



Catalog No. 1783

6th Message

Bernard Bell

July 27, 2014

FORMED BY WORD

SERIES: FORMED INTO CHRIST

As we continue in our summer series, “Formed Into Christ,” today’s topic is “Formed By Word.” We take the Word seriously. We identify ourselves as a *Bible Church*: not a Baptist Church, though we do believe baptism is for believers, nor a Presbyterian Church, though leadership rests within the eldership, nor even a Community Church, though we stress the value of community. We are Peninsula Bible Church, and PBC has been such for 65 years, whether in Palo Alto, or Cupertino, or now in Willow Glen. “Peninsula” may be a legacy name from the past since Cupertino is not on the Peninsula, but “Bible” is not simply a legacy name. It continues to characterize who we are. We take the Bible seriously.

Our commitment to the Bible is expressed as an open Bible in our window. There we see three figures, representing the community gathered around the elements of the Table and the open Scriptures. Many of you here are involved in community Bible studies of various sizes and levels. We encourage everyone to be in community studying the Word together.

Our commitment to Scripture is expressed in the flow of this service. We started with a reading from the Scriptures: Psalm 19 in which David extols the word of the Lord. We had a lengthy reading from Luke’s gospel (24:13-32) describing how Jesus “opened the Scriptures” to the two men on the road to Emmaus. Many of our songs have been about the Scriptures. Now we come to the sermon, or the message from the Word. Half of each service is devoted to this. Normally the message would be an exposition of a passage of Scripture, for we are committed to expository preaching, systematically preaching our way through books of the Bible. Yet today I have a topic! It is ironic that for this message on being “Formed by Word” there is not really a passage for me to base my message on! In the absence of a Bible passage, I am going to use a prayer, a prayer about the Scriptures. It is a prayer written by Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury, for the *Prayer Book* of 1549.

Blessed Lord, who hast caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning; Grant that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that by patience and comfort of thy holy Word, we may embrace, and ever hold fast, the blessed hope of everlasting life, which thou hast given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ.¹

Cranmer wrote it as the Collect for the Second Sunday of Advent, the second Sunday of the Church Year. Right near the beginning of the year he wanted the church to collectively pray for help in receiving the Scriptures throughout the rest of the year. In recent prayer books this collect has been moved to the end of the Church Year, which seems to me the wrong place for it.

The prayer consists of three parts: an acknowledgment, a petition, and an aspiration. First, Cranmer acknowledges what God has done: “caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning.” This action of God’s forms the basis for his petition: “grant that we may... hear... read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them.” Why this petition? Cranmer offers his aspiration: that we may embrace and hold

on to hope. Here he draws on Romans: “Whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope” (Rom 15:4 ESV). What is this hope? It is the hope of eternal life, given us in Christ, as Paul wrote to the Colossians: “Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Col 1:27).

It is a wonderful prayer, one of the most famous in the Prayer Book, especially because of the phrase “read, mark, learn and inwardly digest.” This is a very familiar phrase to me, one that I grew up with. As a teenager I had no appreciation for the Prayer Book which we used daily at my boarding school in the UK. But my appreciation for it has grown steadily since then, and especially for the prayers written by Cranmer.

In talking about “Formation by Word,” I want to use the five verbs of Cranmer’s petition. What does it mean to hear, read, mark, learn and inwardly digest the Scriptures which the Lord has caused to be written for us?

1. Hear

The petition for help to hear the Word implies a God who speaks. The Scriptures are clear about this. God spoke the world into existence with ten words, as shown by the tenfold use of the phrase “And God said” in Genesis 1. As we sang, “Thou whose Almighty word, chaos and darkness heard and took their flight.” When God called Israel to be a new humanity, a people for himself, his treasured possession, the charter document he gave her was in the form of ten words, the Decalogue (which means just that). He spoke again by his Son who is the Word of God, the Logos. And he has spoken in his Word, the Scriptures.

