

A Doctrine of the Bible

Taught by Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Summer 2015

Lecture I: The Bible As Text

Sunday, June 21, 2015

WELCOME

Welcome, everyone, to our first session on “A Doctrine of the Bible.” Warm welcome to each of you!

Let us begin with prayer. This is a classic prayer for God’s grace in studying the Bible:

Blessed Lord, who caused all Holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen

Notice that I call this course “A Doctrine of the Bible.” At first I had thought of a bit different title — a title that I soon decided would be too highfalutin for me. I had thought about calling it “The Doctrine of the Bible.” Well, it is not “The” doctrine, it is simple “A” doctrine — it is the doctrine of a simple parish pastor.

The truth is, I suspect that each of us has “A Doctrine of the Bible.” We each love the Bible and we each have some theory about why we consider the Bible to be important and how we ought to go about interpreting the Bible.

What I hope is that maybe by sharing my doctrine of the Bible with you, it will help give each of us a methodical way to begin thinking about this gift of the Holy Spirit to the church: the Bible. (hold up my dear Bible)

Now, I can think of real theologians who could do a better job at teaching us a doctrine of the Bible than I can. Theologian David Yeago, for example, has devoted his career, his massive learning, his piety and brilliance to this subject. David is a friend of our congregation, and so maybe later we can invite him to address questions and puzzles that we have trouble sorting out for ourselves.

Meanwhile, let me share with you my thoughts about the Bible and about faithful ways to read the Bible.

By the way, if you should hear little church bells ringing at 10:45 a.m., those bells are chimes on my iPhone. I have set the alarm for 10:45 a.m. because then we have to hasten upstairs to the main church for the liturgy. Especially this Sunday, we need to hasten upstairs because this is Confirmation Sunday for our young people.

LET'S BEGIN WITH THIS THESIS

Thesis: Whatever else can be said about the Bible, at least we can begin with this: The Bible is a text. It is a fixed array of words that opens up a world and can be entered into well or poorly.

Texts are important to us. Take, for example, the Declaration of Independence of the Thirteen united States of America:

IN CONGRESS, July 4, 1776.

The unanimous Declaration of the thirteen united States of America,

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.--That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed...

I bet there are people in our land who re-read The Declaration of Independence or our Constitution once a year, say, on the Fourth of July. The words of the Declaration and the Constitution echo around in their minds. They live *with* these texts, and the texts somehow lives *in* them, and this process of study makes them a particular kind of citizen in our land. I suspect it makes them strong citizens.

Here is another text – one that warms the hearts of us Lutherans. It is verse 4 of Luther's hymn "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God":

God's Word forever shall abide,
no thanks to foes, who fear it;
for God himself fights by our side
with weapons of the Spirit.
Were they to take our house,
goods, honor, child, or spouse,
though life be wrenched away,
they cannot win the day.
The kingdom's ours forever!

With this hymn echoing in their hearts, Christians have been strengthened to do some mighty deeds for the Lord.

Let me lift up another text for you — one that means a lot to me. It concerns slavery. The reason I want to speak of slavery is that sometimes people says that the Bible endorses slavery. We then think to ourselves that if we can resist what the Bible says about slavery, then we can resist other things that we modern folk

find to be wrong in the Bible. Well, I will want to argue that a careful and loving reading of the Bible does not endorse slavery. Indeed, the Bible unleashed forces on earth that helped to overcome that wickedness. We will turn to that soon. First, let me set the stage by speaking of what I consider a masterpiece of American literature and of moral persuasion: *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*.

Frederick Douglass came from my neck of the woods, the Eastern Shore of Maryland. He was a slave on a plantation not far from my hometown. Later he was a slave in Baltimore, and eventually he escaped from slavery and became an eloquent speaker and writer against slavery.

Let me lift up a passage in his *Narrative*. The passage is called Douglass's "apostrophe" to the sailing ships on the Chesapeake Bay. "Apostrophe" is a rhetorical device in which the writer speaks to an inanimate object – a thing - as if he were speaking to a person. In this case, Douglass speaks to the "moving multitude of ships" on the Bay. Here are the first couple sentences of his apostrophe:

"You are loosed from your moorings, and are free; I am fast in my chains, and am a slave! You move merrily before the gentle gale, and I sadly before the bloody whip! You are freedom's swift-winged angels, that fly round the world; I am confined in bands of iron! O that I were free!"¹

This from a man who was denied an education, from a poor boy who paid pennies to his white friends to purchase letters from them, slowly building up his vocabulary: a, b, c, and so on.

