

## **Concluding Thoughts on the Gospels, Reprised**

**2010 September 22<sup>nd</sup> & October 19<sup>th</sup> for October 19<sup>th</sup>**

We reprised the Gospels for two reasons. First, the Old Testament has a lot more books and a lot more pages in it than the New. To alternate back and forth anywhere near even, it was reasonable to repeat some of the New Testament. The Gospels were the obvious choice. They are the account of Jesus and are therefore central to our faith. If we'd only studied part of the Bible it would have been this part, so we started with it. Once we had been through all the rest of the Bible as background we then ended with it, in the belief that we would understand Jesus more thoroughly due to our improved background.

It didn't exactly work that way, but that was the plan.

One piece of good news is that in the recent part of the study I found ways in which I can identify with Jesus. Before, I could identify and empathize with pretty much anyone else in the Bible, they all being imperfect humans like I am, but least so with Jesus, though he was human for a time. But there are, as it turns out, some very human features to Jesus' life and situation with which I can identify. One example is exasperation with reality. Another is being a cultural outsider. Perhaps there is some divine in me after all. Or maybe I am identifying with his mother's side.

One piece of not-so-good news is that I feel less mysterious certainty about my faith than I did going into the project. One would think that the text would stand up to questions, doubts, and complaints. One would think that the magical Word of God would move me to a higher plain of existence. Maybe I'm too close to tell, but it doesn't seem like that has happened. Maybe later after some germination time.

The Gospels each tell the story of Jesus in different ways. Taken together the story begins before the creation and proceeds through the institution of the race of people that God placed on earth in the middle east and into which he would become human, and then to God's miraculous birth as the human Jesus with his mother Mary and supposed father Joseph.

Very little is said about Jesus' youth except that his rebellion against his parents was to stay in the temple after a festival, sparring with the teachers there.

Most of each of the texts concern Jesus' ministry. They include the preaching, the proclamation of the Kingdom of God, for which he was sent, the miracles that he uses to establish his credentials as God, and the calling of and interaction with his closest friends and followers, the disciples, in various tiers. Just like king David, Jesus had an inner three: Peter, James, and John; then there were the called twelve that included the three, then there were a few score other followers about which not much is said except that they provided some support and were sometimes sent out as missionaries themselves. Sometimes the outer crowd ranged into the thousands but there was a lot of dynamic coming and going and churning in the larger crowd.

Jesus would say things that would blow away all the smoke pretty quickly. He wasn't here to make himself king in *this* world.

Each account ends with what we call "Holy Week," Jesus' triumphant return to Jerusalem where he celebrated the last Passover, was betrayed, tried by religious and civil authorities, condemned, crucified to death, and buried.

On the third day after his death, he was resurrected and appeared several times to the disciples and others. He restored denying Peter, convinced doubting Thomas, taught on the road to Emmaus, bestowed the Holy Spirit as comforter, delivered the Great Commission (go into all the world preaching the Good News and baptizing in the name of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) and at last, ascended into heaven, returning to the Father.

Each of the four accounts tells different parts of the story from different points of view. Luke is mostly an historical account, crafted for accuracy and relative completeness. Matthew tells the story to the Jews who were the first Christians. Mark is like the Cliff Notes of Matthew. John is the first hand account of one of the inner Three, as close as we could get, personally speaking.

All of the witnesses go to the trouble to write so that the reader will know about Jesus and believe in him. Any minor inconsistencies are just the shades of viewpoint and memory that any court of law deals with in witness testimony all the time. Minor problems are no cause for dismissal or rejection of the works. Broadly, all four are the same story, carefully told four different times so that we the readers can find our own understanding and viewpoint.

We have now read the four stories twice and have covered all of the background literature that goes with them, at least in the Protestant version. Now we do not suffer from lack of information.

So what will we the readers now do with what we know?

### **Concluding Thoughts on the New Testament**

**2010 September 22<sup>nd</sup> & October 19<sup>th</sup> for October 20<sup>th</sup>**

So we have finished the New Testament. It is comprised of the Gospels and Acts (the account of the early church, post Ascension), the letters of the early founders (mostly Paul) to the churches, and the psychedelic Revelation to John. A lot of Bible hammering I am about to talk about is done from the writings of Paul. We'll also deal with some of that in the case studies later in this conclusion series.

I object to religious people using the Bible as a hammer more on each other than on themselves. Did you realize that Christ died for *our* sins? He died for the sins that *we* committed, not to eradicate sins that others commit against us. If we are to use the Bible as a hammer, we need to hammer ourselves first. Jesus said as much. "Take the log out of your own eye, then you will

see clearly to help your brother with the speck in his eye.” “What if I want him to live until I return? What is that to you?” Jesus dealt with *me* not with everyone else on my behalf.

Consider a discussion I found of “phileo” and “agape”, two Greek words translated into the English “love” but that have substantially different meanings. In the three-episode restoration of Peter at the end of the book of John, both words are used.

Checking the spelling of ‘phileo’ online, I came across an article that discusses these different Greek words for love. The author, defending the veracity of the Bible and of the King James Version, which also makes the translation error, argues that the words are synonyms and that the Bible tells us that Peter was grieved because of the third *question*, not the change of word *in* the third question, and that we are worse than not smart for presuming to add something to what the Bible has told us like that, and for childishly bantering about our naive knowledge of Greek at Sunday School cocktail parties.

Well, “whatever,” I thought. Sunday School cocktail parties would be an interesting phenomena....

It is this very sort of strong-arm, shaming, hammering of somebody’s idea of the Bible over my head that has me reading it for myself rather than trusting the interpretations of others, though I have confessed often that it is impossible not to have interpretation, either from one’s own training or from one’s own life experience projected onto the text.

Give me a person who is *real* over a person who is *good* any day. Peter was real. He was hurt. Jesus was real. He was hurt badly. Most religious leaders, then and now apparently, are good. In perceived self-protection, they did a lot of the hurting.

Of course Peter had to confess his love three times to balance the three fearsome denials. When Peter said he would stand up with Jesus to the end and was then corrected by Jesus, Peter was expecting a pitched battle with swords where they would either die by the sword or win and rule. He would have done that. He was not expecting Jesus to voluntarily march off into the jaws of corrupt “justice.” And he was not prepared to march himself into the jaws of corrupt justice. It was all very confusing. He had no idea what it all meant, was bewildered, and denied Jesus out of fear and ignorance. Jesus was right about the denials, of course. Peter did what any other devoted, clueless follower would do, what any of us would do. Even us now.

The other thing that bugs me is that all of this interpretation is part of the religious establishment now. We have had literally thousands of years to pore over and micro-judge every action and gesture of Peter and Thomas and Adam and all the others. The guys who write the books, Moses, Samuel, John, and so on, get a better shake, but all are imperfect people imperfectly hearing and experiencing God, even those who walked around with Jesus. Several entire religious establishments just such as the one Jesus struggled against, have arisen to condemn our

forebears in their relationships to Jesus, all under the implicit assumption that it could not happen today because we know the truth in twenty-twenty hindsight.

Of course, nothing could be *further* from the truth. We and our institutions are gravely the same as those of Jesus' day. We would struggle under Jesus today just as they did if he were here looking us in the eye and not just in our imaginations backing up our point of view in the conflict. Yes, there is a real Jesus who speaks to us and deals in the world today, but much of what religion does in the name of Jesus is from people's imagination.

And much of that imagination is not as well informed by direct exposure to the New Testament as one might think.

### **Concluding Thoughts on the Bible 2010 September 22<sup>nd</sup> - October 16<sup>th</sup> for October 21<sup>st</sup>**

Now we're getting down to your last chance to argue any fine theological points with me.

After working on the problem for quite some time, I decided to summarize the entire Bible by reading all of my individual summaries written over the last six years and picking out the common themes that seemed to emerge. This has been an interesting exercise. Some of my writing has been excellent and insightful, really capturing my thoughts. Most of it has been less than excellent, however. Some of it seems rushed or clueless. I find proofreading problems that I should have caught years ago. Viannah just says, "verbose, dad." Fair enough.

Although the original intent here was to *instruct* you in the Bible, all I claim now is that I *read* it to you and told you some stories from my own Bible training and my own theology or really, my own philosophy and education. I'm happy enough to have done that. I could have ended every day by saying, "... but, if you really want to know what's going on, read it for yourself." You've had my take on the Bible in your inbox for the last six years. It's time to go off and get your own take. And, sure, send it to my inbox if you like. I would enjoy that.

