

How Are We Supposed to Understand the Bible?

A Five-Part Discussion

Part One:

The two words most commonly used regarding the Bible are **infallible** and **inspired**. The problem is that different religions—even different Christians within the same church—mean different things by using those words.

The words **infallible** (*incapable of failing*) or **inerrant** (*without error*) are often used of the Bible in order to express the belief that the Bible is trustworthy and reliable. If I can count on the Bible to be true then I am much more likely to live my life by what it teaches.

When some people use these terms what they mean is the Bible is absolutely and literally correct in every statement and every detail. For instance, they would believe that the earth was created in 7, 24-hour days. There are those who may use words like infallible or inspired and mean that the Bible can be counted on as being true in the things that really matter, but each detail does not have to be factually accurate. For instance, they may point out that the Hebrew word translated in Genesis as ‘day’ doesn’t mean what we think it does, or that the passage is to be understood poetically not scientifically. What is important to understand is that God is creator and His act of creation moved forward in a planned and evolving way, and was judged by God to be good.

When people use the word **inspired**, as in *the Bible is the inspired word of God* they may mean:

- a) The Bible is the Words of God—God directed each and every word to be exactly as it is. The women and men who wrote and put together the Bible did so at God’s direct dictation.
- b) The Bible is the Word of God—the Bible is the faithful telling of God’s presence and interaction with the world, particularly Israel and the church of Jesus Christ. This view understands the Bible to accurately describe the experience that men and women had of God in their lives. We are to listen to God’s Word as it stands behind and is communicated through the human words of its authors.
- c) The Bible contains the Word of God—similar to *b*, this view also believes that not all the Bible has the same authority. The real purpose of the Bible is to point the way to, and reveal the true nature of God’s Word made flesh in Jesus Christ.
- d) And frankly, there are any number of combinations of *a* through *c*. Most of them affirm that The Bible is God’s book, and it is our book—it was inspired by God but pulled together and interpreted by God’s people to help them live faithfully in many different places and times.

What all Christians agree upon is that the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are full of powerful and living insights on what it means to be human and what it means to be in relationship with the One who created us, who has redeemed us, and who sustains us day by day and forever.

Part Two:

One of the classic protestant understandings of the Bible is summarized in the following statement.

The scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the revelation of God--the infallible rule of faith and practice.

I have a favorite Bible teacher who uses this statement to describe his perspective on reading and understanding scripture. It is very close to what we say we believe as United Methodist Christians. If these words are an accurate way of understanding the Bible, it may still not be obvious as to what it means. The following four insights should clear things up.

- 1) **If the Bible is the revelation of God**, then it behooves us to understand them correctly. Not what we've always heard about what it said, not what we hoped it might say or wish it said. It is up to us to do what we can to honestly figure out what each passage originally said and meant.
- 2) **If the infallibility of the Bible is in the area of faith and practice**, there is no need to find within in it infallible history, infallible geography, infallible science; or politics, sociology, or economics. They are not the primary issue the Bible intends to address. The primary purpose of this revelation of God is to shape our faith and guide our practice: it focuses on what we believe and how we live that belief out in our daily lives.
- 3) **Therefore, it is important to learn to ask the right questions**. If the Bible is about faith, God, living in genuine and loving relationships with others, as well as the deepest questions of our existence, then those are the kinds of questions we should be asking when we read it. If you come asking scientific or political questions you run a real risk of getting the wrong message. If you come with spiritual questions you will find what you are looking for.
- 4) **If the scriptures are infallible at the point of faith and practice, then it means we have to do something about it**. Infallible here means that these things are true, that they have unique authority over our lives, and they are to be obeyed. The truth is that sometimes we will not like what we find in the Bible—we won't appreciate the answer we find to our questions. But as one rabbi put it, "We are not called to be wiser than our Creator." In so far as we are able to understand the scriptures honestly, accurately, and faithfully we are expected to live by the wisdom we find there.

