

Jesus or the Bible? A Conflict of Authority

A sermon on John 5 by Nathan Nettleton, 26 May 2019

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Message

Following the living Jesus is the pathway to healing, integrity and life, and sometimes it comes into conflict with “following the Bible”.

Acknowledgement

Most of the exegesis and many of the images and punchlines in this sermon were drawn directly from Bruxy Cavey, specifically from a recent interview that he did with Jarrod McKenna on the [Inverse Podcast](#).

Sermon

One of the things that our church is sometimes accused of is teaching things that are contrary to the Bible. It has been said about a number of issues, but the most frequent hot potato issues have mostly been to do with sex. There have been plenty of other candidates, but sex seems to be the issue that gets people jumping up and down and demanding that everyone fall into line with their take on the “authoritative teaching” of the Bible.

Well, let me be up front here. To those who say that we, or I, have taught things that go against something in the Bible, I put my hand up and say, “Guilty as charged.” Guilty as charged because there are times when following Jesus and obeying the Bible part company, and when that happens, I want us to follow Jesus every time.

Our gospel reading tonight tackled this question quite directly. I extended the reading to include most of John chapter 5, because we usually only hear the healing story in the first 9 verses, and not the conflict over authority that it introduces. So, a bit of a Bible study tonight. Let’s walk our way through the story.

The healing story itself is not the main point, but it is a quirky one nevertheless. It is quirky because it sits on a blurry boundary between orthodox Jewish faith and pagan superstition. There was a belief that the pool of Beth-zatha had magical healing properties. Sacred pools at healing shrines were not part of authorised biblical Judaism. This one, and others like it were probably connected to the cult of Asclepius, the Greek god of medicine. Popular religion is often a dubious blend of orthodoxy and superstition, and it is here in this blurry zone that we find Jesus today.

The way that the magic was supposed to work was that every now and then, the waters in the pool would bubble up, and when they did, the first person to jump in would be healed. This sounds like one of those survival of the fittest medical systems designed by Darwinian capitalism. Those with the most resources or the least actual disability get the best chance of getting in first for today’s one available healing. The athlete with the toothache is always going to beat the man in our story who’s been flat on his back for 38 years.

Anyway, Jesus confirms the man’s desire to be made well, and then says, “Stand up, pick your mat and get on your way,” and the man is healed.

And then John the gospel writer, consummate story-teller that he is, drops his bombshell. “Now the day that this happened was a sabbath.” This is the plot explosion that is supposed to make you gasp or swear in shock.

It's bigger even than you might have realised. Jesus is often in trouble for healing people on the sabbath, but this one is bigger than that. Not only has he healed this bloke, but he has specifically instructed him to pick up his mat and carry it off. And in the Hebrew Bible when people were trying to work out how strictly to interpret the biblical prohibition of working on the sabbath, the prophet Jeremiah had specifically said that you were not to pick things up and carry them around the city on the sabbath day (Jeremiah 17:21-24). But Jesus says, "Pick up your mat, and go carry it through the city." This guy didn't even need his mat anymore. Is Jesus picking a fight or what?

The nature of the fight is immediately clear. The religious authorities confront the healed man, telling him that he is going against the bible by carrying his mat, and quite understandably, the man defends himself by saying that it wasn't his idea. So once they establish that he's carrying the mat because Jesus told him to, they forget the man with the mat and turn their outrage on Jesus.

The text says that they "started persecuting Jesus, because he was doing such things on the sabbath." The issue was one of authority. They hold the biblical law to be the ultimate authority, but Jesus is explicitly instructing people to do things that are at odds with biblical teaching. Big trouble.

Now at this point, you might expect Jesus to try to hose down the conflict and smooth things over. You might expect him to say, "Come on reverend sirs. This is not work. Let's celebrate an act of healing and liberation done with nothing more than a word, not really work at all. I totally support the orthodox sabbath teaching."

We might expect that, but Jesus doesn't try to smooth things over at all. In fact he escalates it. "Working on the sabbath? Let me tell you, my Father is still working, and I also am working. Work, work, working!"

In case there is any doubt that he is escalating things, the narrator tells us that after this, the religious authorities were not just persecuting him, they were seeking to kill him. Not only was he breaking the sabbath and flaunting it, but he was putting himself above the Bible and on an equal footing with God.

And Jesus hasn't finished. He then goes into an extended spiel about the relationship between the Father and the Son, and how the Son is only doing what he sees the Father doing. In case it is not obvious enough that he is using a workplace picture with the Father teaching the Son the family trade, he keeps on dropping in the "work" word. "The Father will show him greater *works* than these. Work, work, works!"

