

On This Word I Stand

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2 Timothy 3:14-17

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

Baptist Principles – Scripture

Movement 1 – In the Center of Attention

What role does the Bible play in your life? Where does it stand as far as prominence and importance? How has it led you in your faith? What role does the Bible play in your life?

If there is one thing that unites Baptists (and there are a number of things) it is scripture. Our worship styles vary, our music varies, our buildings vary, our preaching styles vary, yet our emphasis on the word remains true amongst Baptists. It is the center of our life, of our identity as a church – we are rooted in scripture.

This has been a constant for Baptists from its beginning. Groups of believers gathered together to read and experience the Word because they felt that the established church, the Anglican Church had lost the scriptural emphasis in their liturgy, their church governance, and hierarchy. Return to the Word, *sola scriptura*, cried the Baptists carrying on the cry of the early Reformers. Rather than a worship service focused on a prayer book and a set liturgy, Baptists instead structured their service with some prayers, and reflections and exhortations (i.e. sermons) on particular selections from the Bible. All they wanted to do was to be focused on the Bible; the Word was central to their life.

Today we carry on that emphasis. Our American Baptists domination states that “American Baptists believe... that the Bible is the divinely inspired word of God that serves as the final written authority for living out the Christian faith.” It is the authority upon which we stand.

The architecture of the church speaks to the centrality of the Scriptures. We have a central pulpit, symbolically stating that the word is central to the structure of the church. We do not normally have an alter table with elements for Eucharist on it, but a table with the Bible opened up, inviting us all to enter in and engage the word (today is Communion Sunday, so the communion table is set). The sermon, the moment when the Word is proclaimed, is seen as the apex of the worship service. Our worship space and service claims scripture as important. The Bible is central to our Baptist identity today as it has been for four hundred years.

I did not realize how true this was until I went into my doctoral studies. I had grown up in a Baptist church that cherished scriptures and held them as important, but did not push memorization of texts. I could never parry with someone else who could throw out scriptures with a deadly accuracy like missiles heading directly for their target. I could remember most of the books of the Bible in order, but not all of them. I could not spout off a flurry of words and then say exactly where it would be found. Even in seminary it seemed at times that I read more about the Bible than actually read the Bible. So I felt like I was perhaps less than the Bible expert that I saw other, more charismatic and evangelical Baptists. Then I went to a Catholic school for my doctoral work and was surrounded by Catholics. There I found that I knew the stories, I knew the background, I

knew more than I expected when compared to those who aren't known as having Scripture central to their identity (no offense to Catholics, but they have stressed Scripture AND Tradition – a conversation for another time). I realized that even in what I would have described as a sub par knowledge of Scripture, it was a part of who I was and is a part of who I am.

In the early church, Timothy was encouraged to turn to scripture for help and for instruction for his faith. Remember that back then the scriptures were the Psalms, the Prophets, the Pentateuch, and other Jewish scriptures. Timothy did not have the Gospels, the epistles or other parts of the New Testament, yet still the scriptures, the Word was seen and held as important for the faith of the community.

We don't have a liturgy, we have the Word. We don't have a creed, we have the Word. We don't have a book of prayers, we have the Word. The Word is central; it is the book that we stand upon. The Word is central to Baptist identity. So where is the Bible in your life? Do you turn to scriptures in times of need? Do you look to the Word in times of distress? Where is the Bible in your life?

Movement 2 – Look High, Look Low, Look All Around

How do you read the Bible? How do you approach the Holy Scriptures? When you are by yourself, and you open the book, do you read it the same way you would read a phone book, dry and analytical, an encyclopedia, with all the answers, a story book, a diary, or someone's private letters? How do you approach that which we claim is central to our faith? How do you approach that which we claim is central to our lives? How do you read the scriptures?

We have a variety of views of scripture. There are a number of different ways to read scripture. We all approach this same book, this same collection of sacred texts, but we all come from different places and end up with different understandings. There are a variety of ways to read scripture.

