

**“God said it, I believe it, that settles it”  
OAK GROVE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

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**July 11, 2021**

**2 Timothy 3:14–17**

***“But Is It in the Bible” Series***

Let us pray for an awareness and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

Startle us, O God, with your truth and open our hearts and our minds to your wondrous love. Speak your word to us; silence in us any voice but your own and be with us now as we turn our attention, our minds, and our hearts, to you, in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

*2 Timothy 3:14–17*

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, <sup>15</sup>and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. <sup>16</sup>All scripture is inspired by God<sup>a</sup> and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, <sup>17</sup>so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.

<sup>a</sup>2 Timothy 3:16 or *Every scripture inspired by God is also*

Poet and author Kathleen Norris has a book of essays that is entitled, “Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith.” The essays are brief and focus on a particular word from faith, like “prayer,” or “incarnation,” or “anger,” or “grace.” She wrote the essays as a way to wrestle with her faith as she came back into the Christian tradition. Not so much definitions or historical accounts of each word, the essays are more

personal mixing theology and storytelling and memoir as a way to find meaning and substance to her faith.

One of my favorite essays in the book is the one titled “Bible.” In this essay, she tells the story of a South Dakota rancher who, on the occasion of his marriage, received a bible from his grandfather as a wedding gift. The young rancher and his wife sent a thank you note to the grandfather for the gift, and then promptly put it on a shelf in the closet where it sat unopened for years. Whenever this rancher would see his grandfather, the grandfather would ask about the bible. Long after the grandfather died, and toward the end of his life, the rancher finally opened the bible that was gifted to him and his bride. It finally made sense to him why the grandfather always asked about the bible and whether he liked the gift. Inside the bible, at the beginning of each book of the bible, the grandfather had placed a twenty-dollar bill. Altogether, there was more than \$1,000 inside the bible. The rancher could only laugh and reflect on how much that money could have helped he and his wife through the lean years of their early marriage, if only he had opened the book!

Since 2011, The Barna Group conducts a study along with the American Bible Society and they publish an annual report called “The State of the Bible.” They released their findings in May of this year.<sup>i</sup> They conduct telephone interviews online surveys to gather the data. And one statistic seems to model the essay in Kathleen Norris’s essay about the bible, the majority of folks surveyed own a bible (well over 80%) and most of those own more than one. At one point the average number of bibles owned by a household was over four. When asked how they feel about the bible, and how they engage with the bible, well, the numbers drop off a bit. About half of the people surveyed read the bible somewhere between never and two times a year. About a third say they read the bible about once a week. In one more measure, more than half the

people surveyed indicated they thought the country would be worse without the bible.

Over the next several weeks, we will talk about scripture, or to be more specific we will look at some sayings and beliefs that are often said by many Christians and non-Christians but may or may not be actually in the bible. Things like, “there but for the grace of God go I,” or “God won’t give you any more than you can handle.” I want to start first, though, with talking a little bit about how we use and approach scripture.

Our saying for this week is, “God said it, I believe it, and that settles it.” Perhaps you have even seen this on a bumper sticker. “God said it, I believe it, and that settles it.” But does it?

Our passage from Timothy, a letter of instruction from the more experienced apostle Paul to the younger disciple Timothy, details a number of concerns about organizing and leading church life, and includes some instruction and advice concerning scripture, or as it is referred to in the letter, “the sacred writings.” Paul writes, “from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.” (Sounds a lot like our first hymn, “Jesus loves me this I know, for the bible tells me so”). Paul continues, “All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.”

What’s interesting is that the phrase that is most often translated from the Greek as “all scripture is inspired by God” can have a different and equally accurate translation so that this verse can be read as, “every scripture inspired by God.”

“All scripture is inspired by God and is useful,” or “Every scripture inspired by God is useful...” well, that changes things a bit. Is all scripture inspired, or is only the scripture that is inspired useful, meaning there may be some scripture that is not inspired?

The late author Rachel Held Evans grew up in the church and loved the church. She grew up in a very conservative church. In her book, “Faith Unraveled: How a girl who knew all the answers learned to ask questions,” she documents how her faith changed over time, including her relationship to scripture. She was helpful to many people who, like her, who were taught the idea that scripture was best summarized by “God said it, I believe it, that settles it.” That one could not challenge what was written and had to take it at face value. But she also knew there were troubling passages that she couldn’t reconcile with her understanding of God, she knew faithful people who came to different understandings of what scripture meant, and she knew the world was different than when the scriptures were written.

Most often she notes in a video talking about scripture<sup>ii</sup> when someone would say to her or others, “God said it, I believe it, that settles it,” that they say this to be a conversation-ender not a conversation starter. That is something can’t be reconciled or if there is disagreement, the person will simply declare that “God said it, I believe it, that settles it” as a way to shut down further discussion.

But she believes the bible should be a conversation starter, not a conversation ender. She says, “Being people of faith isn’t just about being right about things... being a people of faith is about being part of a community. And the bible invites us into community precisely because it is difficult to understand. Precisely because it doesn’t have a single apparent, clear meaning.”

