

PASTOR'S NOTES. Understanding the Bible, part 4.

*“First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.”*

(2 Peter 1:20-21, NRSV)

The United Methodist Church came about when the Evangelical United Brethren (EUB) and the Methodist Church merged in 1968. The Methodist Church had 27 Articles of Religion, and the EUB had 16 Articles of their Confession of Faith. When they merged, instead of rewriting the statements, they just put them all together. These are their statements regarding the Bible:

#### **Methodist Article 5 — Of the Sufficiency of the Holy Scriptures for Salvation**

The Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation; so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man that it should be believed as an article of faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation. In the name of the Holy Scripture we do understand those canonical books of the Old and New Testament of whose authority was never any doubt in the church. *(The 39 books of the Protestant Old Testament, and the 27 books of the New Testament)*

#### **Methodist Article 6 — Of the Old Testament**

The Old Testament is not contrary to the New; for both in the Old and New Testament everlasting life is offered to mankind by Christ, who is the only Mediator between God and man, being both God and Man. Wherefore they are not to be heard who feign that the old fathers did look only for transitory promises. Although the law given from God by Moses as touching ceremonies and rites doth not bind Christians, nor ought the civil precepts thereof of necessity be received in any commonwealth; yet notwithstanding, no Christian whatsoever is free from the obedience of the commandments which are called moral.

#### **Evangelical United Brethren Article 4—The Holy Bible**

We believe the Holy Bible, Old and New Testaments, reveals the Word of God so far as it is necessary for our salvation. It is to be received through the Holy Spirit as the true rule and guide for faith and practice. Whatever is not revealed in or established by the Holy Scriptures is not to be made an article of faith nor is it to be taught as essential to salvation.

Both traditions were careful to state it this way: The Bible contains all things necessary for salvation. On the one hand, this distinguishes them (and other Protestants) from the Catholic church which added traditions, some loosely based on scripture, and some not. So they argued then and now that there is nothing in addition to the Bible that is needed for one to be saved, other than to personally accept it and offer oneself to Christ.

On the other hand, they didn't answer the question about how the Bible relates to other areas of life. Let me also remind you of the different ways Christians have understood the Bible regarding truth:

1. The Bible has come to us by the hand of God forcing the writers to write the words they did; every word is directly from God – it is therefore the authority on all things it mentions: about

God, about salvation, about history, chronology, biology, sociology, psychology, politics, physics, math, art, etc.

2. The Bible is the direct word of God, in its original language and manuscripts.
3. The Bible is the result of divine action in its original form, as well as in 1611 in the formation of the King James Version.
4. The Bible is without error in its primary purpose: revealing God, God's vision, God's purposes, and God's good news to humanity. On other matters, it reflects the views of its time.

Of these four options here (and I realize there are many others, with subtle differences), the founders of the denomination probably chose either option 1 or 4. The other options, 2 and 3, came into being with the rise of fundamentalism in the early 1900s. Today, there are a number of people who might hold options 1, 2, 3 together.

But there are problems with these options. When one dives into deep Bible study, one finds out immediately that we do not have original manuscripts of the Bible books. We have copies, in fact we have over a thousand copies that date back at least one thousand years. That there are not significant differences (in most opinions) is nothing short of miraculous. But at the same time, almost no copy is a perfect copy. Since we have multiple copies to look at, scholars have been able to correct most typos and grammatical errors. Thus we have a reasonably reliable record of the original scriptures.

However, there are differences: in the New Testament, there are 6 places where there are verses that exist in some copies of the Bible, and not in others:

- **Mark 16:9-20** *Follow-up Easter stories*
- **1 John 5:7-8** *mention of the Trinity*
- **John 5:3-4** *Angel disturbing the water*
- **John 7:53-8:11** *Woman accused of adultery*
- **Luke 22:43-44** *sweat like drops of blood*
- **Luke 23:34** *Forgiveness at the cross*

What this means is that either these verses were originally part of the the books of Mark, John, Luke, and the first letter of John, and then were removed, or someone added them later. Scholars argue both sides of this. I have put them here in order based on how scholars look at them, which might change tomorrow – the largest number think that the verses in Mark 16 were not original, but added in later copies; and the largest number think that Jesus's words of forgiveness in Luke 23 were original, but removed from some later copies.

So how do we make sense of this, in using the Bible as a guide to God's will? I will propose a closer look at option 4, a way that I believe is more in line with how Jews and Christians historically have used the Bible. However, it looks like it is going to take one more article to explain it, and it is taking my lifetime to live by it. So, until next time,

Yours in Christ,

