanity.

Since the Enlightenment, it has become fashionable to apply literary criticism to the Holy Scriptures. Some of this analysis can bring us healthy spiritual insight. Unfortunately, most of it is approached from a position of skepticism which denies that the Bible is providentially compiled. Such analysis claims that our current Holy Bible is the product of merely human editors over the millennia, and that only the original, unedited texts have could have any authority. Of course this means that the task of the textual critic is to deconstruct the text of God's Word so that we only pay attention to the very primitive texts from each author. Unfortunately for these critics, this is a fool's errand. How could one possibly look back over the thousands of years and ascertain with certainty just exactly what the original texts were? They claim to have very precise methodology; but such techniques are built upon many assumptions, which are almost certainly not widely applicable, and are themselves highly subjective. One simply cannot go back in time to see certainly and precisely what the original text was. The net effect of these efforts is not providing a text that is most reliable, but discrediting the entire canon of scripture. It is a game played for centuries at this point, and we should have little patience with such attacks, which are driven by arrogance and by a desire to tear down traditional orthodoxy, which is labelled "patriarchal" and "oppressive" and not in keeping with contemporary sensibilities. The faith of those who listen to such critics will implode.

Please do not misunderstand me. I do not claim that no editing has ever taken place. In fact I very much think that we can see it, in the Pentateuch – the first 5 books of the Bible, attributed to Moses. For example, the character of Genesis 1 and 2 are very different. It is plausible that these were compiled from two different authors, but yet I find no reason why Moses could not have honored both of these texts as being from God and set them side by side. It is actually the fact that the ancients didn't "reconcile" these two chapters to make them better reflect a single voice, that certifies their credibility. The texts are handed to us in the authority of Moses. These are the texts that God wished us to have, and we thus put them both forth to be unequivocally God's Inspired Word.

We can see something similar at the end of Deuteronomy. Chapter 34 of the last book of the Pentateuch describes the death of Moses. Of course Moses could not have written this chapter. It was appended later. Some would even suggest that this book was compiled, edited, and maybe written much later, perhaps during the Babylonian captivity. Yes, there may be some evidence to support this claim, but this does not mean that the source material is not much earlier. And it does not mean that God did not want us to have this text as it is, as His authoritative Word. You see, the power of the scriptures isn't in the human beings that first wrote the words onto the pieces of parchment. The power of the Bible lies in that it is the Word of God. Period. Full stop.

The People of God throughout the millennia have been the guardians of the text of Holy

Scripture; God has every prerogative to use them as He will to present His Word as He wishes. God is the one Who has given us the Holy Scripture, and in His Providence, He has superintended all of the authors and all of those who have protected and preserved the text down through the ages. The assumption that the pristine original text is the only authoritative text is simply a denial of God's hand in the process. More exactly, it is a denial of God, and needs to be called out as such. We assert utmost confidence in the Word of God, as we have received it. "For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart."

It is no accident that the first temptation of humanity, the Serpent's deception of Eve in the Garden of Eden, was an attack on the Word of God: "Now the serpent was more subtle than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made. And he said unto the woman, Yea, hath God said, Ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden?" *Hath God said?* Eve, what exactly was it that God said unto you? Do you remember His words well? Of course, Eve goofs it up. She didn't evidently pay close heed to the Word of God. "And the woman said unto the serpent, We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden: But of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God hath said, Ye shall not eat of it, neither shall ye touch it, lest ye die." That bit about not touching the fruit was perhaps a little legalism thrown in for good measure. It might indeed have been wise to stay away, to touch not; but it wasn't exactly what God commanded. And if we are not sure what God says, then we are lost. This is what the serpent counted upon in his engagement with the mother of all mankind. "And the serpent said unto the woman, Ye shall not surely die: For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil." Satan here basically accuses God of lying! Satan says that God is keeping the truth from Eve. It is very similar to what our contemporary liberal theologians claim: "Well, in fact we don't really know what God said here. You see the form of this Hebrew word is primitive while the adjacent verse is of much later construction. So ... hmm ... I guess we should just wing it here. And why don't you go ahead and have a bite of that fruit while we sort this out?"

