



CHRISTIAN EDUCATION SUNDAY

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

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Lection – 2 Timothy 3:14-17 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 14) But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you have learned it, (v. 15) and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. (v. 16) All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, (v. 17) so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

From its earliest appearance in the first century C. E., the Christian faith has included an educational dimension. Just like its theological parent, Judaism, Christianity is a religion of the Book. Moreover, the canonical Gospels portray Jesus as having disciples or pupils or learners (both male and female). He invited and encouraged these learners to observe his activity, listen to his words, and follow his example in preparation for making disciples in all the world and leading the faith community that he was to leave in their hands.

Some of the earliest attempts to bring Christian education to African Americans came from a branch of the Church of England called the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in the 18th century. These efforts met with considerable opposition from colonial planters for three main reasons: 1) the implied equality in Christianization; 2) the supposed intellectual and cultural inferiority of Africans; 3) the potential economic loss to slave owners due to time spent by their slaves in religious instruction. To counteract these concerns the first missionaries to enslaved Africans assured slaveholders that their slaves would become even better servants if they became Christians. This position led to the presentation of a distorted, pro-slavery view of the Christian faith. Many slaves, however, learned to read for themselves, sometimes through the efforts of whites, and came to understand for themselves the liberating thrust of the gospel of Jesus the Christ. (See Albert Raboteau's *Slave Religion*, pp. 96–150, for a full discussion of these issues.) Religious education for African Americans was from the start very closely associated with general education and the longing to be free.

We also see a strong connection between the establishment of primary, secondary, and post-secondary schools and Christian education among African Americans. Many historically Black colleges and universities, for example, began as schools to prepare students for ministry. Howard University, Morehouse College, Shaw University, Spelman College, and Talladega College are examples, just to name a few. (See the history of these and other schools on their official websites.) Some form of religious education has been a part of most African American churches since they began forming in the 18th century.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: 2 Timothy 3:14-17

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

If it is to be relevant, Christian education has to be a complex undertaking in today's multifaceted, problem-laden, global society. The days of gathering on a Sunday morning or afternoon to discuss Bible verses in a religious vacuum are indeed over unless one enjoys emptying those sessions of people. Now, Christian education must be done with some of the most pressing issues in mind. We speak here of matters such as international poverty and starvation, socio-political upheaval in North Africa and the Middle East, noticeable climate change, gender differences, sexual orientation, the prison industrial complex, the rights of the disabled, lingering racism, and many more. Christian education

that fails to address these concerns does not wish to carry out the task of the faith to save, liberate, and deliver.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

This designated text, coming out of what is commonly referred to as one of the three Pastoral Epistles, speaks on the issue of the use of Scripture in preparing believers for Godly work in the world. Although the apostle Paul is designated as the author of this letter and the young pastor Timothy as the recipient, its content and style have convinced most scholars that the document is pseudonymous; that is, written by another author to another recipient whose respect for the acclaimed missionary caused him to use Paul's name and relationship with Timothy. It nevertheless has value as a tool for understanding a number of critical aspects of faith as it pertains to Scripture. We can extract from this selected passage several lessons important to believers who are serious about doing God's will in the world.

The first lesson calls for a continuation of what has been learned and firmly believed. The essence of this author's view of the gospel is found earlier in the document; it includes "the appearing of our Savior Jesus Christ, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light..." The emphasis here, however, should not be placed on the content of this gospel, but rather upon the act of continuation—continuation in what has been acquired from trustworthy teachers. While modes, forms, and even some of the content of faith change, a core dimension of our faith must remain constant. This constancy identifies who we are as followers of Jesus the Christ and that identity, regardless of the transitory character of our situations, has to be maintained. We must continue in what we have understood as the essentials of faith, seeking always to do God's will.

The second lesson alludes to the significance of learning biblical principles as a child (v. 15). Childhood is the time when knowledge is most readily absorbed. Therefore, a systematic study of the Scriptures for youth—in ways appropriate to them—creates the best opportunity for one to gain instruction for salvation in Christ Jesus. The often quoted Proverb supports this method of early-in-life exposure to what is good and the resulting benefit: "Train children in the right way, and when old, they will not stray" (22:6). In another statement that suggests the importance of children learning the way of salvation we find the authors of the synoptic Gospels recording Jesus as saying, "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs" (Matthew 19:14; Mark 10:14; Luke 18:16).

The third lesson articulates an essential attribute of Scripture that is often the subject of much doctrinal controversy (v. 16a). The characterization in the text—"All scripture is inspired by God"—is not a statement about the inerrancy or divine dictation of what we know as the contemporary canon. Rather, it is most likely a comment about Scripture as it was known to first- and second-century believers, which almost certainly included the Hebrew Bible, but may or may not have included other documents that would be canonized later. **To say that Scripture is divinely inspired is to make a statement of faith that God was the impetus for writing it, not that God was the author. This**

means that we may find the word of God in Scripture, but Scripture is not identical in every respect to the word of God. Theologically we are saying that God cannot be fully contained in anything humans can produce. This is good news because nothing should take the place of God, not even divinely inspired Scriptures.

The remainder of verse 16 provides yet another lesson: four uses of Scripture. The first use is “teaching” and simply refers to the knowledge gained through acquisition. The second use is “reproof,” which means rebuking with the truth so that one becomes convicted of one’s wrongdoing or sin. The term “correction” calls for straightening up again, or reformation, or a restoration to an upright or right state. The fourth and final use is “instruction,” which is education accompanied by an ordering discipline.

The fifth and probably most crucial lesson of this text articulates the ultimate purpose of Scripture: enabling or empowering believers—“everyone who belongs to God”—to perform good work. Note the utilitarian conception of Scripture that this author puts forth. We should not view Scripture as an end in itself, but rather as a means to an end. And the end is good work in accordance with God’s will. The emphasis rests squarely on the good work that Scripture helps us to perform.

Celebration

The good news is that Scripture, even when read critically, can provide us with tools to do the Christ-like deeds God has call us to do: proclaim the gospel, address the needs of the disinherited, confront wickedness, and love others.

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details in this passage include, but are not limited to:

Sights: A child being taught the sacred writings of their faith community; a teacher teaching a class doctrine; a parent teaching a child moral lessons; a well-equipped Christian at work; and

Sounds: Pages being turned; children reciting Bible verses; and chatter in a classroom.

III. Other Sermonic Comments or Suggestions

A. Some key concepts and phrases in the text:

- Continue
- Learned
- Firmly believed
- Childhood
- Salvation
- All scripture
- Inspired by God
- Teaching, reproof, correction, training

- Good work

B. Scripture serves the purpose of good work, not vice versa.

C. “When it comes to Christian education—whether in church school classes or from the pulpit—churches must tackle issues of the day and offer their members a thorough grounding in the Bible and in their faith tradition’s heritage.” (From a press release by the National Council of Churches, October 29, 2003, nccusa.org)

D. Because of the unique challenges facing African American communities—high unemployment rates, family disintegration, dangerous school dropout rates, intra-community violence, a problematic criminal justice system, etc.—the African American Church must become scripturally equipped to address them.

E. Songs for this moment on the calendar:

- Lord, I Want to Be a Christian. Negro Spiritual
- More about Jesus. By Eliza E Hewitt
- Order My Steps. By Glenn Burleigh
- Available to You. By Milton Brunson