

How to Read the Bible for All It's Worth

DAVE BAST

Christians agree that the Bible is by far the most important book for our faith; in fact, that is what the word means. Bible comes from the Greek word for book. As far as Christians are concerned, it is *the* Book; but we don't always agree on what the Bible teaches or how to interpret it. So, if you have some questions about how to read and understand the Bible, stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast, and today we are beginning a special series of four programs entitled: How to read the Bible. I am very excited about welcoming two guests for this whole series of programs. Dr. Tim Brown is president and professor of preaching at Western Theological Seminary in Holland, Michigan. Welcome, Tim.

TIM BROWN

Thank you, David. I am honored to be here.

DAVE BAST

And joining us as well from Western Seminary, from the faculty, is Professor J. Todd Billings, who is a professor of Reformed Theology and the author of a recent book on how to read the Bible, really. It is called *The Word of God for the People of God*. Todd, welcome.

TODD BILLINGS

Thank you, Dave. It is good to be here.

DAVE BAST

And I am also happy to say they are both friends, so this should be an interesting series of conversations that we are going to have; and I want to begin today by talking about this claim that the Bible is – and the language we often use in the Church – in our church at least – is our only rule of faith and practice. Todd, let me start with you. How do you reflect on that, or react to that phrase?

TODD BILLINGS

Well, when we speak about the Bible as our only rule, a rule is something that we practice, something that we use. It is a pattern that we follow and go to; and as disciples of Christ, the Bible is the rule that we come to because it is where God presents himself to us. In fact, it is where the living Christ speaks to us by the Spirit as his disciples...

DAVE BAST

So, maybe... You are not suggesting it is a list of rules; that that might be going down the wrong path with that word, but think of it more as a ruler, like a marker that we lay beside something to tell if it is straight or not, something like that?

TODD BILLINGS

It does give us a sense of where the center is, kind of like a rule of thumb in that sense, but it is also a rule in the sense that we let ourselves be guided by scripture as disciples of Christ.

DAVE BAST

And we talk about faith and practice, Tim; meaning what we believe, what we do, how we live.

TIM BROWN

Exactly that; and I think that the word *practice* is pretty interesting in that the scriptures themselves set up practices – actions – that a Christian would do, so you not only think about the Bible, you actually act out the Bible.

DAVE BAST

So, another way of getting at this, I guess, is to bring up the word *authority* – another important word in the Christian toolbox for describing scripture: The authority of scripture.

TODD BILLINGS

Yes, I think sometimes we have a negative view of the idea of authority. We think of authoritarian or something like that; but the authority of scripture is a life-giving authority in the sense that this is the source that we go for nourishment as disciples of Christ; even when the Bible tells us what we don't want to hear; even those words from the Bible are ultimately life giving for us as we seek to die to our old self and live to our new self in Christ by the Spirit.

TIM BROWN

Sure; think of it in terms of parental authority. A parent has authority over their children, and that actually helps them to live more fruitfully and safely.

DAVE BAST

But how does a book possess that kind of authority? I can see a living, breathing example of a parent who loves their child and is bound together with them in a household, especially a book that is a lot of stories, you know. In what sense does that work, that a book has authority?

TIM BROWN

I want to respond right away in saying that what Christians have believed for the longest time and in the most places is that the Bible actually *is* living and breathing; and it offers life. It is not simply sitting passively on your desk; it is interacting with you.

DAVE BAST

You know, that is really interesting because we asked a question on our website. We always encourage people who listen to *Groundwork* to interact with us and let us know what they are thinking; and one of the comments addressed just that point, Tim, that you said. Listen to this: It is alive – the Bible is alive. The only living book. It speaks to us where we are no matter who we are and what is going on in our lives. It knows us. It is uniquely active. Other books are dead – words on pages; the Bible is the living, breathing, loving, laughing, reaching, embracing, scolding, and encouraging word of God. I like that.

Todd, this idea of the living, breathing, active word of God – that is actually scriptural; and it brings a different sense to the authority.

TODD BILLINGS

It definitely does. I mean, I think ultimately scripture is authoritative for us as Christians because God is authoritative to us, and Jesus Christ is our Lord and this is the way that God has chosen to speak to us as disciples of Christ.

DAVE BAST

Well, it strikes me that the word *authority* contains within it the word *author*, and the authority comes from the author, right? So, if we believe that the Bible really does come with God as its author, obviously it is going to rule us, just as God rules us.