You see, critical analysis begins with a skeptical position toward the text. It works very well for deconstructing entire passages, even entire books of the Bible, casting doubt upon the veracity of large swaths of scripture. At the same time, it is unable to assert anything from a position of faith. It seeks to understand the human processes behind the text while ignoring the divine cause of the text. Do not fall prey to this subtlety. Do not let them tell you that we don't have an authentic text. There is surpassing more documentary evidence that attests to the veracity of scripture than of any other ancient book. The comparison is not even close. If someone says to you, "We don't know what the actual text of the Bible is," just tell them to prove it. Tell them to show you ancient documents that demonstrate significant conflicts in the text which undermine the meaning. They can't do it. Yes, there are some discrepancies between manuscripts, but these are minor in nature and do not impact the reading of the text or subvert our assertions that the Bible is the very Word of God. Such spurious claims are merely intellectually lazy excuses for a person to avoid being confronted by God Himself.

Sometimes, we merely have to step backwards from the adult sophistications with which we deceive ourselves. Sometimes we must take up again the faith of a child. Sometimes, we need once

again to sing the children's hymn, "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so." Our intellectual rigor should not be simple, but our faith must be. Faith is a gift, and it must be received as a gift, and it must cause us to live as gift. The Bible, also, must ultimately be received in such faith.

Why is the Bible so critical to us as Christians, followers of Jesus Christ? First, think about the dual meaning of the phrase "Word of God." We use this phrase in two primary ways: in referring to the Scriptures and in referring the Christ Himself, the Word of God Incarnate. This ambiguity is intentional, and the two can often be used synonymously. Christ is the One who acts in the world. By Him and in Him all things are created. He is the embodiment of the Will of God. The Mind of God, the Divine Logic of God is revealed to us completely by Christ, the organizing principle of Creation. Yet the Word of God written also reveals to us the mind and logic of God. It reveals the structure of Creation to us, and it reveals Christ to us. So the Word Incarnate, Jesus, and the Word Written, the Bible, both reveal the fullness of God to us in complementary ways.

Now, understand that we don't worship the Bible itself. The physical existence of this book is not God. But we do treat it with respect because it is no ordinary book. The Bible always points us to Christ and always encourages us to love Christ more. If we forget this, we will be like a person who memorized the entirety of the Scriptures without having love. Would such a person be saved? Knowledge puffs up; it is a source of pride. But love edifies. Therefore, as our collect today encourages us to do, we study the Bible out of love for the ultimate Author of the Holy Scriptures.

What is so special about the Word Written? First, it is the proclamation of the Word that touches the heart and ultimately saves the soul. It calls to a lost humanity and speaks of a loving Savior. It is in such proclamation that the Spirit of God awakens the souls of those who do not yet know the love of God.

Secondly, the study of the Word Written confirms our faith; it strengthens those who have already been brought into relationship with God, who through the waters of baptism have been grafted into His Church. The Bible reveals Divine Wisdom to the mind and heart of man. In Romans 12:2, the Apostle Paul states, "And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God." Only in grappling with the Eternal Truths contained in Holy Scripture can one's mind be spiritually renewed and thus transform us into the image of Christ.

Thirdly, only through the application of the Written Word will the Spirit of God rule our lives and guide our actions. The transformation of the human being from a fallen and self-centered creature into holiness and sanctity is catalyzed by the Word of God. The Scriptures reveal our faults, convict of sin, urge to repentance, speak reassurance of pardon and peace, and empower us in the Spirit, to become Holy as God is Holy.

I would like to close this morning by asking the question, "Do you treasure your Bibles?" You should. We all should. For in the scripture, authored ultimately by the Spirit and cherished and guarded by the church, we have the revealed Truth of God which leads to salvation, from the fallen world, to the redeemed world. How do you know that you treasure the Bible? Do you heed it, read it, perceive it, receive it, and feed upon it? In other words, do you hear, read, mark, learn, and inwardly

digest the Word of God? How much time do you spend reading, studying, memorizing God's word? Do you take it in like food? For you are what you eat. So feast upon the Holy Word of God, which points us to the image of God as found in Christ His Son. In the Bible we find comfort and hope, because in it, we find Jesus Christ.

Amen.