

OPENING



THE

*What It Is, Where It Came From,
What It Means for You*

BIBLE

ROBERT KYSAR

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Introduction

What's Become of the Bible?

MARIANNE IS A DEVOUT CHRISTIAN who takes her discipleship seriously. She always attends every Bible study offered in her congregation and practices a daily discipline of reading her Bible. Above all, Marianne is honest. She adamantly insists that she understand Christian life and faith to the best of her ability so that she can practice them well.

A few weeks after her congregation called its first female assistant pastor, Marianne came to see the senior pastor. She expressed how excited she was about having a woman clergy on the staff. But then she confessed that she did not know how to reconcile the ordination of women with some biblical passages. She had done her homework and mentioned a number of specific passages that seemed to deny women a place of leadership in the church. "Look at 1 Corinthians 14:34. Paul says, 'Woman should be silent in the churches'! How can we allow Pastor Smith to preach?"

Her senior pastor was impressed by Marianne's honesty and by her desire to understand the practices of her denomination. After a long and open conversation, he suggested that Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 14:34 needed to be understood in the context of the apostle's historical setting. Then he asked Marianne to read 11:4-5 in the same letter. "Any man who prays or prophesies with something on his head disgraces his head, but any woman who prays or prophesies with her head unveiled disgraces her head . . ." In the process of urging the Corinthians to continue the practice of women keeping their heads covered in worship, Paul clearly acknowledges that women prophesy. In the New Testament, the word *prophesy* means, essentially, what we mean today by the word *preaching*. Moreover, the pastor suggested that 1 Corinthians 11:11-12 assumes the mutual dependence of men and women on one another: "Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man or man independent of woman. For just as

woman came from man, so man comes through woman; but all things come from God.” He then invited Marianne to look at Galatians 3:28. “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”

Marianne made careful notes of each of these passages. But then she looked her pastor in the eye and asked, “Why, then, don’t we require women to cover their heads during worship?” And the conversation continued.

What’s become of the Bible? To practice its teachings faithfully seems to have become so complicated! There are the writers’ historical settings to consider. The relationship of one passage to another must be taken into account. One cannot deny that the Bible sometimes seems to contradict itself. It has been suggested that some things in the Bible are “outdated.” How is the ordinary Christian to know and understand all of this? Must we leave the reading and interpretation of the Bible to the experts? If so, why then should the layperson even bother to try to understand the Bible?

Of course, Marianne’s question about Paul’s teaching concerning women is only one example. There are currently many issues about which sincere Christians disagree and do so on the basis of their reading of Scripture. For decades devout Christians believed that the Bible taught racial segregation. Now there are some who base their stands on abortion, homosexuality, suicide, and many other issues on biblical readings and teachings. Christians seem to agree that the Bible is their guidebook. But with the same guidebook, why do we disagree so much on what it teaches? Is the Bible so obscure in its meaning that you can justify any view on the basis of some portion of Scripture? Some have suggested just that. Is it no longer possible to identify a common biblical basis for life in our world?

These questions invite us to open the Bible and think further about it and its place in the church in the twenty-first century. They lead us to two fundamental questions: What is the authority of the Bible today? How should we read it in the light of its authority? There are no easy answers to this pair of questions. Nor is there a clear path toward some greater consensus among

Christians on the Bible's meaning. But we can, at least, identify these and other questions and discover ways of thinking more clearly about them.

That is the goal of this book. It will not give you a "quick fix" for the problems of reading the Bible and applying its teachings to your life. But it may guide readers through rethinking some of the questions that haunt us today and toward reading the Bible with greater meaning. The chapters of this book address questions that plague many of us who read and study the Bible today.

In each of these chapters, I will try to analyze what is involved in the question before us and supply some information involved in a thoughtful response to it. Sometimes the discussion will describe alternative ways of answering a question. I will not pretend to hide my own views on some matters. But I really want *you* to come to your own conclusions and take responsibility for your own view of the Bible and its interpretation. My role in this process is to clarify the questions and suggest directions for your reflections on them.

You should have your Bible at hand as you read this book. I will refer to many biblical passages as examples of what I mean and, sometimes, as evidence for what I am saying. If you read these passages along with the pages of this book, what I am saying probably will make a good deal more sense to you. Unless otherwise indicated, biblical quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version.

