"Picking And Choosing"

I REMEMBER IT WELL, too well in fact. It was the year 1973. I was a new minister fresh out of seminary and serving my first parish. It was a two-point charge deep in rural Vermont among the rolling green fields and picturesque red barns of dairy farms. My family and I had arrived in that beautiful Eden just a few months before.

Like all new ministers, I was eager to put the skills I'd learned in seminary into practice. Right off the bat, I started a Bible study class. It seemed like a fine thing to do. After all, who could find fault with studying the Bible?

This was the time when many churches and their clergy were in conflict over the Vietnam war and Watergate. In comparison, a simple Bible study seemed like a peaceable enterprise, tailor-made for a new pastor who wanted to ease his way into a new congregation.

But that's where I was mistaken, for to my great surprise, after just a few weeks my Bible study class turned into an explosive battleground.

On that particular night, the class and I were all seated together in a friendly circle in the church's basement. We sat on wobbly wooden chairs and balanced Bibles and study guides on our laps.

Drawing on my seminary training, I relayed a scholarly theory which called into question a strictly literal interpretation of a passage we were studying.

Suddenly, I was interrupted by a loud, stern voice. The voice belonged to an older woman in the group. Focusing on me with an intense, icy stare, that woman demanded to know if I believed the Bible was the Word of God, if I believed that each and every word in the text was both inspired
and infallibly true. Totally startled by that challenge, I recall mumbling something about how I had great respect for the Bible, though I thought some parts of it were more valuable than others for Christian faith.

Again, that women issued her challenge. Did I or did I not believe the Bible was the infallible Word of God? Her face began to flush red. Again, I tried to make a response. I said that for me, it was not a black and white issue which could be answered with a simple "yes" or "no."

Interrupting me again that woman launched into a scathing diatribe. She said the Bible was either God's Word or it wasn't. And if I thought I could pick and choose what to believe in it, then obviously, I had no respect for the Bible.

She went on in that vein for a few minutes, then concluded her remarks by declaring that I had no business being a minister of Jesus Christ.

Then, that woman rose from her seat and angrily marched out of the room. Two other class members followed right behind her. There were about ten people in the room that night. The rest of us sat in our chairs, stunned by that unexpected attack.

THE NEXT MORNING I received a phone call from a sweet, elderly lady in her 90's, who was, by far, the class' oldest member. Sympathetic, that woman wanted to be sure that I, the new minister, didn't become distraught over the outburst the night before. I was deeply grateful for her call.

Being fresh out of a seminary and still brand new in that parish that was a particularly painful experience for me. At first, I was tempted to take that attack personally. But then, as I gave the matter more thought, I began to realize that conflict was not personal.

Rather, it was a conflict between two different traditions of Christianity, each of which approaches the Bible in a different way. As I realized, that woman and I were
essentially playing roles. That same basic conflict of views had been going on for centuries involving different people in different places.

HERE’S THE DIFFERENCE. In living their faith some Christians bring a critical eye to the interpretation of the Bible. They seem to pick and choose what they will believe from the Bible. In sharp contrast, there are other Christians who claim to follow the whole Bible in its entirety as literal truth.

It's somewhat beside my point this morning, but I'll tell you how that confrontation turned out. The woman who led the attack eventually found a fundamentalistic Protestant church to her liking. But to reach it she had to travel fifteen miles to another town.

The church I was serving was the only Protestant church in that little Vermont farming community. Within a year, the other two people who had walked out came to me separately to apologize for their behavior. I accepted their apologies as graciously as I could.

That was 1973. It is now many years later. I tell you that story because today, after all my years of ministry, I still maintain the view of the Bible I held back then. In fact, I'm even more convinced of that view today.

Without reservation, I freely admit that I am a so-called "picker and chooser" when it comes to the Bible. But that's not all. I also maintain that all Christians are "pickers and choosers" in the final analysis. I say all Christians, regardless of whether they are conservative, liberal, or somewhere in between in their theological orientation.

