

“God said it; I believe it, that settles it: Half Truths”

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Place: Lakewood UMC

Texts: 2 Timothy 3:16-17; Deuteronomy 23:12-14

Themes: Scriptural interpretation, truth, authority

Occasion: Half Truths, sermon series

I'll bet you've never heard a sermon about where to go to the bathroom. I'll be honest, neither have I. Nor have I ever preached on this text in my entire life. I don't know many pastors who have.

However, back in the 1880's you might have heard a sermon on this text. Why? Because indoor plumbing was becoming widely available for the first time and churches were beginning to debate its merits. Before that time, if someone felt "nature's call" while they were at church, they had to leave the building and visit an outhouse.

Suddenly, parishioners all over America began suggesting that everyone would benefit if they modernized their churches with indoor plumbing. No one today suggests that churches should build outhouses. And I'll take a guess, you're glad about that.

But in the 1880's when indoor plumbing was an innovation, this passage from Deuteronomy was taken by many to mean that God was against indoor plumbing. The argument went something like this:

When the Israelites were in the wilderness before coming into the Promised Land, the Lord was with them in their camps as they traveled. God made his residence with them as they traveled. So, according to the instructions of Deuteronomy, the Israelites were to set up an area outside of their encampments for relieving themselves.

That way, the Lord would not see anything "indecent" among them. The passage explicitly says God might "turn away" from the Israelites – that is, God might deny his blessings and protections from

his people – if he saw something indecent. Even though going to the bathroom is a part of the natural workings of the human bodies that God created. Somehow this is unholy and unacceptable.

By this logic, since churches were understood as God's house, then the same rules apply about where people could take care of their personal business. An outhouse was literally outside of God's house and was therefore acceptable, whereas indoor plumbing brought toilets into God's house.

And in fact, many preachers made this argument from the pulpit. "God said it, I believe it, that settles it." But is it necessarily so? Simply because something is written within the pages of the Bible, does it mean it is God's will for ever and ever?

Today we are looking at this simple phrase, that on the face of it seems reasonable. "God said it, I believe it, that settles it." Don't we want to affirm the importance of scripture? Don't we want people to have faith in it? Don't we want the Bible to have authority in our lives? Yes, to all of those questions, with a caveat. Yes, but....

The challenge with this phrase is that it oversimplifies Scripture. It is even naïve to assume, all we have to do is read the Bible, without thinking or interpreting it. All of us interpret Scripture, even when we take it seriously and allow it to have authority in our life. We still filter it, in some way, if we're honest.

If we took the Bible literally, "God said it, I believe it, that settles it," all of the time, many of us would have to radically change our behavior. For example, you wouldn't be allowed to wear fabric that was blended or sow two different kinds of seed in your field, a violation of Leviticus 19:19. You would have to eliminate pork and

shrimp from your diet, Leviticus 11:7-12. For men, you couldn't trim the edges of your beard, Leviticus 19:27.

Children who curse or strike their parents, or who are persistently rebellious should be put to death, Exodus 21:15. You wouldn't be allowed to mow your lawn or clean your house on Saturdays, the Sabbath, or you could be put to death, Exodus 35:2. For women, if you're not a virgin when you marry, the men of your town could stone you to death, Deuteronomy 22:21.

No, most Christians don't read these passages and say, "God said it, I believe it, that settles it." Instead, we say "that was part of God's covenant with Israel, but those laws are no longer binding upon Christians." In other words, we filter the Bible, we interpret it.

In fact, Jesus himself interpreted the Law. He was criticized for healing on the Sabbath, but replied, "The Sabbath was created for humans; humans were not created for the Sabbath." (Mark 2:27) On other occasions he was stricter than the Law of Moses. When it came to divorce, Jesus said that Moses allowed for divorce in case of adultery, but that was never God's intention for marriage in the first place. God made an exception because of our sinfulness.

And yet, with the woman who had been married five times before and was now with another man, Jesus showed mercy instead of judgment. Jesus interpreted the Law. He never held to an attitude of "God said it, I believe, that settles it." Like the rabbis of his time, Jesus was helping people to interpret what the Scriptures say.