Part Three:

United Methodists have a strong commitment to the scripture. As a denomination we are a little skeptical and wary of trying to understand the Bible from only one particular perspective—from one teacher/preacher, one culture, one narrowly defined point of view. Because of this, we believe that we can best understand the Bible by reading it through three ‘lenses’:

- 1) **Tradition.** What the Hebrew people and the church have taught, believed, and understood the scripture to mean over the years. To consult tradition is similar to looking at a family photo album, surrounded by the family pictured in the book. Tradition includes things like creeds, doctrines, great teachers & authors, and congregational life.
- 2) **Reason.** God gave us a mind and it’s reasonable to assume God expects us to use it to our fullest. We need to look at the Bible in ways that make sense: logical, thoughtful, and well researched. We can learn a great deal about the original places and times in which the Bible was written, but we have to use the tools at hand to do it. To try and come to an understanding of scripture without putting some intellectual energy into it would be like strapping on a football helmet and running out onto the field without knowing a thing about how the game is played or how your team’s offense is run.
- 3) **Experience.** This is a tricky one. What we don’t mean is how you feel or think at any give time. Experience includes what you know of the world through your studies, what you know about your inner urges and failings from your daily prayers, what you know of real love from your parents/grandparents or being loved by Jesus, what you know of devotion/praise/confession from weekly worship—the sum total of who you are and your ability to empathize and imagine what you haven’t been through personally. Experience includes the guidance God gives each of us through His Holy Spirit in our daily lives. It also includes *when we ask for the Spirit’s help in opening up the meaning* of the scripture we are reading.

When we read the Bible using tradition, reason, and experience we gain a much richer and fuller understanding of who God is and who we are to God. We United Methodists believe that there are definite skills you can learn that help you understand God’s intention for our faith and practice. We also believe that there is an art to it as well. And good art takes lots of practice, imagination, commitment, and passion. But when it comes to reading the Bible these are virtues that really pay off!

One important assumption: Christians believe that the men and women who wrote and pulled together the words of scripture were inspired through the Spirit of God. It makes sense then that we turn to that same Spirit in our efforts to interpret, understand, and share those words. We are promised that when we call on the Holy Spirit, we will experience the presence of One who will convict, comfort, guide, and challenge us as we make our way through God’s word. To try and read the Bible without the Spirit is like a far-sighted person trying to read a book with tiny print—in dim light—without the help of reading glasses.

Part Four:

How Should I Go About Understanding the Bible?

Ask God for help: invite God's Holy Spirit to inspire you.

When you identify the passage you want to understand, it makes a huge difference to **begin with Prayer**. As part of that prayer read over the passage several times and pay attention to what stands out, what catches your attention and how it makes you feel. Praying the scriptures is an ancient practice of faithful Christians.

Read the passage in a different translation. There are so many out there. Consider pairing a translation like the NIV with a 'paraphrase' like The Message or The Living Bible. (If you speak/read another language, i.e. Spanish, read it in your second language!)

Don't jump to obvious conclusions: **Consider the Context**

What comes Before and After your passage?

What can you find out about the book & author where it is found?

How might the very first people who heard or read this have understood it?

See if you can discover other scriptures dealing with same topic.

How does this message fit within the entire redemptive story of God?

Test your conclusions with faithful Christians sisters and brothers

Consider Going Through a List of Guided Questions

Such as: 1) What does this passage say about God? 2) What does this say about humanity (me)? 3) What does it say about the relationship between God and humanity?

Read it as a Journalist, asking: Who, What, Where, When, Why? Or as some preachers put it: What, So What, Now What?

Reliable and Accessible Commentary

Bring along a wise guide who has done much of the 'leg work' already. Study Bible notes, though editorial opinion, can offer good insights. There are some very accessible commentaries to help you understand what isn't obvious from an English language translation.