Some read with a literal approach, claiming that what is in the Word is the truth, just as it is printed. They claim that there should not be any variation to interpretation because we all have a common text and all just need to read what it says. Others would look at this approach and ask what about the symbols. What about the parables that Jesus offered? Are we to think that the Kingdom of God is literally a mustard seed? Are we to believe everything in Revelation word for word, or is there more to the text than just what we see? When Paul says that he had a thorn in his side which God had refused to remove, is it a literal thorn?

Some would take these questions and say, we need to understand the history and the context. We need to take a historical and a social approach to the text to understand what may have been going on at that time, to understand what the symbols may have stood for and how they would have been understood by people at that time. They would claim that we need a social-historical understanding of scripture.

Others would hear this critique and maybe go another step further. Others would hear this and claim that what we need to find out is what really happened. We need to find out how the Red Sea could have parted, how the sun stood in the sky. We need to know if Joshua really did walk around Jericho and cause the walls to come down. We need a historical approach, an approach that is critical of what the scriptures said

happened and what really happened. We need a historical-critical approach to the text and the reality of the text.

Some have said that we need to look at the manuscripts. We need to focus on the translation we are reading. We need to look at the Greek, the Aramaic, and the Hebrew. We need to consider the Coptic, the Acadian and all other dialects to discern the best translation. We need to read the King James Version, the New American Bible, the New Revised Standard Version or the New Interpreters Version. We need to look at the language, at the manuscripts, at the actual words when we read the Bible.

Some others have said that we should take where we are in life and apply that to the text. The text will speak to us, and guide with whatever problems we are dealing with in life. We shouldn't have to consider what it might have meant, what it could be suggesting to others, but take a personal approach as we consider the text. Just read and reflect.

There are a variety of ways to approach the scriptures. The growth of denominations comes out of the plethora of hermeneutical approaches. Luther and Zwingli disagreed how to read the Matthew or Mark when Jesus said, "this 'is' my..." Luther wanted to read that literally and understand a real presence at the table. Zwingli wanted to read it symbolically and understand a memorial approach to the table. Thus we have Lutherans and Baptists (among others). There are a number of approaches which lead to a number of interpretations, and we can find ourselves paralyzed as we stand before the Holy Word. We can find ourselves holding the text and not knowing how to open, how to read and how to understand the complexities of this word. We hold a book that we claim to be central to our faith, and yet we may not know how to read it.

Movement 3 – "The Most Dangerous Book in the World"

We need to be careful. Be careful before you jump into the Word, because just as the Bible is a powerful and moving book, it is also a dangerous book. There is much in the Bible that should cause us to be uncomfortable. Henry L. Mencken once said, "The Old Testament, as everyone who has looked into it is aware, drips with blood; there is, indeed, no more bloody chronicle in all the literature of the world." Think about what is in the Old Testament. God kills the firstborn of all of the Egyptians. Elijah is mocked by children so God sends a bear to maul them. David not only kills Goliath but then cuts off his head. A king is killed by a stake going through his head and into the ground. And the examples go on and on. We can take these stories and claim that we are following a violent God who sanctions violence. Such stories can scare our children; we can warp the minds of our young people with the violent scenes in the Bible. It is a dangerous book.

Or think of those who have taken the Bible and have misused it. Elizabeth Cady Stanton reminds us that "the Bible and the Church have been the greatest stumbling blocks in the way of women's emancipation," and this still continues. Scripture is used not only to deny the ordination of women, but to keep them from even reading from the pulpit or teaching. Many women have endured domestic abuse because of a skewed interpretation of scripture refusing to admit that the husband may sometime be wrong. Scripture was used to justify the continuation of slavery into the mid 1800s, and still there are some who still make such an argument. Scripture has been used to justify the rule of tyrants and despots as God-appointed rulers. Scripture was used against the civil rights

movement. Scripture has been used to justify wars and murder; case in point – the crusades. The Bible is a dangerous book

Today we face the heresy of the prosperity Gospel. Self-proclaimed preachers are taking snippets of scripture, twisting and contorting them and claiming that God wants us to have money. If we have money we are blessed and if we don't have money then we are not in God's good graces. Such teachings have left droves of impoverished people giving their life savings to these charlatan preachers, assuming that God will bless them with riches, and then assuming that God has rejected them when the checks do not come in. The Bible is a dangerous book.

