

## The Bible Tells Me So

Think with me for a few moments about slogans, phrases, even songs that describe the role of the Bible in the life of a Christian.

The first thing that usually comes to my mind is a song: *The B I B L E. Yes, that's the book for me. I stand alone on the word of God, The B I B L E*

I've seen the word *Bible* used as an acronym – *Basic Instructions Before Leaving Earth*. This views the Bible as an instruction manual. Just follow what it says exactly and everything will be OK.

Another slogan is a strong affirmation of faith: *The Bible says it. I believe it. That settles it.* A corollary might be: *If the Bible doesn't say it, I don't believe it.*

A famous preacher of a mega-church in Houston begins his sermons with something funny and then asks the tens of thousands of people in the congregation to hold up their Bibles and recite a pledge: *This is my Bible. I am what it says I am. I have what it says I have. I can do what it says I can do. Today, I will be taught the Word of God. I boldly confess: my mind is alert, my heart is receptive. I will never be the same. I am about to receive the incorruptible, indestructible, ever-living seed of the Word of God. I will never be the same. Never, never, never. I will never be the same. In Jesus name. Amen.*

It's not unusual for a church to use the phrases "Bible believing" or "Bible teaching" when describing who they are. In a congregation's statement of beliefs, it's also not unusual to see the Bible described as incorruptible, indestructible, inerrant, infallible, or inspired.

Today we heard the story of the temptation of Jesus right after his baptism as told in the Gospel of Luke.<sup>1</sup> We also find the temptation story in Matthew 4 and a much-abbreviated version in Mark 1.

The devil, also called the tempter or Satan, presents Jesus with three offers, three temptations. *If you are the Son of God, turn this stone into bread. If you worship me, I will give you all glory and all authority over all the kingdoms of the world. If you are the Son of God, throw yourself off this mountain.*

Jesus rebuffs each temptation in a similar way, beginning his response with the words "It is written" or "It is said" and quoting a scripture. Jesus rebuffs temptation, in each case quoting from Deuteronomy. *One does not live by bread alone.*<sup>2</sup> *Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.*<sup>3</sup> *Do not put the Lord your God to the test.*<sup>4</sup> The Bible says is, Jesus believes it, and that settles it.

However, in one of the temptations, the one about throwing himself off the mountain, both Jesus and the devil quote scripture. The tempter accurately quotes from Psalm 91: *He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you, on their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.*<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 3:21-22; 4:1-13

<sup>2</sup> Deuteronomy 8:3

<sup>3</sup> Deuteronomy 6:13

<sup>4</sup> Deuteronomy 6:16

<sup>5</sup> Psalm 91:11-12

This complicates the way we approach scripture. When we use words like incorruptible, indestructible, or infallible, we might get lulled into the way of thinking that as long as I am quoting the Bible I must be right. But that's not always the case. In this story we have a misguided way, an errant way, even a deceitful way of using scripture.

This can be a difficult truth to wrestle with: Simply quoting scripture accurately does not automatically make us correct. We can quote scripture accurately and still be totally wrong. That's what the devil does.

We'll be reading this story again in March. When we read it on the first Sunday of Lent each year, we usually think about temptation: what the temptations are and how Jesus resists them. Today, I want to use this story as a way to think about how to use scripture. What do we do about the fact that the tempter can accurately quote scripture and still get it wrong? How do we rely on scripture the way that Jesus does rather than twisting and distorting scripture the way the devil does? If simply saying the Bible says so does not guarantee that we are correct, then how should we try to read, approach, interpret, and apply scripture to our everyday lives?

