

The Bible Is Not...
Deuteronomy 31: 9-13; Luke 24:27-32
Pastor Bill Chadwick
Oak Grove Presbyterian Church
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My brother-in-law, Mark is and was one of those perfect kids that never got into trouble. He's the medical missionary in Tanzania that I have spoken of before. When Mark was in high school he had a car full of friends and he went around a corner a little fast and got pulled over by a police officer. After looking at his license and looking around the interior of the car he said to Mark, "Open the trunk." Mark got out of the car. Opened the trunk and stepped back. The trunk was jam-packed with ...Gideon Bibles. (His dad was a leader of the Gideon Bible organization.) "Get outta here!" growled the cop, with a wave of his arm.

Bible. The word itself conjures different emotions in different people.

For some the word "Bible" is a sweet word that conjures nothing but warm feelings.

Many of us know the song:

Oh, the B-I-B-L-E
Yes, that's the book for me
I stand alone on the word of God,
The B-I-B-L-E

Here is our Chadwick Family Bible, originally belonging to my great-grandfather, William Chadwick, one of the charter members of this congregation. It's an 1851 version of the King James Bible. It has some newspaper clippings inside the front cover, wedding announcements, a Golden anniversary and obituary, all from the 19th century. This Bible is a priceless treasure to our family.

On the other hand, for some the word "Bible" conjures up their shame-based upbringing and makes them cringe.

And then there's the person, active churchperson, who said to me long ago, "I don't really pay any attention to the Bible. It doesn't do anything for me."

And one can sympathize with that attitude. "What do spears and chariots and leprosy and village wells have to do with me here in the 21st century?"

That's Dries's and my job, to answer that question: to help us make the connections between these stories that are two or three thousand years old and our stories today.

I thought it would be helpful in our ministry together if we had some common understandings about the Bible. Or if we don't hold them in common, you at least know where I am coming from as far as Biblical interpretation and Biblical authority. I believe that my perspective is solidly within mainstream Reformed tradition, "Reformed" being our branch of Protestantism beginning with John Calvin. This sermon today may be a very small way of honoring the 500th birthday of John Calvin, which was July 10.

Now, in good Reformed tradition you don't have to agree with the way I understand the Bible. As our Book of Order says, "God alone is lord of the conscience," which I take to mean that just because the preacher says something you don't have to buy it. We can politely agree to disagree with one another, though I don't think that I'm going to say anything horribly controversial today.

Today we will look at Biblical interpretation and in a future sermon, August 16, we will look at Biblical authority. Before we do either I thought it would be helpful to say what the Bible is *not*. (Idea from Cal Cooper.)

The Bible is not...

A baseball bat to clobber people over the head with, people who don't agree with us.
As tempting as that is.

A science book...There is no science in the Bible. We'll come back to that.

A bumper sticker. Here are a couple of my favorite bumper stickers:

Save the Earth: It's the Only Planet with Chocolate

Lord, help me to be the person my dog thinks I am (That is a brief definition of sanctification.)

A secret codebook that predicts the future in specific ways.

Hal Lindsey in 1970 published a book entitled *The Late, Great Planet Earth*. It predicted the world would end in 1982. After 1982 came and went Lindsey put out an edition that predicted 1988 and so on. The Bible is not a predictor of the future in very specific ways, not even the book of Revelation. We'll look at that in a future sermon.

A newspaper trying to be relatively objective. Every book is written with an agenda.

A batting helmet to protect us from getting hurt. All but one of the disciples were put to death for following Jesus.

The key to financial success. Joel Osteen's prosperity gospel has nothing to do with the Jesus of the gospels. It is heresy. And he is leading millions away from the Jesus we find in our Bibles. Did the disciples become wealthy? Did the apostle Paul become wealthy? Indeed they did become wealthy. But not material wealth.

And yet, neither is the Bible a wet blanket to smother all the fun in life. As Jesus said in John 10:10: "I have come that they (my disciples) might have life and have it abundantly!"

The Bible is not even...a book!

As we noted in the children's sermon **the Bible is not a book as much as it is a library of 66 books**. They were written by dozens of people over the course of hundreds of years.

Now we recognize that a newspaper contains a number of types of writing. Name some: sports, ads, editorials, letters to editor, human interest, crosswords and Sudokos. Do we read them all the same? Do you read a letter to the editor the same way you read the sports or an ad?

So, too, **the Bible contains numerous types of writing and each deserves its own treatment**.

Let's name some of the types of writing in the scriptures: poetry, narrative, history, parables, Jewish apocalyptic language about the end of the world, wisdom sayings, warnings, letters.

How do we interpret scripture? Ay, there's the rub. There are lots of ways to get the Bible to say pretty much anything we want it to say. Shakespeare in *The Merchant of Venice*: "The devil can cite scripture for his purpose." Which indeed the devil does in his temptations of Jesus in the wilderness.

