

For Christmas, my oldest son gave me a really thoughtful gift: Bibliotheca. Bibliotheca is a new literary edition of the Bible; an updated rendering of the American Standard Version focused on translating the text for the purpose of readability. For anyone who loves the look and feel of a good book, Bibliotheca is an aesthetic gem.

Most notably, like Bibles up to the 1500's, Bibliotheca has no chapter and verse numbers. (Did you know that? Chapter divisions were not added to the Bible until the 13th century? Verse numbers were added 300 years later, in the 16th century. So up until the later 1500's, nobody cited the Bible chapter and verse. Imagine!) One other thing I like: this edition of the Bible is separated into 4 volumes: The Books of Moses & the Former Prophets, the Latter Prophets, the Wisdom Writings, and the New Testament.

Every night before bed (*almost*), I've been reading two or three chapters, immersing myself in another round of reading of God's Word. Have you noticed how, when you re-read even familiar portions of scripture, there are things you see with fresh eyes?

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We are in the 3rd of a 6-week series based on questions posed by many of you when you were invited to share one question you would ask, if you could ask God anything. Today's focus, "How should we read the Bible?" wasn't an actual question. But several questions revealed a great deal of interest in how we should read and apply the Bible. "Should we teach the orderly exposition of scripture?" "How do we reconcile Genesis and modern science?" "Is [this or that] passage literal or figurative?" "Should politics or social issues be preached from the pulpit?" "How do we know which scriptures apply today, and which don't?" Questions like these suggested today's focus, "How should we read the Bible?"

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In the preface to *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis wrote: "Ever since I became a Christian I have thought that the best, perhaps only, service I could do for my unbelieving neighbors was to **explain and defend the belief that has been common to nearly all Christians at all times.**" That would be a good preface for this message. What I hope this morning is offer an equivalent perspective of how Christians have read Scripture over almost our entire history.

The earliest Christian view of scripture is from 2 Timothy 3:14-17, though we tend to focus attention on v. 16: "All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for

training in righteousness, *so that...*" (Notice how verse 17 divides what is one sentence and thought! And keep the *so that* in your minds for later...) The apostle Paul wasn't thinking of this letter as Scripture when he wrote to Timothy – a young pastor – sometime between 55-70AD.

The Greek word used in the passage is *theopneustos*, meaning 'breathed into by God.' So the concept that scripture is 'breathed into by God' has been fundamental to our faith from nearly the beginning. What this actually means is less clear, and so there's much acrimonious debate among various branches of our Christian family tree.

What is clear, is that up until 1850 or so, what this belief meant to Christians – the belief that scripture is 'breathed into by God' – was that the writings of the Old and New Testament were 'soteriologically inerrant.' (How's that for a million-dollar phrase?) Soteriology is the word theologians use when talking about matters related to salvation. 'Soteriologically inerrant' means that the Scriptures do not err in revealing all we need to know for salvation.

Methodism's phrasing of the traditional Protestant view of the Bible is in our Articles of Religion: "The Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary unto salvation; so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man that it should be believed as an article of faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation." This is in aligns exactly with v. 15 where the NIV translates Paul's assertion this way: the sacred writings are 'able to make you wise for salvation through Jesus Christ.'

This Protestant view of scripture, shared by the leaders of the reformation like Jon Hus, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Richard Hooker, and – later – John Wesley, was to make clear that Scripture, not the rites of the Catholic church, provide all we need for salvation; thus the phrase *sola scriptura*.

This traditional Protestant view allows that there may be mistakes in matters *other* than those related to faith in practice. "So, if 2 Samuel 24:9 and 1 Chronicles 21:5 disagree on the number of soldiers in the armies of Israel and Judah, it is of no consequence for faith and practice. If 2 Kings 8:26 and 2 Chronicles 22:2 disagree on how old Ahaziah was when he became king, it is of no consequence for salvation." (F. Joyner)

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So, while it's fair to say that Christians in all times have believed in the 'sufficiency of scripture' for salvation, Christians more recently – beginning around

the mid-1800’s – have disagreed about how far inerrancy extends *beyond* matters of salvation.

