

This morning's bumper sticker is "God said it, I believe it, that settles it." If you do a quick Google search, you'll find hundreds of thousands of web pages offering this slogan. If God says something, of course, we should believe it. If we had a question, and God stood before us and told us God's answer, that would indeed settle the matter.

Of course, what Christians generally mean by "God said it" is that the Bible says it; therefore, they believe it, and that settles it. That, too, seems right, but there's a problem with "God said it, I believe it, that settles it," the problem is that it's a green light to oversimplify scripture and it's a "Conversation Stopper."<sup>1</sup> You guys know conversation stoppers, right? It's the things that we say when we're unwilling to discuss certain topics further. Stuff like "Talk to the hand" or maybe just a "Bye," or perhaps you've experienced this one (Amanda ducks behind the pulpit for 5 seconds and stands back up). You've been "ghosted."

These are all ways we communicate that we're done talking and engaging in communication, and no doubt, "God said it, I believe it, that settles it, falls into this "conversation ending" category. To continue and engage in these conversations, like whether women should serve in ministry or not or whether homosexuality is a sin or not, requires a commitment to deep thinking and an openness to theological interpretation. And as followers of Jesus, are we not called to be deep thinkers about scripture? Jesus did not interpret the Law in a "God said it, I believe it, that settles it" way. He thought deeply and had a very open interpretation of the Sabbath laws, quite different from how those laws were applied by Moses

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<sup>1</sup> [www.uccmedina.org/sermons/god-said-it-i-believe-it-that-settles-it/](http://www.uccmedina.org/sermons/god-said-it-i-believe-it-that-settles-it/).

when he had a man put to death for picking up sticks on the Sabbath. Jesus noted, "The Sabbath was created for humans; humans weren't created for the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27). Jesus' willingness to heal on the Sabbath was one of the big factors that led to his eventual crucifixion. This negative attention was led by powerful people saying things like "God said it, I believe it, that settles it."<sup>2</sup>

Suppose we're unwilling to think deeply about scripture and understand the contexts in which they are written. In that case, we can find ourselves setting all kinds of unusual limits on our behavior, even down to where we're allowed to go to the bathroom. I'll venture to guess that you've never heard a sermon or a devotional on one of our scripture lessons today from Deuteronomy chapter 23. In this particular context, pastor Jennifer very quickly quipped, "Doo-doo-onomy" and you're about to find out why.<sup>3</sup>

Let's listen to a word from the Lord.

"You shall have a designated area outside the camp to which you shall go. With your utensils, you shall have a trowel; when you relieve yourself outside, you shall dig a hole with it and then cover up your excrement. Because the Lord your God travels along with your camp, to save you and to hand over your enemies to you, therefore your camp must be holy, so that he may not see anything indecent among you and turn away from you."

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<sup>2</sup> Hamilton, Adam. *Half truths: God helps those who help themselves, and other things the Bible doesn't say*. Abingdon Press, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Hamilton

The word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

If you happened to be 140 years old, you might have heard a few sermons on this text. In the 1880s, believe it or not, you could find preachers expounding on the biblical teaching in Deuteronomy 23 about where to relieve oneself. In the 1880s, indoor plumbing was becoming widely available for the first time, and churches were beginning to debate its merits. Before that time, if someone felt "nature's call" at church, they had to leave the building and visit an outhouse. Suddenly, parishioners all over America began suggesting that everyone would benefit if they modernized their churches with indoor plumbing.<sup>4</sup>

Now, no one today suggests that churches should build outhouses. You won't find a church built in the past seventy-five years without indoor toilets. But in the 1880s, when indoor plumbing was an innovation, that passage from Deuteronomy was taken by many to mean that God was against indoor plumbing and that God might abandon the church because of indoor plumbing. This seems absolutely ridiculous to us, but this is where "God said it, I believe it, that settles it" get us. It's a superficial, oversimplified interpretation of scripture.<sup>5</sup>

If we are committed to this oversimplification approach to scripture, we better be ready to alter our lives quite a bit. For instance:

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<sup>4</sup> Hamilton

<sup>5</sup> Hamilton

- Don't wear blended fabrics or sow two different seeds in your fields (Lev. 19:19).
- Eliminate pork (that does include bacon) and shrimp from your diet (Lev.11:7-12)
- Men, you cannot trim the edges of your beard (Lev. 19:27) (I'm looking around, and I'm seeing entirely too many neat beards).
- Children who talk back to their parents should be put to death (Exodus 21:15; Deut. 21:18-21).
- Don't mow your lawn, clean your house, do laundry, go to the grocery store, or do anything except worship on Sundays or .... wait for it... you can be put to death (Sorry, music team and all of Triune's staff) (Exodus 35:2).

There's a lot more, but this makes my point. Most of us have not read the Old Testament passages listed above and said, "God said it, I believe it, that settles it." Some might rationalize that these verses reflect God's covenant with Israel but are no longer binding upon Christians. YET, Jesus said in Matthew 5:17-20, "Don't even begin to think that I have come to do away with the Law and the Prophets. I haven't come to do away with them but to fulfill them." and yet, Jesus still healed on the Sabbath.<sup>6</sup> Why? It's because:

1. Jesus cared and thought deeply about the scriptures, which of course, during Jesus' time were the scriptures of the Old Testament, something we'll reiterate in a moment.
2. Jesus. Was. God. Fully human. Fully God. Jesus can most accurately articulate what God says... because Jesus is God.

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<sup>6</sup> Hamilton

There are indeed passages in which the biblical authors claim they literally received God's words. For example, Moses at times says that God dictated sections of the Law; the prophets sometimes say (as in Jeremiah 1:4), "The Lord's word came to me..."; the writer of Revelation claims at points that the Lord spoke directly to him and commanded him to write down specific things (though often it's an angel or merely a voice that he claims is talking to him in a vision). Yet most of the time, the biblical authors do not claim any form of dictation but claim to bring their own insights, reflections, and ideas concerning God's will.

