

First Presbyterian Church, Spartanburg SC
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THE BIBLE: OUT OF DATE?

Luke 4:1-21, 2 Timothy 3:14-17

In our sermons as this new year begins, for the first few weeks of the year, we're thinking together about some probing questions that people ask about religion in general and about Christianity in particular.

Last week, we looked together at the fundamental question of all religion which has to do with the existence of God. If there is no God, there is no religion! And there certainly is no Christianity!

This week, we're looking together at the Bible, this book from which we have just read, and we're going to ask a few questions about it because the relevance of the Bible has been attacked on various fronts.

Is the Bible out of date? This ancient Book, the last part of which was written two thousand years ago and the first part of which was written perhaps as early as three thousand years ago, is it out of date?

Is it in any sense the word of God? Is it still the word of God?

How in the world can we trust this Book?

Now, these are huge questions that we're asking and so, at the beginning of each sermon, I'm going to give a disclaimer! It's always a good thing to do, to give a disclaimer: to say that I'm going to cover some aspects of the answer to this question but by no means all of it. This past fall, we had a ten-week course, two hours every Sunday, looking at questions like these. Twenty hours! But even that was not enough to cover the topic - and here we've only got fifteen to twenty minutes each week to look at such questions as these . . . so all I intend to do is to raise some of the questions, hope to start some sort of a discussion with help of the sermon notes, and provide some guidance about how to think your way through some of these problems, some of these issues.

The questions we are asking are, in fact, good questions and we ought to be asking such questions as these. Many people are asking questions such as these. Some of them are inside the faith, like us, but some of them outside the faith - and sometimes when they ask these questions, they don't really ask them in ways that are very nice at all!

So, for example, outside of the faith, I mentioned last week Christopher Hitchens' book called God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything. Well, Mr Hitchens' book has two chapters with challenging titles like these: one of them is *The Nightmare of the Old Testament* (doesn't sound too favorable to me!) and, the other is *The New Testament Exceeds the Evil of the Old Testament!* This is not friendly fire at all.

Or we might move onto another best seller, The God Delusion, by Richard Dawkins and he has a quote in there from Gore Vidal who speaks of the Old Testament like this. He says, "*From a barbaric bronze age text known as the Old Testament, three anti-human religions have evolved: Judaism, Christianity and Islam.*" From a barbaric bronze age text known as the Old Testament! Bronze age? Old Testament? Barbaric?

Or think perhaps of what has even been more influential, Dan Brown's book, *The Da Vinci Code* written back in 2003. This is a book (and a movie too! -- read and seen by tens of

millions of people) in which he claims that the books of the Bible were just chosen by a group of men, not women but men, in a closed room (a closed male-dominated smoky room!). They chose the books that they wanted in the Bible, they included the ones they wanted and they deliberately excluded the ones that they didn't want. It's all an inside job. So, how in the world can we trust this Book?

These are serious critics about the relevance of the Bible and the veracity of the Bible and they're made even more powerful and serious because they come not just from those who are clearly outside the faith and possibly never have been inside the faith, but they also come from time to time from those who have been inside the faith and have chosen to be outside the faith. People like Dr. Bart Ehrman who teaches, and is, in fact, the Chair of the Religious Studies Department, at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Now, Dr. Ehrman is a great teacher, make no mistake about it, who actually graduated from one of our own Presbyterian seminaries (Princeton). He is a prolific author and his books, almost always turn into runaway best sellers. He has one which is entitled Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why (sounds like a conspiracy theory to me!)[1] Another is Lost Scriptures: Books that Did Not Make It into the New Testament. His latest book is entitled Jesus Interrupted in which, according to the press release and I quote, "*Ehrman reveals not only that the Bible is riddled with inconsistencies and outright forgeries but the many fundamental stories and doctrines don't actually exist within its pages. They were later inventions by people trying to make a sense of a disconnected collection of text.*"

Well, these are frontal assaults on this Book that we have. They are powerful assaults and unfortunately in my estimation, they are made even more powerful, not just because they come from people outside the faith, not just because they come from people who were once in the faith and now are outside the faith, but they are made even more powerful, unwittingly sometimes, by those of us who are on the inside of the faith, by things that we say about the Bible which can be undermined easily by those outside - ***because we really have not thought through what it is exactly that we do or do not believe about this particular Book.***

There are times in which I believe Christians have idolized the Bible as if it were more important than Jesus or right up there with Jesus. No way! Now I think it should be way up there! I love the Book! But Jesus is at the top and the Bible is below. We do not worship this Book.

