Spokane Friends Meeting, October 25, 2026

"Standing on the Bible"

Scripture: Romans 15:1-4; 2 Timothy 3:14-17

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Hello from the Whitechapel neighborhood of London, where we're winding up our fall visit to our son Luke. We've had a restful month with a few sprinkles of tourism and a lot of thoughtful conversations with Luke, with members and attenders of Bunhill Fields Quaker Meeting, our Quaker home away from home, and with participants in a weekly online seminar I'm part of on British Quaker history.

The seminar, which still has a week left, is being presented by Mark Russ, a tutor with the Quaker educational and research center known as Woodbrooke and the author of an interesting book entitled *Quaker Shaped Christianity*. And it was this seminar that gave me today's theme, "Standing on the Bible."

For the past four weeks, and with two weeks to go, Mark Russ has been talking with his fifteen seminar participants on how the Quaker community in Britain turned from a very evangelical body of Friends up until the last quarter of the 1800's, to the liberal body it is now, in general. The Quaker scholar Ben Pink Dandelion uses the word "hyper-liberal" to describe much of the current body of Friends in Britain Yearly Meeting.

Part of the story involves some leading personalities of the period, such as the British Quaker John Wilhelm Rowntree and his close friend, American Quaker Rufus Jones. But the changes also involved currents of thought from the larger world of English-speaking Protestants of the time, developments such as theologians trying to cope with Darwin and the theory of evolution. There was also the so-called search for the historical Jesus, a search that sometimes seemed to challenge earlier assumptions about the full divinity as well as the full humanity of Jesus. And then this was an era where biblical criticism also raised searching questions. Many scholars challenged whether the Bible accurately reported events and chronologies, and whether the writings attributed to certain biblical figures were actually written by them. However,

many scholars encouraged readers of the Bible to focus on the theological content, what we learn about God and our relationship to God, whether or not certain characters and events took place exactly as described or were instead composed to teach us essential things about God and ourselves. In some earlier visits with you, I talked about the divine dialogue that we can enter into with the Bible, trusting the biblical writers as a uniquely authoritative resource for the discernments we need to be a people of God in our own time.

So, those kinds of trends may have contributed to the rise of so-called liberalism among Quakers as it developed in the late 1800's. But we also thought about whether people were simply reading the Bible less often, at home for example … individually and in family settings. Mark Russ used the metaphor of the Bible as a ship closely moored by strong ropes to the Quaker community, but as time went by, those ropes frayed and weakened, and the ship began to drift away.

Among American Quakers as well, if we're honest, we see a great variety of attitudes toward the devotional use of the Bible. I hope some of us still have family devotions, many of us attend Bible studies at our meetings, many of us observe a calendar that takes us through the Bible in a year, and I bet some of you have an app like I do on my smartphone that gives me Bible content and devotions three times a day. Even so, I suspect that earlier generations were more disciplined in their daily practices, more closely moored to their Bibles.

A related factor that may have contributed to the shift in how liberal Friends regarded the Bible was the way that individualism and secular skepticism were becoming part of the surrounding culture. The earlier periods of Quakerism knew that the Bible was their "salvation history" as a people, or to put it another way, their community's family album. It was a legacy provided to us by many generations of faithful people. Those ancestors were in some way still part of our community. There wasn't chronological snobbery—the attitude that now we must know better than our ancestors, about spirituality as well as science, and that George Fox believed the Bible, not because the same Holy Spirit we rely on now wasn't guiding him, but because clearly he didn't know any better. Of course that new emphasis on individualism

provided a good corrective for previous generations' conformism and nominalism, but when you lose the sense of community with nearly two thousand years of devout people ratifying the Bible's value, it's no wonder that the mooring might come loose.

One thing that became clear among our seminar group was the negative influence of today's politicized evangelicalism. As someone who identifies as an evangelical, this reputation we've gained, of sharp-elbowed legalism and rigidity, and being exploited by certain politicians, has distressed me no end, as those of you who peek into my blog will realize. I remember the story of someone in a local Friends church in Oregon who got so tired of debating with people who announced that they stood on the Bible, that he put a Bible on the floor and announced that he too could stand on the Bible. He proceeded to do so. And then he marched out the door.

