

Staying Rooted in Love  
2 Timothy 3: 16  
Matthew 22: 36-40  
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It is good to be with you as this “Bad Theology and Good” series continues to launch this summer. It is also good to be with you, and good to be together, on this weekend when the nation is reeling from the Supreme Court overturning Roe v. Wade.

In churches like ours in the Congregational tradition, we can trace our commitment to justice and equal rights for women back to and through the women’s suffrage movement. Of course there is moral complexity around the question of abortion, but the fact that the Supreme Court has just taken rights away from women, the ability to decide for themselves how they navigate those complicated moral questions in their own circumstances, a removal of rights from more than a majority of the people in our country, is shocking. In churches like ours in the Congregational tradition with European roots, we can trace our commitment to racial justice and standing in solidarity with people of color back to and through the abolitionist movement. This ruling will put the lives of women who are poorest, often women of color, at risk. In churches like ours that are committed to equal rights for the LGBTQ community, there’s concern over what this ruling could mean for rolling back decisions on same sex marriage and more. There’s a broader concern about the Supreme Court itself and the anti-democratic power it has over our nation. There are many reasons that we may be carrying feelings of shock, fury, disgust, a sense of hopelessness and worry about where we are headed as a people- and it is good to be together.

Pastors Sarah and Christian gave me a variety of Bad Theology and Good topics that I could choose from for today, and I selected “Biblical Inerrancy.” It turns out, this is actually a very timely topic for today. The Bible says nothing about abortion, nothing about when life begins, (my take on that is its a mystery), but the two wings of the church that have so much power in our politics right now (Catholicism and Evangelicalism), follow this doctrine of Biblical inerrancy. Or, I would say, they follow it for certain things. The doctrine held by the Catholic Church expressed by Vatican II is “The books of Scripture must be acknowledged as teaching solidly, faithfully and without error that truth which God wanted put into sacred writings for the sake of salvation.” Evangelicals would likely agree with the statement that the Bible is “without error or fault in all its teaching.” The 2nd Timothy verse that was read is usually the proof text for this

doctrine “All Scripture is inspired by God and is good for teaching etc.” A simplified, popular saying in Evangelical circles is, “God wrote it, I believe it, that settles it.”

So if scripture is inspired by God, how could God be wrong? And how do we know that scripture is inspired by God? Scripture tells us that it is inspired by God. We get into some circular reasoning here. If this logic isn't persuasive to you, then the question comes up, “well what authority does the Bible have?” Big parts of the church are afraid to lose this doctrine because the Bible's unique authority and what it means to be a Christian for those communities flows from it. I'll talk a little about how I resolve that later.

I think the real trouble with Biblical Inerrancy is that it is used in the church to hold onto damaging worldviews. It is used to try to win debates about who matters most when there is a fear of losing power and status, and the doctrine has done tremendous harm. In practice I don't think it is really about the truth of God but protecting the powerful-there are always humans deciding what the truth is.

Biblical inerrancy is used in debate about evolution and the “Biblical view of creation that the world was created in 6 days.” Of course, there isn't one biblical view of creation. We have two stories in Genesis 1 and 2 that have completely different orders and timelines. One where humans are created last and one where the human is created first and time isn't discussed. We can see inaccurate human understandings of what our world is like. Genesis 1 explains why the sky is blue by saying that sky is a dome that separates waters from above the ground from the waters below the ground and the story of the flood expands on it when it says the heavens were opened. The ancients literally believed doors had to open in the sky for water to come down. This is a clever pre-scientific construction of how the world is, but we know now it isn't accurate.

Why is this a big deal, why do we get in this fight? Because significant parts of the church are afraid of losing the special importance of human beings. I'm afraid we won't be able to address climate change until we have a proper understanding of the place of human beings in the whole of creation - something scripture can also help us with, and the creation stories themselves if we let them.