These couple sentences give you a feel for the spirit of Douglass's book.

Now, my theme is that the Bible is a text, and like any text, it can be read well or poorly. A poor reading of Douglass's text, for example would be for a slave owner to read Douglass's *Narrative* searching for clues on how to prevent his slaves from escaping. A horrible reading of the *Narrative* would be for Douglass's old slave owner to search for clues on how he might recover Douglass. I mean, Douglass published his *Narrative* in 1845. He was still a fugitive slave. Well, the reading of the slave owner trying to retain his slaves would be a poor reading of this book — it would be all out of synch with the flow of the book.

A somewhat better reading would be that of a slave mistress who reads the story about the kind-hearted mistress in Douglass's new home in Baltimore and who concludes that she too wants to be a good slave mistress. Well, that's better, but still is a poor reading of the *Narrative*.

Or we could read the *Narrative* and note how bit by bit, that kind-hearted mistress in Baltimore becomes cruel, and we can grieve over the capacity of slavery to brutalize not only the slave but also the slave owner. Well, yes, that is

¹ Douglass, Frederick (2015-04-06). *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (Kindle Locations 927-930). Chios Classics. Kindle Edition.

one of Douglass's themes, but it is not yet a good reading of the Narrative, for the *Narrative* is an eloquent and passionate cry for freedom for the slave. It has a secondary theme about the effects on the slave owner, but its main passion is for freedom for the slave.

You get my point, don't you. There can be intelligent and sensitive readings of a text, and there can be poor readings of it.

PHILEMON AND ONESIMUS

Now, let's turn to the Bible. Let's consider Saint Paul's brief letter to Philemon. Paul is writing to Philemon on behalf of Philemon's slave Onesimus. It seems that Onesimus has departed from Philemon and Paul is sending him back. Paul urges Philemon to receive back Onesimus as "no longer as a slave but more than a slave, as a beloved brother..."

It is fair, I believe, to be troubled by this letter to Philemon, because St. Paul does not seem to be condemning slavery. He is rather asking that these two Christians remember that they are both brothers in Christ, though one is a slave and the other a slave owner.

There are other passages in St. Paul like this. Perhaps most striking are the sayings in Ephesians 6. There St. Paul addresses both the slave and the master:

Slaves, be obedient to those who are your earthly masters,
with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, as to Christ...
(Ephesians 6:5, RSV)

Masters, ... forbear threatening, knowing that he who is both
their Master and yours is in heaven, and that there is no
partiality with him. (Ephesians 6:9, RSV)

We might wish that these verses were not in the Bible. I think it is better to read these passages in the context of the whole Bible, and then to see what profit we can find in these particular verses. An important classical principle about the Bible applies here: The Bible interprets itself. Any one passage needs to bear in mind the overall witness of the Bible.

So, let's begin to discuss slavery in the Bible, as an illustration.

First off, let's note about Paul's letter to Philemon that Paul did not invent slavery, nor is he commending it or defending it. He seems to be thinking out the meaning of the Gospel in the world in which he actually lives. It is a world that believed in slavery. St. Paul appeals to Philemon to be kind in his conduct toward his slave. In fact, he urges Philemon to recognize his slave as a brother in Christ. This is unstable. This is revolutionary. This is a step toward William Wilberforce and the English abolition of slavery movement.

Let's broaden our horizons about slavery in the Bible. First off, let us note that God did not make us to be slaves. He could have made us to be slaves, say, of the

angels. But no. We were not made for slavery. Even when Adam and Eve fell into sin and were expelled from the garden, and the ground became contrary and childbirth became hard, still Adam and Eve were not cast into slavery. No slavery for humanity.

Later, one of the patriarchs became a slave — young Joseph, of the coat of many colors. But the Bible views this as appalling. It was great wickedness on the part of Joseph's brothers that they sold their brother into slavery. But God's people are not meant for slavery, and so it is not long before Joseph is elevated from slavery back into freedom.

