

Adventures In Missing The Point
Just what is the Bible?
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2 Timothy 3:16-17 (The Message)

But don't let it faze you. Stick with what you learned and believed, sure of the integrity of your teachers—why, you took in the sacred Scriptures with your mother's milk! There's nothing like the written Word of God for showing you the way to salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. Every part of Scripture is God-breathed and useful one way or another—showing us truth, exposing our rebellion, correcting our mistakes, training us to live God's way. Through the Word we are put together and shaped up for the tasks God has for us.

As I begin this morning I need to make a confession: I LOVE THIS BOOK!

I really do — but while I say that, I also need to say that it confuses me — frustrates me — exhausts me — challenges me — all the while it excites me!

Too often, I think we see the Bible as a rigid rule book
A book that can tell us right from wrong
A book that can tell us what to do and what to think

Even in our “Mission, Vision and Values” statement (which I helped write 8 years ago) — we say that the Bible is a “road map” for our lives.

As I began working on this sermon I wanted to go into our Mission, Vision and Values statement that mention this and remove it (and the sad truth is most of you would have never known!)

Because, I really don't see the Bible in that rigid way.

I have come to see the Bible as a lover — and like any lover — the Bible excites, but also frustrates.

But, the problem with the Bible is — most of us never read it!

And when we do read it — we do so with so much baggage that it is almost impossible for us to see in it anything more than what we are looking for.

- We want to see that women should keep quite in church —> NO PROBLEM — It's there
- Want to find out about how homosexual relationships are an

abomination —> I can show you the verses

- Want to see how God demands a sacrificial atonement —> it is right there as well

According national surveys conducted in 1992, by Barna Research, almost half of the Christian adults read from the Bible during a week.

In 1995, that figure came down to less than one-third.

Pollster George Gallup and Michael Lindsay, in a book on US trends comment: "the glaring lack of knowledge about the Bible, basic doctrines, and the traditions of one's church.... (and) the superficiality of faith, with many people not knowing what they believe, or why" (George Gallup Jr. and D. Michael Lindsay, *Surveying the Religious Landscape: Trends in U.S. Beliefs*, 1999, p.4).

Stephen Prothero, the author of *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know - And Doesn't*, says the United States is one of the most religious countries on earth, but Americans know nothing about religion - their own or the religions of others.

He talked about the Biblical literacy project that he is involved with. He says: I would give them a list of Bible characters and then Bible stories and I'd ask them to match them. I'd have Adam and Eve and Paul and Moses on one side and, on the other side, I'd have Exodus and the Road to Damascus and the Garden of Eden. I'd ask them to draw a line between the two, and it's amazing — the lines that they would draw in their heads. Paul would be getting the olive branch from the dove and — Jesus would be parting the Red Sea. I mean, somebody must have been able to do that. It was probably Jesus, you know.

He goes on:

There have been surveys done on this, but most Americans cannot name any of the Gospels. It's about 50 percent, a little below, when you ask them to name a Gospel. Most don't know that Genesis is the first book of the Hebrew Bible. Ten percent think that Joan of Arc was Noah's wife. A sizeable minority think that Sodom and Gomorrah were a happily married biblical couple. This is the kind of stuff you get when you ask about the Bible.

The unfortunate reality is that most Christians do not know the Bible.

And when we do talk about the Bible — we often misrepresent what it really

is.

Brian McLaren in *Adventures in Missing the Point* suggests that we often damage the reputation of the Bible because of four things that we often say about it.

1. We compare the Bible to things we value highly.

When we compare it to something like an encyclopedia, or blueprint or roadmap for our lives we raise the expectations that people have about it. They figure that it has all the answers they need — and when they can't find the answers, they become disappointed and walk away from the Bible.

2. We claim that the Bible is easy to understand — that any child can understand it.

The Sunday School song says it best:

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

Today we give Bibles to our children and we will, no doubt saying things like:
It's easy to understand
You just need the right version

But even the Bible tells us that it can be difficult to understand
There are some things in them (the scriptures) hard to understand,
which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other scriptures. (2 Peter 3:16)

Let me be clear — it is not easy to understand — it takes a lot of hard work and effort.

3. We present the Bible as a repository of sacred propositions and abstractions.

If we sort out the chaff from the wheat we can find all kinds of doctrines and principles.

