

This I Believe? The B.I.B.L.E.

Dr. Tom Pace

February 25, 2024

2 Timothy 3:16-17; Matthew 5:17-18; John 5:39-40

All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that the person of God may be proficient, equipped for every good work. 2 Timothy 3:16-17 (NRSV)

Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Matthew 5:17-18 (NRSV)

You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life, and it is they that testify on my behalf. Yet you refuse to come to me to have life. John 5:39-40 (NRSV)

Let me share with you that today is a teaching sermon. We'll learn some things, and I hope you open your minds to learn. But one warning – there are no stories that are going to make you cry today. So, if it isn't sticking with you and you're having trouble, just spread out your palms as you close your eyes and look like you're praying. And you'll end up, and it'll go okay.

Let's pray together. *O God, open us up, open our eyes that we might see, our ears that we might hear, open our hearts, God, so your word will fall in, and then, O Lord, open our hands that we might serve. Amen.*

I love the Bible. I love reading it, studying it, explaining it, talking about it – I love the Bible. My favorite part of the week is not when I get to preach, which is really a joy, but when I'm working and studying, and this idea comes to me. Or something I didn't understand comes to me, and I think, "Wow – I get that now!" Or I might think, "That's so exciting; I want to tell people about that." It's usually on the day I'm in my study, or it's early in the morning, and I can really feel my heart beat faster. I'm excited all of a sudden, and I can't type fast enough. Maybe it's early in the morning, maybe it's the coffee, but I'm just pumped. It's so exciting for me, and it feels like there's a connection with God, and God's saying, "What about this?" I love the Bible. I will

confess that there are parts of it that I read, and I think, “I don’t understand that at all.” I may put it in a box over here for a while, and then months or years later, I may come back and look at it again. Still, sometimes I don’t get it.

Sometimes I’m reading the Bible, and something in it really upsets me. I think, “How can that be in this book?” In these books? There are actually 66 books. It’s a library. I think, “How can that be in here – that’s not right. God, you did not tell the people of Israel to go slaughter every man, woman, and child in Canaan. You did not tell Joshua that. I don’t buy that.” I just don’t understand, and it upsets me a great deal.

Sometimes, I’m reading it, and it upsets me, not because I don’t get it or think it ought to be there, but because I’m reading it and I do understand it, but I don’t want to do it. So, it says, “Sell what you have and give the money to the poor and come follow me.” If you really want to be my disciple. And I’m thinking, and the Scripture says, “The young man went away sorrowful because he had great possessions.” I’m thinking, “That’s me.”

I love the Bible, but here’s the thing. Everyone is not in the same place as I am. If I talk to people who are not Christian, I ask, “Why aren’t you a Christian?” They may not have grown up that way, but maybe if they’ve chosen not to be a Christian, there are two main reasons. Number one is “Other Christians.” They say they don’t see a great witness. I think honestly that’s stereotypical and often portrayals of particular Christians as opposed to the whole faith. Nonetheless, some say that it’s other Christians.

But the number two reason is “The Bible.” They say, “I just can’t buy it. It’s full of fanciful stories that act like magic. It’s full of contradictions with each other. I see those, and it describes a God I just can’t believe in.” So, I think to myself, “How can we help people understand Scripture so they can embrace that faith?”

I want to talk to you about some different ways we understand Scripture today. And I want to begin by talking about this whole sermon series. Because this series, “This I Believe,” really has two facets. Katie did a good job last week of saying, “Here are my doubts, and doubts are okay.” I like to say, “Doubt is to faith what hunger is to food.” Doubt says, “I want.” Doubt is not the same thing as disbelief; that’s something else. But doubt is like you say, “What?” and you’re trying to figure it out, and so you’re hungry, and you’re struggling. And if you had no doubts, you’d cruise on along, and there’d be no hunger for more.