God speaks and we listen. As we listen we are transformed. As the hymn says, “He speaks and listening to his word new life the dead receive.” But we have a hard time listening. Israel repeatedly did not listen. She refused to listen to the Lord. She refused to listen to all the prophets he sent, his spokesmen who proclaimed, “Thus saith the Lord.” It was not that Israel was physically deaf. She heard the words well enough to kill the prophets. Likewise, the Jewish leaders heard the words of Jesus well enough to kill him, the final prophet. Israel of old and the Jews of Jesus’ day heard the words, but they did not take the words to heart. They heard but they did not hear. In both Hebrew and Greek the word for “hear” is also the word for “obey.” Our word “heed” carries that connotation. Even the word “listen” means more than simply sound waves hitting our ear drums. All parents know the challenge of getting their kids to listen.

Whether the Scriptures are read aloud to us in a church service, or we read them to ourselves in private at home, or we discuss them in a study, it is God’s Word which we are hearing. But really hearing it implies that we take it to heart and act upon it. This requires humility and submission. God does invite us to talk back to him, whether in praise, lament or petition. He promises that his ear is open to us,

as are his eyes and his heart. But at the end of the day we shut up and listen. We allow ourselves to be informed by God and not vice versa. We allow God to tell us how to live, not us telling God how we think we should live. We cannot begin to be formed by Word unless we are willing to hear.

2. Read

Secondly, we read. Our word “Bible” means “books” (Gk *ta biblia*, “the books”), for the one Book contains many individual books written over many centuries and in three languages. “Scriptures” means that which is written. The Scriptures were written down by human authors, but, as Cranmer acknowledged, it was God who caused them to be written. Therefore they are God’s Word, they are his communication to us.

God’s role in communicating through his Word, the Scriptures, has three important aspects: revelation, inspiration, and illumination. The Bible contains God’s *revelation* of himself and his purposes. It is not a full revelation: we would be incapable of handling a full revelation of God. There are many things we might wish were in the Bible, but they are not and we have to be content with this. But the Bible is a sufficient revelation: it contains what God intended to reveal to us, what he wants us to know. The Bible was written under *inspiration*: God, through his Spirit, inspired the human authors to write what they wrote. Receiving the revelation contained in the inspired text requires *illumination*. God, through his Spirit, opens our eyes, ears, mind, heart and will to receive his revelation in the inspired text. Without this illumination we will neither correctly read the Scriptures nor be formed by them.

Though all Christians affirm that the Bible is God’s Word in some way, there are wide differences in how much authority we give to the Bible. Bruce Waltke helpfully summarizes five different attitudes that Christians of various persuasions bring to the Bible, whether they stand above, before, on or under the Bible, or place something else alongside it.²

1. Liberal theologians stand *above* the Bible: as heirs of the Enlightenment they put reason above revelation, and read with scepticism.
2. Neoorthodox theologians stand *before* the Bible: as they proclaim the Biblical witness to Jesus Christ, this becomes the word of God to those who hear.
3. Traditionalists place Traditions and Confessions *alongside* the Bible: for both Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox, the Church is the authoritative custodian and interpreter of God’s Word, and the guardian of Tradition. Protestant churches also have confessions and many traditions which often are treated with at least as much deference as Scripture, even if this is usually denied.
4. Fundamentalists stand *on* the Bible, usually convinced of its “plain truth.”
5. Evangelicals stand *under* the Bible, submitting themselves to the Bible’s unique authority.

Waltke writes of his own position of standing under the Bible:

I consider the Bible utterly trustworthy, and I commit my life to it, but I do not presume to know beforehand the exact nature of its parts. With this posture, I continue to learn and allow myself to be taught and corrected by the Bible.³

To which I say, “Amen!” Bruce Waltke is a role model for us on the pastoral staff, and I’m sure for many of you who have heard him teach or preach. Two months ago we had the privilege of having him preach here. I’m sure all who heard him then agree that our hearts were burning as he opened to us the Scriptures.