We have at times as Christians made claims for the Book which simply cannot be defended and if you make exaggerated claims for something, then you are asking for potshots to be taken against you: and there are people out there who will take potshots against anything which cannot be substantiated.

And I believe, and this is probably even worse, we have honored the Book in name, claiming great things for it, while all too often we have not read it and placed in our hearts as Jesus himself did. He, in fact, did not speak about the Bible. He just read it and knew it. It was there for him, in his head, in the moment of temptation, and it was for him the guiding light of his life. That's how it functioned. He read it and he knew it, but we too often speak about it but in the churches our ignorance of the Scriptures is often colossal. What a tragedy! What a travesty that is!

Let me this morning then, as we think about all of these different things said about the Bible, let me primarily tell you what we *as a Presbyterian church, and what I **do*** believe about the Bible, and also *what we **don't*** believe about the Bible.

What does our Presbyterian church say about the Bible? What does our Constitution say? We have a Constitution comprising two books, one called the Book of Confessions and one called the Book of Order, and in the Book of Order, there are vows which officers take, Constitutional Questions we call them, officers and ministers take them. And there is a short vow which every minister, every deacon, every elder affirms about the Scriptures. This is the best short summary of what the Presbyterian church believes about the Scriptures that we can find. We are asked this question.

Do you accept the Scriptures of the Old and the New Testament to be by the Holy Spirit the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the church universal and God's word to you?

Do you accept the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament to be by the Holy Spirit the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the church universal and God's word to you? And we say, "Yes, we do." That is what we affirm. This is where we are when it comes to the Scriptures.

Now let me be clear as to what we are affirming here and what we're not affirming.

- We are affirming that God speaks to us through this Book today. Here I am in the twenty-first century and this is God's word to me. Somehow, in some way, God uses this Book as a channel through which to speak to me, and I trust to you as well.
- We are affirming that this book is unique and authoritative. There is no other book like it . . . which can lead us to Jesus Christ. It is unique and authoritative ***in its witness to Jesus Christ which is its purpose.*** Its purpose is to bring us to Jesus Christ, and to bring Jesus Christ to us.

That's what this Book is, and that's what this Book does. What is just as important to say is *what we are not affirming* which is this.

- We are not affirming that this is a scientific textbook. It is not a scientific textbook.
- And we're not affirming that it is a history book. It contains history, but the purpose of the Bible is not to give us lessons in history two-three thousand years ago. It does that, but that is not its primary purpose.

Its primary purpose is through the history, through these stories that are told, to bring us to God made known in Jesus Christ and to bring God made known in Jesus Christ to us. And this book has done that repeatedly, again and again, for millions of people for two thousand to three thousand years.

Indian Methodist Bishop John Subhan was a Sufi Muslim preparing to be an Imam before he became a follower of Jesus Christ. Dr. Christy Wilson who was my Professor of Mission and Islamic studies, and who for many years was a missionary in Afghanistan (before the Russians came in to Afghanistan) tells his story like this. He says:

One day, while Subhan was walking home from class, he noticed a scrap of paper tossed by the wind across his path. It turned out to be a page from Matthew's gospel describing the crucifixion and death of Christ. "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" These were the words that he read and he read them over and over again. Now this astonished Subhan. He'd been taught that Jesus Christ had not really been crucified. [DR: *The Koran actually honors Jesus as a prophet and treats him so honorably at times, doesn't believe he is divine, but treats him so honorably at times that the Muslims say he couldn't have been put on the cross. And this is, in a sense, a defense of Jesus. This is what he was taught that it was not Jesus on the cross but Judas.*] It was Judas who had hung on that cross not Jesus. Christ had ascended to heaven before the crucifixion. Subhan read and reread the single sentence again and again. 'These are not the words of Judas,' he thought to himself. 'Judas would have known why God had forsaken him.'

