

Holding Fast to the Word of Life | Philippians 2:14-16

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(Small Group Discussion Questions on Page 7)

Introduction

I recently joined a small cohort of pastors, all of us in our first decade of ministry. We meet a few times a year with a seasoned pastor who recently retired. He has decades of experience and is a respected writer and leader. Before our first meeting this fall, he gave us assigned reading to prepare us for the topic we'd discuss.

What do you think a seasoned pastor in his seventies would give young pastors to read? At this point we've all been through seminary; we know the basics. Maybe material on executive leadership? Perhaps an article on engaging cultural issues?

I didn't get to the reading until the plane ride there. I was surprised to find myself working through a meticulous article from the 1915 edition of *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*. The article's title, "Inspiration." It was a thirteen-thousand-word treatment of a single phrase in the Bible: "All scripture is breathed out by God" (2 Tim 3:16). It was a defense of the divine origins and divine authority of the Bible.

Working my way through the essay, I was struck afresh by an old truth: For Christians, things really do stand or fall based on our relationship to the Word of God. Trajectories of lives, institutions, churches, denominations, are determined by whether or not we see the Bible as a Word from God, or merely words of men.

As we continue this January to consider disciplines that disciples of Jesus keep, we turn today to the discipline of adhering to, and abiding in, the Word of God. Or, as Paul puts it in Philippians 2, the discipline of "holding fast to the Word of life" (2:16).

The phrase is sandwiched in the middle of the passage, Philippians 2:14-16. Paul is not arguing for the validity of the Word but stating its power. It has the power to make Christians shine as lights in a dark world; and the power to prepare us to stand before Christ on the day of Judgement:

Do all things without grumbling or disputing, ¹⁵ that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, ¹⁶ holding fast to the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I may be proud that I did not run in vain or labor in vain (Phil 2:14-16).

How do disciples shine in a dark world (v 15)? By holding fast the Word of God (v16). What prepares disciples to meet Christ on the last day (v16)? Holding fast to the Word of God (v.16).

Whether you're a 75-year-old retired pastor, or 17-year-old brand new Christian, nothing is more relevant for you than your relationship to the Word of God. With the rest of our time, we'll consider what it entails to heed Paul's admonition to hold fast to the Word of life. To do so, we'll explore the phrase one part at a time. First, we'll consider the *word*; second, why it's the words *of life*; third, how we *hold fast* to it: (1) Word. (2) Life. (3) Holding Fast.

I. Word: An Objective Revelation Framing Reality; An Objective Rule Measuring Truth

The Christian is to hold fast not to a feeling, or a movement, or a tradition, but to the word. By "word" I think Paul means Scripture, especially in its witness of Jesus Christ. This witness now comes to people in a concrete, objective, articulate, *word*. What's the significance of this? Consider two things: this word is a *revelation*, and a *rule*.

A Revelation Framing Reality

Through the Word, God reveals to us the most important things we must know. The Word reveals that God is, what God is like, and what we are like. It reveals who the savior is, and how we find help in our deepest need.

In short, the Bible *frames reality* for us—it answers the most fundamental questions.

In the Pali canon of Buddhism, there is a story of a monk who comes to the Buddha with questions he feels are of the utmost importance. "Is the world eternal or does it have an end? Does a person continue to exist after death or not? Is there a soul separate from the body or not?" But the Buddha responds saying he doesn't answer questions like these. "The religious life," the Buddha insists, "does not depend on dogma" (PC 121).¹ By dogma, the Buddha means doctrinal answers to life's big questions. Instead of answering these, the Buddha offers techniques for escaping suffering through detachment, and guidance for living in peace and reaching Nirvana. But overarching worldview, answers to big questions, there is none.

In a similar vein, neither does our purely scientific worldview answer fundamental questions. The telescope and microscope show us what's *there*, but can't tell us *why* it's there—or what things and people are ultimately for.

The Word of God is different. It is a revelation from God that addresses just these sorts of questions.

We can see how this revelation was reframing reality for the Philippians. Many of them came from Roman or Greek backgrounds. They believed in multiple deities, valued people based on class and ethnicity, and followed a moral code that often was far more lenient for men than for women. But notice the realities that are shining through in our passage:

¹ For a brief overview of Buddhism and of this supposed interaction, see Leslie Stevenson and David L. Haberman, *Ten Theories of Human Nature: Confucianism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Plato, Aristotle, The Bible, Kant, Marx, Sartre, Darwinian Theories*, 5th ed. (Oxford University Press, New York, NY: 2009), 47-70.

God: God is mentioned in verse 15 in the phrase, “children of God,” assuming—as the letter does throughout—that there is only one God, not many.

Children of God: And beneath the phrase “children of God” is the radical Christian claim that through Jesus anyone can become a member of God’s family—whether Jew or Greek, barbarian or Scythian, slave or free, man or woman.

