

God and the Bible: Or, Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About the Bible but
Were Afraid to Ask; Or, Everything You Never Wanted to Know But I'll Tell You
Anyway!

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August 11, 2019

The Bible and God are not the same. The Bible shows forth who God is and God's will for us and the world. But the Bible doesn't exhaust who God is. Sue remarked as we talked about this sermon: "Isn't it amazing that God wants to be known?" It is, and one of the ways God has made Him/Herself known is through scripture, through inspired men and women.

Today let's talk about the Bible. I love this long, complex, sublime, sometimes difficult book composed of history, story, teaching, law, songs, proverbs, visions, parables, gospels and letters. So let's take another look at it today.

I

First, let's look at the book itself. The cover says Bible. The original word was *Biblia*, or books, plural. It is a library consisting of 66 books, 39 in the Hebrew Old Testament and 27 in the Christian New Testament.

The Bible was composed, passed along, and collected over a period of 2,000 years. Each book is set in its own historical place and time. It is important to know these things as we interpret them today.

II

It has a Table of Contents at the beginning and Maps at the end. Both are important. The Table of Contents tells us that the Bible is one great story, beginning with Creation and ending with the consummation of history at the end of time. It is not a set of theological lectures arranged by topic, it is the narrative of God's involvement with us and the world. So the overarching purpose of scripture is to move us to become part of God's great story and be in relationship with this God.

The Maps? They are important too. They tell us that God works in history, our history and world history. The Bible is not a great Myth, or set of myths, detached from history. God is at work within history.

III

Finding a way through this long meandering book. If you pick up your Bible and open it to its middle, you are at the Psalms. If you divide the second half you are at the New Testament. (This does not work if your Bible has the Apocrypha added to it.)

Should we start at the beginning and read to the end, Genesis to Revelation? Probably not. You'll probably bog down somewhere in Leviticus with its dietary regulations, or in Joshua with its Holy War conquest of Canaan. A better idea would be to alternate readings from the Old and New Testaments, pairing for example, Genesis and Matthew.

And I wouldn't recommend closing your eyes, opening the Bible, putting your finger on a verse and reading. It might work, but it might land you on some non-edifying or even horrendous passage. My beloved preaching professor and mentor, George Buttrick told of a German preacher who decided that the next Sunday he would open the Bible at random, put his finger on a passage and preach extemporaneously, depending on the Holy Spirit to help. He looked down at the passage. The only words he heard were: "Hans, you're a damn fool!" Then Dr. Buttrick would look over his glasses and say, "An authentic word from the Spirit."

IV

Two ways to draw the Bible, one a circle and the other a straight line.

Jews arrange their Hebrew Scripture as a set on concentric circles. The inner-most circle, and heart of the circle, is the *Torah*, the first five books of the Bible and the heart of Hebrew scripture. The next circle, around it, is the

collection of books called the *Prophets*. The third circle is the *Writings*, books like Psalms, Proverbs and Job.

We Christians might add a fourth concentric circle, the New Testament. And a fifth, the circle with your name on it, because it only becomes scripture for us when we engage it. Revelation is not a speech, it is a dance.

Let me say at this point that the Jewish Hebrew Bible and the Christian Old Testament have the same 39 books, but are arranged differently for theological reasons. For example, the Jewish scripture ends with the story of the Hebrew people coming home from Babylonian Exile. Exile/Return is the last great miracle of the book. The Christian Old Testament ends with Malachi and the promise of the coming Messiah, a bridge to the New Testament.

The other way to picture the Bible is of a straight line, a time-line if you will beginning at Creation, having its great center at Christ and ending with the Consummation at the end of time.

V

I have spoken of the Bible as a Great Narrative. We could divide it into Nine Acts. (May I have nine volunteers?)

The first act is *Creation*

The second act is the *Fall*

The third act is *Covenant*, the beginning of God's relationship with the Hebrew people with Abraham and Sarah.

The fourth act is *Exodus and Law*, the freeing of God's people from slavery in Egypt and the giving of the Ten Commandments at Mt. Sinai.

The fifth act is *The Rise and Fall of Nations*, and the coming of the prophets.

The sixth act is *Exile and Return Home*.

The seventh act is *Gospel*, the life and teachings of Jesus.

The eighth act is the *Church*, as we see its beginnings in Acts and the Letters.

