

“The Bible and Opinion”

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That the Bible is God’s opinion should make us humble, not arrogant.

2 Peter 1:16-21

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Two stances

Since it appears in the sermon title, let me begin with a few comments about the word “opinion.” I remember arguing with my teenage daughter who had learned in school that “opinions can’t be wrong.” I made a smart aleck response along the line of, “My opinion is that opinions can be wrong.”

The dictionary definition of “opinion” is “view, judgment, or appraisal.” Examples in the dictionary include people with rigid opinions, public opinion, doctors who give a second opinion, and legal opinions, all of which can be wrong, right?

All through my adult life I have felt the pull of two primary stances on the Bible. The first stance is that the Bible conveys God’s opinion. Stance #1 is that when you read the Bible, you read God’s view, God’s judgment, God’s appraisal.

The second stance is that the Bible is human opinion. That doesn’t necessarily make every opinion expressed by Moses or Isaiah or Paul wrong, but it allows the reader a great deal more flexibility to evaluate those opinions. That includes the record of events – whether, for example, Moses led a large group of ex-slaves through the Red Sea. It includes matters of faith – the true identity of Jesus of Nazareth – and of ethics – what constitutes sexual behavior that honors God’s intent. If the Bible expresses human opinion only, any part of it is subject to my opinion.

You probably need me to say clearly at the beginning of this sermon that the first stance was and still is my stance. I believe the Bible faithfully and sufficiently conveys God’s opinion, that the Bible is our ultimate authority for what we believe and how we

live. That's the stance on which I was raised, the stance I was taught in Bible college and seminary, and the stance from which I still preach and teach.

Through the years, however, I have learned not to automatically close my ears and heart to those who think the Bible is human opinion, whether or not they confess themselves to be Christians. I have learned to listen thoughtfully and respectfully to those who have a very different starting point when they open the Bible.

That balance – of honoring Scripture as God's opinion but listening to those who believe it is human opinion – is where I'll end up in today's sermon. As we turn to the text, I want to tell you that what we do each week when we open the Scriptures is hands-down my most favorite part of my calling. I love the Bible, and I love teaching the Bible. Thank you for allowing me to do something that brings such joy.

Eyewitnesses of his Majesty (16-18)

As we come to 1 Peter 1:16-21, we need a brief review, for context. The writer of this letter claims to be, and I believe him, the same Simon Peter Jesus called and commissioned at the Sea of Galilee, the impulsive disciple who walked on water with Jesus, who was the first of the Twelve to say, "You are the Christ," and who denied Jesus three times. This is the second of his letters the early church canonized. He is writing to remind his readers of some critical truths because he knows he is nearing his death.

His focus in the first 15 verses is on "knowledge," because an early form of Gnosticism claims to possess secrets belonging to an inner circle. He will deal with those "false prophets" in chapter 2, but in chapter 1 he says our goal is not more secret head knowledge but personal connection with Jesus. That deep intimacy with Jesus gives us everything we need for life and godliness (3), so we need to "make every effort" to so choreograph our lives so that we are constantly growing from faith to selfless love.

One of the angles these Gnostic false teachers used to undermine the faith of Peter's readers is to deny the Second Coming of Jesus. "Ha!" they might say. It's been literally decades since he said he would come again. It's not going to happen. That's just a fable." (What might they say now, since it's been twenty centuries?)

Beginning in verse 16, Peter responds to that criticism: "We did not follow cleverly devised fables," he insists, "when we told you about the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ in power." The word "coming" is *parousia* in Greek, which is used by Jesus (Matthew 24:37), Paul (1 Thessalonians 4:15), James (5:8), Peter (2 Peter 3:4), and John (1 John 2:28), consistently in reference to Jesus' second coming.

To back up his statement that the Second Coming of Jesus is not a "clever fable," Peter now does something that he and other writers of the New Testament letters do only rarely: he relates one of the pivotal events in Jesus' earthly life.

In these verses he says, in effect, I know we *will* see Jesus in his power because some of us *have already* witnessed his Majesty. The event to which he refers is what we call the Transfiguration. What do you recall about that event? Maybe you remember Jesus' dazzling white clothes. Maybe the presence of Moses and Elijah. Maybe the cloud of glory. Maybe Peter blurting out, "Lord, let's put up three tents."

