

How Does God Speak to Us Today?
Part 1 of "Crucial Questions the Church Needs to Answer"

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These are not easy times for the Christian church in our country. A variety of surveys report that the number of people who self-identify as Christians is in decline. According to a Gallup survey, that number is now 73%, compared to 80% just ten years ago.

One statistic that strikes me is that there is not one county in the United States where church attendance is up from what it was ten years ago. There are 3,007 counties in the U.S., and in every single one of them, a lower percentage of people go to church than did ten years ago.

The opposition to Christianity, especially Evangelical Christianity, is becoming more and more vocal. Recently, a banner advertising an evangelistic crusade with Pastor Greg Laurie of Calvary Chapel was taken down because it was deemed "offensive" to that southern California community.

Groups like Focus on the Family and The Family Research Council are frequently labeled hate groups because of their views on LGBT issues. Inter-Varsity, CRU and other Christian student groups continually struggle to maintain a presence on university campuses because their views are deemed "intolerant" and "non-inclusive." Requiring that the leaders of their groups be Christians is what earns that kind of label.

However, the biggest challenge facing the church may be coming not from the outside, but rather from inside the church. There are trends involving attitudes, beliefs and practices which I fear may prevent today's church from being faithful and pleasing to the Lord.

Now friends, there is no need to panic. Ultimately, the Christian church will not only survive, but thrive and triumph because as Jesus says, it is built upon a Rock, the Rock of Ages, the Rock that never rolls – Jesus Christ – and our confession of him as Lord of lords.

Yet, for Chisholm Baptist Church as a congregation, for us as individual Christians and for the church as a whole, to be spiritually healthy, we need to make sure we stay out of some ditches alongside the road we are traveling. We will focus on four of them over this next month, trusting this will enable us to stay on the path the Lord has for us.

Let's pause and pray that God would challenge and encourage us through his Word.

1) The first ditch I want to address is the danger of undermining or eroding the authority of Scripture.

This church believes the Bible is the Word of God. We embrace and proclaim the teaching of Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformation, which is also the teaching of Jesus and the Apostles – that the Bible alone is our authority.

What concerns me is that even though most Christians enthusiastically pronounce, "Yes, we believe the Bible is the Word of God," there seems to be a growing number of occasions when its authority is ignored, both in obvious and more subtle ways.

Two big questions often asked are, "Who says so?" and "How do we know?" For Christians, the answers have been fairly clear throughout the centuries. God is the ultimate authority. What he says is so. He has revealed truth and revealed himself through the Bible, which is the written Word of God.

As Christians, we insist that not only does God exist, but he speaks. As Francis Schaeffer used to say, we believe "He is there and He is not silent."

The climax of this self-revelation is the incarnation, God the Son becoming human in the person of Jesus Christ.

Hebrews 1:1-3a – Long ago God spoke to the fathers by the prophets at different times and

in different ways. In these last days, he has spoken to us by his Son. God has appointed him heir of all things and made the universe through him. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact expression of his nature.

To truly see and know Jesus is to truly see and know God. How do we, people who live almost 2000 years after Jesus was on this earth, see and know him? Through the Bible. Jesus said that he came not to abolish, but fulfill the Old Testament law (Matthew 5:15-16). He told his disciples (Luke 24:44) that the Old Testament scriptures were really about him.

Yet, it wasn't just the Old Testament that revealed the truth about Jesus. Before he left the earth, Jesus commissioned his apostles to tell people what he said and did while he was on earth. Most important, they were to explain the meaning and significance of his life, death and resurrection.

The apostles and their associates did this as they proclaimed the great news of Jesus throughout the Roman Empire and as they wrote letters to people in the early Christian churches. These letters were soon recognized as Scripture, with the same authority as the Old Testament.

They also composed historical narratives – we call them the four Gospels plus Acts – which tell the story of what Jesus said and did during his time on earth. These, too, were quickly recognized as Scripture and were viewed as writings coming from God himself. That is why the Apostle Paul said:

2 Timothy 3:16 – All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.

Now friends, I realize some of you may have a hard time buying this idea that the Bible is the Word of God. If so, let me say that I think there are some very good reasons to believe that is what it is.

#1 The Bible claims to be God's Word

#2 The incredible consistency, coherence and way the Bible corresponds to reality are evidence that this claim is true

#3 Jesus believed and taught that the Bible is God's Word

There are many other things I could mention that point to the supernatural nature of Scripture, but that will have to wait for another day. If you agree that the Bible is the Word of God, great! If you have questions about that, please pay attention to the rest of the sermon, see what you can glean and let's chat later.

OK, if we believe God is the Creator and Sovereign of the universe, then he is clearly the ultimate arbitrator of truth. He gets to decide what is true and what is not, what is right and what is wrong.

If the Bible is God's Word, if he speaks to us through this book, then it becomes our final authority for faith and practice. That means whenever the question is: "What should we as Christians believe?" or "What should we as a church do?" the answer begins, "Well, the Bible says..."

We are to believe what Scripture teaches is true and do what it says we are to do. Whenever we evaluate a particular teaching or practice, we need to determine if it is consistent with what the Bible teaches. We are to be like the folks we read about in Acts 17.