It is not that tradition and reason are wrong. God has given us rational minds, and centuries of faithful Christians have gone before us and passed on to us what had been passed on to them. What role should the mind, tradition and experience play in reading the Bible? I find John Wesley’s example helpful. He used four sources in reaching theological conclusions: Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. This has come to be known as the Wesleyan Quadrilateral, sometimes likened to a four-legged stool. But though “quadrilateral” might seem to imply equivalence between the four, in truth one stands above the others: Scripture, to which the other three must continually be subjected, as we read Scripture, as we form conclusions, and as we develop an ethic for living life.

PBCC has a doctrinal statement, whose first article concerns the Bible. This is common in confessional statements: you need to state what the Scriptures are before you can state other doctrines based upon them. Here is the statement concerning the Bible:

The original writings of both Old and New Testaments were inspired by God by means of the Holy Spirit, who chose the words employed. These writings were without error and are of supreme and final authority in the lives of believers in any age. The Bible says everything God intended to say to mankind regarding redemption.

It was a very helpful exercise for the elders to develop this statement when PBCC became independent in 1991, and the elders sign the statement each year. But the doctrinal statement is not primary. It, along with all the traditions inherited from previous generations, and the experiences of those generations and ours must be submitted to Scripture. It is the Bible that is authoritative. It is the Word that God uses through his Spirit to form us.

I am regularly contacted by people asking about the church’s doctrinal position; they want to check out our doctrinal statement. But I am not really interested in talking about that. I consider it much more important to talk about the church’s attitude to Scripture. We have the word “Bible” in our name. Is this still part of our ethos? In the words of Cranmer, do we hear, read, mark, learn and inwardly digest the Scriptures? Do we really place ourselves under the authority of Scripture—not just expressing this in a statement, but actually living this way?

How do we read this Word? Since this is God’s word, it is not like any other book, so we shouldn’t read it like any other book. Let me make some remarks here, which are by no means comprehensive.

We don’t read the Bible for utilitarian purposes. There are several ways of doing this. Sometimes we treat the Bible as a textbook, and use it to understand something else. I know I am going to upset some people by saying this, but the Bible is not, for example, a science book. It is not even a history book, though it refers to many historical events. It contains a highly-selective, highly-slanted analysis of certain peoples and events, an analysis that is by no means balanced. It is not a dispassionate, unprejudiced view of history. Often the Bible is treated as a repository of proof texts. We shouldn’t read the Bible as a textbook, though we may certainly read textbooks to help us understand the Bible.

Sometimes we treat the Bible as a treasury of useful verses. Certain printed Bibles facilitate this by listing at the back verses to read

according to one's need. These verses may indeed be useful in our particular circumstance, and it is good to know where to turn for comfort, but we're not really submitting ourselves to the Bible.

Sometimes we look to the Bible for a verse for the day. Some might open the Bible at random and read whatever page falls open. Others might read a pre-determined section, but in expectation of finding a verse for the day. In circles in which I grew up fifty years ago this was quite common. It is undeniable that many have been helped tremendously by their "verse of the day," but this approach to reading tends to submit the Bible to our own situation, emotions, and the power of suggestion.

Some open the Bible randomly in a moment of crisis. Again, many have been profoundly influenced, through God's grace. When Augustine heard a child's voice saying *Tolle lege*, "Take, read," he picked up a Bible and it fell open to Romans 13: "Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires" (Rom 13:13-14). The Lord used this to get Augustine's attention; it was the moment of his conversion.⁴ The late Eli Fangidae, a pastor in Indonesia and former PBC missionary, came to faith through a similar experience. After one failed suicide attempt and contemplating a second, in desperation he opened the Bible his wife had been urging him to read. It fell open to 1 Corinthians 3: "Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple" (1 Cor 3:16-17). God graciously used this method to bring both men to himself. But this is not the recommended way to read Scripture! It is not the way to be formed by Scripture.

We don't read the Bible just once and put it away. We read it again and again. We spend a lifetime reading it. We wear out Bibles by reading them so much. We are never done reading the Bible.

We don't speed-read the Bible. Perhaps some of you have taken a speed-reading course to help you with college or work. We need to read slowly as well as repeatedly. We should savor what we read; we meditate and reflect and chew on it.

