

# *“What Is The Bible and How Do We Read It?”*

*Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7, Romans 5:12-19; Matthew 4:1-11  
Part II of IX in the sermon series: “Christianity 101”*

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*March 1, 2020*

From the Pulpit

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A communion meditation delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Lent I, March 1, 2020, dedicated to Cal Roetzel, Bonnie Kittel, Brevard Childs, Robert Wilson, Leander Keck, Richard Hays, Abraham J. Malherbe and Walter Brueggemann, and all the women and men who have touched my life through their powerful studies and teachings in Jewish and Christian Scriptures, to Taco and Mariner Taft and always to the glory of God!

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On Ash Wednesday, we started our sermon series on “Christianity 101” with a reflection about baptism – our initiation into our Christian faith. Copies of this sermon can be found in the information racks and online at our website – [www.first-church.org](http://www.first-church.org). You will find sermons in the Worship section under Sermons. You can listen to the podcast as well.

Today, we will explore the Bible. Up front, I want to thank the late, great Marcus Borg for his inspiring chapter on the Bible in his 2011 book, *Speaking Christian*. His influence is embedded in this reflection. Thanks friend.

Since this a communion meditation, this will be the shortest ride through the Bible and how to read it that I have ever given. But, in Lenten small groups which are beginning this week and next, I recommend you join with small group members for a “deeper dive.” We could still use some small group locations and facilitators. See Mark Williams, Emily Corzine or me if you would like to help or join in a small group. Thanks.

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*Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation.  
Amen.*

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***The Bible.*** On a very basic level, when we speak of the Bible, we are referring to Christianity’s holy book, our sacred scripture. On the surface, this seems really simple enough. But, once you get past the “facts” of the Bible, we head into the conflict and controversy of the Bible – its origin, its authority, and how we interpret “God’s Word.” Crossing the line from facts to the meaning of the Bible is the single most divisive issue in Christianity today (*Speaking Christian*, p. 55).

Before we hit the conflict, let’s begin with the “facts” about the Bible – the information about which there is no disagreement.

As Christian sacred scripture, the Bible is the foundation for Christianity.

The Christian Bible includes the Old and New Testament. The First Testament is the traditional Christian name for the Jewish Bible (we refer to this as Hebrew Scripture because it is written in the Hebrew language). The Second is a collection of Christian documents from the century after Jesus. Though both are sacred scripture to Christians, we often neglect the former and elevate the later.

All Christians agree that there are at least 66 books in the Bible – 39 in the Old Testament and 27 in the New Testament. Based on varying translations, the 66 books are about 611,000 words long.

More Protestants restrict the Bible to these 66 books. However, for a majority of Christians – Catholic, Orthodox and Anglican – there are more books, an additional collection of books commonly called the Apocrypha, Jewish writings from the two centuries before Jesus (See how quickly we got to divisions!). The most common of these are I and II Maccabees, Sirach, Wisdom of Solomon, and Judith. The Old Testament is four times longer than the New Testament. The Apocrypha is about four-fifths as long as the New Testament.

The Old Testament has three main parts – **Torah, Prophets and Writings**. The **Torah** (also known as the Law or the Pentateuch) includes the first five books of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. These are the most definitive and significant books of Judaism. The **Prophets** include all four books of the Major Prophets and 13 books by

Minor Prophets, and also I and II Samuel, I and II Kings. The **Writings** include Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Esther, Ecclesiastes, and others. They are a blend of history, poetry, inspirational sayings (Ibid, p. 56).

The New Testament has four kinds of documents: the four **Gospels** Matthew, Mark, Luke and John; 21 **Letters** attributed to figures such as Paul, Peter, James, and John; one **Narrative** about the early church history known as *Acts*; and one anticipation of the “**End Time**” known as “Revelation” to Protestants and the “Apocalypse” to Catholics (Ibid, p. 56).

To refer to biblical documents as “Books” is common but it is also somewhat misleading. In our modern times, a book refers to a document of considerable length. But many documents are not very long. A few are as brief as a page or two – some with just one chapter in the book. Others have less than a dozen pages and most are under forty pages. The Greek root of the word Bible reflects this, it means “little books.”

There is another critical difference in the Books of the Bible. In our world, books are generally written for people the author doesn't know. In the Bible, the documents were written for people whom the authors did know. The Hebrew Scriptures were all written within the Jewish community and directed toward the ancient Jewish people. The Christian scriptures were all written from within and for the early Christian communities. All of these statements are non-controversial (Ibid, p. 57).