Acts 17:11 – Now the Jews in Berea ... received Paul's message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.

In the same way, we as Christians need to evaluate teachings, practices and ideas on the basis of whether or not they are consistent with what the Bible teaches. That is how we determine what is true and what is false, what is good and what is evil, what is right and what is wrong.

Who says so? "God does." How do we know this? "Because the Bible tells us."

Yet today, more and more people are questioning the authority of Scripture. Some of them are doing so explicitly. “I know that’s what the Bible says, but maybe it is wrong. After all, the Bible was written a long time ago.”

Now, most people in the church don’t swallow that. However, there are more subtle denials of the authority of Scripture that are being embraced by people within the church. And folks, that is a big problem.

When we no longer recognize and accept the authority of the Bible as God’s Word, we no longer have a clear path for knowing what is true, right and good. If we are not careful, we will find ourselves in a post-modern wasteland where everyone will have to choose their own truth and can do only what is right in their own eyes.

2) Friends, this morning I want to spell out some ways in which I see the authority of the Bible being compromised in the church today.

To do that, I want to use what is called “Wesley’s Quadrilateral.” John Wesley was the founder of the Methodist denomination and a wonderful Christian leader in the latter half of the 1700’s. He said that to discern truth and choose the wisest path, the church needs to utilize four resources (four is from where the quadrilateral part comes).

He says the Lord has given the church Scripture, tradition, reason and experience. These four should all be utilized if we are to develop beliefs and practices pleasing to God. Wesley said the Bible is the primary authority of the four, and the other three are secondary authorities.

Friends, as with some other things, I think Wesley hit the nail on the head, *but not very squarely*. Instead, I think the Bible needs to be our sole authority. It is the authority which is then served by tradition, reason and experience. We need to be very careful that these three do not become competition to what the Bible says. Whenever tradition, reason or experience allow or cause us to deny or distort what Scripture

teaches, we have fallen into a dangerous spiritual ditch.

Here are some ways this has happened and is happening today:

#1 Sometimes tradition can push us into a ditch where we deny or distort what the Bible says.

Mark 7:8-9 – “Abandoning the command of God, you hold on to human tradition.” He also said to them, “You have a fine way of invalidating God’s command in order to maintain your tradition!”

Tradition, believing and doing things because that is how we have believed and done things in the past, can indeed keep us from embracing the truth God has revealed. That was what the Protestant Reformation was all about.

Martin Luther realized that the traditions for belief and practice which had developed within the Roman Catholic Church were very different from what the Bible said.

A big one was what the church taught about purgatory. He correctly saw that as a direct contradiction to the Bible’s teaching of justification by faith alone. Because Luther’s conscience was captive to the Word of God, he was compelled to reject the church’s tradition.

Giving tradition an equal voice to the Bible in determining faith and practice continues to be a problem in the Roman Catholic Church today. Many of my Catholic friends are surprised to learn that different teachings they have grown up with – Mary’s immaculate conception, praying to saints, etc. are not even mentioned in the Bible, but are products of church tradition.

However, we as evangelicals don’t always stay clear of this tradition ditch either. For example, when I was growing up, being a Christian – at least a Baptist – meant one did not drink, smoke, go to movies, dance or play cards. Those were the “Big 5 Sins.”

I was a bit surprised when, as a teenager, I realized none of these prohibitions were really

found in the Bible. There were reasons, maybe good reasons for these rules, at least at one time. However, by the time I was growing up, they were mostly just traditions we followed. It was hard to get a coherent explanation about why we could play Rook, but not Solitaire.

When Charles Spurgeon, the great Baptist preacher of the 19th century, was confronted about smoking cigars, he replied, “Friends, I have enough trouble obeying the commands in the Bible. I am not going to add any more.”

Folks, I am not a fan of smoking cigars. Never smoked one in my life. But, like Spurgeon, I am not a fan of adding commands based on tradition, rather than what is taught in the Bible.

Well, fortunately, we no longer follow man-made traditions in the church today. Just kidding! We have all sorts of traditions not mentioned in Scripture.

Why do we have ushers pass the plate around collecting the offering on Sunday mornings instead of just having a box in the back like some churches do? Tradition!

Why do we have male ushers, instead of usherettes? Not because of anything the Bible says, but tradition!

Now, don’t misunderstand. Traditions in themselves are not bad. In fact, they are sometimes very good. “Without our traditions, we would be like a fiddler on the roof.” And the best traditions are those which help us believe and obey what the Bible teaches.

Traditions can be helpful in avoiding the errors and distortions which people embrace because of reason or experience. In liberal, mainline churches, the pastor’s sermons sometimes border on heresy, but the traditional liturgy still often provides spiritual nourishment for those in the congregation.

However, when tradition conflicts with what the Bible teaches, then it is time to put that tradition on the shelf and follow what God has taught us through his Word.

#2 Sometimes reason can push us into a ditch where we deny or distort what the Bible teaches.

