

“Core Christianity”
“Christianity’s Book: Is the Bible All It's Cracked Up To Be?”

One can hardly preach a series of sermons on core Christian beliefs without saying something about the Bible! Down through the years for Christians, the Bible has been *the book* on which we base our faith. The early founders of our United Methodist tradition were people of the Book - John Wesley, Philip Otterbein, Jacob Albright, and others.

Before the Methodist and Evangelical United Brethren Church merged in 1968, the EUB church had this to say about the Bible: “*We believe the Holy Bible, Old and New Testaments, reveals the Word of God so far as it is necessary for our salvation. It is to be received through the Holy Spirit as the true rule and guide for faith and practice. Whatever is not revealed in or established by the Holy Scriptures is not to be made an article of faith nor is it to be taught as essential to salvation.*” Article IV, Confession of Faith. What is this saying? The Bible is God’s Word to us; everything we need to know about the way of salvation is in the Bible; the Bible is the guide for what we believe and how we live; and, no Christian should be made to believe anything not taught in the Scriptures.

In the United Methodist *Discipline*, the guidebook for our denomination, it says: “We (United Methodists) share with many Christian communions a recognition of the authority of Scripture in matters of faith...”. Virtually all Christians *agree* that the Bible is the sacred writing that has authority over us.

But before I go any further with this message, I think I need to spend some time talking about how peoples’ perception of the Bible is changing. ***An increasing number of Americans view the Bible negatively, or with skepticism.*** In previous generations, even if people weren’t Christians and didn’t read the Bible, most people respected it, and regarded it as a special, sacred book. That is less true today.

I checked out some studies that might shed some light on this issue. A major survey was done recently, the results of which were made public last year (2016). It shows that the number of Americans who believe the Bible is sacred literature, in 2011, was 86%. Only 5 years later, in 2016, that had dropped to 80%. The number of Americans who believe the Bible is a sufficient guide for meaningful living, in 2011, was 77%. In 2016 that had dropped to 67%. During that short time span (2011-2016), the percent of Americans who believe there are *no* books that are sacred had *doubled* from 7% to 14% !

Now we may doubt whether polls like this are accurate, but I think they reflect reality! Fewer people today assume that the Bible is a divinely inspired book, or that it is any more important than any other religious book, such as the Koran. More are prone to view it merely as a book written by humans, putting forth their own ideas

and their own opinions. For instance, I've noticed at times in the letters to the editor section of the newspaper, when there is a discussion on religion, and someone refers to the Bible, invariably someone will write in with an opposing view, saying that it does no good to quote from the Bible, because it's just written by humans, it's an outdated book, and it's foolish to let that dictate how live in the modern world.

This changing attitude towards the Bible certainly makes evangelism more difficult today. We can't assume that referring to Scripture, in itself, will carry any weight with an increasing number of people in our American culture.

Having said all of this, I think it's important to point out that some of the things in the Bible and some of the ways the Bible is interpreted, actually get in the way of people becoming Christians.

For instance, many individuals are troubled by passages in the Bible that are bloody and violent – where God is pictured as a God who wages war or commands mass slaughter. Take this passage, for example: "But as for the towns of these peoples that the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance, you must not let anything that breathes remain alive. You shall annihilate them - the Hittites and the Amorites, the Canaanites and the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites - just as the Lord your God has commanded" (Deuteronomy 20:16-17).

In the above passage, God commands His people to totally exterminate the enemy - kill them all - men, women, babies, even animals. Now I know, this is an ancient practice called "the ban" – where you utterly destroy every living thing of your enemy as a kind of "religious sacrifice". But many non-Christians read this, and say, "If that's the Christian God, you can have him!" Actually, many *Christians* are troubled by these passages, too. Today, when radical Muslims kill people to please Allah, we think it's horrible! Israelites killing in God's name - is that much different?

Or this? Leviticus 20:9: "All who curse father or mother shall be put to death." I think we can agree that it's not a good thing when a child curses their parents. But put them to death? Imagine any parents who did this in our country today, and the consequences they would face in a court of law!

Or this, in Deuteronomy 22:22 "If a man is caught lying with the wife of another man, both of them shall die, the man who lay with the woman as well as the woman." Now adultery and unfaithfulness in marriage is not good! But the death penalty?