**Now the fun begins. Beyond these basic facts, Christians disagree vigorously about the Bible's origin, authority and interpretation.**

For hundreds of millions of Christians, the Bible is called the “inerrant and infallible revelation of God” and it is to be interpreted **literally and absolutely**. This understanding of the Bible locates its absolute authority in its origin. Followers of Biblical Literalism believe the Word of God came directly from God's mouth to our ears. It is inspired as no other book is. It has divine authority because it is of divine origin.

But, hundreds of millions of Christians also have serious problems with the infallible understanding of the **Bible**. The alternative understanding of the Bible's origin is grounded for many of us in the historical and theological scholarship of the last few centuries. This scholarship makes it clear that the Bible is “divinely inspired” but produced by humans. We see that the Jewish Scriptures were developed by centuries of writings coming out of ancient Israel and the Christian Scriptures are a product of early Christian communities. These understandings have come from excruciating and extensive study of languages, patterns of authorship, carbon dating the scrolls, understanding the history, the period of the writings, and deciphering the variety of voices expressing faith in God from within people's faith-filled contexts.

To affirm all of this does not mean denying the reality of God or the absolute inspiration of God's presence within these

communities and their texts. Quite the opposite. It honors the people's experiences of, encounters with, and stories about God and their deep understanding about how we should live in Godly ways.

But it is their story – **NOT** God's infallible, inerrant, and absolute story. Their wisdom, their convictions and their insights also include their limitations, their blind spots, their prejudices and their misapprehensions. Reading the Bible attentively, carefully, and historically makes this clear (Ibid, p. 58).

For example, did God ever command that all men, women and children of our enemies should be killed? Did God ever say slavery was okay and sanctioned? Did God forbid remarriage after divorce? Did God ever command adulterers to be stoned to death? Did God ever say that children who dishonor their parents should be put to death? Did God ever command women to be silent in the church? Did God judge same-sex loving relationships as an abomination? Is God violent? Will the second coming of Jesus involve incredible suffering and death for most of humanity, salvation for a tiny number and the ultimate destruction of the world (Ibid, pp. 58-59)?

Or is it fair to say that passages in the Bible that teach these things and more tell us how some of our spiritual ancestors saw things? Don't they suggest – persuasively and overwhelmingly – that the Bible is their product and their determination and not God's?

My answers to all these questions are quite different from someone who reads this as the inerrant, infallible, literal and divine word of God. As I like to say, **“I take the Bible seriously not literally.”**

This reading of the Bible has its authority – not grounded in the origin of God’s absolute Word – but grounded instead in the sacredness of the texts which convey the depth and love of God expressed over generations and millennia. The authority of the Bible has been determined by thousands of years of writings which have been gathered and collected and bound together by our spiritual ancestors and then granted to us as divinely inspired. Their inspiration comes from God, their authority comes from their presence in the final collection of books (Ibid, p. 60).

We best understand the Bible from the texts’ settings ancient contexts inspired by their metaphorical meanings. I trust their more than literal, more than factual, more than historical meanings. The pages of the Bible cry out for us to learn the lessons of faithfulness to God and love of our neighbors.

One last thought on the Bible for this morning....

Each Sunday, when we read the texts, our liturgists or pastors say, “The Word of God for the people of God” or “May light break forth on God’s holy Word.” To which we all reply, “thanks be to God!” As you know, there are times when “the word of God” phrase and the thanksgiving phrase get stuck in our mouths. We don’t feel so thankful for the severing of limbs,

the plucking out of eyes, the death of thousands, and on and on...

It really is an overall acknowledgment and celebration of the totality of God's Word. It is our affirming the revelation found in "the Word of God." It is our way of saying that it really matters that God's Word, in Jesus Christ, became flesh and dwelt among us. It is not our way of saying that every word in God's Word is infallible. To echo the language of the Apostle Paul, "we have this treasure in earthen vessels." The Bible is an earthen vessel that contains God's treasure. Or in the words of the great Protestant reformer, Martin Luther, "the Bible is the Manger in which we find Christ" (Ibid, p. 63).

For this gift, for this treasure we call the Bible, "thanks be to God." Amen.

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A huge thanks goes to Marcus J. Borg for his book, *Speaking Christian*, and especially chapter 4, "The Bible," which I have quoted extensively throughout this sermon today, published, Harper Collins, NY, NY, 2011, pp. 55-63.