

**Getting the Essentials:** of the Bible. (Deuteronomy 6:17-25, 2 Timothy 3:14-17)  
July 31, 2011: Rev. John Salley, Bedford Presbyterian Church.

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Three weeks ago (July 10), I was asked – as a “local Presbyterian Minister” to give comment for a WSLR Roanoke news piece on the PCUSA’ s broadening of its standards to now allow those living a gay lifestyle to be ordained as Deacon, Elder, or Minister within our Churches. From my understanding of Biblical standards, I spoke against the change. Two Church Elders also gave their opinion. Then the reporter took video footage of our congregation in worship and of our Church sign and crafted a 3-minute piece. It wasn’t the most brilliant news editing, a lot that was said was left out, I was misquoted once, but otherwise I was pleased with its outcome.

However, after the airing of that news article, members of two different groups within our Church quickly spoke up: those who were in agreement with my remarks applauded them. Those who were in disagreement with my remarks thinking that - because of the way the news piece was presented – I was trying to speak for the whole church. They were offended.

If you are among those who were offended, let me apologize. I was speaking for myself, within my role as a local Presbyterian minister. Knowing the wide latitude of beliefs within Bedford Presbyterian Church, I would never presume to speak for this entire body. So again, if what I said offended you, please accept my apology.

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But briefly let us return to the various groups surrounding this issue. There was one applauding, one offended, and I believe that there is an even larger middle group who are wondering what the fuss is all about and asking – like Rodney King -- why can’t we all just get along?

These three groups existing in this Church, make Bedford Presbyterian a microcosm of the controversy that, for over 30 years now, has been tearing apart our entire denomination – and it’s not over yet. Whether or not we in this church can do a better job of living and ministering together in love – regardless of our differences, or whether, as Jesus noted, such a house divided will be unable to stand ... that remains to be seen.

But serendipitously, no matter which group you are in, today’s “Getting back to the Essentials topic” of what role the Bible should play within a modern Christian’s life,

should give you some understanding of a larger issue, of which these others are but offshoots, currently roiling many of our mainline Churches (not just PCUSA).

### **How then should the Bible be used to guide the modern Christian, the modern Church in today's world?**

And since a picture is worth more than a thousand words – I would share with you two images, illustrating two contemporary Christian views on the application and authority of the Bible today.

Notice that the first picture shows two-ships sailing on a wide sea: modern western culture and one labeled as “Biblical Culture.” These aren’t the only two, there are plenty of other ships sailing out there as well: eastern culture, communist, Muslim, Buddhist. There are as many ships on this sea as there are or ever have been individual world cultures. (but if I drew them in here – it would get crowded).

Those who follow a “progressive” Christian viewpoint state that we in modern western culture – of which the modern church is a part - are sailing the sea of history as best we know how. And not too far from us, on that other ship is the historical Judeo/Christian culture in which the Bible was written. So whenever we want direction or guidance we can just look over to that other ship to see where it would lead us.

- BUT (and here’s the importance difference) progressive Christianity also says, that the Bible we are now reading is little more than a letter written to us from that other ship, from within that historical setting.
- That the Bible’s values and message were shaped by that culture’s values: a superstitious, patriarchal, slaveholding culture).
- And since what they valued is different from what we value, we are free to take whatever guidance we deem profitable and to reject whatever we consider dated and culturally bound.
- And we can also do the same from all the other cultures around us. We can learn something from Buddhists, and something from Muslims, for after all aren’t we all sailing towards the same destination.

But here’s the problem with this image.

First, the Bible doesn't present itself as a historically written, culturally bound book. It presents itself as God's word for all time, and a guide for all cultures. Thus we are not free to sample, we have only been instructed to follow.

The Bible claims to teach Godly standards that all cultures should follow.

And the Bible charges us Christians to live and lead in such a way as to reshape our culture according to God's standards. So ... when in Rome, don't do as Romans do. But do as Romans ought to do, and as Roman Christians have set the example.

Let's think a bit further about the Bible's claim to authority over culture.

In today's Scripture lessons, you first hear Moses commanding these former Egyptian slaves now being formed into the Hebrew nation, not to follow the cultures around them or from which they came, but to follow all the commandments as given to them by the One God of Heaven and Earth, and to teach their children to follow as well so that as a nation, **they will always "be in the right."**

Fast forward 1,500 years to our next scripture where you hear the Jewish Christian Rabbi Paul, calling the Old Testament "**SACRED WRITINGS ... inspired by God**" (remember, none of the New Testament had yet been written) and instructing a young half-Jew half-Greek Pastor leading a church in a Greek city that these writings were profitable for "teaching, for correction & reproof, for training in righteousness ... so that all who belonged to God would be equipped for every good work. Again, when in Ephesus, don't do as the Ephesians do, but do as God instructed the Christian Ephesians to do.

So ... If the Bible's message, if the Bible's standards of conduct are not God's standards but rather are culturally, historically bound, written perhaps by wise men – otherwise no different from you and me. Then, other than ourselves, who is left to define right or wrong for us today. If God is not the ultimate authority trying to shape ours and all cultures according to Godly standards. Then to rephrase the maxim, *The victor not only writes the history but also makes all the rules.*

How then might we be different if the Nazi's won World War 2?  
Or Mao's Communist revolution spread to the whole world?  
Or if tomorrow's Muslim Majority tries to instate Sharia law in the U.S?

The Bible does not view itself as a dated, but as a dateless guidebook for all time and all cultures.