Biblical inerrancy has been used to defend racist, white supremacist interpretations, like the curse of Ham from the story of Noah, the belief that Biblical Ham and his descendents, Black

Africans, had been cursed by God with eternal slavery. This is a human interpretation of a few verses in scripture used to justify colonialism and slavery when justice for the oppressed rooted in love for the neighbor isn't just a verse or two in the scriptures but most of our Bible. The call for justice and loving the neighbor will work to dismantle white supremacy, and white people have been, and are, afraid of what they will lose.

And of course, Biblical inerrancy is used in the church's debates over gender and sexuality which are connected to the Supreme Court's overturning of *Roe v. Wade* and the fear that the court will roll back same sex marriage, and more.

One of the things we see in the New Testament itself is a debate about the role and place of women in the life of the church. The Apostle Paul has this amazing statement of equality in Galatians 3: 28, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." And it looks like women and men in the church took him at his word. There are extra-biblical accounts like the Acts of Paul and Thecla where we see that women were preaching, and teaching, and baptizing, doing what Apostles do.

In 1 Timothy 2: 12 you have the opposite. It reads, "I permit no woman to teach or have authority over a man, she is to keep silent." As my New Testament professor said, "you don't tell women to be quiet in church unless they are speaking. Obviously, in the debate between Paul and the writer of 1 Timothy, the writer of 1st Timothy won. The Roman church goes in that direction. It is no accident that the two wings of the church, Catholicism and Evangelicalism, that have asserted themselves in the *Roe v. Wade* decision that rolls back women's rights, follow 1st Timothy 2: 12 and do not ordain women, often explicitly oppose contraception, and teach very patriarchal gender roles. But hopefully we can see that this isn't God's teaching but humans deciding moral questions.

Similarly with same sex relationships, there are really only two verses in the Bible that are unique statements against sexual activity between two people of the same sex, one is from Leviticus chapter 18: 22 and the others from Romans 1. They pale in comparison to the volume of verses that have to do with central themes of the scriptures, the call to do justice and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

I wish we heard from more conservative parts of the church about how those verses are inerrant, how the calls for justice from the prophets for the poorest are inerrant, how Jesus' quoting of Isaiah in Luke 4 is inerrant: The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor (Which is proclaiming Jubilee, a radical redistribution of wealth). But I don't hear Biblical inerrancy used to back that one up.

So what is a Good Theology instead?

I find Marcus Borg's statement to be helpful "The Bible is a human product: it tells us how our religious ancestors saw things, not how God sees things." To add to this, it is the story of our ancestor's encounters with God, the Holy, in the life of the people of Israel, in the life and ministry of Jesus and in the early church. They were pointing to and naming the presence and power of God in their midst, and it is all so, so human.

Just as the Bible is a human product, our interpretations are always a human product too. We interpret together as the church, and we can challenge one another, we should. Our plumb line, our guide, shouldn't be what will protect our power, our place, our previous understandings, but our guide should always be love. The great commandment. "Is this loving?" should always be our question. That question can lead us through moral complexity. Does this lead to justice, equity, human dignity? Does this lead to wholeness for all that is God's? When the answer is yes, we will be pointed towards God who is love, towards all that is life giving, and all that gives hope.

What about the authority of the Bible? Can it have any special authority if we say it is a human product? Sure it can. The Bible earns it just like any other book and sacred text.

In our scriptures we hold a way of life, rooted in the power of love to deliver a people from slavery and oppression in Egypt, that then becomes a way of life for a people that seeks to be the opposite of an oppressive empire, the call of prophets to remember this way of life, and a renewal of this way of life in Jesus' proclamation of the Realm of God in opposition to the Roman empire, and an affirmation in Jesus death and resurrection that this love, this power, never runs out. Death is not stronger than this love. Extreme authorities are not stronger than

this love. Suffering and oppression are not stronger than love, and that love can never be extinguished. It always remains with us.

This has authority for me because I've found God in it. I have found our ancestors of faith who have been pointing us in this direction to be trustworthy. And I know that will continue to be the case, as long as I, and we, stay rooted in love. Amen.