

First Presbyterian Church of Santa Fe

Adult Education Class on July 11, 2021

Presenter: Allen Gullledge

For the next 3 weeks, I wanted to lead us into some areas of tough questions that revolve around the Bible, its relevance in the 21st Century and how spiritual people, Christian people, can make the Bible “work” for them in an age when we are bombarded by facts or at least information that seems to have replaced much of the Bible as any kind of authoritative part of our lives.

According to a recent Gallup poll,

Americans’ membership in houses of worship continued to decline last year, dropping below 50% for the first time in Gallup’s eight-decade trend. In 2020, 47% of Americans said they belonged to a church, synagogue or mosque, down from 50% in 2018 and 70% in 1999.... The decline in church membership is primarily a function of the increasing number of Americans who express no religious preference. Over the past two decades, the percentage of Americans who do not identify with any religion has grown from 8% in 1998-2000 to 13% in 2008-2010 and 21% over the past three years.... Church membership is strongly correlated with 58% of baby boomers, 50% of those in Generation X and 36% of millennials.

<https://news.gallup.com/poll/341963/church-membership-falls-below-majority-first-time.aspx>)

Some have opined that the reason for much of this is that the Reformation led by Martin Luther which was responsible for the foundations of our Protestant faith is quite honestly running out of gas. A major movement born 500 years ago whose lynchpin of its authority was “sola Scriptura, Scriptura solo” (only Scripture, Scripture only) which replaced as it were the authority of the Roman Catholic Church and the Pope which had been the legal, sacramental, Biblical interpretation source of faith of the preceding 500 years.

So much of what Martin Luther put into place has been uprooted by our overpowering understanding of the world by science, technology, cultural claims that have upended scriptures’ authority in our lives and out of the church. The authority of “sola Scriptura” is fighting an uphill struggle in trying to defend everything from our origins, our ancient history, our societal ethics, our churches’ relevance in deciding the agenda of our everyday lives.

Join that together with the United States’ origins built around what many founders declared, and many groups around the country still believe, that America is a Christian country. So, what happens when half of the population chooses not to be a part of the “organized” church, who declare they are much more spiritual than religious? At the same time, many Americans equate Protestant Christianity with the American Flag and Patriotism as though the two are the same, or at least you can’t have one without the other.

This fissure in the foundations of the American-Christian pairing has led us to the absurdly-funny-if-it-wasn't-so-sad reality today that a group of American Roman Catholic clergy are actively seeking to ban the President of these United States from taking communion in a Catholic church because of his unwillingness to oppose abortion and actively join the political pro-life movement.

At the same time, many of the church-attending folks in our land fervently believe God wants us led by a man with no active involvement in any form of Christianity, who doesn't relate to any part of Christianity, and whose flaunting of any perceivable ethical code that parallels Christian thinking and theology is deemed acceptable as long as he wears a flag pendant on his suit coat.

The Reformation running out of gas may be a kind way of describing it.

So, I want to return to the battle cry of the Reformation that, going forward, scripture would replace the church, with the Catholic church as its final authority. Estimations show there are more than 200 Christian Protestant denominations in the U.S. alone and a staggering 45,000 globally, according to the Center for the Study of Global Christianity in February of this year.

There is that much disagreement about what the Bible teaches within the organized Christian communities. HOW DO WE THEN LIVE?

Some of the reasons for this critical change in perception of the authority of Scripture stems from the realities that: fewer and fewer Christian groups and individuals believe the Earth is only several thousand years old, that it was created in 6 days, and that Adam and Eve's behavior in the Garden of Eden has put all of us in jeopardy of Hell without a major change in the attitude of our hearts followed by a similar abrupt change in our lifestyle and molding our lives around obedience of God's laws. If Christians struggle with the concepts, what are non-churched, non-Christian people to think?