This book is based on the belief that the Bible continues to offer us faith and hope for Christian life in a troubled and changing world. The struggle with what the Bible is and how it might be helpfully read is necessary because I believe, with you, that the Bible is the church's foundation. I invite you to join me in the effort to get down to and understand our foundation.

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Chapter One

How Do I Know What Is True?

EVERY DAY, NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL news reports seem to pose social, moral, ethical, and spiritual questions for us. Abortion, doctor-assisted suicide, affirmative action programs, immigration laws, sexual morality, family values—the list goes on and on. How do we decide what is right and good in these cases? There are so many differing opinions. How do we know what is true? How do we distinguish truth from falsity?

Imagine that we are investigating a house we hope to purchase. We would, of course, want to examine the foundation of the structure. But, if we were wise enough, we would be curious about what are called the footings of the foundation. They have to do with the depth of the foundation into the earth.

Think of this first chapter as an investigation of the footings of the foundation for an understanding of the Bible. We say that, in some way or another, the Bible informs us of what is true about our lives. But that raises the question of how we know what is true. What sources of truth are there for us?

What Helps Us in the Quest for Truth?

We learn truth in a number of ways. For instance, suppose we want to know if it is true that *Spitfire Grille* is a good motion picture. We have a number of options. We can talk to our friends who have seen the picture. We can read the critics' reviews. And, of course, we can go to see the picture for ourselves. Humans have a variety of resources for determining what is true, especially in religious matters.

Experience

The most common way by which we learn truth is through our own immediate experience. Viewing a motion picture for ourselves provides us a direct way of deciding whether or not it is a

good movie. Experience in this sense has to do with what happens to us when we encounter something. It involves our response to another reality of some sort. Seeing the Grand Canyon for ourselves evokes a response from us that either confirms or denies the claim that it is a magnificent and beautiful site.

Religious people have often discovered truth through personal experience. Luther claimed that he came to the insight of a gracious and merciful God through his experience of studying the Bible. Many of the leaders of the church speak of intimate experiences of God's presence. Jesus and Paul both seem to have had direct and personal experiences that led them to truth. Jesus' transfiguration experience in Mark 9:2-8 confirms his identity as God's son. Acts reports Paul's encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1-9)—an experience in which Paul discovers the truth of the Christian faith.

We might say that personal experience is the "common sense" way of learning what is true. On a daily basis through our own experience, we learn whether or not using such and such a shampoo really makes a difference. For some Christians experience figures prominently as a source for truth.

Most often, emotional experiences have helped some to be confident of their faith. Many speak of feeling the presence of God at certain moments in their lives. Others have unique experiences of the activity of the Holy Spirit. But sometimes, too, experience is understood in others ways. Believers have a sense of the truth of their faith that they may speak of as "instinctive." Have you, for instance, ever said, "I just *feel* it's true"? It is the sort of experience that confirms the reality of faith born within the human spirit. Others speak of those moments when they perceived God, Christ, or the Spirit in their relationships with others.

As important as experience is in discovering truth, it is not always so convincing. We read and hear about people having all kinds of personal religious experiences. Some of the reports make us doubt that experience really taught these people truth. For instance, we are rightly suspicious of those who claim to "hear" the voice of God telling them to kill another person. (The story of Abraham's near sacrifice of his son, Isaac, in Genesis

22:1-14 meant, among other things, that God did not desire human sacrifice.)

As a source of religious knowledge, personal experience is suspect for good reasons. Our own personalities shape what we experience. How we have been nurtured and molded in life becomes a kind of internalized filter through which we process stimuli. If I was taught by my parents (both in word and in behavior) that other people are not to be trusted, it is probable that I will tend to experience suspicion about things others tell me. On this level, how I experience life is a reflection of my background.

But personal experience is not always reliable, because it can be too individualistic, too subjective. Each individual has particular experiences. As a society, we challenge some claims to individual experience. We do so in part because we believe the shared experience of a community is more reliable than any individual interpretation of an event. Certainly, there are times when an individual rises up against the community to challenge it, and it is right to do so. Martin Luther King Jr. was a clear example of an individual challenging accepted community beliefs and practices. But in such cases, a community may still form around the prophetic figure—a community that confirms the individual's experience as its own.

