

Is the Bible **THE Word of God?**

II Timothy 3:14-16

As a UCC minister who holds liberal and progressive views on social issues I am often accused by more conservative Christians of not recognizing the Bible as being “**THE**, with emphatic capitol letters, Word of God.” So that when I say I believe women should be able to be ministers, or hold leadership positions in churches and everywhere else, I am told that this goes against Paul who said women should be silent in church or that women should never be in a position to rule over men. When I tell people that marriage should be a partnership, that women should not be subservient to their husbands, I am told that Ephesians says otherwise. When I say that homosexuality is not necessarily a sin, any more than heterosexuality is, than I am told that the Bible says otherwise and am quoted passages from Leviticus or Paul. When I say that the government is wrong on some issue such as the war in Iraq or its approach to the poor, than I am told that I am not abiding by Paul’s statement that all those in positions of power are in those positions by the “will of God.” I am told that I do not believe the Bible or respect the Bible as God’s Word, in spite of the fact that I can quote Bible passages to support these positions.

My reaction to such encounters usually falls somewhere between anger and bemusement. It angers me that brothers and sisters in Christ can question my respect for the Bible, when I’ve spent most of my adult life reading and studying it. This book, more than any other has shaped who I am and how I see the world. Through this book I have come to whatever understanding of God and God’s will that I might have. This book has been one of the most important sources of whatever I have experienced of God as Creator, Christ and Holy Ghost. But this tends to not be recognized by those brothers and sisters in Christ who hold different views than mine. The ridiculousness of this sometimes leads me to simply be bemused at their attitudes, which are as unenlightened as they are uncharitable.

There was a time when my reaction was not always a mixture of anger and bemusement. After such encounters I use to have doubts about my own respect for the Bible. Certainly, I didn’t see the Bible the way these people did. Certainly, they seemed to be able to quote chapter and verse far better than I could. They seemed more knowledgeable about the Bible and to take it with far more seriousness than I. To tell the truth I was a bit envious of their certainty, their seeming unquestioning approach to the Bible, the kind

of approach one often sees summed on a bumper sticker, **“The Bible says, I believe it, that settles it!”**

There are few more important questions for a Christian to be able to speak to than “What role does the Bible play in my life?” This is why for my first Lent with you we are taking this holy season to explore the topic “Struggling with Scripture.”

Before I go much further, let me give you the answer I have arrived at for myself to the question, “Is the Bible the Word of God?” Let me give it as simply and straight forwardly as possible. Yes, I consider the Bible to be the Word of God. . . . Of course, this begs a further question. “What do I, or for that matter, mean by this?” The next time somebody accuses you of not believing the Bible is the word of God, ask them what they mean by “the Word of God.”

When I say the Bible is the word of God, I do NOT mean that it is **“the one and only”** Word of God. Setting aside for another day the question of other religion’s Scriptures, let’s just focus on the witness of the Bible itself. It never claims to be the “one and only Word of God”, far from it! The Bible speaks of God speaking the universe into existence in the opening chapter of Genesis, so the Word of God can be observed in nature, past and present. The Bible speaks of the prophets of God speaking “God’s word.” Most importantly for Christians, Jesus is said to be the Word of God made flesh. For Christians if there is a THE Word of God, with all capital and bold letters, it most certainly is NOT the Bible, it is Christ, crucified and risen and present in our midst.

Now, let us turn our attention to another claim that fundamentalist Christians place near the very center of their theology, namely, that the Bible is THE Word of God in every conceivable way, that every jot and tittle, every word, every thought, every statement, every position, every everything in the Bible is THE Word of God, God ordained, God spoken, God’s thoughts and words written down in black and white for all to see. I reject this, as I believe every honest, thinking person will who reads the Bible.

Let’s be honest, the Bible has some pretty nasty things in it. You can’t tell me that God said them all. I mean really, just read the Old Testament through sometime. I don’t see how anybody can claim God said or meant everything that is in there! I mean people get all bent out of shape, and rightly so, when Muslims stone a woman accused of adultery, but guess what the Bible calls for that too! The Old Testament gives plenty of examples of polygamy, but I don’t hear Focus on the Family advocating that stance! The Bible also advocates that children who are disobedient to their parents be killed, but I doubt if the PTA would recommend this! Jesus

himself contradicts Scripture from the Old Testament when he willingly chooses to break the Sabbath laws or call for no divorce. Just because the Bible contains these things doesn't mean that they have somehow all been "sanctified" as God's Word for all eternity. I frankly don't think they were God's Word in their own day, let alone ours!

