

“Foundations: The Bible”

2 Timothy 3:14-17

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Rev. David Williams

Scripture: 2 Timothy 3:14-17

Sermon:

Introduction

Imagine arriving at work one day, or at school, or having tea with a neighbour who is not a Christian. I'm sure we all know at least one person who is not a Christian. Think of that specific person. **[pic]** Picture them in your mind. Imagine as you talk about your day that this person turns the conversation to the Bible. “Why do you believe in the Bible?” they ask, “I've tried reading it. It doesn't make much sense. And I hear there are all kinds of contradictions in it.”

How would you feel in that moment? Would you feel anxious? Can you imagine your chest tightening, or your palms getting sweaty? Perhaps you may feel defensive? Maybe your mind would start racing, wondering what they were going to bring up. Would you try to change the conversation? Or would you try to draw out more information from them? Would you see that conversation as a scary event, or an opportunity?

Imagine, for a moment, being able to handle that situation coolly and calmly. Imagine being able to say, “I love the Bible. It really speaks to me, but I can understand it may be confusing at first. What particular difficulties were you having?”

Or, imagine for a moment, a good friend of yours who is a Christian moves to another city. After a few months there, they call you to tell you how excited they are about their new church. You're glad that they've found a church and are excited about it, so you ask them what they love about it so much. They tell you that the church is large and has a beautiful sanctuary. **[pic]** They have all sorts of great programs and fabulous music. Then they tell you pastor is teaching them things from the Bible they've never heard before. For instance, the pastor says that if you give to God he has to give back to you even more! It's called “sowing.” And just this week the pastor taught about the Sower and the Seed and that the farmer reaped a harvest 30, 60 or even 100 times as big as what he sowed. So your friend has decided to start giving the church a lot of money, confident that God is going to bless them with 30, 60 or even 100 times as much money as they give to the church!

How would you respond to your friend? Would you be excited for them, or would your heart sink? Would you know where to begin? Would you be able to help them understand that parable better? Did you even know there was a story in the Bible about a sower sowing seed and reaping a big harvest?

Over the years, people have used the Bible to defend everything from slavery to incest. Is that really what the Bible says? Is that really how we are to understand it? Some people toss up their hands and say, “You can make the Bible say whatever you want, why should I bother reading it?”

When I think of success for myself as a preacher, one of the things I imagine is that people who've been in my church for a number of years would be confident in the types of situations I just described. For me, success means, in part, that all of you would be able to **handle the Bible correctly [4 lines come together]**. You would be able to explain the message of the Bible in general terms, and on a case by case basis, be able to read, understand and interpret many passages of scripture that others abuse. My goal is that each of us here be able to read, understand and correctly apply the Bible in most cases and be able to detect abuse of the Bible when we hear it.

Imagine, now, loving your Bible so much, and enjoying reading it so much, that you take your Bible with you to work or school each day. **[pic]** Imagine yourself at lunch time, sitting down where you usually eat, and pulling out your Bible to read it. Imagine some of your co-workers or classmates coming to join you with their Bibles so you can read them together. Maybe the others are believers, maybe not, but they're interested in reading the book, and not out of a sense of duty, but a sense of excitement and love for the book! And as you read it, you're able to help them consider the context, make observations from the text, understand it and apply it.

In order to make these ideas a reality, we need to read our Bibles. We need to pay attention to good models of how to read and approach the Bible. We need to learn how to take the Bible on its own terms and to let it speak for itself.

But what is the Bible? What do Christians believe about the Bible? Is the Bible just like any other religious book? Don't all religions have their scriptures? Aren't they all pretty much the same? What is the Christian belief about the Bible?

The Bible is a collection of 66 different books by a variety of authors written over a period spanning 1500 years! [incl timeline] It is broken down into two volumes. Volume 1 is the Old Testament which was written before Jesus over the course of about 1,000 years. The last book of volume 1 was written roughly 400 years before Christ. Volume 2, the New Testament, starts with Jesus' birth, life, death and resurrection. It goes on to detail the birth of the church and contains many letters written by the apostles to the various groups of Christians.

The Bible as a whole contains stories, histories, poetry, laws, letters, laments, dreams, prophecies, preaching and even a book of erotica! The Bible is not a philosophy book. It is not a handbook on how to be a Christian. It not a text book arranged by topic so you can look up how to pray or what God is like.

