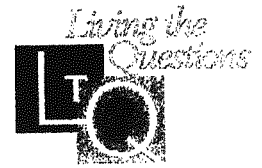


# 1. invitation to journey: the role of biblical authority



**FOCUS:** Faith is not a destination, but a journey. The authority one places in the Bible plays a critical role in where and how you will travel on that spiritual journey.

---

## how to begin?

Its influence has been recognized for centuries. It has been quoted and misquoted, used and abused, appealed to and discredited. While American Presidents quote "A house divided cannot stand" and "from those to whom much is given, much is required", Biblical texts have also been used to oppress women, support slavery, justify wars, and today, bolster White Supremacy and other discriminatory movements.

Preachers try to bring the text alive, classes and small groups provide vital places of discovery. Personal study allows the Bible to speak to an individual's situation. But what is it exactly that we're looking for? The Bible is so big, so intimidating, it's difficult to know where to start. It's hard to know what to believe or what not to believe...

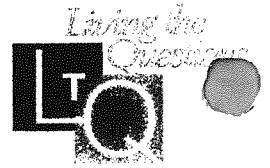
## the book "by" Jesus?

Before leaving for seminary, a young theological student was taken aside by an evangelical pastor and was told in the hushed tone reserved for the imparting of great wisdom, "You're going to read a lot of books ABOUT Jesus – don't forget to read the book BY Jesus!"

And therein lies what is perhaps the greatest divide among Christians: the authority one places in the text of the Bible. It's important because how you understand the Christian life depends on *how you read the Bible*.

How much "authority" do you give scripture? How do you determine the level of trust you place in any written material, for that matter? As perhaps the best-selling, least read book of all time, the Bible needs to be re-examined by most of us. It is not something to be "believed" in as though it has some magical powers, but to be in relationship with, as one would be with any person or cause or issue to which we give allegiance in this life.

In his bestseller, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, Marcus Borg writes "the Christian life is not primarily about believing the right things or even being good. The Christian life is about being in *relationship* with God which transforms us into more and more compassionate beings, 'into the likeness of Christ.'" Likewise, having a "relationship" with the Biblical text that grows and changes has more spiritual and intellectual integrity than performing the mental gymnastics necessary to cling to the notions of the Bible one learned in Sunday School. The degree to which a person venerates or critiques what has come down to us in the form of the Bible has wide-ranging implications for the way one interacts with the others, the world, and the idea of the divine.



As a record of various peoples' experience of God's faithfulness and human infidelities, the Bible is full of colorful characters, lying, cheating, sex, hate, war, sex, betrayal, murder, sex, letters, poetry, history, sex, great ideas, lousy ideas, and more sex. Read closely, a variety of theological voices are revealed — sometimes harmonious, other times a cacophony of contradiction. Most people don't even realize that there are two flood stories in Genesis: the familiar one where God has Noah collect the animals two by two, and the other where they are collected seven by seven. We only hear about the first story because seven by seven would clutter up the simplicity of the illustrations in children's books and murals.

Yet many people are afraid that if they admit that there are contradictions in the Bible then the whole thing has to be dismissed as a worthless lie. So, a simple defense was concocted as a bulwark against letting the evidence sway people once their minds were made up.

### **“shall the fundamentalists win?”**

In the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, a pamphlet circulated about the “Fundamentals” of Christianity. It spawned a whole movement committed to the inerrancy of scripture and other supposedly bedrock doctrines. Defenders of the infallibility of scripture pointed to one verse in 2<sup>nd</sup> Timothy, (verse 3):

*“All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.”*

Literalists then adopted a kind of circular argument, saying that because the Bible is without error or inconsistency, it must be the work of God, and because it is the work of God, it must be without error or inconsistency. It doesn't matter which proposition comes first, the other is argued to follow.

