

Chapter 10

The Word of God in Community

Joseph Khabbaz

SABBATH

Introduction

In the main sanctuary of Sligo Church, Bibles are conveniently located at the back of each pew. On a typical Sabbath morning, everyone is invited to take one, turn to the chapter and verse shared, and read along.

The visual of having several Bibles in each pew of Sligo Church would suggest that the Word of God is the foundation of our church. To add to the visuals, we have multiple Bibles in our homes. You can probably picture in your mind copies of the Bible laying around, or lining the bookshelf in your living room. Bibles in the church, Bibles in homes. Could there be any doubt that the Word of God saturates and guides every aspect of our life as community?

Meanwhile, poll after poll reveals that the overwhelming majority of Christians, even a majority of churchgoers, do not read their Bibles regularly. Not very many church members study Scripture daily, or meet with fellow members

2 Timothy 3:16;
1 Peter 1:22-23;
John 17:17;
Deuteronomy 8:3;
Romans 10:17;
James 1:22

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to share what they learned from the Bible. Is it a surprise then that church attendance is sporadic? Should we be baffled that we face significant challenges of community in the Christian Church?

The Bible is not just a devotional book that we dutifully read together in our church services and on religious occasions. We cannot read it with the same attitude as when we take cough medicine. Rather, the Bible is the book that reads us. It is the book that transforms us, as individuals and as church. The Bible defines our identity and rallies us around community. As we open it and read it in community, God calls us to understand our true condition and change together through its power. God invites Christian communities to be transformed through His Word.

Have you ever witnessed the power of God's Word in the church, your own life, or in other communities to which you belong? If you have, how was that power manifested?

SUNDAY

The Word of God Constitutes Community (2 Timothy 3:16)

History is very important for Christian faith and the people of God understood themselves in light of the history told by the Word of God. The people of Israel passed the story of God's dealings with their ancestors from generation to generation. The echoes of the exodus from Egypt, rebellion in the desert, God's faithfulness and forgiveness, idolatry in the Promised Land, judgment of the exile and

the return, thoroughly permeate the pages of the Old Testament. There is no doubt that the memory of the past pulsed with vibrancy and vitality in the midst of God's people. The people of Israel regularly remembered it, reminded each other of it, and understood themselves to be at all times right at the center of this story. As they consistently retold the story of their ancestors, they learned and relearned who they were.

The Word of God tells the real and authoritative story of the community of faith and defines its place and role in history. We, the community of God at present time, need to hear the story of God as well. In order to orient ourselves in the present, we need to hear the story of our past and our future.¹ The Bible is the only book that tells us where we come from, who we are, what is our heritage, what is our role in the history of salvation, and where we are ultimately going. The Word of God is so essential for our self-understanding as individuals and community that without it there would be no community of faith.

In 2 Timothy 3:16, we learn that the Holy Spirit uses the words of Scripture to instruct us. The Word of God establishes our identity as community and as individual members of that community. It teaches us how we become members of the community of faith and what it means to be a member of the community. Therefore, an urgent imperative before us as individual members of the Sligo community and before the entire church is to understand how the Word of God defines and constitutes us as the people of God.

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¹Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 390.

What is your personal identity in light of the Word of God? What is the identity of Sligo Church? How would you define your role and the role of Sligo church in the history of salvation?

MONDAY

The Word of God

Transforms Community

(1 Peter 1:22-23; John 17:17)

Spiritual author and former seminary professor Howard Snyder diagnoses a particularly concerning malady of the Church. He writes, "The church today is suffering a fellowship crisis . . . In a world of big, impersonal institutions, the church often looks like just another big, impersonal institution . . . One seldom finds within the institutionalized church today that winsome intimacy among people where masks are dropped, honesty prevails, and that sense of communication and community beyond the human abounds—where there is literally the fellowship of and in the Holy Spirit."²

Is it possible for us at Sligo to have a community where there are no masks, and loving honesty permeates all our relationships? Can we be a community that is supernaturally inclusive and supernaturally deep? The power and love of our God give us every reason to believe that such a community is possible. But, how can a community like this be forged?