We read the Bible for pleasure, not because we have to or ought to. We should take pleasure in reading Scripture for it is the revelation of the God in whom we take pleasure, and it testifies to what he is doing in us. It is a tragedy that not infrequently seminary students, while reading the Bible a lot, lose their delight in it, because their reading is under the obligation of assignments.

Reading the Bible is a great privilege. Cranmer knew this in 1549, during the English Reformation. The Catholic Church had persecuted those who dared attempt to translate the Bible into the vernacular. In Cranmer's day it was at last possible for the English to read the Bible in their own language. The first "authorized version," the Great Bible, had been published ten years earlier in 1539. We can be thankful for translators who devote their lives to enabling God's people to read God's Word in their own tongue. Over the years many have gone out from PBC to participate in this work. God's Word continues to be God's Word when it is faithfully translated into another language, unlike the Koran which is valid only in Arabic. In the English-speaking world, and especially in the US, we have the unique problem of an abundance of translations. Nearly all of these are faithful representations of God's Word.

I have a shelf of Bibles in many translations. Not all are so fortunate. Last November, I was at a conference in Turkey for recent graduates from across the Arab world. Several were from a country where it is extremely dangerous to be a Christian, too dangerous to have a printed Bible or even use an online one. At the conference they were able to borrow an Arabic Bible. It was moving to watch them pore over it, at last able to handle God's Word.

As a missionary in Thailand my father spent many years working with rural farmers and fishermen and with lepers. Most had only four years of primary education at poor village schools and were functionally illiterate. But when they became Christians they had powerful motivation to learn to read so they could read the Bible. They became avid readers of their one book.

3. Mark

Having heard and read the Scriptures, we mark them. This means that we observe and take note of what we are reading so as to understand it. Like reading, this is a lifelong process, as we grow in our skill of observation. We mark that the Bible contains different genres of literature: narrative, poetry, apocalyptic, prophetic, legal, letter. We learn how to read and mark each one appropriately. We mark that the Bible records a progressive story, and we learn its grand metanarrative, and make it our metanarrative. We learn how to read and mark each portion of Scripture with respect to its place in the overall story. Above all, we mark that at the heart of the Bible is Christ.

The two disciples on the Emmaus road knew the Scriptures, which for them were our Old Testament. But they hadn't been reading them correctly, as shown by their lack of comprehension of recent events. So Jesus said to them,

"O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken!"... And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself. (Luke 24:25-27)

After Jesus left them the two said,

"Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the Scriptures?" (Luke 24:32)

Shortly thereafter Jesus appeared to the disciples and said,

"These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled." Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures. (Luke 24:44-45)

Philip heard the Ethiopian eunuch reading Isaiah 53 and asked,

"Do you understand what you are reading?" And he said, "How can I, unless someone guides me?"... Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus. (Acts 8:30-31, 35)

As we read and mark the Scriptures, we do so with a Christocentric frame of mind, whether in the Old or New Testament.

This work of observing the text is a lifelong process. The more we read and the more years we devote to reading, the more we will observe. Some of you have heard me read the story of Professor Agassiz and the fish. Around 1859 an eager new student arrived in the science lab of Harvard Professor Agassiz. The student's first assignment was to look at a single fish for three days. "Look, look, look" was the professor's repeated injunction. The student gradually learnt to observe, realizing how little he had been seeing. The Scriptures stand

up to a lifetime of looking. A lifetime is still not enough to plumb their depths.

This work of observing Scripture can be done alone, but also benefits greatly from being done in community, as many of you who are in Bible studies of various sorts can attest.

The work of observing Scripture is for both the young believer and the veteran Christian. Gregory the Great said that the Scriptures are simultaneously both shallow and deep enough for the lamb to paddle and the elephant to swim. Both the new Christian and the lifelong Christian are able to read and study the Scriptures with great profit. Again, Bruce Waltke is a great example. At the age of 84 he is still studying the Scriptures and still learning.