So that's one component, but what I want to look at today is how I look at my faith and what I believe. And how does that fit with what other Christians believe? Sometimes, we go through this time in which we look at whether we grew up in the Christian church, what we were taught as Christians, or what other people have told us we were supposed to believe because we're Christians. Like everything happens for a reason, or "God did that for a purpose" – it may be said that if your child dies or something. And you think to yourself, "Wait a minute, that can't be. What? Wait a minute." Or you believe something as a child, then later you begin to question it and think again, "Wait a minute." We call this *deconstruction* – taking this faith, you assumed and didn't really think through. You just assumed it, and then you begin to think, "Wait a minute, I need to think this through. So I will take the pieces apart to look at it." It's different than destruction because that would be we're wiping it all out and thinking we don't buy it. But deconstruction means "I'm going to take it apart and think it through. And get clear on what I believe." So, you de-construct, and then there's a moment when you re-construct. You put it back together again and say, "Oh, so this is what I believe, and here is what other Christians believe, too. I can see that I'm like them; I'm not like them. But I am like them." You begin to get this clarity when these things that are hard for you to understand come up; you can go, "Oh, so this is why I believe this."

Now, the second thing I want to talk about is confidence, and you can do that with confidence because you believe that God loves you no matter what and died for you on the cross. When we hold fast to the assurance of God's love for us that the Gospel is what God did, not what we do, then we don't worry as we struggle with these. We don't worry that "Oh, my gosh, I might be wrong." Well, you probably are, certainly, about some things. We're all going to be wrong. But we can come to our own understanding with an assurance with the confidence that it's not, as Romans 8 says, "That there's nothing in all creation that will separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." So, we come to that assurance as we struggle.

Then we put some things, and we leave them in that conundrum situation where we go, "I don't know about that. That's a problem. I can't figure it out, so I'll leave it here, and maybe I'll return to it. Maybe I'll keep wrestling with it. But I don't have to solve it. I can still move forward in faith with this as a conundrum in my life."

So that's what we're going to be talking about really all through this as we look at various different sort of basic doctrines of the Christian faith. Today, we're going to talk about the Bible. And I wanted to talk about it by making two distinctions for you that might help you decide where you land and how you believe about Scripture.

The first is the distinction between inerrancy and inspiration. Inerrancy and inspiration. And in all honesty, inerrancy includes inspiration. Inerrancy says that everything in the Bible is without error in fact, detail, or meaning. There was a group of scholars who gathered in 1978 in Chicago and put out a statement. I think it's called the Chicago Statement on Inerrancy. It lists all these different things about the Bible and about how it is without error. If you go to, let's say, you're looking for a new church, you've moved to a different city because you couldn't be looking for a new church if you were staying here in Houston, I'm sure. And you're looking for a new church, and you go to their website, and it says, "What we believe." And you click on that, and many will say something like, "We believe the Bible is the inerrant word of God." That's saying, "Our church has a claim with regard to inerrancy. We believe it is inerrant." And there are many scholars, many Christians, who would believe that the Bible is without error in fact or detail.

The challenge is that there are places where the Bible seems to have apparent conflicts or contradictions. Let me give you some examples. In Matthew, it says that Judas went and hanged himself. In Acts, it says Judas took the 30 pieces of silver that he got from turning Jesus into the Sanhedrin. He bought a field and plunged headlong into the field, and his bowels burst open. And that's how he died. Matthew says that the women went to the tomb, an earthquake occurred, and an angel appeared and sat upon the tomb and rolled the stone away. In Mark, it says the women got to the tomb, and the stone was already rolled away. These are apparent contradictions; apparent conflicts may be the way to say it. And so, as we worry about fact and detail, there will be Christians, many Christians who will start from an assumption, so they're starting from a statement of belief, a leap of faith. All of us take a leap of faith; I don't use that in a negative way. Take a leap of faith and say, "I believe the Bible is without error."

Someone said we were talking earlier, and someone said a member of the church had said to him, "If I can't believe every word of it, I can't believe any word of it." So, someone who starts from an assumption that says, "Everything is that way," and then works toward saying, "If that's true, then there must be a way these fit together." So, we'll work hard to put together a chronology that allows all these things to be the case. So that would be inerrancy.