So what is the Bible? Is there a thread that ties it all together? **The Bible is the story of God's loving pursuit of fallen people for the sake of their redemption and salvation.** We need to keep this in mind when we read the Bible. Some parts are about God. Some parts are about the fallenness of people and their need for redemption. Some parts are about faithful people. Some parts are about unfaithful people. But throughout the Bible we must remember to look at it through the lens of God's loving pursuit of fallen people for the purpose of their redemption and salvation. This means that the Bible doesn't always answer the questions we would ask. The Bible doesn't contain everything we might wish.

The Bible does contain reports of how things actually are, which is often not how they should be. That is, **the Bible is often descriptive, not prescriptive.** The Bible tells us what people did, not what they should have done. Just because you read about somebody doing something in the Bible doesn't mean that is what God wants you to do! Just because the Bible describes Jacob and his mother defrauding his brother Esau doesn't mean it's ok for us to do that or that God intended for them to do that. Just because the Bible describes Samson visiting a prostitute doesn't mean it's ok to visit prostitutes! The Bible is descriptive- describing what happened, not always prescriptive- describing what God wanted or commanded.

But what makes the Bible special? Why do we call it God's word? What does it mean that the Bible is inspired? What is the Christian belief about the Bible as a whole, not just particular passages?

The word Christians use to describe the Bible is "inspired." Let's take a look at what that means. We're going to zero in on one particular passage in the NT that talks about this.

Context

By way of context, 2 Timothy is a letter written by Paul to his protégé Timothy who was pastoring or leading the Christians in the city of Ephesus. At the time of writing, Paul had sent Timothy to Ephesus to help straighten the church out because a number of **false teachers** had started leading the Christians astray. It is with these false teachers in mind that Paul wrote the passage we are about to read.

Text

Read 2 Tim 3:14-17

Observations

Let's make some observations about this text and then zero in on a couple particulars. First, Paul encouraged Timothy to hold fast to what he has learned and been convinced of. He is to do this by remembering where he learned these things. We know from the opening of the letter that Timothy learned much from his mother and grandmother. **1 Timothy 1:5** tells us about his grandmother Lois and his mother Eunice and the faith they imparted to Timothy. Certainly, as well, Paul has himself in mind too. [Walter L Leifeld, *1, 2 Timothy*, p. 279] He taught Timothy much in their travels together and Timothy had been a student of Paul's for years before being sent on his own to work in Ephesus.

In addition to learning from important people in his life, Timothy also knew the "Scriptures" from the time he was little. We must remember that this means the OT. When Timothy was young, the NT hadn't been put together yet. It's interesting for us to note how Paul describes the OT. He says it is "able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus." That's the OT he's talking about! How many of us, today, know our OT well enough to see how it makes us wise for salvation through faith in Christ? The OT was completed 400 years

before the birth of Christ! We're used to going straight to the NT for our information about Jesus and salvation.

We're going to zero in on verse 16, though. This is where the inspired nature of Scripture comes into play. In verse 16, Paul says, "**All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.**" What does it mean for Scripture to be "God-breathed"? Many translations render this word "inspired." But in Greek the word is literally made up of the words for "God" and "breathed." **The word "inspired," when used for Scripture, literally means "God-breathed."** That means that our understanding of what inspired means should reflect something about being "God-breathed."

There has been a lot of ink spilled over the centuries about what, exactly, it means for the Bible to be inspired. But I learned something really cool working on this sermon. Remember last week when we talked about humanity? Remember that we read in Genesis 2 that God "breathed" life into the man? Remember, also, that we've been talking about how the Hebrew and Greek words for "breath" or "wind" are also the words for "spirit"? [Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, p. 227]

When we read that God "breathed" into man, he made him a "living being" different from the other animals. There are certainly similarities between humans and other animals. We are made from the same materials. But humans are profoundly different than other animals because God breathed life in to us. In the same way, Scripture is like other writings, but it is profoundly different because God "breathed" into Scripture. There is a life to Scripture not found in other books. That life comes from God's Spirit at work in the writing of Scripture. God's creation of humanity involved a self-giving act by God to make them distinct. Scripture, too, is distinct because of a self-giving act of God, breathing his Spirit into the writing.