In Paul's letters, he never claims that his words and thoughts are interchangeable with God's words and thoughts. He does, however, trust that the Spirit leads him. Our other scripture lesson today, 2 Timothy 3:16-17 is historically attributed to Paul, although some historical critics question Paul's authorship. Nevertheless, the author responds to questions from early Christians and writes to teach, encourage, correct, and mentor his flock.<sup>7</sup> He writes:

"Every scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for showing mistakes, for correcting, and for training in character, that the person who belongs to God can be equipped to do everything that is good."

Does God speak through this text? Of course. Does God still speak through these words to us today? Absolutely. But since the author is writing as a human and not God, we must interpret their words. We must seek to understand the times in which Paul or the author wrote,

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<sup>7</sup> Hamilton

the circumstances he was addressing, and how his words continue to address our current situation.

When people speak about scripture, they often refer to its inspiration. Interestingly, the word inspired regarding scripture appears only once in the Bible, found in our lesson today.

"Every scripture is inspired by God.." In interpretation, we have to note a few things.<sup>8</sup>

1. When the author uses the word scripture, they refer to the documents that make up our Old Testament. The Gospels, Acts, Revelation, and most general epistles in the New Testament were not written by the time of Paul's death, and it's unlikely the author was referring to Paul's letters as scripture, especially if it was Paul).
2. When the author writes that "every scripture" is inspired by God, they are not likely referring to every word or verse in the Old Testament, but instead addressing a question of which individual writings circulating among the Jewish communities in the first century were holy books influenced by God. You see, the Sadducees and Samaritans considered only the Torah to be influenced by God and did not give the same weight to the Prophets or other writings that we consider part of our Old Testament. The author is likely saying that all of the writings, including the Torah, the Prophets, and other Writings, are all valid and inspired by God.
3. It's hard to say what the author meant by "Inspired by God" because the Greek word for "Inspired by God" (Theo-pneustos) only appears this one time in scripture, and history

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<sup>8</sup> Hamilton

for that matter. The writer created this word for this scripture, and it's not mentioned anywhere else. "Theo" means God, and "Pneustos" refers to breath, wind, or spirit. What precisely does the author mean by this word? We don't know... We can only interpret. We can confidently say that Paul or the author believed that, in some sense, all the sacred writings of the Old Testament were influenced by God, but we can only speculate precisely how.<sup>9</sup>

So, to use 2 Timothy 3:16-17 to validate "God said it, I believe it, that's it" as a conversation stopper to defend the "inerrancy" of all scripture, including the Old and New Testaments is an ill-informed and an oversimplified translation of that scripture.

So, in addition to understanding context, how do we think deeply and theologically about scripture? How do we apply it to our lives? Pastor and theologian Shirley Guthrie answer these questions well. He says (I quote)

"We must listen to all of what scripture tells us about the meaning of Christian faith and life.

We must pay attention, especially to those passages that call into question or conflict with what we would like the Bible to say or think that it must or should say. If we listen only to those parts of scripture we find agreeable, we do not listen at all. We only use the Bible to confirm what we think we already know. If we really want to overcome our own presumptions and biases and

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<sup>9</sup> Hamilton

correct those of others, we have to subject them to critical examination in light of the whole biblical witness to the word and work and will of God in Jesus Christ." (end quote).<sup>10</sup>

It's essential to recognize that when we study scripture, our own biases can lead us to hear what we want to hear. When we pick up the Bible, all of our own stuff is right there with us. Yet, if we are in a relationship with what Shirley Guthrie calls the whole biblical witness and all of its sacred stories, holding it not with a clenched fist but with an open hand, if we allow them to speak to us, if we engage in conversation with others without shutting them down, if we allow God in our midst, then beautiful conversations happen. Conversations capable of shaping hearts. Conversations that break hearts until they stay open for our neighbors.<sup>11</sup>

Guthrie also points out the importance of reflecting and meditating on the "Word and work and will of God in Jesus Christ" when reading scripture. For me, the most important lens for interpreting scripture is Jesus himself and his words. If a Scripture text seems inconsistent with something Jesus says or Jesus' behavior patterns, then I choose Jesus every time. John describes Jesus as God's Word that became flesh: He is the definitive Word of God. All other words in scripture were mediated through ordinary human beings. As Christians, we believe that in and through Jesus, God came to us, walked among us, showed us, and taught us who

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<sup>10</sup> Guthrie, Shirley C. *Diversity in faith, unity in christ*. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1986.

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God is and who we are meant to be. When we seek to read, and understand scripture, Christians should interpret it through the lens of what Jesus teaches us about the heart, character, and will of God and through the commands to love God and love others. Particular weight ought to be given to the "rule of love"—that is, "How does this passage help the reader better fulfill Scripture's highest law to 'Love your Lord with all your heart, your soul, your mind, and your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself?'" <sup>12</sup>

The Bible shouldn't be used to end conversations but to begin them. Our sacred stories are not an end to an argument but an invitation to deeper understanding and knowledge of God and one another.

Let us enter into conversation together. To learn. To see the broader scope of God's love and creation. Let us interpret our scripture through the lens of love because that's what Jesus did. Jesus reminds us that all scripture, all of our doctrines, and denominations are about one thing... We are made for love. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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<sup>12</sup> [www.uccmedina.org/sermons/god-said-it-i-believe-it-that-settles-it/](http://www.uccmedina.org/sermons/god-said-it-i-believe-it-that-settles-it/).

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