These are not the words of an evil man. They are the words of a good man. Only a good man would have asked, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" Suddenly, he knew that it was really Christ who had died on that cross and not Judas . . . And that simple but profound realization changed his life.

I don't know precisely how God acted through that scrap of paper, but I do know that this man who was heading in one very serious direction turned his life around. It was through that scrap of paper that God spoke to him and he was led inescapably into a relationship with the living Christ which transformed his life and through his life, transformed the lives of others.

This is the purpose of the Bible. This is what it is supposed to do. And this is what it had done in the lives of people for millions and millions of years. AND the Bible can do this, the Bible can function powerfully in this life-transforming way, ***whether it is literally true or not***, whether it is perfect or not. It is perfect for its purpose but is it perfect in every way?

When the Apostle speaks (2 Timothy 3:16) about the inspiration of Scripture, and says, "All Scripture is inspired by God," *he does not* go on to say, "therefore it is perfect in every way." He uses a very weak word; he says, "It is *useful!!!*" It is *useful* for God's purposes: to teach us, rebuke us, and admonish us and so to equip us for every good work that God intends for us to do!



It is perfect for what God intends, but it doesn't have to be perfect in every way: **and if we claim it is, then we will open ourselves up needlessly to damning criticisms which seem to win the day.** In fact I think that one of the questions that is asked within the Christian faith most frequently about whether or not people believe in the Bible, has probably caused more damage than anything else *from inside our house of faith*, and that question is this: **Do you believe that the Bible is literally true? Do you believe that the Bible is literally true?**

Now this morning, I'm going to tell you the answer to that particular question, not just for me but for you! I'm going to tell you **your** answer to that question: and the answer to that question is this: **No! you do not believe the Bible is literally true.** None of you here today believe the Bible is literally true . . . and I know that for three very good reasons.

The first reason I know this to be true (that you do not believe the Bible is literally true) is that in thirty years of ministry, no parent has ever come to me asking whether or not they should apply Leviticus 20:9 to their family life. Leviticus 20:9 says, "All who curse father or mother shall be put to death." I want to assure you that no children in my congregations have been put to death at my suggestion - and it's not because none of them have cursed their parents!! I know that some of them have. But, the fact is that NONE OF US, not even the most ardent Bible Lover, is going to take Leviticus 20:9 literally, as if it were to be done by us today. We're going to weigh it up, side by side with Jesus who says, "Suffer the little children to come unto me for such is the kingdom of heaven" and we're going to say, "How do we put them together?" *And as soon as you do that, you are not taking the Bible literally; you're interpreting it through some kind of lens.*

I know this in the second place (that none of us take the Bible literally) because all of you here today know that the Bible contains poetry. The book of Psalms is a book of poems and you actually misinterpret a poem if you take it literally. In other words, if you take the Bible literally at certain places, you will be misreading it. You will be misreading it God's intention! The issue is for us to read it seriously and correctly -- and to read it seriously and correctly means that there are times when we MUST NOT read it literally. In other words, there may be times to read

it literally but there are definitely times not to read it literally . . . and that's when you're reading a poem, like Psalm 23, "The Lord is my shepherd." It's a poem! Am I going to forget that and say, "this is God's literal word, so I wonder if God is up in heaven wearing shepherd's clothing and holding a staff?" Of course that's not what we're supposed to think! We're supposed to use our imaginations, to use our brains to allow the image to impact us: this is powerful, figurative language about an amazing God, this enormous God who creates a universe and yet who for us will be like a shepherd . . . like (that's an interpretation) . . . like a shepherd. That's not literal. That figurative. And that's where the power is, as you read it: ***not literally but seriously, within its context.***

I know in the third place that none of you, none of you read the Bible literally or believe that what we have in front of us is literally the word of God, because you know that the original, authentic Bible was written in Hebrew and Greek. Now, let me ask you to read "the literal Bible" with me. You need to turn here to your sermon notes and I would like us to read in unison what we have on the back page of the notes. Let's read in unison!!! Join in with me.  בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים (b'reshit bara elohim) OK? That's it literally. Now you all say it. (No response!). OK. Well, let's move on to the Greek. That should be a little bit easier.  και θεος ην ο λογος (kai theos en ho logos) Now say it all together (silence!) Now that's pretty poor! *But that's the literal Bible! and we don't understand it!*

