

Christianity 101 (part 1 of 5)  
The Greatest Book Never Read  
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Jeff and I are beginning a sermon series that we are calling Christianity 101, we will explore topics such as: what is the Bible, who is God, who is Jesus, what is Christianity, and what is the purpose of the church. A rather impossible task, if you ask me — because it is going to be very easy to get caught up in one phrase, rather than seeing the big picture.

The Christianity that I grew up with doesn't work very well. Doves of young people — our children and grandchildren who grew up in the church find that it has no value for their lives.

I think that they are wrong, that there is great value in Christianity, it is that we have been presenting it the wrong way. So our challenge for the next few weeks is to try and open your eyes to an authentic experience of God through the resurrected Jesus Christ, and to offer some ways that you can help others to see the value of just such an experience.

Thirty-Five years ago, Walker Percy in his novel: *Love in the Ruins* wrote:  
Now in these dread latter days of the old violent beloved U.S.A. and of the Christ-forgetting and Christ-haunted death-dealing Western world, I came to myself in a grove of young pines.

Wow, Percy got it right — even as we forget Jesus — we remain fascinated by Jesus!

They ways in which this is true is apparent.

- # Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*, gripped audiences with Mel's vision of the torture and death of Jesus. That movie was the talk of all the morning shows and made the cover of the major news weeklies.
- # *The DaVinci Code*, Dan Brown's novel which is still on the best seller lists, focused on Jesus and his relationship with Mary Magdalene.
- # The *Left Behind* Series, with close to 70 million books sold has given another novelist view of what the end times will be like.
- # One of the most fascinating books that I have read lately, *American Jesus* by Stephen Prothero, explores how American culture has turned Jesus into an icon and hero.

Yet the truth is, Jesus is someone we really don't know. And one of the reasons is because we don't know what to do with this book that we call the

Holy Bible.

And I think it is here, with the Bible that we must begin this journey.

And I start with a relatively simple question: What kind of book is this?

How would you define it?

- # Is this a history book?
- # Is this a faith book?

Or would you call it something else?

What difference does it make as to what kind of a book it is?

I think that it makes a great deal of difference.

It seems that there are primarily 2 paradigms in operation today as to how one reads scripture.

By paradigm I mean a way of seeing or understanding.

Let me try to illustrate what a paradigm is from the history of astronomy.

Are you familiar with the Ptolemaic or Copernican way of seeing the earth in relationship to the universe.

The Ptolemaic paradigm placed the earth at the center of the universe and understood how everything moved in relationship to the earth. In other words, this way of seeing saw the sun and everything else moving around the earth — which was stationary in the heavens. The amazing thing about this paradigm is that it was very successful at predicting eclipses.

This was the accepted scientific view until Copernicus and Galileo in the 1500 and 1600's.

The Copernican paradigm understood the sun to be the center of a solar system and the earth and everything else moved around it.

Two ways of seeing.

I believe that we are in the midst of a transition from one way of understanding the Bible to another way.

Both paradigms are Christians paradigms — and millions understand the Christian life with each one.

One is not “traditional” and the other not. Both are ways of seeing the Christian tradition and what it says about the Bible, God, Jesus and what it means to be a follower of Christ.

The Earlier Paradigm or Belief-Centered Paradigm sees the Bible as a divine product, as the unique revelation of God. Words that are often used to describe this paradigm are:

word of God or inspired by God.

Within this paradigm there are two forms, a harder form and a softer form. The harder form makes claims of Biblical infallibility or inerrancy. Marcus Borg writes: "Whatever it says — about the origin and early history of the earth, about God, about Jesus, about ethics and behavior — is 'God's truth'." Karen Armstrong once commented that the harder form sees the Bible as a kind of holy encyclopedia in which one may look up information about God.

The softer form also sees the bible as a divine product, but does not claim that every statement is inerrant. It proclaims that the spirit guided the writing of the Bible to prevent any serious errors. The Bible is true because it comes from God.

