

Ephesians 6:17 in the Navajo Bible

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Áádóó béesh ch'ah bee yisdá'iildéehii índa Níłch'i Diyinii bidiltłish nídahidoohníł, jó, Diyin God bizaad éi diltłish át'é. (Ephesians 6:17)¹

Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. (Ephesians 6:17)²

Introduction

This passage is one that we love to read, but what does it mean? In another place Paul says the letter kills. "He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant-- not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life" (2 Corinthians 3:6). In this case the Spirit is at cross purposes to what is written. Here, however, the word of God is "the sword of the Spirit," which would imply that the Spirit and the written word stand side by side, as it were, working together to accomplish the same purpose. Both passages are true and both were written by the same author. What is the relationship between them?

The Question

This question is a fundamental one. What is the relationship between Scripture and the Holy Spirit who inspires Scripture? The word "Scripture" just means something "written." Why do we capitalize it? Because Scripture is not just anything that has been written. News papers and mail order catalogues are also written. Other things are written, some of which never should have been. But Scripture is something inspired by the Holy Spirit – something of spiritual value preserved for us in written form.

New Testament

All would agree that the passage quoted above is inspired. So is the rest of Paul's letter to the Ephesians. What about Paul's other letters, e.g., his letter to the Galatians? That was inspired too. Why do we say this? Because Paul was inspired. This is a very important point that has all kinds of implications. Because the writer was inspired, the things written are inspired.

If Ephesians is not Paul's only inspired letter, is Paul the New Testament's only inspired writer? If we think so, what shall we say about Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, James, Peter, and any others that might be represented? All of these were inspired men. And so the New Testament, which brings their writings together, is an inspired book.

¹ Navajo Bible quotations are from *Diyin God Bizaad. The Holy Bible in Navajo*. Revised edition. New York: American Bible Society, 2000.

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Old Testament

I once heard the leader of a major American denomination that he believes the Bible in its entirety. In fact, he said, he would believe it if the Bible said that Jonah swallowed the whale. This, of course, was just an illustration, but it makes a valuable point.

It always amuses me to hear people say, for example, that Paul didn't really write this, or that. Does "inspired" mean that Paul wrote it? No, it means that someone inspired by the Holy Spirit wrote it. Paul did not write the gospels. He did not write the book of Revelation. Other inspired people did.

Did inspired people write the books of the Old Testament as well as the New? If they didn't, why do people spend so much time translating such a long document? It took over half a century to translate the Navajo Bible and bring it to us in its current form. A project like this is a lot of work. The only reason why people invest such large amounts of time and effort in a translation of this sort is they believe in what they're doing. The documents they are translating are inspired, so it's important that people be able to read them in a language they understand.

Discussion

Doing Bible study wrong

In this context, with a belief firmly established that the entire Bible – every part of it – is the inspired word of God, what does Paul mean when he says, "the letter kills, but the Spirit brings life" (2 Corinthians 3:6, above)? When he says "the letter," he's talking about things that were written down. He's talking about Scripture. If Scripture brings death, why translate it? Why insist on teaching that it's inspired in all its parts?

Actually, there's an interesting distinction we'll need to make here. Remember, we said that inspired writings are inspired because they're written by inspired people. The person is where inspiration occurs. The Spirit comes into a person's mind and gives him or her information to share with others, or leads them to record a set of events when God was especially active in history, and that's inspiration. The word "inspire" means literally to breathe in. Letters don't breathe. For that matter, they don't think. How would a letter on a page know anything about the Holy Spirit? But people think, and they breathe, and the Holy Spirit influences them.

So I would argue that there's less of a conflict here that might appear. Letters are not inspired. The people who write them are. So when Paul says "the letter kills," he's not arguing against the concept of writing things down. (He, himself, was inspired and wrote over a fourth of the New Testament.) Instead, he's talking about a way that Scripture can be misused, when people focus only on the letters and lose sight of God.

Notice that Paul doesn't tell us which letters kill. He makes a general statement. "The letter kills." A general statement is one that applies anywhere. So if we focus on letters from the law, they can kill. If we focus on something from the New Testament, those can kill too. Any letters can kill if we lose sight of why the Holy Spirit inspired them. It's not just these letters

(because they're bad, or because they say this or this, or because they come from a certain passage), but any letters.

Doing Bible study right

When we use letters to condemn other people our hearts become hard and unfeeling toward them. In this way the letter kills. But it is not the fact that something is written down that makes it bad. Instead it's how we use it, or in this case misuse it. If we know God and open our hearts to Him, the Holy Spirit can use Scripture to tell us about Jesus and we receive grace and mercy. We think of others as God thinks toward us and become His children. In this way the Holy Spirit brings life. But the way the Holy Spirit does this is by working through something that an inspired person had written down – using letters – which in and of themselves could kill. That's what the Holy Spirit uses to bring life. That's why we read our Bibles. As one Christian writer puts it,

The creative energy that called the worlds into existence is in the word of God. This word imparts power; it begets life. Every command is a promise; accepted by the will, received into the soul, it brings with it the life of the Infinite One. It transforms the nature and re-creates the soul in the image of God.³

Conclusion

When Paul says, *jó, Diyin God bizaad éi dilttish át'é* ("The word of God is a sword!"), he means any part of the word. Any passage of Scripture can be a sword in the Holy Spirit's hand, if the Spirit is telling us how to use it. And when he says, "the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life" (2 Corinthians 3:6), he means any part of Scripture – including his writings, if we misuse them.

So let's not assume that if it's we're talking about God's law, then those letters are bad. They kill. But if we're talking about the twenty-third psalm, then those letters are good and the Holy Spirit can use them to give life. Paul doesn't make those distinctions. Whatever part of Scripture we misuse can kill. Whatever part of Scripture we're reading when we open our hearts to the Holy Spirit, the Spirit can use it to bring life. We can misuse any passage. But the Holy Spirit can use any passage correctly – even the law.

So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith. (Galatians 3:24)

Any part of Scripture that can lead us to Christ is a pretty good passage to know. My point is that we can open our Bibles anywhere without fear that we're about to read a passage that kills. Open your heart to God. Invite the Holy Spirit to guide you as you read. If you do this, you can be sure that you'll be getting something good and that the Spirit can use it to lead you to Christ. If you read it very carefully, the Spirit can even show you how to use that passage to lead someone else to Christ. That's what Bible study is really all about.

³ Ellen White, *Education*, p. 126.