

**“What Did Jesus Believe About the Bible”**  
(Matthew 5:17-18)

**Introduction**

On June 14, 2000 Southern Baptists came together in Orlando, Florida for their annual meeting. The most important issue on the agenda was the *2000 Baptist Faith and Message*. While the 1925 and 1963 confessions had served us well, many believed certain theological currents and trends made it wise to reconsider, and where necessary, revise the 1963 statement. Article I addresses the Scriptures. The following is the statement which the convention overwhelmingly adopted.

“The Holy Bible was written by men divinely inspired and is God’s revelation of Himself to man. It is a perfect treasure of divine instruction. It has God for its author, salvation for its end, and truth, without any mixture of error, for its matter. *Therefore, all Scripture is totally true and trustworthy. It reveals the principles by which God judges us, and therefore is, and will remain to the end of the world, the true center of Christian union, and the supreme standard by which all human conduct, creeds, and religious opinions should be tried. All Scripture is a testimony to Christ, who is Himself the focus of divine revelation.*”

*Exodus 24:4; Deuteronomy 4:1-2; 17:19; Joshua 8:34; Psalms 19:7-10; 119:11, 89, 105, 140; Isaiah 34:16; 40:8; Jeremiah 15:16; 36; Matthew 5:17-18; 22:29; Luke 21:33; 24:44-46; John 5:39; 16:13-15; 17:17; Acts 2:16ff.; 17:11; Romans 15:4; 16:25-26; 2 Timothy 3:15-17; Hebrews 1:1-2, 4:12; 1 Peter 1:25; 2 Peter 1:19-21.*

This is a fine statement, rooted both in Scripture and the language of historic Baptist Confessions. However, from its initial presentation this statement ignited a firestorm of protests among a segment of our denomination. In particular they decried 2 points:

- 1) Instead of saying the Bible “is the record of God’s revelation” as did the 1963 statement, the 2000 statement affirmed that “the Bible is God’s revelation ...”;
- 2) Instead of saying “the criterion by which the Bible is to be interpreted is Jesus Christ,” again as did the 1963 *Baptist Faith & Message*, the 2000 statement affirms “All scripture is a testimony to Christ, who is Himself the focus of divine revelation.”

Both revisions were viewed by its authors and the convention as a safeguard against neoorthodox manipulation which used the 1963 statement:

- 1) to say some of the Bible is God’s revelation but not all of it is, and
- 2) that the teachings of Jesus recorded in Scripture at times should, and even must, be set in opposition to other Biblical texts and authors.

During debate at the Convention a pastor from Texas said to the astonishment of thousands “that while the Bible is true and trustworthy ... the Bible is still just a book” (*B.P.* 6-21-00). Later in a telephone interview he told Baptist Press, “As I shared, I believe the Bible is a book that God has given us for guidance. It’s a book that points us to the truth. We’re not supposed to have a relationship with a book.” These comments, confusing and misguided as they are, were mild, in comparison to what followed. In an editorial in the *Baptist Standard*, the state paper of Texas, the following was written,

“If the Bible alone is our primary guide, then all parts of the Bible receive equal weight. It is a flat Bible. For example, the words of Moses, Jesus and the Apostle Paul are equally authoritative. If, however, Jesus is the guide to interpreting Scripture, then Jesus’ words and clear actions take precedence over their apparent discrepancies with other Scripture passages, such as the Old Testament codes and some of Paul’s admonitions.

Some Scriptures, especially portions of the Old Testament, clearly stand in paradox to Jesus’ life and teachings, also recorded in Scripture. Other passages, such as Paul’s writings, seem to be at odds with each other, and Jesus’ words and actions clarify and separate the timeless and universal from the culturally specific.

Baptists who place Jesus over the Bible still affirm the full authority of the Bible upon their lives. They do not exalt personal experience over Scripture; rather, they base their decisions upon Scripture. But some passages are paradoxical; they say different things about the same subject. In those occasions, Jesus-first people look to Jesus for help in understanding what the biblical norm means for help in applying the Scripture to their lives.”