The theologian, Stanley Hauerwas suggests that churches not give people bibles and let them read it on their own. He suggests that we must train someone to read the scriptures in an appropriate way, and maybe he is right. Maybe we should keep the scriptures under lock and key. Maybe we should hold the Bible close to just those who have done the appropriate research, those who have been trained. After all, we don't want people taking the Good Book and using it as a weapon. We are ashamed when Christians use the Bible to justify bombing an abortion clinic. We are ashamed when Christians have used the Bible to justify genocide. We are ashamed with Christians have used the Bible to support evil as happened with churches and Hitler. The Bible is a dangerous, dangerous book, so we must approach it with caution and care. As George Benard Shaw said, "No man ever believes that the Bible means what it says: He is always convinced that it says what he means." We can easily take the text, twist the text and pull out our own contorted understanding how to be a Christian.

Churches have split over interpretations. Baptists have a history of being mired in controversy after controversy because of interpretations. An outsider would look at the pattern and practices of many churches claim that the Bible has done more to divide than to unify. It can be a dangerous book. So approach with caution. Approach with care as you approach this powerful book.

Movement 4 – Timothy's Advice

How can we approach the Bible in a way that honors the truth that it contains and avoids the dangers which have occurred in the past? How can we read the Bible? Look again at the text for today. Look at what Paul (presumably) is suggesting to Timothy. The scriptures will "...instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus." The whole purpose of scripture is to guide us to Christ. The focus of scripture is to lead us and inform us in our faith. This is important to remember. The stories of Moses, the stories of Jacob, of Isaac and Abraham, the stories of the prophets, the prayers of the Psalms all bring us to the culmination of faith in Jesus Christ. The letters of Paul point back to Christ. The challenges and concerns of Peter look back to Christ. The visions and illuminations of John focus on Christ. The scriptures lead to Christ and bring us to Christ. When we open the Bible, when we read the scripture, we are informed and instructed of our salvation through our faith in Christ.

We read of a God who called Abraham, who leads Jacob, and guides Joseph. We read of a God who does not reject the Israelites in Egypt. We read of a God who has devotion and love for the least of society, the orphans, the poor and the widows. We hear God's pathos and anguish for Israel in Jeremiah and Hosea's writings. We are reminded of God's great creating hands and of the gift of creation in the psalms. We are reminded

of God's saving presence in the psalms. We are reminded of God's glory in the psalms. This all leads to and informs our faith.

Yet the scriptures do not stop there. We are given a picture of who God is, and then we are introduced to Christ. The scriptures give us the picture, the person and the teachings of Jesus Christ. In the gospels we find the love of Christ portrayed. In the gospels we find the mercy of Christ shared. In the gospels we find the glory of Christ shining through. From his actions toward the children, toward the women and toward the ones that no one would go to we find the person of Christ. From his teachings, his parables, his sermons we find the glory of Christ. In the Gospels we find and are lead to Christ; informing our faith.

We read in Acts, we read in the epistles of the action of the Holy Spirit. We read of the Holy Spirit giving voice to a scared and anxious band of disciples. We read of the Holy Spirit leading the preaching of Peter and Paul. We read of the Holy Spirit giving gifts to the believers. We read of the Holy Spirit through whom we know because of Christ, and we are informed in our faith.

In the Bible we are not only introduced to Christ, but we are informed of our salvation, that Christ, the Son of God (who is loving, powerful and gracious) came and lived amongst us. He lived amongst us, loved us, taught us and showed us a new way to live. And then he gave himself up. He gave himself up to the hatred, to the anger, to the violence and the oppression of the world. He gave himself up to the sin, the sinful actions, and the sinful people of the world. He gave his life to the evil, the sin, the brokenness of the world and then three days later rose again. He rose again, beating evil, beating sin and making whole the brokenness of the world. We need to read the prophets, the Pentateuch the psalms to understand the fullness of our salvation which culminates in Christ. The Bible instructs us of our salvation, of our grace that we receive through faith in Christ.