And the final act is *Consummation*. The Book of Revelation is the revealing of the meaning and end of history.

These are not only chapters of the Bible, they are also chapters of our lives.

We can find ourselves in each of the nine acts.

VI

How do we think theologically and biblically *about* the Bible? I've chosen two texts, the first from Psalm 119. It is the longest psalm by far, and it is a song dedicated to the love of God's Word. Verse 105 says: "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path." (Did any of you memorize that verse growing up in

Sunday School and Vacation Bible School?) Yes, the Bible is a guide and a light as we walk along our earthly paths.

Verse 103 says: “How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth.” I believe this can be so, because beneath all the words is the steadfast love of God. The most oft used description of God in the Hebrew scriptures are what I call the John 3:16 of the Hebrew Bible:

O, give thanks to the Lord, for God is good.

For God’s steadfast love endures forever. (Psalm 136:1)

The New Testament scripture for today is one of the most important verses in the Bible when the Bible talks about itself (II Timothy 3:14-17). First it tells of the importance of the teaching and reading the Bible from childhood. Second, it describes the Bible as “inspired”, or “God-breathed”. The Bible was not dictated from heaven, word by word, but “God-breathed.” Humans over 2,000 years inspired by the Spirit wrote the scriptures. You might call it a divine/human book. Third, the purposes of scripture are listed: instruction for salvation, teaching, reproof, correction and training in righteousness. We don’t just read the Bible, the Bible reads *us*. The Bible “equips us for every good work”, it prepares us to live the goodness of God.

How then do we best *interpret* the scripture? This is *our* part in the divine-human dance of Revelation.

First, most importantly, we read it through the lens of Jesus Christ, his life, teachings, death and resurrection. He is our key to unlocking the meaning of scripture. We read the Bible with Jesus looking over our shoulder guiding us.

The Old Testament Theologian Walter Brueggemann has said that there is a war-tradition and a peace tradition in the Bible. The question is: Is the war-tradition the main text and the peace-tradition the sub-text. Or is the peace tradition the main text. If we read the Bible through Christ the peace tradition is the main theme.

Second, St. Augustine gives us this advice: If your interpretation of scripture leads to an increase in the love of God and neighbor you are on the right track. If not, interpret again.

VIII

We need to read scripture three ways: historically, devotionally or spiritually, and in community.

Historical reading places scripture in its historical setting. What do the words mean, and what was the author trying to say?

Devotional or Spiritual reading seeks, with the help of the Spirit, to hear what God is saying to us through the words today.

Communal reading of scriptures places us around a table with other Christians, and with Christians through the centuries. It gives us new understanding and helps correct false understandings we might have arrived at alone.

IX

God's Word and Us! There is 1) the Word of God in Scripture; 2) there is the Incarnate Word, Jesus the Christ; 3) and there is the Living Word, the ongoing revelation of God in our lives.

Today after the reading of scripture we used these words from the Iona community:

For the Word of God in scripture,

For the Word of God within us,

For the Word of God among us,

Thanks be to God.

All are important. The center of it is the Bible. It is the measuring stick of all the ways God reveals God's self to us. It keeps us honest.

But there are other ways God speaks to us. The Celtic Christians believed that there are two books of scripture: Creation and the Bible. Does not God reveal God's self through both?

And God also speaks to us inwardly, through the Spirit.

And God speaks to us in community, "among us", as we seek God and God's will for us.

All of that is to say, there is a Living Word of God. Revelation is ongoing. As pastor John Robinson said in 1620 to those boarding the *Mayflower* and setting off for America: "The Lord hath more truth yet to break forth out of His Holy Word. God hath yet more light." The fine hymn *We Limit Not the Truth of God* uses his words:

We limit not the truth of God
to our poor reach of mind,
By notions of our day and sect
Crude, partial and confined!
Now let a new and better hope
Within our hearts be stirred:
The Lord hath yet more light and truth

To break forth from His Word.

(George Rawson)

The United Church of Christ once had boldly on its website: “God Is Still Speaking”. And then there was a quote from Gracie Allen: “Never place a period where God has placed a comma”.

Perhaps it is best said by the great rabbi, Abraham Heschel in these poem-like words:

The Word of God

never comes to an end.

No word

is

God’s last word.