In the 1920's, a highly publicized battle flared up between the mainstream church and what had become known as the Fundamentalists. It was front-page news in national newspapers. The Scopes “monkey trial” was just one skirmish in this national “battle for the soul of America”. One of America's great preachers, Harry Emerson Fosdick, preached the sermon “Shall the Fundamentalists Win?” in an effort to stir people to action. He was worried that if the mainline church didn't do more to educate its people about the metaphorical and mythological origins of scripture, we would lose our “brightest and best” young people. He was right.

### **“twelve unbelievable things before breakfast”**

For lots of reasons, people are dissatisfied with the church today – and they're voting with their feet. One of the biggest reasons is, *folks are not stupid*. They look at the Bible and ask themselves, why is it that of all the things in my life, I have to have a whole different category for the Bible? Why am I expected to suspend disbelief and not think through what I'm reading the way I would with any other object, issue, or situation in my life?

People run out of patience with bumper sticker platitudes like, *“God said it, I believe it, that settles it”*. One might get the impression that in order to be a Christian they have to (in the words of Mark Twain) “believe twelve unbelievable things before breakfast.”

Hebrew Scripture Professor, Dr. Harrell Beck, used to stir up a lot of people with the exclamation: "The Bible is NOT the word of God -- but the word of God is in the Bible." It's in there, but don't get caught falling prey to worshipping the Bible the way many faith communities seem to have done. Many people cling to the unspoken cultural belief that the origin of "Holy" scripture is somehow the result of a series of some sort of supernatural events. Tongue firmly planted in cheek, Dr. Beck used to describe the scene: long ago, a shepherd boy in Palestine was startled by an ungodly clap of thunder and the King James Version of the Bible floated out of a cloud and settled at his feet. Having an uncanny appreciation for the value of an ancient text in Elizabethan English, the boy immediately took it to the religious authorities for distribution. Voila!

### thinking critically

In reality, the sixty-six separate books crammed together in a not-always-logical arrangement came together in very human ways. With all the haggling and bickering you'd expect from a committee, the Catholic Council of Carthage pulled together one of the first official collections in 397 C.E.--more than three hundred years after the time of Jesus. What we call our "Old Testament", consists of thirty-nine books, many of which had multiple authors. The New Testament has twenty-seven books -- many of which also have multiple authors or uncertain authorship. Catholic Bibles include an additional twelve books known as the Apocrypha. The Old Testament is concerned with the Hebrew God, Yahweh, and a history of the early Israelites. The New Testament is the work of early Christians and reflects their beliefs about Jesus.

The composition of the various books began before 1000 B.C.E. and continued for more than a thousand years. Oral material that was repeated from generation to generation, revised over and over again, and then put into written form by various editors, was also included. These editors often worked in different locales and in different time periods and with very different socio-economic, philosophical, theological, and spiritual worldviews. They were most certainly unaware of each other and it is unlikely that any of them foresaw their work being included in a "Bible." Their work was intended for local use.

The four Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, are examples of books which did not carry the names of their actual authors -- their present names were assigned long after the books were written and circulated anonymously. Despite the witness of the Gospels themselves, biblical scholars are now almost unanimously agreed, based on evidence within the books themselves, that none of the Gospel authors was either a disciple of Jesus or an eyewitness to his ministry.

These are such ancient texts that no original manuscripts exist. Not one book which survives is probably in anything like its original form. Comparing the oldest manuscripts with the most recent copies of any one book, scholars have discovered numerous differences. These differences indicate that additions and alterations were made to the originals by various copyists and editors. Priority is placed on the oldest texts as the ones likely to have been changed the least.



Many of the ethical teachings and laws from Leviticus for example (You shouldn't plant two kinds of seed in the same field, nor two fibers in one cloth, or talk back to your parents – the penalty for which is death) are relegated to obsolescence while others are lifted up as definitive rules of life.

Then there are all the stories that don't "sync": two creation stories (Genesis 1 & 2), two flood stories, (and imagine the surprise of Victorian scholars who discovered the same story elements in the Genesis flood story lifted from a Babylonian flood epic!) Some would say there are no less than four authors' versions of the exodus lurking in the book we call Exodus and the narratives of Jesus' birth are in only two gospels and don't have the same characters, timeline, or story emphasis.