Some people take issue with the idea of interpreting scripture at all. They say, "I don't *interpret* the Bible. I take it at face value." That sentiment is reflected in the bumper sticker which reads: "God said it. I believe it. That settles it."

Let's see if that works. How did Judas die? Matthew 27:5 "Throwing down the pieces of silver in the temple, he departed; and he went and hanged himself." That's what I thought until I was in high school and read the entire New Testament for the first time. I read about Judas hanging himself in Matthew but then when I got to Acts of the Apostles I read: Acts 1:18: "Now (Judas) acquired a field with the reward of his wickedness; and falling headlong, he burst open in the middle and all his bowels gushed out."

I've seen some convoluted attempts to reconcile those accounts, but please. Hanging yourself is not the same as falling headlong and having your bowels gush out. And throwing down the pieces of silver in the temple is not the same as taking the pieces of silver and buying a field.

At least one of these accounts is wrong. But who cares how Judas died? It's certainly not a key tenet of the Christian faith. It won't be on the final.

A more common example. What about Creation? Some people get all excited about *how* the earth was formed. Many Christians insist that if you are going to be a follower of Jesus you have to believe the Creation account found in Genesis 1 is scientific fact.

Okay. But then what do you do with the second Creation story found in Genesis 2?

There are significant differences. In Genesis 1 the garden is made first and then the people. In Genesis 2 the people are made and then the garden. Those are different. But again, who cares? I submit that the real point of these stories is not what order things were created or how long it took. Those are science questions. Friends, the Bible is not a science book. It's a theology book, or rather, a theology library. Here are the important things we learn from Genesis: Who created the heavens and the earth? God. And what is God's evaluation of the Creation? It is good. And both stories affirm that.

So, then, do I "believe in" evolution? I believe in God. God can use whatever God wants to fashion this amazing, beautiful world.

I like to say that not every word of the Bible is true (little "t" as in scientific or historical fact), but the Bible as a whole is True, big "T" referring to the things that matter. As Jesus said, "You shall know the Truth and the Truth shall set you free." Big T Truth.

Did you know that taking the Bible literally is a relatively new invention? Throughout the first 1700 years of Christians reading the Bible the primary way people understood the Bible was a figurative or allegorical interpretation of the text.

There are a number of important things to note:

1. There are no original manuscripts of any book of the Bible still in existence. The earliest manuscripts are 150 years after the fact. Every Bible we have today is a copy of a copy of a copy.
2. If you are not reading the scriptures in the original languages you are already dependent on others' interpretations.
3. Paul does not take the Bible literally. In Galatians chapter 4 he interprets the story of Hagar and Sarah allegorically. We won't take the time now but if you are interested read Genesis 16 and then Galatians 4. Paul not only interprets Genesis 16 allegorically he actually turns the original story on its head!
4. How did Jesus treat his own Bible? Jesus himself a number of times in the Sermon on the Mount says, "You have heard that it was said (and he's referring to the Jewish scriptures, our Old Testament)... but I say to you..." and he turned it upside down! For example he takes Deuteronomy 19:21 "Show no pity: life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot." and he says in Matthew 5:38 "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 violently resist an evildoer."

So, if you are going to follow the Bible literally are you going to follow what it says in Deuteronomy or in Matthew? For those of us who follow Jesus the answer is Matthew. We always interpret scripture through the lens of Jesus. Through the lens of Jesus. In our gospel lesson today Cleopas and an unnamed disciple are walking from Jerusalem to Emmaus on Easter Sunday and the Risen Christ joins them. They do not recognize Jesus. (That's a future sermon.) After they are at supper and Christ disappears they say to themselves, "Did our hearts not burn within us as he explained the scriptures to us?"

That is our hope, that as we read the scriptures the Spirit of Christ will inspire us and lead us to understanding. But we always read through the lens of Jesus. In Psalm 137 we read a lament written by one who is angry and heartbroken over the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. The author has been hauled off to exile in Babylon and in his fury and despair he writes: "Happy are those who smash your babies against the rocks!" (vs. 9)

Whoa! Do we follow that advice? No, we look to Jesus, who said, “Do not violently resist an evildoer.”

Now, in your bulletin you will find a handout (see below) on Presbyterian interpretation of scripture. I think it's clear and self-explanatory. I invite you to read it at home. If you have questions or comments I will try to address those in the sermon on August 16.

Enough interpretation. Let's look at a couple of big questions.

What is the basic message of the Bible?

God created the world and it is good.

Humans messed things up.

God came in Jesus Christ to set things right.

Jesus is the fullest revelation of what God is like and what humans are supposed to be like.

What is the purpose of the Bible?

Westminster Shorter Catechism, one of the basic Presbyterian confessions: “The Scriptures principally teach what (people are) to believe concerning God, and what duty God requires of (humans).”