How many of us believe Jesus was physically born of a virgin teenager (and how does that happen)? How many Christians believe that Jesus was fully man and fully God (not more of one or less than the other)? That Jesus' teachings are more authoritative than any of the scripture that preceded him, that His way is the only way to understand Scripture, that He is returning to Earth for a day of judgment, reckoning, and a final victory for those who have stayed true to His teachings? How many believe in a literal Heaven (up there) and a Hell (down there) that are more permanent places of residence than anything we can experience on Earth? Enough, they say, enough... though there is much, much more.

So, if the authority of the Bible is a relative belief—some things “yes”, some things “no”—how can it be authoritative? If 200 organized Christian organizations in this country—all speaking English and all reading the Bible in English—can't agree on a common set of Church laws and worship—much less ethical conduct—how in the world can we attract non-church people into our organizations and houses of worship?

One of the main stumbling blocks, I would say, for all within and without the church is how accurate is our Bible, and how can we trust the many different translations that continue to pop up year after year? Translation by definition means that the word being translated becomes a word that is close to more than an exact replication of the original Greek or Hebrew meaning.

Christians call the Hebrew word for God, Y-H-W-H, Yahweh, adding an “a” and an “e” because the four consonants Y-H-W-H are unpronounceable in our language. Most understand if I say Yahweh, I mean God. Some Jewish Rabbis and teachers will tell you that was exactly the point of all consonants, that there is no adequate word to describe God, that He is beyond words, and that YHWH mimics that by forcing us into a worshipful stance of the breathing of inhalation when we are born and exhalation when we die: YH-WH. It’s the worshipful way of talking about the Deity instead of the reliance on words, which stand for comprehension and understanding of God, like we really do understand and comprehend the First Cause, the Creator, the Eternal One.

First of all, many are in agreement that the Bible is an ancient document that can never stop being an ancient document. God, it seems, was comfortable having those who wrote the many varied texts that make up the Holy Scriptures be people of their time and culture. In other words, all of them saw the world and its reality through the lens of their ancient, non-scientific, non-technological point of view. They all had cultural consciousness and cultural biases that God was apparently okay with. If you are concerned about the effect of the Internet on all of our lives, you will have a difficult time finding help from Scripture; none of the Biblical authors had any clue about it or its effect on the world.

More on Interpretation deserves some renewed thought.

THE BIBLE WITH AND WITHOUT JESUS

The answers we receive, the interpretations we develop, are all dependent on the questions we ask, the experiences we bring, and the preferences we have.

Its title is not “The Bible With **OR** Without Jesus”; it is “The Bible with **AND** Without Jesus.” This title offers three subjects that we care about equally: Bible, with Jesus, and without Jesus. The authors do not claim that there is only one way of reading Genesis or any other text in what is called variously the Hebrew Bible, the Tanakh, and the Old Testament, is correct. The questions we bring to the text will yield multiple answers, sometimes mutually exclusive, sometimes complementary, and even mutually enhancing. We ask, “What did this text mean in its original context: the time that the author of Genesis wrote the tale?” And we ask, “What does Genesis 18 mean in a Christian context, with Jesus?” Genesis 18 is where Abraham is visited by three men while God is present with them; they say Sarah – who is very old, long post-menopausal – will have a child in the next year. Sarah in effect rolls her eyes, laughs, and God speaks up and asks “why is Sarah laughing; does she think anything is beyond the power of God?” (Who are the three?) Later in that chapter while God is telling Abraham about destroying Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham argues with Him and gets many concessions from the Lord.

The interpretation of these texts by the communities that hold them sacred is the mission of the book: to examine ten well-known passages or themes from Israel's scriptures that are important to the New Testament. Each of our central chapters asks three questions: What did the text mean in its original context in ancient Israel? How do the New Testament authors interpret that text? And how do post-Biblical Jews from the time of Jesus (e.g., the Dead Sea Scrolls, the first-century historian Josephus, and the first-century philosopher Philo) through the rabbinic and medieval Jewish tradition, and later Christian traditions, understand those same texts? How have the different meanings changed?

