The B-I-B-L-E Sermon Series
The Authority of the Bible
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Rev. Dr. Kory Wilcoxson

"You're going to Hell!" That's what a neighborhood kid told me once when I bragged to him that I got to watch an R-rated movie. I think it was "Animal House." I thought he would be impressed! Instead, he was horrified. I don't know if he really believed I was going to the Bad Place or just wanted to take that opportunity to say the word "Hell." I said, "How do you know?" He said, "The Bible says you can't watch R-rated movies!" I was too scared to question the historical accuracy of this accusation, but I later learned in seminary that the Bible has very little to say about watching R-rated movies. My friend said it like it was true, so I believed him. That's the thing about the Bible. People can quote it, invoke it, and use it to tell us what God thinks about just about anything. And they can sound awfully convincing while doing it. But how do we know when someone is using the Bible faithfully? How much authority should we give it in our lives?

To answer that question, we first have to answer for ourselves the purpose of the Bible. I say "for ourselves" because each of us may define the purpose of the Bible differently. For example, if you think the Bible is a book of rules for how to live your life, then you'll grant it a certain kind of authority. I don't the Bible was written to be a rule book. To be fair, there are plenty of rules in there. God gave the Israelites over 613 laws to help them know how to live Godly lives. But as culture changed and civilization developed, so did the understanding of those laws, especially for Christians. If we are going to read the Bible as a rule book, then we shouldn't eat shrimp, shouldn't wear clothes made of mixed fabric, and shouldn't touch the skin of a pig. Yikes! That means no more tailgating or polyester blend clothes, and apparently the road to Hell is littered with Red Lobsters.

The Bible is not as simply or clear-cut as some people think. Here's just one example. In the book of Proverbs, a collection of wise sayings, there are two proverbs side by side. Proverbs 26:4 says, "Do not answer fools according to their folly, or you will be a fool yourself." That's sound advice, right? The very next verse, Proverbs 26:5, says, "Answer fools according to their folly, or they will be wise in their own eyes." Wait a minute! Which is it? Don't answer fools or answer fools? I wish the Bible would make up its mind, because I've got some Facebook comments I need to respond to. Well, maybe the point is that wisdom requires knowing the right time for reach. Even the Bible's wisdom literature asks us to think about how we apply what we read.

The Bible isn't a rule book and doesn't provide step-by-step instructions. It's also not a spiritual Magic 8 Ball that gives us a definitive answer to every question. It's not an encyclopedia containing everything God has ever said. It's a collection of writings from different times, places, and people, telling the story of God's relationship with humanity. We have to be careful about putting expectations upon the Bible that it was never intended to bear. The passage I read from 2 Timothy said that all scripture is inspired by God, but a few weeks ago we also acknowledged the Bible was written by human and bears our smudgy fingerprints. When the authors wrote the Bible, they never thought what they were writing a book that would become the all-time bestseller in the history of the world, not to mention the centerpiece of grandmothers' coffee tables and the rationale for horrible genocides. They were simply writing their version of God's story. It's the story of God's relationship with humanity—a story of love,

struggle, failure, forgiveness, and redemption. And because it's a story that reveals who God is, it has tremendous authority in our lives. The question is how we understand that authority and how we apply it faithfully.

To answer that, we have to recognize that the Bible is God's word for us, but it's not ALL of God's word for us. Some folks treat the Bible like it contains the totality of everything God ever wanted to say to us, as if God finished the book of Revelation, put down the pen, and said, "Well, I think I've made myself perfectly clear." Which, if you've ever read Revelation, is a pretty funny thing to say. Do we really believe God has nothing left to say to us? The United Church of Christ used to have a slogan that said, "God is still speaking" with a comma at the end. But if God is still speaking, how do we recognize God's voice? How do we distinguish what God is saying from what we simply want God to say?

One helpful approach comes from the Methodist tradition. Their founder, John Wesley, came up with a way of theological discernment that involved four sources: scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. It's known as the Wesleyan Quadrilateral. All four are conversation partners in determining what God had to say and how we were to incorporate that authority into our lives. For Wesley, scripture was the primary source of authority, but not the only one.