As the Apostle Peter, quoting the Prophet Isaiah said  
The grass withers, and the flower falls,  
but the word of the Lord endures forever.'

That word is the good news that was announced to you. (1 Peter 1:24-25)  
Now look again and notice that only the Bible ship carries the most important passenger in all of history. God himself is riding in that ship in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. And we can't separate Jesus from that ship. His very personhood, his entire history, his story of Hope and salvation are so intrinsically a part of the Bible's story... in fact HE indeed is the captain of that ship so you can't have Jesus without taking the rest of the Bible.

- The story of Jesus can only be found in the Bible
- From Genesis to Revelation, all prophecies point to him
- Jesus not only endorsed, but expanded upon the Bible's moral codes – so no one can say that he was silent on the matter.
- Jesus declared himself to be God-in-the-flesh, able to give himself in payment for all our sins and by his resurrection from the dead to prove that we are a forgiven people.
  
- And if Jesus didn't do this, if he was merely a good teacher who is now dead... then we are as the Bible also notes, most foolish people to be wasting all these Sundays following such a false religion – when we could be out golfing or back home reading a good book
- but we probably wouldn't be, because the idea of a Sabbath rest was also a Biblical invention. Without it, we would be just like the slaves of Egypt working 24/7/365.

And so this Jesus, whom you can only learn about from the Bible, on whose person you place all your hope for forgiveness and everlasting life...is inseparable from the rest of the Bible. It is the only book about him claiming to be his own inspired autobiography.

This is the same Jesus who told Nicodemus that God so loved the world that he sent his son... and in his next breath said: (John 3:19) *And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil*

This is this same Jesus who said, *do not think that I have come to abolish the law, but rather to fulfill it, therefore whoever breaks one of the least of these*

*commandments and teaches others to do so will be called least in the kingdom of God,*

And it is this same Jesus who declared that the righteousness of his followers must exceed that of the religious leaders of his day – who taught, but themselves did not live by God’s laws. He called hypocritical leaders whitened tombs – pretty on the outside but with only dead bones on the inside.

So you might say that this two-ship theory of Biblical authority doesn’t hold any water. **There is in actuality only one ship sailing in the right direction. So if you want Jesus in your life --- you had better climb into his boat.**

Your only real choice is to be in the boat with Jesus or to be drowning in a sea of culture. And once on his ship you are expected to live by the rules of his ship.

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Look now at the second picture. Which I think better illustrates what the Bible says about itself and the impact that it expects to have in our lives and on our culture.

Now you only see one ship in the ocean, modern culture. There are again, plenty of others out there – all the other cultures of the world ... they are all sailing in different directions but they are all looking for home, for the promised land.

The Bible teaches that the only home that we can sail home to, the only solid ground we can find to stand on is Holy Ground. And that Jesus has provided our only way to reach land.

He has in fact built the pier to which, by faith, we can tie our ship, so that we can leave the storm-tossed sea and step out into a new life.

And that, once on Holy ground, **ONLY** by following his teachings will we be able to build our home upon the rock.—a home that can stand through the storms of life.

And the Bible further claims for both itself and for us, who are the Church, that Jesus left here to spread his message that **we are God’s lighthouse** --- That our entire mission in this life is to shine the light of God’s word out into a darkened world so that all those ships lost at sea might also find their way home to God’s harbor.

But they must choose, as we have chosen, whether or not to turn around to literally “change their mind” (to repent) and sail towards home.

If they do not choose to follow God’s light, and like the prodigal to return home to the father, then all they will do is sail out into the darkness and be lost forever.

This is what Jesus says about himself, and about God’s word (our Bible) which he has left for us to be both our guide home and our training manual to help us grow to maturity, to competence, to be a vital part of the Body of Christ

Of which this congregation is to live as an example to the surrounding Bedford community.

As the Apostle Peter wrote to all our churches...

*(1 Peter 1:16 – 2:3) For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty. ... So we have the prophetic message more fully confirmed. You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.*

*[So] 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.*

*But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive opinions. They will even deny the Master who bought them—bringing swift destruction on themselves.*

*Even so, many will follow their licentious ways, and because of these teachers the way of truth will be maligned. And in their greed they will exploit you with deceptive words.*

*Their condemnation, pronounced against them long ago, has not been idle, and their destruction is not asleep.*

This is rather harsh language.

But further on in his same letter this

Mature and Holy Spirit inspired

Disciple of Jesus writes

*(1 Peter 2:9-12) But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.*

*Once you were not a people,  
but now you are God's people;  
once you had not received mercy,  
but now you have received mercy.*

*[Therefore] Beloved, I urge you as aliens and exiles to abstain from the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul. Conduct yourselves honorably among [non-believers], so that, though they malign you as evildoers, they may see your honorable deeds and glorify God when he comes to judge.*

So there you have both a progressive and classical view of how the modern Church must relate to this timeless book.

The choice is yours,  
No one can force you to choose one viewpoint over the other

But only one of these viewpoints comes with the story of Jesus, Gods' son our savior, and with the promise of forgiveness, our only hope for everlasting life.

And it is the same one which demands of us  
We who would call ourselves Christian -- That we must be Holy according to God's standards.

So, as the Apostle Peter also wrote:

*(1 Peter 1: 13-15) Therefore prepare your minds for action; discipline yourselves; set all your hope on the grace that Jesus Christ will bring you when he is revealed. Like obedient children, do not be conformed to the desires that you formerly had in ignorance. Instead, as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct;*

*for it is written, 'You shall be holy, for I am holy.' ---- Amen.*