Personal experience, furthermore, may not always be reliable because it usually depends on particular moods, conditions, and attitudes at the moment. When we are terribly depressed, we are more likely to experience the whole world in a negative way than when we are in a good mood. Without careful examination and other tests for truth, it is risky to base our lives only on some religious idea that we have personally experienced.

At the same time, personal experience, in large part, is also determined by our culture. Our Orthodox Jewish brothers and sisters, for instance, are puzzled by the notion some people hold that keeping their religious laws is a burden. They experience those regulations not as chores, but as a delight. Our cultural differences are liable to produce very different perceptions. An individual's culture influences what she or he experiences.

Surely, experience plays a vital role in learning religious truth. But any experience needs to be examined. Does the experience

introduce me to truth beyond my personality, mood, and culture? As a source of truth, it needs to be supported by other avenues of learning.

Culture

Experience is influenced by culture and so is most of what we claim to know. For the most part, each of us is a product of a particular culture. By culture I mean that larger community of which we are a part. We in the United States are members of the wider North American culture. But within that broader community, each of us participates in smaller groupings—American Indian, African American, European American, Asian American, and so on. Each community shares certain values and perspectives.

A culture is built around certain principles that it claims are true. So, for instance, individual freedom has been a basic principle in the United States and its culture. That principle contains several claims to truth: Humans are capable of being free. It is better to be free than to be subject to dominance by others. All humans are entitled to freedom.

Conscience is a good example of the way we absorb the values embraced by our culture and call them our own. That vague sense of “feeling” that this or that is right or wrong usually reflects the particular cultural setting in which we were raised. What we seem to claim to know, almost instinctively, is pretty much the result of cultural influences on us. As a means of learning truth, conscience must be examined and criticized in the light of our culture and its influence on us.

If culture so strongly determines what we know, we have to ask whether our particular culture is based on and teaches truth. We especially have to ask if the cultural values we embrace are universally true, that is, if they are true for everyone everywhere at all times. There are a good number of clues that the culture of the United States does not have a monopoly on the truth.

One of those clues is the simple fact that cultures change and along with them values change. In the last several decades we have witnessed the decline of many of the values that were once a part of the culture of our nation. Cultural values are not stable. They are constantly changing with nearly every generation.

Compare your life with that of your grandparents. The values that are commonly taught today are, for better or for worse, very different from those of our ancestors. I shudder to think how my mother would respond to an evening of television viewing. She would be shocked by television's lighthearted and open treatment of sexuality and its frequent portrayal of violence.

Cultural values are liable to change. Older values die, and new ones are born. And without permanence cultural values can hardly be claimed as truth for other times and other societies. They offer little in the way of access to truth. A set of values is important for any culture. But they are at best temporary expressions of what is worthwhile and meaningful.

Trying to free ourselves of the views culture has implanted in us is a lot like trying to free ourselves of our skin. The implantation of cultural views is deep within us. They become an integral part of who we are. So, how do we manage to peek beyond our culture in our search for truth? We probably have to say that we never do—at least not entirely.

Still, a number of things enable us to at least imagine truth—and maybe sometimes even to learn truth—beyond cultural definitions. Humans have some capacity to stand up taller than their culture. Those who insightfully critique culture demonstrate that people can rise above their culture to view it critically. Remember, too, those groups of people who, in various cultures, were able to imagine possibilities for themselves beyond their culture. The French Revolution is one example where people did so. The pilgrims' search for freedom to practice their religion in a new land is another example.

But today, we are privileged to have certain means of peering beyond our culture. Thanks to modern communication and travel, we have extraordinary exposure to other cultures. Our own nation is also becoming increasingly multi-cultural. We may live closely with people of cultural backgrounds different from ours. Every day, television and other news media take us inside other cultures. We travel to other parts of the world. As a result, we can easily compare our ways of life with other ways of life. This helps us see the strengths and weaknesses of the society and culture in which we have been raised. It gives us perspective.