It's exactly these kinds of inconsistencies in scripture that have lead careful readers of the Bible to be curious about what was going on. These people weren't folks who were looking to discredit the Bible, either. Far from it! They were people who had dedicated their lives to understanding scripture through-and-through. What these modern biblical scholars do is called Historical and Literary Criticism – and it doesn't mean being *critical* of scripture. It means *thinking* critically about scripture.

"Well, if the Bible is just the product of humans, then what sets it apart from all the other ancient texts and holy books?" In short, two thousand years of people's experiencing its contents as a means of grace and as a life-changing window onto the divine.

The window metaphor is author Frederick Buechner's way of talking about scripture. We don't worship the window. We simply look through it to get a glimpse of the divine on the other side. Just because there are smudges, swatted flies, and hairline cracks obstructing our view, we don't throw the window out. We learn to distinguish between what is part of the window and what is beyond. As a window, fashioned by people of faith, inspired (not dictated) by God, it helps us catch a glimpse of the mystery beyond.

### the spiritual journey

An important thing to remember, as well, is that the divine is not limited to the Bible. The Source of Life, Ground of All Being, the "More" is bigger than the Bible. The Bible is just one way in which the divine is revealed to people as they grow and travel over the period of one's whole life.

But 21<sup>st</sup> Century Western culture revels in instant gratification – the easy fix. We want our stuff, our answers, our entertainment, and our deep sense of personal fulfillment *NOW*. The idea that something worthwhile might take a long time to develop or be complex to comprehend is not only resisted, but condemned as suspicious or morally questionable.

This consumer mentality bleeds over into religion – we want salvation simple, easy and *NOW*. Rooted in our primal fascination with all things magic ("just say this prayer/incantation and you're all set!"), many churches have warped Jesus' life-transforming call to "follow me" into a smorgasbord of methods for achieving wealth, health, and victory all in a couple of painless and mindlessly easy steps.



One of the more popular ways of identifying oneself as a Christian is to affirm that one has been "born again". And although a whole religious culture has risen up around the phrase, the concept of being "born again" is essentially based on a mistranslation.

The phrase in Jesus' mouth in John 3:3 (translated correctly in the NRSV version, for instance) actually tells Nicodemus that he must be born "from above" (*anothen* in Greek). Whereupon the literalist Nicodemus misunderstands and asks, "How can a person be born after having grown old?"

It all goes to a basic difference in approach to life: Jesus never said you have to be born again, but born "from above". "Born again" has come to mean a once-and-for-all experience of God's grace and love. Insofar as it can be the first step in a life's journey of faith, being "born again" can be a helpful experience and concept. Being born "from above", however, implies a process, an orientation, or a way of life. The founder of the Methodist movement, John Wesley, would call it "going on to perfection."

Maya Angelou was asked if she was a Christian. She turned the question back on the one inquiring of her: "Are you a Christian?" The person replied, "Why, yes, of course!" Angelou exclaimed, "Already?"

Being there already is unlikely for most of us. Besides making us totally insufferable to be around, it would also prevent us from opening up the Bible and looking at it again with the openness, thoughtfulness, and critical thought necessary to help us along the way.

The Bible is many things to many people. It's both what people make it and what they let it make of them over the course of time. Even if we read the same translation of the Bible — and there are many different translations, each with its own interpretative slant — we all bring our own assumptions, presuppositions, prejudices, and experience to bear on the text.

It has been said that there are as many Bibles as there are readers of the Bible. As William Blake wrote:

*"Both read the Bible day and night  
but thou readst black where I read white."*

Acknowledging that the history of interpreting scripture is itself in process is one of the first steps in establishing a personal, life-long journey with the Biblical text — a sometimes frustrating, often rewarding, always surprising relationship.

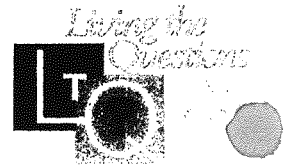
As people are given permission to think critically about the Bible and are resourced with a broad understanding of the history, culture, and political intrigues that originally drove the content, story lines, and theologies of the canon, the text can become less of a stuffy rulebook and more of a lens through which one's spiritual and life journey comes into focus.

