

The Lenses We Bring

“All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful”
(2 Timothy 3:16).

We can agree that, somehow, “all Scripture is God-breathed.” All Scripture is inspired . . . *someway*. We don’t know exactly *how this is possible*. And we don’t have to agree about its exact nature.

But when this verse in the Second Letter to Timothy was written, there was no such thing as a New Testament. Certainly, none of the Gospels had been written yet. It would be centuries before the New Testament would be considered “finished.” And even more, the contents of the OLD Testament weren’t even agreed upon by the Jewish leadership yet.

So, we must take lightly what “all scripture” meant to the writer of 2 Timothy. She would probably have never imagined in a million years that her letter would one day be considered sacred & inspired, that it would be included in the Bible, and that 2,000 years later a group of Methodists in Wisconsin would be reading it.

Nevertheless, today we have these 66 “books” in our Holy Bible and we should, to varying degrees, treat them all as sacred. They were included in the Bible because the Church and Synagogue agreed that these had been inspiring the people for a long time.

United Methodists do not believe that the Bible is the “inerrant, infallible Word of God.” Instead – taken directly from our Anglican roots – we believe that “the Scriptures are sufficient for salvation”; meaning, we should not require anyone to believe anything beyond what it clearly teaches: If the Bible doesn’t say it, it’s not necessary to being saved. (*That doesn’t mean we think the Bible speaks on every social issue in today’s culture – just in terms of salvation.*)

Still, we can’t shake this nagging feeling that some parts of the Bible may be *more important* than others. As Christians, we can readily admit that we revere the New Testament over the Old. And of all the parts of the New Testament, we would probably drop the Book of Revelation first. (*It was also the book that was debated the most before it was eventually – and reluctantly – included. Many of the earliest Christians didn’t think too highly of it, either.*)

So, we’re left with the Letters and the Gospels: *Paul* or *Jesus*.

And while Paul offers us many incredible teachings that are beautiful and inspiring, we admit that the Four Gospels would be our unspoken **canon-within-a-canon-within-**

a-canon. If we had limited ink and paper available to us, we would most likely choose to photocopy just this small part of the Bible. *It's the most important bit!*

Perhaps we can go even further. Let's take our four Gospels and zoom in some more. We would probably want focus on the very words and actions of Jesus. That is why we have “**red letter**” Bibles.

We would easily agree that **Jesus is at the center of our Bible**,
(*while God the Creator is throughout the whole thing*).

I want to introduce you to a ten-cent seminary word called **hermeneutics**. It means “*the study of interpretation.*” *Hermeneutics* refers to the set of “lenses” we all have built into us. We all have different life experiences and teachings, so we all have our own perspectives. A female hermeneutic will be different from a male's. A white hermeneutic will be different from a person of color's. An Asian's from a European's. A billionaire's from a merchant's. Nobody can truly claim they have the right set of lenses to interpret the Bible fully and accurately. We all have our biases and predispositions.

This is why United Methodists believe it is very important to read the Bible *in groups*, especially where diversity is honored. We learn a whole lot more when we bring our unique set of lenses to the same table.

So, if Jesus is at the center of our Bible, then we have reached a **Christological Hermeneutic**. This fancy phrase simply means that **we filter everything in the Bible through the words of Jesus**. This is why only His words are printed in **red**, in a sea of black-and-white. He is the **definitive Word of God**. He is the colander (strainer) through which every verse in the Bible is sifted. And not all get retained.

We are allowed to be a bit more critical of *Paul* than of *Jesus*. Paul is not the Messiah. We are allowed to disagree with him. Paul doesn't always get it right, and sometimes he is just plain confusing.

On the other hand, do not let every ‘Tom, Dick, and Jane’ convince you that it's *their* interpretation or bust. *Hermeneutics* ought to draw us together in a state of humbleness. We all have a small piece of the puzzle – and wherever Jesus Christ is our True Lens through which we approach the Scriptures, we are truly in the Word of God.