

A Doctrine of the Bible

Taught by Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Summer 2015

Lecture 2: The Inspiration of Scripture

10 a.m. Sunday, July 19, 2015

Welcome, everyone, to our second session on “A Doctrine of the Bible.” Please feel free to interrupt me as we go along. We are talking about important matters, and I want us to be able to ask questions or raise objections while they are still fresh on our minds.

In our first session, I offered the theme that 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. The Bible is like other books: it can be read intelligently or badly. May I suggest to you that a key line from my first lecture was that “The Bible is not a rule book, it is a world.” It is not good enough to scan the Bible looking for rules to live by. Rather, we should try to *enter into* the Bible, imaginatively identify with the characters in the Bible, and notice the ways of God and human beings in the Bible. To use the great phrase of theologian Karl Barth, we should strive to enter into “the strange new world of the Bible.” Then, when we have been inspired and transfigured by that strange new world of the Bible, we should look around at our modern world with new eyes – eyes that have seen the King, eyes that have seen Jesus Christ and his way of the Cross and his way of love.

So, among other things, the Bible is a piece of literature – a really good and true piece of literature. And we should try to read it well and honestly, with great attentiveness to its overall flow, and with the conviction that our destiny is in the hands of the Bible’s Author.

In our last session, I introduced a traditional rule about reading the Bible. It goes this way: The Bible illumines and interprets itself. That is, any one passage should be interpreted in light of the whole Bible, especially as the Bible points to Jesus Christ and to his love.

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.

Let me repeat this paragraph for you. I mean to return to this paragraph later in this lecture:

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.

A FALSE NOTION

This morning's session is on the classical doctrine called "the inspiration of holy scripture." To get us started, let me share with you a coherent, but strange and awful notion about the Bible. This is a piece of functioning theology in the ELCA. In the end, this theology destroys the Bible. Let me tell you about it.

The argument goes back to the early days of the Reconciling in Christ movement in the Metropolitan New York Synod of the ELCA. This was back in the mid-1990s. The "Reconciling in Christ" movement had a noble mission: To welcome homosexual people into the church. Who could disagree with that? Certainly I agreed with it and still do. The church is "catholic," which means that it is open to the whole world. The catholic nature of the church means that if anyone is not welcome to me in the church, it is I who does not belong — not that person.

And so, there was nothing wrong with the official mission of the Reconciling in Christ movement. In fact, it was a good and pious movement.

The problem is that everyone knew that Reconciling in Christ was after something else too. The movement did not seek simply to welcome homosexual people into the church, but more importantly, to revise traditional church teaching about homosexuality, to say that homosexual sex can be fine. Here in our Metro NY Synod, the hand was revealed quite quickly. I remember the speech clearly. A delegate to one of the synod assemblies said this, with great passion:

We are always saying that homosexuals are welcome in our churches, welcome in our churches! But when homosexual people come to our churches, they find a teaching that makes them uncomfortable. So just how welcoming are we?

No one thought to answer, "Why all this emphasis on being 'comfortable'? How can a church with a crucified Lord — a Lord who bids his followers to take up their cross and follow him — think that the truth of the church must be fit to that which is comfortable?"

There was no objection to the argument about traditional teaching being uncomfortable. Rather, people seemed to think that it was decisive.

Now we come to the argument about the Bible I want to lift up. Back in those early days, I asked an influential leader of our Metro New York Synod Reconciling in Christ movement whether he really believed that homosexual sex is compatible with the Bible. He answered this way: "No, it is not. However, if the apostles had known what we know in our modern and scientific age, they would have written the Bible differently."

Mercy! This notion is one of the chief reasons I am recommending that we leave the ELCA and join the more traditional NALC. You will be hearing more about that over the next couple months.

Again, the notion before us is this one:

If the apostles had known what we know in our modern and scientific age, they would have written the Bible differently.