Eventually, having built it up and built it up, Jesus finally addresses the question of the Bible and the authority of the Bible teachers directly. And he's not too gentle about it.

"You have never heard the Father's voice, and you do not have his word abiding in you, because you do not believe him whom he has sent."

Get that? He is addressing the leading religious experts of his day, the most dedicated, trusted and revered interpreters of the Bible. These people are absolutely full of the Bible, but Jesus

says, “you do not have God’s word abiding in you. You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf.”

Now we’ve hit the crunch point, the heart of the issue. Jesus is saying, “You study the Bible so diligently and carefully and studiously because you think that it is the Bible that gives you life. But the Bible does not give you life, no matter how hard you study it or memorise it or honour it. The Bible’s job is to bear witness, to point you towards the one who can and will give you life. The Bible is a signpost, but you lot are so busy honouring the signpost that you are completely missing what it is pointing you to.”

And for good measure, to really rub in his point, Jesus ends by quoting their highest authority back at them. “If you really believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me.” They always saw themselves as standing in the tradition of Moses, as people of the book, people of the biblical law, the law of Moses. “If you really believed Moses, you would believe me, for he was pointing you to me.”

So here’s the thing. When people who make a big deal of being Bible-believing Christians want to criticise us for not being fully obedient to the Bible in the way they think we should, I’m willing to wear that. And I’m willing to wear it because they said the same thing about Jesus, and he was willing to wear it.

All manner of atrocities have been committed by people who claimed to be acting in accordance with the Bible. Violent crusades have been waged. Genocide has been perpetrated. People have been persecuted and tortured. Women have been downtrodden and abused. LGBT people have been subjected to violence and hate-speech and driven out of the churches. People have been dispossessed or subjected to slavery on the basis of skin colour. All these things can be and have been justified from the Bible. But they can’t be justified when you learn to read the Bible the way that Jesus reads and interprets the Bible.

The Bible is not the authoritative Word of God. It is the witness to the authoritative Word of God. The Bible doesn’t even call itself the Word of God, despite what all those Bible waving people want to call it. The Bible calls itself the Scriptures, and it calls Jesus the Word of God.

Does that mean that we no longer value the Bible, that we’ve thrown out the Bible? Absolutely not. The Bible is the primary witness to Jesus, the Word of God. We should study it all the more, and not only those parts that are specifically about Jesus. Much of the Bible teaches us about all the ways we’ve misunderstood God and got it wrong in our attempts to follow God, and we’ll have a very hard time understanding the ways Jesus seeks to correct those things if we haven’t first learned about those things in the Bible.

The Bible is the definitive signpost, the primary witness to who Jesus is and what Jesus was on about, and if we want to follow Jesus we will need to pay attention to that signpost. But if we get sucked in to the idea that the signpost, the Bible, is the be all and end all, we will, Jesus says, miss the point. We’ll be stuck in a rut, quibbling over whether someone can pick up his mat on the sabbath, while the Word of God, Jesus, has gone dancing on without us, joyously celebrating a wonderful healing and liberation of one who neither the Bible nor the Bible-wavers had been able to help for 38 years.

Yes, we still love and value the Bible. Yes we still love to study and learn from the Bible. But we learn to read it through the eyes of Jesus, through the teaching of Jesus. We don't try to edit Jesus to conform to the rest of the Bible. Instead we gladly receive as God-breathed teaching anything in the Bible that conforms to the example and teaching of Jesus. We learn to read the Bible from the ways that Jesus reads and interprets the Bible. This story tonight is one of the more explicit examples of his testimony about the Bible.

In the very last verse of this same gospel, the Apostle John tells us that "there are also many other things that Jesus did and said. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written." In other words, don't think that the Bible is some kind of last will and testament from our dearly departed God. There is much more that the living Jesus has said and done, and much more that the risen Jesus is continuing to say and do. And when that takes him dancing on beyond the boundaries of older biblical teaching, our call is to go dancing on with him, following in the footsteps of the risen and living Jesus.

So let the Bible-wavers accuse us of not following every jot and tittle of the Bible. Let them say that we have abandoned the Bible or that we are being selective in the way we read it (as Jesus clearly was, by the way). But if they start saying that we no longer believe in an inspired, infallible, authoritative Word of God, then it is time to stand up and say no. Because we absolutely do. We absolutely put our trust in the inspired, infallible, authoritative Word of God, and his name is ...? Jesus!