

## **“Is the Bible the Last Word?”**

### **Matthew 5:21-48**

Many of our sisters in brothers in Christ like to claim that the Bible is the first and last word on every conceivable topic, past, present and future. How they can maintain this position knowing that the New Testament was written almost 2,000 years ago and the Original Covenant almost 3,000 years ago, based on stories from almost 4,000 years ago. It beggars belief! Clearly much of the Bible was shaped by the time and place in which it was written and many things have changed since then. For that matter the world is a very different place from what it was even 50 years ago, let alone 2,000 years ago! I would agree with the poet James Russell Lowell, whose hymn we will sing at the end of this sermon, **“New occasions teach new duties, time makes ancient truth uncouth. They must upward still and onward, who would keep abreast of truth.”** The God of the Bible is not a static God who never changes. This is the definition of something that is dead or never was alive. The God of the Bible is alive and to be alive is to adapt and change.

I realize that this goes against some of our most basic religious wishes and desires. All of us desire an immutable, unchanging, core for our religion, a God who is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow. I would argue that there is such a core, but it is not found in the printed page of Scripture or in religious laws, interpretations or traditions.

Our desire for an ancient, unchanging truth is perhaps expressed by that old hymn *Give Me That Old Time Religion*. The chorus goes, **“Give me that old time religion, give me that old time religion, give me that old time religion, it’s good enough for me.”** The verses then proceed to say

that the “old time religion” was good enough for our mothers and fathers and it’s good enough for us.

Certainly there is much about the religion of our parents and grandparents that is worth hanging on to. There is much there that can inspire us. These things should be hung on to because they are indeed “good enough for us.” However, honesty compels me to say that not everything about our parents and grandparents religion is worthy to pass on, anymore than everything about our religion today is worthy to pass on to future generations. We are all creatures of our time and place, and fallen, mortal creatures at that. No, every generation must try to learn from the mistakes of the past and take the best of the past and develop their own understanding of the faith for their time and place, as God gives them the grace so to do.

Of course this is too much for some people. When I looked up the phrase “give me that old time religion” the Google search came up with 6,530 hits in just 6 seconds! Obviously this is a phrase that catches people’s imaginations! Obviously, there is a heavy dose of nostalgia for “the good ole days” expressed in this sentiment.

In this search I ran across a sermon by the well known Texan Baptist preacher W.A. Criswell, who held forth for decades in Dallas and did much to help the Southern Baptist Convention be taken over by the fundamentalist. In 1975 he preached a sermon entitled “The Old-Time Religion.” This was an old sermon that people requested he preach again. Apparently it was popular because he was still using parts of it more than 20 years later at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in the mid 90’s!

In the sermon he bemoans the lack of feeling and emotion in modern churches. He bemoans the emphasis on rationality that he felt leads to lack of faith. He tells of college students being indoctrinated by

agnostic/atheistic professors and coming to him saying, “You believe in that book? I’ve learned it’s full of Aesop’s fables, myths and all kinds of things that are man-made and man-thought. My professor with a Ph.D. told me I was green scum, then a fish, then a fowl, then a marsupial, then a homo sapiens.”

Criswell said he would tell the students this little fable, “Once I was a tadpole beginning to begin; then I was a frog with my tail tucked in; then I was a monkey in a banyan tree; now I’m a professor with a Ph.D.!” Criswell expressed sadness and bewilderment at what he perceived to be rampant disbelief.

He then told an amusing story to illustrate what he thought was missing in modern belief. He said there once was an old-time bible-believing preacher on whom some boys played a trick. It seems they took some glue and glued some of the pages of his Bible together. Well the preacher took out his Bible to preach and he turned to the story of Noah and commenced to read about Noah’s wife “And in those days, Noah was one hundred forty-seven years old and he took unto himself a wife and she” – then he turned the page and read on, “and she was forty cubits broad, seventy cubits high, and a hundred cubits long, made out of gopher wood, and daubed on the inside and out with pitch.”