If this notion had been a stray or eccentric idea, then we could dismiss it. But it was not a stray idea. First off, it came from a learned and influential clergy person in our synod. But even more importantly, I believe that it is the prevailing theology of the ELCA. It is believed high and low. It is believed everywhere. It is believed by many seminary professors and then, naturally, by many of their seminarians. It is believed by many young clergy starting their ministries, by many seasoned clergy and by those they influence, including synod delegates and congregational leaders. It is a powerful idea. It makes sense. It is a way of dealing with the Bible. But I think we can do better.

To begin critiquing this notion, I claim this: the fellow has no Bible! He might have a Bible in his pastor's study, he might read it, preach on it, carry it with him, but he has no Bible. He has no Bible because whenever the Bible conflicts with his own notions, he is free to set it aside and to say that if the apostles had known what he knows, they would have written the Bible differently.

Another way to put this is in terms of the doctrine of "the inspiration of the Holy Scriptures." The fellow had no doctrine of the inspiration of the Bible. For him, it was a historic human document that happened to be written in a primitive age.

IN THE TRADITION

So, let's begin talking about the doctrine of the inspiration of holy scripture. First off, please note that this doctrine is a settled part of the Lutheran tradition. Lutherans believe that the Bible is inspired by the Holy Spirit. And the Holy Spirit is not ignorant of human nature, its sorrows, and its temptations.

Our Immanuel constitution, for example, makes the doctrine part of our Confession of Faith here at Immanuel:

ARTICLE II CONFESSON OF FAITH

Section 1. This Congregation accepts all the canonical books of the Old and New Testaments as the inspired Word of God, and all the confessional writings of the Evangelical Lutheran Church as based on the truth contained in Holy Scripture for its form and norm.

The ELCA "Model Constitution for Congregations" also affirms the inspiration of the Bible:

C2.03. This congregation accepts the canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the inspired Word of God and the authoritative source and norm of its proclamation, faith, and life.

In fact, this is the classic wording of our Lutheran stance: The Bible is the inspired Word of God and is the “authoritative source and norm of its proclamation, faith, and life.” A “source” is the deep wellsprings of our teaching and life. A “norm” is a standard to be measured against. The source of our teaching cannot be popular culture, not even something so elegant as the *New York Times*. Rather, the source of our teaching and life is the Bible and it is against the Bible that we measure ourselves.

I believe that the problem with the ELCA is not its constitution, but a prevailing theology that is contrary to its constitution. They cannot both be true. It cannot be the case that the Bible is both the inspired Word of God and a book that would have written differently if the apostles had known what we know in our modern and scientific age.

The NALC “Constitution Document for Congregations” (2011) likewise believes in...

2.03. The canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the inspired Word of God and the authoritative source and norm of its proclamation, faith and life, “according to which all doctrines should and must be judged.” (Formula of Concord, Epitome, Part I)

The “Formula of Concord” referred to here is one of the Confessional Documents in the *Book of Concord*. Let me mention that we are studying the *Book of Concord* in our “Lutheranism 101” course. That is the first Sunday of each month, at 10 a.m. here in the undercroft.

So, our official Lutheran position is that we believe in the Bible as the inspired Word of God. We are not troubled by passages like these in the Bible:

All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness... (2 Timothy 3:16, RSV)

²⁰First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one’s own interpretation, ²¹because no prophecy ever came by the impulse of man, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God. (2 Peter 1:19-21, RSV)

The dear old King James Version puts this last verse this way:

For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake *as they were moved by the Holy Ghost*.

This is the idea I do not want us to lose: The Bible is not a mere human production, but is the very discourse of the Holy Spirit.

THAT VAST HOST OF SAINTS

The Bible is a very long book. You know that. For a stretch of his life, Alan Hoffman, of blessed memory in our congregation, used to read the whole Bible once a year. He would use one translation one year and shift to another translation the next year. But I do not read that fast. I've never read the whole Bible in one year. Maybe I will when I retire.

At any rate, the Bible is a very long book, and it refers to events that happen over a very long stretch of time, from the beginning of everything to the early days of the church.

Furthermore, there was a vast host of saints, inspired by the Holy Spirit, both in the Old Testament and the New, who taught and sang the faith to their children, who preached and wrote, edited and polished, selected and excluded – all to produce this treasure of God-befitting words to nurture our faith and to keep our faith true in this world.