In 1 Peter 1:22-23, we learn that spiritual transformation is a necessary foundation for a loving community of faith. Mere intellectual assent to a

community's belief system is inadequate. There has to be a transformation, so complete and profound that it is likened to a new birth. 1 Peter 1:23 associates the new birth experience of a Christian community with seed. It states that there are two kinds of seed—corruptible and incorruptible. When our communities are generated by corruptible seed, however innocuous that seed may be, their vitality is weakened and they cannot reflect all the glorious divine ideals for the community of faith. However, when communities are formed from incorruptible seed, they become transformed and their actions of sincere love resemble God's vision. Apostle Peter says that this incorruptible seed is the Word of God, which is active and eternal.

We cannot have a supernatural and loving community at Sligo without being increasingly sanctified. In his gospel, John recorded a prayer of Jesus, "Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth" (John 17:17; NIV). Jesus is praying for the community of believers when He prays "sanctify them." Then he states that the means of sanctification is God's Word. The Word of God has the power to sanctify a community of believers. Therefore, the Word of God does not only define us and constitutes us as community, but also leads to sanctification.

How can Sligo church respond to perceived lack of transformation in church communities? How does the eternal Word of God live in a community of faith?

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²Quoted in Scot McKnight, *1 Peter: The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 91.

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TUESDAY

The Word of God Sustains Community

(Deuteronomy 8:3)

The most recurring word in Deuteronomy 8:3 is the word *you*. Even though this is second person singular *you*, Moses is speaking to the entire people of God as a community. Moses reminds the people of God that as a community they suffered together with hunger, and as a community they received God's sustenance together through the manna which God provided and through the word that God spoke to them. God chose to save and prosper a nation, not just unrelated individuals.

Still, this verse presents an apparently odd-sounding argument. It claims that God humbled His people and let them hunger and fed them with very material food—*manna*—so that they would understand that they do not live on material food alone, but on every word of God. If you want to persuade someone that they do not live on bread alone, would you give them bread as a part of your argument? But this was a different kind of bread—the one the people of God did not know and did not bake themselves. It was the bread of miracle, provided without any effort on the part of the people at all. It was the bread of God. When the people of God were in need they could not go and sow wheat or rye in the middle of the Sinai desert. Their only hope was God and His all-powerful Word. Therefore, even manna was the proof that they were entirely dependent on God and His Word!

Another reason why the bread is a part of this verse and this argument is that the community of faith needs to know that the Word of God props them up

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in a similar way that the bread does. Just like bread, the Word of God is the basic sustenance of life. It is the bottom-line fare of life that fills our souls the way bread fills our bellies. It satisfies and holds us for a long time. It puts strength into our limbs and sends us into a new day. This is what the Word of God does for us as individuals and community.

How do you feel when you eat a piece of hearty bread? In what ways does this experience resemble what the Word of God does for us as individuals and community? As you eat your bread this week, remember the sustaining power of the Word of God.

WEDNESDAY

Hearing the Word of God as Community

(Romans 10:17)

According to Romans 10:17, the faith of a community depends on hearing the Word of God. Therefore, hearing Scripture is essential in the life of a community. The most prominent and visible venue for hearing the Word of God in the community is listening to a sermon (see Romans 10:14). The role of preaching is to give the community an encounter with God through His Word, so the sermons that the community hears should be biblical. What it means, is that the exposition and application of the Word of God should normally take precedence over any other element of a sermon. In the present moment of the history of Christian Church, when a sermon is imagined in a myriad different ways, we need to remember that the promise of faith is associated with the Word.

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Preaching is very important, but not the only way a community hears the Word of God. A community can leverage its sermons in teaching its members how to carefully listen to Scripture. Sermons have a great potential for demonstrating to the community members how they should study the Bible individually and in groups. Sermons do not have to turn into lectures on biblical interpretation, but they could practically demonstrate methods of Bible Study.