After this rather convoluted and sad exhibition of sloppy theology the editor concludes,

“So, the SBC leaders - - who trumpeted “biblical inerrancy” as a battle cry to gain and implement control of the convention during the past 20 years - - have a high view of Scripture, after all. In fact, it’s higher than we thought. Rather than a Trinity, they worship a defacto Quartet: Father, Son, Holy Spirit and Holy Bible, with the Bible acting as the arbiter of the other three.

This is dangerous, for several reasons.

First, it refutes orthodoxy - - which asserts the primacy of the Godhead: Father, Son and Holy Spirit - - by exalting the Bible to near-divinity and supplanting the influence of Jesus.

Second, by elevating a thing, as precious and authoritative as the Bible is, to such lofty status, it at least implies idolatry, the worship of something other than God.

Third, it denigrates the influence of Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit to work in lives and guide them toward God’s will.

Fourth, it begs a vital question: Who then is to provide the authoritative interpretation of all Scripture?

If Scripture stands over Jesus, then the teachings and actions of Jesus are inadequate.” (*Baptist Standard*, Marv Knox, 6-19-00)

A local Louisville pastor would add, “Not all Scripture rises to the full level of Christ.” Later the “BGCT Seminary Study Committee Report” said the *2000 Baptist Faith & Message* makes the Bible “equal to God.” Even the occasionally evangelical Christianity Today supplied its 2 cents worth saying the 2000 statement “is poorer without the rich Christo-centric language of the earlier statement.” (*Christianity Today* 8-7-00, p. 36). Strangely neither this editor nor any other detractor noted “Jesus as the criterion” does not appear in the 1925 statement or any other Baptist Confession! As Dr. Al Mohler, Jr., pointed out,

The statement [that Jesus is the criterion] was not simply eliminated. It was replaced with a sentence that is far more in keeping with historic confessions of faith. The new sentence affirms that “All Scripture is a testimony to Christ, who is Himself the pinnacle of divine revelation.” The language of the 1963 statement is not found in any historic confession of faith, nor did it appear in the 1925 *Baptist Faith and Message* as adopted by the SBC ... The 2000 revision is even more Christologically focused than the 1963 statement, and its Christological hermeneutic is stronger, not weaker. In keeping with historic evangelical and Baptist theology, we understand that every single passage of the Bible, in the Old Testament or in the New Testament, is a testimony to Christ. Every word is true, every word is fulfilled in Christ, and Christ affirmed every word of Scripture as fully authoritative.

### **Transition**

Well, just what are we to make of all of this? Have we “demoted Jesus” and improperly elevated the Bible to a status “equal to God”? Though numerous avenues could be profitably pursued, I want to examine just one and perhaps the most important one. I want to try and answer the question, “What did Jesus believe about the Bible? What was the Savior’s view of Scripture?” After all, as Clark Pinnock put it so well, “Unreserved commitment to Jesus requires us to look at the Bible through his eyes.” (*God’s Inerrant Word*, 202). We shall call to the stand several statements made by our Lord, but in particular I want to give attention to Matthew 5:17-18. A careful examination of this text reveals 2 basic truths concerning Jesus’ view of the Bible.

#### **I. Jesus believed all the Scriptures point to Him. 5:17**

- In the greatest sermon ever preached, the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus returns to the theme of the kingdom (3 times in 5:19-20)
  - These verses serve as the introduction to the “6 great antitheses” of 5:21-48. They also explain how it is that we can live out the beatitudes of 5:3-12 and be the salt of the earth and the light of the world (5:13-16).
- 1) 5:17 introduces us to the high view of Scripture held by Jesus. Though there is no questions He has the Old Testament Scriptures in view, what He affirmed about the Old Testament He also promised concerning the New Testament as well. In John 16:12-15 He said,

“I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. However, when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth; for He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak; and He will tell you things to come. He will glorify Me, for He will take of what is Mine and declare it to you. All things that the Father has are Mine. Therefore I said that He will take of Mine and declare it to you.”

