

The Bible and Bethel Church

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Today we begin a month-long series on what it means to follow Jesus at Bethel Church. There are a number of reasons for us to spend time on these. One is that the world is a mess right now. Messes create confusion and confusion is the devil's playground. He is up to great mischief right now and it would seem many Christians are losing sight of what's really important. These don't change if you are in a pandemic, a world war, or a personal crisis. We need to be reminded of the main things in following Jesus.

It's also important as the coronavirus has taken us out of our normal rhythms of life. This includes rhythms of worship gatherings and other Christian gatherings that nourish our spiritual lives. Good habits and rhythms sustain us. When those are altered, we are easily distracted and discouraged.

Today, we're doing *The Bible at Bethel Church*. The functional church of your heart is wherever you turn for guidance and answers. The biggest church in America is The Church of Social Media. It has strangely become the repository of how to live, how to think, and what's important. There's the old adage, "*If a tree falls in the forest and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound?*" Now, if anything happens and it isn't immediately posted on social media, did it actually happen?

The most important words are not online, nor any words humans say. The most important words are any words God says. Just believing God has spoken is itself scandalous. For any truth to be acknowledged as transcendent requires humans to also acknowledge the existence of God. It requires humans to acknowledge an authority and therefore, accountability to this Deity. One God and one truth ring to rule them all. No. Mankind threw that ring into the fires of Mt. Doom long ago. The result is 7 billion people trying to answer the haunting questions of the human heart—origin, meaning, and destiny—with no transcendent truth. As Francis Schaeffer said, "Modern man has both feet firmly planted in midair."¹

Not so the Christian. This really is one of the most wonderful things about being a Christian: *we believe in truth. We believe in absolute truth.* We believe God's Word is divine revelation that transcends time and culture. We believe in truth and we believe truth is found where God has spoken. You say, *well, where has God spoken?*

The Revelation of God

The world of God

"For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse." (Romans 1:20 ESV)

This world was spoken into existence. God said words and the physical realm came to be. "*Let there be light*" (Genesis 1:3). "*Let there be lights in the expanse of the heavens*"

¹ Francis Schaeffer as quoted by Charles Colson, *Being the Body*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004), Page unknown.

(Genesis 1:15). "Let us make man in our image" (Genesis 1:26). In creation, God spoke words and by divine power the spoken word created the physical realm. Creation continues to speak as "the heavens declare the glory of God" (Psalm 19:1) and "the whole earth is full of his glory" (Isaiah 6:3).

The Son of God

Jesus is the incarnate Word of God. Hebrews says it this way,

"Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world" (Hebrews 1:1-2).

Jesus is divine revelation. His teachings are divine teachings. His life was and is a divine life. There is much we could say here, but our focus is on the Bible at Bethel Church; this is the third kind of revelation.

The Word of God

God spoke words and God wrote words down. We believe the Bible is God's written Word. This message is not a defense of the Bible as God's Word, but more of an explanation of the Bible's role in our church. If you are interested in the arguments for the Bible as God's Word, a good start would be Erwin Lutzer's, *7 Reasons Why You Can Trust the Bible*.

Bible comes from the word that means "book." It really is a collection of books and letters. 66 books: 39 in the Old Testament; 27 in the New Testament. These were written over a span of 1500 years by over 40 different people in three different languages. The Bible is written in many different styles or types of literature yet with an astounding unity of message and theme. Imagine 40 people writing about anything and there being any cohesion or unity. Space those 40 over 1500 years and the unity is astonishing. The Old Testament foreshadows the New Testament. The New Testament completes the Old Testament. These together form the canon of Scripture providing a sure foundation for faith and life for God's people.

The Bible at Bethel Church in Four Words

I am summarizing the Bible at Bethel in four words; *Truth, Authority, Inspiration, and Sufficiency*.