I have squared off with the Bible in my best way of learning -- reading and summarizing -- and have learned more about myself than I have about my faith, if the two can be distinguished. I have not been guided by extra-Biblical sources that I didn't come in with: specific preaching, commentaries, or concordances. I used very little of the footnote material in the actual copies I referenced. I just tried to take the straight text like I thought I was supposed to.

Now I will summarize the summaries into ideas and themes and recount what I've learned with a little elaboration here and there.

Flame On!

*I didn't change as much as I expected to.*

I intentionally did not refer back to my former writings at any stage, but my memories of them had me believing that my approach, my writing style, and my beliefs had changed a lot. Re-reading the introductions and summaries, I find that this hasn't been the case.

For example, I'm more impressed by the Gospel of John today than I was in 2004 but I used the word "veracity" in describing it both times.

Today I feel like I understand less, not more.

*More accurate reality is better.*

I didn't really get this from the Bible; though I suppose it's implicit there, but it's a notion that I live by.

Some claim to live by Occam's Razor, the notion that complexity is minimized and that the simplest model of reality is probably the right one. Since this is usually given without proof, I can only ask, "Who says?" Why is Occam's Razor not just an artifact of our intellectual incapacity or laziness? I agree that it's a useful, essential tool for humans, but ... true?

On the other hand, if the simplest explanation *is* more accurate, fine by me.

*Things generally tend to equilibrium. Religion tends to fight uphill. So does life.*

What battles are really worth fighting then?

*Why do the good suffer anyway? Oh, never mind. They just do, OK?*

*Skepticism is an incomplete world view.*

For many it's a clever way out of spiritual responsibility. Agnostics untie! (Or was that dyslexics? I can never remember.) I'm a skeptic because I distrust my understanding until something works. Working on a kit on the way from a bag of parts to a working device, I always scratch my head a lot and learn things from hard realities. In any endeavor where that hasn't happened I'm ... skeptical.

Simple enough for a child to understand? Sure, at some level. So explain the Trinity to me again. Father and Son are the same, but not. Holy Spirit ... ?

*Spirit and body and gnosticism.*

Well that was a clever way to get license for the carnal nature wasn't it? Jesus taught like only the spiritual mattered, but he was resurrected *in body* and ate fish afterwards. What's up with that?

*Tension between science and religion misses the point, of both.*

A lot of other people have figured this out so I won't elaborate here.

*A lot of the Bible is pretty dry, even to me.*

Try Numbers. And Moses couldn't even count. Try Numbers 3.

*I liked the history best. And the wisdom. Would like the songs more if we had the music.*

A lot of the words are, "God destroy my enemies or I won't praise you." Is everybody OK with this? I know there is a lot of praise not going on but the dead don't write the books do they....

*I find the Bible much more understandable through the lens of human reality than through religious hype.*

Our faith is based on a tiny over-unpacked percentage of the Bible. This willful ignorance is amusing and intriguing.

*The Bible teaches socialism. God wants the people taken care of. By us.*

I found only one capitalist in the Bible, Lydia. If there are others, not enough was made of their economics or their business for me to notice. Much of the Law is about taking care of people regardless of or oblivious to their property. I stop short of saying, "Vote accordingly." Voting doesn't happen in the Bible. The Bible teaches casting of lots to decide important national matters. We will talk about property in a couple of days.

*The text is long on "Do Right!" and short on what "Right" is in practice*

That's preaching. Both Moses and Jesus did this frequently. And Samuel did a lot of preaching without much teaching, at least from what he wrote down. Yes, I know about the Sermon on the Mount.

*Do we cram our notion of "right" into the Bible or the reverse?*

Every religion has similar notions of "right" and "wrong." Where do they come from really?

*Where there's heat, there's not much light.*

This is something else I didn't find explicitly stated in the Bible but I saw it demonstrated throughout and I see it throughout my own life. When people are low on hard information and think they need to make important choices (or even if they don't), the yelling level escalates

exponentially. This is why religious debates are hot and why religion is often excluded from polite company. Politics even more so!

*The magic properties of "The Word."*

There is mystery everywhere and in everything because of our limitations. I don't believe that The Word itself is somehow magic just because God spoke it. It's hard enough to follow seriously taken advice (or consider it "directive" if you prefer) from a loving superior without adding magic or intentional obscuration.

In any case, I'm not worried about God's ability to give the perfect Word and I'm not worried that it didn't reach me in good enough shape over the eons to be sufficient. I'm worried about my inability to *understand* it. This inability of mine is well precedented, it doesn't just happen with God.

*Religion interprets whatever happens in fulfillment of its own world view.*

Pay attention to funeral rituals.

*Just be obedient to God and everything will be fine.*

If you interpret anything that can possibly happen as "fine."

*Ixnay on the oofexting pray.*

Enough said.

*There is not much time correlation in the Bible between the blessings and curses, sins and repentances, and the prophecies about them.*

It's just all haranguing, about half and half blessing and blistering.

Consider Solomon, the most blessed, successful king ever, the only one who reigned over anything remotely resembling "the blessings." Solomon had 700 wives, mostly strategic alliance foreigners, for whom he built temples in direct violation of the First Commandment. The *First* Commandment. Does the Law not matter because of who Solomon is? And the kingdom was knocked down only *after* his death? What about personal responsibility and accountability and consequences?

Maybe it's all just economics after all. Sure, Solomon benefited from David his father, after the bloody ascension. Saul took the big fall. Saul was mostly ignorant, weak, and crazy, disobedient mostly by clumsiness and insanity. He had a hostile biographer.

Consider David. David carried the ephod around with him all the time in violation of the law that said it had to stay with the Ark of the Covenant all the time. And he had the Ark carried around incorrectly leading to a fatality. The ephod and the portable priest that went with it was God's Word when David needed to make military decisions, after all. What's that? Why didn't somebody write, "And he added this to all his sins that he carried the ephod around with him all the time."? Obviously there was no "Book of Nathan."

And then there was Bathsheba, Solomon's mother. By now I don't think I need to retell the story of Uriah.

Anyway, everyone has trouble all the time. How could a prophet of doom miss?

There are always cycles of good and bad and there always will be. They can be interpreted to support any world view you want. Somehow the true faith needs to transcend this.

*The Bible, at least in our translations of it, is surprisingly sanitized in the teaching I've received.*

"Filth" happens.

*"Money is the answer for everything."*

Check out this tidbit of wisdom from Ecclesiastes! Paging Jesus!

*Jesus:*

Must be asked for help, he doesn't volunteer it. Take that as a lesson.

Jesus, a Galilean in Jerusalem, was an outsider in his own faith. Who knew?

The Blue Collar disciples are remarkable. Who else ever did that?

The Second Coming has always been imminent, even before the First Coming. (Check this out in Daniel.) ... and always will be?

If Jesus was incomprehensible to his followers in the flesh, why are we so smug?

Jesus spent a lot of time in exasperation. Exasperation as a spiritual discipline, perhaps?

Most sermons are, "Believe in me and do as I command!" Come again? Where is the footnote saying that those command were? (Yes, I said I know about the Sermon on the Mount.)

God is above us, not a peer. This is hard for egalitarians from democracies to grasp.



Did you know that Jesus is also *just*?

*The early church was only ideal in the early times. We've changed.*

So doesn't our understanding and our mandate of faith change? It obviously has whether we will admit it or not. Observance has changed too. It changed *inside* the Bible, from Moses to the Exile, for example, and it has changed an amazing amount since.

*Total Warfare Christianity*

... with your whole mind, and strength, and soul... What about sleep?

*There are some cranky old men among the prophets.*

Samuel comes to mind, again. Samuel chose Saul to be king (at God's instruction) though Saul was just a tall guy looking for donkeys and had no leadership potential, a fact that was later demonstrated amply. Samuel wrote the story, however, so Saul was the loser and Samuel, who never had real civic responsibility, was justified. Samuel thinks Saul knows everything he knows. Why?

Why are there even Judges in the Bible? A mistake in management? What was God expecting to happen when everyone did what they thought was right and what leadership there was was all ad hoc?

*Paul stirred up trouble wherever he went. (Not saying that's bad.)*

He even took command of a ship on which he was a passenger, *as a prisoner*.

He dashed off instructions to temporarily fix things in churches that would then stand as the inspired Word of God for thousands of years. But what did Paul know personally about women and children? He was single and preached singleness as "the way." Religions that practice that literally (Shakers come to mind) don't last more than about a generation. This wouldn't have bothered Paul in his day, the Second Coming was imminent after all, but would any of us exist today?