Well, the old Bible-believing preacher scratched his head for a minute and said, “Brothers and sisters, that’s the first time I ever saw that in the Word of God.” “But,” he said, “if the Bible says it, I believe it!” Then he added, “That just goes to prove that other marvelous text in the Bible which says we are wonderfully and fearfully made.” Criswell says of this, “But he believed it,” the Bible as he had read it, glued pages and all, “and he

preached it, and all of us were blessed and encouraged by it – the old-time book.”

I don't doubt that this was true. God can work through some pretty strange circumstances, even error and ignorance. There is certainly some truth that “modern” religion, particularly I would say, liberal religion, is too intellectual. Perhaps this very sermon is an example of this! But what can one do? We can not go back, nor would I want to go back, to a pre-enlightenment form of religion. For better or worse, humanity has eaten of the tree of knowledge. We can not go back to the garden where ignorance is bliss. None the less, there are many in Christian communities all around the world who will try mightily to go back to whatever conception they have of the old time religion and what they consider to be the old certainties of faith.

Benjamin Franklin had it right when he commented on the brand new United States Constitution, saying, **“Our new constitution is now established, and has an appearance that promises permanency, but in this world nothing can be said to be certain except death and taxes.”** I might add God to his list of two but he of course was right. The constitution has been amended 27 times, including the 10 Bill of Rights. These amendments were made to do such important things such as outlaw slavery and extend the right to vote to women. “New occasions” do indeed “teach new duties, time makes ancient truth uncouth.” The Supreme Court continues to seek to “stay abreast of truth” every time it rules on a case, interpreting the constitution for that particular case, on a host of issues the original framers of the constitution never dreamed of, everything from abortion to contested elections in Florida!

We have seen the same kind of dynamic at work in the development of the Bible as we have it today. I talked about this several weeks ago when we

discussed JED and P and how the Gospels were developed. We also see this same dynamic at work in the very necessary task of interpretation, which every Christian in every age must do as they read the Bible and seek to apply it to their life and time.

Let's take one very specific example of what I am talking about, in which the Bible and its interpreters certainly did not have the "infallible" last word on, namely slavery. It is of course true, as I all ready pointed out, that the American constitution also got this wrong. In both cases this "ancient truth" was proved to be "uncouth" with the passage of time.

Since the time of St. Augustine in the 5<sup>th</sup> century A.D. pastors, preachers and scholars have pointed to Genesis 9:20-26 to justify slavery. "And Noah began to be a husbandman, and he planted a vineyard: and he drank of the wine and was drunken; and he was uncovered in his tent. And Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father, and told his two brethren without . . . And Noah awoke from his wine, and knew what his younger son had done unto him. **And he said, Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren. And he said, Blessed be the Lord God of Shem; and Canaan shall be his servant.**"

Now, let's move forward to pre-civil war America. The people using this text and interpreting it in terms of blacks and slavery, were not Ku Klux Klanners or Neo Nazi types! They were mainstream preachers, teachers and college presidents. One such person was James Henley Thornwell (1812-1862). In 1850 he preached a sermon in which he sought to condemn those who were working to ban slavery forever, the abolitionists. He said, "**The parties in this conflict are not merely Abolitionists and Slaveholders; they are Atheists, Socialists, Communists, Red Republicans, Jacobins on the one side, and the friends of order and regulated freedom on the**

**other. In one word, the world is the battleground-Christianity and atheism the combatants; and the progress of humanity the stake.”** Well Thornwell was correct, but little did he realize that he and all the folks like him were the very ones holding up the progress of humanity!

