

## **What the Bible Is and Is Not**

*A sermon preached on 1 John 1:1-4 and 2 Timothy 3:16-17 by Emily Hull McGee at First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC on June 3, 2018*

“Attention. Salute. Pledge.” Hundreds of young voices in VBS camp t-shirts recited aloud: *I pledge allegiance to the Bible, God’s holy word, and will make it a lamp unto my feet, a light unto my path, and will hide its words in my heart that I may not sin against God.*

“Attention. Present Bible. Start.” All around me swirled rapid thumbing through these crinkly pages, followed by a triumphant step forward as the Bible driller jabbed the page with his or her finger and read aloud the verse or passage they had searched and found.

I asked our Summer Sunday School class earlier to recall one of the earliest memories of the Bible in their childhood, and these are two of mine — Bible pledges and Bible drills were the sounds and sensations of my childhood as a preacher’s kid. I remember each of the Bibles my church presented me at the changing seasons of life: the tiny white one that was given to my parents upon my dedication, the red King James Version Bible I got when entering kindergarten, the creamy white Precious Moments Bible I handpicked upon the occasion of my baptism, the Teen Study Bible that captivated me with graphics and relevant questions in the sidebars of scripture, the Life Application Bible I was given as I set off for college to take this adolescent faith of mine on the road, and the thick Bible + commentary I was given at my ordination to the gospel ministry, assuming rightly that I’d be doing in-depth study on a regular basis. With my parents and brother at my side, I remember the bright pictures of Adam and Eve, Moses and Miriam,

Jesus and the colorful cast of characters who surrounded him, images now etched in my biblical DNA. As a child, I remember blushing terribly in my first read of Song of Solomon, feeling mighty scared at the odd images in Daniel and Revelation, marveling at the cosmic swirl “in the beginning” that stretched from Genesis to John, and wondering intently about this person named Jesus. My first attempt to read the Bible from cover to cover even failed miserably as I fell asleep each night trying to slog through the Levitical codes in the Old Testament!

I have no doubt that these early encounters with scripture shaped my life’s biblical and theological framework. These childhood memories I have of the Bible probably sound familiar to some of you who, like me, grew up in churches or homes where the Bible was a revered and friendly companion. And yet others of you may have had wildly divergent experiences of the Bible in your past — where the Bible was used to condemn or diminish, hurt or distance you from God. Many more of us have had spotty histories with the Bible, times in our lives where we may have sought counsel or comfort in its pages during seasons of crisis only to let it grow dusty on the shelf in seasons of calm. And yet, as people of faith, we know that this isn’t just any old book on a shelf. We believe that these words *matter*, that they mean something profound for our experience of God and this world.

So *what is the Bible?* We could start with some **definitions**. The word “bible” comes from the Greek word *biblia*, which literally translates to mean “books.” Thus first and foremost, the Bible is a collection of books — some 66 of them — written and compiled and organized and codified into these holy scriptures over centuries of time. It’s practically like a library, with all sorts of

types of writing contained within: stories and songs, legal codes and genealogies, instructions and laments, poetry and parables, wisdom sayings and prophecies.

*What is the Bible?* We could also rattle off some **descriptions**. If you've been around the Bible for any length of time, surely you've heard words used to describe the Bible, words like 'infallible,' 'inerrant,' 'truth,' 'true,' and 'holy.' You've probably also heard or even felt that the Bible was complicated or frustrating, curious or peculiar, transformative or life-giving. Pastor Adam Hamilton of the book *Making Sense of the Bible* that we're exploring together this summer even calls it "disturbing, wonderful, perplexing, and inspiring."<sup>1</sup>

*What is the Bible?* Paul calls it "**inspired by God**" in today's reading from 2 Timothy. "Inspired by God" is a curious little phrase, translated from the Greek word *theopneustos*. It literally means "God-breathed," and ironically enough, this is the only time in all those 66 books and in other Greek texts in the decades that followed that this particular word *theopneustos* is used. Christians for centuries have wondered about the meaning of "inspired" or "God-breathed" – were our scriptures dictated to their authors and exact in transcription, or do they bear the creative breath of God that moves as a force throughout the history of the world? Does 'God-breathed' mean technically precise or Spirit-infused?

Regardless – this is the breath that is as old as time itself, when God scooped up some dirt in the garden and blew humanity into existence. It's the same holy breath that once animated a valley of bones, parted the waters,

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<sup>1</sup> Adam Hamilton, *Making Sense of the Bible*, p3.

and set loose the church.<sup>2</sup> It's the holy breath that fell hot on the faces of the disciples as Jesus showed up on that Easter night, blowing through the tatters of their lives and somehow stitching them back up again as if in thin air. It's the holy breath from the One mistook as a gardener who scoops up our sacred ordinary grounds of fear and zeal, denial and betrayal, indifference and hopefulness, and inflates us with a purpose and a calling. It's the holy breath that sent forth the Word to become flesh in Jesus, the Word by which all other words of God are measured.<sup>3</sup>

No matter the number of times you've read the Bible — be it a handful or thousands — I imagine you've felt that breath of God capturing something within these words that has inspired you: moving and provoking and rousing and stimulating and urging you to new thoughts and practices in your life.<sup>4</sup> In moments of great inspiration, you likely acted upon it, and God used you however imperfectly in the midst of it! Such too is the work of the Bible. If scripture is inspired, or God-breathed, then the authors captured the ways that God had moved them — writing the story of their ancestors, penning letters to churches seeking counsel, capturing the teachings of Jesus, composing songs, hymns, and spiritual songs, crying out in grief and anger towards God, inscribing the prophetic words of God through people to a world in need. However imperfectly yet truthfully, God used these authors to communicate the greatest story ever told.

