

## “We Call the Bible ‘God’s Word’”

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Part of an occasional series about why Christians do peculiar things.

2<sup>nd</sup> Timothy 3.14-17; Genesis 32.1-2,24-31

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. . . Continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.

2<sup>nd</sup> Timothy 3.14-17

*New Revised Standard Version*

*(Holding Bible)* Amazing! I can hold this collection of 66 ancient writings, by different authors, over many centuries. Brave souls have died to put this in hands of ordinary people like us. Folks have poured their lives to translating this into the world’s languages.<sup>1</sup> This sits in churches, on family bookshelves, in hotel rooms and on witness stands. Every moment, people are cracking it open, underlining it, praying it, agonizing and rejoicing with it. More than five billion copies made, with 100 million more each year.<sup>2</sup> Why? Christians believe this is God’s Word.

### II

The United Church of Canada’s website says, “*We often refer to a passage as ‘the Word of God.’ By this we mean the writer was inspired by God.*”<sup>3</sup>

*Inspired.* The Tragically Hip’s song “Courage” was inspired by a Hugh MacLennan novel.<sup>4</sup> The beauty of Lisa Gherardini inspired Da Vinci to paint *The Mona Lisa*. But with the Bible, “inspired” means something different. “*All Scripture was inspired by God. . .*” we heard in the 2<sup>nd</sup> letter to Timothy. Inspired . . . God-breathed. We’re saying that God the Holy Spirit was actively involved in the writing of these texts, and in the ways some of this material was told through generations beforehand, and how it was all gathered and edited. We mean that the Bible was a product of God at work.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bible\\_translations#Modern\\_translation\\_efforts](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bible_translations#Modern_translation_efforts)

<sup>2</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bible>

<sup>3</sup> [www.united-church.ca/community-faith/welcome-united-church-canada/what-we-believe](http://www.united-church.ca/community-faith/welcome-united-church-canada/what-we-believe)

<sup>4</sup> *The Watch that Ends the Night*. <http://www.hipmuseum.com/hugh.html>

<sup>5</sup> Scot McKnight, “#3 The Inspiration and Inerrancy of the Bible,” *Kingdom Roots with Scot McKnight*. Podcast audio. February 11, 2015. <https://itunes.apple.com/us/podcast/kingdom-roots-scot-mcknight> I agree with McKnight’s view that the Spirit’s work guided the whole process that led to the Bible, not just the writing of each particular author (or group of authors). He defines inspiration as “A long-term, centuries-long process of God’s guidance through the Spirit of God, leading in specific instances to a text that expresses the mind of God in a given context for the people of God.”

Here's what we don't mean (at least, most of us.) We don't mean that God dictated the Bible. That would be closer to Islam's view of the *Qur'an*. Muhammad did not write the *Qur'an*, Moslems believe. Allah told Muhammad exactly what to recite, and the Prophet faithfully told it to followers who wrote it down. The *Qur'an* is literally Allah's words, spoken in Arabic to Muhammad. (Of course, others will disagree.)

But for Christians . . . scholars will argue about who wrote a particular book, but we all agree that someone wrote it. Paul wrote letters. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John each wrote their account of Jesus, in their own words (and sometimes borrowing from each other). Genesis was compiled by either Moses himself (the traditional view) or many authors (the critical view). And so on.

These authors matter. Their individual styles matter. We must pay attention to their time and place, their contexts. I'll say, for example, "*This is God's Word, through God's servant, Jeremiah.*" How much of it did Jeremiah write? All of it. The Bible is very human.

How much of it did God inspire? All of it? I think so. We, and generations before us, have discovered God working on us in these pages. Often, surprising us. God's inspiration is not a club to beat people with. ("*Believe the Word of God!!*") It's an invitation. "*You can live in relationship with God, who choses to speak to you, and us together, through these texts. God who, through a meandering and sometimes messy process, made sure that what was written is what God wanted to be said.*"

That does not make it easy. It makes it much harder.

Jacob stayed apart by himself, and a man wrestled with him until dawn broke. When the man saw that he couldn't defeat Jacob, he grabbed Jacob's thigh and tore a muscle in Jacob's thigh as he wrestled with him. The man said, "*Let me go because the dawn is breaking.*"

But Jacob said, "*I won't let you go until you bless me.*" He said to Jacob, "*What's your name?*" and he said, "*Jacob.*" Then he said, "*Your name won't be Jacob any longer, but Israel, because you struggled with God and with men and won.*"

Jacob also asked and said, "*Tell me your name.*" But he said, "*Why do you ask for my name?*" and he blessed Jacob there. Jacob named the place Peniel, "because I've seen God face-to-face, and my life has been saved." The sun rose as Jacob passed Penuel, limping because of his thigh.

Genesis 32:24-31

*Common English Bible* (adapted)

III

That incident is a picture of my relationship with the Bible. Sometimes it's my pleasant companion: encouraging, supportive, informative, at times witty. Other times, it's a wrestling match.

With whom was Jacob wrestling? A man? God?