Thorwell said the hierarchical caste system, based on race, was instituted by God himself and was biblically based. He could cite chapter and verse to prove his point, passages like the one earlier from Genesis. He assumed the descendants of Ham were the African Americans of the south. In one of his sermons he said, **“There are no doubt, many rights which belong to other men . . . to his master, for example – which are denied to him (the slave). But is he fit to possess them? The truth is, the education of the human race for liberty and virtue, is a vast Providential scheme, and God assigns to every man, by a wise decree, the precise place he is to occupy in the great moral school of humanity.”** This sounds strange to us today, but it was considered gospel truth by many in the south in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Now one would think that much of this kind of thinking would have been laid to rest after the civil war but it was not. Some were seeking allow African Americans to be ordained into the Southern Presbyterian Church but others were stubbornly clinging to old, uncouth, interpretations. Fully 23 years after the Emancipation Proclamation, if you can believe it today, Robert Louis Dabney said in 1888 in his “Anit-biblical Theories of Rights” **“The radical social theory asserts that ‘all men are born free and equal.’ But it was his contention that “The honest student, then, of the New Testament can make nothing less of its teachings on this point than that domestic slavery, as defined in God’s word and practiced in the manner enjoined in the Epistles, is still a lawful relation under the new**

**dispensation as well as the old.”** Once again he based this on his interpretation of Genesis 9:20-29.

To be truthful, Dabney was right. There is nothing in the old or new testament that condemns slavery. It was simply assumed to be a fact of life and went unchallenged. Frankly, a short 145 years later one can only assume that other biblical texts, interpretations and truths have thankfully come to the fore, such as “love your neighbor” or “in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, slave nor free.”

If Scripture and scriptural interpretation is not the LAST word, what is it? What is its value? What role does it play? What is its relationship to truth? C.H. Dodd has this to say about the Bible, **“If the Bible is indeed ‘the Word of God’, it is so not as the ‘last word’ on all religious questions, but as the ‘seminal’ out of which fresh apprehension of truth springs in the mind of man.”** Perhaps Jesus had something in mind like this when he said, in Matthew 5:17, **“Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.”**

In the remainder of chapter 5 Jesus then proceeds in 6 different areas to take ancient Scripture and change its emphasis and I would say deepen its meaning. Jesus is more interested in the “Spirit of the Scripture” than the “letter of the Scripture.”

- “You have heard it said to those of ancient times – ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister...”
- “You have heard it said, “you shall not commit adultery - But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery ...”

- “It was said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.”
- “Again you have heard that it was said to those in ancient times, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but carry out your vows you have made to the Lord.’ But I say to you, do not swear at all,....”
- You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also;...”
- “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven;...”

Notice that Jesus radically changes some of these ancient teachings. He turns some of them completely on their head. He seeks to deepen and stretch their meaning and goals. What would you say the overriding principle is behind all of these? (ask the congregation Get some responses.) I would say that the overall principle behind each and every one of these is a deep seated love, an ever expanding love of God and of all, friend and foe alike, everyone that we meet. This is the overall aim of the Bible at its best. It is this deep love that Jesus is seeking to fulfill personally and encourages each and every one us to fulfill. Jesus shows us the way when it comes to changing ancient truths and scriptural interpretation. It is not to be done willy nilly. It is not to be done in a self serving way, just the opposite. It is to be done in the name of love of God and love of all humanity. It is not change for the sake of change, but change for the sake of love.

It is my firm belief that both the Bible and Jesus point the way. The Bible is not the last word, it is as Dodd describes it “the seminal word” out of which a deeper, more holy love is born, by the grace of God and the movement of the Holy Spirit.

Our ancient forbearer in the faith in the United Church of Christ Rev. James Robinson said in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, “**The Lord hath more light and truth to break forth out of his holy word.**” Amen to that! May we continue to seek that light and truth, for ourselves and our world.

When you get down to it the issue is not whether or not it is old or new religion, but whether it is true religion, the real thing. Leonard Sweet in his Magna Charta of Trust by an Out of Control Disciple says, “**Don’t give me that old-time religion. Don’t give me that new-time religion. Give me that all-time religion as hard as rock and as soft as snow.**” Amen.