Now, as one commentator pointed out, "**God-breathed" is an indication of the source of inspiration, not the manner of inspiration.** [William D. Mounce, *The Pastoral Epistles*, p. 566] So we still are not sure how, exactly, God inspired Scripture, but we will get there.

Next, notice what Paul says next about God-breathed Scripture. He says that it is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness. "In righteousness" applies to all 4 uses: teaching in righteousness, rebuking in righteousness, correcting in righteousness and training in righteousness. Righteousness means having a right relationship with God.

Remember, Paul sent Timothy to Ephesus to confront false teachers that were leading the church astray. So here we see Paul telling Timothy that all Scripture is inspired, or God-breathed, and useful for confronting these false teachers. The Scriptures are useful for teaching doctrine, that is, teaching right ideas and truths about God and how to have a right relationship with Him. They are useful for rebuking, which is what Timothy needed to do with the false teachers. They needed to be rebuked for their false ideas about how to have a right relationship with God and for spreading them. [Leifeld, p. 280] Scripture is also useful for correcting. The people who had been led astray needed to be corrected on how to have a right relationship with God. And they all needed training. They needed to be trained in righteousness, trained in having a right relationship with God.

But it's not just about knowing the right things. Having correct knowledge about having a right relationship with God is a crucial first step. But it's not enough to just know. You have to actually live it out. This is what Paul is getting at in verse 17, "**so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.**" Righteousness leads to action. Righteousness is lived out in good works. This was one of the big contrasts between Paul and Timothy on the one hand, and the false teachers in Ephesus on the other hand. Part of the evidence for the truth of Timothy's message was that his message was lived out in good work. [Liefeld, p. 280] We're going to get into what good works are and how they relate to our relationship with God in the coming weeks, but for now we need to understand that our relationship with God is about a lot more than what we think and believe. Our relationship with God leads to good works, which in Ephesians 2:10, Paul says "were prepared in advance for us to do." "The affirmation of inspiration at the centre [of these verses] must not be isolated from this context of purpose." [Liefeld, p. 281]

Interpretation

So what does all this mean? What does it mean, then, that the Bible is inspired? What does it mean that it's "God-breathed"? The classic protestant description of the Bible's inspiration is that it is **the only infallible rule of faith and practice.** That means that the Bible contains no errors when it comes to issues of faith and the practice of Christianity. It is infallible, it never fails, it is without error. Notice, however, that it restricts the

Bible's infallibility to issues of faith and practice. The Bible is not the infallible rule of history, or politics, or science.

What this boils down to is that all Christian doctrine or teaching, all our articles of faith come from the Bible and the Bible alone. No other authority, not the Pope, not the church, not tradition or even reason may produce an article of faith contrary to the Bible. We use reason to understand the Bible. We rely on the historical understandings of the church to inform our understanding of the Bible, but all these other sources of knowledge or authority are subject to correction by the Bible. What we know, believe and practice as Christians is to all come completely from the Bible.

The Bible was written by specific people at specific times with specific cultural contexts and historical circumstances. This means that **the Bible was written for us but not to us**. The Bible was written to the original readers, taking into account their immediate cultural expectations and understandings. This means the Bible may not answer the questions we have today. It may not speak the way we speak today. It may not reflect our current understanding of history, science or politics.

What this also means is that when it comes to politics, history, science or other "secular" topics, the Bible is not necessarily infallible. Even within the OT there are differing historical reports. 1 and 2 Chronicles give parallel accounts of events found in 1 & 2 Samuel and 1 & 2 Kings. In 2 Samuel 10:18 we are told of 700 chariots but the parallel passage in 1 Chronicles 19:18 speaks of 7,000. There are a couple other similar inconsistencies between these books on the numbers of troops. But these reports have nothing to do with faith and practice.

Similarly, the Bible is not the infallible rule of science. In Matthew 13:32 Jesus says that the mustard seed is the smallest of seeds. But today we know there are other seeds that are smaller. However, the mustard seed is the smallest seed in that region. Does that mean the Bible has an error? Of course not! Jesus was speaking to people in a particular context who would not have known about these other seeds. He's also using it as an illustration. But for us, we need to realize that the Bible is not the infallible rule of science and it has never been held to be so.