Truth

In Jesus' high priestly prayer, he summarizes the entire witness of the Bible to its own truthfulness when he said, "*Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth*" (John 17:17). What's tricky here is how we define truth. It's like Pilate's response to Jesus. Jesus said that he came to bear witness to the truth. The Roman governor summarizes humanity's problem when he responded, "*What is truth?*" (John 8:38). Indeed, that is a huge question particularly when in our day, your truth doesn't have to be my truth and any claim to absolute truth is hubris at best. Our world denies any truth that claims to be truth for all times and everyone.

What do we mean by truth? I mean it as J.I. Packer defines it,

*"Truth in the Bible is a quality of person primarily, and of propositions only secondarily. It means stability, reliability, firmness, trustworthiness, the quality of a person who is entirely self-consistent, sincere, realistic, undeceived. God is such a person; truth, in this sense is his nature, and he has not got it in him to be anything else. That is why he cannot lie. That is why his words to us are true, and cannot be other than true. They are the index of reality. They show us things as they really are, and as they will be for us in the future according to whether we heed God's words to us or not."*²

The opposite of truth is falsehood. God is true; there is no darkness in him. Satan is a liar; there is no light in him. Satan's words are deceptive and unreliable. God's Words are always consistent with his own character.

This is the connection we need to make between the written word of God and the character of God. Because God is true, all he says is true. He is the "God who cannot lie" (Titus 1:2). He can't. We can. We do. God can't. Therefore, all that he says is consistent with his divine character, which is incredibly reassuring to us. In a world filled with lies and human opinions, when we read what God says, it is always true. Transcendently true. Eternally true.

There is truth found outside the Bible but never in contradiction to the Bible. So, the biologist or chemist or sociologist may make their observations and interpretations. The Bible doesn't explain the Pythagorean theorem or how tadpoles reproduce. But where it speaks, it does so truthfully, therefore we can rest and rely on God's Word.

Authority

It's one thing to say something is true, it's another to submit to it. Some people view the Ten Commandments at the ten suggestions. Good principles. Good ideas. *Commandment* implies authority and accountability. As an example, we may know what the speed limit says, but do we view it as an authority over us or not? It quickly goes from a suggestion to a commandment the moment we see a state trooper. Our instinct is to hit the brakes. Ever do that only to realize that Crown Victoria is being driven by grandma and not Officer Krupke?

The role of the Bible in relationship to the church has also been debated.



This graphic summarizes the authority structure options. The church over Scripture is an option, although I am unaware of any branch of Christianity that overtly practices this. The church and Scripture as equals is the belief of the Roman Catholic Church and other ancient churches. They call it "tradition," which means interpretations and teaching decrees over the centuries are viewed as having equal authority with Scripture.

By the time you get to the 16th century, the church being equal with Scripture has produced terrible abuses of authority and even more horrific doctrines. I could list some, but then you

² J.I. Packer, *Knowing God*, (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 113.

would be asking, *where is that in the Bible?* You are revealing your Protestant DNA. With the Reformation, Protestants began asking about everything, *where is that in the Bible?* Why? Because we view Scripture as having authority over the church and everything else. If the Bible says it, that's the way it is.

I remember 20 years ago we were in the process of revisioning our worship services. I was told of someone in the church who wasn't happy about it. Their friend who related this to me had encouraged them to come and talk to me about it. Their friend said, "what's the point? He'll just ask, *where is that in the Bible?*"

That was one of the nicest things that has ever been said about me. May that continue to be the culture around here. *Where is that in the Bible? What does the Bible say?* Our instinct must be to first open the Bible to see the truth. Secondly, to view that truth as more important than my opinion or preference.

May I give an example? What if I could open the Bible and show you where it says, "during a pandemic, wear a mask?" or "during a pandemic don't wear a mask?" How would you handle that? There are many strong opinions about this, but what if the Bible said that? Would you humbly submit to it? Now you may say, *but the Bible doesn't say that, that's a terrible illustration!* No, but it repeatedly tells us to put others' needs and interests ahead of our own. How might that apply?

"But this is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word." (Isaiah 66:2)

A biblical church trembles at God's Word. Trembles to know it and trembles to obey it.

Inspiration

This is one of the most important doctrines in Christianity and therefore in our church. We firmly believe that God is the source of every word in the Bible.

