

April 3, 2011

“What the Bible Is and Is Not”

Exodus 3:13-14:

¹³And Moses said unto God, Behold, when I come unto the children of Israel, and shall say unto them, The God of your fathers hath sent me unto you; and they shall say to me, What is his name? what shall I say unto them? ¹⁴And God said unto Moses, I AM WHO I AM: and he said, Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you.

“I am who I am” is from Hebrew verb root which encompasses past, present and future tenses...the eternal NOW.

Mark 14: 60-61a

⁶⁰And the high priest stood up in the midst, and asked Jesus, saying, Answerest thou nothing? what is it which these witness against thee? ⁶¹But he held his peace, and answered nothing. Again the high priest asked him, and said unto him, Art thou the Christ, the Son of the Blessed? ⁶²And Jesus said, **I am**..

Jesus here equates himself with the presence/voice that spoke to Moses from the “burning bush.”

There are some things too good to be true:

1. Emails that begin, “My dearest, sweetest friend in Christ,” or, “Claim your winning lottery number today.”
2. or, in the ancient days of regular mail, when publisher’s clearing house sweepstakes would send out envelopes with your name printed on a one million dollar check, with the tiny, fine print saying, You may have already won.

Such things are so slick, so polished, they activate our gullible radar. Such things are not believable because they are simply too good to be true; they are Manhattan street vendors selling “roll-ex” watches for twenty dollars.

When I was a child, what I found so compelling about the Gospels were the miracles. This is perhaps true of most of us no matter our background, but, for me, I think, growing up in circumstances desperate for a miracle made the miracle stories of the New Testament all the more attractive.

What I find, these days, so compelling, so believable, about the Gospel of Mark in particular and the New Testament Gospels in general, is the lack of slickness and polish, the way they, for the most part, under-sell their message. In the case of the Gospel of Mark, to end the story in fear and silence is equivalent to publishers clearing house

sending out a letter saying, “You have virtually no chance at winning, but buy five magazine subscriptions from us anyway.”

So, when I point out some of the lack of polish, some of the inconsistencies, some things that do not make sense, I am, in the long run, pointing out why the story is, for me, so believable. I am not poking holes in the Bible in order to make the Bible unbelievable: I am merely pointing out the holes in the Bible so that the truth witnessed to in the Bible can pour out more easily.

“The truth witnessed to in the Bible...” For Presbyterian ruling elders, deacons, and teaching elders at the time of ordination, the question asked is, “Do you accept the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be, by the Holy Spirit, the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ...” So, when I say, “the truth witnessed to in the Bible,” I am *not* saying, nor is the Presbyterian Church (USA) saying, that the Bible is true, that “the Bible says it, I believe it, and that settles it.”

Much more humbly and simply, what we *are* saying is that the Bible, through the working of the Holy Spirit, witnesses to who Jesus truly is. It is a witness to who Jesus truly is. That is the purpose and role of the Bible, a unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ.

Through the centuries of the church’s existence, various people have tried to make the Bible more than this, and many of those ways can be explicated by the following example. On route 206 as you pass Condit Toyota and you go towards the Fairgrounds, there is a billboard with a picture of the Bible that reads, “Need Help? Read God’s Instruction Book.” There are three things wrong with this picture.

First, the Bible is a collection of sixty-six different writings from different time periods with sometimes differing views. The Bible has nearly 800,000 words. Reading a six page instruction manual to put together a cheap desk from Staples is hard enough to follow. Even if we approach the Bible as an instruction manual, the directions are too voluminous and, at times, contradictory, to follow precisely.

Second, the purpose of an instruction manual is that we follow the detailed instructions precisely, so that we achieve a positive, pleasing, successful outcome. If the Bible is an instructional manual on how to live, it follows that our lives will be positive, pleasing, and successful, and such terms are given content by our own varied cultural assumptions about success. Throughout the various sixty-six “books” of the Bible, one thing is clear: the heroes of faith sometimes had success, but they also met with crosses, shipwreck, torture, and imprisonment. Positive, pleasing, successful outcomes, as typically defined in our culture, are the not the goals witnessed to in Jesus the Christ.

Third, and most importantly, for the Presbyterian Church, the Bible isn’t about the details: it’s about the big picture. If the Bible is about details and us following those details precisely, then we become attached to the Bible, and we are then constantly and predominantly looking to the Bible to direct us. Becoming attached to the Bible may

sound like a Christian thing, and if it does, all the more reason for this sermon. To become attached to anything other than Jesus is idolatry, and, indeed, idolatry in all its biblical meaning.

The Bible, as a witness to who Jesus truly is, directs our attachment to this Jesus, not to the Bible. We human beings, Presbyterians included, find it easier to follow a book we can hold rather than a Spirit we cannot touch, or to talk about a holy book we can read rather than try to follow a holy person we cannot see with our eyes. The Bible's only purpose is to point us to Jesus, witness to Jesus as Lord. For the Bible to become more than this, it becomes our tangible totem pole, and we cling to it rather to Jesus, the Christ who we cannot see, and who we cannot always explain, and who according to the varied witnesses of the Bible, the Lord who may be as likely to leave us in fear and silence rather than lead us to sure and pleasant outcomes: "*My God, my God, why have forsaken me?*"

Now, I want to end by saying two commonly understood things about witnesses as a way of preparing for what I will present next week.

First, there have been more than enough courtroom television shows, crime novels, and high profile court cases on the evening news to make us all familiar with the following: if you have four different witnesses testifying for the defense, and all four of them say exactly the same thing, they come off as being too coached, too polished, too slick, and, therefore, unbelievable.

Second, even when the witnesses come across as authentic and believable, the important person is never the witness, but the defendant. The defendant is who it is all about. The Bible, as witness to who Jesus truly is, is therefore not about us, nor is it meant to be a rule book or instruction manual on how we should live. That's what the living Jesus and the work of the Spirit is for, and we dare not replace them with a book.

Someone recently asked why I went from being a Southern Baptist to a Presbyterian. There are three main reasons, and one of them is related to today's topic. When—as a young child and increasingly as a teenager— I went to church and sat in the pew, I felt like I needed to be wearing a hard-hat. It was all very "biblical," but it was all about me (us human beings in general) and how bad I was, how deep in sin I was, and how little faith I had, how I needed to repent, etc. I left church feeling worse than I entered, and I left church having heard so much about myself and my fellow sinners (or "the world", or "them"), and so little about God. It was God I was going to church to meet; but, instead of meeting God at church, I only met myself, and I already knew myself way too well to get excited about that. I needed to meet something other than myself at church, and, despite all the secondary benefits to things like coffee hour, I also needed to meet something other than my fellow sinners at church.

The Presbyterian Church professes to order its worship so as to focus on God and what God is doing in the world through the risen Christ. Sometimes such a meeting will result

in fear and silence; sometimes, an excited hallelujah; sometimes it will result in questions; sometimes, in answers; but always, hopefully, it will be the result of a focus on the God we know in Jesus rather than a focus on us, or on the Bible whose purpose is to witness to that Jesus.