Be wary of interpretations that come too quickly or fit too nicely with what you already believe or want to believe. One of the surest signs of receiving an authentic word from God is when it challenges, convicts or makes you shift perspectives. I love the way Rachel Held Evans puts it: "I am suspicious of those who say the Bible never troubles them. I can only assume this means they haven't read it."

Part Five:

More Recent Thoughts

God is bigger than the Bible. There is more to God and God's relationship with history and his people than is covered in one anthology, even an authoritative anthology of God's purpose and plan like the one we find in scripture.

The Bible is *both* human and divine—maybe in an analogous way to the fact that we believe Jesus was both human and divine—that the loaf and cup are both bread and juice as well as the body and blood of Jesus Christ.

The genius of the Hebrew people and the Christian church is that **we include our failures as well as triumphs**—and some of those triumphs are understood later to actually have been failures just as and some of those failures are understood later to be triumphs. There is movement and growth in the revelation of God which reaches its highest and truest point in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. God works with God's people where they are—with what they can handle at any given time in their history. But God has been always been leading his people to a greater, fuller, more mature revelation of God's self—until such time as God's Kingdom is fully realized here and in heaven.

There are not two Gods: one of the Old Testament and one for the New. There are though, occasionally what we might call *majority* and *minority* reports about God's people and their actions contained in the same Bible. If there is any confusion between the two, the teaching and character of Jesus has made it clear over time which 'report' is to be honored most highly. More often than you might think, both perspectives are true and reliable even though they seem at odds with one another (*it's a Hebrew thing*). For instance, King David is understood to be “a man after God's own heart” while at the same time he is someone guilty of adultery, murder, and terrible parenting. Thinking of it this way, Jesus is not just the Great High Priest, he is also the Great Chief Justice. The heart and mind of Jesus are the lenses through which we prioritize all that comes before or follows after.

When you want to know about the Bible—what the church believes and teaches, what your pastors believe and preach—**what are you really asking?** What I think many of us are really asking is:

- Can I trust what the Bible says about God?
- Can I trust what the Bible says about human beings, namely about me and my relationships with the people I love?
- Can I trust what the Bible says about life after death?

And the answer is a definitive Yes! We believe that—properly understood—the Bible is a trustworthy and reliable witness to the good news we have in Christ Jesus and more. At the same time, the Bible is a means—a God-given one—and we should not see it as an end unto itself. **The holy scriptures are precious to us for the simple reason that—with the help of Holy Spirit—they are the primary means to entering into a life-giving relationship with our God and King.** It is always a dangerous thing to confuse the gift with the Giver—no matter how holy the gift.

Conclusion

If the Bible has a thesis statement—a theme that ties it all together—it might sound a lot like one or both of these two ideas:

“If fish were made for water, what are human beings made for? What is the element in which human beings find themselves, as water is the element in which a fish finds itself? I don't hesitate to say that according to Scripture the answer is love. **Human beings are made for love because God is love.** When he created us in his own image, he gave us the capacity to love and to be loved. So human beings find their destiny in loving God and in loving their neighbors.”

John Stott

“The Church exists for nothing else but to draw men [*sic*] into Christ, to make them *little Christs*. If they are not doing that, all the cathedrals, clergy, missions, sermons, even the Bible itself, are simple a waste of time. God became Man for no other purpose. It is even doubtful, you know, whether the whole universe was created for any other purpose. It says in the Bible that the whole universe was made for Christ and that everything is to be gathered together in Him.”

C.S. Lewis

The most faithful way to receive God's Word is to watch and listen for how God loves his creation and his children—those who know that they are his children as well as those who have not yet figured it out. And the reason we come to the scriptures at all is in order to be shaped and formed by what we find there—to become more and more the women and men God created us to be in the first place. Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ and Son of the living God, is the perfect example of what it means to be fully human—which is to say, what it means to reflect the image of God that lies within each and every one of us. You might say that God inspired the holy scriptures for no other purpose than for us to become like Jesus and to allow him to live through us.