

It's Far From Settled
 Half Truths Series #4 ó God Said it, I Believe it, and That Settles It For me
 Psalm 119:97-105, Matthew 5:17-20
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God said it, I believe it, and that settles it for me. This week I googled song lyrics for this phrase, and several different versions popped up. Here are the lyrics to one of the songs:

Faith is the essence of things unseen
 The substance of things hoped for
 God's word has said it and I believe it
 For the miracle has happened to me

Do you believe that God created you
 Just like He told you in His word?
 Do you believe that every world in space
 Came to place by His own power?
 Do you believe that God can change your life
 And give you freedom from your sin?
 He'll open every door that blocks the way
 You can say when...

God is the Author and He's the ending
 Of all that I believe in
 Life more abundant is yours for the asking
 The miracle can happen to you

Now here's the chorus:

Though some may doubt that His word is true
 I've chosen to believe it, now how about you?
 God said it and I believe it
 and that settles it for me
 God said it and I believe it
 and that settles it for me.

There is a lot of whole truth in these words, and it's a catchy tune if you hear it. However, the statement "God said it, I believe it, that settles it," contains some half-truths, and it is important that we examine them critically. As Christians, when we say, "God said it," what we usually mean is that the Bible says it. So let's start there. If it's in the Bible, ***did*** God say it?

How we answer this question depends on what we believe about the authority of Scriptures. And not surprisingly, there is a continuum here. On one end of the spectrum, there are people who are not believers. They would say that the Bible is inspired, but no more inspired than any other great work of literature that anyone felt inspired to write. I doubt that any of us here today would hold this view.

On the other end of the spectrum are people who believe that the every word of Scripture is divinely inspired and that God dictated it word for word to people ó probably all men- who served as nothing more than scribes or secretaries who wrote down what God said. Folks who hold this view would say that if it's in the Bible, God said it and we should believe it, and that settles. These are people who often talk about the inerrancy or infallibility of Scripture

Most mainline Christians would find themselves in the middle of this continuum. They believe that God inspired the writers of Scripture, but that God did not dictate actual words. In this view, the writers of Scripture were fully themselves, viewing the world through the lens of their culture and time in history. This group, and I am among them, believes that Scripture must be read in context and interpreted responsibly for each generation.

I think Jesus would fall into this group too. He had a very high view of Scripture. As we heard earlier, Jesus proclaimed that he didn't come to do away with the law, but to fulfill it. But he did interpret it. He often disagreed with the religious leaders who held to a strict and literal interpretation of the law. He was more liberal about Sabbath rules than the Pharisees, but much more conservative on divorce -- and he had good contextual reasons for both of those interpretations.

I appreciate Jesus modeling this for us, for if we interpret Scripture literally and follow it uncritically, we can confuse timeless truth with time-bound rules that would bind us to behaviors in ways that God never intended. Many of you may remember the episode of the West Wing where Jed Bartlett offers a number of time-bound rules in the Old Testament to a disrespecting fundamentalist. I don't remember what specific verses were on President Bartlett's list, but here are some that would certainly change our behavior if we followed them today:

- The end of Leviticus 19:19 commands that we should not wear clothes made of two different materials. Are you wearing a poly/cotton shirt or a sweater that's a wool and acrylic blend? Would you consider that a sin or a violation of Scripture? According to this verse it is.
- Leviticus 19 also warns that men aren't to trim their beards and tattoos are forbidden. Clean shaven men and those with body art-- according to these verses, you're in trouble.
- Food requirements in Leviticus prohibit pork and shrimp from our diets.
- Did you know that there are three verses in Deuteronomy that give the Israelites instructions about burying their excrement outside of their camp in order to keep their camp holy? Did you know these verses were widely quoted in the 1880's as churches debated whether having indoor toilets would violate this law? I don't think having a port-o-let in our parking lot would do much for church growth, do you?
- More seriously, throughout Exodus and Deuteronomy, the following actions make one subject to the death penalty: children who curse or strike their parents or who are persistently rebellious, those who work on the Sabbath, and women who are not virgins when they marry.