How does this work? Well, you take an issue and you see what each of these four have to say about it, and then you do your best to be faithful to what God is saying to you through each of them. And sometimes, the Bible isn't the definitive word. For example, we Disciples take communion every week during worship. There's nothing in the Bible that says you should take communion weekly. Not a word. But our tradition as a denomination is to practice communion this way, so our tradition best informs our practice.

Here's another example: Paul clearly says in scripture that women should be silent in church and hold no authority over a man. It's right there in the Bible, so it must be true! But our reason tells us that women have been given gifts by the Holy Spirit to lead and to teach. Our experience tells us that women have held prominent leadership positions across culture. And our common sense tells us that if women didn't speak and lead in the church, nothing would get done! So on this issue, we have chosen to give priority to our reason and experience over what the Bible says.

I think this is a crucial point in order for the Bible to be a living, dynamic presence in our lives. I know a lot of people who've left the church and faith altogether because what they read in the Bible and what they've experienced in the world don't match up. The Bible can be read to say that anyone who doesn't believe in Jesus is going to Hell, and yet they've met non-Christians who are better Christians than some of the Christians they know! The Bible tells us to honor our father and mother, and yet an abusive parent makes that impossible. The Bible defines marriage or sin one way, but our experience or reason may conflict those definitions. So, when we factor in our experience, reason, and tradition, how do we determine what scriptures are authoritative?

Here's the truth when it comes to how we use the Bible in our lives. You can pick out a passage of scripture to support just about anything you want to believe, from handling snakes to stoning rebellious children to answering or not answering fools. But all of us…ALL of us…pick and choose. It's kind of like going through the buffet line. We load up on the verses about love and forgiveness and quietly walk past the ones about selling everything we own. We pick and choose what to believe on hundreds of issues presented in scripture, from tithing to divorce to keeping the Sabbath. We all pick and choose, and what we choose determines the type of authority we give the Bible.

With tens of thousands of passages to choose from, the task of determining what the Bible has to say for us can be paralyzing. So how do we decide what should be authoritative for us? I think what we do is we take the Bible, our tradition, our experience, and our reason, and we formulate a picture of who God is for us. Then we pick and choose passages that most closely match that image, and we make those passages authoritative. For example, if I experience God as a disciplinarian or judge, I'll pick passages that reinforce that picture. If I experience God as a friend of the outcast or the poor or the foreigner, I'll pick passages that support that over and against ones that don't.

And then – and this is key – we will read all the other passages through that lens. For example, my tradition and reason and experience tell me that God loves and welcomes everyone, so I choose not to give authority to passages that portray God as excluding people, and there are plenty of those in the Bible. While I believe that those passages contain some form of truth, they don't hold authority for me in how I understand God and live my life. Other people may choose to interpret those passages differently, which is completely legitimate. It's not a matter of absolute right and wrong or having a monopoly on the truth. It's a matter of what we choose to give authority, and we all pick and choose. It's not my job to tell you that you've misread scripture, and I don't want people doing that with me. We don't all have the same traditions, reason, or experience, so we will come to different conclusions about the Bible.

The important thing for us to do, as we continue to grow in our faith, is to keep listening for the ways God is speaking to us through all four parts of the quadrilateral. The words of the Bible aren't going to change, but the words God speaks to us may very well go beyond the words of scripture. So we have to let those words inform the words of the Bible, and we have to be OK with the fact that sometimes what God says to us through our reason or experience or tradition supersedes what God has said to us through the Bible. If we didn't do that, women would not be allowed to preach or teach and we'd all be poorer for it.

Using the authority of the Bible to end a debate, settle a question, or get the "right" answer is never how it was meant to be used. The Bible is our conversation companion, telling us the story of who God is and how God loves us, inviting us to ask our questions, voice our doubts, wrestle it, disagree with it. The Bible is meant to be an authority in our lives, but not the sole one, and not the ultimate one. The ultimate authority for us is God revealed to us through Jesus Christ, and I think it's safe to say that he ain't dead yet. He is still speaking to us every single day, through our experiences, through our reasoning, through tradition, and through the Bible. Our job isn't to stop asking questions or to pretend we have all the answers. Our job is to keep listening, keep discerning, and keep allowing God to shape us into the people Jesus calls us to be.