The problem is — who decides what is the chaff and what is the wheat?
We have been debating this ever since the Bible was canonized

4. We mass produced the Bible

I think this is the most interesting insight by McLaren.

Today you can buy virtually any kind of Bible

Men's Bible

Women's Bible

Teen Bible

Military Bible

12 Step Bible

Chronological Bible

Super Hero Bible

Because of this, McLaren argues that we have reinforced the idea that the Bible is cheap and common.

Because of these four reasons, McLaren suggests that people reject the Bible needlessly.

He says:

"What they're really rejecting is the modern Western straitjacket in which we have corseted and even detained the Bible.

So, how should we read the Bible?

We all read it so differently, does that make any difference?

LeadershipJournal.net asks the question:

Ever wonder how two people can look at the same passage of the Bible and come away with such different applications? The ways we interpret the Bible, and what enters into our process of applying the Bible, are important for us to be aware of. Without this self-awareness, we can have blind spots in our Bible reading and not even know it.

They have published a valuable online quiz that I found very interesting and you might find helpful so that you can understand some of the baggage that you bring to the Bible.

The creators of the quiz divide individuals into three groups:

Conservatives: They emphasize the "... authority, ongoing and normative authority, of all of Scripture." They interpret biblical passages as literally true where possible. "If the Bible says it, that settles it."

Moderates: They struggle to reach what they feel are the correct

interpretations, sometimes siding with conservatives, and sometimes with progressives. They are sometimes criticized for being inconsistent.

Progressives: They look upon the Bible as "historically shaped and culturally conditioned." They try to understand the culture in which the authors lived in order to interpret what a passage meant at the time it was written. Then, they struggle to apply their writings to today's world. Some passages, particularly those related to human slavery, the treatment of women, the treatment of religious and sexual minorities, genocide, torture, etc. simply have to be abandoned as inapplicable.

It certainly isn't a perfect quiz — but I think it is insightful and a great starting point as we begin to understand how we approach the Bible.

As we understand how you come to the Bible it will help us as we begin to read and grow with it.

I believe we must become students of this book — or as I said earlier — lovers of this book — taking the time and effort to get to know the God who is written about within its pages.

I think that there are four basic ways of reading or interpreting the Bible. Each approach has its own advocates and distractors.

1. Literally reading the Bible
Pretty self explanatory

Inerrant — perfect — without errors
Infallible — absolute — THE WORD OF GOD

2. Reading it as a historical document

This understanding views the Bible as having been written by very human, fallible authors. The writers were motivated by a desire to promote their own religious, spiritual, and political beliefs and/or those of their faith group. Thus, the Bible reflects the evolution of religious and cultural thought over about a ten century time span.

3. Reading it as Midrash

This is a method of looking at the Bible from a totally different perspective. As explained by retired Episcopal Bishop Spong:

"Midrash is the Jewish way of saying that everything to be venerated in the present must somehow be connected with a sacred moment in the

past...It is the means whereby the experience of the present can be affirmed and asserted as true inside the symbols of yesterday."

According to a Midrash interpretation, the purpose of the parting of the Red/Reed Sea was to show the Israelites that God was on their side and that Moses could call on him for protection. It also shows that the history of Israel is continuous, containing repetitive themes that link back to earlier events.

According to this interpretation, it is not useful to ask whether the partings of the waters actually occurred. A proper question is:

"What was the experience that led, or even compelled, the compilers of sacred tradition to include this moment, this life or this event inside the interpretive framework of their sacred past?"

4. Reading it as folklore

Alan Dundes is a professor of anthropology and folklore at the *University of California*. He has written over 30 books based on his studies of the oral traditions of many cultures. In his book called: "*Holy writ as oral lit. The Bible as folklore*," he reports that multiple versions of various stories appear in the Bible.

Dundes believes that these stories were circulated for decades and even centuries as an oral tradition. During that time, each version of the stories subtly changed as it was circulated before it was recorded in written form. From the discrepancies among the various version of the same story, he concluded not only that the Bible *contains* folklore, but that the Bible *is* folklore.

Dundes writes: "*...the Bible clearly manifests the basic distinctive criteria of folklore: namely multiple existence and variation.*"

Which is the best approach?

Each has it's own merits.

The goal is to learn to see all of the different ways of reading the Bible and the questions that they raise.

Ultimately, I believe that the questions that the Bible raises are more important than the answers that you find.

Fall in love with the Bible
Let it frustrate you
Let it excite you!