This means that behind the final form of the Bible that we have in a Bible like this one, there is much, much history and many, many people. The doctrine of the Inspiration of the Bible means that God was powerful in the life of *all* those people, producing a treasure to serve as authoritative scripture for continuing generations of the church.

I still cringe when anyone tosses something on top of a Bible. I am not swept along by fear of magic or desire to earn my own salvation. Rather, I am swept along by the sense that God has given us a treasure for creating and sustaining our faith, and I do not want us to be careless about that treasure.

UNPACKING AN EARLIER PARAGRAPH

I have referred to the “final form” of the Bible. To begin discussing this final form and the long, long history behind this form, let me repeat and try to unpack a paragraph from earlier in this lecture:

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.

A LONG AND COMPLEX TEXT

First point: The Bible is a long and complex text. That the Bible is long is easy to judge by the heft of a Bible. This is a big book. And that it is a complex text is easy to see too. Just recall the various kinds of literature we find in the Bible. We have narratives, like the Exodus and the story of the passion, death, and

resurrection of Jesus, and the story of the early church in Acts. We have poetry and prayer and praise of God, as in the Psalms. We have Torah, or the holy law of God, as in the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount. We have parables – earthly stories with heavenly meanings. We have apocalypses, like Daniel in the Old Testament, and Mark 13 and Revelation in the New Testament. We have different genres of literature in the Bible and each should be read in a way that is natural for it. A parable, for example, should not be read as history. To ask whether there *really was* a Samaritan who ministered to a Jew waylaid by robbers is to misunderstand the parable.

A CAREFULLY CRAFTED TEXT

Next point: The Bible is a carefully crafted text. Here I am able to report some good news. You and I have been born into a generation that is starting to regain the sense of awe that the church fathers had for the canonical text. We can be very grateful to theologians like Robert Jenson and a splendid generation of theologians at Yale University for leading this recovery of respect for the canonical text. I mean theologians like Brevard Childs, Hans Frei, and George Lindbeck, along with their graduate students, like David Yeago, Rusty Reno, Bruce Marshall, and Ephraim Radner. We are still in the early stages of recovery of respect for the canonical text, and God willing, it will continue, because the preceding period of modern historical critical study specialized in fragmenting and atomizing that text.

The historical critical method of reading the Bible explodes the final form of the Bible. It is a method that is built on this principle:

The meaning of any passage of scripture is the meaning it had for its original author.

At first glance, this seems sensible, doesn't it? But I have my doubts about this principle even for secular literature. If the girl back home writes a letter to a soldier, and the soldier concludes from the letter that she has found someone new, it might be a heartbreaking mistake, yet one that is justified by the words she actually wrote. She might protest that she never intended to say what the soldier thought she said, but in a way, that does not matter. He was on a battlefield far away. All he had were the words she actually wrote. Her intentions are relevant, but they are not decisive in determining the meaning of the letter.

Does the songwriter understand his or her own song better than we do? Does the novelist understand his or her own novel better than we do? I am not so sure. The writer might have been swept along by a spirit of genius or insight that even he or she did not understand, but the words reflect that genius anyway.

However that might be, the notion that the meaning of a Biblical passage depends on the intention of the original author launched modern study of the Bible away from the canonical text back into a search of the history behind the text. Bible scholars became historians, searching for the pre-history of the text,

speculating about the historical situation that could have moved the original author to phrase his message the way he did, imagining the theological or political aims of those who cherished the stories of the original authors, passed them along, and modified them to suit their aims.

The historical critical method of Bible study has dominated the study of the Bible for more than a century. Nearly all clergy have been trained in it, unless they were evangelical clergy who knew from the beginning that they did not mean to touch this method with a ten-foot pole.

Now, I have my own theological troubles with evangelical readings of the Bible, and I mean to get to those troubles later. But there is one thing I can say in defense of our evangelical brothers and sisters: They tend to love and to read the actual Bible we have. They do not busy themselves with the pre-history of the various Bible passages. They simply try to read and to love the canonical text.