The United Church's *A Song of Faith* says:

*Scripture is our song for the journey, the living word  
passed on from generation to generation  
to guide and inspire,  
**that we might wrestle a holy revelation  
for our time and place  
from the human experiences  
and cultural assumptions of another era.***<sup>6</sup>

Cultures of another era? I'll say! Their attitudes are puzzling, their practices peculiar, and often offensive. What do we do? (Good thing our cultural attitudes and practices are neither puzzling or peculiar, nor offensive at all!)

When God inspires, it is not up here, above the mess of life and history. God speaks into daily life, into every culture, because God speaks to real people. So the fact we need to wrestle with those differences is part of the good news of the how the Bible works.

But I go further than *A Song of Faith* does. It's not just the human stuff we wrestle with. Remember my question: With whom was Jacob wrestling, a man or God? With the Bible, we wrestle both. It's not possible, but even if we could boil away all the human stuff, we would be left with God. God, who provokes, and pushes, and challenges. God, who will not fit our tender sensibilities. Are we so arrogant to think that God should bend to our viewpoints and values, our prejudices and preoccupations? That we are so special?

Jacob wrestles with this strange man, whom he realizes is this even stranger God. Here's the thing. Jacob refuses to let go. The struggle wounds him, but he will not let go. Not until he is blessed.

Trusting that this Bible is God-inspired, is an invitation to not let go. "*God, I really don't like some of this. But I will stay in the struggle with You and Your inspired word. For I trust that even in the struggle, You will bless.*"

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<sup>6</sup> *A Song of Faith: A Statement of Faith of the United Church of Canada*, (2006).

#### IV

I trust the Bible because of Who it shows me. These words are about the Word.

Remember, John's Gospel starts with this:

*In the beginning was the Word,  
and the Word was with God, and was God. . . .  
The Word became a human being, and lived among us.*

These texts are God's word because they tell of Jesus, the Word of God. Jesus is God, speaking to us.<sup>7</sup>

My goal is not to understand the Bible. I need to understand Jesus. I can only understand him, however, through the Bible. From Genesis to Revelation, we need it to know Jesus.

I don't follow the Bible. I follow Jesus. I don't believe in the Bible. I believe in Jesus. But I can only trust him and be his disciple as I meet him in these pages.<sup>8</sup>

And as I come to know him, Jesus helps me to know the Bible better.

On the day of his resurrection, two disciples were walking along a country road. Jesus came alongside them. (They didn't recognize him. They weren't expecting him. He was supposed to be dead.) As they walked, they shared with him their confusion. With Jesus dead (they thought), they did not know what to make of him anymore. So Jesus — they still didn't realize it was him — Jesus began to unfold for them everything that was written about him in their Scriptures (what we call the "Old" or "First Testament"). Now, the whole

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<sup>7</sup> We use this phrase, "word of God," primarily for Jesus, and secondarily for the Bible. We also use it for what I'm doing now, preaching. When the Jesus-community, or someone on the community's behalf, announces the good news, it's the word of God. The same Spirit who inspired the Bible writers, now fills us. The Holy Spirit creates this moment, when we experience God's word together. But, it's only God's word if I am faithfully speaking the Bible, and we are faithfully hearing it. My job is to be transparent, so that through what I say, you hear God's word. This does not put me on a pedestal, or stamp my words with infallibility. This is simply my offering, which I give trusting that the Spirit will do with it in each of us, what each of us needs done. Announcing God's word is not about the announcement. It's about the Bible. Yet the Bible is transparent too. It is about Jesus. Karl Barth distinguished between: a) the Word of God incarnated in Jesus; b) the Word of God written in the Bible; c) the Word of God as the church proclaims it. The order is important. Proclamation can only be "the Word" if it faithfully presents the Bible. The Bible can only be "the Word" as it faithfully tells of Jesus. See Stanley J. Grenz, Theology for the Community of God (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 392f.

<sup>8</sup> Scot McKnight says, "*We don't know Jesus apart from the witness of the Spirit through this book. But we are people of Jesus. We believe God has revealed himself in Christ, and this Scripture points us to this Jesus. . . . I believe in the Bible because I have encountered Jesus Christ in the pages of this Bible. It is him as a person, him as the Messiah, him as the Lord that has given me confidence in this Scripture that points us to him and what he brings for us today.*" McKnight, "Inspiration and Inerency."

story makes new sense, because of Jesus.<sup>9</sup>

The word of God, the Bible, is about God the Word, Jesus. In turn, Jesus, through his Spirit, shows us what to see here. We read alongside Jesus. We understand in the light he shines on it. When I'm wrestling with something, it helps me to ask, *"Jesus, from what I know about you, help me to make sense of this. I hear you speak. You teach me. I see your love in action. I see how you are with the broken and beaten, the condemned, as well as your enemies. I see your sacrifice. I see you enter the depths of violence, sin and suffering. I see you, risen and glorious. So in what I'm reading now, show me how I can see you."*

God the Word invites us into a relationship with him, through our Bibles, the word of God. What a delight! Amen.

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<sup>9</sup> Luke 24:13-32. See also w.44-48.