TIM BROWN

And I think it is so important for the reader of the Bible to always keep in mind that the biblical text is actually the speaking voice of God. So God is present in this interaction with the Bible.

DAVE BAST

So when I am listening or reading – listening to the Bible or reading it for myself – I am not just hearing Paul or Isaiah or whoever; I am really hearing God?

TODD BILLINGS

You are not just gathering information either. The fact that God spoke through these words means that as you meditate on these words and as you listen to them and give careful attention to them, that that is actually a place where you meet God and experience God's presence.

DAVE BAST

I like something that you said, Todd. You wrote an article entitled: How to Read the Bible. It was a recent cover article for *Christianity Today*, and one of the things you said about the standard academic way of approaching the Bible is just to look at the history and the circumstances and who wrote it maybe and when; and they treat it as a thing, not as the living word of God for them.

TODD BILLINGS

Definitely.

DAVE BAST

That is a real danger, isn't it?

TODD BILLINGS

I think it is a danger, both for scholars and also for other people. Sometimes we can become so interested in some of the history behind to text of the Bible that we can find ourselves not paying attention to the words of the Bible anymore; but the words are important; the words are what God has chosen as a means to communicate with us.

DAVE BAST

Well, and the term we use for that, I think, is inspiration – that the words are breathed out by God. There is a famous passage that is the claim that the Bible makes for itself, and after a short break I want to pick that up.
Segment 2

DAVE BAST

Hi. Welcome back to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast, and joining me today and for the next several programs, Todd Billings and Tim Brown. They are both professors at Western Theological Seminary in Holland, Michigan. Tim also is the president of that institution, and they are friends, and we are talking about how to read the Bible.

So, let's take the classic passage on the inspiration of scripture. It is from 2 Timothy Chapter 3, and I will just read a few verses from toward the end of that chapter:

¹⁴But as for you (Paul writes to Timothy), continue in what you have learned and become convinced of because you know those from whom you have learned it; ¹⁵and how from infancy you have known the holy scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. ¹⁶All scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness, ¹⁷so that all

God's people may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.
Now, that is a classic passage! I know you have preached on that, Tim.

TIM BROWN

More than once; more than once.

DAVE BAST

So, what jumps out at you from that?

TIM BROWN

Well, the first thing that jumps out to me is the image is actually not inspired but *expired*. God breathes this out...

DAVE BAST

Breathed *out*, yes. Not expired – died...

TIM BROWN

I think it is pretty important – and I would love to hear what Todd has to say about this – the image is not that the Bible existed and then it became inspired by something else at a different point in time; it came out of the loving heart of God right from the beginning.

TODD BILLINGS

One way to say that is the Spirit *generated* the Bible – the Spirit produced the Bible...

TIM BROWN

That is nice...

TODD BILLINGS

for our purpose to...

DAVE BAST

Which is an image 2 Peter uses of a ship – a sailing ship – with a sail filled by the wind, and that is what the Spirit did to the people who wrote the Bible. So, what they were writing, while couched in their own language and coming through the medium of their own personality and experience, really ultimately came from God.

TIM BROWN

Sure. This is what we refer to often as the double authorship of the Bible. There were human beings writing, but they were moved by the Spirit of God and joined together; in human language, the voice of God is heard.

DAVE BAST

I want to explore that a little bit more. Does that mean that the very words on the pages of our Bible are inspired – the words themselves?

TODD BILLINGS

I think it does mean that the words themselves are inspired – that God has chosen to set apart these words for a special purpose; to be his way of communicating with us, of presenting himself to us, so that we can be conformed to Christ's image.

DAVE BAST

Because sometimes, you know, people will sort of take a half-step backward and say: Yes, the Bible is inspired, or it contains the word of God, or it becomes the word of God or something, but we cannot say that

that language itself is inspired – the words themselves. You know, that has been a conflict controversy for a long time in Christian circles, but it always has struck me, I don't know how you inspire thought without using language. I don't think it is possible to think other than in words. So, there is no possibility here that the Holy Spirit somehow inspired thoughts in the writers' minds without also the language that they used to express these thoughts.

TIM BROWN

Sure, sure.

DAVE BAST

Does that make sense?