Anyway, sex exists, people. Get over it! Would you prefer not to exist?

*Moses and Aaron were the only establishment religion in the Bible that actually worked.*

Or did it?

Anyway, we ignore all that Law stuff today anyway. Most of it would be illegal, like public animal sacrifice. Illegal in a Christian nation....

God is portrayed as nitpicking his rules. Why do we take only one verse of Leviticus seriously and consider all the rest obsolete? Does God really detest his people? Sure, I don't like most of my friends either, but I'm not God. I have ignorance and apathy as excuses.

The voodoo test for unfaithful wives (Numbers) is really superstition, akin to throwing the accused in a holy lake and acquitting them if they drown. That's pretty far out for me. And I'm uninterested in a sermon about how I just am not seeing some mysterious unknowable truth here. If it's unknowable, I'm not going to know it and I'm going to have to cope some other way.

If you think the exodus people were ungrateful gripers, you just try eating nothing but manna for a few years yourself.

*The Law was an improvement over natural instinct. Grace is an improvement over the Law.*

Of course we got/get all three wrong.

*I don't want to be anybody's "bride."*

One reason why men hate church. (Another is that they prefer action. They have trouble sitting still and being lectured.)

*"There is one Truth, one Religion. It becomes many when it passes through human beings."*

That's not the Bible, it's Gandhi, but it is obviously true, *prima facie*. We've talked about the many divisions of every religion many times, and will again.

*A Word on Inerrancy.*

John Wipf tells me that inerrancy is a non-discussion. It begins with: "The Bible, in the original texts..." ... which we don't have.

Take the parables literally? Tear out your eye? Cut off your hand?

Will Salmon tells me the parables are for shock value. God over the top? Please... step away from the knife.

"Inerrancy" divisive doctrine that it is, is not Biblical, and does not exist. When the Bible itself uses concepts like "perfect," it is not talking about the absolute mathematical consistency, absolute lack of flaw that we associate with, for instance, a "perfect" crystal in physics or chemistry or a hundred percent of something. It is talking about holistically right with most of the details in reasonable alignment.

We have texts that are very close to the originals. In a sense of profound, divinely inspired work, we have translations that are very close to those near-original texts. In a sense of convergence, we are close enough for God to reach us through what we have. At least I believe that he can and does. We “see in a glass darkly” (quoting Paul) even at best anyway so the text really isn’t the main problem. If it is all about the texts and only about the texts, we have made a grave error already. Remember the people of Jesus time who did this, the “Scribes”, the lawyers, and the teachers? They took the text very seriously. Jesus rode them a lot for being so nit-picky and for having bad priorities, and for missing the point of God’s Kingdom.

And Jesus knew all about the nit-picky portrayal of God in the Law. He knew it from the text and he knew it personally and he was pretty exasperated with it. “You tithe mint and dill and cummin and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness.”

*A Word on taking the Bible seriously.*

Faith is important.

The model of “take the Bible literally and here is what this five verses means for you today” preaching is even less impressive to me now than it was when I started. There is a lot of “filth” being thrown around in the Bible that we never hear about from controlling literalists.

Is there something “magic” that I can just take a verse for the day and it does something? Yes and no, but at the very least one who does only this misses out enormously.

So let me say one last time, in case there is any confusion about it. Do I believe that the Bible, in whatever form, is “inerrant?” No. Do I take it absolutely literally? No, because if I did, it would be quick to dismiss it on several grounds (as many do) including internal inconsistencies. (Lawyers have no trouble with such things; only mathematicians try to be so pure; and engineers are just practical.) Do I take it seriously? Very seriously? Do I find God there? Do I recommend it? Isn’t it obvious by now?

*The arc of the story.*

God wanted to come be one of us. He made himself a people and spent thousands of years doing it. Then he came as one of those people and accepted everyone. At least everyone who accepted him. At least everyone who the Father allowed to accept him.

Then there was the residue of the people, the Jewish nation. Then there was us.

*The First Coming wasn’t anything like it was expected to be. Neither will be the Second Coming.*

And the Second Coming still hasn’t happened. *Still!* “Please wait.”

But Armageddon is now within our power. So....

*Someone in the Bible is Wrong!*

But what are they *doing*? In the end is it what they *say* or what they *do* or both that counts? Jesus answered this in a parable of two brothers. Do you remember the answer?

*Universal Acceptance?*

Cornelius, the Gentile host of Peter, the Samaritan woman at the well, God chooses you, you don't choose him. Jesus said it dozens of times. He doesn't choose some. What can be done about this? It's God doing the choosing after all.

*God's grace perfected in my weakness.*

I guess. I've got plenty of weakness to work with. Is there really no value in any of the strengths God gave me?

Do we really have to do what we are worst at because it is what Jesus is best at? That's not what it means, I don't think, but it often comes across that way.

*Deny Who?*

But didn't we already deny ourselves and take up our crosses and follow Jesus in the first place, which led us to where we are now? Are we still wrong? Every minute of every day? Do I need to be homeless in perpetuity to be close to Jesus?

Who is this about anyway? People who party all the time? Someone else's sins?

*Believing is seeing.*

I don't know what to make of this, but it is clearly true and clearly is key to better understanding of life, the universe, and everything. But if believing is seeing, what reality are we talking about, mine or "objective" or spiritual or other? Indeed, what reality? What is reality? Jesus had a different notion than most of us.

Flame Off! (But only until the upcoming case studies from the Bible.)

At the beginning of our study I would have said that our faith was based mostly on the work of Jesus and to a lesser extent on the other parts of the New Testament and to an even lesser extent on the Old Testament. Reflecting back on the last six years in the Bible, I don't think that anymore. I think our faith is based pretty sparsely on all parts of the Bible fairly evenly, even the Minor Prophets. More of our faith, however, comes from a whole lot of foam that has been

generated over the centuries: our traditions and our derived, intensely and minutely debated theologies, than from the Bible itself.

The Bible, after all, is a pretty dangerous book, taken straight up. Reader beware!

**Resurrection!**

**2010 October 18<sup>th</sup> for October 22<sup>nd</sup>**

I had finished yesterday's summary remarks and was ready to publish when early the next morning, a Sunday as it happened, I awoke to Bach and remembered something important that I'd forgotten. In fact, it is possibly the most important, possibly the *only* important thing about the whole faith and about this whole study.

The Resurrection!

In the natural order of things, death comes to all individuals and, on vast time scales, even to entire races and species, presumably to entire planets and planetary systems and galaxies, and ultimately to the whole universe.

Everything is finite in this Creation.

Death is the biggest violence we can do to each other. Death is the cost of life. It is the means of clearing the way for evolutionary improvements. Every time I eat, something has to die, even if it is only some plants.

But humans are aware and they understand at some level the miraculous and incomprehensibly wonderful thing that each life is, especially a human one. It seems downright unthinkable that an existence so wonderful could end, and yet it is the universal human experience. All individual lives end.

Death occurs at all times of life and in all sorts of places from the most dangerous to the most safe. No one is exempt. We all, in our appointed time, die. We leave this four dimensional creation never to return. We are missed; we are forgotten. Something immensely precious yet fragile is gone. Life goes on for a time but eventually everyone dies. The struggle ends.

This was the universal story of humanity until Jesus.

There was belief in life ongoing from the beginning, however. Several in the Old Testament went to return to God their maker, some, it is said, without going through death: Enoch and Elijah at least. Others went off mysteriously and were never seen again, like Moses. Others' bodies were buried but it was understood and sometimes demonstrated that their Spirits were with God, like Abraham. Jesus spoke to Moses and Elijah on the mountain. The day after Samuel died, his spirit was conjured by a medium and gave Saul word of his own imminent

doom. After ragging on Saul all his life, it was kind of poetic justice that Samuel would be roused from eternal rest for something like that.

All this hope notwithstanding, death is gravely serious to us. We are taught not to fear it, to take all parts of life with joy and courage, but few fully succeed. Few are ever ready for their end. Death is indeed, due to our heightened consciousness, the ultimate horror, both for the deceased and for anyone important to him or her. And, like I said, it is universal. The poorest die right alongside the richest. The most vulnerable pass away just like the most well protected. No one escapes in the end. Some have longer and fuller lives than others, a basic unfairness of nature, but all die.

It is the most important doctrine of the Christian faith that this problem has been solved.