This is not a book of answers for every question, but a book of faith. This is not a book of directions for every moment in life, but a book of direction of faith. We won't find how much butter to put on our corn, or which way to mow our grass, but instead direction for our faith. The Bible is inspired by God, breathed by God (as the Greek actually says) and guides us in our faith. We learn from it, we are corrected by it; we are trained for righteousness by it so that we can grow in our faith. This is the advice given to Timothy. This is the advice given to us when we consider how we can approach the Bible. It is a book, it is a sacred text that informs and instructs us for salvation through faith the Christ. It is a book of faith.

Movement 5 – The Story

When we read the Bible, we are entering into the story of the text. When we read the epistles, when we read the gospels, when we read the prophets instead of asking what this means, or asking what the purpose of the passage may be, ask yourself where you are in the text. McClendon describes this as a narrative approach to the Bible; it is looking not for the meaning, or what actually happened, but instead at where we are in the story. It reminds me of part of the Chronicles of Narnia. In a number of those books, four siblings find themselves pulled into a storybook world, and they find themselves living what many would describe as fantasy story. In a similar way we are pulled into the text. When Jesus asks Peter who people say that he is and Peter responds, "You are the

Christ,” where are we in that story? Are we some of the people who refuse to believe Jesus is who he says he is? Are we silent and waiting? Are we Peter, proclaiming Christ, and then a moment later denying the ministry of Christ (leading to the “Get behind me Satan”)? Where are we in the story?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer once criticized the Conforming Church of the Third Reich as forcing the scripture into the world. He said that instead we should bring the world into scripture. When we use scripture to justify our ends, when we use scripture to prove claims of science, of history, of medicine, we are forcing the text into the world. Yet when we take our questions of the world, our questions of science, history, medicine, family dynamics, forgiveness and anything else and bring them into the story of Scripture our eyes are opened. They may not be opened to the answers we may be looking for, but to an approach that is couched in grace and glory.

A friend of mine was accosted by a Seventh Day Adventist who was claiming that when we worship on Sunday we are not keeping the Sabbath, and thus breaking the Ten Commandments and we will all be going to hell. My friend tried to bring his concern of the Sabbath into the narrative of the gospels, into the story of Jesus and the disciples eating heads of wheat and the conflict with the Pharisees. The Seventh Day Adventist was taking just one point about scripture and bringing it into the world. He did not bring his idea of Sabbath into the narrative of the whole scripture.

Even the idea of the church, the Baptist idea of the church, is found in the narrative of scripture. McClendon points out that the church is realized and actualized in Peter’s speech in Acts when he claims, “this is that.” The church is that church which Peter proclaims, the church that preached in such a way that many people understood in their own languages. The church is the church that rejected God as the Israelites did and embraced God as they did later. The people of scripture are us. We are that church which is in scripture.

Read the scriptures looking at the greater story, the greater context. Ask where you find yourself in the story, and then let the story carry you to faith in Christ. Ask how the story shapes you and challenges you and look to be drawn toward faith in Christ. Enter into the story and become the story of the Word, the story of Christ.

Movement 6 – Baptist’s Bibles

Baptists stand on the word. It is the authoritative source of our faith. We have practiced this, we have lived this and we are continually pulled by this connection from scripture to faith. As Baptists it is important that we embrace the Bible, which we hold to. To take the Bible and follow the leading of the Bible in all that we do. It is who we are as Baptist. It is how we understand ourselves. Charles Haddon Spurgeon once said, “Some people like to read so many chapters every day. I would not dissuade them from the practice, but I would rather lay my soul asoak in half a dozen verses all day than rinse my hand in several chapters. Oh to be bathed in a text of Scripture, and to let it be sucked up in your very soul, till it saturates your heart!”

E.Y. Mullins describes the Bible as giving a sufficiency to one’s faith and religious purpose. He describes it as authoritative and inspirational. In the London Confession, in the New Hampshire confession we find and embrace of scripture as the ruler of knowledge, faith and obedience, as something divinely inspired.

Scripture is central to the Baptist identity. So let us embrace the Word. Let us continue to be people of the book, not allowing ourselves to be misled, or to misuse the text. Instead let us embrace the book and allow it to challenge, to change and to save us. It is in the Bible and the Bible alone that we find Christ. It is in the Word that we gain our faith. Let us embrace the Word, and live the Word as people of the story, people of the Book.

AMEN