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"The Bible Says..."

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W. Burney Overton

“THE BIBLE SAYS...”

Because it is in the Bible, it is true
or
Because it is in the Bible, it is in the Bible.

I raise the question with myself, “What, in my view or understanding, gives the Bible authority?” I believe it to be the Word of God, or at least, to contain and disclose the Word of God. Even so, how do I view the Bible? What do I believe about it? Is it valid to say, “THE BIBLE SAYS...” and that be the end of the matter in terms of truth or validity? It appears from what I read and hear, that many people believe that, if the Bible says it, it is true – no questions asked. Many times I have heard, “But THE BIBLE SAYS...”, and, for that person, that settles whether or not the words are true.

When persons are ordained to the ministry of Word and Sacrament in the Presbyterian Church (USA), they are asked to give assent to a series of questions. One of them, No. 2 in the series, is as follows, “Do you accept the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be, by the Holy Spirit, the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the Church Universal, and God’s Word to you?” Of course, I answer the questions affirmatively. Then I wonder what the question really means, and what I mean when I say, “Yes,” to it.

When I say “Yes” to it, I could mean that I attribute all authority to the words of the Bible as being the word of God. I could mean that whatever the Bible says is true, with no questions asked nor doubts expressed. Of course, I am aware that, even so, I have to interpret the words that I read. I have no way of knowing, objectively, what the words mean – more about this later.

My assent to the question could also mean that, some way, the Bible contains and reveals the Word of God, and I am able to know Its meaning by the power of the Holy Spirit working in me. If this is true, I am in touch with the reality that I do not automatically know what a Bible passage means. Hence, I do not automatically know what truth it is expressing.

Or, when I give assent, I could mean that, although I see the Bible as God’s Word to me, I do not attribute authority to it nor its content simply because the words are in the Bible. In that case, I see the Bible as a most significant and remarkable assembling and presenting of truth as God would have us to know it. However, the fact that it is in the Bible, would not, in and of itself, be what made the words true.

The ordination question says, “The Scriptures” (are) “the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the Church Universal, and God’s Word to you” (me). I do not know, automatically nor authoritatively, what the question itself means either. Is it asking me to accept that the Bible has the authority to make a statement true just because it is in the Bible? Is it asking me to commit myself to a prayerful, discerning process whereby, with the power and direction of the Holy Spirit, I may come to understand truths contained in the words of Scripture? To what do I give assent when I answer question No. 2 of the Ordination questions in the affirmative? I don’t know – not just by

reading the question.

When I take the position that, because it is in the Bible, it is true, I encounter all kinds of problems.

One very obvious problem is that, from time to time, the Bible contradicts itself. An example is in the two accounts of Creation, found in the first and second chapters of Genesis. One describes human beings created at the end of the Creation process, and the other at the beginning of the Creation process. Which is true? The Bible says both things.

Another really big problem is with knowing what a passage means. I don't automatically know. The words, without some kind of interpretation, in some kind of setting, are meaningless. Whatever passage it is, I must first provide a setting. It may be that of the author, and it may not be. Then I must give it a meaning, which is always based on my point of view and what I believe. I would like to believe that the meaning I perceive in a passage is the correct meaning. However, I do not know that that is the case, and cannot know. I have no way to know. For instance, among the more familiar passages of the Bible are the Ten Commandments, found in the twentieth chapter of Exodus. The eighth one is, “You shall not steal.” (Exodus 20:15) – a simple, powerful, declarative sentence – just four words. That's what the Bible says. Who could question what the words mean? Isn't the meaning obvious? Not to me. Not automatically.

What is stealing? The words of the Bible do not give me a meaning. How, then, do I know? If I see a book on a picnic table in the park and I pick it up and keep it, am I stealing? Obviously, it isn't mine. To answer my own question, I have to decide what stealing is, and then I have to decide whether or not to steal – or whether or not my action in picking the book up and keeping it, really is stealing. I must decide. When, and under what circumstances, do I steal?

The Bible says, “You shall not steal.” Whatever the commandment means, why shouldn't I? Does the fact that the Bible says so make stealing wrong and me a sinner if I steal? Or, does the Bible say so because, as it turns out, stealing is a destructive and harmful thing for me to do, both for me and for the one from whom I steal? Is it authority speaking and I am not to question it? Or is it the authoritative Word of God speaking to alert and enlighten me about the damage that results when I chose to steal? By stealing, I mean, simply, taking something – anything – that does not belong to me and claiming as my own.

