

*The Bible Is...*  
A Sermon by Bill Chadwick  
Oak Grove Presbyterian Church  
August 16, 2009  
Jeremiah 31:31-33; Acts 8:26-31

In our Acts passage we find one of the newly ordained deacons responding to the leading of the Holy Spirit. He is told to "Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." Or another translation is "Get up and go *at noon* to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." And so Philip does. There he encounters an official from the Court of the Queen of Ethiopia, who had come to Jerusalem to worship. Obviously a convert to Judaism. He is reading aloud from the book Isaiah. Philip asks, "Do you understand what you are reading?" He replies, "How can I, unless someone guides me?"

There's some honesty. Ever sit down to try to read the book of Isaiah on your own? I have. Not easy. Friends, the Bible is not a children's book. We'll come back to Philip and the Ethiopian later.

Today's sermon is a sequel to the July 19 sermon entitled "The Bible is Not..." in which we looked at Presbyterian understandings of how to interpret scripture. Copies of that sermon and a handout on Presbyterian interpretation are available in the narthex.

In that sermon I asserted that the Bible is not...a baseball bat, a science book, a bumper sticker, a secret codebook to predict the future in specific ways. It's not a newspaper trying to be relatively objective, a batting helmet to protect us from getting hurt, not the key to financial success, and yet, neither is the Bible a wet blanket to smother all the fun in life.

It's actually easier for me to say what the Bible is NOT, but it's only fair to make some suggestions as to what the Bible IS, at a great risk of being corny and simplistic.

The Bible is (these items were displayed) ...a light (as scripture says, "Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, a light unto my path"), a siren to warn us of danger, lenses to see life without distortion, life preserver, liquid wrench to help us get unstuck, concrete for a firm foundation, key to remove chains, a level to see if we are living in accord with the prophets' call to justice, and my favorite, the Bible is like a set of jumper cables to help us connect to the Source of Power.

In the July 19 sermon I asserted that the chief value of the Bible is that it is where we read about Jesus, the revelation of what God is like and of what we humans are meant to be like. And I said that to interpret scripture we read through the lens of Jesus. So in reading scripture we ask ourselves, "Does this particular passage fit with the picture of Jesus—his life, his teachings?"

I also asserted that the purpose of the Bible is to teach us, to teach us what to believe and what we are to do. To do! This brings us to today's subject: authority. That is, how do we make decisions? How do we discern the will of God?

A major theme of our life together this next year will be to discern the leading of the Holy Spirit.

Some people declare: "Knowing what to do is simple. We just follow what the Bible says!" Right?

I've heard some people search for direction by opening the Bible at random. When I tried that I flipped it open to "Judas went and hanged himself." I quickly tired again: "Go and do likewise."

Just follow the Bible. Some of you may have seen this response to a segment by the radio personality Dr. Laura Schlesinger. Dr. Laura had made a definitive pronouncement that certain behavior is an abomination according to Leviticus. Someone wrote this open letter in response. I will read just parts of it.

**Dear Dr. Laura:**

*Thank you for doing so much to educate people regarding God's Law. I have learned a great deal from your show, and try to share that knowledge with as many people as I can. When someone tries to defend (a certain behavior), for example, I simply remind them that Leviticus 18:22 clearly states it to be an abomination. End of debate. I do need some advice from you, however, regarding some of the other specific laws and how to follow them:*

*...I would like to sell my daughter into slavery, as sanctioned in Exodus 21:7. In this day and age, what do you think would be a fair price for her?*

*...Lev. 25:44 states that I may indeed possess slaves, both male and female, provided they are purchased from neighboring nations. A friend of mine claims that this applies to Mexicans, but not Canadians. Can you clarify? Why can't I own Canadians?*

*I have a neighbor who insists on working on the Sabbath. Exodus 35:2 clearly states he should be put to death. Am I morally obligated to kill him myself?*

*A friend of mine feels that even though eating shellfish is an abomination – Lev. 11:10, it is a lesser abomination than homosexuality. I don't agree. Can you settle this?*

*...Most of my male friends get their hair trimmed, including the hair around their temples, even though this is expressly forbidden by Lev. 19:27. How should they die?*

*I know from Lev. 11:6-8 that touching the skin of a dead pig makes me unclean, but may I still play football if I wear gloves?*

*My uncle has a farm. He violates Lev. 19:19 by planting two different crops in the same field, as does his wife by wearing garments made of two different kinds of thread (cotton/polyester blend). He also tends to curse and blaspheme a lot. Is it really necessary that we go to all the trouble of getting the whole town together to stone them? – Lev.24:10-16. Couldn't we just burn them to death at a private family affair like we do with people who sleep with their in-laws? (Lev. 20:14)*

*I know you have studied these things extensively, so I am confident you can help. Thank you again for reminding us that God's word is eternal and unchanging.*

We just follow what the Bible says, right? A real-life example: Pat Handlson is known to many of you. He came out of this congregation to become a pastor. His first church was the Hastings Presbyterian Church which he brought back from the edge of extinction into vibrant health. After ten years he was called to a congregation near Louisville. There he quickly found himself in trouble with some people in his congregation who claimed to be biblical literalists. It was a very tense situation. At one session meeting one of Pat's most vocal opponents, a woman, stated forcefully, "We're simply trying to follow the scriptures!"