I find something really wholesome in the following little story. It is a story of a group of poor but devout Christian women in the South:

For years and years they met every Sunday afternoon, sat around a kitchen table, and read the Bible to each other. An outsider once asked them, “What do you do when you get to a difficult passage?” One of the women thought for a while and answered, “Well, we explain it to each other.”¹

And I bet their way of explaining the difficult passage to one another was to talk about that passage in terms of similar passages throughout the Bible. They did that, plus they probably gave personal testimonies of how that difficult passage had proved true in their own lives.

I don't think we can do a whole lot better than that. When we read the Bible, we do not need to be scholars. It will carry us a good long way if we will simply try to think of each passage in the context of the whole overall flow of the Bible, and, if we have some time, that we will listen to the testimony of others who have had some experience with that text.

When I first began my ministry here at Immanuel, there was a longstanding Bible Study group here led by our member Barbara Zelenko. I loved that class. It met on Monday evenings. Barbara had access to some scholarly commentary on the Bible. She especially enjoyed reading the William Barclay commentaries, as I remember it. But Barclay was a Bible-loving Christian who practiced what the Yale School of Theology has since been encouraging the whole church to do: to use whatever historical insights we might have to illumine the actual Biblical text that lies before us.

It is the same thing in a little book written by David Kiehl's father, Erich Kiehl. David is a member of our congregation, and his father was a lovely Bible scholar in the Missouri Synod. Dr. Kiehl wrote this book I'm holding here,

¹ Joseph T. Lienhard, S.J. *The Bible, the Church, and Authority* (The Liturgical Press: Collegeville, Minnesota, 1995), page 11.

Everyday Life in Bible Times. It discusses the homes, the vineyards, the farming and shepherding, the food and drink, the trades and social customs of ancient Palestine. He includes these nice drawings of things like the tools used in threshing grain. I love this sort of historical and cultural information. It helps bring the Bible to life. But that's the thing: It helps bring *the Bible* to life. It helps illumine the highly polished, Spirit-crafted canonical text that actually lies available to us.

I bet the group of poor Southern women sitting around their kitchen table reading their Bible did not know the scholarly conviction that the true writers of the Pentateuch were various schools of theologians who lived centuries after Moses and who themselves were separated from each other by centuries. The ladies around the table reading their Bible did not know the characteristics of the various schools, did not know the historical circumstances that inclined the various schools to write as they did, and did not know how to divvy up each book of the Pentateuch among the various schools of theology.

A modern Bible scholar might say that the Southern ladies reading the Bible around their table are naive about the Bible. Maybe they are. But when it comes to the actual Spirit-crafted canonical text lying before them, they knew and loved that text.

Many of the leading clergy and bishops of the ELCA were trained in the historical critical method, but have not always used that method in a churchly way — in a way that shows honor for the Spirit-crafted canonical text. The method tempts people to abandon the Bible that lies before us in favor of historical reconstructions of background traditions and texts, as if the “authentic” meaning of the Bible is somewhere back there, behind the text. I sometimes fear that if liberal churches want to set aside the Bible on *any* matter, it can probably find some Bible scholar and some substrata of historical reconstruction that will justify it. Or, it permits them to dream about what the Bible *would have said* if the apostles had known what we know in our modern, scientific age.

It was chiefly by reading the church fathers that I came to understand that there is something dreadfully wrong with this method. And then the Yale School came along to give me help in developing what I call “a more churchly use of historical/critical insight.” That is, my aim now is not to abandon the text because of historical insight, but to use that historical insight to illumine the text that actually lies before us. That is, I value historical/critical insight for its ability to help me notice things in the canonical text which are really there, but which I had not sufficiently appreciated before.

AMOS

Let me give you an illustration of historical/critical method. Last Sunday our First Lesson was about that interesting prophet Amos and his plumb line. Amos had been a farmer in the Southern Kingdom who was sent by the Lord to prophesy against the Northern Kingdom, Israel. He did so until at last Amaziah the priest

exiled him from Israel and sent him back to his farm in Judah. That was probably the end of his ministry.

By and large, the book of Amos is full of fierce preaching against the injustice and the idolatry of Israel.

