GOD'S WORD IS LIFE

READING THE BIBLE AS LAW AND GOSPEL: THE WORD THAT READS US

SESSION ONE: A BIT OF HISTORY

"You search the scriptures, because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness to me; yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life." John 5:39–40 (RSV)

When someone says, "I believe the Bible," what might that mean?

- Everything in it is true.
- It is God's Word.
- We should obey it.
- It tells us about Jesus.
- It contains God's instructions.
- It is inspired.

These answers may sound similar, but they can lead to very different ways of reading Scripture.

100–400 AD | The Early Church

Christians read Scripture through the proclamation of Christ, employing literal, symbolic, and allegorical interpretations. Origen and Augustine recognized that biblical texts could communicate meaning beyond the immediately apparent sense of their words.

500–1500 | The Medieval Church

The traditional medieval approach was known as the Quadriga, or the Fourfold Sense of Scripture. **Literal** (historical): What the text says or describes. **Allegorical**: What the text reveals about Christ and the faith of the Church. **Moral**: What the text teaches concerning Christian life and conduct. **Anagogical**: What the text reveals about humanity's ultimate hope and eternal destiny.

1517–1600 | The Protestant Reformation

Martin Luther and other reformers insist upon the authority of Scripture over competing ecclesiastical claims. For Luther, Scripture's central purpose is to proclaim Christ and God's

promises. The distinction between Law and Gospel becomes essential to understanding what Scripture does to its hearers

1600–1700 | Protestant Orthodoxy

Protestant theologians develop increasingly systematic accounts of biblical inspiration and authority. Scripture's trustworthiness is vigorously defended, although interpretations continue to differ across Christian traditions.

1700–1800 | The Enlightenment

Reason, historical investigation, and emerging scientific methods challenge traditional assumptions about biblical authorship and historical accuracy. The Bible increasingly becomes an object of critical investigation, raising new questions about its authority.

1800–1900 | Historical Criticism and Modern Science

Biblical scholars examine the authorship, composition, historical setting, and literary character of Scripture. Developments in geology and evolutionary biology intensify disagreements. Some Christians welcome these methods; others regard them as threats to biblical authority.

1881 | The Princeton Defense of Inspiration

A. A. Hodge and B. B. Warfield publish their influential essay Inspiration. Their defense of biblical inspiration and freedom from error helps shape the modern evangelical doctrine of inerrancy.

1910–1915 | The Fundamentals

Financed principally by California oil businessman Lyman Stewart, twelve volumes of The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth defend traditional Protestant doctrines against modernist theology and biblical criticism. The series gives its name to the emerging fundamentalist movement.

1920s | The Fundamentalist–Modernist Controversy

Disputes over biblical authority, miracles, evolution, and Christian doctrine divide American Protestantism. The 1925 Scopes Trial brings the conflict into national public view. For many fundamentalists, one's position on biblical reliability becomes a test of theological faithfulness.

1978 | The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy

Evangelical scholars formally affirm that Scripture is without error in all that it teaches. Inerrancy becomes an important doctrinal boundary within many conservative Protestant institutions, although the statement itself recognizes literary forms and figures of speech.

TODAY | The Continuing Question

Christians still disagree about literalism, inerrancy, historical criticism, and the interpretation of Scripture. The question remains whether defending a particular theory of the Bible's reliability is the same thing as hearing and trusting the Word of God.

A DISTINCTION WORTH REMEMBERING

Literal interpretation, literalism, and inerrancy are not identical. Christians have long sought the literal meaning of biblical texts. Modern literalism tends to read passages as straightforward factual accounts even when their literary form suggests otherwise. Inerrancy is a doctrine concerning Scripture's freedom from error.

THE QUESTION WE CARRY FORWARD

If Scripture's authority does not depend upon our ability to prove that every statement is historically or scientifically correct, what makes it the Word of God?

That is where Session Two begins.

NEXT WEEK: THE WORD THAT DOES WHAT IT SAYS