Inspiration says that the Holy Spirit has been at work in the creation of Scripture from the very beginning. Let me read this passage that is again what we read just a few minutes ago. This is 2 Timothy 3:16-17: “All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that the person of God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.” (2 Timothy 3:16-17). Inspiration has as its core word Spirit – the Holy Spirit. In fact, some translations of this will say, “All Scripture is God-breathed.” I love that term. God-Breathed. Here’s what we believe when we believe in the inspiration of Holy Scripture. The Holy Spirit guided the authors of the books of the Bible as they wrote the words. The Holy Spirit guided the scribes as they copied the words. The Holy Spirit guided the church when the church decided that these 66 books of the Bible would be authoritative for the church. And that others – for example, the Gospel of Thomas, floated around with the other gospels for 250 years. And the church decided by the power of the Holy Spirit and the guidance of the Holy Spirit that the Gospel of Thomas is not authoritative for the church. So, we believe that the Holy Spirit was active there. That the Holy Spirit is active as you and I or as current churches, this church and others,, determines our doctrine and what we believe. We believe that the Holy Spirit is active as you and I read the Bible and apply it to our lives.

And if we don’t believe that, if we don’t believe that the Holy Spirit is active then how can we possibly take a book that was written to audiences 2000 years ago and apply it to what’s happening in my life today. It has to be a living word for that to work. I love that idea of “God-breathed” because you remember God breathed into Adam’s nostrils the “breath of life” and he became a living being. God breathes into Holy Scripture, and it becomes a living word for us that we get to experience.

So that’s the distinction we see between believing that the word is inspired and that Scripture is inspired, and we can say that the Holy Spirit led Matthew as he remembers his experience and passes on what was told to him about what happened. That there’s a theological point he’s trying to make that is a truth for all of us to understand about an earthquake and an angel. Whereas Mark has a different point Mark wants to make when Mark comes and says that the stone was already rolled away. One wants to focus more on supernatural intervention, and one wants to focus more on the direct story. Each of them has a particular point they’re trying to teach us. And all of those are true.

All right, so that’s the difference between inerrancy and inspiration. The second distinction I want to make to you concerns the basic, most foundational, and essential point of Holy Scripture.

What is the most essential point of the Christian faith? Is it to live by a book? We have a look that teaches us how we're supposed to live, and so the Christian faith is primarily about living by the Bible. Or is the Christian faith primarily about following Jesus? And the Bible tells us who Jesus is.

Let me make this distinction in a couple of ways. On the one hand, we would say every Sunday, we read the Bible, and we say, "The word of God for the people of God," and you say, "Thanks be to God." This is the word of God; we believe that the Bible is the word of God. It is God's revelation to us. It is what God is speaking to us. We say, "This is the word of God." I titled this sermon "The B.I.B.L.E." because the song with the lyrics:

"The B-I-B-L-E,
Yes, that's the book for me,
I stand alone on the Word of God,
The B-I-B-L-E."

But here's the thing: most often, when the Bible is talked about in the Bible, it doesn't use the term the word of God. It's implied. It will say something like, "The Lord has spoken to us through the prophets." So, they are speaking the word of God. It's implied in that way. That, yes, God was speaking through the prophets; yes, God is speaking to us through the law; yes, God is speaking to us through the sacred history is the word of God. But at least most of the time in the New Testament, when it refers to the word of God, it's referring to Jesus. It's not referring to the Bible; it's referring to Jesus himself.

Let me start with the Gospel of John. It begins this way, "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God." And then it talks about John the Baptist and then it says, "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth." (John 1:1,14). The Word of God was Jesus, who came to live among us – that's the living Word of God.

Or in the Scripture we read this morning when it says Jesus says to the Pharisees that not, or in the sermon on the mount, do not believe that I have come to do away with the law, but rather to fulfill it. I am the culmination of the Word, of the law; I have come; I am the fulfillment of all that Scripture is. Everything in Scripture was leading to me and pointing to me." The passage we read a few minutes ago, I think, is so powerful. It's from Hebrews, and it says, "Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit,

joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.” So, that sounds like it’s talking about the Bible. Then it says, “And before him, no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account.” (Hebrews 4:12).

