

FROM A SCREEN, OLD
WORDS TAKE NEW LIFE

By J. B. Leftwich

The words adorned the screen in our church sanctuary augmenting the words our minister spoke from the pulpit, and I sat in thought almost as if I were reading them for the first time.

On our church screen: “Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.”

In reality, the words were not precisely the text above, which comes from the King James Version of the Bible. But the phrasing and the meanings were the same, and their impact was so powerful my mind wandered from the sermon to dwell directly on the structure and thoughts beaming from the screen.

St. Paul uttered or wrote these words about two centuries ago – of course, not in English or Latin, but in a depth that bridges language, centuries and religions. For Christian or Jew, Muslim or Buddhist, atheist or infidel, these words should resonate with meaning.

The apostle Paul was providential. It was through his daring and dedication that Christianity emerged from a minor Mid-Eastern nation and spread to Mediterranean Europe and thence to northern European countries.

One senses from reading biblical texts Paul would not have been Mr. High School or most likely to succeed if such honors had existed 2,000 years ago.

He burst on the scene as an agitator who delighted in tormenting the Christians, fair game for his brand of activity. Why God chose him to lead Christendom is somewhat of a mystery that baffled me until I studied Bible in the Methodist high school I attended when the last century was relatively young.

My high school Bible teacher enjoyed telling her students that Paul ranks with David, the ultimate sinner, and Moses, a fugitive from justice, as milestones and guardians of the Judeo-Christian heritage.

Their biographies forever remind Christians of the redeeming qualities of their religion. These qualities may not be unique in world religions, but they are comforting resorts for congregations of sinners.

Paul stands as the first and most important milestone after the death of Christ. It was he who pressed the button that eventually turned a large section of the world to Christianity.

And it was he, a reformed hater, who wrote passionately of the necessity of love.

Wrote he:

“If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.”

David, to whom many of the Psalms are attributed, also cut to the essence when he acknowledged youthful transgressions and prayed for mercy. David’s prayer in this instance is the prayer of many today:

“Remember not the sins of my youth or my transgressions; according to your steadfast love remember me, for the sake of your goodness, O LORD!” One of the amazing incongruities of life can surface from the familiar and reveal a meaning previously cloaked by its familiarity. To mix the profound with the mundane, it is somewhat like working hours on a perplexing crossword puzzle, giving up in exasperation, and next day having an obvious solution leap into your mind.

Through high school and college classes in Bible, from years as a Sunday school pupil or teacher, I have encountered Paul’s admonitions on things that are true and honest and pure. I have admired his phrasing, his thoughts and his intent.

But late in life, casually reading the apostle’s words on a latter day projection screen, a message emerged that through previous decades had eluded my perception.

The emphasis was not solely focused on things of beauty and of good report. Each of Paul’s virtues stands on its own and needs no amplification.

Paul’s thrust was on thinking. “Think on these things,” he said.

That is just what I did. For the remainder of the sermon. (Sorry, Preacher, what was it you said?)

That also is what I did next day as I walked my assigned laps. And if, indeed, I have any virtue, perhaps I can act on these things.

See more of J. B. Leftwich stories at: <http://www.ajlambert.com>