Studying the Bible together as a community can be one of the best ways to grow in our faith, as we discover the viewpoints of others that can enhance our biblical understanding. True church community should be a safe haven for those seeking to have their major questions answered, doubts healed, and fears comforted. Imagine what our Sligo church community would be like if we took more time to listen to the Word of God together!

Do you feel that here at Sligo we need more of a culture change than a behavioral change, when it comes to listening together to the Word of God? How can we immerse all our meetings and interactions in Scripture? How can your individual life contribute to this culture change?

THURSDAY

Living the Word of God as Community

(James 1:22)

As important as hearing the Word of God is for a community of faith, it is insufficient. In James 1:22, we learn that hearing the Word, without going any further, is not acceptable in God's eyes. The Word

of God is not meant to be only heard, but obeyed and lived. Jesus himself said as much in His Great Commission when, in Matthew 28:20, He argued that an essential characteristic of the community of His disciples is obedience to His commandments. Obedience to His Word is a central element of His great missionary mandate to the Church.

Therefore, there is a great imperative before us as the Sligo community: we have to obey and live the Word of God and we have to teach the people of the world to do the same. The ultimate goal of all our sermons, all our services, all our ministries, and all our small groups has to be the obedience to the Word of God.

As a community, Sligo church has made important and intentional strides to be obedient to the gospel. In the past our church was predominantly made up of Caucasian church members. However, during the 1960's and 1970's a more faithful listening to Scripture caused Sligo church to grow in the area of social awareness. Sligo began to see its responsibility towards social justice with a much broader perspective. The church began to open its doors to the homeless and placed a priority on racial reconciliation. Because of Sligo's courageous and Christ-centered work, it is a different and more diverse church today than it was 50 years ago. Our history is evidence of what a community can accomplish when the Word of God takes root and lives among us.

But, we are not perfect and have much work ahead of us, if we want to stay obedient to the Word of God. As we walk the journey of obedience, we have to keep

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in mind that genuine faithfulness to the Word of God is best nurtured in community, in an atmosphere of accountability, authenticity, and encouragement. All of us, Sligo members, need to gather regularly in smaller groups to share with one another progress we are making, or lack thereof, in living the Word of God. These meetings have to be marked by authenticity, for when we are unable to be authentic and honest with ourselves and one another we cannot have real community. Finally, we need to be patient with each other, for we are all striving against sin, and we cannot tire of encouraging each other with the hope of the gospel.

How would you evaluate your own progress in living the Word of God? In what ways can you serve others in the Sligo community in their efforts to be obedient to the Word of God?

FRIDAY

Summary and Application

On August 5, 1888 Ellen White wrote, “The Word of God is the great detector of error; to it we believe everything must be brought. The Bible must be our standard for every doctrine and practice . . . We are to receive no one’s opinion without comparing it with the Scriptures. Here is divine authority, which is supreme in matters of faith. It is the word of the living God that is to decide all controversies.”³

Ellen White wrote these words during a time when the Adventist church community almost split. It was during the theological crisis of 1888 that

Seventh-day Adventists discovered that a person could be an Adventist, but it did not necessarily mean they were Christian. The theological discussions of the time were so toxic and not Christ-like that it threatened to end the Adventist community that had recently been formed and was growing. The central issue of the crisis was that the Adventist church had lost sight of what kept the church unified. Certain leaders within the church sought to utilize unbiblical methods to resolve biblical issues. Ellen White boldly and unequivocally spoke up against this approach and sought to draw the attention of the church community back to Scripture. She understood the importance and relationship between the study of Scripture and a unified church community.

What habits can you put in place to read the Bible more consistently? What can you do to ensure that the Word of God lives in you this week and into the future?

In what practical ways can the Bible create community in Sligo church? How can we as a church make the Bible more accessible to the community both inside and outside the church?

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³Ellen G. White, 1888 *Materials Volume 1* (Washington, DC: Ellen G. White Estate, 1987), 201.