

One Book Many Opinions Part 3 2 Timothy 3:10-17

Summer is a season for celebrations- our mailboxes bring an abundance of invitations to graduation parties, weddings, showers, and family reunions. If you haven't been to one in a while, you might find that many of these modern- day celebrations barely resemble the ones we attended in our younger years. Even so, they are not just celebrations of current events but golden opportunities to reminisce and share special stories and memories with friends and loved ones. They are also prime opportunities to reconnect with friends and loved ones we rarely see.

One of the questions I like to ask people I haven't seen for a while is one that John Wesley used to ask early Methodists gathered for their weekly class meetings. Those class meetings were much like our modern -day Bible studies and Sunday School classes. It was a group of 12 people or less that met every week to encourage each other in their faith in Jesus. Some were committed Christians and others were seeking an encounter with God but had yet to experience it. The goal of the class meeting was that of Methodism itself, to be transformed by the grace of God and become an "altogether Christian." To those ends, Wesley would ask those gathered a simple question. How is it with your soul?

That question may sound strange to our modern ears, and today most people are definitely startled by such an unusual personal question. People that know me or at least know that I am a pastor are usually good sports about it but typically struggle to come up with an answer. After asking two or three times most will simply respond that it is good or it is well, and try to shift the conversation to more comfortable topics like sports or politics.

How is it with your soul? It is relevant question for all of humanity, but particularly pertinent for those of us concerned for the future of the Methodist church and the church in general. At one time, we used to pay great attention to the idea of soul and the condition of the souls of those who were connected in the love of Jesus Christ. Today, social and political causes have largely taken precedence. In fact, when asked most Christians probably would not be able to define what the soul is other than to say it is the part of us that goes to heaven when we die.

A good working definition is that **the soul is the spiritual aspect of our existence, the part of us that God reaches out to and the part of us that responds to God.** It is an intrinsic part of our existence, and something that needs to be cared for just like the rest of our body. Today we can become so focused on matters of health and fitness that we often forget about the need to care for our soul. We can go to a doctor for a checkup or an X-Ray or an MRI and learn something about our physical condition, but it is not so easy with our soul. We can ignore problems with our soul just like we can ignore problems with the rest of our body but sooner or later we will have to deal with them.

The good news is that the condition of our soul is not governed by external factors, circumstances, or events but by our minds. Unlike many other parts of the human body, our soul cannot be damaged by disease or physical abuse. To borrow an old saying, sticks and stones may break our bones, but they cannot hurt our souls unless we let them. Verse 12 is not particularly comforting, yet it reveals a difficult truth. We will be persecuted when we live our lives for Jesus Christ. Persecution is suffering harm for the sake of the Gospel. For some that harm may be physical, and history is deeply stained with the blood of martyrs. Countless numbers of people have suffered greatly, many lose their lives, in defense of the Gospel. Others may suffer a different kind of persecution, being ostracized, shunned, ridiculed, and excluded for their faith. Yet, it matters not whether persecution is physical or social in nature, no one will lose their soul for defending the Gospel.

Our soul is a priceless treasure like no other, and it is safe from harm from persecution. **What will cause lasting harm to our soul is deceit.** Webster's defines deceit as "the act of causing someone to accept as true or valid what is false or invalid". Paul warns Timothy in verse 13 that it is not just harmful, but evil. It is a deadly tool of Satan, and something we must always be watchful of. That word imposter refers to false teachers, those who are twisting and in the words of Paul to the church at Galatia perverting the Word of God, often to further a social agenda. Deceit and deceivers go from bad to worse, and left unchecked they will cause lasting harm to our soul.

Deceit is believing we have reached a point in our faith journey where we think our soul can care for itself. Deceit is believing we can ignore or in today's lingo reimagine timeless Biblical truths and have a healthy soul. Verse 14 is a stern warning against such thinking. Unless we "continue in the things we have learned and have been assured of" we are susceptible to false teaching that may place our souls in harm's way. The words of Jesus recorded by St. **Mathew 4:4** come to mind. "Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God."

Psalm 107:9

Psalm 34:8

Souls are starved by deceit, and they are fed by truth. If the church is to regain her place of influence in society and once again become an agent of change, we must return to the task of attending to our soul and the souls of those around us. We must become people who love Jesus and love the truth. We must be people who abide in the word of God and flee from deceit.

John 8:31-32

Last week, we learned that the Bible is trustworthy because it was co-authored by Jesus Christ. Paul reinforces that again in his letter to Timothy in 3:16 when he declares that *all* Scripture is given by inspiration of God. "All scripture". Not pieces and parts, not just the verses we like, but all Scripture, Old and New Testaments, even Numbers and Lamentations, are inspired texts. What does that mean? This is one of those times when knowledge of the original Greek word is helpful. The original Greek word for inspired is recorded as "theopneustos". It literally means God-breathed. There were times when the Scripture writer wrote the words exactly as God dictated them, thus saith the Lord. Jeremiah 1:9- Then the LORD reached out his hand and touched my mouth and said to me, "Now, I have put my words in your mouth. Likewise with Moses when God gave him the ten commandments on Mt. Horeb.

Exodus 20:1

There were other times where God allowed the minds and unique experiences of the Scripture writer to get His exact message across in their own words. But either way, they are the inspired words of God. They are given for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, and for instruction of righteousness. Let us take a quick look at those four things.

Doctrine is belief. It is the understanding of God's revealed truth, the way God has revealed Himself to us. Our understanding of sin and righteousness, the concept of forgiveness, marriage and baptism, human sexuality, the sanctity of human life, our concept of the Trinity, and the death and resurrection of Jesus and His atoning sacrifice for sin and sinners are doctrines. There are some things in Scripture that God has clearly revealed to be true, and they are just not up for vote or debate.

The Scriptures are profitable for reproof. That means they allow us to determine if our actions and behavior are acceptable to God, whether they happened yesterday, today or sometime in the future. The truths of Scripture are timeless, even though they were first recorded thousands of years ago.

Hebrews 4:12

The Scriptures are not given as a weapon to punish those living contrary to those standards. Scripture is not meant to punish, but to correct. It is like a carpenter's level or plumb line, something that helps us to build something that is level and true, or help us to recognize that a banner is hanging crooked on a wall.

Lastly, the Scripture is profitable for instruction in righteousness. We Methodists might say profitable for instruction in "holy living". Not only does it help us see what is wrong in our lives, it also reveals to us the good things that God expects His people to do on His behalf.

The Scriptures are divine food for our soul. Psalm 19:7-10

Living in 2021, we are immersed in a culture that has been taught that there are no absolute truths, that our world came about by accident, and that God is whoever and whatever we might imagine or desire him to be. Some even teach that we can be our own God! In this age of immense information and opportunities for education, people appear by their actions to be more biblically illiterate and deceived than at any time in history. We can help change that, and it begins with our own souls. We will not be able to care for the souls of others unless our own souls are secure in the truth.

So how is it with your soul? It is not a question to be taken lightly. When we live our lives in a way that is in absolute harmony with the Scriptures, we can honestly say it is well with our soul. Will you join me in praying that more people will find that to be true? Amen