
I'm Selling Bibles, Ma'am

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A Sermon by the Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler
Proper 24C in the Revised Common Lectionary

All scripture is inspired by God,
2 Timothy 3:16

"I'm selling Bibles, ma'am. God's holy word."

Those are the words of young Henry Dampier, in Clyde Edgerton's delightful novel of a few years ago. It's called, simply, *The Bible Salesman*, a kind of coming-of-age story in which a young Bible salesman actually begins to read the Bible.

That's right. He is a Bible salesman before he has even read the Bible. The novel is about his beginning to read the Bible, and about his beginning to grow up, and about his experiencing the good and the evil of human life.

"I'm selling Bibles, ma'am. God's holy word," he says, without ever having read the Bible.

There's a lot of people these days who talk about the authority of the Bible, or who believe in the literal and inerrant authority of the Bible, but who seem never to have actually read it-or at least have never actually pondered, and critiqued, and truly examined it. I am amused by proclamations about the infallibility of scripture that so rarely ever actually use scripture.

The fact is that scripture only occasionally talks about itself! Today is one of those occasions, and so I pause to talk about what scripture is and what it isn't.

Upon their ordination, Episcopal priests take a vow declaring that they believe the Holy Scriptures to be the Word of God, and that the Holy Scriptures "contain all things necessary to salvation." (You can read the full vow on page 526 of *The Book of Common Prayer*.) That sort of vow has been in place a long time; it was part of the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion in sixteenth century England.

Notice what the vow does not say. It does not say that everything in scripture is necessary to salvation. It says simply that scripture "contains all things necessary to salvation." Furthermore, our vow does not claim that the Bible is inerrant, or without error. That sort of claim has never been a majority claim in the Episcopal Church, or the Anglican Communion of Churches.

The inerrancy of the Bible is not part of our tradition.

But let me note something else. The Bible itself never claims to be inerrant! When I am arguing with people who believe in the inerrancy and the authority of the Bible, I ask them for one thing: "If you believe so much in the inerrant authority of the Bible, give the chapter and verse where the bible itself claims it is inerrant."

It's not there. The Bible itself never claims to be inerrant.

But the Bible does make some extraordinary claims for itself, or at least for the scriptures. One of its major claims for itself is today's passage in 2 Timothy. We think it was Paul who speaking to his young disciple Timothy; it was certainly some authoritative figure speaking to a larger church. And he mentions scripture, the sacred writings. Remember, if he writes during the middle of the first century, AD, much of the rest of the New Testament has not been written yet, or certainly regarded as scripture yet!

He says, "As for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, and how from early childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work." (2 Timothy 3: 14-17).

This is a beautiful passage, speaking of the merits of sacred scripture for teaching and correction and righteousness, yet the passage never claims that the sacred scriptures are inerrant or without error.

Unfortunately, our Christian past is littered with outlandish attempts to interpret the Bible so that it can be symbolized as without error. Some of the more amusing have to do with harmonizing various accounts of the same event. In case you haven't noticed, the Bible contains many stories which seem to refer to the same event.

In fact, the very first two chapters of the Bible contain two very different accounts of creation—two different accounts of the same event. So, according to "the Bible," who was created first? Humanity or all the other animals? Genesis 1:24 ff. declares that all the living creatures were created first, before humanity was created in Genesis 1:27. But in our Bible's second story, Genesis 2:19 says that God created all the other animals after it was found that the man was alone and had no helper.

Two different stories. There is no need to harmonize them or even talk about inerrancy. But this "harmonization" principle has persisted among fundamentalists and inerrancy believers. The story of Jesus cleansing the Temple occurs at the beginning of his ministry according to the Gospel of John, and at the end of his ministry according to Matthew, Luke, and Mark. How do inerrancy believers harmonize that difference? They claim that Jesus must have cleansed the Temple twice in his ministry!

That's all well and good, until you get to something like the Ascension. Luke, chapter 24 seems to indicate that the ascension of Jesus occurred on the very same day as the Resurrection? Yet, Acts chapter 1 explicitly says that the Ascension occurred forty days after the resurrection. James Barr, in his book called *Fundamentalism* claims that he has heard conservative scholars offer, in all seriousness, the explanation that Jesus must have ascended twice—once on the Day of Resurrection, then he came back down, and he ascended again forty days later.

Obviously, this is a silly and extreme example. The point is this. There is a difference between inerrancy and inspiration. I believe that sacred scripture is inspired of God. That inspiration is why I read scripture, and contemplate scripture, and study scripture. The words contain the breath and energy of God. I do not read the Bible because it is inerrant and literal; I read the Bible because it is inspired. God breathes through the Bible's words.

Even though we often speak of the Bible as the Word of God, even that phrase deserves explanation. "Word of God" is not the same as "words of God." It is difficult to make the claim that the very words of the Bible are also the literal words of God. It is far more accurate to say that the Bible contains the "the capital W" Word of God.

For Christians, the ultimate Word of God is not even the Bible. The Word of God is Jesus Christ. That is what the Gospel of John means when it says, at chapter one, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. , and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth." That Word of God is the living Jesus Christ. Jesus is the ultimate standard and guide of our faith.

I have one more favorite passage when it comes to Bible study. Hebrews 4:12 claims that "the Word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword." I believe that verse refers to both concepts of word: Jesus as the Word and wisdom of God, and the Bible as the Word of God.

The point is that the Word of God is alive, not objectified and literalized and harmonized into rigidity. It is because the Word of God is living and active, that it really does mean different things from generation to generation. Indeed, it speaks differently to us this year than it did last year. The text has certainly not changed, but our lives and cultures have changed.

Only a living and active Word of God is worth studying year after year, and week after week,

So, the discipline of Bible study is serious stuff. (I say to my Bible students, "take the Bible seriously, but not always literally!"). But it is also fun stuff. God speaks to us in various ways in each of the various sixty-six books of our scripture.

It is when we actually read the Bible that we discover its brilliance and authority. It is when we actually read the Bible that we discover it is certainly inspired stuff. The authority of scripture is that it is inspired. And it is when we actually read the Bible that we find it points to someone else. The words of scripture always point to the Word of God, Jesus Christ our Lord.

In Clyde Edgerton's novel, young Henry Dampier introduced himself by saying he was selling Bibles, "I'm selling Bible's, ma'am. God's Holy Word."

But that's not me, Sam Candler. I am not selling anything. I am preaching Jesus Christ as the Word of God. I want people to be inspired by Jesus. "I'm preaching Jesus, ma'am. God's Holy Word."

The Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler
Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip

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