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“Taking Our Temperature: Secular or Biblical?”

[Matthew 7:24-27](#), [Philippians 4:8-9](#), [Psalm 119](#) (selected verses for Call to Worship)

[We watched a video celebrating Martin Luther King Jr.’s legacy which used quotes of his and verses from the Bible that inspired him.]

Leadership matters. Martin Luther King Jr.’s leadership mattered, and his legacy of leadership lives on even today. Elders and deacons and pastors at FPC – who have stepped forward in the past, are stepping forward now, and will step forward in the future – [their] leadership matters. There are a lot of ways to lead; a lot of styles; a lot of tasks and challenges to lead through; a lot of expert advice on how to lead – including from the culture at large. But leadership for a follower of Jesus and His Church is a unique calling displayed in this unique book we call The Bible. As we take our temperature related to being Biblical, as opposed to purely Secular, it’s important to note that, for us, being biblical and being a leader in the Church go hand in hand.

Almost half of the 9 ordination vows each elder, deacon and pastor make in the Presbyterian Church include a commitment to the authority of God’s Word. Authority isn’t a real popular word these days; and being specific about what teachings and words should and shouldn’t have authority isn’t very popular either. But we keep asking these 9 questions and making these 9 promises as leaders. We keep making it clear that – though there are great leadership tools, tips strategies inside and outside the Church – the Bible is more than a tool box of resources or book of tips. It is our authority. Our 9 ordination questions include:

Question 2: “Do you accept the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be, by the Holy Spirit, the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the Church universal, and God’s Word to you?”

The third question focuses on our Reformed Tradition and the theological convictions expressed in our historic creeds and confessions. Leaders are asked if we will pay attention to those theological distinctives and recognize them Question 3: “. . . as authentic and reliable expositions of what Scripture leads us to believe and do . . .”

Question 4 asks, “Will you fulfill your ministry in obedience to Jesus Christ, under the authority of Scripture . . .”

And Question 5 speaks to our relationships with others, asking if we will serve and interact with others while being “. . . subject to the ordering of God’s Word and Spirit.”

But it’s not just church leaders for which being biblical is essential. All who have submitted to the Lordship of Christ and recognize their need for a Savior do so, at some level, with the belief that God’s Word contains truth coming from outside ourselves; a truth revealed by God, who

LEADS US. It becomes very difficult for a church to be a church without some agreement on where its marching orders and mission come from. Here at FPC we say that being Biblical is a foundational value.

In the Fall of 2007 a team of writers was asked to craft statements around the 8 foundational and ministry values we adopted earlier that year. We wanted to do more than say we value – at a foundational level – being a Christ-centered, Loving, Missional and Biblical community of faith. We asked ourselves, what do those words and values actually mean to us? How would we help others know what we meant by each value? How would we define ourselves along those values? After several months of rough drafts and re-writes, parsing words and fighting (in a good way) over phrases and clauses, we approved the 8 value statements.

To help flesh out our Biblical value we say, “We believe all scripture is the inspired Word of God that dynamically bears witness to Christ and points us in His direction. Both Old and New Testaments tell the grand story of who God is and who we are called to be. We seek not only to understand God’s Word, but to be transformed in our everyday lives through prayer and study.” (from FPC’s Foundational Values)

As we were writing these values (with a team of 6 as I recall) I was trying hard to fit in something I heard Dale Bruner say years ago: “We don’t just seek to Understand scripture but to Stand Under its authority.” (Dale Bruner) I chose not to exert too much force and get my way, but I love that expression. This, of course, implies obedience; that we want to know God’s Word so that we can actually DO what God’s Word says.

Bruner, of course, got this from Jesus, who at the end of The Sermon on the Mount said, “Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock.” (Matthew 7:24) The Message translation of the whole passage goes like this: “These words I speak to you are not incidental additions to your life, homeowner improvements to your standard of living. They are foundational words, words to build a life on. If you work these words into your life, you are like a smart carpenter who built his house on solid rock. Rain poured down, the river flooded, a tornado hit—but nothing moved that house. It was fixed to the rock. But if you just use my words in Bible studies and don’t work them into your life, you are like a stupid carpenter who built his house on the sandy beach. When a storm rolled in and the waves came up, it collapsed like a house of cards.” (Matthew 7:24-27 in The Message)

Martin Luther King Jr. put the words of scripture into practice; into action. Doing so made a lot of people uncomfortable, which reminds all of us that obedience to God’s Word isn’t always popular. What’s funny (not really funny but peculiar) is that all kinds of people are made uncomfortable in all kinds of ways when we put God’s Word into practice, whether that be God’s Word about freedom and justice, holiness and purity, our bodies and sexuality, wealth and

possessions, prayer and healing, sin and judgment, grace and forgiveness. And, still, we seek to be Biblical; not secular, popular, or relevant (although I think God's Word is very relevant).

So are we Biblical?