As we dig into the themes and concepts of the coming weeks, you'll find that the written material and the contributors in the DVD sessions will strive to

raise questions that go deeper into the material than superficial "proof-texting" (The scripture passages that are mentioned will be listed for your reference).

The re-visioning of Christianity that is already emerging in the world is motivated in part by taking the Bible seriously and not literally. The core message, dogma, and practice of the Christian faith in today's world is being re-evaluated with a love for and relationship with scripture at its center.

As we practice "Living the Questions", may we discover that the richest treasures aren't found on the surface, but deep down where the alchemy of time, uncertainty, faith, and mystery have been allowed to do their work.





## vocabulary and concepts in dvd session 1:

This is not a comprehensive vocabulary and concept list but is offered to serve as a guide. You will want to augment the definitions with your own notes and observations and add other words and concepts below for your discussion.

**Canon:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Certainty:** convinced of the indisputable truth or reliability of something

**Fundamentalist** – someone committed to the strict and literal adherence to a set of ideas or principles. Able to subscribe to the statement: “if you don’t take what is in the Bible literally, you’re not a Christian”

**Ideological Fundamentalism** \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Rhetorical Fundamentalism** \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Physical Fundamentalism** \_\_\_\_\_

**Heretic:** from the Greek root word “to choose”; one who dissents from or disavows accepted church dogma or doctrine; a nonconformist. \_\_\_\_\_

**Idolatry:** the worship of or devotion to something or someone as a god.

**Inerrant:** (re: the Bible) completely free from error. Belief that the Bible is completely true and free from mistakes.

**Infallible:** (re: the Bible) not capable of misleading in doctrine, faith, or morals. Belief that the Bible is a reliable and trustworthy guide in all matters.

**Inspired Word of God:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Jesus Seminar:** a group of scholars organized since 1985 to research and report on their studies of the “historical Jesus”. ([www.westarinstitute.org](http://www.westarinstitute.org))

**Literalism:** taking literally everything that can be taken literally. Taking everything in the Bible literally

**Metaphor:** figurative language \_\_\_\_\_

**Orthodoxy:** conforming to an established set of beliefs.

**Sanctification:** the state of growing in holiness as a result of one's Christian commitment

**Ultimate (primary) Authority** \_\_\_\_\_



### scripture mentioned:

Jeremiah 18: Potter's house

Genesis 32.24 & 32.25 Jacob wrestling with the angel

John 14.6 "I am the way and the truth and the life"

Deuteronomy: the "way"

Matthew 5.13ff, etc. "Salt in the soup, yeast in the dough, light in the darkness"

John 15.5; 15.8; Colossians 1.6ff; You'll know a Christian by the fruit they produce

### something to try in worship:

In an effort to help recalibrate people's understanding of the origin of scripture, replace the clichéd affirmation after scripture used by most churches. Instead of reinforcing conventional wisdom with "This is the word of the Lord", try the less misleading, more persuasive response from the New Zealand Book of Common Prayer, "Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church." Now with a clear conscience, the progressively-minded congregation can still respond with "Thanks be to God."

### questions for discussion session:

#### Preliminary:

What jumped out at you? What do you remember as catching you by surprise?

What idea or comment disturbed you? Where did you have to keep yourself from jumping up and shouting "Amen!"?

#### Going deeper:

As a group, discuss any questions that are raised from the material or observations from the individual participants (remembering that we're not looking for answers, but cracking open old ideas in an effort to spur dialogue beyond this gathering)

#### Wrap up:

1. What do you find most helpful/interesting so far from the material? Least helpful/interesting?
2. What implications does this material have for Christianity as a whole? For the wider Church? For your local fellowship? For you personally?

#### Answer the following questions as a group:

What has this session challenged or changed about the way you think about the divine? People? The Church? Yourself? The interrelationship of all these?