What is burned into Peter's memory most vividly is the Voice. Can you imagine being on an otherwise quiet mountain late at night and you hear God speaking out loud, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased"? (17) Had you heard those words with that Voice, could you ever doubt the identity of Jesus of Nazareth?

Now, three decades later, when Peter could have recalled the feeding of the 5000 or the raising of Lazarus or ten lepers who were made well, the one event he recalls to verify his belief in Jesus' Second Coming is the Voice on the sacred mountain (18). "We were with him," he insists, and that settled everything forever. He could never *not* bear witness to the Majesty of Jesus. If that Jesus said he's coming again, it's enough for Peter. He wants his eyewitness testimony to be enough for his readers.

Prophets spoke from God

That's not the only reason he believes in the Second Coming of Jesus. "We also have the prophets' message as something completely reliable," Peter continues. Remember, the context is the contrast with "cleverly devised stories" (16). "You can't trust every fable spun by a charismatic story-teller," Peter says, "but if you want something in addition to my personal experience, there is a "completely reliable" written record and "you will do well to pay attention to it" (19).

Why? Because the world is "a dark place" (19, the word means dry, squalid, dismal). That is just one of the many reasons that when we read Scripture it feels so contemporary even after all these years. We feel the darkness in our own generation, in this particular calendar year, but there have certainly been much darker horizons for much longer periods of time – the Roman persecutions, the Dark Ages, the Islamic expansion, the Bubonic plague, the US Civil War, two twentieth century world wars and more. If the Bible and the Church survived all that, it will survive the coronavirus.

We are living the most recent version of the long night – but Peter wants to remind us that dawn is coming and the morning star (Numbers 24:17; Revelation 2:28; 22:16) will rise. You can count on it.

He feels the need to say more. Remember, he is specifically speaking of what we would call Old Testament prophecy concerning the Second Coming of Jesus. The prophets themselves may not have known there was a Second Coming of Jesus, but they said God was going to show up and make the world right. Since that hadn't happened yet, it was still "prophecy," and Peter still believes it.

Verse 20 is a little difficult to translate and interpret. Let me start with a literal, word-for-word translation from the Greek original: “Knowing this first, that all prophecy of Scripture is not of its own unloosing.” In other words, Bible prophecy is not about personal opinion. There are two ways to understand the verse, and more than likely the Bible translation you’re reading has chosen one or the other.

1. Prophecy in the Bible is not about *the prophet’s* personal opinion.
2. Prophecy in the Bible is not about *your* personal opinion.

It probably doesn’t make a lot of difference, because either way he’s referring to the false prophets. He’s either saying that *real* prophets (in contrast to the Gnostics) did not prophesy from personal opinion, or that *false* prophets (the Gnostics) have no right to distort the words of real prophets by their personal opinion. Opinions can be wrong.

The conclusion, then, is that “(true) prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (21). This is such an important statement of self-witness in the Bible. One of my true-false Confirmation questions is, “The Bible is the Word of God and the words of humans.” True. Absolutely true. The verse indicates that even though real people were writing on scrolls with real pens and ink, processing their words through their own human minds, there was an invisible but personal Force carrying them along and, as a result, when we read their words, we can know they are expressing God’s opinion.

God’s opinion and ours

This text expresses why I find it such a humbling privilege to stand before you week by week to preach. While I know that others are trained to preach differently – and that “differently” is not necessarily “wrongly,” I was trained that my primary role as a preacher is to stick to the text in front of us week by week rather than making my sermons about my own pet peeves or current affairs – except as they illustrate and apply the text in front of us.

There are times, though, when it’s helpful to note that the point being made here is not isolated in the Bible. This is one of those times. When Peter says the Scripture is expressing God’s opinion, that’s a consistent theme in the Bible.

- Psalm 119:89, “Your word, LORD, is eternal; it stands firm in the heavens.”
- Isaiah 40:8, “The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God endures forever.”
- 2 Timothy 3:16, “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.”

Most importantly, what Peter says is consistent with what Jesus said –

- Mathew 5:18, “Until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished.”
- John 10:35, “The Scripture cannot be broken.”

And it’s not just about a handful of one-liners. The New Testament writers don’t spend a lot of time defending the Bible. But whenever they quote Scripture, they quote it as God’s opinion, not human opinion. Most of these texts refer to what we call the Old Testament, and there’s another whole line of argument why we trust the New Testament. If you’re interested in more on that, join my Sunday School class this fall.