In any case, it was great to have a chance in Mark's seminar to confront some of the more unhelpful definitions of what it means to be an evangelical in our current polarized political climate. And Mark reminded us that some of the leading Quakers of the evangelical period in British Quaker history, such as Elizabeth Fry and her brother Joseph John Gurney, were powerful advocates for concerns that are now often associated with liberalism, such as the rights of women, prison reform, and peace.

I should confess that I have a very personal reason for cherishing the Scriptures. I came to Christ as the result of reading the Bible.
A few years ago, I wrote a blog post entitled "Is the Bible nice?" in which I described my own first encounter with the Bible. In my growing-up years, my mother Erika taught German language and literature at Roosevelt University in Chicago. As a child, I often explored our home's bookshelves, where her huge collection of German language textbooks and literature dominated our family library. One day I noticed an odd thing that didn't seem to belong there. It was a book-sized white cardboard box. Inside I found a book wrapped with tight precision in thin white tissue paper. As you've already guessed, it was a Bible—a black leather Bible with a zipper along the three open sides, and a transparent marble serving as the zipper pull. The marble had a small seed in it. (I didn't have any context to guess that it was a mustard seed, or what that even meant.) I unzipped the cover and looked inside. Since most of my

reading at the time was at the Hardy Boys and Nancy Drew level, I think I can be forgiven for deciding that this Bible was not a reader-friendly document. The pages were small and thin. The tiny print on each page was divided into two columns separated by a thin third column. The English was strange ("... my tongue cleaveth to my jaws"; "suffer the little children to come unto me"), I couldn't figure out why some words were in italics, and the little marks over some of the letters just made everything even more mysterious. Given that marble and zipper, I decided that this was not a regular book but some sort of ritual object, which helped explain why it was so tightly wrapped.

It wasn't for several more years that I began the general task of unwrapping what the Bible was all about. Since religion was a forbidden topic in our home, I heard about the Bible mainly from side-references in magazines and on the radio. I gradually understood that it was a very important book for certain kinds of people, namely people my parents wanted to avoid.

Then came an opening. My high school offered an elective class on the Bible as literature, which is why the library had a stack of New Testaments in the then-just-published New English Bible translation. I wasn't in the class, but I helped myself to a copy of that book. It was a normal looking hardcover book, and the text on each page also looked normal—one column crossing the whole page, no illogical italics and no diacritical marks over the letters, and—best of all—comprehensible English. I remember sitting down and reading the whole book of Acts, marveling at how compelling the book turned out to be.

When my sister was killed and my family life collapsed completely, I was forced to leave home, and eventually ended up in university in Canada. Somehow that New English Bible had gotten a hold on me, and every once in a while, I picked it up and read a few pages. One evening, when I was alone in my dorm room and reading the Gospel of Matthew. I came to a passage in the Sermon on the Mount, and through the words I got a vivid message directed to me: "**These are my words, and you can trust me**."

I was still dealing with family trauma, and trust was a central issue in my life. That was the day I became a disciple—not through someone's preaching, not a public event, not anyone's convincing argument, but that immediate promise that came alive through the text. Now I know that there's no one model for conversion; for some it's sudden, for some it is gradual, and for some of us faith has been in our bones all our lives. But that encounter in my dorm room was my experience, and that's why I don't want our Quaker community to become unmoored from the Bible.

