

II Timothy 3:13-4:4 ¹⁴ But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it ¹⁵ and how from childhood you have known sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. ¹⁶ All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, ¹⁷ so that the person of God may be proficient, equipped for every good work. ^{4:1} In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I solemnly urge you: ² proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage with the utmost patience in teaching. ³ For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound teaching, but, having their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires ⁴ and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths.

II Timothy 3:13-4:4

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Sermon Series: *Questions You Always Wanted to Ask, but Never had the Nerve*

“Week Four: Is the Bible Inerrant?”

Rev. Amy Terhune

As we continue our sermon series on *Questions You’ve Always Wanted to Ask, But Never Had the Nerve*, I turn to a question I received in writing for this sermon series, but also a question I’ve had to answer on the fly in confirmation classes, bible studies, counseling sessions, and even once on an airplane. Is the Bible inerrant? Now some of you are probably scratching your heads. Is the Bible *what?* Inerrant? What in the world is that? Inerrant is a fancy theological term meaning “without error”. So the question is: Is the bible without error? The simple answer is yes, but you all know me well enough to know that there’s probably more to it than that if I’m going to preach a whole sermon on it. So let me offer a fuller answer. But first, let’s put things in a bit of a broader context.

Most Biblical scholars, from all perspectives, begin a conversation around this issue by highlighting the three I’s of scripture from church tradition. That is, Scripture is Inspired, Inerrant, and Infallible. Whenever I mention those terms in teaching, that’s usually when the eyes of my confirmation students glaze over. But really – most of us have a pretty good handle on what ‘inspired’ means. It’s the only word of the three that scripture actually uses about itself. More on that term in a few minutes. Moving on: inerrant and infallible – aren’t they the same thing? Not quite. Inerrant means the scriptures are without error. Inerrancy is something we can look at, debate, and discuss. Infallible means the scriptures are incapable of error. Infallibility is a faith thing – you either believe it or you don’t. The church has traditionally held that scripture is inspired, inerrant, and infallible, but the great theologians of history – Origen, Ignatius, Tertullian, Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Wesley – they all wrote about it, tried to clarify it, wrestled with it, and ultimately came down in somewhat different places on what it all means. Which tells us that understanding the inerrancy of scripture is not as simple as some like to pretend.

Look with me at what Paul writes in our scripture lesson today from his second letter to Timothy. All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that the person of God may be proficient, equipped for every good work. The most telling word in that is *theopneustos*. It’s translated here “Inspired”. *Theopneustos*. *Theos*, meaning God, and *pneustos*, meaning breath, spirit, wind. All scripture is God-breathed. In scripture,

we encounter the Spirit of God at work through our interaction with the writings before us. Why? Paul tells us. He gives us five reasons, and I'm going to give you the Greek here.

First, for instruction. To learn – the story of our faith, the teachings of Jesus Christ, the way to be saved from sin, God's vision for humankind. Learn it. Second, for conviction. I have no idea why the translators choose the word reproof in this instance. The Greek word is *elegmon*, and it shows up one other spot in scripture, in Hebrews 11: 1 – *now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction (elegmon) of things not seen*. Scripture is meant to give us conviction – to know what and who we stand for. Third, for correction. All of us stray sometimes and need to be set back on course. Scripture directs our eyes back to God, back to our relationship with God. Fourth, for training in righteousness. Righteousness is a characteristic of God – one who does right by us, who loves us, who enacts justice, who loves perfectly. To train in righteousness is to seek to be like God, to imitate God in our thought, word, and action. And fifth, so that we may be proficient and equipped for every good work. John Wesley called it sanctifying grace – the process of living our faith in the real world day by day.

Scripture is inspired. It is God-breathed. This is the claim scripture makes about itself. However, you will not find the terms inerrant or infallible in the pages of scripture. Those have never been claims that scripture makes about itself. Those are claims the church has made. The closest claim scripture makes to this is Psalm 19, where the psalmist writes, "The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul." The Apostle Paul would later agree with that in principle, but acknowledge that while the law is perfect, we are not. In other words, we are not sinners because we break the law. We break the law because we are sinners. And so God sent Jesus Christ, the Word Made Flesh, to dwell among us, to bring us into right relationship with God. Jesus does what the law cannot – Jesus redeems on our behalf. All of which may suggest that even if the law itself is perfect, it cannot perfectly do what it was intended to do apart from the grace of Jesus Christ – that is, it cannot bring us into relationship with God.