The great mystic Christian, African-American, author and teacher, Howard Thurman tells a story about his grandmother. She had been a slave in the south as a young girl. She taught her grandson, Howard Thurman, much about the Bible, having memorized large portions of it. He eventually went to seminary and when he was there he realized that his grandmother never taught him anything from the Apostle Paul. When he asked her why she gave told him this story. As a young slave girl she remembered the black preacher coming around and preaching about Moses and Jesus, but when the white preacher came he always preached from Ephesians 6:5 which says, "Slaves, be obedient to those who are your earthy masters, with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, as to Christ." Thurmond says that when his grandmother was able to read the Scriptures for herself, she took a pair of scissors and cut out all of Paul's writings from the New Testament. She did this on the grounds that they were inconsistent with what Jesus taught, and that therefore they had no place in the Bible.

I don't know if I could go as far as Thurman's grandmother did, but then again I didn't experience what she did. I would leave such passages in, not because they are the Word of God, but because they are in the canon, the Bible, recognizing that not everything in there comes from God and that we can struggle with such passages and God can even use such terrible passages as vehicles for the Spirit to work. There is such a thing as a "negative example!"

Some things in the Bible are just flat out wrong. At several points in the New Testament Paul and Jesus suggest that the second coming would take place before everyone living then had died. Well, 2,000 years later it hasn't happened! I think it is safe to say that all those alive in the first century are dead and have been for quite awhile. The Bible itself recognizes such problems. Paul had to address questions around the delay of the parousia, the second coming.

Not everything in the Bible is THE Word of God. In fact most parts of the Bible do not claim direct "inspiration from God." As far as I know, in the New Testament only the apocalyptic book of Revelation claims direct inspiration from God and if you remember from last week, the book of Revelation almost didn't even make it into the Bible. Many early churches refused to accept it for hundreds of years!

True, II Timothy 3:16 says “that all Scripture is inspired of God” but when this was written it could only apply to the Old Testament. The New Testament had not yet been gathered together! The writer of II Timothy certainly was not claiming that his book was so inspired and all of this is assuming that inspiration means direct literal inspiration of the text. We’ll come back to that in a moment.

Paul in one of his letters says straight out that what he was saying and writing was his own opinion and that God had not told him what to say on this matter. In I Corinthians 7:25 Paul is commenting on the question of whether or not “virgins” should get married. He says, **“I have no command of the Lord, but I give my opinion as one who by the Lord’s mercy is trustworthy.”** He then goes on to say that people shouldn’t get married if they are single unless they are burning with lust! Again, I don’t think Focus on the Family is going to cite this verse very often!

Alright, let’s deal with the “Word of God” part of the question. C. H. Dodd, the great 20th century New Testament scholar, who wrote a book entitled *The Authority of the Bible*, says that the first thing we need to note is that “Word of God” is a metaphor. It is not like we are talking about God having vocal chords and air passing through them and us hearing the words that come out. So what do we mean when we say something is the “Word of God?” Dodd says we mean something like this **“...a means whereby the ‘thought’ of God, which is the truth, is mediated to the human mind.”** It is his contention that the Bible as a whole, but not in all its individual parts, is “the Word of God,” in that, as a whole it is a vehicle for God’s truth.

He goes on to contend that “...in a literal sense the Bible consists of the ‘words’ of men – or rather of their visible symbols in writing. It is not the utterance of God in the same sense in which it is the utterance of man. Not God but Paul is the author of the Epistle to the Romans, though in a **transferred sense** we may describe the Romans as the ‘Word of God’, meaning that in some way it mediates to the reader the truth which is the thought of God.”

Dodd then makes an extraordinarily important point, **“God is the Author not of the Bible, but of the life in which the authors partake, and of which they tell in such imperfect words as they could command.”** Paul certainly never claimed to be perfect, just the opposite. In fact, when Paul speaks of his ministry and indeed of his Christian faith in general, he says in II Corinthians **“But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.”** What an amazing statement by Paul! Dodd is right on target when he says, **“If the Bible has authority as a revelation of truth it**

is in some sense which is not incompatible with its human imperfection.”