Another advantage we have in testing the truthfulness of our cultural values is available. Thanks to the new awareness of ethnic and racial heritage, we are aware that there is no single U.S. culture. Our nation is comprised of people of a variety of backgrounds, not all of which are European or of European descent. Each group has its own cultural practices and virtues. So, on a daily basis we witness the values embraced by sisters and brothers of many cultural backgrounds.

Cultural values are not necessarily truthful in and of themselves. But by evaluating the things we have been taught to treasure as true, we can glimpse the possibility of knowing the truth. Cultural values need to be criticized, assessed, and tested if they are to provide us knowledge of what is true. Needless to say, much that is part of our understanding of religious truth is blended in with the values of our culture. That makes the assessment of cultural values all the more important, but equally all the more difficult. Confusion of religious truth and what a culture claims to be true is dangerous. For instance, are some of our most common understandings of Christian morals really not so much Christian as they are North American? Views of human sexuality in other cultures may be a good example of how Christians interpret morality from a cultural context.

Reason

We need to be critical of the potential of both experience and culture to bring us truth. That critical thought is itself part of another classic source of discerning truth: human reason. Reason involves the capacity to think clearly and to see connections between ideas. It entails rational thought that seeks to understand causes and consequences. Reason employs logic, that is, the ability to see that two truthful statements may mean that a third statement is also true. Most significant about reason is that it draws upon the human capacity to go outside of oneself and view something at a distance and without self-interest, with a degree of objectivity.

In Western cultures, reason has enjoyed a place of prominence, not least of all in science. Scientific method is based on setting out a hypothesis, acquiring evidence (for example, laboratory

experiments), and reaching certain conclusions about the hypothesis based on the evidence. But reason has also played a significant role in religion. Both Jesus and Paul employed reason in their teachings. For instance, Jesus argued that, if one was permitted to work on the Sabbath in order to save an animal, then healing a human on the Sabbath did not violate the commandment that it be a day of rest (Matthew 12:9-14). It is a matter of simple logic.

In the history of Christian thought in later centuries, reason was sometimes believed to be the primary source of knowledge. Anselm, a great eleventh-century theologian of the church, spoke of “faith seeking understanding.” Reason was the means by which he sought to think through faith in order to come to some clearer intellectual comprehension. With reason, Anselm proposed an argument for the existence of God based on the simple fact that other things existed.

Reason is still a common way of learning religious truth. An example is the argument that the beauty of nature proves there is a God. Or, if one believes that God loves humanity, we cannot then logically claim that God brings disasters and causes human tragedies. Most of us try at least to think logically about our faith. Of course, to do so sometimes brings us up against serious contradictions in our faith. If God determines the course of our lives (what is sometimes called “providence”), what then of our freedom? What is the logical relationship between God’s providential care for us and our own decisions?

Most of us recognize that reason is important in our Christian faith and life. We want things to hold together logically around a center. So, we seek an understanding of our faith that is a rational and reasonable whole.

But we may also be acutely aware that faith cannot be supported entirely by rational thought. We recognize that reason has its limits. Some things may be true without being entirely rational. Christ’s resurrection from the dead defies normal human reason. But we believe it to be true. Reason also resists the acceptance of what we call “paradox.” Paradox is the belief that a truth may be composed of two equally true statements that contradict one another. For instance, we say that it is true that Christians

are, at the same time, both saints and sinners. Reason, then, has limits in terms of what it can teach us about truth.

Reason also is limited by the fact that, like the whole of our lives, it is influenced by culture. For the most part, the reasoning many people use is a product of Western European culture. Talk with an elder in an American Indian community, and you may encounter a different kind of human reasoning. But we must also admit that reason is tainted with human sin. Adolf Hitler reasoned with a kind of logic that led him to the conclusion that the Aryans comprised the master race. Consequently, in Hitler's view, Jews and others had to be eliminated.

With all of its limitations, we need reason to help us analyze and understand our experience and our culture. We also need it to seek understanding of our faith, even when our faith need not be entirely reasonable and logical.