The word of God here is him. It’s Jesus. So, what we have to do is ask ourselves how we understand Scripture. It’s not that it’s an either-or it’s which is primary, which is the primary purpose. Does it mean what we’re supposed to do is live by the Bible, and that’s what it means to be a Christian, or does it say what we’re supposed to do is follow Jesus? And if we come to that place where we say, “You know, the living word of God is Jesus, then we read the Bible differently.” Then, we read the Bible, looking through the lens of Jesus. So when we read in Joshua about going in and slaughtering every man, woman, and child, we ask ourselves, “Would Jesus say that? Does that make sense?”

When we read the Bible through the lens of Jesus, we are able to determine what is most important and what is less important. Even in the New Testament. Is everything of equal importance? Of course not. It’s clearly not the same to say, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength and love your neighbor as yourself,” and the only thing we ask is that you not eat meat from anything that’s been strangled or has blood still in it. No rare steaks for you. It means those things aren’t of the same importance, so when we read the Scripture through the eyes of Jesus, we can come to terms about what is essential. When we read Scripture through the eyes of Jesus, we can understand that there is a both/and instead of an either/or. Jesus can say things like, “If you don’t give a cup of cold water or visit those who are in prison or give to the hungry, I will cast you out where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. You’re a goat.” And at the same time, Jesus can say, “My way is easy, my burden is light. Come and follow me.” It’s both/and. We can hold things intention when we read through the eyes of Jesus, when we understand Scripture and apply it to our lives through the eyes of Jesus.

When we read Scripture and understand it and interpret it through the eyes of Jesus through the lens of Jesus, then we see the overall picture as being one wanting to gather in rather than cull out. So that as Abraham is called early on, and says, “I’m going to bless you and make your name great. I’m going to give you the land of Canaan so that you can be a blessing to the whole world.” Then we say, “Oh,” So Jesus came not just for Israel but for the whole world. We see the movement of Scripture toward these wider arms that Jesus welcomes. Tax collectors, other

criminals, Jewish zealots, prostitutes, and all sorts of folks, as Jesus puts those arms wide to draw in instead of culling out. When we read Scripture through that lens of Jesus.

So, in this Sanctuary, in this room, in this church, we have people who find themselves on both sides of these decisions. But what is so wonderful is that as we work our way through it, we have the confidence to know that we can struggle with these.

I thought it was so interesting in the evangelical Chicago statement in 1978 about inerrancy. This is what I thought was so interesting. This is Article 19, and it says, “We affirm that a confession of the full authority infallibility and inerrancy of Scripture is vital to a sound understanding of the Christian faith. We believe in inerrancy.” Then it says, “We deny that such confession is necessary for salvation.”

Even in that group of scholars who hold fast to inerrancy, they say this is not the essential thing. The essential thing is that Jesus came to die for you. Hold fast to that.

I hope you’ll learn the Scripture, that you’ll read it. On St. Luke’s app, we have a daily reading. You download the app; it’s very cool; it has a daily Scripture reading. You click on it; it’s right there; you don’t have to get out your Bible. It’s on the app. And you can read through it. And at the end, you can say, “I did it,” and you get a little check mark, and all those endorphins come rolling in, and you feel like you’ve accomplished something for the day. If you have accomplished nothing else, you read a little passage of Scripture. I pray that you will love Scripture as I do. Maybe you can’t. I don’t know. You probably don’t have the same time I do. But as you delve into it, you will find yourself shaped and formed to be more and more like the Jesus we claim as our Savior. And it’ll change your life.

Let’s pray. *Gracious God, we thank you so much for the Scripture that you’ve given us. We thank you so much that you continually have tried to speak to us. To show us how to live, to lead us in that way that leads to that close relationship with you. And we thank you most of all that your Scripture points us to Jesus, who ultimately came so that nothing would separate us from you, not even our own sin. Thank you, God, open us up, open our hearts to your Bible. We pray in the name of Christ, Amen.*