Borg likes to describe the earlier paradigm as "literal-factual," because this paradigm is greatly concerned with the factuality of the Bible. The hard form will take that quite seriously and believe that everything in the bible is the factual way that it happened. While the softer form believes that the really important events happened the way that they are recorded in the Bible.

One final comment about this earlier paradigm. This form of Biblical literalism also typically affirms the absolute character of the biblical teachings. Whether those teachings are doctrinal or ethical. To be a Christian is to be able to say all the word of the creeds without crossing one's fingers or becoming silent during some of the words. To be a Christian is to believe all of the statements of the creeds to be factually true.

The other way of seeing the Christian tradition is described by Marcus Borg as The Emerging Paradigm or a Way-Centered Paradigm. It is described by Borg using three adjectives: historical, metaphorical and sacramental.

This paradigm sees the Bible as the product of two ancient communities that spans over a thousand years; the ancient Israelite community and the early Christian movement.

The Bible was written by these communities, for these communities. In other words, in order to understand the Bible, one must understand the culture that produced it. It is not absolute, but it is an understanding of God within a particular context.

The bible is also viewed metaphorically. Again using Borg, the bible is seen in

its “more-than-literal, more-than-factual” meaning. This paradigm is not so concerned with whether or not an event actually happened, but rather what does the story mean.

Borg’s last adjective may be the most confusing. He uses that word sacramental, which for many Protestants means either Baptism or Communion. But he is referring to the word at its root meaning. Sacrament is something that mediates the sacred. It is a visible and tangible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. In other words the scripture becomes a vehicle in which one can encounter the sacred — in which one can encounter God.

At times it may seem as if these two paradigms are talking about two different Gods or religions. Even though they both use the same sacred scripture and often the same language.

As you can imagine these two ways of being Christian often result in hostility and animosity toward each other. The earlier paradigm seems rigid, anti-intellectual and moralistic. The emerging paradigm looks like a reduction of Christianity, a discounting of authority, and very earthy.

As I stated earlier, one assumption that I operate under is that there is not a “single Christianity”. Both of these paradigms have their place within the Christian family, and have served, and will continue to serve the community. The question is which paradigm works or which one gets in the way.

It is easy to focus on how these paradigms are different, instead let’s examine the common ground that they both share. Both share:

- # the reality of God
- # the centrality of the Bible
- # the centrality of Jesus
- # the importance of a relationship with God through Jesus
- # our need for transformation

Millions of people still understand God through this earlier paradigm. Unfortunately, however, millions more see this paradigm as a stumbling block, or even a road block to God.

As the book of Hebrews suggests, God indeed may be the same yesterday today and tomorrow. While God does not change, our cultural context does and has changed, and so too our understanding of the divine.

What difference does all this make?

For many people under the age of 40 today, they look at the claims that Christianity makes and say it makes no sense — and it becomes a take it or leave it proposition.

Did God Create the world in seven days — the belief centered paradigm says yes — so if you see evidence of evolution this does not work.

Was Mary a virgin when Jesus was born — again the belief centered paradigm says yes — so if that doesn't make sense to you, you are out of luck.

If you see issues in the inerrancy of the Bible — again the belief centered paradigm says yes — so if you see evidence of textual problems, you are out of the "faith."

In Bart Ehrman's book, Misquoting Jesus, a book in which he tries to explain in a popular way how the Bible came to be and why it is often misunderstood and misused, puts the problem quite simply when he writes:

how does it help us to say that the Bible is the inerrant word of God if in fact we don't have the words that God inerrantly inspired, but only the words copied by the scribes — sometimes correctly but sometimes (many times!) Incorrectly? What good does it do to say that the autographs (i.e., the originals) were inspired? We don't *have* the originals! We have only error-ridden copies, and the vast majority of these are centuries removed from the originals and different from them, evidently, in thousands of ways.

Over the next few weeks, Jeff and I are going to try and show you what this new way of seeing — this new paradigm — this Way-Centered paradigm does to our Christian walk.

I believe that it can help you draw even closer to God.

But if it doesn't work for you, that is OK, but what you need to understand, is that it might help someone who can't see God through your paradigm come to a relationship with our Lord and savior.