I realize that, sadly, that the Bible has been misused for rhetorical purposes and to serve agendas other than honoring God, but my testimony is that the Bible has the antidote to its own misuse. For example, let's consider today's Scriptures. First, Paul writing to Timothy:

> **2 Timothy 3:14-17 (New International Version)**
> **But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it** [from his grandmother and mother; we talked about that not long ago]**, and how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.**

And here's an application, from Paul's letter to the Romans:

> **Romans 15:1-4**
> **We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. Each of us should please our neighbors for their good, to build them up. For even Christ did not please himself but, as it is written** [here he quotes Psalm 69:9]**: "The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me." For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope.**

Notice that in his letter to Timothy, Paul does not oversell the Bible. Of course in his own day, he was referring to the Hebrew scriptures, and almost certainly doesn't realize that, in dictating his letter, he himself is writing Scripture. But everything he said seems to me to be true for the Bible we have now.

Nothing he said to Timothy implies that the Bible is the fourth member of the Trinity. Early Quakers, with all their love for the Bible, insisted that it is outranked by the Holy Spirit, by whom it was given to its writers. Our first Quaker systematic theologian, Robert Barclay, wrote in his *Apology for the True Christian Divinity* that the Bible is an expression of the fountain (that is, the Holy Spirit) and not the fountain itself. He goes on to say that "We confess indeed there wants not a majesty in the style, a coherence in the parts, a good scope in the whole; but seeing these things are not discerned by the natural, but only by the spiritual man, it is the Spirit of God that must give us that belief of the Scriptures which may satisfy our consciences."

The Bible does not credit itself with being perfect journalism or claim any kind of magical power. Paul says that its words are "God-breathed," a phrase I did some research on, not knowing Greek myself. The Greek word is *theopneustos* (θεόπνευστος), combining two Greek elements:

- *theos* (θεός) — God.
- *pneō* (πνέω) — to breathe or blow.

It's functional, not metaphysical; it doesn't say exactly *how* God accomplished this shaping of the Bible, and doesn't imply that God gave dictation to the original human writers. But God *shaped the content* in accord with God's own character and God's promises to us. God's trustworthiness means that the words really do equip us for salvation and every good work, but they don't guarantee that we will accept God's equipping and do what God is making it possible for us to do.

One of the things about the Bible that is both awkward and helpful is that it is utterly realistic about us humans. I've brought this up one way or another in my messages to you since the very first one in these five years I've been visiting with you regularly. In

that first message I talked about Noah and his family and his ark full of animals. After they touched dry land and disembarked, Noah made a burnt offering that was pleasing to God, who said in Genesis 8:21, "Never again will I curse the ground because of humans, *even though every inclination of the human heart is evil from childhood*." In the Bible's realism we see that evil inclination over and over, to the point where, for example, Eugene Peterson's introduction to his version of the book of Judges has him warning us as follows:

> Given the Bible's subject matter—God and salvation, living well and loving deeply—we quite naturally expect to find in its pages leaders for us who are good, noble, honorable men and women showing us the way. So it is always something of a shock to enter the pages of the book of Judges and find ourselves immersed in nearly unrelieved mayhem.
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> It might not gravel our sensibilities so much if these flawed and reprobate leaders were held up as negative moral examples, with lurid, hellfire descriptions of the punishing consequences of living such bad lives. But the story is not told quite that way. There is a kind of matter-of-fact indifference in the tone of the narration, almost as if God is saying, "Well, if this is all you're going to give me to work with, I'll use these men and women, just as they are, and get on working out the story of salvation."

That realism comforts me. It says to me that the promises of God, recorded in the Bible, are also real, not decorative or sentimental. Our biblical heroes and heroines are often shown as being as flawed as we are, and yet God's purposes and promises remain true. As James said in his letter, in chapter five, in King James English, "Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much." That much may be an obvious teaching, but James goes on to point out that "Elias *[whom we call Elijah]* was a man subject to like passions as we are, and he prayed earnestly that it might not rain: and it rained not on the earth by the space of three years and six months. And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth brought forth her fruit." Don't

wait for perfection, either in ourselves or our circumstances: take God's promises seriously now.

I want to end with what Paul wrote to the Romans. God's teachings of endurance and encouragement, as recorded by the biblical writers, really can help us remain hopeful despite all our failings. And these days, believe me, I'm clinging to that biblical promise. I hope that promise is as real to you as it is to me.