Another example is that several times the Bible speaks of dew "falling." But dew technically doesn't fall. Dew forms on grass and plants by condensation. It doesn't fall like rain. But these examples in the Bible are figurative language. They're not scientific statements about nature.

Why does this matter? Because antagonists to Christianity will point these things out in an attempt to discredit the Bible specifically and Christianity in general. My aunt recalls her years in university taking a science class in which the professor specifically used the example of dew falling to discredit the Bible! At that point, my aunt, a Christian, decided to leave science alone. Others would have decided to leave the Bible alone. **Antagonists towards Christianity will twist our understanding of inspiration in order to discredit the Bible and reject Christianity.** If we, as Christians, don't understand what we believe about the Bible's inspiration, we will not be able to defend our faith against such faulty criticism. In fact, we may even be led astray such attacks ourselves.

When it comes to the inspiration of the Bible, we must "focus on what Scripture specifically affirms, especially about itself, taking literary form and genre as well as purpose into consideration." [Leifeld, p. 282] If Jesus is using an illustration taken from nature, or telling a parable, the inspiration of that passage needs to take into account his purpose in telling it. When Psalm 14:1 says, "There is no God," we must take into account that it is the "fool" who says this. The purpose of that verse is to affirm only a fool denies the existence of God. To cut those words out of their original context and present them as Scripture denying the existence of God is to completely reverse their meaning.

We must remember that the Bible was written by specific people in a specific time and cultural context. It was written for us, but not us. We cannot forget the people to whom it was originally written. This means that "the Bible's scientific and historical references reflect the understanding current at the time it was written." [Erickson, p. 248] This is why in some earlier passages, the writers speak of the pagan gods, like Baal and Ashera, as if they were real. In later books they are spoken of as non-existent and only represented by idols. This reflects a development or maturing in the understanding of the people of Israel.

Another example is slavery. Even in the NT Paul speaks of slaves obeying their masters. Does this mean the Bible condones slavery? Not at all! It means that when Paul was writing slavery was a fact of the matter. It

was part of the Roman Empire and unavoidable. So Paul wrote to slaves to help them understand how to live out their Christian faith in their cultural context. That was a matter of faith and practice, equipping slaves for righteousness and good works. Sadly, centuries later, people abused these passages and used them to justify the enslavement of Africans captured and sold to Europeans or North Americans. Other Christians used Scripture appropriately in the battle to end slavery.

Now Apply It

Now, what does all this mean? How is this useful? Part of our series is comparing Christianity to other religions. When we see the contrast between Christianity and other faiths, it helps us see the broad range of options and makes the Christian beliefs a little clearer. Sometimes you don't know what you're affirming until you hear what else could be affirmed. So let's do some comparison with other religions when it comes to our holy books.

Some people think that inspiration of the Bible means divine dictation. That is, they believe that God spoke specific words to the authors that they then transcribed. This is not what inspiration means in the Christian sense. This is not what "God-breathed" means. Actually, this is more like what Muslims believe about the Koran. They believe that the angel Gabriel appeared to Mohammed numerous times over the course of his life and told him what Allah said. Mohammed would go into a trance-like state and when he came out of it, he would repeat what Gabriel had told him. A number of men around him would write down what he said or, in some cases, memorize what he said. The traditional belief is that Mohammed himself was illiterate, so he could not have written it down himself or have been influenced by Jewish or Christian writings. **But the Muslim understanding of the inspiration of the Koran is divine dictation.** So if you're talking to somebody about the Bible and they say God dictated it to the authors, you can correct them. You can tell them "That's not the Christian view of inspiration. That's the Muslim view of inspiration."

Muslims also have another set of writings, the *Hadith*, which are a collection of sayings and actions of Mohammed. Remember when I said that the Bible is often "descriptive" not "prescriptive"? For Muslims, the Hadith is both descriptive *and* prescriptive. These sayings by Mohammed are considered to be binding. It is in the Hadith that Mohammed is described as wearing a beard and having 4 wives, so it is then considered binding that Muslim men wear beards and have no more than 4 wives. In the Hadith there are many descriptions of Mohammed and his lifestyle and these have become binding on Muslims. They are both descriptive and prescriptive.

