

Got Questions: Why Trust the Bible?
2 Timothy 3:15-17; 1 Corinthians 15:12-20
September 12, 2010

There are many questions that come up in the lives of Christians. Over the next number of weeks, we are going to consider some issues/questions that pop up over and over. I want to thank those of you who have responded to my inquiry as to what questions you wrestle with. The questions that you have lifted up are profound and I'm sure will be interesting to the rest of the congregation.

This morning I want to try to address a question that gets raised periodically, both within the Church as well as outside the Church. The question get asked many ways, such as: Can I trust the Bible? Is the Bible truly authoritative? Is everything in the Bible accurate?

Most of the time these questions are asked, they come out of some pre-existent agenda. One of the most pervasive agendas centers on the supposed conflict between Scripture and science (an issue that I will try to address on another Sunday). So that we can properly speak about the authority of Scripture, we must first understand the nature of the concept of authority as it applies to God's Word, and what it means for that authority to be used – or what is that authority to be used for?

Let's begin with 2 Timothy 3:16-17:

All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It corrects us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right. God uses it to prepare and equip his people to do every good work.

As we receive this teaching from Paul, as Christians we believe the Scriptures are God-breathed and authoritative. By *God-breathed* we mean that the Holy Spirit communicated to the author precisely what God intended, and that the author, in his own words, accurately recorded what was communicated. This means that the Scriptures are *not* a collection of *human* ideas about God. The writings are God's self-revelation to humanity, and because of this reality the Bible carries with it a certain authority.

Those who would like to discredit the Bible as a writing inspired by God sometimes accuse Christians of using circular reasoning when Scripture is used to prove Scripture. After all, critics say, you can't quote the Bible to prove the Bible. But, that argument is flawed because the Bible is not a single book. Rather, it is a collection of 66 books penned over a period of about 1,600 years by 40 different authors writing in three different languages, living in many different places and in different centuries. If the Bible had been written by one person, I could see where there might be room for argument. However, that's not the case. Therefore, I have a hard time buying the circular reasoning argument where the Bible is concerned.

2 Peter 1:20-21 tells us:

Above all, you must realize that no prophecy in Scripture ever came from the prophet's own understanding, or from human initiative. No, those prophets were moved by the Holy Spirit, and they spoke from God.

Just because a book or a letter was penned by a human being doesn't mean it doesn't carry the authority of God within its text. Again and again, in the biblical story itself we see that God does, in fact, exercise his authority *through human agents anointed and equipped by the Holy Spirit*. This is itself an expression of God's love, because he does not will simply to come into the world in a blinding flash of light and obliterate all opposition. He wants to reveal himself meaningfully within the space/time universe; to reveal himself in judgment and in mercy in a way which will save people. So, we get the prophets. We get obedient *writers* in the Old Testament, not only prophets but those who wrote the psalms and so on. As the climax of the story we get Jesus himself as the great prophet and Son of God incarnate. And, we then get Jesus' people as the anointed ones.

So, if Scripture is inspired by God, for what purpose was it intended? We're given the short version of that in the 2 Timothy passage: *God uses it to prepare and equip his people to do every good work.*

United Methodist minister, Dr. Maxie Dunnam, says that Scripture is about revelation, encounter, and invitation. He says, "**When our minds are open to understand the Scripture, our hearts are open to receive God's grace** – that is what the revelation and encounter and invitation are all about. But then there follows this profound truth. **When our hearts are open to receive God's grace, our wills are softened to do God's bidding.**"

In his statement, Dunnam echoes the message of the Scriptures: that God's Word is ultimately about God and God's relationship with mankind. It is this reality that is missed when we try to make the Bible into something it was not intended to be. For instance, it was never intended to be a history book, though it does contain history. It was never intended to be a science text even though it speaks of things in the natural world. The Holy Word of God carries its own authority on its own subject matter. It is this notion of *authority* that I want to spend the rest of the sermon thinking about.

When we think of the concept of *authority* in our present culture, we normally infer some type of hierarchy or power over another at work. But biblical authority is not the power to control people, and crush them, and keep them in little boxes. Scripture's own view of authority focuses on the authority of God himself.

The Bible is all about God's power and authority which he wields in different ways, and for a different purpose, than mankind tends to use power and authority. Further, for some reason God

has chosen to vest his authority in the collection of writings he inspired – the holy Scriptures. But God is not capricious in his acts. For every act that originates with God there is a reason and a purpose. God’s authority vested in scripture is designed, as all God’s authority is designed, to liberate human beings – to judge and condemn evil and sin in the world in order to set people free to be fully human.

How does God exercise his authority through the Bible?

Somehow, the authority which God has invested in this book is an authority that is wielded and exercised *through* the people of God (the Church) telling and retelling *their* story as the story of the world...telling the covenant story as the true story of creation and life. Somehow, this authority is also wielded through his people singing psalms. It is wielded in particular through God’s people telling the story of Jesus.

You and I, as the Church, are given the authority of God through the biblical story. I like the way Anglican theologian, N.T. Wright envisions the role of the Church as it lives out the authority of God given it through the Book.

Wright invites us to imagine a Shakespeare play which has 5 Acts, but the second half of the 5th Act has been lost. So, the actors must fill in the missing part as it might occur within the context of what comes before it and after it.

If we were to transfer that image to the Church there is the possibility of seeing the 5 Acts as follows: (1) Creation; (2) Fall; (3) Israel; (4) Jesus. The New Testament would then form the first scene in the fifth act, giving hints as well (e.g., Rom 8; Revelation) of how the play is supposed to end. The church would then live under the *authority* of the existing story, being required to offer something between an improvisation and an actual performance of the final act.

In other words, you and I live under the authority of Scripture as it places us within the redemption story. The story forms who we are as individuals and as a community of believers. It tells us how to live our lives and for whom we are living them.

Why should you and I trust the Bible? Because if we will let Scripture be itself, then the Holy Spirit will enable us to live within its authority...and when we do that our hearts are open to receive God’s grace, and we will live out the story of the Church as we share the Good News of Jesus Christ with the rest of the world.