So, let’s return to 2 Timothy 3. As I said, Paul wrote these words sometime between 55-70AD. The question Bible scholars debate is, what did Paul mean when he said ‘all scripture’? This question may sound silly, but how the community of faith has seen and understood scripture, and even what writings were considered to be scripture, has varied over the ages. We need not be afraid of these questions. In fact, I believe our life of faith is strengthened by addressing them.

Not all would agree with that. For example, when I responded to God’s call to ministry, I shared with a popular pastor from a local non-denominational church that I was going to attend seminary. His reply continues to haunt me. He said, “Ah. You’ll learn all the things you cannot say to a congregation about the Bible.” (What he meant was crystal clear. There are things in and about the Bible that it’s better not to share with lay people. I still find that troubling. But more troubling, is that many pastors operate in the manner he counseled.) What I’m about to share falls into the category of what he meant I should not say, but I think you’re up to it!

Historically, the first five books of the Bible were not determined to be sacred until 400BC. The Prophetic writings were determined to be sacred 2 centuries later, around 200BC. The Wisdom Writings (Job, the Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes ...), these were determined to be sacred scripture in 100AD. While I’ve never been very good at math, what this means is that if Jesus was killed in either 30 or 33AD, a final determination of the books included in the OT did not happen until *after* Jesus died, and after Paul wrote 2 Timothy. Based on this, scholars ask an honest question: “When Paul refers to ‘all scripture’ in this letter, was he only referring to the Books of Moses and to the Prophets, not to the OT Wisdom Writings?”

And what about the NT? The 27 books that make up our NT seem to have been first listed in 367AD. Again, you’ll need to check my math, but that’s something like 300 years after Paul wrote 2nd Timothy. Since Paul never refers to any of the gospels, there’s a question if he even knew of the gospels. We do know that the gospel of John was written sometime between 70-90 AD, and Revelation a bit later, so these books were most likely written after Paul wrote 2nd Timothy. Did Paul think ‘all scripture’ would include the letters he himself wrote and also things not yet written? (That’s not a rhetorical question. It’s something to think about

because, as one of my Bible professors said, “My friends, Jesus’ tomb was empty so that our minds need not be!” And as another Bible professor counseled – in contrast to the non-denominational pastor – we who are clergy have an obligation to tell the truth, because nothing that’s true is outside of Jesus.)

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Based on all this, it’s not surprising to learn that from the beginning of our faith, there was *no official doctrine* about what a convert to Christianity needed to believe about Scripture. How do we know that? If you turn to #880 and #881 of your hymnals, you’ll find the Nicene Creed and the Apostle’s Creed. These creeds established the dividing line between Christian and non-Christian. One or both of these creeds (depending on the era) are what you needed to affirm to be baptized. The Apostles creed is the oldest; it may go as far back as 120AD. The Nicene Creed was adopted in 325AD, so both creeds were established before the final 27 books of the NT were formalized.

As you can see, neither creed includes an affirmation about Scripture, though the Nicene Creed does include that Jesus’ resurrection happened ‘in accordance with Scripture.’ Keep in mind though, that the creed would have been pointing to the prophetic witness of the OT to validate the resurrection of Jesus. In any case, the creeds clarify that -- since the very beginning -- our salvation depends on what **we believe about Jesus**.

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With that introduction let’s explore the question “How should we read the Bible?” (I’m joking!) But here’s the deal. Like the earliest Christians, beginning with Paul in 2 Timothy and continuing in the tradition of historic Protestantism, we believe that scripture contains all things necessary for salvation. While many put a heavy emphasis on 2 Timothy 3:16, Paul’s emphasis was v. 17: That scripture is breathed into by God “*so that* everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.”

To put it another way, the reason God breathed into scripture was not *so that* we could win arguments, score debate points, or impress others with our ability to cite the Bible chapter and verse. The reason God breathed into scripture was *so that* we are equipped us for every good work. And that means that Scripture is ‘breathed into by God’ *so that* we will have life, and have it abundantly, in and through Jesus, our Christ and Lord. If we read it in any other way, there’s a good chance we’re missing the point. Amen.