

2. TAKING THE BIBLE SERIOUSLY



FOCUS: The authority one places in the Bible plays a critical role in one's worldview and understanding of the Christian life.

Its influence has been recognized for centuries. It has been quoted and misquoted, used and abused, appealed to and discredited. While American Presidents quote "a house divided against itself cannot stand" and "from those to whom much is given, much is required," Biblical texts have also been used to oppress women, support slavery, justify wars, and today, bolster White Supremacy and other discriminatory movements.

Preachers try to bring the text alive, classes and small groups provide vital places of discovery. Personal study allows the Bible to speak to an individual's situation. But what is it exactly that we're looking for? The Bible is so big, so intimidating, it's difficult to know where to start. It's hard to know what to believe or what not to believe...

THE BOOK "BY" JESUS?

Before leaving for seminary, a young theological student was taken aside by an evangelical pastor and was told in the hushed tone reserved for the imparting of great wisdom, "You're going to read a lot of books *ABOUT* Jesus – don't forget to read the book *BY* Jesus!"

And therein lies what is perhaps the greatest divide among Christians: the authority one places in the text of the Bible. It's important because how you understand the Christian life depends on *how you read the Bible*.

How much "authority" do you give scripture? How do you determine the level of trust you place in any written material, for that matter? As perhaps the best-selling, least read book of all time, the Bible needs to be re-examined by most of us. It is not something to be "believed" in, as though it has some magical powers, but to be in relationship with, as one would be with any person or cause or issue to which we give allegiance in this life.

In his bestseller, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, Marcus Borg writes, "the Christian life is not primarily about believing the right things or even being good. The Christian life is about being in *relationship* with God which transforms us into more and more compassionate beings, 'into the likeness of Christ.'" Likewise, having a "relationship" with the Biblical text that grows and changes has more spiritual and intellectual integrity than performing the mental gymnastics necessary to cling to the notions of the Bible one learned in Sunday School. The degree to which a person venerates or critiques what has come

down to us in the form of the Bible has wide-ranging implications for the way one interacts with others, the world, and the idea of the divine.

As a record of various peoples' experience of God's faithfulness and human infidelities, the Bible is full of colorful characters, lying, cheating, sex, hate, war, sex, betrayal, murder, sex, letters, poetry, history, sex, great ideas, lousy ideas, and more sex. Read closely, a variety of theological voices is revealed — sometimes harmonious, other times a cacophony of contradiction. For example, most people don't realize that there are *two* flood stories in Genesis: the familiar one where God has Noah collect the animals two by two, and the other where they are collected seven by seven. We only hear about the first story because seven by seven would clutter up the simplicity of the illustrations in children's books and murals.

Yet many people are afraid that if they admit that there are contradictions in the Bible then the whole thing has to be dismissed as a worthless lie. So, a simple defense was concocted as a bulwark against letting the evidence sway people once their minds were made up.

“SHALL THE FUNDAMENTALISTS WIN?”

In the early part of the 20th Century, a pamphlet circulated about the “Fundamentals” of Christianity. It spawned a whole movement committed to the inerrancy of scripture and other supposedly bedrock doctrines. Defenders of the infallibility of scripture pointed to one verse in 2nd Timothy (chapter 3, verse 16):

“All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.”

Literalists then adopted a kind of circular argument, saying that because the Bible is without error or inconsistency, it must be the work of God, and because it is the work of God, it must be without error or inconsistency. It doesn't matter which proposition comes first, the other is argued to follow.

In the 1920s, a highly publicized battle flared up between the mainstream church and what had become known as the Fundamentalists. It was front-page news in national newspapers. The Scopes “monkey trial” was just one skirmish in this national “battle for the soul of America.” In an effort to stir people to action, one of America's great preachers, Harry Emerson Fosdick, preached the sermon, “Shall the Fundamentalists Win?” He was worried that if the mainline church didn't do more to educate its people about the metaphorical and mythological origins of scripture, that we would lose our “brightest and best” young people. He was right.

“SIX IMPOSSIBLE THINGS BEFORE BREAKFAST”

For lots of reasons, many people are dissatisfied with the church today – and they're voting with their feet. One of the biggest reasons is, *folks are not stupid*. They look at the Bible and ask themselves, why is it that of all the things in my life, I have to have a whole different category for the Bible? Why am I expected to

suspend disbelief and not think through what I'm reading the way I would with any other object, issue, or situation in my life?