Still others see the Bible as limiting and hindering our ability to think - that it's against learning, opposed to scientific facts. For example, Christians who read the Book of Genesis and come to the conclusion that the earth is about 6,000 years old,

when scientists tell us it is millions of years old. Or Christians who quote the Apostle Paul's writings that a wife is to submit to her husband, and women are to be silent in church, and use this to justify all sorts of demeaning behaviors toward females. I counseled a man who claimed to be a Christian, who admitted that he spanked his wife, because the Bible says a husband is head over his wife. The man told me that it worked, and he would do it again if necessary.

So, non-Christians look at some of the ways the Bible is used to justify ignorance, or harsh treatment of others, and say to Christians, "If that's your Book, I don't need it!"

Therefore, today, when Christians claim the Bible as "our Book", there is a greater amount of negativism and skepticism that we encounter in our culture!

How can we respond to those who doubt the Bible's value and relevancy for today?

I don't have a lot of time in this message to respond to that question, but here are a few brief comments. First of all, one's interpretation of the Bible does not have to be narrow and limited. Many Christians believe the Bible is the inspired Word of God, but that doesn't mean we dismiss what we are learning in areas of science and other fields of modern knowledge. For instance, the creation stories in Genesis were not written to be a scientific account of *how* the world was created, but rather a theological witness of *who* created, and *why*!

Not everything in the Bible was written to be taken literally. There are many different types of writing in the Bible – poetry, drama, legend – not all is historical fact. Thus, when Jesus said if our hand causes us to sin, we should cut it off, and if our eye is a source of evil, we are to pluck it out - even those who interpret the Bible in the most conservative way do not take that literally.

Another important point that needs to be made is that many believe we have in the Bible what's called "progressive revelation". In other words, in the earlier history of humankind, God's revelation of Himself was limited. But as time went on, God revealed more and more of Himself, and finally God gave us the most complete picture of Himself in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. So, for instance, in the Old Testament we have a whole slew of dietary laws – laws governing what was regarded as clean or unclean, what you could eat or what you couldn't eat. Are these binding on Christians today? Most Christians say, "no". These are laws that served a purpose for ancient Israelites, but no longer apply.

Deuteronomy 22:11 says, "You shall not wear clothes made of wool and linen woven together" (don't wear garments of mixed fibers). Anyone wearing a polyester shirt or blouse today? If so, you're breaking one of God's laws in the Bible! There's a book called *The Year of Living Biblically*. The editor of *Esquire* magazine decided to live one whole year literally trying to keep all the laws in the Bible. This book

describes that experience. It's a fascinating, hilarious book that shows how strange and far out some of these laws are, and how irrelevant to modern life.

Think about this: Which reveals most about the nature of God? The laws governing the diet and garb of the Israelites? God commanding the Israelites to totally annihilate their enemies? Or the Jesus who taught, "Love your enemies"? Did God get converted between the Old Testament and the New Testament, and become more humane? Or, did our *understanding* of God change as we saw God revealed in the Christ?

I think a lot of the problems posed by the Bible can be alleviated if we believe the Bible gives us a *progressive revelation* of God's character and purposes. And that *all Scripture must be judged against the revelation of God given us in Jesus Christ!*

In spite of much skepticism today regarding the Bible, one of the central tenets of our faith affirms that the Bible is God's Word, and the "playbook" for Christian living!

What makes this book unique and special? Why should it have authority over our lives as Christians? The Bible is unique and special because it is ***the written record of how God revealed himself in history in order to save humankind.*** In the Old Testament God reveals Himself and His purposes through a people called Israel. In the New Testament God reveals Himself most fully in the Person of Jesus of Nazareth. The Bible is important because it points to Jesus! The Old Testament anticipates the coming of a Savior. The New Testament shows how Christ fulfilled those prophecies and expectations. And the New Testament was written by those *closest to the Christ Event!* The Bible is important because it points to Christ in a way that no other writings do!

Christians claim that the Bible is inspired by God. The people who wrote the Scriptures were moved by the Holy Spirit to write what they did. It's not just *their* thoughts and opinions, but *God* speaking through them. Scripture makes that claim for itself. 2 Timothy 3:14-17 says, "But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work."