But the end of the book is much more cheerful. The last three verses of the book go this way:

¹³Behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that the plowman shall overtake the reaper, and the treader of grapes him that soweth seed; and the mountains shall drop sweet wine, and all the hills shall melt.

¹⁴And I will bring again the captivity of my people of Israel, and they shall build the waste cities, and inhabit them; and they shall plant vineyards, and drink the wine thereof; they shall also make gardens, and eat the fruit of them.

¹⁵And I will plant them upon their land, and they shall no more be pulled up out of their land which I have given them, saith the LORD thy God. (Amos 9:13-15, KJV)

Now, historical critical Bible scholars says that obviously these concluding verses are an addition to the original fierce preaching of Amos. They speculate about who made the addition and when and why. In the process, the historical critical scholars or their readers might be tempted to value one part of the book over another.

My theme is that the Doctrine of Inspiration means that the whole process was overseen by the Holy Spirit to yield a polished text – a perfect text - for the sustaining of faith over continuing generations. The Spirit moved holy men and women of old — lots of them: preachers, prophets, poets, historians, families who cherished their words and kept them alive by passing them on to their children, editors, and people who worked out the canon of sacred scripture. I mean, the resurrection of Jesus resulted in an explosion of spiritual writings, only some of which made it into the Bible. This process of selection and exclusion of writings is called the “canonization” of the Bible. My theme is that the Holy Spirit presided over the whole process, stretching over centuries in order to craft a complex text useful for sustaining faith for continuing generations. The Holy Spirit inspired the Bible, so that not even the gates of hell shall prevail against the church.

Now, for someone to turn around and dismiss this complex, carefully constructed Spirit-crafted text and to say that “if the apostles knew what we knew in our modern and scientific age, they would have written the Bible differently” is to cast the Bible to the wind and is to deny the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. It is to deny that God has been at work in the creation of our Bible.

THE SPIRIT CONTINUES TO USE THE BIBLE

Furthermore, the Holy Spirit is not done with the Bible but continues to inspire the church through the Bible to this very day. The reason I preach on the Bible is that I believe the Bible has been crafted by the Holy Spirit to be useful for keeping faith alive in this age and in ages to come. There are many fine books in this world, but the Holy Spirit hovers around *this* book: the Bible.

Theologian Robert Jenson points out that the Holy Spirit gives us the Bible not just for preaching but also for the nurture of our families. He says this:

For a second instance, the Spirit inspires Scripture in that he provides it to families as curriculum. Among the many ways in which families are the foundation blocks of a people, they are the classrooms without which all others are at best emergency substitutes. By every word exchanged, by the assumed patterns of the usual familial day, by prayers offered or omitted, by meals eaten together with thanksgiving or separately in haste, families train up the child in the way it should - or should not - go. The Bible's stories are some of the world's best; let them be told in the family...some of the prohibitions that ruled pious families fifty years ago were indeed superfluous and even harmful, but the present principled indulgence is worse. By these practices and many others, the Spirit carries on his inspiration of Scripture.
(Robert W. Jenson, *On The Inspiration of Scripture*,
<http://alpb.org/inspiration.html>)

Adding it all up, the Doctrine of the Inspiration of Scripture means that the Bible is not some mere human construct, but is a treasure given to us for maintaining true faith. And we should not dismiss the Bible, lest we do something we do not want to do: We should not dismiss the Bible lest we grieve the Holy Spirit, who wants nothing but good for us, indeed who wants us to have life and life abundantly.

NEXT SESSION

In our next session I want to speak of Jesus as the Word proclaimed in the Old Testament. I do not want us to imagine that there is somehow a disconnection between Jesus of Nazareth and the preaching of Amos or Leviticus or of any of the preaching of the Old Testament. When Moses received the Ten Commandments, for example, he received them from Jesus. More precisely, Moses received the Ten Commandments from the Word of God who in the fullness of time became incarnate as Jesus of Nazareth. That means that we do not understand the Ten Commandments unless we understand them as coming from Jesus. AND we do

not understand Jesus unless we understand him as the Giver of the Ten Commandments.