

“Itching Ears, Jackrabbit Theology, and Genuine Faith”

2 Timothy 3:14—4:5

Dr. Christopher C. F. Chapman

First Baptist Church, Raleigh

October 16, 2022

In Marilynne Robinson’s novel *Gilead*, an older minister expresses frustration with people’s willingness to embrace uninformed teaching.

Two or three of the ladies had pronounced views on points of doctrine, particularly sin and damnation, which they never learned from me. I blame the radio for sowing a good deal of confusion where theology is concerned. And television is worse. You can spend forty years teaching people to be awake to the fact of mystery and then some fellow with no more theological sense than a jackrabbit gets himself a radio ministry and all your work is forgotten. I do wonder where it will end. (p. 208)

It is exactly how the Apostle Paul feels. He lives in a time long before radio and television, but even though he spends his entire life after his conversion teaching people sound truths about Jesus and what it means to follow him, the time will come, he says to young Timothy, when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Having itching ears, they will find teachers who say what they want to hear. They will turn away from truth and wander away to myths.

It is how we feel as well in a time when we have added the abyss of social media to radio and television as vehicles for utter nonsense. Every kind of practical, verifiable truth — from public health data to election results — has been challenged and replaced with conspiracy theories. The assertion that the moon is made of green cheese has as much validity as many things millions of people have embraced.

But if people are picking and choosing their truths and conveyers of them in the realm of such practical matters, how much easier is it to do so when it comes to spiritual matters no one can prove? During the takeover of the Southern Baptist Convention, one of the pastors behind the effort, which

first attacked seminaries, said that if the majority of Southern Baptists believe that pickles have souls, our seminary professors should teach our ministers that pickles have souls. Personally, I'd have to know if we are talking about sweet pickles or dill pickles... but kidding aside, there is no better illustration of itching ears!

To name a slightly less absurd example, in the late nineteenth century, William H. Whitsitt was a church history professor and third president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. For a number of years, he published work, though not under his own name, documenting the theory that Baptist heritage dates back to the 1600s in Europe, a view every church historian affirms today.

But in Whitsitt's time, the majority of Southern Baptists, at least those in power, embraced the tenets of Landmarkism which claimed that there is an unbroken line all the way back to the Apostles, and thus, Baptists go back to John the Baptist. Whitsitt was okay as long as he did not claim his work. When he did, he lost his job.

When people want to hear what they want to hear, they will do anything to make sure they hear it, no matter how absurd it is. How do we address this challenge, especially in regard to the teachings of faith?

Paul says that faithful education over time is required. He solemnly urges Timothy to proclaim the message of the gospel; to be persistent whether the time is favorable or not; to convince, to rebuke, and to encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching. While each part of this calling is worth examining, the big picture is of a task too large to be accomplished in one brief moment or even period of life.

Understanding who God is, who Jesus is, and how we are called to live is a massive undertaking under the best of circumstances. But when we factor in the added threats of competing ideas and agendas, the only solution is consistent educational efforts throughout life.

The question is — how do we do know what sound doctrine is? How do we decide what we teach? What one person believes is true another disputes. Well, leaving room for each person to discern truth under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, this church has a curriculum guide that shapes what we seek to teach and learn in each stage of life through every part of the church. It is the

product of years of prayerful study that grew out of a desire to be consistent, faithful, and intentional.

It is a wonderful document, which I can say without feeling self-serving, since it was developed long before my time here. It has led to a thoughtful approach to education. What children and youth are taught, how they are empowered to think for themselves, that love always lies at the heart of everything is magnificent! We are witnessing one small illustration of this reality in the children's leadership today.

What we offer adults is also solid. Our Sunday School classes take nurture seriously, realizing it is not just about what happens in this building. The challenges are that not everyone can make Sunday morning work, and not all adults value ongoing Christian education. We need creative approaches to learning that encourage people to participate. We all encounter all sorts of ideas about faith. Discerning what is true is an endless challenge that benefits from ongoing study.

But the specific actions Paul names merit consideration too — convincing, rebuking, encouraging, exercising patience. Education, especially Christian education, has a bias. As my theology professor, Frank Tupper, used to say, in some matters there may not be one right answer, but some answers are better than others. Thus, we don't always just throw out options, like maybe God causes harm, maybe God doesn't. We argue for the latter and try to convince others of this reality.

