

“The Bible and How to Understand It”

Many years ago I was teaching an adult Sunday School class in a church where I was not the pastor. I don't remember exactly what we were studying, but I made a comment about the Bible and why it is so essential for Christians. One of the men in the class seemed rather agitated, and said: “I don't see why it's *this book*; what's so important about *this book*?” I admit that I was a bit dismayed that a church member was questioning the value of the Bible, but it is a fair question: Why *this book*? What is so important about *this book* we call the Bible?

This incident happened a long time ago. Since then, there has been a decided shift in our culture regarding how we view the Bible. Fewer and fewer people see the Bible as a divinely inspired book, or that God speaks in a unique way through the Bible, or that it is binding in any way on our lives. So I want to talk today about the inspiration of the Bible. Is it divinely inspired in a way that sets it apart from any other writings? And if it is inspired by God, exactly *how* is it inspired?

Christians and the Church over the centuries have claimed that the Bible is the Word of God – God speaks through the Bible in a way that sets it apart from any other writing. 2 Timothy 3:16 says, “All scripture is inspired by God.” Now we should keep in mind that when Paul wrote this to Timothy, somewhere around 65 A.D., they only had the Old Testament, and maybe a few of writings that became part of the New Testament, not the whole Bible as we know it. The New Testament writings were added later. Skeptics may look at 2 Timothy 3:16 (“All scripture is inspired by God”) and say: That doesn't prove anything. That's the Bible speaking about itself! It's kind of like me writing something and then saying, “This is divinely inspired.” Would that prove it to you? You would want some objective evidence, beyond the document itself.

This brings up a valid point: No one can prove the Bible has been inspired by God. If you believe the Bible is just a book of human thoughts and opinions, I doubt that anyone can prove otherwise.

Now there are good reasons to believe that the Bible is the inspired Word of God: It has stood the test of time (it's still the #1 bestseller among books). Modern archeological discoveries validate the accuracy of the Scriptures. And over the course of centuries the Bible has changed countless lives. But when all is said and done, the Bible's authenticity as God's Word can only be ***experienced***, not ***proved***. This inward conviction that the Scriptures are the inspired Word of God only comes when we dig into the Scriptures, and find again and again that God speaks to us through its pages.

You may say: “Well, doesn't God speak to us through devotional literature, through books written by Christians about Jesus and our faith? What makes the Bible different from these other inspirational materials?”

What makes the Bible unique is that – more than any other writing – it tells the story of God's redeeming acts in human history, especially through Christ. The Bible was written over a span of some 1,000 years by many different authors. It is more a *library* than it is a book – containing different types of writings (history, drama, poetry, short story, apocalyptic writings, etc.). But

there is a thread that runs through the whole of Scripture: *It is the written record of God's revelation, of how God has made Himself known in history to redeem humankind.*

The Bible has authority because it witnesses to Jesus Christ more than any other writing: the New Testament tells the story of Jesus, written by those closest to the Event. The Old Testament points ahead to the coming of the Christ (Messiah). Jesus Himself made a telling comment about the Old Testament: "You search the Scriptures (i.e. the Old Testament)...and it is they that bear witness about me" (John 5:39). The Bible best tells the drama of God's redemptive act in Christ. Remember: *the Bible* is not the center of our faith; *Christ* is the center of our faith. The Bible is the *written* Word of God that points to Christ, *the living* Word of God.

Now if the Bible is inspired by God...*in what way or ways did God inspire it?* There is a theory of inspiration called the "verbal theory of inspiration". This view maintains that God dictated every sentence, every word, even every punctuation mark. However, if you hold to this manner of inspiration, it presents some problems. First, *we have none of the original writings of Scripture –we only have copies.* In some of these ancient manuscripts (or copies) the text varies from one manuscript to the other. e.g. Words or phrases included in some manuscripts are left out of others, or are slightly different in how they read. Also, the scrolls were all copied by hand, often by monks in cold, dark monasteries. Sometimes errors were made in copying. It's interesting, too, that there are a few instances where a comment on a text was written into the margin by one copyist, then when the text was copied again, the marginal note became part of the actual text. An example of this is the Lord's Prayer. The phrase, "for thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever" is regarded by most scholars as one of these marginal additions, since it is missing in some earlier texts.

Secondly, *the Bible we have is only a translation from the original language of the Bible,* which was Hebrew (the Old Testament), Greek (the New Testament and a bit of Aramaic). If you have ever taken a foreign language, you know how difficult it is to translate word for word from one language to another.

Still another reason why I do not agree with the verbal inspiration theory is that the original texts were written in all capital letters, with no spaces and no punctuation marks! Someone had to decide where to place spaces and commas and periods, for example. And where you put the spaces or punctuation marks could radically change the meaning of a text!

So, I myself don't hold to the verbal inspiration theory. Rather, I believe it is the thoughts, ideas and truths that are inspired. The writers were human – not robots writing down as God dictated. They wrote from their own perspective and experiences. *But they were inspired by the Holy Spirit to write what they did. The Scriptures are more than mere human words and thoughts: it contains words from God.* In 2 Timothy 3:16 where it says, "All scripture is inspired by God...", that literally reads, "All scripture is *God-breathed.*" God breathed His word into human writers.

With this interpretation of inspiration, we can admit that Bible is not always correct in matters of science, for example. The Biblical writers believed, for instance, that the earth is flat.

Nevertheless, the Bible becomes the vehicle, the written means, through which God's truth and the message of salvation in Christ is revealed to us! It is God's Word!