In seeking to walk in the footsteps of Jesus, to read Scripture like Jesus did, we would do well to do three things. First, read Scripture as a story – an unfolding narrative. Each of Jesus' answers to a temptation uses a scripture from Deuteronomy. Jesus situates his wilderness experience in the story of Israel and their experience and temptations in the desert. Jesus grounds his response in a story of God's people, actually, the biggest story of God's people up to the time Jesus came along. He interprets his experience in the light of a previous story but with a different ending. Jesus is reenacting and retelling the story of the exodus, however, where Israel was unfaithful to God, Jesus is choosing to be faithful

The Bible isn't just a list of dos and don'ts. It is not an instruction manual, not just some basic instructions before leaving earth. It's a story told by many different people in a variety of ways and styles. It has plot, conflict, characters, setting, and resolution in which Jesus triumphs victoriously over the powers of sin and death. Everything we read is grounded in this story,

Second, read the whole story – not just isolated "proof texts." When reading a verse or a chapter or a book of the Bible, keep the whole story of God's redemptive goodness in mind. Don't do as the devil does, taking a few words out of context, twisting them, and using them for destructive ends.

The Salina Journal used to have a small feature called "Just sayin'" at the bottom of the front page. Readers could send in their comments on any subject using less than 100 words. I usually read "Just sayin'" with a sense of trepidation: Would my response be anger? Or disgust? That's what I usually expected. But sometimes I would smile or laugh or feel uplifted.

One time a reader quoted Leviticus 25:44-46: *As for your male and female slaves whom you may have: you may buy male and female slaves from among the nations that are around you. You may also buy from among the strangers who sojourn with you and their clans that are with you, who have been born in your land, and they may be your property. You may bequeath them to your sons after you to inherit as a possession forever. You may make slaves of them, but over your brothers the people of Israel you shall not rule, one over another ruthlessly.*

I was shocked. I was appalled. I was disgusted. What was this person trying to say? This was soon after I had read a report of someone suggesting that one way of dealing with people who were in the US illegally would be to reinstitute slavery in America. Is that what this person wanted? There wasn't any context given for the quote.

I thought I recognized the name of the person who sent it in, someone who frequently had letters in the paper, but I couldn't remember anything about him. Was he liberal? Conservative? Christian? Agnostic? What was his reason for submitting these verses?

About a week later, one person stated in a letter to the editor that in his opinion, the “Just sayin’” quote was intended to ridicule and undermine all of Scripture. The next day, another person replied with a quote from a Bible commentator explaining how slavery in Old Testament times differed from modern day slavery.

My purpose here is to illustrate the importance of context. Knowing the context of the person who submitted this scripture, would help in determining his purpose in submitting it. Knowing the context of the scripture, as well as knowing how it fits into the entire biblical story, would help in determining how we would read it today, whether or not it has anything to say about how we are to live now.

I’m confident in this point because Ted Zerger agrees with me. He contributed this to “Just Sayin’” almost four years ago.

*In his Feb. 8 Letter to the Editor, Vernon Steerman closes with:  
“the Bible sayeth: ‘The truth shall set you free’”*

*Actually what the Bible “sayeth” is the following: “Then Jesus said to those who believed in him, ‘If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed; and ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free’” John 8:31-32 (KJV)*

*Comment: A text taken from its context is nothing but a pretext.*

The third guideline is, read the story with Jesus as the center. When we read the Bible accurately with the idea that the Bible has a grand, overarching story, we see that Jesus is the center. This should sound familiar. I hope it brings to mind three statements, three core values, outlined by Palmer Becker about what it means to be an Anabaptist Christian, a Mennonite. I’ve mentioned these multiple times before. Do you remember what they are? (1) Jesus is the center of our faith. (2) Community is the center of our life. (3) Reconciliation is the center of our work.

The first one is the most directly relevant to today’s discussion: Jesus is the center of our faith. One implication of this is that we interpret the Bible from a Christ-centered point of view.

It’s possible to approach the Bible in a “flat” way. That means all the verses have the same importance. The words of God quoted by Moses are of the same value as words of God quoted by Jesus. “When political or social issues such as war, capital punishment, or treatment of deviant people are encountered, those with a ‘flat’ Bible often claim Old Testament texts as the basis for their belief and action, even when these texts differ from the teachings of Jesus.”<sup>6</sup>

It is also possible to approach the Bible from a “dispensational” point of view. That means there are different periods of time for history – different dispensations. In this view, different biblical passages are authoritative for different periods of time. The Sermon on the Mount, in this approach, is for the future – when the new heaven and the new earth appear. The thinking is that those ethics aren’t possible to live out now. They are for a time of perfection. For the present time, persons with this viewpoint tend to worship Jesus, but not think it is necessary to try to follow or obey everything he said.

