

# “The Essentials”

In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things love.

## Essential #4

God's Conversation for Life

## Deuteronomy 30:11-20

*For this commandment that I command you today is not too hard for you, neither is it far off. It is not in heaven, that you should say, "who will ascend to heaven for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?" Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, "Who will ascend to heaven for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?" But the word is very near you. It is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it.*

*See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I command you today, by loving the Lord your God, by walking in his ways, and by keeping his commandments and his statutes and his rules, then you shall live and multiply, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to take possession of it.*

*But if your heart turns away, and you will not hear, but are drawn away to worship other gods and serve them, I declare to you today, that you shall surely perish. You shall not live long in the land that you are going over the Jordan to enter and possess. I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse.*

*Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying his voice and holding fast to him, for he is your life and length of days, that you may dwell in the land that the Lord swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give them.*

The Scriptures (the collection of books) that make up the Bible represent a conversation (a back-and-forth-communication) that God had with a particular segment of humanity over a period of about 2000 years. This conversation culminated in the life, teaching, and mighty acts of Jesus Christ. The fourth essential belief undergirding Christian faith is that the written record of this conversation between the one God, good, loving and in control and a people with whom He sought to share both His goodness and His love is now God's instrument in sharing His goodness and His love with us and the world. In other words, the fourth essential is that the Bible is inspired by God to enable us to live.

When non-believers call into question the Bible's relevance and authority, Christians have usually sought to defend the inerrancy or infallibility of Scripture, stating that the Bible is mistake-free and is consistent and harmonious throughout. In the ensuing argument, nonbelievers point out the "mistakes" in Scripture (such as a different dating for the reigns of the kings of Judah in the books of Kings and Chronicles), while Christians try to reconcile the apparent inconsistencies. Because this particular argument tends to focus on picky details of the Bible, I would like to choose to ignore it in favor of the curious and wonderful way Scripture offers itself as God's definitive conversation with people.

I would like to offer two sets of three observations. The first set of observations are the kind that any fair reader of the Bible, believer or not, might make. The second set of observations have to do with the objections that specifically contemporary (postmodern) readers make regarding the Bible. I care very deeply that the Bible be viewed by Christians as reliable and authoritative, but my objective *in this sermon* has less to do with the Bible's *authority* and more with its *inspiration*, not only the way God inspired it but the way it continues to inspire people into loving relationships with God and with each other. I believe that many people today do indeed believe that the Bible is inerrant and authoritative, but few of even those who say the Bible is the Word of God actually read it because they do not believe in their heart that it has anything relevant to say for their lives. In this message I am not trying to prove that the Bible is free from error but to show why you want to read it.

Here are three deceptively simple observations about the Bible that any careful reader might notice: 1. it is human 2. it is countercultural, 3. its point of view tends to be subjective. Allow me to elaborate on each.

The Bible is human, it is not “too hard” or “far off.” It is not “in heaven” or “beyond the sea.” In Scripture God never speaks directly to us without a human intermediary (unlike the Book of Mormon). In the passage quoted above, God seems to speak directly, but of course it is actually through Moses. Not even Jesus wrote His own Gospels, but entrusted them to *witnesses*. Indeed, the biblical authors are all witnesses rather than philosophers, historians or scholars. And the people they describe are not ideal, otherworldly heroes, but human beings with human frailties, and suffering in a very real human world (didn't Mark Twain say that no child should be allowed to read the Bible because of the negative influence the Bible characters provided?). The Bible is not only human because it describes the human condition, however; it is human because it has such incredible adaptability to all human settings. Every Christian group and denomination holds that the Bible continues to reflect God's word, even in translation (indeed, the Bible of the very first Christians was a translation into Greek of the Hebrew Scriptures). In translation, the Bible becomes an integral and influential part of each culture it enters. Our own Anglo-American culture, even in its “secular” expression, has been so influenced by the Scriptures that traces of that influence can be found in every piece of legislation, every political speech, and every party platform.

The Bible is, however, also countercultural: *if your heart turns away (from God), and you will not hear, but are drawn away to worship other gods and serve them . . .* Each one of the Biblical books has an edge that challenges “the gods” of each and any culture. Even those people who first heard the prophets speak or listened to a Gospel or an Epistle being read, recognized that, although the words may have been comprehensible to their cultural situation, the obedience demanded by those words would set them in opposition to the prevailing culture. For this reason, ancient people would have said that they were merely *recognizing* those books that offered the inspired words of God rather than *selecting* the books to be included in the Bible. Furthermore, the central events of God's active presence that were experienced, described, and reflected upon in the books of the Bible—these events were not *natural*. The freeing of the people from Egypt under Moses, the confrontation of God against the false gods of the Canaanites, and the Resurrection of Jesus from the dead were all experienced as *miraculous* events that shattered culture-bound understandings of God.

