
All Scripture is Inspired by God

A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam Candler
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All scripture is inspired by God.
--2 Timothy 3.16

Second Timothy 3:16. "All scripture is inspired by God." That is our text today. Does it mean that the Bible should always be taken literally? Does it mean that the Bible is always inerrant?

You all remember the story of the young fool, who thought he knew what the authority of the Bible meant. It meant that all of the Bible is the literal and inerrant Word of God, no matter what culture or context. He could turn to any page for guidance. So, he thought, "I'll just turn to any page in the Bible and do what it says!" The first verse he turned to Matthew 27: 5. It said "Judas went out and hanged himself."

"Wait a minute!" he cried out. "This could not be right. I'll try again." He opened the book and let the pages fall again. This time his fingers came to Luke 10:37. It said, "Go thou and do likewise."

"No!" He tried a third time. This time, the Bible, the holy Word of God opened to John 13:27: "What you must do, do quickly."

The Bible does not come out well when it is interpreted by folks who do not use their heads. Like someone once said (including William Sloane Coffin), "The Bible is something like a mirror. If an ass looks in, you cannot expect an apostle to look out."

But the Bible does not come out well even when people do use their heads!

When Henry VIII struggled to have an heir to the throne of England, he thought his wife's miscarriages were a result of God's judgment. After all, that wife (Catherine of Aragon) had been, first, his brother's wife! When his brother had died, Henry had married his deceased brother's wife, Catherine. Folks had used the bible to justify that marriage.

It is right there at Deuteronomy 25.5: "If brethren dwell together and one of them die, and have no child, the wife of the dead shall not marry unto a stranger; her husband's brother shall go in unto her, and take her to him as wife, and perform the duty of an husband's brother unto her." (That is certainly a scriptural injunction if I have ever heard one.)

But when Catherine did not have a male child, Henry began to sense that another section of scripture took precedence. Maybe Leviticus 20.21 was correct. Leviticus 20.21 says that "if a man shall take his brother's wife, it is an unclean thing; he hath uncovered his brother's nakedness; and they shall be childless." Maybe, thought Henry, which was why he was childless.

You know, as well as I, how often certain verses of the Bible have been used to justify our arguments. People thought hard

and long about these issues. The Bible was certainly used to justify the continuation of slavery. Consider Ephesians 6:5: "Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, as you obey Christ." It took a long time for folks to raise up those principles in the Bible which show slavery as a travesty; we created a whole difference culture, a healthier culture that foreswore slavery.

The Bible has also been used to deny women leadership roles in the Church. First Corinthians 14, verse 34 clearly says "As in all the churches of the saints, women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, *as the law also says*" (emphasis mine). It took a long time before we relied more on Galatians 3:28: "In Christ there is neither male nor female, neither slave nor free."

In fact, as soon as we begin reading the Bible, the observant among us notice the major difference between Genesis 1 and Genesis 2, the very first two chapters in the Bible!

If we believe scripture is inspired by God, must we also believe that wives are subject to husbands? Must we believe that slaves ought always to obey their masters? Must we also believe that we should not eat shellfish, like lobster and shrimp? What do we make of certain cultural assumptions in scripture that are no longer part of our world?

Must we believe that the sun stood still? Must we believe that Moses had horns? One version of the inspired Bible said that.

Must we believe that God is literally a rock? Must we believe that Jesus is literally a Lamb? Is belief in the inspiration of scripture the same as taking every jot and tittle as in errantly and literally as we can?

No. Bible interpretation is a careful and sacred art. It is not served well by absolutists and litigators. Inspiration does not mean inerrancy; and inspiration does not mean literalism.

The inspiration of Scripture is a much higher doctrine than inerrancy or literalism. Because the word "inspired" here at 2 Timothy 3:16 means "God-breathed." Inspiration means that God lives in these words of scripture. Every piece of scripture, Paul tells his young student, Timothy, "all scripture," is breathed of God. Of course, Paul was not even speaking literally of his own writings when he said this, and none of the four gospels had even been written yet! Yet, Paul's words do mean something sacred to us; something lives in them. When Paul speaks of scripture, we know that God uses his words to mean something for us, in our time.

The inspiration of scripture means that we can know God through these beautiful writings. There is an undeniable air of God, breath of God, in the words of the Bible. Sure, we have relatively minor concerns about certain historical errors or differences. But those minor details are blown away by the mighty gale of God.

The breath of God becomes a gale of grace when we read about the magnificence of creation, when we read about the prodigal son or the Good Samaritan, or the story of the Exodus, or Psalm 23, or the feeding of the five thousand, or the hymn to love at First Corinthians 13. The story of Job is in scripture because even suffering is close to the life of God. The painful psalms, the disappointments, even the sins of Bible are there to remind us an overwhelming grace of God.

The inspiration of scripture means that we find the breath of God in scripture. We find the air of God. We find the whispering wind of new life. We discover the gale of grace. This is why the church shall always read scripture together. If any of you are not in a Bible Study these days, join one! Ask one of the clergy to begin a Bible study for you.

There is nothing more foundational to our spiritual life. These words have formed communities of faith for two thousand years. This wind of God is not subject to our strange, absolutist rules about inerrancy. This wind of God cannot always be seen by the lens of literalism. The spirit of God, the breath of God, goes way beyond literalism and inerrancy.

Finally, the Spirit of God will always show us the Word of God. Remember, the Word of God, with a capital "W," is not the Bible. The "capital W" Word of God is always Jesus Christ. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The Word became incarnate and dwelt among us." (John 1.1, 14). I believe that the words of scripture are not meant to be scattered and thrown about like bullets in our little theological wars. We study the "small w" words of scripture so that God can show us the "capital W" Word in Jesus Christ.

Is all scripture inspired by God? It sure is. I cannot prove it by logic or history or by pointing to some feeble human idea of inerrancy. I know that scripture is inspired by God through its own evidence. I know that scripture is inspired by God because the Bible has taught me grace and truth. The Bible has taught me that Jesus is the Word of God.

AMEN.

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