

The Chaos Ladder

Episode 4 - God didn't dictate the Bible (The Bible is not God part 1)

[Podcast intro]

Hi, I'm Steve Flowers and you're listening to The Chaos Ladder-- a podcast that explores how the Bible is not a gaping pit waiting to swallow us but a ladder for us to climb.

[Episode intro]

There's a well-known saying that "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." If Christianity keeps failing to respect that God did not dictate the Bible, then, it will continue to harm others as it has in its past and, I would argue, continues to do so today.

[Main content]

The book of 1 Timothy includes a teaching that is very divisive in Christianity to this day when the writer stated "I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent."¹ Titus, another New Testament letter, is very short but was used to help support a very dark time in U.S. history when the writer commanded "slaves to be submissive to their masters and to give satisfaction in every respect."² And then there's that passage in 1 Samuel that you can never unhear. The prophet Samuel told King Saul that God was ordering the Israelites to "utterly destroy" the Amalekites and to "not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant."³

It's very reasonable to find yourself asking why God would allow texts such as those to be in the Bible. But that's asking the wrong question because it implies some level of belief that God wrote, dictated, or controlled the final content of the Bible. Many Christians act like that's what it means to believe that the Bible is inspired.

I believe that the Bible is inspired. The problem I see is that many Christians tend to confuse the theological concepts of revelation from God with biblical inspiration. That problem is at the root of many of the misunderstandings and controversies in the Church throughout its history and today. The two concepts are closely associated but are not synonymous. I'm going to spend time in future episodes taking my shot at discussing in detail what I think makes the Bible

¹ 1 Timothy 2:11-12

² Titus 2:9

³ 1 Samuel 15:1-3

inspired, but for this episode I want to help you simply understand that God's revelation and biblical inspiration are different.

Revelation is defined as "the process whereby God makes (God's self) known to (humans)."⁴ It is any action God takes in which, as the word implies, God reveals God's self. Examples would include if God were to speak directly to someone or if God incarnated God's self in human form as Christians believe God did through Jesus.

Inspiration is the Holy Spirit of God acting "on the minds and hearts of" people in such a way that they become the instruments that transmit their understanding of God's revelation, such as writing a book of the Bible.⁵

We can see points of God's revelation through scripture but the Bible as a whole is "not merely a verbatim record of (God's) revelation." As such, the Bible includes times when its writers caught lightning in a bottle regarding how God revealed God's self to them, but they also "often wrote and acted out of harmony with (God's) revelation." Why? Because they were human, who no matter how inspired they were by God's Holy Spirit, were conveying "personal, social, and national experiences" through the lens of how they perceived God.⁶ And, unfortunately, that lens included being limited to the knowledge of their time period in things like science, advocating abhorrent practices like genocide in God's name, and retaining culturally-accepted institutions like slavery.

When we say the Bible is inspired, it means the Bible is sacred due to its close association with God, including that God's Spirit can speak through it today, but it doesn't mean that God controlled exactly what the Bible's authors wrote.

Ok, maybe you learn concepts better through metaphor than me expounding on Bible dictionary definitions. So let me try to explain the difference between revelation and inspiration using a little made-up story. Here goes:

One day God splits open the sky in a neighborhood and booms out in a clear voice, "Quit being mean to people or eventually that will take a toll on everyone. Now, go share my message with others." That's all God said. Sky closes up and the earth returns to normal.

Now, there were only four people who were outside when God said that and who heard what God said which, again, was "Quit being mean to people or eventually that will take a toll. Now, go share my message with others."

The first of the four people was a 17-year-old who went to his parents and said, "God told me to quit picking on my little brother."

The second person was a hard working company employee who went to work the next day and started befriending work colleagues who they had been ignoring.

⁴ Harper's Bible Dictionary (1973), p. 613

⁵ *ibid.*, pp. 281-282

⁶ *ibid.*, p. 614

The third person was a long-time church council person who immediately called for a meeting and told the committee that God said the church must add a by-law to their church constitution that requires prospective members to repent of their wrong-doings against others before they can join the church.

The fourth person had been a homeowner in the neighborhood a very long time. After hearing God speak, the homeowner went across the street, and rang the doorbell of the fairly new neighbors. When the new neighbors came to the door, the long-time homeowner said, "God told me that you better change how you're living or God is going to punish you."

They each received the exact same message of revelation from God. But each of the four persons heard God's words through the filter of their own circumstances, experiences, traditions, and personalities, including their biases. And the inspired writers of the Bible's books acted essentially the same way.

Now let's consider that after hearing the concepts of inspiration and revelation are different, you either still don't understand how they're all that different or you still believe they're the same. Well, let me make one last argument in which the results of it show we do treat them as different concepts.

First, I'm going to submit that the following statement is a given: If an inspired Bible is essentially the same as revelation from God, it means every law, command, teaching, and story in the Bible are from God and should be followed or somehow highly influential in our daily lives today. If inspiration and revelation are not the same, then we'll find points in scripture we identify as being outside of God's revelation and therefore not something to influence us or emulate in our daily lives today.