Early Anabaptists, our denomination’s ancestors, taught that Bible is to be read and interpreted from a Christ-centered point of view. They read back into the Old Testament through the lens of Jesus; they read ahead in the New Testament through the lens of Jesus; all scripture is read with the lens of the spirit of Jesus. That means that sometimes the teachings of Jesus transcend previous teachings. Jesus did that in the Sermon on the Mount in a series of teachings beginning with the phrase “You have heard it said” and after quoting an Old Testament scripture, continuing with the phrase “but I tell you” and offering a different way of applying that scripture.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Palmer Becker, *What Is an Anabaptist Christian? Revised edition*, Mennonite Mission Network, 2010, p. 7.

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 5:21-48

As Anabaptist-minded Christians, we are not strict literalists. We seek to understand scripture from the viewpoint of Jesus. The written word and the spirit of Jesus are held in “creative tension.” This is not always neat and tidy, or exact.

Palmer Becker writes, “Anabaptists affirm that while all Scripture is inspired, Jesus is the fullest revelation of God and the final authority for decision-making. Jesus fulfills the Old Testament, and is the norm for both personal and social ethics.”<sup>8</sup> “Thus, when Anabaptist-minded Christians face an ethical question, they go first to Jesus for their primary guidance and then to other scriptures for further background and understanding. If two passages of Scripture seem to disagree, they let Jesus be the referee!”<sup>9</sup>

These thoughts resonate well with me. They inform how I approach the Bible. I view the Bible as a vital and crucial part of the living Word of God. God’s Word is also revealed through prayer, the working of the Spirit, life experience, group discernment, and more than two thousand years of church tradition.

I am dismayed when the Bible is regarded as instructions set in stone with only one possible interpretation for all of time to be used as a club with which to beat people into submission. I also am dismayed when the Bible is disregarded as obsolete and irrelevant to life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

When reading the Bible for study and sermon preparation I try to understand the context in which it was written, how it would have sounded to its first hearers, and what purpose it was used for in the lives of God’s people at that time. I attempt to look at the Bible as a whole, noting the trajectory of God’s unfolding story of salvation and reconciliation. I then try to discern what God is saying to God’s people today and particularly to those of us meeting as Salina Mennonite Church.

At the same time, I recognize that not everyone agrees with this way of approaching scripture. Not all Anabaptist-Mennonite people would concur with my interpretation and application. In fact, I suspect that each of you has disagreed with something I’ve said over the past twelve years. But that’s OK. In fact, it’s good to hear from other people. It’s good to listen to how others read and interpret the Bible.

Last year I listened to a priest read the entire Bible. I appreciated his enthusiasm and love of the written word, even when slogging through the long lists of names and laws in the Old Testament. Because the Catholic Bible contains a few more books that ours does, I heard some stories and writings I had rarely or never heard before. I didn’t agree with everything he said, but I value the experience of hearing the Bible as a whole, not just a few verses or chapters at a time.

This year I’ve begun listening to the Bible from a different translation along with comments from a Protestant woman. As with the priest, I don’t agree with all of her faith convictions, but I’m interested in what she has to say. We’ll see if I make it all the way through again this year.

Even if you don’t read or listen to the entire Bible in 2022, I encourage you to read it regularly, keeping in mind to read it as a story, to be aware of the larger context of what you read, and to read it with Jesus at the center. I invite each of you to find your place within a larger story – the story of God and creation; the story that finds its purpose and meaning in the person and action of Jesus.

I pray that we always approach the Bible with wisdom, awareness, and humility, knowing that it’s possible to quote scripture correctly and still be wrong in its interpretation and application. May God’s spirit guide us as we do this.

I’ll end with another simple song. The one from which I took the title of my sermon. *Jesus loves me, this I know. For the Bible tells me so. Little ones to him belong. They are weak, but he is strong. Yes, Jesus loves me. Yes, Jesus loves me. Yes, Jesus loves me. The Bible tells me so.*

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<sup>8</sup> Becker, p. 21.

<sup>9</sup> Becker, p. 8.