- 2) Jesus introduced teachings that were new and striking. Indeed, as John 7:46 states, “No man ever spoke like this man.” Some may have concluded that His teaching constituted a decisive break with the Old Testament Scriptures. That is certainly the judgment of some Baptists today. Not so says Jesus. Do not think (or consider) that I came to destroy (annual abrogate, disintegrate, demolish.) J.A. Alexander notes the idea is that of “the destruction of a whole by the complete separation of its parts, as when a house is taken down by being taken to pieces.” Jesus says I did not come to tear apart or dismantle the law and prophets (a reference to the whole of Scriptures of His day). I did not come to destroy (repeated for emphasis) but to fulfill. Note that the antithesis is not between “abolish” and “keep” but between “abolish” and “fulfill.”
- 3) Jesus provides not only an emphatic denial but also a positive declaration for his coming – he came to fulfill, complete the Scriptures. To set them aside was never His agenda. To bring them to fulfillment and fruition was why He came. Don Carson has it right when he says, “Jesus fulfills the entire Old Testament in many ways. Because they point toward him, he has certainly not come to abolish them. Rather, he has come to fulfill them in a rich diversity of ways ... Jesus does not conceive of his life and ministry in terms of *opposition* to the Old Testament, but in terms of *bringing to fruition* that toward which it points. Thus the law and the prophets, far from being abolished, find their valid continuity in terms of their outworking in Jesus. The detailed prescriptions of the Old Testament may well be superceded, because whatever is prophetic must be in some sense provisional. But whatever is prophetic likewise discovers its legitimate continuity in the happy arrival of that toward which it has pointed.” (Carson, *Sermon on the Mount*, 37). That our Lord would have said “All Scripture is a testimony to Christ, who is Himself the focus of divine revelation” which concludes the *Baptist Faith & Message 2000* on Scripture can hardly be questioned.

John 5:39 – “You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of me.”

Luke 24:25-27 – “Then He said to them, “O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! Ought not the Christ to have suffered these things and to enter into His glory?” And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself.”

Luke 24:44-45 – “Then He said to them, “These are the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me.” And He opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures.”

**★I find my Lord in the Book**

There is an anonymous poem which beautifully expresses the fact that Jesus Christ is the theme of the entire Bible:

I find my Lord in the Bible where ever I chance to  
look, He is the theme of the Bible the center  
and heart of the Book;  
He is the Rose of Sharon, He is the Lily fair, Where  
ever I open my Bible the Lord of the Book is  
there.

He, at the Book's beginning, gave to the earth its  
form, He is the Ark of shelter bearing the brunt  
of the storm,  
The Burning Bush of the desert, the budding of  
Aaron's Rod,  
Where ever I look in the Bible I see the Son of  
God.

The Ram upon Mt. Moriah, the Ladder from earth to  
sky,  
The Scarlet Cord in the window, and the  
Serpent lifted high,  
The smitten rock in the desert, the Shepherd with  
staff and crook,  
The face of my Lord I discover where ever I  
open the Book.

He is the Seed of the Woman, the Savior Virgin-  
born; He is the Son of David, whom men  
rejected with scorn,  
His garments of grace and of beauty the stately Aaron  
deck,  
He is a priest forever, for He is Melchizedek.

Lord of eternal glory whom John, the Apostle saw;  
Light of the golden city, Lamb without spot or  
flaw,  
Bridegroom coming at midnight, for whom the  
Virgins look.  
Where ever I open my Bible, I find my Lord in the  
Book.

**Transition**

Jesus believed all the Scriptures point to Him.

**II. Jesus believed all the Scriptures were perfect in detail. 5:18**

- Verse 17 affirms a promise – fulfillment understanding of Jesus' view of Scripture, not a promise – abolish paradigm.