We are all "pickers and choosers" because our Holy Bible is just too big and too diverse for anyone to give equal weight to everything that is written in it. Inevitably, choices must be made. And so they are, by every individual and every religious denomination which goes by the name "Christian."
In my view the real issue is not whether we pick and choose. Rather, the real issue is whether we pick and choose well, guided by wisdom, humility, and a sincere faith in God.

OUR BIBLE is a very diverse document. It is composed of sixty-six different books written by many different authors over a period of a thousand years or more. Like golden threads in a fine tapestry, there are some important basic themes which run throughout our Bible.

Tested and found worthy over the ages, those basic themes give our Bible coherence. They make our Bible a strong resource for building faith. They also justify bringing those sixty-six different books together under one cover as a unified book of Holy Scripture.

Those basic biblical themes are highly cherished by virtually all Christians. I'll mention a few of those basic themes. For example:

--There is one and only one God. In the beginning God created everything there is in our world, including human beings in God's image.

--Another theme: Down through the ages, God has lavished considerable love and care on God's created people, but we humans are not perfect.

--Another theme: When we could not save ourselves from our sins, God took the initiative of sending a savior to our world to redeem us and bring us abundant life.

--Still another theme: In the books of the Old Testament, this savior is prepared for and looked for longingly. In the New Testament he is revealed as God's only son, Jesus Christ.

Now, mixed in with those cherished themes there are also some portions of the Bible which are self-contradictory and even offensive to Christian faith today. Consider, for example, the following laws from the Old Testament book of Leviticus:
--If anyone eats any blood, he will be cut off from God's people. [Leviticus 17:10]

--No one with a physical blemish or disability will be allowed to approach God's altar. [Leviticus 21:16-24]

--Death is the required punishment for those who curse their mother or father, and for those who blaspheme against God. [Leviticus 20: 9; 24:16]

The book of Deuteronomy adds these laws:

--You should kill anyone who seeks to entice you to worship other gods. [Deuteronomy 13:6-12]

--Parents may have a stubborn and rebellious son stoned to death. [Deuteronomy 21:18-21]

--Women shall not wear anything that pertains to a man. Nor shall anyone wear clothing of mingled fibers such as wool mixed with linen. [Deuteronomy 22:5; 22:11]

--Men may have more than one wife. Women may be stoned to death, if they are not virgins at the time of their marriage. [Deuteronomy 21:15-17; 22:16-21]

Yes, there are Christians who claim that everything in the Bible is God's sacred, infallible Word without any picking or choosing. But in observing such Christians I have noticed these strange things.

--Some of those Christians enjoy a cooked rare steak still simmering in its own blood, as much as anyone does.

--Those Christians do not stop people with blemishes or disabilities from worshiping in their churches.

--They do not seek the death penalty for those who blaspheme against God.

--Those Christians show no shame in wearing the latest fashions in mixed cloth fibers, using blends of polyester,
rayon, Dacron, cotton, linen, or wool.

--They do not rise up and summarily execute their rebellious sons, their nonvirgin brides, or their neighbors who practice a non Judeo-Christian religion.

--And, those Christians make a point of having only one wife, not many.

How can it be that Christians who proclaim strict belief in the Bible's infallibility are so unbiblical in their everyday lives? Often the answer is this.

Many Christians who condemn "picking and choosing" have a favorite belief of their own. That belief is called Dispensationalism. According to that belief, the history of humanity is divided up into seven successive dispensations under God.

Each of those dispensations has its own set of rules for the faithful. And yes, you guessed it! According to that theory, the biblical laws I just quoted are said to belong to another dispensation from a much earlier era. Thus, they are not considered binding on Christians today!

Where do those Christians get their belief in Dispensationalism? Frankly, it is rooted in the works of an Anglo-Irish man named John Nelson Darby, who developed that theology in the early 19th century.