Here's the point I'm trying to make, whether we admit it or not, Christians interpret the Bible, and seldom do we actually read the whole Bible thinking, "God said it, I believe it, that settles it."

Most often, that quote is used when trying to end an argument, with the assumption, “who are you to think you know better than what the Bible says?”

I contend however, that Scripture is meant to be read and studied, talked about and interpreted, and even struggled with. There are things in the Bible that I categorically reject as not being God’s final word on the subject.

For example, Paul suggests that women should be silent in church. But I have found women to be quite gifted in teaching and preaching and leading churches. I am proud to be a part of a tradition that ordains women. The Holy Spirit is not quenched in their midst, but is quite evident.

I categorically reject the use of Scripture to defend the notion of slavery, even though you can find evidence in the Bible that seems to support it. The notion that one person can own another human being is anathema, it is a cursed thought. All persons were created in the image of God and worthy of dignity and respect. I know that because of the way Jesus treated all people, even “the least of these.”

The problem with “God said it, I believe it, that settles it,” is that it tends to oversimplify what Scripture is, and how we are to read it. It assumes the words of Scripture were, in essence, dictated by God to the biblical authors.

But is it really true that “God said it?” There are a few times when the author says “God said to me,” or “The Holy Spirit told me to write this down.” Yet most of the time the biblical authors do not claim any form of dictation but claim to be writing their own insights, reflections and ideas concerning God’s will.

Does God speak to us through these words on these pages? Absolutely. But must we assume that God dictated them, or that they are true for all times and places? I think not. But if so, then we need to pull the toilets out of the wall and erect outhouses in the parking lot. And I don't think the trustees will be too happy about that.

So, how do we make sense of Scripture today? How do we apply it to our lives? How do we decide if something should be taken figuratively rather than literally, or that a particular verse may not apply to us at all anymore? Thankfully the process may not be as complicated as our previous discussion has implied.

We have access to great commentaries and study Bibles which can help us understand the Bible. Our pastors and churches are meant to guide us – in sermons, in Bible studies, in one-on-one conversations over a cup of coffee. These will all help us to better grasp what Scripture is saying to us today.

It's important, though, to recognize that when we study Scripture, our own biases can lead us to hear what we want to hear. Liberals can read the Bible and find particular passages to support their beliefs, just as easily as conservative Christians can and do.

We also need to be careful of small groups where there is little training among the members. Discussions can go on and on but end up way off base of what the text originally meant, leading to a case of the "blind leading the blind."

But if we set aside our biases, use some basic Bible study tools, and use our intellects, Bible study can be a very rich and rewarding adventure. God will continue to speak to God's people. This book is the authoritative guide for the life of every Christian. Yes,

we need to interpret it, but we can't dismiss it either, claiming it's just another book. This is the book that has a claim on my life and yours.

I may wrestle with it. I may struggle with it. I may disagree with it. But I cannot ignore it. This is the book we keep coming back to as our reference point. It is our compass and our guide. But it takes work to learn how to use this particular compass.

For me, the most important lens for interpreting Scripture is Jesus himself and his words. When a Scripture text seems inconsistent with something Jesus says or the way he acts, and I have to choose between the two, I will choose Jesus every time.

John, in his Gospel, describes Jesus as God's Word that became flesh: he is the definitive Word of God. All other words of Scripture were mediated through ordinary human beings. But Christians believe that in Jesus, God came to us, walked among us, showed us and taught us who God is, and who we are meant to be.

So in conclusion, it is a half-truth to say: "God said it, I believe it, that settles it." As Adam Hamilton in his book suggests, a more truthful statement would be: "God influenced the writing of this book. I read, study and sometimes wrestle with it. And as I interpret it in the light of Jesus Christ, I hear God speak through it, and I seek to live its words as best I can." Amen. Let us pray.

This sermon borrows heavily from the book *Half Truths* by Adam Hamilton, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2016. Chapter 4: "God Said it, I Believe it, That Settles it," pp. 103-137.