Note what these verses claim. The Scriptures are able to instruct us for salvation (verse 15). They tell us how to be saved. All Scripture is inspired by God, literally "God-breathed" (verse 16a). The Bible is useful for teaching us, correcting us, and training us in righteous living (verse 16b). It is the Bible that helps equip us for effective Christian living and witness (verse 17).

***What do you say to people who don't see the Bible as the unique Word of God?
How do you prove to these skeptics that the Bible is inspired by God? You can't!***

A lady was sitting on a park bench next to a man. She pulled out a Bible and started to read it. The man beside her gave a little chuckle and went back to what he was doing. After a while he turned to her and said, "You don't really believe all that stuff in there, do you?" The woman replied, "Of course I do. It's the Bible." He responded, "Well, what about that guy that was swallowed by that whale?" "Oh, Jonah," she said. "Yeah, I believe that happened." "Well, how do you suppose he survived all that time inside the whale?" the man asked with an air of superiority. "I really don't know," the lady said. "I guess when I get to heaven I'll ask him." What if he isn't in heaven?" the man asked sarcastically. "Then you can ask him," she retorted!

Nobody can prove the Bible's authenticity as the inspired Word of God. Here's about all we can do (besides praying for the person): First of all, remind the person that the Bible has stood the test of time. None of the attacks against the Bible throughout the centuries have destroyed it. It is still the number one best seller among books! Then, we can challenge the skeptic to read the Bible, thoughtfully, with an open mind. After all, it's not fair to criticize or dismiss something we haven't even read. Then, perhaps most of all, we can point out how the Bible is still changing lives! Time and time again, when people read this book, the living God speaks to them and it brings them face to face with Jesus Christ and His claims.

Dr. Benjamin Carson is a world renowned pediatric neurosurgeon, and a Christian. He was made chief pediatric neurosurgeon at Johns Hopkins by the time he was 33. Dr. Carson became the first surgeon to operate and successfully separate Siamese twins joined at the head. And as you know, he made a run for the Presidency this last campaign. Ben was born poor. His mother was abandoned by her husband and at times suffered clinical depression. Ben sloughed off at school and grew up with a volcanic anger. One day, as a 9th grader, he and a friend were listening to his radio. Playfully teasing Ben about his taste in music, the friend reached over and switched stations. Carson's rage erupted as he grabbed a camping knife out of his pocket and plunged it at his friend's stomach (before he even realized what he was doing). Aghast at this uncontrollable impulse, he could only look with surprise at the knife blade, lying on the ground, snapped in two by his friend's *belt buckle*. Stunned, he ran home, locked himself in the bathroom with a Bible. When he finally came out, he determined that he would no longer allow his temper, his poverty, his schoolwork, or anything else to stand between him and his goals. He went on to get a degree from Yale, felt the call of God on his life, and instead of slashing out with a knife in blind rage, he began to artfully use a scalpel to bring miraculous healing. This Book - the Bible - changed Ben Carson's life!

I started reading the Bible regularly, and seriously, as a teenager, *and it changed my life! And that has been the testimony of thousands and thousands of people through the ages!* No wonder the Psalmist said, "Your word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path" (Psalm 119:105).

How much time do we spend with the Bible? What are we allowing this Book to do for us? I read about a man who says he reads the books of Psalms and Proverbs and the entire New Testament every 30 days. He claims it only takes about one half hour a day, the amount of time we spend watching a newscast or a half hour TV show.

There are treasures in the Bible, but in order to find them, we've got to open up its pages and read it! Someone wrote a letter to Dear Abby telling this story. A young man from a wealthy family was about to graduate from high school. It was the custom in that affluent neighborhood for parents to give their graduating sons and daughters an automobile. Bill and his father had spent months looking at cars, and a week before graduation they found the car Bill wanted. On the eve of Bill's graduation, his father handed him a gift – a gift-wrapped Bible. Bill was so angry that he threw the Bible down and stormed out of the house. He and his father never saw each other again. It was the news of his dad's death that brought Bill home again. As this son sat one night, going through his father's possessions, he came across the Bible his father had given him. He brushed away the dust and opened it to find a cashier's check, dated the day of his graduation – in the exact amount of the car they had chosen together.

There are all kinds of treasures in this Book – God's Word to a broken, needy humanity!

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