Sometimes visitors will come up to me after a few Sundays and say, "Your sermons are so biblical!" with a hint of surprise in the tone of their voice. It makes me wonder what they heard about the reputation of Presbyterians; OR what they mean by Biblical. We also have those who come and stay long enough to figure out that I do not do expository preaching; a style of preaching that goes through a passage verse by verse. And to some, this seems less Biblical. Or they are here long enough to discover that we practice infant baptism or don't mandate full immersion baptism for adults, or that we ordain women to all offices of leadership, or *you fill in the blank* _____. And because of our practice(s) or theological understanding, they decide we are not Biblical. And that's okay. There are a lot of churches who also desire to be biblical and come down differently on certain issues, practices and a variety of theological emphasis.

Full disclosure: we do not use the words Inerrancy or Infallibility to talk about our view of The Bible; those words aren't found in the Bible but became a designation in people's view of how the Bible came to be in a post-Darwin battle for scripture and truth in the Church. We don't use those words but we do say The Bible is Authoritative and Inspired. We have not chosen a philosophy or theology of biblical inspiration to talk about our relationship to scripture, but we still believe they were – somehow – inspired by God and that these scriptures we call Old and New Testaments are our authority.

I knew someone in my former church who loved and knew the Bible – and led a bible study group every week. He also held to what is called "Verbal, Plenary" inspiration; the belief that God spoke every word of scripture out loud and that a writer heard audibly and wrote what he heard instantly. This is a position many others hold, which is fine, but there are other ways of understanding how God inspired His written word. My friend, knowing I had a different understanding said, "Tom, I don't know how I could have faith in the scriptures if they weren't inspired like this!" This sounded, to me, more like faith in a theory of inspiration that was doomed to disappoint in various ways.

We don't use certain words when talking about what it means for us to be Biblical; but NOT using certain words or terminology doesn't mean scripture is not our authority in matters of faith and life. Truth be told, using certain words that sound like you take scripture more seriously also doesn't mean you actually do, because using certain words – or not using them – isn't what makes us Biblical: knowing and DOING God's Word does!

If we're going to be honest, all followers of Jesus who profess to be Biblical should also admit that none of us (regardless of our doctrinal position on the theory of inspiration or if we have a Bible we have memorized and marked up) have arrived at being fully obedient to ALL of God's

Word – or even close. And we should all confess that, when it comes to The Bible, WE PICK AND CHOOSE, PRIORITIZE AND RANK, FOCUS ON AND IGNORE, DEFEND AND EXPLAIN AWAY. That’s true for you and me, and Martin Luther King Jr.

And yet, God’s Word calls us to submit our wills and obey the God who inspired and guided the crafting of His Word. And those scriptures mince no words about where our ultimate authority lies: in Jesus Christ. And Jesus knew God’s Word inside and out and obeyed it fully. He even said at the beginning of The Sermon on the Mount that He didn’t “come to abolish the law or the prophets . . . but to fulfill them.” (Matthew 5:17)

Scripture tells us attention to and obedience to God’s Word (being Biblical) makes us “like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in season, and their leaves do not wither.” (Psalm 1:3) We read from Psalm 119 earlier. Right in the middle of the longest chapter in the Bible (176 verses) with a singular focus on knowing and obeying God’s Word, the Psalmist says “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.” (Psalm 119:105)

Is that true for you and me? For us? Let’s take our temperature. Are we biblical?

I want to CHALLENGE each one of us TO KNOW AND DO GOD’S WORD more intentionally in 2021. We found all kinds of time in 2020 to do puzzles, take hikes, do home improvement projects, hang out with friends and family on Zoom, read books, absorb the news; and those are all good things. Let’s invest some of that time we discovered and claimed into knowing and doing God’s Word.

Paul writes, “Finally brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about these things . . . and put them into practice . . .” (Philippians 4:8-9, NIV)

There are plenty of excellent and noble and lovely things to think about in this world – outside of scripture/Bible, the Church, etc. So what I’m about to say isn’t trying to make a false distinction between the sacred and the secular. What I do want to declare, is that everything that is excellent and noble and lovely, etc. finds its origin in the God revealed in scripture – the One who has revealed Himself to us; revealed a reality that is vastly different than what this world paints as excellent and noble and lovely.

Our God has revealed that “to obey is better than sacrifice,” “to forgive is better than accuse,” “to give is better than to receive,” and “that dying to self and carrying a cross leads to life.” And there’s a whole lot more that makes no sense to the world and its ways. But we are not invited to put our faith in what makes sense at any given time in history. We are called to put our faith in “The Word made flesh” – Jesus, the Son of God. Who knew this through and through . . . and DID what it said. Let’s be Biblical as we are “Rooted in Jesus, Growing in His Love, and Branching Out to Serve Others.”

Questions for Personal Reflection and Small Group Discussion

1. What does 'being Biblical' mean to you? Have you ever been questioned for NOT being Biblical? Have you ever questioned someone else's commitment to scripture?
2. How do you think God's Word came to be? What difference might that make in how you read, understand, and do what it says? What does it mean for you that it is authoritative and inspired?
3. What scripture themes and threads (foci) do you tend to focus on? Ignore? Defend? Explain away?
4. If you had to pick, would you rather Understand what the Bible says without doing it or DO what the Bible says without understanding it, which would you choose? Why?
5. What could you do in 2021 to better understand and obey God's Word?
6. What do these passages have to say about being "Rooted in Jesus, Growing in His Love [Together], [and] Branching Out to Serve Others"?