The Bible's usual point of view is subjective rather than objective. One dictionary's definition of a subjective opinion is one “arising from one's *experience* rather than rational thought or scientific observation. Take, for instance, the commandments: *If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I command you today, by loving the Lord your God, by walking in his ways, and by keeping his commandments and his statutes and his rules, then . . . the Lord your God will bless you . . .* They are offered as *relational* rather than *propositional* truths. This is to say that the Bible does not offer a way to study God in a detached way but only offers truth about God in the context of a life lived with God.

My second set of observations have to do with three specifically contemporary objections to the Bible: 1. It demands obedience, while we are in an age of tolerance, 2. It is ancient, while we are in an age of constant progress, 3. It allows for many different (and divisive) interpretations, and we are in an age that is fed up with religious conflict.

The Bible certainly does demand obedience. The passage quoted above clearly represents the very voice of God setting a stark choice of obedience and life or disobedience and death before the Hebrews. We would rather the Bible presented a God who “accompanies” people, who makes suggestions, who is non-directive. Set as it was in a polytheistic society where people could choose to serve the god they liked, the Bible offers the choice between belief in a revealed God that is in control or belief in an idol that we control. Furthermore, as the current chaotic situation in the USA so eloquently illustrates, community is not possible without respect for common principles, procedures, and rules. If the good God is to be in control and if God’s love is to call forth a community, then God must set forth principles, procedures, and rules for that community to obey.

The Bible certainly is ancient, and in a culture that regards last year’s model as obsolete, the Bible can naturally be viewed as obsolete. There is virtually no area of human science, study, or performance where ancient authorities have not been completely superseded. No one would take up a 2,000 year old book to practice medicine, to teach accounting, or to train an athlete, so how can an ancient book possibly be a guide to life? There is, however, an area of human endeavor where achievements are not superseded and rendered obsolete—that of the arts: painting, sculpture, literature, architecture, and music. In the arts something may be old and yet be both irreplaceable and unrepeatably. It is inconceivable that a contemporary dramatist would be able to reproduce the achievement of Shakespeare, or a contemporary composer be able to improve upon Beethoven. In the areas of sculpture and architecture some of the greatest human achievements of all time took shape at the same time the Bible was being written, think of the Sphinx, the Parthenon, and the work of Phidias. Because of the unrepeatably supernatural events that shaped its record of a unique conversation between God and a particular human community, the Bible cannot be superseded.

The Bible certainly does allow for multiple interpretations. There is nothing that non-Christians find as confusing and frustrating as the hundreds of competing churches, denominations, and groups that all claim to teach “Biblical doctrine.” In our contemporary setting many scholars have even given up trying to teach the Bible itself as a harmonious whole, and spill oceans of ink (or many megabytes, as the case may be) setting Scripture against itself. The Bible is meant to be interpreted. It is meant to be interpreted because even though it reflects the defining moments in God’s conversation with people, it is not meant to be the end of the conversation. In the old King James Version, 2 Peter 1:20 reads, “no prophecy of Scripture is of private interpretation.” The Roman Catholic Church has always held that Scripture is to be interpreted according to *tradition* or in conversation with Christians of the past. Although Evangelical Churches have defended the right of Christians to read the Bible for themselves, the founders of our churches were also in conversation with those who had gone before. So Scripture provides a framework within which Christians enter into dialogue with God and with each other, and none of us should approach the Bible in isolation, but all need to hold their readings open to correction by God and by others.

The Bible is God’s instrument to constitute a people from “among all the nations of the earth” and to equip them to live in fellowship with each other and with God. If the Bible, with all its countercultural humanity, is read “in faith” (with an open heart rather than just analytically) by people who wish to obey God and enter into the defining conversation that God began with the ancient Hebrews, then it offers a *coherent* worldview. This worldview is marked by the conviction that there is a single good and loving God who is in control and who is in the core of His being Lover- Beloved-and Uniting Love. Furthermore, this worldview has been the single worldview that has best enabled people to unite across all boundaries: ethnic, political, language, cultural, racial, economic, technological, and caste.

The authority of the Bible cannot be proven scientifically or philosophically (even though the disciplines of history and archaeology have shown the Bible’s narrative to be accurate). However, when the Bible is read *in FAITH* it does indeed offer the opportunity of *LIFE*: life together with others, life of disciplined freedom, and life in fellowship with God. The book is inspired; give it a chance to inspire you. Choose life.