But it seems to me that the Bible's most massive case against slavery is the exodus of Israel from Egyptian bondage. That exodus made life hard for Israel as she wandered in the wilderness. But nothing seems to have angered the Lord more than Israel's dallying around with the idea of returning to the fleshpots of Egypt. That Israel should trade her freedom for a bowl of porridge back in Egypt was outrageous. God's people are not meant for slavery.

The Bible's opposition to spiritual slavery appears again and again in St. Paul's exhortations against sin. For the life of him, St. Paul cannot imagine why free Christians would want to return to the slavery of sin.²

And then we come to St. Paul's great teaching about equality:

There is neither Jew nor Greek, *there is neither slave nor free*,
there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ
Jesus. (Galatians 3:28, RSV)

For people of goodwill, for people who read their Bible's well, this teaching eventually became the death knell of slavery.

So, that is one of my themes in this course: The Bible interprets itself. The Bible is a Spirit-crafted text that can be read well or poorly, but we should try to read it well.

Let me approach this theme from another direction. This time I want to lift up an argument — a line of reasoning -- about homosexuality. In doing this, let me clarify that homosexuality is not my issue here. I figure that homosexual Christians are like all Christians: we are all trying and struggling to do the best we can to be faithful to Jesus, and meanwhile we hope for mercy on one another. So my issue here is not homosexuality. My issue is the Bible. But let me illustrate a

² For example,

¹⁶Do you not know that if you yield yourselves to any one as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness? ¹⁷But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, ¹⁸and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness. (Romans 6:16-18, RSV)

point about the Bible by lifting up an actual, living moral argument. It goes like this:

The Bible says that for a man to lie with a man is an abomination.³
The Bible says that eating shellfish is an abomination.⁴
You eat shrimp.
So homosexual sex is okay.

I hope you can sense that something has gone wrong with this argument. One way to see what is wrong is to notice that this kind of reasoning essentially tosses the Bible to the wind. You can get rid of anything you don't like in the Bible with this kind of reasoning. For example,

Worshiping false gods is a sin.
Eating shellfish is a sin.
You eat shrimp.
So idolatry is okay.

But my fundamental complaint about this kind of argument is that it has an entirely wrong view of the Bible. Let me put it this way: The Bible is not a rule book, but rather a world. Let me repeat that: The Bible is not a rule book, but a world! We do not honor the Bible by consulting it to see whether there is some rule relevant to life. Rather, we honor the Bible by entering into it. We honor the Bible by entering into what Karl Barth called "the strange new world of the Bible."

I end with two important ideas about this strange new world of the Bible: First, the Bible tells a great, complex, and glorious story, and it happens to be true. It is the truest thing in the world. Indeed, it is the story of the world. You and I are part of this story, and we would do well to learn the nature of reality from it.

³ Leviticus 18:22, RSV

You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination.

Leviticus 20:13, RSV

If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death, their blood is upon them.

⁴ Leviticus 11:10, RSV

But anything in the seas or the rivers that has not fins and scales, of the swarming creatures in the waters and of the living creatures that are in the waters, is an abomination to you.

And my second point is related to this: It would be good for us to read the Bible with the understanding that our destiny lies in the hand of the Bible's Author. It would be same with any author and text. If we knew that our destiny lay in the hands of Melville, for example, then it would be rational for us to ready *Moby Dick* with great care, with great sensitivity to its nuances, and with great attention to its themes. Even more so with the Bible. The Bible is the "discourse of the Holy Spirit." When we deal with the Bible, we are dealing with the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, to whom belongs the glory, now and forever. Amen.

Our next session will be a month from now: 10 a.m. July 19, 2015. In that session we will deal with the idea of "The Inspiration of the Bible." The Bible is a long and complex text. It is a carefully crafted, unified, minutely interwoven body of discourse granted to the church by the Holy Spirit for the purpose of maintaining true faith across the continuing generations of the church. We believe that the writing, the collecting, the process of canonization, and the interpretation of the Bible to this very day are all inspired by the Holy Spirit. So, the "Inspiration of the Bible" will be our topic in Session 2.