In fact, she notes that what is biblical is to argue and investigate and explore and seek different meanings in scripture. This is expected in the Jewish tradition. That a Rabbi can spend hours, days, years, and a lifetime exploring scripture and finding new insights and meanings. And isn't this what we see Jesus doing in his own life? This Jewish teacher who constantly challenges other religious leaders and those that will listen with additional insight and interpretation. How many times in the Sermon on the Mount does Jesus start a lesson by saying, "you have heard it said, but I say to you..."? How many times when someone asks Jesus a question about scripture or the law that Jesus responds with a question furthering the conversation? Or how many times does someone ask a question and Jesus responds by not answering the question, but rather by telling a story? Jesus, most often, doesn't give a direct answer to a question. Instead, he engages the person with more questions or uses a story to illustrate the possibilities, to expand the meaning of something, to give a new insight, and to keep the conversation going.

Paul, in his letter to Timothy, mentions scripture being useful not as a means to win an argument or be right about something, but rather as a tool for training and teaching in order to help people become equipped to do good work. And, it should be noted, that the sacred writings Paul is talking about here, the scripture to which Paul refers, is what we know as the Old Testament, or the Hebrew Bible, what we know as the New Testament isn't yet formed, some of it hasn't been written yet.

I know there are times when we want simple answers and concrete instructions. There are times when we wish there couldn't be a number of ways to interpret something. There are times when I want to be right and I want scripture to back up just how right I am.

One writer notes, “We *so* crave a Bible that we can use quickly and neatly to support our various arguments and discussion points, when *that* Bible doesn’t really exist.”<sup>iii</sup>

But the bible we have is complex. It’s actually not one book, but several books; think of it more as a bookshelf of books than a single book. And each of those individual books come from different perspectives and contexts. They are different genres, some are poetry, some are letters, some are history, some are memoir. So, what do we do with this library of books that isn’t so simple as, “God said it, I believe it, that settles it?”

Well, first, we need to admit and wrestle with the challenge that scripture isn’t so simple. Debbie Blue, a pastor in St. Paul, describes her approach to scripture “like a farm wife handles a chicken, carefully but not delicately, thoroughly but not exactly cautiously.” We take it seriously, but not literally. The scriptures are not God, rather they are our guide to point us toward understanding God.

In the Presbyterian tradition we have some guidance for how to do this.<sup>iv</sup>

We make sure that we are using scripture the way it was intended, as a means for deeper understanding in life with God and one another. As a means to understand our faith. Scripture is not meant to answer questions of science, so it isn’t the place we go to understand how the universe works, even as we can hold that God created all things.

When we seek to understand scripture, we ask for guidance from the Holy Spirit. We ask for insight and illumination before we read scripture. We believe that God is active and still speaking to us through the Spirit. And that means we also believe that scripture is best understood through and within a community. As we study scripture together and seek to hear from the Holy Spirit, we understand more clearly if we can bring multiple voices and perspectives to the Bible.

When looking at a particular Bible passage we also following the guideline that scripture interprets scripture. We don't isolate a verse of the Bible and hold it up as true if the rest of Scripture says otherwise.

We study scripture in its historical context. We seek to understand as best as possible the context and culture in which scripture was written and interpreted. We acknowledge the original context and how different scripture has been interpreted since then, in the tradition of our faith. We pay attention to tradition, and we also bring to bear our own experience and knowledge to how we understand scripture.

We also know, we can be wrong. That past or current interpretation and understanding may not be useful or correct, so we approach scripture with an attitude of humility.

Finally, we when we study scripture to determine what it may mean for us in our own time, how it can guide us, correct us, and challenge us, we interpret everything through the lens of Jesus and the rule of love.

Remember how I said that when Jesus was asked a question about scripture that he most often responded with a question of his own or a story? Well, there is one time where he is asked a question about scripture and he answers pretty directly and unambiguously, when he is asked what is greatest commandment, he answers clearly, when he is asked what is biblical he says, "You shall love the lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and the greatest commandment. And a second one is like it, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'"

When we are trying to figure out what something means, when in doubt, love. Does this particular understanding or interpretation align with Jesus' teaching, life, and ministry? Does this way of understanding to harm to others? Will this way of understanding and interpretation bring

about actions of love toward others or will it cause harm or hatred?

When in doubt, love. When in doubt, justice. When in doubt, compassion, When in doubt, mercy. When in doubt, grace.

God said it, I believe it, that settles it, except when it doesn't.

And when it doesn't, love. Love God with everything you've got. Love others as you love yourself. Love.

That settles it.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.barna.com/research/sotb-2021/> or <https://sotb.research.bible/>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.theworkofthepeople.com/person/rachel-held-evans>

<sup>iii</sup> <https://johnpavlovitz.com/2015/02/25/why-the-bible-shouldnt-be-worshiped/>

<sup>iv</sup> <https://www.pcusa.org/resource/presbyterian-understanding-and-use-holy-scripture/>