"All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work." (2 Timothy 3:16-17)

"All Scripture is breathed out by God." What is that? It's what we all know about speech. It requires you to breathe out. Try to speak while breathing in. It sounds terrible. We speak by breathing out and that breath produces our words.

The inspiration of Scripture is the connection between what human authors wrote and the real source of Scripture.

"...Knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit." (2 Peter 1:20-21)

Was the Bible written by God or man? Both. But the origin was God who so moved the writers of Scripture that what they wrote was exactly the will of God.

How precise was inspiration? Some people who don't like verbal plenary inspiration see the broad concepts being inspired, not the actual words. Yet Jesus believed the Old Testament was the inspired Word of God and it would be fulfilled right down to the iota. Here's an

example: Jesus bases his argument for the resurrection on the tense of the verb, *I am* the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. "Am" is present tense, so God is not the God of the dead but of the living (Matthew 22:32). Such is the amazing and exacting nature of God's divine revelation.

Sufficiency

The sufficiency of Scripture says that God's Word is complete, lacking nothing we actually need, and fully capable of providing truth to believe and live the life to which God has called us. It doesn't contain all there is to know, but it does contain all that is necessary to know to live the life God expects.

"His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness" (2 Peter 1:3 NIV).

"...and how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (2 Timothy 3:15 ESV).

The sufficiency of Scripture shows itself at our church everywhere. One is the priority of preaching God's Word and the content of sermons. I want each week for you to have your Bible with you. *Expository preaching* is our approach to teaching in which the emphasis is to explain the text of Scripture in its original meaning and purpose and then seek to apply that truth to today. A high view of Scripture creates an expectation and appetite in the church for the Bible to be taught accurately, carefully, and passionately.

If you like the preaching at our church, don't mistake what you actually like for the particular church or the particular preacher; we ourselves have nothing to offer. What you are actually drawn to is God's truth proclaimed through the preacher in the church. Preachers' words are nothing. God's Words are everything. God's Spirit through the Word comforts, convicts, edifies, nourishes, and transforms.

Since God's Word is what he Spirit uses to transform God's people, we need more of it! Some people say, *but not too much, right?* Then they go home and watch six consecutive hours of NFL football.

Our counseling ministries are biblical counseling. Our recovery ministries are Bible-based. Why? Because the Bible is sufficient. God has given us all we need for life and godliness.

So, let me wrap this up and tell you one final story. We hold as a core value the truthfulness, authority, inspiration, and sufficiency of Scripture. We don't want to just say it, but to live it. How? We treasure it, we revere it, we conform to it, we read it regularly, we memorize it and study it, we share it with each other, we sing it, and we strive to live it. We don't worship it. But we do worship its author, Almighty God.

The doctrine of Scripture is a watershed doctrine. You give on it even a little and the rest of the doctrines come falling down. As an example of this, we have the friendship between Billy Graham and Charles Templeton. You have heard of Graham, not likely Templeton. Charles and Billy were friends. They were both evangelists. They were both effective. They roomed together in the early years of evangelistic crusades. But Charles went off to a liberal seminary and before long wasn't believing the Bible is God's inspired Word. Then he didn't believe in creation. Soon, he didn't believe in Jesus' deity or even that he was the Messiah.

Less than a decade later, he would declare himself an agnostic and disappeared. What about Billy Graham? Here's what Billy Graham said in response to Charles urging him to give up on God's Word:

"I've discovered something in my ministry: When I take the Bible literally, when I proclaim it as the Word of God, my preaching has power. When I stand on the platform and say, 'God says,' or 'The Bible says,' the Holy Spirit uses me. There are results...so I've decided once and for all to stop questioning and accept the Bible as God's Word."³

Templeton disappeared. Billy Graham changed the world. We must not ever budge on our belief in God's Word, for faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God.

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³ Billy Graham, as quoted by Charles Templeton, *Farewell to God: My Reasons for Rejecting the Christian Faith* (Toronto: McClelland & Stuart, 2011), Page unknown.