Morality: The language of “blameless and innocent,” and of a generation that is “crooked and twisted,” assumes moral absolutes. In ethics and morality, the Philippians’ lives are being collectively re-organized around the Holiness of God, rather than the cultural norms of Roman society.

The Word of God was framing reality for the Philippians. It was like giving lost people a **map**: you are here; this is the bigger picture; this is the pathway to life and that the pathway to death. The revelatory power of the Word of God should not be taken for granted. We hold fast to the word—not a nebulous feeling of love—because God is framing reality for us, answering the types of questions that we simply must know.

A Rule Measuring Truth

Along with being a revelation, the Word is also a rule. It is a rule by which all other truth is measured.

It’s sobering how quickly the problem of false teaching and deception emerges for Christians.

In **Galatia**, people were distorting the Word:

“... there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ (Gal 1:6-7).

In **Colossae**, people claimed to have visions as authoritative as the Word, and therefore added to the Word (like Islam and Mormonism today):

Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions ... and not holding fast to the Head (Col 2:18-19).

Addressing churches across ancient Turkey, the **Apostle John** warns of antichrists going out from the church:

Children, it is the last hour, and as you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come.... They went out from us, but they were not of us (1 John 2:18)

The pure word of God will always be assailed by distortions and false teaching. And note well, the false teachers often emerge from within the church. They could be pastors, bishops, even a pope. They appear at first to hold fast to the Word, but slowly distort it, veer away from it, and lead thousands into deception along the way.

So I ask: *How are Christians to distinguish between genuine and counterfeit Christianity?* There is only one way: *the Word!* The Word is the object, concrete, articulate **revelation** and **rule** by which we know reality and measure truth.

[T] That's our first observation: we hold fast, not to a feeling or movement or tradition, but to an objective *Word*—that reveals the truth, and acts as a rule to measure truth.

II. Life

The next term to consider is “life.” Paul says we hold fast to “the Word *of life*.” This conveys that the Word gives life. How so?

Paul connects the Word with giving eternal life. We see this in the connection with the day of Christ, the final judgement:

...holding fast to the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I may be proud that I did not run in vain or labor in vain (Phil 2:16).

Paul also envisions that the Word effects the quality of our present lives, however, because it holding fast to it can make one shine as a light:

“be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world (v15)

How are they to do this? By

holding fast to the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I may be proud that I did not run in vain or labor in vain (v16).

From Dead Letter to Living Word

How exactly does this happen? How does the Word give life? And we need to ask this, because it's clear that people can read the word, understand the word, and get no life from the word. This was the case with the Pharisees. And even the Devil knew the word of God and would not call it a word of life. If merely reading the word is not enough, then how does the Bible go from an ancient book to a life-giving word?

Principle: I will state the principle, then unpack it. The Word becomes a word of life only when its reading involves the Spirit and faith: The Word gives life when the Spirit works through it, and when we more than read it, we believe it.

The Word and The Spirit

Notice the close relationship between God's Word and God's Spirit. Spirit, is breath from the mouth of God (Gen 2:7 God breaths into Adam the breath, i.e., spirit, of life). Words, are also breath from the mouth of God. Put your hand close to your mouth when you speak and you'll see the connection between words and breath.

This is why God's Word is so powerful; His Spirit works through it.

By his spirit working through his word, God created the world and the human beings. And it is always God's word that then calls and fashions people: God speaks to Abraham, calling him and drawing him into faith; God speaks to Moses and through Moses gives Israel His Word, that then forms Israel. God speaks to his people by the prophets. God's spirit working through the preaching of God's word gives birth to the church in Acts 2. And, for every Christian, as Paul says, "faith comes by hearing, and hearing the Word of Christ" (Rom 10:17). And of course, Jesus is the Word of God become flesh.

Sometimes people will say that the church created the Bible, noting that the Apostles wrote down the Gospels and the early church determined which books were in the canon and which were out. But this is to get things completely backwards. God's people never create God's Word; rather, God's Word always creates God's people. When the church determined the Canon, it was like someone working at the **mint distinguishing pure gold from fool's gold**; the church didn't create the Word, it was created by it, and then duly recognized it. Paul is crystal clear in Ephesians, "the house of God is built on the foundation of the apostles [New Testament] and prophets [Old Testament], Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone" (Eph 2:20).

The Word of God is lifegiving, because God's Spirit works through it.

The Spirit shines a light on Jesus

But along with the work of the Spirit, there must also be faith in the reader. And this happens when the Spirit removes scales from our eyes, and shines a spotlight on the person of Jesus Christ. By seeing Christ—in his glory—our hearts are moved, and faith is awakened.