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<sup>2</sup> Beautiful reading of 'breath' in Rachel Held Evans' chapter "Breathe" of *Searching for Sunday*.

<sup>3</sup> Hamilton, 146.

<sup>4</sup> Hamilton, 132, for a great explanation of what it means to "inspire."

But just because we might know what the Bible is — how it's defined and described and divinely inspired— that certainly doesn't mean that whatever questions we have about the Bible go away. To the contrary!

Centuries of readers — us included! — have wondered: who is the Bible for? How and where should it be used? What does the Bible *say*? What does the Bible *mean*? Are there certain passages of scripture that are more important than others? How do I know what to take *seriously* and what to take *literally*? If the Bible is full of truth, does “truth” mean “factually correct” or “timelessly meaningful”? And how exactly should I read the Bible?

Is it to be an *instruction manual*, telling me exactly how I'm supposed to live and make decisions in this life? Or perhaps like a fully-fleshed out explanation — what we might call a *systematic theology* — that answers the questions about the work of God in the world. Maybe I should read it like a *Magic 8 ball*, asking questions of the text like “Should I move to another location?” or “Should I end this relationship?” ... then instead of shaking the ball and getting an answer floating to the top like “all signs point to yes,” I could simply flip through the until I randomly find an answer like “Smoke went up from his nostrils, and devouring fire from his mouth; glowing coals flamed forth from him.”<sup>5</sup> Wait, that may not work.

Perhaps I could read the Bible like a *textbook* or a *reference book*, there in case I need to look something up but mostly living on the shelf instead of in heavy rotation like other things I read. Or is it a *book of promises* — kept and broken — from the God who relentlessly pursues us?

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<sup>5</sup> Psalm 18:8

So we ask again: *what is the Bible?* It's more than a definition, and definitely larger than a description, and even broader than its divine inspiration. And while there are components of instruction manuals, theologies, Q & A, text or reference books, and promises contained within, the Bible is not exclusively any of those things.

Friends, the Bible is a **story**. It is our story: the story of God and the story of us. One pastor calls the Bible “a collection of different confessions of faith ... all offered by persons so gripped by an experience of God that they had to tell others.”<sup>6</sup> Another says that it's the “human response to the initiative of God.”<sup>7</sup> It is a *public text*, in that we hold it in common, belonging to the community, and feasting upon in communion with one another. It is a *living text*, dynamic and, in the words of Hebrews, “living and active, sharper than a two-edged sword.”<sup>8</sup> And it is an *inclusive text*, wide enough to draw us all in with wonderful words of life, words that remind us of who and whose we are. Frederick Buechner says, “we can't really hear what the stories of the Bible are saying until we hear them as stories about ourselves. We have to imagine our way into them.”<sup>9</sup>

We can do just that, because these stories contain themes as timeless as time. As one writer says, this is the story: “God creating life out of death, darkness, and chaos... and we want more; God setting limits... and we challenge them; God is God... and we try to be God too. God judges... and we

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<sup>6</sup> David Lose, *Making Sense of Scripture Leader Guide*.

<sup>7</sup> Peter Gomes, *The Good Book*, p14. His three descriptors of the text – public, living, inclusive – were so helpful in my preparation for today's sermon.

<sup>8</sup> Hebrews 4:12

<sup>9</sup> Frederick Buechner, *Sermons*, p259.

get the message. God forgives... and we forget the message. God keep choosing us... and we keep choosing death. God creates life out of darkness and chaos... and we rejoice: 'thanks be to God!'"<sup>10</sup> Wonderful words of life indeed!

That's exactly what pastor Barbara Brown Taylor found as she traveled to her local nursing home one afternoon to celebrate communion with the guests there. It was a semi-regular practice of hers, you see. Upon her arrival, a dozen or so folks would have been wheeled in their wheelchairs into the television room, where there, she'd set up the communion elements. Many of these residents had a high level of need. Some dazed into space, others dozed with heads drooping. Some yelled at her, and others treated her as if she was there to rob them. She said about the experience, "it's one of the hardest things I do because I sometimes doubt the power of the sacrament to break through their fog. I say all the comfortable words and wonder if anyone hears them. I stand there with my arms raised over the bread and wine and suspect that I might as well be flying a kite."<sup>11</sup>

She was warned one visit that because of the lateness of the day, many medications were beginning to wear off. Folks were more awake than usual, and one resident sang "Row Row Row Your Boat" so loud throughout, that Barbara finally had to clap her hands to get everyone's attention.

"What shall I read from the Bible this afternoon," she asked. "What part would you like to hear?"

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<sup>10</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Preaching Life*, 53.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 61.

And from somewhere in the room — she couldn't find it exactly — a woman's broken voice surfaced above the din. "Tell us a resurrection story," she said. It was as if her words settled the cacophony. "Yes, yes!" one said, and then another. "Tell us a resurrection story!"

No matter your age or life stage, no matter if you participated in Bible drills and pledges or if the Bible has been inspired or devastated you, my friends, this holy, sacred, confusing, peculiar, transformative book right here is a resurrection story. For the God who breathed these words into being breathes on you and you and you and me, inspiring us for the living of all our days. Thanks be to God indeed!