Now, reason is a good thing. Being reasonable is always better than being unreasonable. But autonomous reason, reason not tethered to truth that God has revealed, can get us into trouble; and when reason becomes the master rather the servant of God’s revelation, that often happens. One example of this is what the Apostle Peter says:

2 Peter 3:16 – Some matters that (Paul writes about) are hard to understand. The untaught and unstable will twist them to their own destruction, as they also do with the rest of the Scriptures.

Scripture twisting is a very destructive use of reason.

Reason has been misused in many ways over the years. Theological liberals, both in the past and present, often decide that their understandings are better than what the Bible teaches. This ranges from thinking they understand human sexuality more than the Apostle Paul did to claiming the resurrection of Jesus was merely spiritual and his body never left the grave.

Those are blatant denials of what the Bible teaches. What is almost as disturbing, however, is that many Christians who profess to believe the Bible, will use their reason to reinterpret Scripture to make it say things it really doesn’t say. (I hear things like this – “Yes, in Romans 1, Peter seems to condemn homosexuality, but homosexual practice in the first century was very different than it is in the 21st. Paul would not condemn homosexuality today.”) Friends, that is using reason to twist the clear teaching of God’s Word.

Now, as I said, reason can help us to interpret Scripture correctly. That’s important. It is not enough to say, “Well, I just believe whatever the Bible says.” We need to understand what the Bible says before we apply it to our beliefs and practices.

The most basic question when reading Scripture is, “What do the authorities (God and the human writer) mean? We must pay close attention to the words found in the Bible and to how they are used grammatically. We need to follow the storyline and context of the Bible. This enables us to recognize how, for example, the commands about making sacrifices in the Old Testament no longer apply – because Jesus’ death on the cross is the perfect sacrifice which makes anything else obsolete.

Now, let me give you a few warnings as you seek to use reason to interpret or understand the Bible:

1 - Be careful of “wooden literalism” where you focus on what the Bible says, but not on what it means.

Yes, Jesus did say, “To be my disciple you need to hate your father and mother,” but that isn’t what he meant. He meant our love for him must be even greater than our love for our parents.

2 - Pay more attention to the words, grammar and context of the Bible than you do to the supposed cultural background.

People are often only speculating when they describe situations which supposedly existed in the first century that should change how we understand what the Bible means.

3 - Remember that reasonable deductions do not carry the same weight as the clear teachings of the Bible.

Reasonable deductions are often important. For example, Scripture teaches there is one God, but also teaches that the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God. So we use our reason to conclude God is one being, who exists as three different persons, the trinity. That is true and very important.

Yet, when what the Bible clearly teaches conflicts with what we think is a logical deduction of what the Bible says, we need to stick with the Bible. As the Word of God, it cannot be mistaken. Our logic and reason sometimes can be.

#3 Sometimes experiences, spiritual experiences, can push us into a spiritual ditch where we deny or distort what the Bible says.

Theologian Michael Horton notes that our current culture is not so much becoming more secular, as one where people experience spirituality on their own terms, without any of the boundaries of traditional religion or biblical revelation. This often means people want to experience some sense of God directly, without any connection to or guidance from the Bible.

Yet, that is unlikely to lead us to truth. It really doesn’t help us discern what is truly right and good. The Bible warns us about supposed revelations apart from Scripture.

For example, Galatians 1:8 tells us that even if an angel appears to us, if the message is different from the gospel of Jesus Christ spelled out in the New Testament, we must not believe that message.

Of course, the most well-known report of someone receiving a message from an angel different from what the Bible says is Joseph Smith, who claimed to receive golden plates from the angel Moroni containing the Book of Mormon.

Friends, I suggest we reject any “revelations” that contradict what the Bible says, whether they come from Joseph Smith or any contemporary prophets claiming to receive a revelation from God. I also think we need to be very skeptical of revelations which may not contradict, but *supplement* what God has revealed in his Word.

Yes, God does give the church pastors, teachers and maybe prophets to help us understand what God has already spoken through his Word. Yet, when they tell us things which are not found in the Bible, it is merely their own opinion, or at least we have no way of knowing whether it is anything but their own opinion.

We also need to be careful that we don’t allow our own feelings or even our consciences to distort what the Bible says. The Apostle Paul knew better than to totally trust his conscience:

1 Corinthians 4:4 – My conscience is clear, but that doesn't prove I'm right. It is the Lord himself who will examine me and decide.

Impressions of what we think the Lord is telling us can be wrong. The Bible is never wrong. Yes, we should want and pray for guidance from God's Holy Spirit, but as we seek to be led by the Spirit, we should have a Bible in our hands. As John Calvin liked to say, "The Word and Spirit must never be separated."

Friends, lots of Christians and lots of churches "believe the Bible." An important question, however, is this: Do we see the Bible as one of multiple authorities or do we see it alone as the Word of God? Yes, traditions, reason and our experiences are great, as long as they don't become competing authorities with the bible.

Isaiah 40:8 – The grass withers, the flowers fade, but the word of our God will stand forever.

3) Traditions come and go, our reason can sometimes be twisted, what we think are experiences with God may be creations of our own mind. These can all lead us astray. But the Word of God, the Bible, will never do that.

May the Lord help us as a church and as individual Christians to know, understand, believe and do what it says!