

Sunday 7th September 2025. Tenets: 10 Things every Christian should hold to.

Week 1: The Inspired truth of Scripture 2 Timothy 3:14-17

¹⁴ But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, ¹⁵ and how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. ¹⁶ All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, ¹⁷ so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

Starting this new term in September means we are now two thirds of the way through our 'Year of discipleship' at All Saints. We kicked off in January with a series called *Together we stand*, looking at the Apostle Paul's letter to the Ephesians and laying out some discipleship foundations like the fact that God has chosen each of us for a purpose, and as he calls us to serve and love others, he also equips us with everything we need to stand together against all the forces of evil at work in the world.

Next we moved on to *Practicing the Way*, looking at spiritual formation and the need for us to be intentional about the way we cultivate spiritual rhythms and practices – the daily habits that keep us in tune with the Lord rather than settling for the dull cultural norms that erode our joy and peace.

Then last term we studied the life of Joseph in the book of Genesis, which deals with the nitty gritty of trusting the Lord through tough times and painful relationships. We saw how God does indeed bring everything together for good for those that love him and through perseverance and faithful witness we can make a real difference and actually change the destiny of a nation.

It's all made for some wonderful teaching and preaching, exciting discussions in home groups and a real sense that God has been preparing us for greater things to come. And I am convinced that our best days are ahead of us. We will see this church grow and develop in amazing ways. That being said, at the beginning of the summer I wrestled in prayer over what we should study this term. There is every reason to be expectant that the Lord will bring revival to Weston and Bath, and there is a lot of evidence that people in the public square are rejecting Atheistic materialism as hollow and vacuous. Faith is regaining traction as a better approach for a mentally healthy society with the spiritual fortitude to deal with the existential threats that challenge us all. There is a definite uptick in people finding themselves drawn to church and it's been really encouraging to experience some of that here. But I realised that our teaching on faith and discipleship has tended to be very applied, somewhat assuming that people here understand the essential truths of the Christian faith. That may not be the case. We might say or sing one of the ancient creeds together on a Sunday morning, but do we know what we really believe and stand for as Christians? As Andrew Kitcatt reminded me this week: 'If you stand for nothing, you'll fall for anything'.

So for our Autumn series we are going to spend 10 weeks looking at the core essentials of Christian faith, with the title *Tenets: 10 things every Christian should hold to*. According to the dictionary a Tenet is a noun meaning 'a principle or belief, especially one of the main principles of a religion or philosophy'. It comes from the Latin verb *Tenere*, which means to hold – so *Tenets* are the things we hold to.

In some ways it is easy to preach about the need for us to love one another – most people would agree with that. But what about preaching that God is the only source of true love in the world, that actually the divine *agape* love that Jesus demonstrated on the cross totally challenges our human instincts and concepts of love to such an extent that it can seem scandalous and unjust? Do we really think God is good? What we believe deep down determines our attitudes and our actions. The way we will make a real difference in this community is to hold core convictions in our hearts that actually offer genuine hope for the world, pointing to the real solution to the emptiness of the world's ways.

One of the phrases I read that impacted me over the summer is this: *The person with the most hope has the most influence*. We seek to share the life and message of Jesus in Weston, Bath and beyond. Do we do this just because it is a helpful way to think about life? It is infinitely more than that! It is because the Gospel of Jesus Christ is the power of God for those who are being saved. People are stuck in the Kingdom of darkness and they are desperately looking for a way out to the light. The harvest is plentiful. Our nation is desperate for hope and here we have faith, hope and love by the bucket load to sow in this locality. We cannot keep it to ourselves.

So where do we start when we are thinking about Tenets of the faith? Most people would probably start with God as Theology means 'the study of God'. But instead, I want to begin our series with looking at our understanding of God's Word, because the notion of a God who speaks to us in different ways is foundational for any learning about him. The Apostle John had the same concern so he began his Gospel 'in the beginning was the Word and the word was with God and the Word was God'.

Our life and experience is only possible because God speaks and he spoke time, light and matter into existence at the beginning. Information communication is at the core of the fabric of the universe. Every molecule of life contains billions of pieces of information. God said 'Let there be light and there was light.' God is inherently a communicator and his Word keeps us alive – Jesus said:

'Man doesn't live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.'

So God has been speaking right from the dawn of Creation, and history is *his story*, the story of his word shaping humanity to understand and reciprocate his creativity and character.

God is always speaking. He speaks through creation, he speaks through history and he speaks through his presence, and thankfully we have a window into all three through the written word of the scriptures.

When I was very small, my Dad was a vicar in Bishopsworth in Bristol and one day I went to church and he was giving a talk all about Thomas. He described Thomas's doubts and his stubborn refusal to believe. He said the fact he didn't turn up on time meant he missed out on seeing Jesus for himself. I was mortified. How could my Dad be telling everyone what I was like inside? I hid under the pew.

Eventually of course I realised he was talking about Thomas the disciple, not actually me after all! But I guess I have always had that sense that the Bible stories are not just past history but are present reality. I probably am a doubting Thomas at times, maybe more than I might care to admit, but reading the gospels I also learned that Jesus was gracious to Thomas and let him have another chance to actually meet him, touch him, to connect with him personally and wake up to a whole new reality of the

Kingdom of God. He was one of the first to worship Jesus, to bow before him and say 'My Lord and my God!' If that's my namesake in the Bible – I'll take that please!