When I take something that does not belong to me and claim it as my own, I set several things in motion. I show disrespect and disregard for the owner and the owner's rights to possession. Thereby, I declare that I am not to be trusted. Since I am not to be trusted, I have to assume that I can't trust other people. They are just as free to take what doesn't belong to them as I am. Stealing erodes trust, feeds insecurity, and builds barriers between people. These are very good reasons not to steal.

At the risk of stirring up some negative reactions, I call your attention to another passage from Scripture.

The Bible says:

“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.” (I Cor. 14:34b-35)

The Bible says this about how women are to conduct themselves in the Church. They are to be silent. They are to ask their husbands at home if they want to know anything. It is shameful for a woman to speak in church. Even though the Bible says it, I do not believe it is true. Do you?

But if I hold that a thing is true because the Bible says it, I am forced to the conclusion that these and other statements about women and how they are to be involved in the Church are true, and that the church must use them as unquestioned guides in determining the role of women in the Church. For me, it just doesn't follow that something is true just because the words are in the Bible.

I have written what may be construed as a very radical statement. Just because the words are in the Bible, it doesn't follow automatically that they are true. Yet, truth is in the Bible. It is there for me to discover, to believe, and to implement in my life.

As it turns out, I don't really find a lot of guidance to enable me to distinguish between what is God's Word and God's Truth in the Bible and what is not. I have to work that out for myself.

If I choose to believe that the words in the Bible aren't automatically true, I could misuse that belief. I could select only those words that I want to apply to me, and dismiss everything else that the Bible says as either not being true, or not being applicable. As I write, so many passages of scripture come to mind that I hardly know which to choose for an illustration. Even so, I look at two selections.

The Bible says, “Love your enemy. Do good to those who hate you.” (From Luke 6:27-36 – you may choose to read the whole passage). Elsewhere, I read the words, “Vengeance is mine. I will repay, says the Lord...” (Romans 12:19-21)

Is it true that I am to love my enemies? Do I love them because the Bible says so? Is it mandatory? Virtually everything to which I am exposed and that I have learned, teaches me differently, and, certainly, my conditioning urges me to take vengeance against those who misuse me in some way. Enemies are for hating. Justice teaches me to expect that those who treat me badly must pay a price. These words from the Bible create a dilemma for me. On the one hand, the Bible says, “Love your enemies.” On the other hand, the Bible says, “Never avenge yourselves.” (Leave it to God) “By so doing,

you will heap coals of fire upon their heads (the enemies). It appears that I can interpret that the Bible tells me what to do so that I do my enemies in. Which statement is true, and which is not? And, for that matter, what makes either of them true or not?

The words, “Love your enemies,” could be a very profound truth. Suppose I do love my enemies? They may continue to be enemies. They may continue to try to destroy me. When I hate them, they are almost certain to preserve their enemy status and try to destroy me. When I love them, they just may realize that I truly love them, and discover that their reason for keeping me an enemy is gone. Whether that happens or not, I take much better care of me when I choose to love instead of to hate. Maybe it makes sense to love my enemies. Maybe that’s the best way to cope with enemies.

Suppose, however, that I choose to continue to be an enemy and to hate those who hate me? Under those circumstances, I certainly will want to have power over them, and will want to exercise that power so that they have to pay the price for being my enemy and trying to do me harm. I can easily convince myself that I have the right to take vengeance on them. Then, when the Bible tells me a way for that vengeance to take place, it is easy to say, “Aha. The Bible says, ‘Vengeance is mine. I will repay, says the Lord,’ and if I leave the matter to God, God will reward me by heaping coals of fire on their heads.” But maybe that isn’t the interpretation of that Scripture passage. Maybe the interpretation is that God discloses that vengeance is not the right of any person, and, if there is to be any vengeance, it is the right of God. Maybe God doesn’t intend to exercise that right, but knows that, by loving enemies instead, they convict themselves.

THE BIBLE SAYS... The words are there for me to read. However, I do not know their meaning until I interpret them – which I have to do with all the words I read or hear. When I say, “The Bible says...” to establish something as true, I really am saying that it is my interpretation of the words in the Bible that I declare to be true. Can I take that position? Not really.

Nevertheless, I always interpret the words of the Bible. I can’t know without interpreting. So the Bible says, Don’t steal; Love your enemies; Women are to be silent in the Church; Turn the other cheek; Kill and destroy; Do justice; Be forgiving; Love, The Ten Commandments – words upon words upon words. In them are the truths God wants me to know, to understand, and to live by. I read and I interpret. What is right and what is wrong. What is good and what is evil. What to do and what not to do. I must interpret if I learn the truth. And it is my interpretation.

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Which statement do I believe? I believe the second one. And I focus on searching the Bible to discover truth to guide me in living.