People run out of patience with bumper sticker platitudes like, *“God said it, I believe it, that settles it.”* One might get the impression that in order to be a Christian they have to emulate Alice in Wonderland's Queen of Hearts in believing “six impossible things before breakfast.”

Hebrew Scripture Professor, Dr. Harrell Beck, used to stir up a lot of people with the exclamation: “The Bible is NOT the word of God – but the word of God is in the Bible.” It's in there, but don't get caught falling prey to worshipping the Bible the way many faith communities seem to have done. Many people cling to the unspoken cultural belief that the origin of “Holy” scripture is somehow the result of a series of some sort of supernatural events. Tongue firmly planted in cheek, Dr. Beck used to imagine the scene: long ago, a shepherd boy in Palestine was startled by an ungodly clap of thunder and the King James Version of the Bible floated out of a cloud and settled at his feet. Having an uncanny appreciation for the value of an ancient text in Elizabethan English, the boy immediately took it to the religious authorities for distribution. Voila!

THINKING CRITICALLY

In reality, the sixty-six separate books crammed together in a not-always-logical arrangement came together in very human ways. With all the haggling and bickering you'd expect from a committee, the Catholic Council of Carthage pulled together one of the first official collections in 397 C.E. – more than three hundred years after the time of Jesus. What we call our “Old Testament” consists of thirty-nine books, many of which had multiple authors. The New Testament has twenty-seven books, many of which also have multiple authors or uncertain authorship. Catholic Bibles include an additional twelve books known as the Apocrypha. The Old Testament is concerned with the Hebrew God, Yahweh, and a history of the early Israelites. The New Testament is the work of early Christians and reflects their beliefs about Jesus.

The composition of the various books began before 1000 B.C.E. and continued for more than a thousand years. Also included was oral material that was repeated from generation to generation, revised over and over again, and then put into written form by various editors. These editors often worked in different locales and in different time periods and with very different socio-economic, philosophical, theological, and spiritual worldviews. They were most certainly unaware of each other and it is unlikely that any of them foresaw their work being included in a “Bible.” Their work was intended for local use.

The four Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, are examples of books which did not carry the names of their actual authors – their present names were assigned long after the books were written and circulated anonymously. Despite the witness of the Gospels themselves, biblical scholars are now almost unanimously agreed – based on evidence within the books themselves – that

none of the Gospel authors was a disciple of Jesus or an eyewitness to his ministry.

There are no original manuscripts of these ancient texts. Not one book that survives is probably in anything like its original form. Moreover, there are countless differences between the oldest surviving copies and the most recent manuscripts of any one book. These differences indicate that additions and alterations were made to the originals by various copyists and editors. Priority is placed on the oldest texts as the ones likely to have been changed the least.

Many of the ethical teachings and laws from Leviticus, for example, (don't plant two kinds of seed in the same field, or use two fibers in one cloth, or talk back to your parents – the penalty for which is death) are relegated to obsolescence while others are lifted up as definitive rules of life.

Then there are all the stories that don't "sync": two creation stories (Genesis 1 & 2), two flood stories, (and imagine the surprise of Victorian scholars who discovered the same story elements in the Genesis flood story lifted from *The Epic of Gilgamesh!*), and some speculate that there are no less than four authors' versions of the exodus lurking in the book we call Exodus! While there are four canonical gospels, the narratives of Jesus' birth appear in only Matthew and Luke (and they don't have the same characters, timeline, or story emphasis).

It's exactly these kinds of inconsistencies in scripture that have led careful readers of the Bible to be curious about what was going on. These people weren't folks who were looking to discredit the Bible, either. Far from it! They were people who had dedicated their lives to understanding scripture through-and-through. What these biblical scholars do is called Historical and Literary Criticism – and it doesn't mean *being* critical of scripture. It means *thinking* critically about scripture.

"Well, if the Bible is just the product of humans, then what sets it apart from all the other ancient texts and holy books?" In short, thousands of years of people's experiencing its contents as a means of grace and as a life-changing window onto the divine.