4. Learn

Hearing, reading and marking the Scriptures should lead to learning. We are all called to be lifelong learners. Paul's prayer for the Ephesian Christians was:

that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe according to the working of his great might that he worked in Christ... (Eph 1:17-20a)

Paul wanted them all to learn and to know some quite detailed points of theology, at the center of which lay Christ and what God had accomplished in and through him. Knowledge was not restricted to a special privileged class of people who had been through certain initiation rites, like in the mystery religions. It isn't restricted to a special class of scholars with high IQs and advanced degrees, or to ordained professionals. We are all to learn from the Scriptures.

What are we to learn? Two years ago in a series of sermons I summarized the key things we are to learn as two triads. We learn three things about God: who God is, what he has done in Christ, and what he doing now through his Spirit. Our learning about God has a Trinitarian shape, as does Paul's prayer for the Ephesians. We learn three things about ourselves: who we are in relationship to God, to one another, and to the world. From this we develop our ethics; we learn how to live. It is from the Scriptures that we learn these things. As we hear, read and mark the Scriptures they should form us into a broad worldview of the triune God, Father, Son and Spirit; and of each one of us in relationship in three directions.

5. Inwardly Digest

The final step in Cranmer's prayer is that we inwardly digest the Scriptures that we have heard, read, marked and learned. We absorb them so that they become part of us and we are changed, we are formed. God, through his Spirit, invests his Scriptures with the power to accomplish this transformation.

As well as lifelong learners, we are also called to be lifelong disciples. The word "disciple" means "learner," but in New Testament times it had a particular nuance. Young men who were serious about following God attached themselves to a rabbi, and sat at his feet,

gradually over many years imbibing the rabbi's learning and thinking, until they had so mastered it that they became identical to him. It was for this purpose that Paul left Tarsus and went to Jerusalem to learn at the feet of Gamaliel, one of the most famous rabbis of his day (Acts 22:3).

In many ways Jesus functioned as a rabbi with his disciples. In a passage we looked at last year, Jesus said to his disciples, "A disciple is not above his teacher, but everyone when he is fully trained will be like his teacher" (Luke 6:40). God's goal is to make us more and more like Jesus, not so that we can just faithfully parrot his words, but so that we actually become like him. The goal in inwardly digesting the Scriptures is not that we master them, but that they master us and so form us into Christ. This has nothing to do with academic ability and everything to do with receptivity, our willingness to hear and be formed.

Benedict, whose *Rule* written around 500 has formed the basis for most monastic movements, prescribed reading as an essential part of a monk's vocation: not speed-reading of many books, but slow, repeated, meditative reading of Scripture and a very select few other works. Over subsequent centuries there emerged a four-step approach to reading, known as *lectio divina*. In recent years this has attracted much interest far outside the monastic community.

The first step is *lectio*, "reading," which seeks the literal sense of the text. Next comes *meditatio*, "meditation," an unhurried reflection on the text. This leads to *oratio*, "prayer," and finally to *contemplatio*, contemplation of God himself. The goal of *lectio divina* is for the Scriptures to lead us to humble, adoring contemplation of God, which cannot but leave us transformed.

The Scriptures are a precious gift to us from God. He has revealed himself and inspired human authors to write that revelation down. He now illumines us through the Holy Spirit to receive his revelation and thereby be formed into Christ. May God grant that we hear, read, mark, learn and inwardly digest the Scriptures he has given us. May we indeed be a *Bible* church, where we submit ourselves to the Word and are formed by it into Christ.

1. Collect for the Second Sunday of Advent, *The Book of Common Prayer*, 1662. *The Book of Common Prayer* (Episcopal Church of USA, 1979) moves it to Proper 28, second last Sunday of the year; *Common Worship* (Church of England, 2000) moves it to the Last Sunday after Trinity, fifth last of the year.

2. Bruce K. Waltke with Charles Yu, *An Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 73-77.

3. Waltke, *Old Testament Theology*, 77.

4. Augustine, *Confessions* 8.12.

© 2014 Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino