

3 SCRIPTURE: DIVINELY INSPIRED, DEPENDABLE, AUTHORITATIVE?

PRAYER

INTRODUCTION

How can people read the same scripture text and end up in such different, even opposite conclusions?

Last week we saw how the same words are sometimes interpreted differently.

And for a few years, that was the primary bone of contention:

How to interpret Scripture.

But more recently, there is a bigger question about what the Bible is.

How dependable and authoritative is it?

Is it divinely inspired?

If it is, what do we mean when we say “divinely inspired”?

These are not questions of biblical interpretation,

but actually go deeper.

THE BOOK OF DISCIPLINE (para 105)

Let’s look at what the current United Methodist Book of Discipline says about the Bible.

Actually, there is a two-page description of the Bible,

but right now I’ll simply lift a few pieces of the larger statement:

“United Methodists share with other Christians the conviction that Scripture is the primary source and criterion for Christian doctrine....

The Bible bears authentic testimony to God’s self-disclosure

in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ

as well as in God’s work of creation,

in the pilgrimage of Israel,

and in the Holy Spirit’s ongoing activity in human history....

The Bible is sacred canon for Christian people....

Our standards affirm the Bible as the source of all that is

“necessary” and “sufficient” unto salvation (Articles of Religion)

and “is to be received through the Holy Spirit

as the true rule and guide for faith and practice” (Confession of Faith)....

Thus, the Bible serves both as a source of our faith

and as the basic criterion by which

the truth and fidelity of any interpretation of faith is measured....

While we acknowledge the primacy of Scripture in theological reflection,

our attempts to grasp its meaning always involve tradition, experience, and reason.”

It sounds pretty good.

But nowhere does it say the Bible is the Word of God.

Nowhere does it comment on the dependability or accuracy of scripture.

It says it is “necessary” and “sufficient” regarding matters of salvation.

Nowhere does it clearly define what we mean by “divinely inspired.”

And right at the end it brings up “tradition, experience, and reason.”

To be fair, the larger statement goes on a bit about tradition, reason and experience,

but it does not make clear that they are subservient to Scripture,

that they are simply supposed to be tools

that help us interpret and apply scripture.

WESLEYAN QUADRILATERAL

Written into the 1972 Discipline was something called “the Wesleyan Quadrilateral.”

It stated that we use four sources for theological work:

Scripture: the Old and New Testaments

Tradition: theological work throughout the history of the church

Reason: logically coherent and make sense of reality
 Experience: human experience, particularly our experiences of God

Albert Outler was the theologian who invented the term to describe
 the sources John Wesley seemed to use most.

But he neglected to include the fact that Wesley pressed hard on Scripture being primary,
 and the others being tools to use in interpreting and applying scripture.

Sadly, because of that omission,
 too many pastors used them as independent and equal sources,
 and employed tradition, reason or experience
 to even overrule Scripture.

Albert Outler publicly denounced that abuse,
 and regretted his omission,
 but the damage was done.

What we see in today's debate over sexuality is that "experience,"
 particularly the relational and emotional experiences of homosexual persons,
 often seems to be the single most important factor
 in what people believe about homosexuality.

In many talks and videos from the progressive perspective,
 there is not a lot of scripture,
 but many appeals to this person's story or that person's story,
 that is, their experience.

Now let's look at some key words and ideas that are important to a doctrine of scripture.

"INSPIRATION"

What do we mean when we say the Bible is "inspired"?

2 TIMOTHY 3:16-17 says:

"All Scripture is God-breathed
 and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness,
¹⁷ so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work."

The Old King James version says,

"All scripture is given by inspiration of God..."

And that's where the terminology of "inspired" and "inspiration" came from,
 the KJV translation of 1 Timothy.

The English word "inspired" conveys the idea of breathing in.

Spire is breath, in-spire is to breath in.

Respiration is breathing in and out and in and out.

To CONspire is to breath with.

To EXpire is to breath out and not breath any more.

To INspire is to breath in.

The original Greek of 2 Timothy says "theo tokos," literally "God-breathed."

So it is "divinely inspired."

And this is where the church historically has stood on the nature of the Bible.

It is, in some sense, God-breathed, divinely inspired,
 and so, because of its source and production,

has a special place of accuracy and authority in our lives.

Progressives will say they believe the Bible is inspired.

But when I press them to explain what they mean by that,

they back up a bit and say they believe the *authors* of scripture were inspired.

Not the scriptures themselves,

but the human authors.

And when I ask what they mean by "inspired," and I probe with clarifying questions,

they eventually tell me

the human authors *felt inspired* by some experience they believed to be God,

and they tried to express that in writing.
 They compare this to a modern day poet
 feeling inspired by their experience of a beautiful sunset
 or the sadness of a funeral,
 and so they write to express their feelings.

Progressives typically believe God was not involved in the production of the text at all.

The text of scripture is a purely human production,
 with all the marks of humanity:
 the culture and language of that time and place,
 the knowledge and ignorance of the human author,
 the biases of that society, and even the sin of that author.

The result of that view is that they seek not to interpret the text,
 not to seek the intention of the author,
 but to get behind the text to the original experience of the author,
 and to see what they can learn of God from that experience.

But the text itself is not all that revelatory,
 but is actually a layer they have to peel off to get at that experience.

I have had these discussions with a number of friends and acquaintances who are progressive clergy,
 and they all end up in this same place.

With that view of inspiration, the result is that we must pick and choose from the Bible
 those things we think are from God,
 or those things we think best reflect God,
 and rejecting those things that do not seem to fit our view of God.

But if that's what we're doing,

where do we get our view of God?

The question of how do we choose which parts of the Bible are good and suable
 does not get a clear answer.

Adam Hamilton, the pastor of the largest UMC in the US,
 has written his proposal in a book called "Making Sense of the Bible."
 He suggests all the writing in the Bible can be put in "three buckets."

1) The first bucket are those things that express the will and character of God for all times and places.

 "Love God with all your heart, minds, soul and strength," and

 "Love your neighbor as yourself," and

 "Thou shalt not kill"

 would easily fit in the first bucket.

2) The second bucket are those verses that

 expressed the will and character of God for a particular time and place,

 but are not for here and now.

The ritual laws of the Old Testament,

 about sacrificing animals, the décor of the temple, or the robes of Levitical priests,

 do not apply.

And there's a sense in which we have to consider

 the particular circumstances to which any of the New Testament letters were written.

 Rather than make a wooden application direct to today's church,

 we consider the circumstances and perhaps find underlying principles that apply.

 Paul's instructions regarding eating meat offered to idols is a good example.

3) The third bucket is where things get very questionable.

 The third bucket, Hamilton says, is for those parts of the Bible that

 never reflected the will and character of God.

 Hamilton points to texts where God calls on the Israelites to

 obliterate entire populations of pagan peoples living in the promised land,

 or laws where God tells them it's OK to beat their slaves "lightly,"

so long as they don't die from the beating within two days,
 or a priest must burn his daughter alive if she becomes a prostitute.
 He and others would also put in the 3rd bucket
 the verses relevant to the issue of homosexual sex.

Now, let me pause to say:

Yes, there are texts in the Bible that are disturbing,
 and certainly are not something we want to
 teach and obey in a literal way today.

But do we simply discard them as not of God
 because they make us uncomfortable?

Or, if we spent time with them,
 might we discover some underlying principles of value?

If we are going to sort portions of the Bible into three buckets, particularly bucket three,
 on what basis do we make such a judgment?

Like many progressives, Hamilton says we get our sorting principle from Jesus.
 Everything else in the Bible must be measured by Jesus.

But how do we know anything about Jesus?

From the Bible.

But we clearly can't get anything solid from the Bible,
 because you say it's filled with human flaws, frailty, and even sin.
 So, again, how do we know anything solid about Jesus?

Sometimes they say we have to do it all
 on the basis of loving God and loving people.
 That's what Jesus said was the sum of the Law.

BUT.. That's WHAT THE BIBLE says Jesus said.
 And that's the Bible that you say carries
 human flaws, bias, ignorance, and even sin.

We know the BIBLE says this.

But how do we know JESUS really said it?

Neither Hamilton, nor any other progressive,
 provides a clear and objective direction for how to determine which bucket for what verses.

It really boils down to the personal choice of the reader and interpreter of Scripture.

So what's to keep us from putting the Trinity into the bucket?

Or the divinity of Christ?

Or salvation by grace?

Shall we eliminate the story of the Exodus
 because all those Egyptian soldiers drowned in the Red Sea?

There are some who would place in bucket three the idea that
 God used the suffering and death of Jesus to accomplish our salvation because,
 they say, it is Cosmic Child Abuse.

Some people say, "Oh, no one would do that.

That's the old slippery slope argument."

Next week, I'll show you that this slope really is slippery.

VERY slippery.

Having explained the progressive view of what the Bible is,
 and how that allows them to pick and choose,
 now I want to go to the other side and

discuss what conservatives believe about the Bible.

The traditional view of the church has always held that the Bible itself is divinely inspired.

Not just the human authors, though them too, but the Bible itself.

Somehow the Holy Spirit was so involved in the writing of scripture,

that the human authors were guided beyond their own perspectives, biases and sins.
 Oh, the author's personality, culture, and language is certainly evident in the text.
 But God's inspiring Spirit protected scripture from human frailty and sin,
 and insured that the writings of Scripture
 would be totally dependable and authoritative.

Our own UM Book of Discipline says the Bible is
 "sufficient" in giving us all we need to know for salvation.
 It is the "true rule and guide for faith and practice."
 It is our "primary source and criterion for Christian doctrine."

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY ABOUT ITSELF?

First, let's be reminded of what the Bible says about itself.

I realize that's a circular argument.
 But it is worth pointing out that the human authors seemed convinced
 they were not doing their own thing,
 but were writing under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Numerous times in the Old Testament Law,
 from the book of Exodus through Deuteronomy,
 the claim is explicit that God gives the laws,
 and even writes the 10 Commandments on the stone tablets himself.

Many of the Old Testament prophets proclaim, "Thus says the Lord,"
 or "the word of the Lord came to me,"
 or they describe God literally giving them the words to say
 or instructing them to act out a lived parable of sorts.

When Jesus faced the temptations brought to him by Satan, he answered each one with scripture.
 One of the verses he quoted was Matthew 4:4:

⁴ Jesus answered, "It is written:
 'Man shall not live on bread alone,
 but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" (Mt.4:4)

What do you think he meant by words from the mouth of God?
 He's not referring to some audible words floating disembodied in the air.
 It had to be scripture.

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said,

¹⁷ "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets;
 I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.
¹⁸ For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear,
 not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen,
 will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished." (Mt.5:17-18)
 It does not sound like Jesus recognizes Bucket #3.

In a dispute with the Pharisees, Jesus quoted from Psalm 110:1 this way:

³⁶ David himself, speaking by the Holy Spirit, declared:
 "'The Lord said to my Lord:
 'Sit at my right hand
 until I put your enemies under your feet.'" (Mk.12:36; Ps.110:1)

How did Jesus understand this verse from the Old Testament?

King David, speaking by the Holy Spirit.
 I would say he understood the psalm to be divinely inspired, God-breathed.
 And there are numerous examples of Jesus quoting from the Old Testament
 as given by the Holy Spirit or the very words of God.
 Was Jesus wrong?

Or are we going to say Jesus didn't really believe that or say that,

that the human authors of the Gospels put that in his mouth?

In the book of Acts we read that, against all odds, Peter and John were released from jail.

On their release, Peter and John went back to their own people
and reported all that the chief priests and the elders had said to them.

²⁴ When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God.

“Sovereign Lord,” they said, “you made the heavens and the earth and the sea,
and everything in them.

²⁵ You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David:

“Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain?

²⁶ The kings of the earth rise up and the rulers band together

against the Lord and against his anointed one. (Ac.4:23-26; Ps.118:22)

They quoted from Psalm 118 as

God speaking through the Holy Spirit through King David.

Paul gives a statement about the nature of scripture that is probably the single best-known verse,
when he wrote to encourage a young pastor named Timothy:

“All Scripture is God-breathed

and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness,

¹⁷ so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.” (2Tim.3:16-17)

All scripture is God-breathed.

Not some scripture.

Not just buckets 1 and 2.

ALL scripture.

God-breathed.

In-spired.

Not just the human authors feeling inspired.

Not just the human authors were actually inspired.

But *scripture itself* is inspired, God-breathed.

2 Peter is explicit in describing an understanding of how scripture came to be:

²⁰ Above all, you must understand that

no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet’s own interpretation of things.

²¹ For prophecy never had its origin in the human will,

but prophets, though human,

spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.” (2Pe.1:20-21)

Prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

Sounds like God-breathed, divinely inspired, to me.

The Letter to the Hebrews quotes numerous Old Testament verses,

introducing each one with “God says” or “He says.”

(He.2:12-13, etc.)

And on and on it goes.

The understanding of the authors of scripture was clear, that scripture,

ALL scripture, including their own writings,

were explicitly given by God.

They didn’t cook it up on their own.

It was given to them from above.

I will grant you this is a circular argument.

But it is worth considering.

Were these authors all liars? Or perhaps self-deluded?

If they were,

why would we read these writings in search of anything good or worthwhile?

If they were not liars and self-deluded,

why would we want to pick and choose and toss any of it in bucket 3?

One of the ways progressives shed doubt on the reliability of Scripture is to

point to the fact that we do not have any of the original writings from the hands of the authors.

We have copies of copies of copies.

And each layer of copying is an opportunity for mistakes to creep into the text.

So what we have is far removed from the originals,

and how do we know it's even close to what they wrote?

But here are the concrete facts about the manuscripts of at least the New Testament:

- 1) Every book from the ancient world is a copy of a copy of a copy.
- 2) Of all the ancient writings for which we have anything, the NT is by far the best attested.

The original writings were closer in time to the events to which they bear witness.

The Gospels were all written 25-60 years after the death of Jesus.

Paul's letters were written before the Gospels.

Revelation, perhaps the latest of the NT documents, was written around 90 AD/

We have more ancient manuscripts of the NT

than any other piece of literature from the ancient world.

The Roman historian Tacitus wrote a history of the empire about 116 AD.

The first part of it is known from one manuscript,

which was copied about 850 AD.

That's ONE manuscript from the distance of 700 years.

Josephus' 1st century history known as The Jewish War is known to us

from 9 Greek manuscripts from the 11th, 12th, and 13th centuries.

That's NINE manuscripts from the distance of 1000+ years.

There are over 5000 ancient Greek manuscripts of parts of the New Testament.

Some of those date to the early 2nd century,

a distance of less than 100 years.

- 3) There are variations between manuscripts, but they are minor (spellings, word order, etc.), and none of them touch on any doctrinal issues.

This all weighs in favor of the dependability of scripture,

even if it's just a humanly-produced document.

Interestingly, archeology in the Holy Land continues to turn up evidence that supports the accuracy of the Old and New Testaments.

The names and places of cities and towns in Israel, personal names, cultural artifacts, all continue to be unearthed and show the Bible to be accurate.

In the early 1900s, liberal scholars insisted the Hittites,

mentioned in the Old Testament, were a fictional tribe.

Scholars used to insist

Moses could not have had anything to do with the production of the Old Testament Law, because he lived in a time that was, in that region.

They suggest the first five books of the Old Testament,

books traditionally attributed to Moses,

were probably written about 600 years after he died.

Then, in 2019, there was discovered a curse tablet at Mt. Ebal.

It's in an ancient Hebrew dialect,

includes the Hebrew name of YHWH,

and may date back very close to the time of Moses himself.

Interestingly, the book of Joshua calls Mt. Ebal "the mountain of curse."

When we had a mission trip to Israel a few years ago,

we visited the recently excavated town of Magdala, the hometown of Mary Magdalene.

When I toured Israel in the summer of 1976,

the town had not been located,

and some liberal scholars decided it was an invention of the biblical authors.

Wrong.

The discoveries just keep coming.

Q&A

PRAYER