Jesus was with his Father from before the Beginning from before the Creation. He came to be a mortal among us for a normal, more or less average human lifetime, and was horribly killed by his human peers. Coming from glory, he experienced birth as we all do, and experienced death more intensely and consciously than nearly anyone does. He was dead for about 36 hours.

And then he was raised. Yes, raised back to life!

I have argued that the Christian way is more civilized than the natural way, and indeed it is, and there are some who say that this civilizing factor is the important contribution of Christianity to the culture of the world, and perhaps it is for people who have not yet died, but the one big thing that Christ did uniquely was to conquer death and to demonstrate himself that leaving this creation, the one with time and space in some strange curved shape where everyone and everything is finite and the speed of light, enormous as it is, is vanishingly small compared to the universe, that leaving *this* creation, is not the end of life.

My second core belief is “we live.” I don’t even know what that means (and so I don’t really know what death means either), but I know it when I see it and I experience it. Similarly, I have no idea what it means to live after death, but there it is, it is there and we will all experience it ultimately.

Not much is really known about what happens “out there.” There is a lot of speculation, there are stories, there is imagery, but no one really knows. All, I would wager, are quite surprised at what they find “on the other side” when they take their turns and go, but I’m not going to speculate myself further about it here myself. I will only say that there is existence beyond this life, that God is there, that Jesus has shown the way, and that the path is open to all takers.

This is the message of Christianity.

Jesus was with his Father before the beginning of time and space and will be with him after the end of time and space. He was here with us for about the same amount of time and space that

any of us are, give or take a little, and while he was here he talked about these things, about the Kingdom of Heaven, and life in the Spirit, and being with God before the beginning and how the Kingdom continues on “forever”, to our finite way of thinking.

Unlike all the rest of us, Jesus claimed to have been conscious of all this and he claimed explicitly that he was the only one who had actually *seen* the Father, before he came to earth. Some think that all the rest of us pre-existed as well and that all of us are taking our turns in this creation for some reason and by some mechanism of entry and exit (birth and death). Maybe so. The Bible does not address this that I know of, but it does seem to imply that we, the created, are at least half-infinite. That is, we begin (at some point before birth) but need not end with death. In fact, it may not be possible to end. Whatever the case with that, we are not conscious of a past before being born, at least not while here (stories of reincarnation and knowledge of pasts that people should not be able to know notwithstanding).

As to the future, we know nothing about it, but we have the promise of Christ that we can accept him and be resurrected with him and be with him forever, after we leave here, beginning even while we are here. We know nothing about all this and though it is hard to grasp, believe, and accept the resurrection, this life after death, we have the promise from a person who has demonstrated resurrection and eternal life firsthand. What more qualification for belief could we ask?

Christ Arose!

### **A Case Study from the Bible                      2010 September 28<sup>th</sup> - October 4<sup>th</sup> for October 25<sup>th</sup>**

Concerning homosexuality and the Bible. I'm not the authority on this but I have read the Bible and I have read apart from the Bible on the subject. There were many reasons why I wanted to go through the Bible systematically as I have and one of those reasons, a minor one actually, was to see what was up with God and the issue of homosexuality. There is a lot of noise out there on the subject. My Bible and I should be able to figure something out.

In Nehemiah 5:9-11, we read these commands of Nehemiah to the people in the newly re-occupied Jerusalem which they were about to endeavor to rebuild:

“So I continued, ‘What you are doing is not right. Shouldn’t you walk in the fear of our God to avoid the reproach of our Gentile enemies? I and my brothers and my men are also lending the people money and grain. But let the exacting of usury stop! Give back to them immediately their fields, vineyards, olive groves and houses, and also the usury you are charging them -- the hundredth part of the money, grain, new wine and oil.’

Usury to us means something like what they do on payday loans, charging ten or fifteen percent for a one week paycheck advance. Here, people were charging their countrymen *one percent* for

a loan. It doesn't say per annum, one gets the idea that it was one percent over the life of the loan whatever that might be.

Nehemiah was appealing to the Mosaic law as found in Exodus 22:25.

“If you lend money to one of my people among you who is needy, do not be like a moneylender; charge him no interest. If you take your neighbor's cloak as a pledge, return it to him by sunset, because his cloak is the only covering he has for his body. What else will he sleep in? When he cries out to me, I will hear, for I am compassionate.”

There is a similar sentiment in Psalms 15.

“Lord, who may dwell in your sanctuary? Who may live on your holy hill?”

...

“[He] who keeps his oath even when it hurts,  
who lends his money without usury and does not accept a bribe against the innocent.”

Presumably the word translated “usury” refers to charging any interest at all as it did in Nehemiah and Exodus.

(Yes, I understand that I'm proof texting here. Bear with me. There is a purpose.)

How many church buildings are built on borrowed money, paid back with interest? Sometimes even to members?

In addition, an entire chapter of Leviticus, Chapter 25, deals with the Jubilee. Jubilee is the central concept in Hebrew property ownership under Mosaic Law. The land belongs to God, but is partitioned out to the various tribes, clans, and families in subdivision. They can sell their land, but every seven years, and every fifty years, property reverts back to the original owner. Leaving aside that this would be unworkable in perpetuity unless the population remained static and nothing in the world internal or external to the Jews changed from generation to generation, this means that the trading of property was never done except on a temporary basis. The sale price was to be prorated based on the amount of time remaining until the Jubilee when all property would revert. The same was true with slaves. They were freed on the Jubilee. There were provisions for permanent sales and permanent (voluntary) slavery, but it is clear from the text that these were exceptions.

God ordained, in essence, leasing, not transferring and owning.

God's concern here seems to be that people not get enslaved to their economic system. The money really isn't that important. It is neither to be hoarded by those who already have plenty



nor withheld from those who have little or nothing, for whatever reason they have nothing, deserved or otherwise. Trust God, not money, not property, is the essence of what it means.

There are numerous other instructions in the Law apparently intended to make life a little more even, a little more humble for the rich and a little more bearable for the poor such as leaving the edges of a field unharvested so the poor can have at least a little to eat. Americans consider this charity and are constitutionally against it. To force such charity is considered unfair.

Some teach this, perhaps legitimately, as instructions only for family and neighbors, how to treat your brother Israelites. Maybe so but Jesus answered the question, “Who is my neighbor?” with a story about a hated Samaritan who helped a stranger on the road. Remember? Who is my brother in Christ? Who is my neighbor? It’s not just my fellow Israelite, not just my fellow Protestant, not just the members of my immediate family. Jesus said that if I loved only them, what credit was that?

This is only a small part of the Bible teaching on the subject of money, property, employment, compassion, and fairness. If the Bible is inerrant, if we are to take it at face value (some say “without interpretation”), if we are to do exactly what it says without question or clarification, as many preach, we cannot live in a capitalist society. We can hardly be U.S. citizens. We cannot charge interest on investments. Dividends, by contrast, are not even mentioned. Somehow the Bible does not address complicated fiduciary arrangements. It treats money as a neutral medium of exchange that leads people into “all sorts of evil” when taken too seriously. Our system, by contrast, has all sorts of ways to manipulate money, to some people’s incredibly extravagant gain.

But what about building wealth and security? What about enabling the finer things that are possible in a large society? The Bible talks a lot about that. Isn’t that storing up treasures on earth where rust and moth destroy? Isn’t this putting faith in things that are inanimate, that are temporary, that provide no safety? Aren’t these prohibited nearly exactly in the words of Jesus, and of Moses?

At the very least it would seem that the Bible wants God’s people to use money to meet their needs and those of others, not to accumulate so much of it that they can live on interest without needing to do anything but banking. So much for the American Dream.

But, I will continue to be a U.S. Citizen and will, with struggles, continue to try to function in a capitalist economy, while trying to do the Godly thing: use resources to help those who suffer in many ways, including from lack. Dad always said, after all, “Grow where you’re planted.” I will live within my own faith and faith community, trying not to fall into the traps of the self-righteous religious establishment, but just trying to do the right thing. God’s Word, as canonized, translated, and printed, is a significant input but it is not the only input. I have to somehow carry on in this way using the Bible as guidance, where it speaks, where it is silent, where it conflicts, and where it challenges. I have to take the prohibition against collateral on

loans and the prohibition against charging even one percent interest on a loan and the command to forgive all loans periodically with a grain of salt. I plan leave my bank accounts, loans and investments pretty much as they are.