- Verse 18 provides the Christological and theological rationale.
  - 1) Jesus introduces verse 18 with a note of personal authority that transcended all other rabbi's. "For assuredly" or "for truly" or "I tell you the truth" is the word *Amen*. It alerts us that the words that will follow are of paramount importance and authority.
  - 2) Till heaven and earth pass away means until the end of the age, as long as the present world order persists.
  - 3) One jot (Gr. *iota*) a reference to the *yod*, the smallest letter in the Hebrew alphabet, similar to our comma.
  - 4) One tittle (Gr. *kerasia*), the smallest projection or part of a Hebrew letter, similar to that which distinguishes our "F" from an upside down "L."
  - 5) Will by no means (*ou me*) a double negative used for force. "No not."
  - 6) Shall pass away from the law 'til all is fulfilled
    - In the Lukan parallel we read, "It is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one tittle of the law to fail." (Luke 16:17)
    - Jesus in the strongest possible language affirms the reliability and truthfulness of the Scriptures. He is not saying the Old Testament contains some truth or that it becomes truth when men and women have a significant encounter with it. As he affirms in John 10:35, "the Scripture cannot be broken." As it proclaims in prayer to the Father in John 17:17, "Your word is truth." The outstanding scholar H.C.G. Moule says it well, "[Jesus] absolutely trusted the Bible; and though there are in it things inexplicable and intricate that have puzzled me so much, I am going, not in a blind sense, but reverently, to trust the Book because of Him." (Pache, 223).

### Illustration

I, as anyone who knows me knows, am no fan of liberal/antisupernatural theology or destructive biblical criticism. I am not impressed with its worldview, unhealthy biases or schewed methodologies. Still, I believe we can learn even from those with whom we disagree, and it is sometimes the case that a breath of scholarly fresh air and honesty blows our way from this camp. When it comes to what Jesus and the Church has believed about the Bible some of our moderate Baptist brothers and sisters would do well to listen to some of their heroes.

Rudolf Bultmann – "Jesus agreed always with the scribes of his time in accepting without question the authority of the (Old Testament) law ... that the idea that Jesus had attacked the authority of the law was wholly unknown to the Christian community" (*Jesus and the Word*, 61, 63).

Emil Brunner – "The doctrine of Verbal Inspiration was already known to pre-Christian Judaism and was probably also taken over by Paul and the rest of the Apostles" (*The Christian Doctrine of God*, 107).

Kenneth Kantzer in an article entitled “Christ and Scripture” notes,

“H.J. Cadbury, Harvard professor and one of the more extreme New Testament critics of the last generation, once declared that he was far more sure as a mere historical fact that Jesus held to the common Jewish view of an infallible Bible than that Jesus believed in His own messiahship. Adolf Harnack, greatest church historian of modern times, insists that Christ was one with His apostles, the Jews, and the entire early Church in complete commitment to the infallible authority of the Bible. John Knox, author of what is perhaps the most highly regarded recent life of Christ, states that there can be no question that this view of the Bible was taught by our Lord Himself. The liberal critic, F. C. Grant, concludes that in the New Testament, “It is everywhere taken for granted that Scripture is trustworthy, infallible, and inerrant.”

Millard Erickson, sometime professor at Truett Seminary on the campus of Baylor University, in his Christian Theology calls upon the testimony of liberal theologian Kirsopp Lake as witness to this issue:

It is a mistake often made by educated persons who happen to have but little knowledge of historical theology to suppose that fundamentalism is a new and strange form of thought. It is nothing of the kind; it is the partial and uneducated survival of a theology which was once universally held by all Christians. How many were there, for instance, in Christian churches in the eighteenth century who doubted the infallible inspiration of the Scripture? A few perhaps, but very few. No, the fundamentalist may be wrong; I think that he is. But it is we who have departed from the tradition, not he; and I am sorry for anyone who tries to argue with a fundamentalist on the basis of authority. The *Bible* and the corpus theologicum of the Church are on the fundamentalist side. [italics added] (Lake, *The Religion of Yesterday and Today*, 61).