The Glory of God in Christ—the Object of our Faith

We see in Jesus that God is at once exalted and holy, but also becomes lowly and despised; we see that God is powerful, but also meek. We see in Jesus that the God who is mighty, has acted very personally, towards us. Suddenly, the Word of God is not an old religious text; it is personal word from our Father in heaven, about His unfathomable mercy and love towards us. And seeing such glory, we believe.

Authority of Word Rest in Glory of Christ

This is why the authority of Scripture is not finally established by historical arguments, nor archeology, nor apologetics—though things that help and point the way. The decisive birth of life happens not by logical inference, but by personal sight: the Spirit, working through the Word, illumines the eyes of our hearts to see the glory of Jesus. John Calvin explains it like this:

God's Word ought indeed to be enough to engender faith in us, if our blindness and stubbornness did not prevent it. But ... the bare word profits nothing without the illumination of the Holy Spirit.... God's word is like the sun, for it shines on all to whom it

is proclaimed, but it is without effectiveness among the blind. Now we are all naturally blind in this matter; that is why it cannot enter into our spirit unless God's Spirit, who is the inward Master, gives it access by His illumination.²

There is a role for making arguments—whether for the historical accuracy of scripture, or the logic of its claims. But the decisive moment when the Word becomes the word of life, is not a movement of reasoning, but one of seeing—seeing the glory of God in the person of Christ, which, as Calvin says, “lifts reverence of Scripture beyond the realm of controversy.”

The Spirit working through the Word is the foundation of every true church and every true believer. And the Spirit's ongoing work through the Word is how God sanctifies and shapes every believer.

[T] We need to turn to some practical implications. We do so by considering, lastly, what it means to “hold fast” to this “word of life.”

III. Hold Fast

This phrase “hold fast” shows up elsewhere in the Bible, where it can emphasize “fixing attention on something” (Acts 3:5); “remaining in a place” (Acts 19:22), and “continuing in a body of teaching” (2 Tim 3:14-17).

Surely holding fast to the word means reading your Bible regularly, and reading it clearly. This means having a study Bible to help you understand confusing parts; and a Bible reading plan of some kind, to help you read thoroughly. It may also benefit you greatly to read with a friend—perhaps ask a friend to read one book of the Bible with you this winter.

Paul's words here also imply reading with a community—with the church. Paul is not writing to a single individual, nor would he assume most of these people had their own Bibles. He has in mind the role of the church to be a teaching machine—preaching, teaching the Word of God constantly. Join a church that preaches and teaches the Word of God faithfully; prepare your hearts for hearing it on Sunday. Pray in the morning that the Spirit would speak to you by it. Saturate your small group in the Word; saturate your outreach ministries in the Word; saturate your homes in the Word. This is what it means to *hold fast* to the Word of life as a *church community*.

Finally, we'll close by enticing our appetites for the Word by hearing some of God's promises that are attached to it.

² John Calvin, *Institutes* 3.2.33-34. See also his words from book 1 of the *Institutes*, “[T]he testimony of the Spirit is more excellent than all reason. For as God alone is a fit witness of himself in his word, the Word will not find acceptance in men's hearts before it is sealed by the inward testimony of the Spirit. The same Spirit therefore who has spoken through the mouths of the prophets must penetrate into our hearts to persuade us that they faithfully proclaimed what had been divinely commanded ... because until he illumines their minds, they ever waver among many doubts.”

1. Hold fast to the Word to be equipped for righteousness: “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness,¹⁷ that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim 3:16-17).
2. Hold fast for the Holy Spirit: “Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith” (Gal3:5)?
3. Hold Fast for Faith: “Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ” (Rom 10:17).
4. Hold fast for guidance: “Your Word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (Ps 119:105).
5. Hold fast for refreshment of your soul and for joy in your heart: “The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul... the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart” (Ps 19: 7-8).
6. Hold fast for wisdom: “The testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple” (Ps 19:7).
7. Hold fast for strength and stability and blessing: “Blessed is the man [whose] ... delights is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all he does, he prospers” (Ps 1:1, 2-3).
8. Hold fast for life: “but these [words] are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:31).

Let’s close by praying this Anglican collect about Scripture, which has this very phrase—“hold fast”—in it:

Blessed Lord, who caused the holy scriptures to be written for our learning, grant that we may so hear, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them that through patience and the comfort of your holy Word, we may embrace and forever hold fast the joyful hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Small Group Questions

1. Do you have a favorite verse or passage of Scripture? If so, what is it and how has it impacted you?
2. What would be different about you if you had never had access to the Word of God—not through reading it, or through someone sharing it?
3. Have you ever used a Bible reading plan? If so, which one and how did that go?

This is a preaching draft. Final transcript will be posted at a later date.

4. What are some areas of false teaching that may be afoot in the church (at large) today, and how might a closer reading of the Word of God help combat this?
5. What is your plan for holding fast to the Word of life in 2024?

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