The characters of the Bible used wine fairly freely and openly, both domestically and in sacred ritual, including Jesus himself, who actually made quite a bit of the stuff as his *first* miracle. I have to accept this even though my tradition teaches me that all ethyl alcohol is inherently evil and not to be touched by anyone and even though I follow that tradition, for the most part. I have to take my tradition with a grain of salt too and, although I support drunk driving laws, I don't give the weight of the Bible to my *tradition*.

I have to accept that the sanitation rules that I live under: what to do with women during their periods, how to deal with refuse, how to deal with physical and ceremonial cleansing, and so forth, are totally different in my culture from anything commanded in the Bible. In some cases under penalty of law in fact, I just do what my culture and what my customs prescribe, taking the Bible as not directly relevant to those cases, though it in fact it appears to speak directly to many of them.

Neither time nor my new 230 MegaByte hard drive permit me to discuss every possible facet of the irrelevance to my real life of an abstract concept such as Biblical inerrancy or the Bible's direction with respect to high finance and a myriad other details of everyday life, but by now you can surely see how it would go.

And so I have to realize that the world was not a perfect place under Moses nor under Jesus, nor now, that things go wrong with the people and the institutions. They go terribly wrong, and yet we carry on, for the most part. We are saved from some of the wrong through the power of Christ and we just live on with some of the other wrong, according to the way in which he has chosen for each of us to glorify God. Our salvation is not perfect until we leave this life.

When I read I Corinthians 6:9 or Romans 2, or Leviticus 18:22, I have the same stance. Certain acts may be "detestable" to Moses, but these verses do not speak directly to me. I don't have to go far to find verses that do, and those are the ones through which God speaks to me.

I saw a piece of art in a studio at Concordia College in Moorhead, Minnesota that was a Bible on a lectern with every verse marked out in black marker, like redacted classified material, except for Leviticus 18:22.

The faith of some is like that. I try for mine not to be.

It is suggested that this verse may refer to temple prostitution, that is, a religious violation, not particularly to particular sex acts. Anyway, it doesn't address female homosexuality at all. Maybe it is assumed it doesn't need to be addressed. Maybe it is intended that they not be addressed. Maybe it never came up. Maybe nobody really cares.

As I have said many times, one's particular version of faith seems to depend strongly on what parts of your sacred text you observe strictly and which parts you explain away or ignore. Most don't do this for themselves, they rely on the dictates of their denominations, non-denominations, seminaries, or other subdivisions of faith. Where do all the versions come from? "There is one Truth, one Religion. It becomes many when it passes through human beings." -- Gandhi.

More often than not, the rules chosen for strict observance are for the other people to strictly observe and the ones ignored are the ones that might have some impact on me.

When it comes to instructing or pleading with or shunning people who seem to be spoken against in the Bible in this way, well, I am friendly with bankers and beggars, and I choose to associate freely with people who drink alcohol and people who don't. I do not advocate isolating women who are having periods, even though some Native Americans, quite independent from the Bible, agree with the Bible in strongly advising that they be isolated as impure. I try to deal constructively with rebellious teenagers without resorting to stoning (which would, in any case, be illegal in my culture) and I do not call down hell fire on homosexuals, Bohemians, Samaritans, or Democrats.

God may. He may also nail me for something and that's what I'm much more worried about. I'm not so worried about him nailing you. That's your problem. Whatever the case with God, it is not my place to nail you.

Perhaps in these debates we are missing the forest for the trees. Perhaps we are missing the trees for the forest. Think about it.

### **Other Case Studies from the Bible 2010 September 28<sup>th</sup> - October 14<sup>th</sup> for October 26<sup>th</sup>**

In our culture we vote on many things but the real power is not in the vote itself but in the question being voted. In the Bible decisions were made by casting lots (Urim and Thumim) but the real power was not in the random choice (though it was said to be decided by God) but in the question that was asked in the first place.

So who has the power here? The questioner or the decider?

We have supported a few missionaries as part of our regular giving for many years. Some of them are peers who have had children grow up at the same time the our children were growing up. As they come of age, these children go on their own missions. One such child who had grown up in central America where his parents had worked was returning in his early adulthood to the home of his youth in the mountains, a place once characterized by pastoreale peace and poverty. Now the place was being exploited for natural resources. From a Christian perspective this young man wrote:

“After all, don’t we believe in the Creator who called this world good and gave humanity the awesome privilege and responsibility of stewarding creation? And doesn’t the Bible affirm a radically holistic ethic of human life rooted in the belief that every man, woman, and child is made in the image of God?”

When I read this, I agreed with the statement and its intent nearly completely, but having always been exposed to other invocations of God for other people’s causes (wealth, poverty, tolerance, intolerance, egalitarianism, classism, etc.) it immediately struck me that all of these were examples of people deciding, usually strongly, what was right, *then* using their religious structures and texts to support their notions. Is this what God intends, that his Word should be a tool to our ends.

And, how can the scripture after thousands of years still be “radical”? I’m not saying it’s not, I’m wondering if anyone has ever paid attention.

I submit that these examples, yesterday’s case study, and countless other possible scenarios, are demonstrations that it is inappropriate to be a single-issue Bible reader. When tempted to enforce religion on someone else you might ask, “Why do I need to do this? To attract attention away from my own sins? To enforce some ill-conceived conformity? To correct some wrong in the creation in which I have no part or concern? Am I really threatened by this difference? Is this just another case of, as we say, ‘someone on the internet is wrong?’” Let me be radical and suggest that some of the prophets in the Bible might also have asked these questions. You could also ask, “Who would Jesus hammer?” The answer in the Bible is nearly always establishment religious people. (That means us, but not the prophets in the Bible.) He didn’t even hammer Pilate. Jesus and Pilate had a civilized conversation, as much as it could have been under the circumstances, though Pilate by virtue of authority in this world, won prevailed.

There is also a distinction to be made between hammering someone who claims to subscribe to the religion of the Bible (or any other religion) and one who has not. Why would a person who has discarded or never had what a faith has to offer them care what that faith has to say to them? At the very least, things must be done in order. First admit a need, then get a prescription, then fill it, then take it, then re-evaluate.

What about tolerance of other religions? After all, Christians have the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, right? Anything less cannot and should not be tolerated, right? But, we have seen even within those espousing the Bible nearly countless denominations based on nearly countless different readings and emphases, de-emphases, and ignorances of it. It is a true statement that denominations, even within such a narrow breadth as Protestant Christianity, often do not tolerate each other. What about Jews? Don’t they have a significant part of the same Bible? Catholics? Same thing and beyond, and the same God too. Muslims? Yes, they share with Christians Abraham at least, although they claim Ishmael has the birthright rather than Isaac. (Ishmael was born first, but there was more story.) Eastern Orthodox? Yes, but when Protestants from the west find out much about it, there is no surprise that the differences between

east and west had resulted in religious wars in centuries past. Hindus and Buddhists and Confucianists? Not the same texts or world views (or the same post-world-view as any brand of Christian), but they and we and Jesus do have many things in common: All religions value wisdom: “Thou Shalt Not Kill,” or “Thou Shalt Not Covet....” Even when not stated as “Thou Shalt Nots” they are still considered worthy guidance.

Imagine my surprise when one day I learned that there are denominations within *all* other religions, even Catholicism! Even among the Muslims! No two Hindus think the same thing about their faith any more than any two of any faith are in perfect agreement. Nor are all Muslims Jihadist. While I do believe that our revealed truth is better than theirs, still, before condemning I first remember that the Soviet Union, during most of its existence, made light of the American south for the Ku Klux Klan and publicized their activities widely in the USSR. To their people, they portrayed Christianity as the KKK, a violent and bigoted religion.

There is a joke I once heard that goes something like this. A man walking home from church on Wednesday evening sees another man about to end his life by jumping from a bridge. He runs to him yelling, “Friend! Don’t jump, there’s hope!” The jumper waits. When the churchgoer reaches him, they have the following conversation.

“Friend, there is hope in Christ!”

“Yes, I know,” the desperate man replies, “I’m a Christian too.”

“Really? That’s great news brother! What kind?”

“Protestant.”

“Is that so! I’m also a Protestant. Praise God! What denomination?”

“Baptist.”

“Brother in Christ, I’m also a Baptist, washed in the blood! What kind of Baptist?”

“American.”

“Praise the Lord, brother, I’m coming from an American Baptist church right now. And are you also a Calvinist?”

“Yes, I’m a Calvinist” said the jumper, now becoming relieved in his newfound kinship that he was beginning to think he might not end it all after all.

“Three point or five point?”

For those who (like me) are not versed in Calvinism, there are different subcultures even therein: The Three-Point Calvinists and the Five-Point Calvinists. Clearly, these groups diverge on at least two points.