Second, let me share two facts with you:

Fact #1 - The Bible has approximately 300 references to the institution of human slavery. None of those passages advocate for the abolition of slavery and arguably all of them implicitly approve of that institution by either providing rules on slavery or referencing it as a cultural norm. This occurs repeatedly in both the Old and New Testaments.

Fact #2 - With the exception of a few, very small Christian-based extremist groups, all Christians today no matter how conservative or liberal believe human slavery is absolutely wrong and should not be allowed in any form.

Last part of my argument-- There is only one logical conclusion. Wittingly or unwittingly, Christianity today has collectively acknowledged that inspiration and revelation are not the same because despite the proliferation of slavery passages in the Bible, Christianity loudly denounces human slavery as an abhorrent practice that God does **not** desire. Whether everyone knows how they got there or not, this means Christianity today already lives out that an inspired Bible can include rules and cultural constructs from ancient societies that are outside of God's intended message, even though they are things that are affirmed in the Bible.

One last thing about inspiration and revelation-- Thinking through that God didn't dictate the Bible can cause a couple of overreactions. They come from different root places of belief, but interestingly, both are concerned with the issue of trusting the Bible.

The first overreaction goes something like this: "If the Bible is more human than God, meaning it could be wrong about things it states, isn't that a slippery slope that could make the Bible unreliable or, worse, allow people to justify disregarding whatever they don't like in the Bible?" This type of thinking comes from a place of wanting to protect a need to put their trust in the Bible itself.

But the "Beware of the slippery slope" is a warning for toothpaste that's already out of the tube. The Bible is littered with a number of plainly stated passages that Christianity now considers are not factually correct or that promoted practices no longer necessary or appropriate. And when Christianity changed its mind on these passages, nothing happened! An example would be the issue of slavery which I just discussed.

But I'll give you another one where even after Christianity realized the Bible was wrong on a subject matter, the spiritual sky still did not fall. The Church used to believe that the earth was flat and that the sun revolved around it because that was the prevailing understanding of the cosmos when the Bible was written. There are a number of biblical passages that describe that ancient view, associating it as being created by God that way. (I'll include several of the citations in the essay version of this podcast.⁷) This is one example of how the scientific knowledge in the Bible is limited to what humans knew 2,000-3,000 years ago. But after world explorers didn't fall off the edge of the world, the Church slowly came to accept the view of the cosmos we know it is today. That means the Church no longer upheld the accuracy of those verses describing the cosmos while somehow managing not to slip into a state of "anything goes."

The change of mind about such scriptures doesn't mean Christians were making the Bible untrustworthy but that an inspired Bible includes times when the writers were inaccurate or just not aligned with what God desires.

The other overreaction comes from a place where Christians are so struggling with the Bible's more difficult passages (ones like the examples I read in the last episode that include passages appearing to show God commands ancient Israel to commit genocide) that it doesn't matter to them who wrote the books because their concern is summed up in asking, "How can I believe in a Bible that says such things?" Well, if you are asking that, then you're asking the wrong question. The witness of the Bible is not commanding you to believe in the Bible itself but to believe in God and to follow Jesus. Studying the Bible can be a sacred journey to help you grow in both.

Biblical inspiration is differentiated from revelation when we realize inspiration doesn't mean looking at the Bible to see what God wrote but looking through the Bible to hear what God's Spirit is saying today. Dr. Pete Enns, a biblical scholar and professor at Eastern University, first

⁷ Joshua 10:12-14; 1 Chronicles 16:29-30; Psalm 104:5; Ecclesiastes 1:5

articulated that differentiation to me when he wrote: “The Bible doesn’t say, “Look at me and trust me!” It says, “Look through me so you can learn what it means to trust God.”⁸

One oft overlooked benefit to this understanding that inspiration means looking through the Bible so we can learn what it means to trust God (and one many people need to hear today) is that any harmful effects you may have experienced from biblical scripture was not from God. It was also not from the biblical writers themselves, even when they may have been writing outside of God’s revelation. Any fear, hurt, or painful confusion you may have experienced regarding the Bible is the result of those in your life who misrepresented what the Bible actually is and twisted what God’s Spirit is actually speaking through it.

Thanks for listening to The Chaos Ladder. Hope you’ll join me next time when I talk about an associated way we need to be careful that we don’t equate the Bible to being the same as God. Take care.

[Outro statement]

The Chaos Ladder is part of StoriesFromAVillage.org, a podcast and essay ministry of Stone Village Church in Columbus, Ohio. You can find a transcript of this podcast on the web site.

⁸ *The Bible for Normal People* blog post by Dr. Pete Enns-
<https://peteenns.com/on-not-trusting-the-bible-or-taking-seriously-what-the-bibles-messiness-has-to-teach-us-about-faith/>.