So what do we need to do? We need to translate! . . . But what is important to remember is this, ***that as soon as we translate it, we interpret it.*** There is no such thing as a literal translation. It doesn't exist, and if it is literal, it wouldn't make sense. As soon as you have to translate from the original Hebrew and the original Greek, you're into the realm of interpretation. That's simply the fact. It's not an opinion. It's the fact.

Does that mean it is not God's word? Of course not! *It simply means that God can use what is fallible, thank goodness, you and me as well to do God's work and to speak God's word to our lives. It is sufficient to accomplish its task. "It is useful," says Paul, "to train us in every good way to do God's work."*

So how are we to think of this book in a way which still makes sense, if we say that what we have is not perfect? At the least, your Bible, the one in your hands, is not perfect. It is a translation. It is not literal.

Well, I have found it helpful to think of the Bible as somewhat similar to our United States Constitution. Let's think about our Constitution for a moment and how it functions.

It is old? Yes, and it's getting old. Two hundred years old. Not two thousand but two hundred years old. It's old and it's getting older.

Does it's age mean that it's out of date? No. It doesn't mean that it's out of date. It is still valuable today.

What about the period of history in which it was written? Well, it certainly helps us to interpret the constitution if we know the history of the time in which it was written.

Yes, that's very helpful but, is the purpose of the Constitution to teach us history about the 1700's? No, that's not its purpose. *Its purpose is to guide us as a nation today in the day and age in which we live.*

Is it perfect? No. It has been amended.

Is it opened to interpretation? For goodness sake, yes, it's open to all kinds of interpretation.

Can different well meaning people read it in different ways and see different things in it?

Absolutely.

Does that mean it's of no use? My, it's the most powerful document of its kind in the world. It's unique and it's authoritative for us precisely because this is the document which creates and sustains and shapes us as a nation.

It doesn't tell us what to do in every single situation, but it forms the "boundaries" of our national thought and determines who we are as a people, just like the rules of a game do.

The rules of basketball or baseball, do they dictate everything that happens on the field?

No. But without those rules, you wouldn't know if you're playing basketball or baseball.

SO, this book, the Bible, determines who we are to be as God's people. It frames our discussion. It sets the terms of our debate; about some things we will agree, and about others we will disagree, but it is allegiance to this book which keeps us in the same family, in the household of God.

The most serious danger to our Constitution is surely not whether we agree or disagree with somebody's interpretation, but the most serious thing would be if a generation were to arise who did not read it. Now that is trouble. That is real trouble for our nation, if that happens.

And the same is true in the church . . . and it is a problem that is frighteningly real! because a generation has arisen that does not read the Book! And our calling, to be like Jesus and to meet Jesus through the Book, is to read it, even if you read a children's story book version: read it! That is better than not reading it at all. There are some great children's story books out there. Read them if the Bible is too tough. Read them every day and you will find as you pray and read with care, that this will be a channel of God's word to you. How exactly? I don't know how! But does God use this? Oh, yes God uses this.

I began reading the Book when I was thirteen years of age and the more I read it, the more convinced I am than ever, that no matter how human the book may at times seem to be, no matter what down-to-earth process God used in bringing the Bible into existence, nevertheless, *the Scriptures of the Old and the New Testament are by the Holy Spirit the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ and the church universal and God's word to me!* And, I trust, to you.

Note [1]: Books such as Dr Ehrman's, are written as much to make money as to share scholarship. Otherwise the powerful comment on p. 207 of **Misquoting Jesus**, would be on the front cover, instead of at the back, where few readers will ever find it: *"To be sure, of all the hundreds and thousands of textual changes found among our manuscripts, most of them are completely insignificant, immaterial, and of no real importance for anything other than showing that scribes could not spell or keep focused any better than the rest of us."*

The truth is that with the help of textual critics such as Dr. Ehrman, we are closer to the original text of the New Testament than to any other ancient document.