Tradition

What is held to be true always stands on the shoulders of the past. Seldom, if ever, do we learn a new truth without the aid of what was learned by our ancestors. That is particularly the case with Christian truth. The earliest Christians were very much aware of their Jewish heritage. We still acknowledge that indebtedness by the presence of the Old Testament in our Bible. Furthermore, what most of us regard as the truths of Christian life and faith are rooted in the church's history. We recognize those roots by using the church's ancient creeds in our worship (for example, the "Apostles' Creed"). We might even go so far as to say Christians simply accept as truth what the church has passed on to us.

But the matter is more complicated than that. Those in the past who discerned and spoke Christian truth were also products of their cultures. Just as we are shaped and molded by our culture, so too were they. What they understood to be true, they saw through the eyes of their time and place. Moreover, when they expressed their insights, they had to do so within the language of their culture and with the ways of thinking it provided.

An example of this is a view of the meaning of Christ's death that arose in the Middle Ages. In that culture, the lords owned the land and livestock. Serfs worked the land and cared for the

livestock in return for a subsistence living. If the serfs offended their lord in some way, by accidentally killing a sheep, say, they had to provide him “satisfaction” (for instance, by giving him another sheep). They had to give the lord something that *satisfied* his sense of loss or injury. In that cultural setting and on the basis of some biblical evidence, Christians thought of sin as offending God. Christ’s death was then conceived as a “satisfaction” offered to God to make up for the offense of sin. Hence, the truth of the meaning of Christ’s death was conceived and expressed in terms of the culture of the time.

We do the same thing today when trying to understand God and Christ. We may think of what Christ has done for us in terms of human relationships. Such relationships are a common theme in our society. We know that in associations with others we sometimes do something that strains the relationship. We might grasp the meaning of Christ in terms of how, in Christ, God offered us divine forgiveness for the sin that has strained or broken our relationship with our Creator. Like our medieval Christian sisters and brothers before us, we use our own cultural setting to understand and express the truth of our faith.

Consequently, Christian tradition is very valuable to us, but we cannot simply repeat it. Rather, the truth we inherit from the past must be rethought and put into new language. Church tradition passes on to us a body of truth that is in another language and springs from other ways of thinking than our own. So the greatest honor we can pay those who have preceded us in the faith is to take their gift and translate it into our own way of speaking. Much the same is true of biblical truth as we will see in future chapters.

But there is another sense in which church tradition, as important as it is, does not suffice. New issues in our contemporary world also require that we do more than simply repeat the truths of the Christian tradition. For instance, the church’s views of war in the past are valuable. But the possibilities of nuclear war present us with entirely new issues. In past centuries the church has spoken of “just war”: warfare necessary to halt the spread of evil in the world. The two world wars of the twentieth century were cases of what many Christians regarded as wars to preserve

justice. But with the likelihood of nuclear disaster, what would constitute a “just war”?

Other issues are just as challenging. The technology of life-support systems forces us to ask questions about the quality of life and not merely value existence at any level of quality. Such technology has resulted in a rethinking of medical ethics. When is a person actually dead? How long should we provide life support to a person?

We need tradition to learn truth. We probe the mysteries of the unknown with the tools our heritage provides us. But tradition alone does not assure us of discovering what is true for us. It only guides us. But out of tradition comes the source of truth about which we are most concerned in this book—the Bible.

The Bible

The Bible is an authority for truth established by the church and passed on to us through tradition. That is to say, the church declared the Bible to be its authority for matters of salvation. It elevated the collection of writings we call the Bible to the status of the basic source of Christian truth. It made that collection of writings its “canon,” meaning the standard by which it would judge the relative truth of any religious statement or way of life. The process of canonization took place over a period of time. For the most part, all the church councils and officials did was to acknowledge that congregations were already using these writings as a measuring rod for determining truth and falsehood. In fact, the church created the Bible. There were congregations of Christians before there was a canon of truth by which they lived.

To claim the Bible as authority for Christian faith, therefore, is to accept the ancient church’s decision that certain writings provide Christians a source for the most important of life’s truths. If we affirm the Bible’s authority, we also confess our faith that God led the early church to declare these documents its canon.

One of the first and most important things about biblical authority, then, is that faith in Scripture is a second step of faith. To believe this collection of writings is in some way God’s saving message for humanity is derived from a faith in God, in God’s work in the church. This doesn’t lessen the value of Scripture as