

Understanding the Bible

A message presented by
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Pulpit Guest
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Scripture: John 1:1-4, 14; 2 Corinthians 3:2-3

This is a message about understanding the Bible. Not understanding the contents, or what the Bible teaches, but rather understanding what the documents are. What the Bible, literally, is.

I grew up in a church where we had a B.Y.P.U. (Baptist Young People's Union). One of the features was a weekly slip (The Eight-Point Record System) which we filled out. It included attending church, bringing your Bible and having read your Bible every day. And we checked our knowledge of the Bible by engaging in an occasional Sword Drill in which we had to find selected verses, etc. The Bible was an important force in my life and, although my understanding has grown, the Bible continues to be a force in my life.

(Aside:) I think of the old story about the man who believed the Bible had an answer for every problem. Seeking an answer he closed his eyes, opened the Bible, placed his finger on a verse. He opened his eyes and read "*Judas went out and hanged himself.*" Certain that he had made a mistake he repeated the process more carefully. This time when he opened his eyes his finger was resting on the admonition, "*Go thou and do likewise.*"

To follow the pattern I have followed recently in prior sermons let me note that the word Bible, itself, does not appear in the English Bible. Not even once. We -- or at least publishers -- have printed it on the cover; it was not part of God's original words or taken from the Bible. Like chapters and verses, it was added by editors. The term Scripture or Scriptures, however, appears over 40 times. It is a reference to material or passages we call the Old Testament, written on stone, on parchment, on scrolls.

And we should note that when the term Scripture appears in what we call the New Testament it also is a reference to the Old Testament. The New Testament did not exist when the Old Testament recorded those words. It is not likely that the New Testament writers were aware that what they were writing was destined to be, nor ultimately would become, Scripture.

We should also note that the Canon of Scripture was determined by human scholars over an extended period of time. It did not fall from heaven in tact. The Canon is the list of books judged to be worthy of inclusion in the Bible.

What does the Bible say about itself?

It was written by Holy Men moved by God. (2 Peter 1:20-21)

We are to study it. (2 Timothy 3:15-16)

We are to Search it. (John 5:39)

What is the Bible? Perhaps it would help to answer a question like that by identifying what the Bible is not.

The Bible is NOT a single book BUT it is a collection of at least 66 books (or documents): History, Poetry, Prophecy, Biography. It is 66 books written by almost as many men (and possibly some women) over a period of more than 1,000 years.

The Bible embraces a great diversity BUT it has a marvelous unity. A single dominate theme (Or themes). The life of Jesus, the Grace and Love of God.

It was NOT dictated by God to secretaries (“Holy Men”) BUT it is composed of books written by men moved, inspired, by the Spirit of God. It is “God breathed” and, as an inspired work it must be read in the Spirit.

It is NOT a book of rules (“How To Get To Heaven”) BUT it is a library which provides guidance on living in the world of humans.

(An aside) I like a story of two little boys. One asked the other why his grandmother was always reading the Bible and the reply was “*She’s studying for the final exam.*”

(Aside:) Then there is the little girl who came home from Sunday School and announced “*I know what the Bible means.*” Her mother smiled and asked, “*What does the Bible mean?*” “*That’s easy*” the girl replied, “*It means **Basic Information Before Leaving Earth.***”

The Bible is NOT a magical document which works miracles BUT it is a mysterious selection of stories of how God worked in the lives of men and women in earlier generations and can witness to and through each of us. As a child I was taught never to place the Bible on the floor. That practice has persisted until this day.

The Bible is NOT a charm BUT it is a source of blessing.

It is NOT God's Word BUT it contains God's Word.

Martin Luther actually said “*The Bible is not God’s Word, Jesus is.*” But remember he said that at a time when the Bible was first being printed. Luther and Johann Gutenberg (who created moveable type enabling the printing of books) were the moving force in that

printing and consequently in the Reformation. They understood what they were doing. They were printing documents about God's Word, not God's Word itself. We need to remember that and realize that the Bible is a collection of documents about the Word of God.