God's word is not just for objective study. It is present reality, evoking us to reflect, worship and respond.

People sometimes try to make a distinction between Jesus the Living Word and the God's Word in scripture, saying that they prioritise Jesus' words alongside our evolving human experience as an expanding revelation. I think that is a false distinction. Yes, the Bible is a library of 66 books of different types and genres, written with human hands over centuries and ratified as canon by the early church, but I see the Bible as a timeless comprehensive snapshot of God's character, wisdom and guidance in various forms:

- It is like a *map*, giving us a guided tour of God's Kingdom with the contours of the covenant relationships God has with his people. There is ever more study to do to add more layers of detail, but the whole idea of a map is to use it to grow in our experience of reality, and learn about new possibilities as well as safe boundaries. No one except a fool sets out on a journey without any sense of direction at all.
- The bible is like a *love letter* sharing the heart of God yearning for relationship with people
- It is like a *manual for life*, warning of dangers and pitfalls, and celebrating the successes
- It is God's *testimony* – an autobiographical account of all that has gone well and not so well for humanity in history
- It is also a rather long personal *invitation* to the heavenly life and banquet that awaits all who accept it.
- I don't see it as a scientific textbook, full of maths and equations except for some fundamental scientific principles such as the universe has a beginning and God brought order out of chaos, that the unseen realm is just as real and important as all we can see, and that life is not down to random chance but is a God given gift full of meaning and purpose.

Paul wrote to Timothy ¹⁶All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, ¹⁷so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

God-breathed here is the word **θεόπνευστος (*theopneustos*)**, and it is found nowhere else in first century Greek literature. It seems like Paul may have created this word especially as a compound of *Theo* which means God and *Pneo*, to breathe. It is a fabulous word for helping us to understand how to think of the Bible. On the one hand it recalls the sense that God breathed breath into Adam who became a living being. So in other words God takes human words of the bible and breathes his spirit into them such that they have a life of their own. On the other hand, it also alludes to God breathing out the scriptures with their source and origin coming from the heart and lungs of God, reminding us of Isaiah 55:11:

So is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.

So Paul insists that the scriptures are living and active, just as the writer to the Hebrews asserts too, just after quoting from the Old Testament:

¹²The word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.

The Lord spoke to the prophet Ezekiel and told him to eat the scroll which had God's word to Israel written on it. Although the words were tough warnings, it tasted sweet as honey.

'My food', said Jesus 'is to do the will of Him who sent me and to finish His work'.

God's word sustains us for life. As Eugene Petersen wrote: 'Eat this book!'

I'm not sure if you have come across a wonderful podcast called 'The surprising rebirth of belief in God' hosted by Justin Brierley. Definitely worth a listen! He describes the problem of trying to critique and interpret Christianity and the Bible objectively from the outside as rather like studying a church building and all its stained glass by walking round the outside of the building. It's only when you take a step of faith and venture inside that all the colours come alive and the beauty and intricacy is revealed.

Paul Langham will be talking more about the trustworthiness of the Bible this evening but when it comes to interpreting the scriptures, they light up when we approach it with 4 things in mind: First, we need to remember that *God is good*. You might think that should be self-evident but it's surprising how easy it is to let doubts over God's goodness govern our interpretation. He doesn't change like shifting shadows. If we are struggling to understand a Bible passage, we have to see that despite human failure, sin or tragedy, God is working to bring everything together for good. His ways are higher than our ways and he is more trustworthy than our limited understanding might perceive at any one time.

Second, we need to believe that *nothing is impossible for God*. Although he created the universe with physical laws and boundaries, he is not limited by our rules, experience or understanding. He can move in extraordinary ways that bring heaven to earth and nurture faith, hope and love.

Third we need to trust that Jesus' death and resurrection is the fulcrum of history upon which everything else rests. *Jesus blood paid for everything*. All history led up to that point and everything since is working out the implications.

Finally we have to trust that *every person is significant to God*. He has a plan for your life and a destiny he desires you to fulfil. The question is whether we will accept it or just continue in our own path. A woman once came up to me randomly and told me to Hold to the Bible, chew on its words and cherish its contents. When I looked again she was gone, but the message stayed with me. The Bible is dynamite.

To me speaking about the authority of scripture is rather like asking 'is this acorn the same thing as a tree?' Of course, it depends what you do with it.

I sat on holiday thinking and praying about this talk and every couple of minutes there would be a bang as another acorn fell onto the car which was parked under an oak tree. I felt like the Lord wanted me to bring some home and hand them out to you. (So Mims kindly collected a load!)

We can look at acorns objectively. We can think they are rather beautiful. We can try to dissect them to find out what's inside. But in truth we will never see their true nature until they are planted. All the talks that follow in this series on the Tenets of our faith will only bear fruit if we allow God's word to be planted into our hearts. It is the Word of God growing and bearing fruit that will transform this community. So let's pray that God's Word would be planted deep into our hearts now.