So let me offer what insight I can. When we ask if scripture is inerrant, one question at stake is: what constitutes error? Consider that the gospel writers – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John – each tell of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, and yet, in each account, the details vary, from what Jesus utters on the cross, to who is hung beside him, who stands in front of him, who is responsible for his death, and who carries his cross. And there are four accounts of Jesus' resurrection, which also vary on which women go to the tomb, and why they go, and whether or not the stone is rolled away, and whether there are earthquakes or an angel or two angels or an encounter with the Risen Lord himself, and whether or not the disciples believe and act on any of it.

So what should we make of these different accounts? Are some in error and others accurate? How do we know? There are inconsistencies like this throughout scripture. There are two creation stories. In Genesis one, God speaks creation into being, and humankind is created last. In Genesis two, God shapes the dust of the earth, and humankind is created first. If you read 1 & 2 Kings and 1 & 2 Chronicles, you'll find all kinds of crossover. They discuss the same kings, though sometimes out of order from one another. By and large, the kings lauded in 1 & 2 Kings are disparaged in 1 & 2 Chronicles, and the kings disparaged in 1 & 2 Kings are celebrated in 1 & 2 Chronicles. If you look at Job and Jeremiah, you find two very different explanations for the exile. And if you look at the teachings of Jesus, you'll find similar parables with different emphases depending on which Gospel writer has recorded it. Jesus turns over tables at the beginning of John, but not until holy week in Luke. He feeds 5000 on one hillside, and 4000 on another. If you look at the beatitudes in Matthew, Jesus tells us "blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven", but if you flip over to Luke's telling, Jesus says, "blessed are the poor, for yours is the kingdom of God." There are two

different genealogies for Jesus, neither of which match up with each other, or with the genealogies in Genesis, Exodus, Numbers, Chronicles, or Ezra.

Which brings us back to the question: what constitutes error? Friends, Scripture is not a textbook. It speaks to the awesomeness of God in nature and the cosmos, but it's not a post-enlightenment scientific hypothesis. It speaks to the history of God's people, but it's not an in-depth exposé on historical context. It includes poetry, hymnody, romance, heroism, bloodshed, beauty, and great suffering, but it's not an epic novel. And it includes moral teaching, proverbial sayings, wisdom, philosophy, and theological doctrine, but it's not a legal document. And it utilizes allegory, hyperbole, metaphor, and symbolism, but it's not an ancient mythological relic.

When I teach confirmation kids about scripture, I stress to them the difference between fact and truth. Fact: A physicist will tell you that all forces in the universe fall into one of four categories – Strong Nuclear, Electromagnetic, Weak Nuclear and Gravitational. That's a fact. You can study it, you can observe it in the universe around you. Truth: the strongest force in the universe is love. I can't prove it, but I see the change love makes in the lives of individuals and communities, and even social structures around us and in history. The Bible communicates truth. We are created by God, in God's image. We are loved. We are sinners. We are redeemed by the death and resurrection of Jesus. We are immersed in grace. We are empowered by the Spirit to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. These are truths, communicated through scripture. And all those seemingly inconsistent records and various tellings of the same event in the scriptures all serve to communicate the many facets of God's truth for our lives.

If we go to scripture looking for it to tell us something other than God's truth, we're going to find ourselves misled, at best, or downright disconnected from God and neighbor altogether, at worst.

Sometimes, people come to scripture looking for a magical guide to life. There's an old joke about a young man who knew his life was on the wrong track and he remembered the teachings of his dear old grandmother, who used to tell him to turn to scripture when he was in a difficult place in his life. But not knowing anything about scripture, he decided he'd just pray and see where God led him. At random, he opened the pages of his bible, and his finger fell on Genesis 4:8, which reads, "Then Cain rose up and killed his brother Abel." This didn't seem particularly helpful, so he shut his eyes again, opened the bible at random and let his finger fall. This time, he landed on Luke 10:37, which reads, "Jesus said to him: Go and do likewise." Now this young man was starting to get nervous. He squeezed his eyes shut, turned a third time, and landed on John 13:27, which read, "what you are about to do, do quickly." I mean, good grief! The Bible isn't a Ouija board!

To say that scripture is inspired, or God-breathed, is to meet God in the words, in the stories and pages. Scripture is meant to inform our relationship with God. But relationship require an investment of time, energy, love, and certain willingness to engage. A marriage doesn't last if a couple don't dialogue. A friendship doesn't last if there's no give and take. A job doesn't last if we don't do the work. And scripture ceases to bring us into God's presence if we don't engage it. There is a contingent of Christians out there who have elevated scripture to such a degree that it becomes their idol.