The man seated next to her quietly said, "Such as 'Women should keep silent in church'?" (I Corinthians 14:34)

Not so simple.

Following the July 19 sermon on Biblical interpretation Sandy Crum gave me a copy of a book entitled *The Year of Living Biblically* by A.J. Jacobs. Jacobs had earlier written a book about his experience reading the Encyclopedia Britannica from A to Z, entitled *The Know-It-All*. It became a NY Times bestseller. For this next book it was Jacobs' intention to follow all the rules of the Bible for a year. Jacobs is a secular Jew living in Manhattan with his wife and two year-old son. While growing up his family did not go to synagogue; he did not have a bar mitzvah. He describes himself as "Jewish in the same way that the Olive Garden is an Italian restaurant."

*The Year of Living Biblically* is an amazing read. I learned a great deal about the Bible and I've read the Bible a few times. Jacobs is also a highly entertaining writer. I read the book on vacation. That is the first work-related book I have ever read on vacation. It's so fun. I believe we are going to do a book study on it later this fall. There is nothing better than learning important things that will help us to follow Jesus and laugh out loud at the same time. That's livin'!

Let me give you a flavor by reading a few short passages from the beginning and then a longer piece from the conclusion, which has to do with our subject today: Biblical authority.

The first thing Jacobs did was to read the Bible cover to cover. It took him five hours a day for four weeks. "As I read, I type into my PowerBook every rule, every guideline, every suggestion, every nugget of advice I find in the Bible. When I finish, I have a very long list. It runs seventy-two pages. More than seven hundred rules. The scope is astounding. All aspects of my life will be affected—the way I talk, walk, eat, bathe, dress, and hug my wife." P. 8

His friends sent him different versions of the Bibles. "One gave me the waterproof Outdoor Bible so that I could study the Scripture even during floods and other Old Testament weather patterns. Another sent me a hip hop version, where the Twenty-third Psalm reads, (not "The Lord is my shepherd," but) "The Lord is all that." (p 9)

"And the more I read, the more I absorbed the fact that the Bible isn't just another book. It's the book of books, as one of my Bible commentaries calls it. I love my encyclopedia, but the

encyclopedia hasn't spawned thousands of communities based on its words. It hasn't shaped the actions, values, deaths, love lives, warfare, and fashion sense of millions of people over three millennia. No one has been executed for translating the encyclopedia into another language, as was William Tyndale when he published the first widely distributed English-language edition of the Bible. No president has been sworn in with the encyclopedia. It's intimidating, to say the least." P. 13

... second to last day. "There's a phrase called 'Cafeteria Christianity.' It's a derisive term used by fundamentalist Christians to describe moderate Christians. The idea is that moderates pick and choose the parts of the Bible they want to follow....The year showed me beyond a doubt that everyone practices cafeteria religion. It's not just moderates. Fundamentalists do it too. They can't heap everything on their plate. Otherwise they'd kick women out of church for saying hello ('the women should keep silence in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak...' I Cr 14:34) and boot out men for talking about the 'Tennessee Titans' (NFL football team) ('make no mention of the names of other gods...'—Exodus 23:13)...

"Now, this does bring up the problem of authority. Once you acknowledge that we pick and choose from the Bible, doesn't that destroy its credibility? Doesn't that knock the legs out from under it? Why should we put any stock in the Bible?" pp. 327-328.

One of his advisors, a retired Lutheran pastor named Elton Richards responded by giving him this metaphor: "Try thinking of the Bible as a snapshot of something divine. It may not be a perfect picture. 'I need something specific,' says Elton. 'Beauty is a general thing. It's abstract. I need to see a rose. When I see that Jesus embraced lepers, that's a reason for me to fight racism.'"

Another of his advisors, a rabbi, "says we can't insist that the Bible marks the end of our relationship with God. Who are we to say that the Bible contained all the wisdom? 'If you insist that God revealed himself only at one time, at one particular place, using these discrete words, and never any time other than that—that in itself is a kind of idolatry.' His point is: You can commit idolatry on the Bible itself. You can start to worship the words instead of the spirit. You need to 'meet God halfway in the woods.'" Pp. 328-329.

Back to the issue of authority. *Sola scriptura*, Latin for "scripture alone," was the rallying cry of the Protestant reformation. The Reformers objected to the practice of the Roman Catholic Church of, in some places, putting Church tradition above the Scripture. The Reformers declared that the Bible alone is the authority for matters relating to salvation and holiness. Not everything, just salvation and holiness. Which makes sense. For not every question is addressed in the scriptures.