Although it's easy to say that these are Old Testament verses, and that we are no longer bound by the law, the New Testament gives us some zingers as well:

- In First Corinthians 14:34-36, Paul writes, As in all the churches of the saints, women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says. If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church. Does this mean that I am outside of the will of God by being your pastor? And what about our single women ó where do they get their questions answered?
- In Ephesians, Paul exhorts slaves to obey their masters ó not only to please them but doing the will of God from the heart. Masters, in turn, are to treat their slaves equitably. Does this imply that slavery is God's will as slave owners justified for centuries?

I hope you are beginning to see that saying, "God said it, I believe it, and that settles it" is far too simplistic an approach to much of the Bible. Through scholarship and interpretation, we know that Paul believed that Jesus was coming back very soon, so his emphasis was on evangelism not changing cultural issues. If Paul had known we would still be here 2000+ years later, I believe he would have been much more intentional about addressing these social justice and equity issues. In the Old Testament, there are a myriad of reasons for many of the laws, and a number of them do not apply to us today. ó If you want to know more about this, feel free to reach out to me, it's more than we can cover this morning.

So our first problem with this half-truth is "Who said it."

Another issue with our half-truth this morning is that there are a number of topics that are not settled in Scripture. For example, in much of the Old Testament, the Israelites believed that

if things were going well, it was because God was blessing them and they were living rightly; similarly, if they were living in sin, their problems were a punishment from God. The book of Job draws this theology into question when a righteous man suffers the loss of everything but his life. By the time we get to Jesus' day, we find the story of the man born blind. People ask Jesus, "Who sinned this man or his parents that he was born blind?" You see Israel's early theology persisting in the question. What did Jesus answer? "Neither this man or his parents sinned, this happened so that God's work might be revealed in him." God didn't cause this to happen, but God allowed it and worked through. Seen this way, Scripture is much more than a book of rules and regulations that we must blindly follow, and much more a book about Israel learning, over time, what it means to be God's people and live faithfully in relationship with God.

Another thing that is not settled is how Scripture is translated for us. First, it is important to note that we do not have the original manuscripts of Scripture. We have lots of copies, some very old, but the originals have been lost to us. Although most of the ancient manuscripts agree with each other, there are places where they do not. Then scholars have the difficult work of determining which ancient manuscript contains the correct words. The exact words of Scripture are not completely settled with the documents we have to work with.

Then, those original documents have been translated from the original Greek or Hebrew into the modern languages that we speak and read around the world today. Again, there are a number of ways to approach this work. Some do a word-for-word literal translation — often called transliteration, this can lead to very wooden readings, and sometimes misleading translations because the meanings of words change over time. The first example that comes to my mind is the word "gay" — think how that word has evolved from the Victorian era when it meant happy or carefree to the current meaning of a same sex orientation. To translate this word

literally without context could be very misleading. Despite these challenges, those who work with a literal orientation to Scripture tend to prefer this word for word literal translation approach. The King James Version would be an example of this type of approach.

Another very different way to go about translation work is to try to convey the ideas or intent of the original author, even if the actual words are quite different ó this is called dynamic equivalence. Examples of this type of work are The Message and The Living Bible. Of course many scholarship teams use the best of both methods ó and the best translations are done in groups to help minimize individual biases and view points in the process. This is why we have so many different versions of the Bible, and why even how we translate is not settled simply.

So how do we, as individuals and as a congregation handle Scripture responsibly? First, we must admit and own that we all interpret Scripture every time we read it ó and be aware of and acknowledge the biases we bring to the process. Second, and most importantly, we should interpret Scripture through the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus is God became flesh, so the record of his life and ministry recorded in the gospels is the best representation we have of God. So when we hit a troubling passage, the best question to ask is, “How can we interpret this passage in light of the example and teachings of Christ?” This doesn’t bring instant clarity of course, but it is a widely agreed upon starting point. And when asked, what did Jesus say were the two most important commandments? Love God with all of our hearts, souls, mind and strength, and to love our neighbor as ourselves. If we start here, a great deal of the rest of it will sort itself out. As for the rest, let’s commit together to wrestle with the complexities in love and grace. Amen.