

“Toward an Honest and Reverent View of Scripture”

Date: October 16, 2016

Place: Lakewood UMC

Texts: Matthew 22:33-40; John 1:1-14 Theme: Scripture, Bible

Occasion: Making Sense of the Bible, series

Well, we've come to the end of our series entitled *Making Sense of the Bible*. For some of you this has been a very liberating and helpful series, as it has helped you to make sense of some troubling Bible passages. For some of you this has been a somewhat disturbing series, as it has challenged your previous understanding of the Bible.

Today, I'd like to summarize some of what we've learned and try to help those of you who might have been upset by what you have heard. Whether or not you have been aware of it, there has been a struggle within Christianity, for a few hundred years about how to correctly read the Bible.

A significant number of conservative and evangelical Christians believe in the verbal, plenary inspiration of Scripture – that God told the writers exactly which words to write down. The conclusion they draw is the Bible is inerrant and infallible, it contains no mistakes, because God doesn't make mistakes.

This view, and others like it, place such a strong emphasis on *God's* role in composing scripture that there is little room left to wrestle with the Bible, or to question its troubling passages. The only course of action is to justify these passages and to insist they are still valid expressions of God's will.

For Adam Hamilton, myself, and many other Christians, this view is not an entirely accurate way of describing the Bible. It's not

hard to demonstrate inconsistencies in the Bible. There are a lot of problematic passages in which the Bible either teaches or accepts behavior we consider immoral today. For example: slavery, the subordination of women, men having concubines, genocide and the death penalty for crimes we would never deem worthy of death today.

Now, some of those on the left solve this problem by going too far in the other direction. The Bible, for them, becomes primarily a human book, with little room for God's involvement in it at all. For them, other than being a book of antiquity, the Bible is not in any way the Word of God.

But there is a middle ground. Instead of assuming the Bible is the result of God's word-for-word dictation, or that the Bible is merely a human book, we can read it another way.

The Scriptures were written by human beings who were inspired by God, yet wrote in the light of their own experiences, the scientific knowledge they had access to, and the historical circumstances in which they lived.

They tried to address the needs of the communities to whom they wrote. They were shaped not only by the Spirit, but also by their own theological and moral convictions. The Bible is a lot more complex than we ever supposed.

One of the key points we've tried to make over the past several weeks is the affirmation that the Bible is inspired by God. But that inspiration does not mean verbal dictation. The biblical authors were inspired in the same way and to the same degree as many contemporary preachers and prophets and authors.

Even ordinary Christians have been inspired by the Holy Spirit, in every age. You've likely felt moved by the Spirit, and you have probably heard God speak to you – as you listened to a sermon or song, or read an inspirational book. The inspiration experienced by the authors of the Bible was no different than our own.

This is troubling to many Christians who need the Bible to be inspired to a greater degree than other literature. They rightfully ask, "How then is the Bible any different from contemporary Christian writings that are widely read, very popular and quite inspiring to Christians today?" It's an important question.

What makes the Bible more authoritative than contemporary inspirational writings is the proximity of the biblical writers to the events they were recording. They were there. They knew someone who was there. They were closer to the events than we are today.

As well, after they wrote their words down, the early church experienced God speaking to them through these words. They determined that these writings contained the essentials of the Christian faith and found them helpful during the opening centuries of the Christian era.

Over time, the Church declared these writings to be the authoritative writings meant to guide the Church. But as recently as the Reformation in the 16th century, Christians have been debating which books rightfully belong in the Bible.

In 1563 the Anglican Church issued this statement: "Holy Scripture contains all things necessary to salvation; so that whatever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required

of any man, that it should be believed as an article of the Faith, or be thought necessary to salvation.”

So what does that mean? It basically says that no doctrine or practice can be insisted upon by the church if it is not proved or supported by Scripture. There is nothing in this statement about inerrancy or verbal, plenary inspiration.

That was as far as the Anglicans, and later the Methodists, would go in formalizing a doctrinal statement about the Bible. In essence they said that the writings of the Old Testament and New Testament offer us the essentials we need to know for our faith.

This Anglican and Methodist view of Scripture is far more “elastic” than the creedal statements made by some conservative Christians today. It allows us room to question things that are in the scriptures, just as Luther and Calvin did themselves.

My friends, you are not dishonoring God by asking questions of scripture that seem inconsistent with modern scientific knowledge or geography or history. You are not being unfaithful to God if you ask questions of a verse that seems inconsistent with the picture of God seen in the life, teachings, death and resurrection of Jesus.

We recognize the Spirit’s inspiration of the human authors of the Bible as being similar to the work of the Holy Spirit in your own life. The Holy Spirit prompts you, but does not dictate. The Holy Spirit whispers to you, but you don’t always hear correctly. The Spirit is at work in your life, but that does not make you inerrant or infallible.

You are not judging God by wrestling with the Bible; you are asking questions of the human authors of scripture. Jesus himself wrestled with the Bible. We remember him saying, “You have heard

it said, but I say to you....” giving a new interpretation. The apostle Paul wrestled with Scripture, when he told the early church that circumcision was no longer required. A person no less than the apostle Paul did not think that Scripture was infallible or inerrant.

Though we wrestle with Scripture, we take it seriously. Though we may question the authors, this book still has a claim on our life. It is our guide to salvation. The Bible contains the theological, spiritual and ethical reflections of God’s people.

It offers us the earliest and most reliable testimony to the life, teachings, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It contains the earliest Christian reflections on the meaning of his life for the ordering of our lives.

Through the Bible, God has spoken, and God continues to speak to the human race. It contains everything we need to know about God and God’s will for our lives.

I read a portion of the Bible each and every day. The stories of the Bible are the defining stories of my life. Its teachings daily shape my life. While I do not read the Bible literally, I take it very seriously listening for God’s truth for my life and for the world.

With Paul, I believe the Bible is God-breathed and “useful for teaching, reproof, correction and training in righteousness.” I love the Bible.... and sometimes I wrestle with it!

Let us pray.

This sermon borrows heavily from the book *Making Sense of the Bible*, by Adam Hamilton, HarperCollins Publisher, NY, NY, 2014. Chapter 31: “Toward an Honest and Reverent View of Scripture.” Pp. 291-300.