The formerly distraught man answers in great relief, “Three-Point!”

To which the would-be rescuer, himself a Five-Point Calvinist, yells, “Burn in Hell, you heretic!” and pushes him off the bridge.

I can just see God at the final judgment telling everyone, “No, there were seven points that Calvin should have found so you are all wrong, all of you Burn in Hell for Eternity!” Having done this with justice across all humanity, God would then be lonely again and would have to start over with a new creation. Again.

Revelation does in fact talk about the final judgment and it’s pretty intense and fearsome, but that’s not how it goes. Nor is that how it goes with Jesus.

Nor does Revelation describe a small group of a few hundred from some backcountry in America or India or Saudi Arabia or anywhere else being the only ones saved while everyone else who thought anywhere from a little bit to a lot differently is condemned. There are sheep and goats for sure, but there are a lot more than a hundred or so sheep at the final judgment.

Here is another example that seems by comparison frivolous. There is one Protestant denomination, one of several that considers itself, “the Only One and everyone else is going to hell,” that bans the use of musical instruments in worship as inappropriate (king David notwithstanding). Maybe it was because such instruments were a distraction, or were expensive, or required skill that diverted people’s attention away from God, but the reason formally given was that musical instruments are *not mentioned* in the Bible (... king David and all of the Psalms notwithstanding).

King David, the man after God’s own heart, was a virtuoso on the harp, a musical instrument mentioned in the Bible. Maybe this denomination is also dispensational and discounts the parts of the Bible not from the modern “dispensation”, at least the ones they don’t want to deal with. Have we heard any of this before?

As a youth, I found this amusing. I had several grandparents and great-grandparents who were of that denomination. So, in questioning my parents (who were not) about it, I came up with several other things not mentioned in the Bible that these people had no trouble using, in or out of worship.

Pews;  
Loans that charge interest;  
Hot and cold indoor running water;

Any type of automotive travel, land, sea, or air;  
Glass windows;  
Electricity and anything powered by electricity;  
Flying in the air! (Except for prophets: Elijah and Jesus.);  
Frame buildings;  
Brick buildings;  
Chairs;  
Asphalt roads;  
Radio;  
Anything in outer space;  
The Constitution of the United States of America and Bill of Rights.;  
Fried food;  
Potable water; (But wine *is* mentioned, for those who equate Christianity with the Temperance movement.)  
Printed books, including bound Bibles.

I don't know. This could go on forever. But you see the point. I still smile when I pass by one of these churches, a frame building of some sort with indoor plumbing and electric lighting, and see a bunch of cars parked out front. But no musical instruments inside! Burn in hell, you heretic!

Let's just say that, often, nits are picked based on what Jesus, or the Bible, said, or was *silent about*. Is everyone OK with this hermeneutic?

And then there's another dimension for which you may well label me a heretic. I've taken the authors of the Bible as human beings with whom I identify or at least try to, as opposed to pillars of faith so far above me, so much more "completed" that I can only blindly do as they, under divine inspiration, have said (as interpreted to me by some contemporary of mine who is also far above me).

Do I have trust issues? No. I have *understanding* issues. I have learned in my work with with making things work that when you build something from scratch you can nearly never get it functioning properly without thoroughly understand every detail and nuance of it. Even then, there are often puzzles and rude changes of ways of thinking that occur while some project confronts cold Physics and Logic. Without such confrontation, there cannot be understanding that is deep enough, at least for me, to execute trust.

I trust God and I trust my boss, but I don't go out and start on things they tell me to do instantly without talking to them a lot about what it is they really want (it may be their understanding or mine that is incomplete) and why and how they want it done.

What have we seen in the Bible? When the angel spoke to Zechariah, he was dumbfounded and confused, and was punished for it. I identify with Zechariah. When the angel spoke to

Abraham he haggled with him like a peer. When the angel spoke to Mary, who was going to be the mother of God, she was trusting, yes, but she had questions, big questions. When God wrestled with Jacob, the Spirit of the Lord had to cheat to get out of Jacob's wrestling hold! When Jesus told someone to follow him, he expected them to drop everything else instantly and do it. Condemned, perhaps, were those who did not. And Samuel on the Word of God, went out and appointed Saul king. Nobody knows why but maybe he should have vetted the divine order more thoroughly before proceeding. Error and imperfection happen.

Part of understanding is vetting the leader. Consider Paul, the unmarried, loner Apostle who is expert on all matters of women, children, and family. There is much strife in Christendom about the "commands" of Paul for women to be in their place and even dress or keep their hair in certain ways. God can't make a mistake, but could Paul. Sometimes he admits that he doesn't have the Word of the Lord on an issue (yet, this admission and what he says after it are still in the Bible.) Wonder if he always got that right?

Some argue that he was just instructing on current trends of the day that have no application now. Others claim that these canonized letters, the inerrant and infallible Word of God, written by Paul who was just trying to keep the church unified and calm for a few weeks until Christ's return, must be followed to the letter by all people (well, OK, all followers of Christ) of all times, at all times, and under all circumstances.

But I am, yes, skeptical. I once worked in the Christian Broadcasting Network and had a colleague whose wife and the two children she was expecting died from complications in pregnancy. He was left with a five year old son. Bad things happen to good people. A couple of years later he met a young widow who had a child of her own and they planned to marry, a very reasonable thing to do the way our world and our culture works, even our Christian culture. The managers where we worked, who were also considered spiritual leaders by virtue of the nature of our business, strongly counseled against remarriage, mainly based on the commandments of Paul, the unmarried Apostle who mostly recommended freedom for Christ. Indeed, Jesus himself said something similar to this, but noted that it was not possible for everyone to always remain single (and a good thing too, for those of us who came dozens of generations later!). My colleague, correctly, ignored this advice and remarried for his own sake, for the sake of the woman, and for the sake of the children. And, Christ in fact has not yet returned, so my friend and his family have had some comfort, some mutual support, and some companionship and consolation during their long, tedious lives while waiting expectantly.

So, yes indeed, everyone everywhere picks and chooses the parts of faith that they want to live by and espouse, usually beginning from their faith of heritage, usually figuring out how to apply it all to *everyone else*. There is ignorance and misunderstanding everywhere. This is part of the human condition. We are too finite to do otherwise. The wise person will be cautious.

There is honor even among thieves, but the Christians are to transcend this, loving their enemies and those who ... see things differently. Loving, best as I can tell, is desiring and working for the



best overall outcome for the beloved. So ask yourself, “Who would Jesus tolerate?” The woman at the well was a Samaritan, a serial fornicator and a half breed in a half breed religion. Oh, and she was a woman, an inferior being in both Jewish and Samaritan cultures at that time. When she realized Jesus was a prophet, she asked him the standard question: where was the proper place to worship? She didn’t know much more about religion than that. A lot of people don’t. Jesus said an interesting thing. “Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews, yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth.”

The most condemning thing Jesus said to a person from another religion, from another ethnicity, from the presumed inferior sex, was “You Samaritans worship what you do not know.” He reserved most of his contempt for the practitioners and abusers of his very own religion, *particularly* the establishment Jews who operated the temple of God in Jerusalem. and worshipped what they *did* supposedly know. But, to the point, Jesus did not say that the country would be a better place if all the Samaritans were deported or if all their houses of worship were destroyed or if they were killed or forced or coerced to confess something they did not believe. When the disciples asked if they should call down fire from heaven on other Samaritans for being inhospitable, he rebuked the disciples. Of course not. Jesus did not destroy. He came to save, repair, and preserve.

Since then, however, we have invented B-52s so we don’t have to ask God for permission rain down fire anymore.

Would the story have been any different if it had been a Muslim woman or Hindu man at the well? Hardly. Jesus simply said that something new had come that transcended all of that misunderstanding and bickering. Too bad that, in twenty one centuries, we have not yet managed ourselves to transcend any of the misunderstanding, bickering or, in fact, much of anything.

### **Concluding Thoughts on the Bible and the U.S. Constitution**

**2010 September 22<sup>nd</sup> to October 15<sup>th</sup> for October 27<sup>th</sup>**

It must have been while listening to preaching on shortwave one day long ago that I heard a preacher say, "The U. S. Constitution, after the Bible, is the most perfect rule known for the governance of mankind," or something to that effect.

This entire project was, in one sense, about that statement. What is all this fundamentally revered material anyway?