That belief was later popularized in America by Cyrus Ingerson Scofield, through the publication of his Scofield Reference Bible in 1909.

Many conservative Christians believe in Dispensationalism. But, the fact is that doctrine is not found in the Bible.

How ironic. Christians who condemn "picking and choosing" are actually doing it themselves, if they accept Dispensationalism. For the theory of seven different ages, each with its own requirements, is really a polite way of sweeping certain objectionable biblical passages
under the rug, where they won't be an embarrassment or hindrance to modern Christian thinking.

Frankly, I don't blame any Christian for wanting to turn away from some of those ancient biblical laws, such as I just noted in Leviticus and Deuteronomy. But I will say this. When we Christians do such "picking and choosing" we should **acknowledge** what we are doing.

It's my observation that whether most Christians admit it or not, their overall approach to the Holy Bible is ultimately one of picking and choosing.

The Bible covers such a variety of cultural settings that it's impossible to live one's faith by every single word and sentence in the Bible. Responsible choices **have** to be made.

Major themes need to be embraced. And some minor themes may need to be put aside for a time, or even discarded if they contradict or are wholly unsuited to our best understanding of the Christian gospel.

**CONSIDER THESE CONTRADICTIONS** within the Bible itself. Jesus taught us to love our enemies. Yet, the author of the 143rd Psalm calls upon God to cut off his enemies and destroy all his adversaries.

Yes, there are parts of the Bible which do not live up to the blessed example and teachings of Jesus. There are parts which fall far short of the Christian gospel.

You will recall that Jesus compassionately forgave the woman caught in adultery and saved her from stoning, an event told of in John 8:2-11. Now I ask you, can you imagine that same Jesus having so little compassion that he would follow that law in Deuteronomy which called for the execution of non-virgin brides? I certainly can't.

During his earthly ministry Jesus made a special effort to care for the sick, the blind, and the disfigured, as well as for many other unfortunate people. Now I ask you, can you
imagine that same Jesus following the law in Leviticus which barred all people with blemishes or disabilities from God's holy altar? Once again, I certainly can't imagine that.

In using the Bible as a guide for faith, Christians are often forced to make choices. But that's not a bad thing, for the true object of our devotion should never be just the literal words of the Bible themselves.

Rather, the true object of our devotion should always be our God, whose divine spirit is far greater than any mere marks on a printed page.

Rather than being an exact, word-for-word, literal rendition of God's Word, our Holy Bible is said to "contain" God Word. That's an important distinction. In a sense, the passages in our Bible are like signposts.

Many of those signposts are right on the mark in directing a Christian's faith journey with God. However, some of these biblical signposts are not nearly as helpful. In fact, a few of these signposts, like calls for God to destroy other people, found in Psalm 143 and elsewhere, are even pointed in directions completely opposite to God's will and truth.

Recognizing that the Bible contains God's Word but is not everywhere a literal rendition of that Word, a guide book to Reformed Protestant worship gave the following advice on the use of the Bible in preaching. As that guide book said,

Part of pastoral integrity is treating people with respect for their minds and trusting that they can handle the truth, even when challenging their cherished fantasies. A sermon should not pretend that the biblical passage has miraculously descended from the mouth of God but rather acknowledge that it has gone through human minds and often endured a process of oral transmission. Not all scripture is equally inspirational. Some passages need to be seen as sub-Christian, such as those that cry out for vengeance,
and the pastor needs to say so and give people permission to have their own internal debate with scripture.

Picking and choosing is not just an option for Christians. It really is a necessity which cannot be avoided. However, picking and choosing should never be undertaken lightly.

Rather, it must always be approached with faith, humility, and the sincere desire to discover God's true Word for God's people. It must always be approached with that spiritual discernment and wisdom which come when we seek God's truth with all our heart, with all our soul, and with all our mind.

Picking and choosing, it's not a question of if. Rather, it is a question of how and in what spirit. May God give us all the wisdom to pick and choose wisely.

ENDNOTE