

IS THE BIBLE REALLY THE WORD OF GOD?

Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.
I have sworn an oath and confirmed it, to observe your righteous ordinances.
I am severely afflicted; give me life, O LORD, according to your word.
Accept my offerings of praise, O LORD, and teach me your ordinances.
I hold my life in my hand continually, but I do not forget your law.
The wicked have laid a snare for me, but I do not stray from your precepts.
Your decrees are my heritage forever; they are the joy of my heart.
I incline my heart to perform your statutes forever, to the end.

Your decrees are wonderful; therefore my soul keeps them.
The unfolding of your words gives light; it imparts understanding to the simple.

Psalm 119, 105-112 NRSV

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. And he told them many things in parables, saying: "Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Let anyone with ears listen!"

"Hear then the parable of the sower. When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path. As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty."

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23 NRSV

In a few weeks I will have been here at First Christian church one year. I've done my best not to rock the boat too much and not to change too many things around here that are held dear by good First Christian folks. Well, I feel like I've been here long enough to risk a little bit. I'm going to confess that there's a part of the order of worship done here at First Christian that I have been uncomfortable with from the very beginning. Please don't feel bad, I was uncomfortable with it long before I came to First Christian, so it's not personal. What bothers me is what happens on Sunday mornings after the minister gets up and reads from the gospel. At that time, here at First Christian, the minister says, "This is the word of the Lord." Then the congregation offers a response: "Thanks be to God." I have to tell you--hopefully I've disguised it well--I inwardly cringe saying those words.

I first heard this call and response—"This is the word of Lord." and "Thanks be to God."--when I was in seminary. I grew up southern Baptist where we didn't say all these high-falutin' things in church. These kind of ritualistic phrases were suspect. From this perspective one always wanted to make sure he or she didn't throw out empty words or empty ritual before God, even though the deacons each week prayed the exact same prayer, a prayer that was supposed to be off the cuff and authentic. At seminary, we were trying to be a little bit

more academic and “high church” and so we said, “This is the word of the Lord.” and “Thanks be to God.” From the first time I shared in this call and response during a chapel service, I thought it was strange.

I went to a seminary that was founded only about four years before I arrived there. It was founded by people who lost the battle over the identity of the Southern Baptist Convention. These were the folks who lost when the fundamentalists took over, and so these folks took their toys and went to play somewhere else. They started a new seminary. My professors and many of my fellow students were people that were theological refugees. They were the folks who had been kicked out for not towing the party line and for not holding the right doctrine. Often the justification for firing professors and forcing students to leave was something like this: “Well the word of God says, this and so, and if you can’t go along with what the word of God says you aren’t properly Christian and you should go.” Actually, it usually wasn’t even that polite. Usually it was much worse and it involved hell fire and brimstone.

So, I thought it strange sitting in chapel at seminary, with female ministers next to me that had been told the word of God says that they could not be ministers, and saying “Thanks be to God” when someone got up and read scripture and declared, “This is word of the Lord.” It was strange, because all of us who were at that place had heard such claims about the word of God before, and we clearly had rejected them. The female students had heard that the word of the Lord said for them to be silent when men spoke, yet there they were studying to proclaim the gospel. The African-American students had heard that the word of the Lord had justified discrimination against their ancestors, yet there they were as equals to their fellow students. The gay and lesbian students had been told the world of the Lord said they were bound for hell, but there they were daring to believe they were redeemed sinners just like the rest of us. Despite the fact that the Bible had been used to justify all sorts of awful beliefs and practices, we still said, “Thanks be to God.” when someone declared, “This is the word of the Lord.” I remember sitting in seminary chapel thinking, “Wait a minute. Didn’t our whole denomination just self destruct and fight a bitter war over what exactly is the word of God and what isn’t? Shouldn’t we be a little more careful when we say, ‘Thanks be to God?’ What may be a word of God to you may not be for me.”

I recall the story told by Howard Thurman, the esteemed African-American theologian. He wrote about what his grandmother told him about the bible. She said, “Back in my slave days, the black preacher would come and preach to us about God rescuing the children of Israel from Pharaoh and from slavery. Well that sounded like God’s word. But then the white preacher would come on alternating Sundays and he’d preach about how the Bible says slaves should be subject to their masters and be obedient. That didn’t sound like the word of God to me. So, when I got free and I got my own Bible and learned how to read it, I cut out those parts that said, slaves should be obedient to their masters.”ⁱ One person’s word of God may not be the word of God for someone else.