TIM BROWN

It was a direct extension from the spirit work in the heart and mind of the author right through their fingertips with whatever they wrote. These were very special words.

DAVE BAST

You know, this is the Bible's claim for itself, and it is quite interesting to me that when Paul talks about the Holy Scriptures he is talking about what we call the Old Testament; and he says you can find salvation through faith in Christ in the Holy Scriptures. He is not speaking about the Gospels or his own writings, he is talking about Genesis through Malachi, right?

TIM BROWN

Sure, of course he is; and the New Testament gives us plenty of evidence of how the early Church read the Old Testament through a Christ lens. Just read Peter's sermon at Pentecost and you will see this remarkable dynamic of the Old Testament actually expressing the story of Jesus.

TODD BILLINGS

Yes, I think that is true that even this 2 Timothy passage is talking most directly about the Old Testament, but there are also New Testament passages where the writings of Paul are referred to as scripture, and we have this forming sense of the New Testament canon as scripture, and some of why it is considered to be scripture is precisely because it is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness; that it shows through the life of the Church that these books, rather than other books, conform people to the image of Christ.

DAVE BAST

Exactly, yes; there is that old argument that the Church created the canon of scripture by choosing which books were in and which books were out; but it did not really work that way. It was much more the fact that the books that were inspired proved themselves by what they did in people's lives.

TODD BILLINGS

I think it was an act of recognition on the part of the Church to recognize that these books – even these books that contain things that challenge us, that contain things that we would not want them to contain, like some of the hard teachings of Jesus in Sermon on the Mount – these books are the books that God is using to make us into disciples and to form us into a faithful Christian community.

TIM BROWN

There is a wonderful line in one of our creeds that says: We receive these books, not so much because the Church attests to them, but because the Holy Spirit witnesses in them that they are from God.

DAVE BAST

So, really, that is the subject of a whole program in itself, I think – the role of the Holy Spirit in this – because the same Spirit who inspired the writing originally dwells within us as the one who unites us to Christ, who gives birth to faith in our hearts and lives, and he testifies to us that this is the word of God – this is the true authority – our rule.

TIM BROWN

Exactly.

TODD BILLINGS

Yes, the Spirit does not testify that this is the word of the Church, the Spirit testifies that this is the God's very word, and that we are addressed by God through scripture.

DAVE BAST

Lets talk a little bit about the role of scripture in teaching us – that list of four verbs; take us through that just briefly.

TIM BROWN

Sure; Paul says: All scripture is God-breathed and profitable for *teaching*. I take that to mean giving to the Church the whole story of salvation from the early beginnings through the fall, the words of the prophets, the final consummation: All scripture is God-breathed and is profitable for teaching; for *reproof*, that is an interesting word. I take that to mean that the scripture has the capacity to indict us – to tell us where we are wrong and convict us.

DAVE BAST

Yes, I remember reading a line somewhere not too long ago: If your god cannot challenge you about anything and convict you where you are wrong, you have too small a god. You have made a god in your own image.

TODD BILLINGS

That is right, yes.

DAVE BAST

And the Bible does that, too. What about the training side in righteousness, any thoughts on that, Todd?

TODD BILLINGS

Well, I think that as disciples of Christ, we would be foolhardy to try to be disciples without the Bible as, in a sense, our trainer through the Spirit of what it means to follow Christ. A lot of people follow Christ in a way where they think: Oh, well, Christ is leading me to do this or that, but don't really take scripture very seriously in this; but that is a contradiction in terms. If we take Christ seriously, we have to take the scripture seriously.

DAVE BAST

Throughout Church history there has been a tendency of people to divorce the word from the Spirit, and say: Well, we are spirit led, we are spirit filled, we can do whatever we want; and they tend to go way off the rails.

TODD BILLINGS

Or the Spirit has given us a new word that was not in the Bible, but what that actually says is that the Spirit has surpassed Christ. I mean, the Bible bears witness to Christ as the final and ultimate revelation of God; and so, the Bible cannot be surpassed just because Jesus Christ cannot be surpassed. He is the Alpha and the Omega.