The Constitution of the United States is about the size of one book of the Bible. It is the social compact of the people of these United States about what to us in a civil sense, is right and wrong, what the government is for, and perhaps what it is not for, what my responsibilities are as a citizen, and what privileges and protections citizenship affords me. "The common defense," for example, is an example of both a privilege and a responsibility.

Due in large part to the "more heat than light" nature of religion that we have discussed elsewhere and the highly pulverized and combative nature of it, the Constitution expressly forbids the establishment of religion by our civil government. This notion is over interpreted, under interpreted, and misquoted all the time. It doesn't, for example, say that all religion is prohibited, wrong, or purely personal and private. It doesn't say that the President can't go to church. Or synagogue. Or mosque. It just says that the government cannot establish a national religion.

Although the Constitution is an axiomatic basis of who we are as a people, little of it appears to have been derived directly from the Bible. There is little in either about how to set up and run an economy. There is no notion of "consent of the governed" or even "mutual defense" in the Bible. The Bible is all about focus on God. The Constitution is all about how we live together as peers in the United States. The Constitution is derived more from the ideas of the Enlightenment which, in turn, was a serious revision of the philosophy of man in the immediately preceding centuries which cannot help having been a turning away from the then traditional understanding of, reliance on, and reverence for the Bible.

The Constitution was written by a committee. The Bible was written by God, speaking through several human beings, one at a time.

Nonetheless, I personally feel that the Constitution, even with the typos and problems, specifies a good government for a large number of people to live under. The system has serious flaws, but many people in the world vote with their feet when they can to come live under this system, even as second class citizens, rather than some more typical tyranny of power and/or corruption exercised by a bunch of mere men (usually men) elsewhere. Whatever it is, the plurality of the people on the earth say that life under the U.S. Constitution is the best available.

Or maybe it's just its outworking in economics.

In any case, here are a few of the ... issues.

The Bible often teaches the idea of fidelity through ethnic cleansing without shame. The Constitution does not do this. Defense against such things internal and external? Yes. Is the Constitution more advanced? Is it wrong?

The Bible has no procedure for amendment. I guess it must be perfect or at least finished.

One of the things we were doing in founding this country was getting away from the very Biblical, classist notion that identity was fixed at birth by who your ancestors were. Top or bottom, left or right you were what you were and were inside where you were inside and you could not move around. Born a king? Born a pauper? That's it.

This was certainly true in the Old Testament although in the New Testament, there was weak movement more toward self determined individuality, but only ("only") in the interest of freedom to follow God.

Biblically speaking, why would God do this? Constitutionally speaking, why would the majority of people ever agree to this such that it became established in antiquity? Was it just the rule of the strongest?

The Constitution is based on an implicit Jeffersonian idea of having a system that allows and encourages people to rise to their naturally proper position in society. Some don't rise very far; others, despite humble origins, can go very far, like Abraham Lincoln. Our system doesn't do this really well, people born high sometimes don't fall very far and many who are born low do not have opportunity to rise that Jefferson would have liked. Perhaps our system does as well as any.

The Biblical examples of government are divine right monarchy and theocracy. Personal choice or individuality, aside from individually and personally choosing to follow God, seem irrelevant to God. The Constitution seems to move far beyond this, at least to our taste. As an agreement among peers, it must allow for multiple focus. Is the Constitution then more advanced? Is it wrong?

The Bible really doesn't care much for doing anything about slavery, though we are led to believe that slavery is a different institution in the Bible than in our own national history, more like employment is today. The Bible, in fact, has a ritual for making slavery (often servitude in order to pay off debts, like employment is today) permanent. If the slave liked the master and keep the relationship for life, there was a ceremony where they would drive an awl through the slave's ear into the doorpost and make a corresponding speech. This is something else that would be illegal in our culture today, on both the servitude, health, and defacing of property grounds. The Constitution, not that advanced either, had slavery written right into it with its absurd three-fifths representation rule. A male slave counted as three-fifths of a person for census and Congressional representation purposes. (Women and children, of any race, counted for nothing.) It took a costly, bloody, and nearly catastrophic war to fix the involuntary servitude matters.

Well, in that respect anyway, the Bible and the Constitution are pretty similar. Would we say "flawed, then?" And if we said "flawed", on what basis would we say it?

In the Bible God plays favorites. The Constitution tries not to. These days we prefer to say that diversity is strength. This is not supported in either text but is the very sort of underlying value that should be. Both documents are classist and sexist despite Jefferson. This sort of thing is used for dismissal today by skeptics and as reason for embracing by fanatics. Neither camp is helpful. On what texts, however, are the evils of classism and sexism based? It would seem that everyone is in their own “believing is seeing” conundrum.

As I said when we reviewed it a few years ago, I don’t find the Constitution very “perfect” or “ideal” as a document. It is better as amended but still not perfect. Is it a great improvement over the farce of divine right monarchy? Over the “Holy Roman Empire” and all the other silly constructs of men through the ages to fraudulently hold power over the rest of us who are supposedly weaker or lesser, supposedly in God’s name? Absolutely. Can a system set up under our Constitution be gamed to the point where most of the people have little power, the money has all the power, and you would hardly recognize the institutions of government? Absolutely. It happens right on our TV sets while we watch. Is the large body of Constitutional law and tradition built up over the life of this country and improvement on the Constitution itself? I’ll leave this as a question for my fellow students.

Neither a Constitutional scholar nor a Bible expert, I have just read and treated the text as delivered. I have tried to read critically and un-superstitiously, but I have had my own unavoidable filters and biases. The chips have fallen where they have fallen.

I have been privileged to live in a culture supposedly under the Bible in a country supposedly under the Constitution in which I have had the freedom and the leisure to pursue these questions. There is a circularity here. Had I had a simpler, more difficult life, my faith (in whatever my faith ended up being in) might be “stronger” and less uncertain. But given leisure, I’ve been able to do this critical read.

In the end it is what it is; I am what I am.

For reference, here is my outline of the U.S. Constitution. I find it useful in thinking on these matters to remember at least this much of the detail, about what we are and what we are not, what we specify and what we leave to the people.

Preamble: Who and what we are.

Article I: The Congress in two houses representing the people and the states.

Article II: The Executive

Article III: The Judiciary

Article IV: Relations between the states

Article V: Amendments

Article VI: Carryover and precedence

Article VII: Signatures

Amendment I. Freedom of religion, press, and assembly  
Amendment II. Right to bear arms  
Amendment III. Quartering of soldiers  
Amendment IV. Protection against search and seizure  
Amendment V. Grand Jury indictment and jury trial  
Amendment VI. Speedy trial, notification of charges, availability of witnesses  
Amendment VII. Facts determined by jury  
Amendment VIII. Excessive bail, cruel and unusual punishment  
Amendment IX. Rights listed are not exclusive or exhaustive  
Amendment X. States and personal powers.  
Amendment XI. Suing of other states prohibited  
Amendment XII. Rework of Presidential election process  
Amendment XIII. Slavery prohibited  
Amendment XIV. Rights of former slaves, rebels and debts  
Amendment XV. Suffrage for former slaves  
Amendment XVI. Income tax  
Amendment XVII. Popular election of senators  
Amendment XVIII. Prohibition of intoxicating liquors  
Amendment XIX. Suffrage for women  
Amendment XX. Terms of executive and Congress adjusted, Presidential contingencies  
Amendment XXI. Repeal of prohibition of intoxicating liquors  
Amendment XXII. Term limits for President  
Amendment XXIII. Electoral votes for District of Columbia  
Amendment XXIV. Poll tax prohibited  
Amendment XXV. Dealing with incapacitation of the President  
Amendment XXVI. The age of suffrage is 18  
Amendment XXVII. Congress can raise its own salary but only effective next term

**Summary Statements of Theology, Philosophy, Politics, Science, Spin, and the Human Situation**  
**2010 September 23<sup>rd</sup> to October 16<sup>th</sup> for October 28<sup>th</sup>**

I don't forward other people's spam; I write my own. But this is the end of it.

By now, I don't really have much more to say about anything. Can you imagine? Here is a summary of my basic beliefs.

Existence exists.

We live.

God is there but we don't know him all that well. A lot is done in his name anyway.

It is what you say it is.

More accurate reality is better. (Understanding is believing.)

Where there's heat there's not much light.

Religion interprets whatever happens in fulfillment of its own world view. (An institutional version of "believing is seeing.")

Everyone interprets whatever happens in fulfillment of their own world view. Believing is seeing.

The Law was an improvement over natural instinct. Grace is an improvement over the Law. Both are higher standards that require effort. The effort is less than the effort of suffering natural consequences.