When we speak of the Bible as the word of God, in this church at least, we use that call and response after the gospel passage is read. I’ve been in churches where whenever any scripture is read someone says “This is the word of the Lord” and the congregation says, “Thanks be to God.” Here it is different. Like many other churches, we offer this response only after the gospel. I believe the assumption behind this tradition is that since this reading comes from a gospel and contains the words of Jesus, then it is or at least is closer to the word of God. I have sympathy with this assumption, but I feel that even in the gospels there are some things that really don’t seem like word of God to me. They don’t seem to line up with my experience of God.

When I read some of the descriptions of the Jews in John, I’d be hard pressed sitting next to one of my Jewish friends and say, “Yeah that’s the word of God right there that just called you the children of the devil.”ⁱⁱ When I think of Jesus’ treatment of the Canaanite woman in Matthew, I am more than a bit uncomfortable.ⁱⁱⁱ This is the passage where she requested healing for her son, and Jesus said, “Why should I throw good foods to the dogs?” Jesus is essentially calling her and all who share her ethnicity dogs. I’ve heard a lot of different interpretations try to explain this insult away, but it still seems like Jesus was at the least a little bit rude. It doesn’t quite feel like the word of God to me.

This practice in our worship services raises the question: what is the word of God? It raises another question: what are we so thankful about anyway? When I pick up my Bible and turn to the gospel of John, I read, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” and I read, “The word became flesh and dwelt among us.” John declares that the Word of God was Jesus and that the word of God remains alive to us and speaks to us still. Jesus, the Word of God, lets us experience the new things that God would have us hear today—things that may or may not be the same as what we find on some pages of scripture.

The fact is, if we’re honest enough to admit it, every Christian makes choices about what he or she takes from this Bible. No one can treat everything found in scripture equally. If we really treated every verse in the Bible as if it was all the word of God, then we would hold up a verse like Matthew 22:37, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” and say that verse is worth the same as any other verse in the Bible, say for instance my favorite verse—actually three verses, Deuteronomy 23: 12-14. This passage says, “You shall have a designated area outside the camp to which you shall go. With your utensils you shall have a shovel, when you relieve yourself outside, you shall dig a hole with it and then cover up your excrement. Because the Lord your God walks in your camp...therefore your camp must be holy, so that he may not see anything indecent among you.” That’s good camping advice, but I don’t believe it has the same importance as “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart.”

You and I pick and choose what is the word of God to us based on our experience of one another and based on our experience of God. Given where you are in life, what’s read in church may be word of God to you; on a different day and with different life experience, it may not be. If that makes you uneasy, I understand. I didn’t come to this conclusion quickly or overnight. I’ve struggled with it over the years and wondered myself, if we all pick and choose what is the word of God to us as individuals, doesn’t that mean anything goes and whatever anyone believes it’s okay no matter the cost to themselves or others? The answer is of course not. It is at this point that the purpose of community reveals its true importance. The church serves the purpose of helping its members to hold one another accountable and keeping its members from going too far off the deep end. It is the church’s job to say, “Wait a minute. You can’t go up on top of the church building wearing purple underwear with the intention of jumping off and flying just because you think the Bible says you can.”

I’d like to do an exercise with you this morning. I’d like you to pick up the pew Bible in front of you. I think part of the reason that we are confused as believers is because of the packaging. Thanks to the printing press and the wonder of bookbinding, we have here in our hands what appears to be a single book. Because it looks like a book, we treat it as a book, and consciously or unconsciously we approach it as if it were one narrative, meant to be read from beginning to end, a narrative written by one author. This is understandable. We pick up books all the time and read them cover to cover. Even if we acknowledge that the Bible is not one book but a collection of writings, we can still be excused for making the assumption that a single author wrote it all. If we were able to pick up a one-volume edition of the collected works of Shakespeare, then we would acknowledge that while there are different plays in this book, there are some common themes and words, so therefore it’s the same author. So, with the Bible our assumption is, well if this is the book of God, or the “collected works” of God, shouldn’t there to be the same kind of consistency there.^{iv}

Well if you’ll turn with me to the table of contents in your Bible, you will see that it is not one book, but rather it’s a compendium of books; Sixty six of them to be exact. For those who might say either it’s the word of God and its all there, inspired, maybe even dictated by God, or it’s worthless, I would say no there are options between those two extremes. Another way to look at this book is to see it as a library held in our hands that took believers three centuries to compile together and decide which ones they would keep and which ones they would discard. In this library we have a wealth of viewpoints on God written in different languages, written over the course different centuries and in different geographic locations. In the Bible, we have histories, we have law, we have meditations upon evil and suffering, we have poetry; we have prophetic works that describe visions of the future and humanity that will take your breath away. We have gospels, we have histories of the

early church, and we have letters written by the first Christians, even a Christian interpretation of what the end of the world may be like. We hold in our hands not one book, but a collection of books.