Theologian Marcus Barth would seem to agree with C.H. Dodd. He writes in his book *Conversation With The Bible*, that, **“Words may be food, joy, a burning fire, the heart’s delight, or the very life of man; the Gospel may be called the power of salvation, or the word and wisdom of God; its effect may be as purifying as the pruning of a vine or the washing of a bride, or as joyful as the release of captives but it is God’s power in the word and not the power of the word itself to which these praises are due The words are but tools; they are not an authority.”**

Now as we close this sermon out, let’s look closely at II Timothy 3:14-16. This is the passage that so many fundamentalist brothers and sisters in Christ point to when they want to argue that the Bible is the “literal Word of God”, the “inspired Word of God”, the “authoritative Word of God, in short “THE Word of God. It is important, perhaps to point out that this is the only place in the entire Bible, all 66 books of it, written over a thousand year period of time, in which inanimate written words are spoken of as being “inspired.” In all other places in the Bible it is a human being who is inspired or the words that a human being is actually speaking that are inspired.

The greek word used here is “*theopneustos*” which literally means “God-breathed.” It can mean “inspired”, which you will not find in the past tense, or it can mean “inspiring”, which has a present and future tense to it, or it can mean both. This word can not help but bring with it association of the Holy Spirit at Work. Perhaps one could say that the Bible has been shaped by the Holy Spirit and that through reading, study, prayer, and worship the Bible can become a vehicle of God’s Holy Spirit in the present and future.

Note that this text does not say that the Bible is inerrant and infallible, simply that it is God breathed. Again, what comes to mind when you think of something else God breathed? What other Bible story uses that imagery? . . . We are told in Genesis chapter 2 that God created the earth creature, Adam out of the dust of the earth and “breathed life into” the earth creature Adam. Perhaps it is not too big a stretch to say that through Scripture God can still “breath life”, new life into men and women today.

Let’s go back to Dodd’s idea that God didn’t author the Bible but rather authors the lives of people who wrote, cherished and passed on the Bible. Paul spoke of being a “new creation in Christ.” He spoke of the church being the Body of Christ in the world and how the Holy Spirit gifts each and every member of the Body of Christ to do the work of God.

Notice that the focus of the passage from II Timothy is on Timothy holding fast to what he has learned. He has not just learned doctrine or things about the Bible. The Bible has been an aid for him finding, as II Timothy puts it, **“salvation through faith in Jesus Christ.”** God, through the Bible has “authored” his salvation, his new life in Christ.

Also notice that the Bible is not the only thing that God has used to help him find salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. Both individuals and by implication, the community of faith, the Body of Christ in the world, the church, has also been an agent through which God has worked. Two people are mentioned by name in chapter 1 verses 5-7, his mother Eunice and his grandmother Lois. They have from childhood taught him “the sacred writings.” They no doubt not only passed on what they knew of the Bible, just like Howard Thurmond’s grandmother, but also what it meant to them in their lives of faith. They became agents for the Holy Spirit, as much as the sacred writings themselves.

This passage, as I said, also implies the community of faith being at work, being an agent for God’s Holy Spirit. Lois and Eunice are not out there all by themselves. They are part of a community of faith. The passage also speaks of how the “Scriptures are useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness...” True these things can happen with an individual using the Scriptures, but there is no doubt that these also describe the work of the church as the Body of Christ in the world. Certainly Paul viewed the Body of Christ having these functions. So again, it is not just Scripture by itself, it is the community using Scripture and becoming a vehicle of the Holy Spirit.

So it is that Marcus Barth says, **“For the author of 2 Timothy, the Bible lives neither in a shrine nor on a dusty shelf. It is a tool that was used by God and is still used by man. Its relation to God’s Spirit is inseparable from its actual employment in learning and teaching.”**

Finally, notice the concluding point of our passage today, what the purpose of Scripture, of the Body of Christ, of the work of the Holy Spirit is, it is all **“...so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.”**

How is this for a doctrine on the Bible: The purpose of the Bible is to be a vehicle of instruction for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ and to equip everyone who belongs to God, for every good work? Is the Bible the Word of God? It can be, God willing. Amen.