How do we apply this? When people talk to us about the Bible and bring up examples of practices that we no longer hold to, such as slavery or polygamy, or examples of sinful behaviour like incest, rape, lying or murder, we can rightly tell them that the Bible is the story of God's loving pursuit of fallen people for their redemption and salvation. Sometimes the Bible is describing the fallenness of humanity. Such passages are descriptive of the human condition or descriptive of particular people, but they are not prescriptive in terms of God telling us this is what should have been done or what we should do today. Bring up the example of Islam and that Muslims are bound by descriptions of Mohammed that, if compared to the Bible, Christians would not consider binding.

Another result of the Muslim view of inspiration, that of divine dictation, is that they **hold the Koran to be perfect in every aspect.** That includes issues of history, but even issues of grammar! In fact, the rules of Arabic grammar were changed under Muslim rule so that they would conform to the Koran! So they don't even leave room for grammatical errors in the Koran, let alone historical or scientific errors. Compare that to the Christian understanding of inspiration that the Bible is the infallible rule of faith and practice. In fact, if you read the NT in Greek, its original language, you can quickly detect different levels of linguistic ability in different books. John's writings, especially Revelation, is very basic Greek, as is Mark. The Book of Hebrews, on the other hand, is incredibly difficult and sophisticated Greek. The other books fall into a range between these. Yet they are all considered equally "God-breathed" in spite of grammatical or linguistic differences. This reflects the variety of authors involved and their own cultural backgrounds.

Some people think Christians believe the Bible was handed down "from on high." That God "gave" us the Bible. This, too, is incorrect. [pic] That's actually the Mormon view of inspiration for the Book of Mormon. Joseph Smith claimed that an angel led him to a book buried in a hill. The book was written on pages of gold in

hieroglyphics. Since nobody could read hieroglyphics at the time, Smith claims he was given magical glasses that had special lenses. When he put the glasses on, he could translate the pages. That's where the Book of Mormon supposedly came from. Sadly for historians, the angel that led Smith to the book buried in the hill later took the glasses and the book back. When archaeologists discovered the Rosetta Stone around the same time and made the breakthrough of learning to translate hieroglyphics, Smith's book was gone and nobody could compare his translation to their own.

That is an incredible contrast to the mountains of early documentary evidence for the NT. We have literally thousands of early copies or fragments of books of the NT. Unlike the Book of Mormon, there is ample opportunity to study early documents of the NT.

I've heard it said that people in the early church made up Christianity. They basically sat down and created a new religion. [pic (2)] That, too, is not the Christian understanding of where the NT came from. That is actually a description of where Scientology came from. L Ron Hubbard wrote a book entitled "Dianetics" and then used that as the basis for a new religion. He and his friends concocted a whole bunch of religious ideas that they then charged people money to teach them. They managed to get tax status as a "church" in the US, but then it was pulled because of financial issues. Basically, Hubbard was getting rich. But then the Church of Scientology sued the US government and eventually had their church charitable status renewed.

What does all this mean for us? What does it mean for Christians? The Bible is the infallible rule of faith and practice. It is God-breathed, or inspired by God, not dictated by God nor handed down from on high by God. The Bible is not a deliberate attempt by a few people to sit down and construct a religion. All those options are possible. They've been done (supposedly). By other religions. The Bible is the story of God's loving pursuit of fallen people for their redemption and salvation. It was written down as that story unfolded by many different authors over more than a thousand years (unlike in Islam, Scientology, or Mormonism). It is diverse in writing style. It is sometimes descriptive, not always prescriptive (like in Islam).

The Bible is useful for teaching us about having a right relationship with God. It is useful for rebuking false teachers who are teaching wrong things about having a relationship with God. It is useful for correcting those who've been led astray in their relationship with God. It is useful for training in having a right relationship with God. Reading it should prepare us for good works which flow out of our right relationship with God.

So read it. Don't let it sit on your shelf and gather dust. Don't ignore it. Don't be discouraged by it. Don't take it for granted that you know what's in there. **If you read 3 chapters a day, you can get through the entire Bible in 1 year.** So if you read 1 chapter in the morning, 1 in the afternoon and 1 before bed, you will read the whole Bible, cover to cover, in 1 year. Do that 5 years in a row and you'll have read the Bible 5 times!

The Bible is God's living word written for you and me so that we will know how to be reconciled to Him and how to have a right relationship with Him. Put it to good use. Amen.