We find in these different peoples' accounts of their experience of God a wealth of viewpoints and ideas to compare and contrast with one another. Our Jewish brothers and sisters, I think, seem to do a better job than we do approaching scripture. When they find two scriptures that seem to contradict, they put those two texts in dialogue with each other. They pick and choose from each and say, "This one says this, this one says that, and when I put them together this is what I make of it." Instead of us just viewing the Bible as a rule book or an operating manual, what if we viewed this book as 66 different voices in dialogue with one another that we can pick and choose from and put side by side for comparison. On the one hand, we may find verses that seem to oppress women or minorities or homosexuals, but on the other hand, we may find verses that speak of God's love for everyone, grace for all, including and accepting all people as created in the image of God. Our job is to join the dialogue between these texts adding our own experience of God and the universe. The Bible does not prohibit a diversity of beliefs; it exemplifies how a wide variety of different beliefs can sit side-by-side with one another. The Bible does not shut down dialogue; it opens the door to the exchange of ideas about the great questions of existence.

One of my professors said that scripture provides a vocabulary for the people of faith to describe their experience of God.^v Understanding the Bible as a tool for expressing our current experience means that we understand God not only as speaking once upon a time back then but also as speaking to us today. If we seek to encounter the Word of God that was made flesh in Jesus Christ, we can take these different writings about God, set them side by side with one another along with our own experiences. At that point, if God's grace truly flows, we can offer thanks to God for revealing to us the Word of God that was made flesh in Jesus.

Now that I have said all of this, I have a proposal for you regarding what I'm going to do next Sunday when I read the gospel to you. I'm going to say something different. What I'm going to say to you is this, "In the words of scripture read this morning, may we hear the word of the Lord." That way, we acknowledge that each one of us interprets scripture on our own, and each one of us brings our own experience of God to bear on this passage. We also acknowledge that God is free to give us new understandings of scripture to meet our needs today. Depending on where we come from on that day and how open we are to God, the word of God that is Jesus Christ will speak to you and me. So, this morning I'd like to practice and see how it goes.

Minister: In the words of scripture read this morning, may we hear the word of the Lord.
Congregation: Thanks be to God.

Amen

Rev. Chase Peoples
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ⁱ Peter Gomes, *The Good Book: Reading the Bible with Mind and Heart* (New York: William Morrow, 1996), 50.

ⁱⁱ See John 8:44. One of the goals of any ethical interpretation of scripture is discovering, as much is possible, the historical context of a passage. In the case of anti-Jewish language in the New Testament—passages that have been used for centuries to justify atrocities committed by Christians against Jews—the religious conflicts between the early Christians and Jews has everything to do with helping us differentiate between the original targets of this rhetoric and Judaism as a religion or all Jews in all places and times. Furthermore, an ethical interpretation of scripture in light of Jesus' commands to love one's neighbor may even call into question whether such language is ever appropriate for a Christian to use. The best treatment of this issue that I am aware of is an article by one of my former professors, Luke Timothy Johnson, "The New Testament's anti-Jewish slander and the conventions of ancient polemic." *Journal of Biblical Literature* (103:8, Fall 1989), 419-441. Other worthwhile books on the subject include: John Gager, *The Origins of Anti-Semitism: Attitudes Toward Judaism in Pagan and Christian Antiquity* (New York: Oxford, 1985); Howard Clark Kee and

Irvin J. Borowsky, editors, *Removing the Anti-Judaism from the New Testament* (Philadelphia: American Interfaith Institute, 1998); and Charles Glock and Rodney Stark, *Christian Beliefs and Anti-Semitism* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965).

ⁱⁱⁱ See Matthew 15:21-28.

^{iv} I am indebted here to the terrific and entirely accessible book by John Barton, *What is the Bible?* (London: SPCK, 1991). He writes, "If even Shakespeare's plays have a certain unity of style and theme, how much more would one expect *The Collected Works of God* to tell a single, consistent story!"

^v Luke Timothy Johnson, *Scripture and Discernment: Decision Making in the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1983).