DAVE BAST

You have a real clear indicator when you have left Christianity with any group that says: We've got a third book. You know, you've got the Old Testament and the New Testament; well, there is another one; but here is the problem, though. Such disagreement among even Christians who profess the Bible as their authority, their rule – you know, the inspired word of God – and yet, so much disagreement on what it actually teaches, and that has been a potent criticism of Protestantism, and Evangelical Christianity in particular. I want to know how you both respond to that, but first we need to take another break.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

Welcome back to *Groundwork*. I am Dave Bast, and joining me today in the studio are Dr. Tim Brown and Dr. Todd Billings, and we are talking about the authority and inspiration of the Bible, which is as important a subject, I think, as there is for the grounding of our faith; and just before the break I brought up the problem of what one scholar today has called: Pervasive, interpretive pluralism – PIP. It is actually very interesting, because this is a guy – you have read his writings – Christian Smith, an Evangelical who became a Roman Catholic, and a big part of the reason was he said we cannot really have the Bible as our authority because we cannot agree on what it teaches; there is so much divergence. What does it teach about baptism? Christians disagree about the Lord's Supper, and so on. How do you respond to that?

TIM BROWN

You know, David, one of the ways I like to respond is to acknowledge the weight and the force of that question, but then quickly say an equal and opposite thing is also remarkable, and that is that there is so much consensus among Christian believers throughout the centuries and around the world; we typically like to think of our differences around baptism, but there is more consensus on baptism in the Church than there is divergence.

TODD BILLINGS

I think that is true, Tim, and certainly, you can also distinguish between essential points of faith and salvation and some other points where there are differences in interpretation which are not as essential.

DAVE BAST

The famous slogan: In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; and in all things, charity.

TODD BILLINGS

Yes, I mean, I think that there limits to that slogan, but I think it does help us to make some distinctions. It is not that Christians disagree about everything with the Bible.

DAVE BAST

Or you think of C. S. Lewis's line, which he got from the Puritan, Richard Sibbes' *Mere Christianity*. He defined it as the ninety percent that we all agree on – that all believing Christians agree on; or the great creeds: The Nicene Creed, the Apostles' Creed – all Christians – true Christians believe that.

Another thing we could say is that, yes, there are some disagreements, but that is because some Christians are wrong in how they interpret...

TIM BROWN

Well, I am just thinking of a book I read recently by a wonderful Evangelical scholar named Alister McGrath, and the title of his book tells it all: *Christianity's Dangerous Idea*; and the dangerous idea is that everyone had access to reading the Bible. It is really hard for us to conceive today, but there was a time in the Church, and not so long ago, when the normal Christian believer did not have access to the Bible.

DAVE BAST

Yes; well, and you think again about history; William Tyndale, the first translator of the Bible into English – proper translation – was burned at the stake for doing that...

TIM BROWN

Yes, exactly.

DAVE BAST

Because the English church leaders did not want people to be able to read it for themselves.

TIM BROWN

Yes; well, because it is actually dangerous when people start thinking about what God is saying to them and to the Church through their own words or through their own thinking.

TODD BILLINGS

And I think that we can also say that in responding to the concerns about Christians disagreeing about the interpretation of scripture, that putting the Church as the authority over scripture is not the solution. I mean, even in the Roman Catholic Church there is a wide range of positions on all sorts of things, and some of the reason for this, I think, is that all of us as Christians are on the path of growth in Christ – we are on the path of sanctification. St. Paul says that we do not see face to face right now, but we see through a glass darkly.

DAVE BAST

Right, yes; exactly.

TODD BILLINGS

So, if we all had a perfect knowledge of God right now, then that would be...

DAVE BAST

We would all agree.

TODD BILLINGS

a problem...

DAVE BAST

Yes, exactly; but we could say this, I think maybe to sum up. Some of the disagreements are about pretty minor things. We are agreed on the essentials. Some of the disagreements are because one group or another has it wrong, frankly, according to the rule of the Bible – the teaching of the Bible – and some of them are because we are all limited and none of us grasps the whole truth, but that whole truth is found in Jesus Christ and someday we will know.

TODD BILLINGS

Exactly, and that is what we confess.

DAVE BAST

Thank you, Tim and Todd. I am looking forward to the next program.

TODD BILLINGS

Thank you.

TIM BROWN

Thank you, David.

DAVE BAST

And thanks to you for joining our *Groundwork* conversation. Don't forget, it is listeners like you asking questions and participating that keep our topics relevant to your life. So tell us what you think about what you are hearing and suggest topics or passages you would like to hear on future *Groundwork* programs. Visit us at groundworkonline.com and join the conversation.

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