The window metaphor is author Frederick Buechner's way of talking about scripture. We don't worship the window. We simply look through it to get a glimpse of the divine on the other side. Just because there are smudges, swatted flies, and hairline cracks obstructing our view, we don't throw the window out. We learn to distinguish between what is part of the window and what is beyond. Even though one can point to countless examples of political and theological "spin" that are anything but holy, the Bible has nonetheless established itself in our culture as a source of inspired (not dictated) guidance and observations. Although a flawed and imperfect window, it was fashioned by people of faith who have helped generations of seekers catch a glimpse of the mystery beyond.

The Bible is many things to many people. It's both what people make it and what they let it make of them over the course of time. Even if we read the same translation of the Bible — and there are many different translations, each with its own interpretative slant — we all bring to the reading our own assumptions, presuppositions, prejudices, and experience to bear on the text.

It has been said that there are as many Bibles as there are readers of the Bible. As William Blake wrote:

*"Both read the Bible day and night
but thou readst black where I read white."*

Acknowledging that the history of interpreting scripture is itself "in process" is one of the first steps in establishing a personal, life-long journey with the Biblical text — a sometimes frustrating, often rewarding, and always surprising relationship.

As people are given permission to think critically about the Bible and are resourced with a broad understanding of the history, culture, and political intrigues that originally drove the content, story lines, and theologies of the canon, the text can become less of a stuffy rulebook and more of a lens through which one's spiritual seeking and life journey comes into focus.

The re-visioning of Christianity that is already emerging in the world is motivated in part by taking the Bible seriously and not literally. The core message, dogma, and practices of the Christian faith in today's world are being re-evaluated with a love for and relationship with scripture at its center.

DVD DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

(Note: Chapter 1 of each DVD session is the introductory story.)

DVD Chapter 2:

Biblical inerrancy is the idea that the Bible is without error in its original form, while infallibility holds that the Bible is inerrant on issues of faith and practice but not history or science. How might unquestioning belief in these ideas affect a person's day-to-day living?

Borg suggests that a more historical and metaphorical approach to the Bible provides a way for non-literalists to be Christian. How does this sync with your experience?

DVD Chapter 3:

Name some of the “discrepancies” that Levine mentions.

Rossing, Brueggemann, & McKenna speak of the Bible as “inspired,” as an “act of faithful imagination,” and as “sacred.” Describe their understandings.

Borg describes the Bible as a “lens through which we see God.” What implications does this metaphor have for the Bible’s “authority”?

DVD Chapter 4:

How might looking at the Bible as the “fourth member of the Trinity” be bordering on idolatry?

According to White, what are some of the negative ramifications of “going literal” with the Bible?

Geering suggests that literalists are the “enemies of the Christian tradition.” Elaborate.

DVD Chapter 5:

Describe what Borg means when he says, “The Bible is a human product and a response to the experience of the Sacred.”

DVD Chapter 6:

What are some of the “triggers” that move people from a literal reading of scripture to a more metaphorical approach?

SPIRITPRACTICE: LECTIO DIVINA

As a resource for practicing Lectio Divina (Divine Reading): see *Gathered in the Word: Praying the Scriptures in Small Groups* by Norvene Vest (1996: Upper Room Books). Written by an internationally known retreat leader and spiritual director, *Gathered in the Word* is the definitive contemporary book on the Lectio process. Available at: www.upperroom.org/bookstore (ISBN# 0-8358-0806-8).

Questions for Personal Reflection:

What do you find most helpful/interesting from the material so far?

What are the implications of this material for you personally? For your local fellowship? For the wider Church? For Christianity as a whole?

Consider the following questions as a group:

What has this session challenged or changed about the way you think about the Divine? People? The Church? Yourself? The relationship of all these?

PRACTICAL APPLICATION:

In an effort to help recalibrate people's understanding of the origin of scripture, replace the clichéd affirmation after scripture used by most churches. Instead of reinforcing conventional wisdom with "This is the word of the Lord," try the less misleading, more persuasive, "Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church." Now with a clear conscience, the progressively-minded congregation can respond with "Thanks be to God."

Be sure to follow up on this session's theme with Session 2's *Living it Out: "Shifting Authority,"* distributed by your facilitator.