--What to believe: Deuteronomy 31: Read the law so that your children may learn to fear the Lord, “fear” meaning reverence and give honor and rightful due to God the Creator.

And what are we to do? Many answers in scripture. One of the most powerful and complete is that famous line from Micah 6:8: “What does the Lord require of you, O mortal, but to do justice, act mercifully and walk humbly with your God?”

To conclude: The Bible is a vast and complex and wonderful collection of inspirational, life-giving literature. We have the Psalms, to carry us through our own tragedies. We see the prophets' concern for the poor and the powerless. The apostle Paul: salvation by grace through faith and the magnificent love chapter of I Corinthians 13. The Letters of John, with tenderness, forgiveness, and the assertion that we are beloved as the children of God.

All these are wonderful. But the paramount significance of the Bible is that it is the vessel that carries the story of Jesus. The Bible is the written word (small w) of God that points us to the Living Word (capital W) of God, Jesus.

In the Bible we see Jesus teaching with authority: the beatitudes and the entire Sermon on the Mount. The Parables. His works—healing, raising from the dead, touching lepers, inviting women, slaves, tax collectors, Gentiles into the kingdom of God. Amazing courage in the face of persecution. Courage which takes him all the way to the Cross. And above all, the Bible is where we read of the Resurrection, God's ultimate stamp of approval on Jesus' ministry and the foundation of our own hope for eternal life.

In the gospel accounts of Jesus' life we see the most complete picture of what God is like. And what human beings are *meant* to be like.

We thank God for the biblical witness of God's love made known in Jesus and for those faithful people who have given us the scriptures!

Amen!

HOW DO PRESBYTERIANS INTERPRET THE BIBLE?

By Donald K. McKim,

from Presbyterian Questions, Presbyterian Answers pp. 17-19

Presbyterians take biblical interpretation very seriously. We believe that the Scriptures are God's Word and that we should use the best resources we have available to help us hear and understand what God is saying through the biblical texts.

A 1982 study, elaborated on in 1983, has given the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) a helpful set of guidelines for interpreting the Bible.* These should be taken together, so that we can adopt an approach to biblical interpretation that maintains fidelity to God's Word.

1. **Recognize that Jesus Christ, the Redeemer, Is the Center of Scripture.** Luther called the Bible "the cradle in which Christ lies." The Old Testament anticipates Christ: The New Testament witnesses to his coming as God's Messiah who has redeemed his people. Jesus Christ is the central focus of the biblical story.
2. **Focus on the Plain Text of Scripture.** Some biblical texts are clearly symbolic, many others are best understood when we know the particular settings and customs of the time. We need to know as much as we can about the biblical languages and the social and cultural contexts of the biblical writings to interpret them well and take the Bible serious.
3. **Depend on the Holy Spirit's Guidance for Interpreting and Applying God's Message.** The Holy Spirit enables us to see and hear things in the biblical texts that may have been hidden to us before. God's Word and God's Spirit always go together. Prayer for the Spirit's illumination is always important for biblical interpretation and for applying the Bible's word.
4. **Be Guided by the Church's Doctrinal Consensus or "Rule of Faith."** The church has interpreted the Bible through the centuries. We should always pay attention to what the church has heard the Spirit saying in the Scripture, and recognize as significant the creeds and confessions of the ancient church as well as of other Reformed churches when we interpret.

*I have slightly modified the points in the two reports for brevity here. The reports are available together from the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) as *Presbyterian Understanding and Use of Holy Scripture and Biblical Authority and Interpretation* (Louisville, KY.: Office of the General Assembly, 1992). Address: 100 Witherspoon St., Louisville, KY 40202-1396. Online see www.pcusa.org/marketplace. The documents can be ordered through "The Presbyterian Marketplace" section and are item number OGA 99022.

5. **Let All Interpretations Be in Accord with the "Rule of Love."** Jesus commanded us to love God and love our neighbor. Later theologians spoke of the "rule of love" as being a guide for us, in that our biblical interpretation should not lead us toward views of actions that are destructive of or harmful to others, since we are clearly commanded to love them.
6. **Remember That Biblical Interpretation Requires Earnest Study.** No amount of prayer or piety is a substitute for using the best resources available to us for helping with biblical interpretation. Today we have many such aids, a large number written for those with no specific theological training. These should be appropriated and well used.
7. **Seek to Interpret a Particular Biblical Passage in Light of All of the Bible.** Biblical interpretation should move from "the whole to the part." The big, overarching message of Scripture should help us understand particular biblical passages. They should also stand as guides to warn us if our individual interpretations are moving in directions contrary to the larger, clearer biblical themes.

These guidelines do not "ensure" that our biblical interpretations will automatically be best. But they do orient us toward a Presbyterian perspective on Scripture that can open us to hearing "what the Spirit is saying to the churches" (Rev. 2:7).