The Bible is NOT an ancient document. Much of what it contains is ancient material, but, as a Bible, it has been put together as a Canon in the last few thousand years, long after the death of Jesus. Long after the events it records.

The Bible is NOT a scientific text book but it reveals the awesome creative power of God.

The simple truth: The Bible leads us to Jesus.

The Bible is still being written. New stories are being added to the "*stories of Jesus.*" Old material is being discovered all the time. The August 30, 2004 issue of Newsweek had a lead article titled "*The Race to Unearth the Bible.*" And the cover highlighted it. The Bible is in the news these days. Would that it was in our hearts and minds as much as in the news.

Remember, there are ancient manuscripts that were not included. There are books -- we call them Apocrypha -- which some Christians embrace while others reject. As late as the Reformation in Europe, Luther was challenging the inclusion of Hebrew, James, Jude and Revelation. Why? They were in seeming contradiction to his theology of Justification by Grace alone. Luther placed these books at the end on the New Testament and wrote of Revelation, "*Everyone may make up his (or her) own mind as regards this book. As for me, I have a personal aversion to it and that is enough.*"

The possibility that two persons could read the same words and come to different conclusions had not bubbled to the surface of human understanding at that point. It is still a source of revelation and argument in our day.

Moreover, there are books named in the Bible which are not included, in fact, they are not extant. The Chronicles of the Kings of Israel (1 Kings 14:19), Chronicles of Judah (2 Kings 14-19), The Book of Jasher (2 Samuel 1:18), The Acts of Solomon (1 Kings 11:41), The Acts of Jehoshafat ... and others.

And there are countless translations. Who knows which is the most accurate? It is almost a matter of personal preference. Even Fundamentalists have forsaken the position that the King James Version is the ultimate, if not only, authority. There is now a "New" King James Version.

Jesus is the Word of God. "*In the Beginning was the Word... The Word Became flesh....*" (John 1:1ff) In the Bible God reveals Himself. The Bible says we are "God's epistles."

Some believe the Bible is infallible, inerrant. Literal. I think of the Bible as creative, a lively continuing correspondence between God and us. Paul wrote (2 Corinthians 3:2)

“You are our epistle, written in our heart, known and read of all men.” The Word of God is alive. It is the Living Word. It lives in each of us.

Not all Scripture is of equal value although some people insist that they are. The genealogies are not as important as the acts -- the deeds -- of individuals. The Ten Commandments, and certainly the vast library of rules drawn from it -- are not as binding as the Beatitudes. Love fulfills the Law (Galatians 5:14)

We love God because God first loved us. (1 John 9:13) As the Psalmist wrote (Psalm 119:15): *“God’s Word is a Lamp unto my feet and a Light unto my path.”* The Book of Proverbs (6:20-22) reflects this when it says *“My son, keep thy father’s commandments, and forsake not the Law of thy mother: Bind them continually upon your heart, and tie them about thy neck. When thou goest, it shall lead thee; when thou sleepest, it shall keep thee; and when thou awakest, it shall talk with thee: for the commandment is a lamp, and the law is a light....”*

The Book of Revelation concludes with the admonition that if anyone adds anything to, or takes anything away from, *“this book of prophecy”* God will punish that person. This warning is in reference to Revelation and not to the entire Bible.

John’s conclusion to his Gospel has a more positive note. Noting that there are things not written (John 20:30 KJV), he reminds his readers that *“there are many other things which Jesus did, which, if they should be written every one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that should be written”* (John 21:25).

That ordains you and me as writers. Authors declaring what Jesus has done and is doing through us.

The Japanese religious philosopher Basho said in the 17th century, *“Don’t follow the old master’ footsteps; seek what they sought.”* Reduced to our language today: *“Don’t get lost in what various leaders and scholars said in the past but seek what they sought.”*

Think on these things. Let the Love of God run rampant in your life.

Learning to live a Christian life is like learning to swim. You must trust the water. You must interact with the water. But the water will sustain you. It will keep you afloat.

“May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in Thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.”