Education also involves encouragement and rebuke. It can be warm and fuzzy but is not always. We challenge teaching contrary to the gospel, for example, that some people are inferior because of the color of their skin, that only men can be leaders, that God is vindictive and always on our side and thus willing to punish our enemies. Some claims need to be refuted, and thus, some people need to be rebuked.

But in all things, patience is required, patience with ourselves and others. Some lessons require readiness. Children don't learn to walk or talk in complete sentences at two weeks because they are not ready. In fact, some people never learn to speak in full sentences, but that's a subject for another day... But readiness matters with many things.

A friend in another church I served was the North Carolina leader of the George Wallace for President campaign. He believed the curse of Ham was

real, black and white people were not equal nor were we meant to live together, and even by the time I became his pastor, thirty years after that election, he still believed these things. But he kept coming to church, studying the same Bible others did, reading about the same Jesus, and hearing me preach about God's love for all. One day, much to my surprise, he told me he had finally come to appreciate what I was saying. That would not have happened if he had been written off. Encouragement and patience were needed, as was rebuke. His beliefs had not been sound. Be persistent, Paul says, some things take time.

But in addition to identifying the need for ongoing education, Paul underscores one key vehicle of learning as we confront the challenges of itching ears and jackrabbit theology — scripture. All scripture is inspired by God and useful for teaching, he says. The scripture he is talking about is the Hebrew Bible. The Christian Testament has not been settled at this time. But we apply these words to the whole Bible. We consider all of it to have been inspired by God, which means God-breathed. As God breathes life into the forms of the first man and woman in Genesis, God breathes new life and love into us through scripture.

It is not the only way God breathes life and love into us. God works through the majesty of creation and the witness of Holy Scripture, the gift of the church and everyday life. We are wise to learn from all of this. I could not help but notice the contrast between commencement speakers at the Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond. One told the students the Bible was all they needed. The other affirmed the role of scripture but added — go to the theater, the symphony, the mountains; live and learn from all of life. The latter message seems more helpful.

But having said this, scripture is central to faith. It is inspired by God. This is why we give Bibles to children and high school graduates, because we believe scripture is one of the best things we can give them, a central guide for life, with God breathing through it. Paul does not say how it is inspired. Those debates are not decided by this text. But he does say what scripture is inspired for, and this is important — teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.

In other words, the Bible is a book, or a collection of books, designed to guide us in faith, which includes what we believe and how we live. It is not a book of science or geography. It is not even a history text, though parts of it have historical content, like 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, 1 and 2 Chronicles. But even in these parts, the focus is on what God is up to in this world, not providing a thoroughgoing history.

The Bible is a book of faith, and thus the first step in understanding it lies in appreciating this reality. Beyond this, prayerful study under the guidance of the Spirit is needed because the Bible has often been misunderstood. As with all education, we need to ask how we know our understanding is sound. It begins with seeking to hear what God is saying through a text. It helps to study in the context of community. And it is wise to appreciate the sacred nature of what we are reading.

Glenn Hinson told a story about his grandmother reading scripture while sitting in a rocking chair on a porch. She read slowly, savoring every word as if consuming a fine meal. Every now and then, she would pause, take off her glasses and lean back, with a tear rolling down her face, as she pondered the meaning of the words, the message of God's love and compassion. That is how we ought to approach scripture, with reverence, and we ought to approach it often throughout our lives.

In the film *The Book of Eli* a prophetic figure travels through a violent post-apocalyptic world trying to get a book which is believed to have the ability to save humankind to safety. A crime boss tries to steal the book because he thinks he can weaponize it, and he eventually gets it, but all is not lost because Eli has memorized every word of the book. He dictates the entire text, word by word, and the book is preserved. As it turns out, the book is the Bible.

It is a dark film, but the message is worth hearing. After all that seems important has passed away, there are sacred truths that endure. People may have itching ears, and some with no more sense than a jackrabbit may have some crazy ideas, but the basic claims of scripture about God's love for the world and our calling to reflect this love are the stuff of genuine faith, and in the end, they will be what saves humankind.