We also seek to demonstrate how translation matters: how reading the original Hebrew, the pre-Christian Greek translation (the Septuagint), and different English versions creates substantially different impressions. **Translators, sometimes deliberately and often unconsciously, choose readings that fit the needs of their own religious communities.** For example, in examining the Bible's very first story, they explain how Genesis 1:2 can be seen as speaking of both "a mighty wind" and the "Spirit of God" hovering over the deep. We see how Isaiah 7 could be speaking of a pregnant young woman, a soon-to-be-pregnant (by usual means) young woman, or a virgin who is also pregnant.

THE BIBLE, in the singular, does not exist; different communities have different Bibles. We don't mean that they prefer different translations, but that they have Bibles comprised of different books, in different orders, in different languages. The biggest difference is between the Jewish and Christian communities, for only Christians have a New Testament. In fact, only Christians have an "Old Testament," which itself differs among the various Christian communions.

Christians read their Old Testament through the lens of the New Testament, and Jews read the Tanakh through the lens of post-Biblical Jewish commentaries. And we are just talking about two groups, traditional Christians and Jews; there are others.

These differences raise major interpretive questions. For example, who is the Bible's main character? What is its main point? Is it God? Is it Jesus? Does it lack a main character? What is its main point, or is there one? Does the "original" meaning of a passage, apart from Christian or later Jewish interpretation, still have anything to say to us?

When read through Christian lenses, what the church calls the "Old Testament" points to Jesus. When read through Jewish lenses, what the synagogue calls the "Tanakh", speaks to Jewish experience without Jesus. When read through the eyes of historians, these original texts yield meanings often lost to both church and synagogue.

To quickly add on one more point: Other things were going on at the time of the Reformation. We were heading into the age of the Enlightenment and the invention of the printing press, which led the pages of Scripture—the teachings of learned Spiritual Authorities—to become accessible to the masses. All of this led to a major emphasis on logic, empirical truth, thinking, wisdom... all wrapped into a word: "education," that penetrated all areas of life both within and outside of the church. To learn, to know, became more important than mere belief.

From the perspective of hindsight, many Spiritual groups today—especially Mystics, Monks, saints—are throwing around phrases like Mysticism, Meditation, Contemplation as being equally important to the mature, Christian experience as book learning. Hindsight might show us that in our effort to define Christian maturity as a level of “understanding,” we inadvertently left out the influence of the Holy Spirit: the third leg of the Trinitarian chair that is the foundation of all Christian theology. We don’t baptize our people in the name of God; we don’t baptize our people in the name of Jesus; we don’t baptize in the name of God and Jesus. We baptize in the name of the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit equally.

The Roman Catholic, Anglican, Eastern Orthodox, and Assyrian Churches include books written by Jews before New Testament times but preserved in Greek, such as Sirach or Judith, as part of their Old Testament. These books are typically called the “Apocrypha” by Protestants or, for those communions that hold them as having the status of scripture, “deuterocanonical” or part of the “second canon.”

Part two of the Christian Bible is “The New Testament.” The word “testament” is a synonym for “covenant,” and the term “New Testament” used for the second part of the Christian canon is first attested to by the North African church father Tertullian (ca. 155–ca. 240). The expression refers to Jeremiah 31:31: “The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah.”

For example, Matthew 12:40 states, “For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so for three days and three nights the Son of Man will be in the heart of the Earth.” Jonah the prophet (another book, like Daniel, ascribed to an ancient worthy) was not, several centuries earlier, thinking about Jesus’ burial.

Next week, I would like to spend our time looking back at the “Origins” questions that make up the first part of the Christian Bible, Genesis, authored—we are told—by a man who lived thousands of years after the fact, Moses; what did he rely on in putting together, what in effect led him to answer the basic question of all life: how did we get here and, for Believers, why did God do it the way he did? We will also look at how the Origins stories, interpreted by different generations, have grappled with and taught the oldest bugaboos of all, Original Sin.