Let's shift gears here. If the Bible is indeed the inspired Word of God, then ***how we can better understand the Bible? Understanding the Scriptures has two aspects to it: (1) the spiritual element, and (2) the scholarly side.***

First, the spiritual ingredient. We cannot understand the Bible's true meaning apart from the Holy Spirit teaching us. The Apostle Paul wrote: "The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness, and *cannot understand them* because they are discerned only through the Spirit" (1 Corinthians 2:14).

You can't understand the Bible in the deepest sense unless you are a believer and have the Holy Spirit within. A person can study the Bible as great literature, and may have brilliant mind. But apart from faith in Christ and the teaching of the Spirit, cannot grasp the true meaning of the Word of God. *The unconverted person cannot receive the spiritual truth in the Word.* So, if you want to understand the Bible, first make sure that you have given your life over to Christ and that you have the Holy Spirit living in you. Then, whenever you read and study Scripture, ask the Spirit to guide you into an understanding of what you read.

So, spiritual side to understanding Bible is when we read Bible, think on it and meditate on it, and allow God's Spirit to open up its truths and apply it to our lives. *But then too, there is the academic, or scholarly aspect of Bible study.* This is where we use the tools and resources of modern Biblical scholarship to further our knowledge of the Scriptures.

God has provided learned men and women – Bible scholars, Bible teachers - to help us understand God's Word. It was a rich, but humbling, experience for me to go to theological seminary, and take courses on the Bible. I was blessed to study under some of the world renowned Bible scholars. I learned that the field of Biblical studies is challenging and complex, that behind each book of the Bible, each story, even *one word*, can be so much background information. So we can tap into some of the resources of modern biblical scholarship and studies!

What are some of the tools at our disposal to better understand the Bible? One is to use a modern translation of the Bible. For about 350 years the King James Version was the standard English Bible. It was translated in 1611. While the King James Version can hardly be matched for its beauty, its language is outdated. The English language today is much different than it was in 1611. Besides that, it is not the most accurate translation, since there have been many new discoveries in Biblical scholarship since then. In our day we have a whole host of newer translations: the New International Version. The New Living Testament, and more. The Common English Bible is, I believe, the newest. translation now available. All of these newer translations help to make the Scriptures more readable.

Another tool we can use to increase our knowledge of the Bible is a Bible Commentary. This is a book that helps interpret the Bible verse by verse, or by blocks of Scripture. It will give us

background information and help us understand the context in which a passage is written. Here is an example of how this can help. 1 Timothy 4:1-3 says this, “Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will renounce the faith by paying attention to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, through the hypocrisy of liars whose consciences are seared with a hot iron. They forbid marriage and demand abstinence from food, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth.” When I was younger, I thought these verses were a prophecy about Roman Catholics (who wouldn’t eat meat on Friday, and not let their priests marry). But not so! Once I consulted a commentary on this passage I learned that “later times” was not necessarily a reference to our day, but that Christians in the first century believed they were living in the “later times” or “last days.” Also, when this passage of Scripture was written there was a heresy called Gnosticism, which regarded the flesh and the physical realm as evil. Gnostics were forbidding the kind of things mentioned in these verses. This passage was written as a warning against them!

Checking a commentary, and getting background information on a passage, can save us from making errors in our interpretation. There are many good commentaries. Some are written especially for lay people. Some cover just one book or several books of the Bible; others cover the whole Bible in one volume. You can spend \$25-\$35 on a one volume commentary, and even less if you go to a used book store. This one time purchase can be invaluable in giving us a better grasp of the Bible, and can last a lifetime!

There are other Bible study tools. A concordance, for example. A concordance will show you where certain words are found in the Bible. Say you are looking for that verse where Jesus says something about moving mountains if you have faith. You can go to a concordance, and look up the words “mountain” or “faith”, and this will give you verses where those words are used, so that you can find the passage you are wanting to find. Then there are Bible dictionaries and Bible handbooks. These will give us information on people, places, and customs mentioned in Scripture. For instance, you will be able to look up topics such as Sadducees, Feast of the Passover, synagogue, King Herod, Capernaum, etc. A Bible atlas contains maps of areas mentioned in the Bible.

The good news is we can go online, or go to a religious bookstore, and find a wealth of materials to help us in our study of the Bible!

Still another tool for growing in our understand of the Scriptures is to develop a system for studying the Bible. Most of us adults got an education by spending at least 12 years of systematic study in school. How much would we have learned if we just went to school when we felt like it? We learn the Bible when we study it day by day, week after week, year upon year! Do you have a system for regular Bible study? There are study programs available. Disciple, is one that’s transformed many lives. We can choose to study a book of the Bible at a time – for example, we can work our way through the Book of Amos, or the Book of Acts, or the Letter to the Hebrews. Read a section of Scripture. Reflect on it. Then use a commentary and see what it says about that section of the Biblical book. We can also study the Bible the themes. Follow through and see what the Bible says about salvation, or grace, or prophecy, e. g. We can

do character studies, studying the lives of people like Abraham, Moses, Joshua, Peter, Paul. There are also many different kinds of *study Bibles* that can help us.

One final point here: *We grow in our understanding of Scripture when we study the Bible with others.* This is a great way to get fresh ideas as we look at a passage of Scripture, as we benefit from the thoughts and experiences of others. Most churches offer some kinds of group studies: Sunday School classes, small groups, mid-week Bible studies, or more intensive studies like the Disciple Bible course.

A long time ago the Old Testament law told us: “One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord” (Deuteronomy 8:3). Jesus affirmed that truth.

Our Bible is the written Word of God that points to Jesus, the living Word of God! It is the food that nourishes our soul!

Harry L. Kaufhold, Jr.
Community United Methodist Church
February 24, 2019