We get a lot of it wrong, but you have to do something. Filth happens. Nothing is perfect.

Believing is seeing. But in the end I'm having trouble grasping and accepting this. Isn't the notion circular? Is there any reality outside of these multiple, parallel perceptual conundrums? Maybe that external reality *is* God that we seek.

The resurrection is worth embracing.

I have spent a great deal of effort and will doubtless spend a great deal more in an attempt to understand God. I do not believe we know much about God, or that what anyone says about him is very accurate. Jesus seemed to agree with this (about us knowing). Knowing God personally doesn't mean knowing much *about* him.

My favorite part of it all was the history. That's partly a personal trait but it's partly because in the history you can see what the other people did, what were their motivations, and what were the consequences. You can learn from the people, good and bad. The history places us in the context of all humanity. We can follow the people. We are the people.

Nearing the end I was mostly quoting. I was running out of things to add and my opinion on how much I had to add was declining, probably from improved self understanding and diminished Bible understanding. Many of my "beliefs" above are beliefs I already had. Believing is seeing for me too. I found some new things in the Bible and the Constitution but not as much as I expected. No radical changes occurred. Should I have expected radical changes?

You find what you look for...

**Why Did I Do This?**

**2010 October 4<sup>th</sup> - 16<sup>th</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup> for 29<sup>th</sup>**

From the beginning until now I've meant to explain why I was doing this. Now the last day has come and I have to say something.

The project was inspired indirectly by Paul Friesen at the last of his family camps that we attended, in 2004, and goes through to the advent of our new pastor at Pasadena Covenant Church, Tim Dally. Both of these men would preach spiritual leadership of the head of the household. Spiritual leadership of the head of the household is, indeed, one reason I've done this, but in my own way, as always. No hour-long expositions from Jeremiah with squirming toddlers in my house, however.

People who are Christian or of Christian heritage should know what it's about. It's about the Bible and what is told in the Bible, so I've e-mailed you something about the Bible every day, five days a week, give or take, for six years, since August 2004.

And we're all American's too, thus the Constitution.

There are other traditions of spiritual leadership. As has often been the case with me, I've had to invent my own. As with any other technique, this has had its pros and cons. I've done what I could. I've done *something*. Where was it *written* that I should have done something else? Seems like we would have come across it by now.

This has been my kinesthetic way of learning: reading, thinking, retyping, and reinterpreting, making physical notes and explaining. So it was about my own education too. No one knows the subject matter like the teacher. (But there is no final exam here, at least not from me.)

It is a little unexpected that I'm not profoundly moved by all this, at least not that I've sensed yet, but am only more troubled than before. Maybe that's the beginning of movement. I wonder, however if trouble is not just a normal artifact of relentlessly advancing age.

As I've said many times before, this has not been intended as a contribution to theology, either a restatement of a school of thought or new work. It's just what I know and what I see and, yes, what I believe. I wouldn't recommend anyone else using anything I've said here in a term paper. I probably wouldn't myself, but I might refer back to it if I had the right assignment. "What *was* I thinking?"

As I've also said many times before, it annoys me that millions of people go around supposedly basing their life on the Bible who know little or nothing about it. Now *we* all know something about it. It's very democratic to take responsibility for yourself and read something for yourself and stand for what you stand for, rather than depend on "leadership" to interpret it to you. Of course leadership, who makes their life of the work of interpretation, does a better job than we lay people do, but they need a starting position from which to work with us and, with me, this is it.

So, in the end, why *have* I endeavored to study the Bible and the U.S. Constitution in depth?

In part because I am a Christian and a U.S. Citizen and, being literate, see these as obligations of faith and patriotism.

Survey familiarity with both of these documents, in their entirety, something we have now accomplished, demonstrates that there are many things about God's character, and about the character of America, that do not align with fundamentalist priorities of any sort. I have nothing against fundamentals but unfortunately, fundamentalists are those who draw a circle encompassing their understanding of faith (usually the circle and the understanding are both quite small) that shuts most others out as deplorable heretics. Everyone has some good points. Most everyone also subscribes to some erroneous beliefs. That being the case, it is unfortunate that believing is indeed seeing, but that's the crux of the human situation.

There was a problem with the five year prediction. It was about a year off. When I started, I took the New International Version (NIV) I was using at the time (1983, Bible Study Fellowship gift from Viann) and just counted pages. The calculation was easy. In the middle, for my 51<sup>st</sup> birthday in 2007, Viannah gave me an Archaeological Study Bible NIV. It had the same text, but a lot more marginal and background material so the pages counted differently. Differently enough to add a whole year over the last half of the project. It might have been seven....

In order to contain the scope of this project and keep it "doable," however, I reduced my ambitions not to include the Apocrypha or other extra-Protestant literature, or extra-Constitutional literature like the Federalist Papers. To have done that would have meant doing this every day for the rest of my life, probably, and with diminishing returns since I know even less about those things. I do plan to *read* those myself, as I will discuss shortly, but I will not be sending out regular e-mails about them. After all, I'm not the scholar, just the lay reader.

I've gone through two computers and four word processors on this project. It got hard right here at the end when the daily routine structure of it evaporated and I was left with a large pile of notes I had taken over the last six years to be somehow incorporated into something conclusive and final. This being the very end, here I am trying to organize my own random thoughts from over half a decade. From nearly five and a half decades!

Here is the deal on copyrights. I thought the Bible was the Bible, but of course, the version I am using is a book that is translated in modern times and there are organizations and publishers who hold the modern copyrights to the *translations*. They are fairly unrestrictive, reasonably so. They don't want to make it a hassle to print up a church bulletin, after all, but for extensive use like I've made, at least since February 26, 2007, and even more especially recently when there has been so much quoting, I should be posting the notice that's at the bottom of this file, which I guess, by putting at the bottom of this file, I've done. I've put it on the index page for the web archive too.



[http://cbduncan.110mb.com/Faith/Bible\\_Const/Bible\\_Const.html](http://cbduncan.110mb.com/Faith/Bible_Const/Bible_Const.html)

What am I going to do now? There is a lot of other information in my faith and in my culture that is not canonized into the Bible (or the Constitution) and I'm going to go through some of that. I plan to start with the Apocrypha, the difference between the Catholic and Protestant Bibles, the material thrown out by Martin Luther, just to see what it's all about. I've never heard preaching or teaching on it so, only unsubstantiated disparagements. Maybe I can be half-way open minded. It would be great to read everything C. S. Lewis wrote, and St. Francis of Assisi, and Martin Luther, and ... Calvin. When I was small my parents bought "The Great Books of the Western World" in the interest of our general education. I've moved the set a lot over the decades but only ever read one of the books, and referred in part to a few others. The books have a recommended ten year semi-comprehensive reading plan. I think I'll do something like that too. That will include the Federalist Papers, Newton, Calvin, selections from the Bible, and everything else considered "great" from Homer to Freud. It probably won't be exhaustive but it will be something and that's what we're trying to do here: something.

And then, who knows?

So as we conclude the concluding conclusions here, let me pass the baton back to each of you. After all, "spiritual leadership" doesn't mean doing all the spiritual work for the followers for them (Job notwithstanding), it just means showing the way. You have to walk your own path for yourself and to the extent that I have been helpful, I am grateful.

I listened to dad preach every Sunday and some Wednesdays, some Sundays up to six times, for about twenty years. (Dadmath: I estimate 3000-4000 sermons.) I was also his son and lived with him as family. His way of thinking and the school of thought that he came from have clearly had a substantial influence on me and I have told you many of his stories here. That was another of my purposes, as it has turned out. But in the end, I had to go off and live for myself and do something about my own beliefs.

Before he died, I was already asking some of the questions that would lead to me starting this study a few years later and I think he was troubled by some of it (I know I would have been if I were him!). But right before the end he communicated to me that it was all OK. He knew that, for better or for worse, his part of the work was done and he left us all in the care of the Father, who he trusted, and who had assured him that we would all be looked after. It wasn't, after all, *what* we knew; it was *Who* we knew.

As you walk your own paths now, I too leave you in the Father's care. I know God, to the extent that I can. I trust him to the extent that I can understand stuff. And I leave you all in his care in the belief that he will also take care of you.

Don't worry; *I'm* not planning on going anywhere anytime soon; I plan to be around for consultation and support for a few more decades. Let me hear from you once in a while and if I have any brilliant new insights I'll be sure to pass them along, as verbosely as possible!

But for now, that's it!

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