Example: if we ask the question, "Is it okay for followers of Jesus to ride in airplanes?" we don't get an answer in scripture. You go to the biggest concordance you still are not going to find the word "airplane."

So what do we use for our authority if there is not a clear answer in scripture? Let me offer the following as what I call a *think-with*. (original idea from UCC pastor Harrell Beck) Again, as our Book of Order says, "God alone is lord of the conscience." You don't have to agree with me.

Authority: How do we make decisions?

Let me be utterly clear that we start with scripture, as interpreted through the lens of Jesus. Yes, there are some unclear things in scripture. There are some contradictions. But there are some things that are 100% clear. We are not to steal. We are not to be promiscuous. We are to love. Give me more examples... (People offered "Thou shalt not steal." "Thou shalt not kill." "Thou shalt not covet.")

We are to forgive. We are to care for one another. We are not to greedily clutch everything God has given us, but we are to share. There are in scripture thousands of verses about money and about how we treat the poor.

But there are some things that are not clear from scripture. Let's say a person is making some vocational choices. Teacher or bank robber? That's clear from scripture. Teacher or businessperson? Less clear. The world needs good businesspeople, people that care for their employees, that treat their customers honestly, that care for the environment. So teacher or businessperson? Not obvious. And if you decide to be a teacher, where do you teach? Small town or inner city? In the US or as a missionary teacher in the Third World?

These are hard questions.

If it's not clear from the Bible, where do we go?

I suggest that we pray and listen to our guts. As we pray, what feels right? In our Acts passage from today Philip "hears an angel." What does that mean? An audible voice? Probably he was at prayer and felt the Spirit's nudging. And it told him to do something weird. Go out to the road at noon. But the Spirit had arranged a "coincidence," or "God incident." It led to the man's conversion to the Way of Jesus! Probably led to the spread of the gospel throughout Ethiopia!

Listen to our guts.

Now, we've got to be careful! I read about a young woman who graduated from college and sought a teaching job. They were hard to come by. She finally was offered a job by a rural district and signed the contract to begin that fall. Two weeks before school starts she was offered a job by a larger district for more money. What to do? She went to the superintendent of the first district and told him that she was not going to teach for him after all and explained the situation. She said, "I prayed about and I have peace that this is the right thing to do." Hmmm?

The superintendent's response: "She has peace. I have the pieces."

My feelings can sometimes be dead wrong. There are a million pop and country songs along the lines of, "If it feels so good it must be right."

Please.

If it feels that good it most likely isn't right. There's that old definition of a conscience: Your conscience is what feels bad when everything else feels so good.

I know that my gut is not entirely reliable by itself. But sometimes it's right on. Which I have realized in the 20/20 vision of hindsight. Back in my early 20s there was one car I really wanted to buy. I had wanted this model for years. I'm embarrassed to tell you what it was, because it shows you how boring I am: a VW bus. Just before my last year of seminary I was going to be working with youth and I thought it would be great for hauling kids around. I found a nice baby blue one.

But my gut didn't feel good about it. There was no logical reason so I ignored my gut.

A couple days later I headed for seminary in San Francisco via the northern route. I got as far as Fargo before the van broke down. Over the next two years I spent more on repairs than I did on seminary tuition.

And I could give you other examples vastly more important than purchases. Now I listen more to my gut. But not alone.

The third leg of the authority stool is to listen to the advice of our trusted Christian friends.

John Calvin warned that we are to interpret the Bible in groups. Otherwise we can get it to say whatever we want.

Listen to our trusted Christian friends. Speaking of friends, the Society of Friends, the Quakers do this regularly. For example, when you want to get married the couple comes before the meeting and they talk about why they want to get married and the elders ask them questions and then everyone prays. If the church says it's a bad idea the couple can't get married in the church.

Another example. In 1995 I was in a vocational quandary. I had four different choices. I don't mean to be bragging. There have been times in my life where I didn't have any vocational choices and I sure didn't like the situation I was in at the time. But in 1995 I happened to have four very good choices. Two in business and two in the church. It wasn't obvious to me from scripture which to choose. My gut was in a different place every day. How to decide? Kris and I called together about ten of our best friends, all people who knew us well and who had a deep faith. And we laid out the opportunities and we asked them to pray. Then we asked for their wisdom. They were unanimous in their recommendation that I accept the call to become co-pastor of St. Luke Church. Which we followed.

When the inevitable trying times took place (it was a pastorate after all) it was very comforting to know that we had followed the wisdom of these people. We felt pretty darn certain that we were following the leading of the Holy Spirit.

Authority: How do we make decisions? How do we discern the will of God? We start with scripture, scripture through the lens of Jesus. We listen to our own guts. And we seek the wisdom and discernment of our trusted Christian friends.

If we get all three to line up we can with confidence move forward. Amen.