Moreover, how we approach the scriptures matters. I love the old quote from William Sloane Coffin, who once lamented that "Christians use the Bible much as a drunk does a lamppost — more for support than for illumination." If we come to scripture in the hopes of proving somebody else wrong, that's using scripture as a weapon. If we come to scripture with the hopes of proving ourselves right, how can it shape us, correct us, or enable us to live our faith? Too many people hold the bible up reverently with stars in their eyes and claim, "God said it, I believe it, that settles it." In this manner, they never have to struggle, never have to confront the difficulties of living our faith in today's world.

But such a tack is inherently disrespectful to the relational nature of a God-breathed gift. And such a tack does gross injustice to truth.

Jesus did not handle things that way. Jesus engaged, he invited people to struggle, to question, to see differently. He tells us in Matthew 5, “¹⁷ Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. ¹⁸ For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished.” And yet, when confronted with the accusation that he violated the commandment to honor the sabbath day and keep it holy by healing illness or plucking grain, he was quick to reinterpret: The sabbath was made for humankind, not humankind for the sabbath” (Mark 2:27). And he teaches that divorce, except in the case of unfaithfulness, is adultery. He argued this even though the law allowed for a writ of divorce in Deuteronomy 24. And yet, when he meets the woman at well in John 4 – a woman who had been divorced 5 times, and hadn’t even married the guy she was with now – his response is not to judge but to give hope and compassion, and fill her with living water.

All of which suggests to me that Jesus knew the sacred nature of scripture and was unwilling to compromise its ability to bring another into relationship with God by using it as a weapon, an idol, or a prop.

One final word. In the early 1500s, Martin Luther was a roman catholic priest trying desperately to find the combination of acts and rituals that would save his soul. But the more he prayed, the more he confessed, the more he served, the more he sacrificed, the more alone and disconnected he felt. Finally, the head of his monastic order came to realize that he was doing so much navel-gazing that he was literally going to kill himself with sleeping in the snow and fasting from food and kneeling for hours in tormented confession, so he sent Luther to Wittenberg to teach the scriptures to the novice monks. Now Luther had to brush up on his Hebrew and Greek, and study something besides his own abject failures. And as he began to work his way through scripture, he came to see that everything he needed to know about the saving grace of Jesus Christ was right there in it’s pages. He didn’t need priestly intercession, or papal decrees. He certainly didn’t need to buy indulgences or pay for a promotion. He didn’t even need all those sacraments. All he needed was faith. And everything he needed to know was in scripture. Sola Scriptura (Scripture alone) became the rallying cry of the protestant reformation. Luther returned the scriptures to the people. The invention of the printing press made it possible to read them, especially once they were translated from their original languages into the vernacular of the people.

But all good things can be taken to extremes. When John Wesley came along 200 years later, he said, “wait a minute. Sola Scriptura – yes! Scripture contains all that we need for salvation. It is indeed a unique authority. But you can’t read it in a vacuum. You do need to know what others who have gone before you have written and understood about scripture. We need the insights and wisdom of those who study it. And your own experience matters. And God put a brain in your head to do more than fill space. Use it. Today, we understand why Wesley argued that the living core of Christian faith is revealed in scripture, illumined by tradition, vivified in personal experience, and confirmed or tested by reason. This is known as the Wesley Quadrilateral. And it’s what I’ve been arguing for all the way along.

How we come at scripture matters. We must take it seriously and reverently, but not blindly or unthinkingly. Scripture does not save us from wrestling with hard questions. Scripture cannot be read in a vacuum, just as it was not inspired in a vacuum. While I don’t see inconsistencies as errors, but as windows on truth, I also cannot deny that scripture is also steeped in culture, language, and historical context that must be evaluated, understood, and engaged. It is my encounter with the living, God-breathed truth of scripture that helps me see past individual verses of condemnation in order to

welcome and affirm the loves, marriages, and ministries of my LGBT friends. It is my devotion to the truth of creation that leads me to call on individuals and our social structures to waste less, use less, and care better for the planet that sustains us. It is my conviction that we are created in God's image that drives my hunger to understand and relate to persons of color, and my commitment to extend the privileges I have inherited by virtue of my racial identity to those traditionally excluded. And it is my deep, personal connection with the author of scripture that is fed in the stories that define us in scripture. Sit down with scripture. Read it. Engage it. Don't be afraid of not understanding it. Don't be afraid of being challenged by it. Ignore the chapters and verse numbers – those are there for scholars – and instead, read the story, feel the flow, look for the Spirit to meet you. Ask yourself what God wants to show you. Do the hard work. Embrace the truth you find there, and let it shape you, let it touch you, let it move you, let it drive you, let it bring you into the very presence of God. Amen.