

## The Surgical Scriptures Hebrews 4:12-16

Brian Dettmer approaches a book like a surgeon. You might think that's a metaphor for the way he dissects and exegetes the biblical texts, but in his case it's actually quite literal. Dettmer approaches every book with an actual scalpel and does some actual textual surgery, carving old books into masterpieces.

Dettmer is an artist and his three-dimensional book carvings are truly stunning. (You can see some amazing pictures of his work on his website [briandettmer.com](http://briandettmer.com)). He cuts out certain parts and pages of old encyclopedias, medical journals, dictionaries, or illustration books with exacting precision and leaves behind a deep visual feast of words and images that bring the book back to life in a new way. Where editing is a chore for most of us, he has turned it into an art form.

Dettmer's work is a painstaking process done one page at a time with the scalpel, tweezers, and a knife. He also bends and manipulates the spines and covers of the books, rolls back pages, and puts together stacks of books to create these original literary sculptures. Nothing inside the books is relocated or implanted, only removed. "My work is a collaboration with the existing material and its past creators and the completed pieces expose new relationships of the book's internal elements exactly where they have been since their original conception," says Dettmer.

Sounds like a guy who not only carves books but reads them, too.

In a world where most words are now processed on computers, Dettmer's work reveals that sometimes the penknife is mightier than the pixel. Those old books, with their yellowed pages and aged covers, reveal a depth of character and wisdom that's somehow more aesthetically pleasing than the instant gratification of an e-book.

While we can download information instantly these days, an old book requires time and patience. Dettmer's careful and surgical precision with each page seems to be a kind of homage to the timelessness of words and their ability to bring beauty and wonder not only intellectually but aesthetically. Cutting the words somehow makes them whole again.

But what would happen if, say, the words themselves were doing the cutting? What if the words were themselves a surgical instrument wielded by a Great Artist to create a very different kind of masterpiece? The writer of Hebrews offers that kind of artistic vision, a word that is cutting, active, and transforming.

"The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Hebrews 4:12). While some might think of the Bible as one of those thick and dusty old books of the kind that Dettmer likes to carve, the writer of Hebrews sees the word of God contained within the Scriptures as a scalpel that cuts to the core of the human heart, exposing both its beauty and its brokenness, and removing whatever doesn't belong.

Indeed, the “word” that the writer is talking about here is actually much more than just the words on the page. The ink and paper are vitally important, but the word comes in many other ways as the Holy Spirit brings the Scripture to life and as we meditate on the application of that word to our own lives. The word of God is always multidimensional and, like a great piece of art, it invites us always to look deeper to find the greater meaning.

The writer of Hebrews demonstrates how this works in the context of the letter. The letter was written by an unknown author to a community of believers that has been the target of abuse and persecution and now faces the danger of “drifting away” from faith in the gospel. The writer’s purpose is to assure them that the promises of God that were given to their Hebrew ancestors were still in effect and had culminated in the person of Jesus, the great high priest, who has initiated a “better covenant” and led them to a new promised land, a “lasting city” of God. The writer thus weaves biblical imagery all the way through the epistle as a reminder that the word of God came not only in the form of the Torah and the prophets, but in the person of Jesus Christ. The word on the page always points to the Word made flesh.

It’s this multidimensional word that acts like a “two-edged sword” that surgically exposes our innermost lives. Granted, a sword isn’t exactly a scalpel. One is designed for piercing and slicing the body in battle and the other for the precise excision of flesh with the aim of healing. The writer here no doubt has in mind the “gladius,” or short sword that was carried by your average Roman infantryman.

The gladius was designed for close combat in tight spaces where a small movement either way could cut the enemy. In the Hebrews metaphor, however, like the old Pogo cartoon, the enemy is us. The word of God moves to and fro in the midst of humanity to cut and pierce through our defenses. The irony is that the application of this sword isn’t designed for our defeat, but, rather, for our victory and a return of our allegiance to God.

Notice here, too, that the writer isn’t primarily interested in making the case that the Scripture is the word of God, or that it contains the word of God, or that it becomes the word of God. That’s the case that Paul makes for Scripture in 2 Timothy 3:16, and we certainly believe that Scripture is God’s word. The writer of Hebrews, however, is more interested in what the word of God *does* to us, namely that it cuts and edits our lives in multidimensional ways that are “laid bare” to the eye of the Great Artist.

In order for the word to do that to us, however, we have to be willing to be patient and prayerful in our own delving into the text and see it as a daily discipline. Mr. Dettmer spends hours, days, and weeks with a particular book in order to determine its contours as well as its content.

Those who are people of the word must be willing to spend even more time allowing the text and the Spirit to have their way with us and shape us into the people we’ve been called to be. Too often we’ve been guilty of doing quite the opposite, of cutting out the parts of Scripture that are most convicting and painful in favor of the texts that make us comfortable.

An example of this is Thomas Jefferson, who took a knife to the Scriptures and cut out all the

parts about Jesus' divinity, his miracles and signs, and his resurrection. He didn't cut those pieces out to be artistic, but to fit his Enlightenment-era sense of reason. The result was a word of God edited to suit Jefferson, rather than Jefferson's being edited to fit the word. Lest we chastise one of our Founding Fathers too much, we need to realize that often we do the same thing. We need to be a people who are constantly and daily being shaped by the word of God in the Scriptures rather than shaping and molding it to ourselves and our worldviews.

We don't confine the artistry of the Scriptures to the printed word, however. We view it through the lens of the Word made flesh. In the second part of this week's text, the writer of Hebrews points out that the sword of the living and active word is wielded by Jesus, God's own great "high priest." This is a Word that knows our weaknesses and temptations and yet overcame them both. Because of him, we who need editing can come to him to be marked and shaped by his grace and mercy. Like a master artist and a gifted surgeon, he knows just where to cut to make us beautiful and whole.

Mr. Dettmer's art is beautiful and a wonder to behold, but the books he transforms are no longer in circulation as readable and useable. Lots of people have Bibles in their homes that sit in prominent places like great pieces of art, they are wonders to behold but not to be used.

What we need is to take that word down from the shelf and let it carve us up every day, shaping us into the people God intends us to be. It is, after all, as the writer of Hebrews tells us, a scalpel for the soul. Amen