The key, as my mentor Robertson McQuilkin phrased it, is this: “If the Bible is good enough for Jesus, it’s good enough for me.” If I believe in Jesus as the Son of God, then I don’t have to understand it all and don’t have to fit it all into a system. The Bible is worthy of my study, of my time teaching it, and of my obedience.

Having said that, I want to return to what I said earlier, that we who believe the Bible expresses God’s opinion still need to listen thoughtfully and respectfully to those who think the Bible is human opinion. We can’t just dismiss their voices by labeling them “liberals” or “atheists” or “skeptics” or anything else. Why do we need to listen?

First, because we’re not saved by our view of the Bible. There’s nowhere in the Bible where it says, “Believe in the inspiration and authority of the Bible and thou shalt be saved.” The Bible is the written Word that points to the Living Word. The Bible is a means to an end. We can work so hard winning an argument about the reliability of the Bible that we forget that we’re not inviting people to a Book but to a Person – a living, vital, real, eternal relationship with God through Jesus.

Second, because some of the criticism from those who see the Bible as human opinion toward those of us who accept the Bible as God’s opinion is legitimate. The fact that the Bible is God’s opinion should make us humble, and often it has made us proud. We should be humble enough to admit that even an entire lifetime of studying Scripture does not make us experts on how God thinks. The Bible itself says his ways are higher than ours (Isaiah 55:8-9). So whenever we read or teach the Bible, if we convey arrogance, condescension, and even hatred toward other Christians and especially toward unbelievers, we’re not being very biblical about the Bible. Study of the Scripture should cause us to fall on our knees and confess what we do not know.

Third, because we (those who believe the Bible is God’s opinion) have often been wrong – terribly wrong, tragically wrong, wrong in ways that set the church back for centuries in its ability to win others to Christ. We were wrong about the Crusades, the Inquisition, anti-Semitism, slavery, and segregation, just to name a few examples of areas in which Christians at the time were absolutely sure they were right.

More to the point of 2 Peter, through the centuries so many Bible-believing Christians were wrong about the timing of the Second Coming. I can't even count the number of self-styled prophets who were absolutely convinced they either knew the date or were convinced Jesus would surely come before they died.

Fourth, because we can never reach people with God's opinion until we're willing to listen to their opinion. You can't instruct until you listen. Greater knowledge always builds on prior knowledge. So how can you go the next level if you don't know what the current level is? I'm convinced that the reason the Church today is failing to reach a new generation is not primarily because we've failed to give God's answers, but because we haven't first listened to the questions.

Meanwhile, we have simply applied American individualism to our view of the Bible. We quote from the Bible thinking we are giving God's opinion when we are really giving our own opinion. So how do you know which is which? How can you tell if a Bible teacher or pastor or web site or televangelist or author is giving God's opinion or human opinion – especially when they disagree? To whom should you listen? My answer is, "Come back next week." 2 Peter 2 gives us a case study in how to discern human opinion from God's opinion. In a word...humbly.

I love the analogy Pastor Paul shared with me this week. He said that it's really critical that as young trees start out, we tie them on all sides so they will grow straight. In other words, it's better for the young and the young in faith to have more anchors, more structure, more guidelines.

I was raised and educated in what I now know was a relatively narrow slice of Christianity. Part of that narrow slice was a very high view of the Bible and a charge to study it, memorize it, and teach it. I was President of the high school Bible Club in the eleventh grade, and attended every church service and Bible study I could. My experience and understanding of the Christian faith has broadened in a half century, but I wouldn't take anything for the investment I made in anchoring my life in the study of Scripture to learn God's opinion. I might even have been wrong about what I thought was God's opinion, but I was on the hunt for it.

If the tree of your life is going to grow up straight and strong, you need a fresh focus on studying God's opinion. Over the next few weeks we're going to make a concerted push to renew our focus on studying Scripture in Christian community.

Yes, I know there's a pandemic going on, but maybe for this purpose it's going to be a good thing. We're going to focus on smaller groups – in person, online, hybrid groups, email and phone groups – whatever we need to do to connect as many people as possible in relationships around the study of Scripture. Stay tuned for details.

We need to seek an understanding of God's opinion humbly and together. His opinion is ultimately all that matters. Amen.