When we survey our Lord’s teaching in the Gospels we discover that the judgments of these scholars is confirmed.

1. Jesus consistently treated the historical narratives of the Old Testament as straightforward records of fact. He referred to Abel (Luke 11:51), Noah (Matt. 24:37-39), Abraham (Jn 8:56), Sodom and Gomorrah (Matt. 10:15, 11:23-24), Lot (Luke 17:28-32), Isaac and Jacob (Matt. 8:11), the manna (Jn 6:31), the wilderness serpent (Jn 3:14), David (Matt. 22:43), Solomon (Matt. 6:29, 12:42), Elijah (Luke 4:25-26), Elisha (Luke 4:27), Jonah (Matt. 12:39-41) and Moses (Matt. 8:4), among others. No where is there the slightest hint that he questioned their historicity or the accuracy of the account.
2. It is interesting to note that Jesus often chose as the basis of his teaching those very stories that many modern skeptics find unacceptable (e.g., Adam and Eve, Noah’s flood, Sodom and Gomorrah, and Jonah).

3. For Jesus, Scripture was the final court of appeal in his disputes with the Pharisees and Sadducees. In their battle in the wilderness both Jesus and Satan accepted scriptural statements as arguments against which no further argument was possible (Matt. 4:1-11). Jesus might set aside or reject the Rabbinic or Pharisaical interpretation of the Old Testament, which He does in Matthew 5:21-48, but He never questioned its authority or truthfulness.

The early Pinnock saw this clearly when he wrote,

Jesus' doctrine of inspiration receives expression in the Sermon on the Mount. Before setting forth his ethical instructions, Jesus explained his intention. "Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them" (Mt. 5:17). Evidently he does not want us to think that the thrust of his teaching is to violate or even to devalue Old Testament revelation. The saying which is also contained in Luke (16:17) has an entirely genuine ring to it. Jesus' enemies were eager to pin an "antinomian" label on him if they could. Therefore, Jesus made it clear that the object of his criticisms was not the Bible, but the traditions which the Rabbis had built as a fence around it, traditions which in practice enjoyed an authority actually higher than the written Word. He assures us that his confidence in the divine character of Scripture does not stop short even of its smallest elements. "Not an iota, not a dot, will pass" (Mt. 5:18). He issues a stern warning: "Whoever then relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but he who does them and teaches them shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven" (v. 19).

No, liberal scholar James Barr misses it when he writes,

"Jesus took Jewish scripture as it was, as his contemporaries did, and he used it as they did in this respect, as a source through which authoritative intimations of divine truth had been given. Thus if Jesus refers to a passage in Exodus or in Deuteronomy with the words "Moses said," it is quite mistaken to read this as if he was placing his own full messianic and divine authority behind the assertion that these books were actually written by the historical Moses. No such question entered his head and there is nothing in the Gospels that suggests that his teaching was intended to cope with it. Historical questions interested him little." (*Beyond Fundamentalism*, 11).

\*Jesus said, "Not a jot or tittle ..."

No, former Southern professor, Alan Culpepper, got it wrong when he said, "Jesus had remarkably little to say about the nature of Scripture ... [and that] Jesus demands [in the Sermon on the Mount] a standard of righteousness higher than that set by the Hebrew Scriptures and the traditions of the Pharisees" (*Unfettered Word*, 26-27).

\*The traditions of the Pharisees yes, the Hebrew Scriptures no way. Our Lord said, "Not a jot or tittle ..."



No, former Southern professor Frank Stagg is off course when he says, “Those who say the Bible is inerrant are lying ... [and] inerrancy misses the point. If we follow Christ we recognize variant perspectives; we see competing perspectives. You can’t go north and south at the same time and Jesus didn’t try to. He affirmed much but He rejected much.” (*Baptists Today*, 5-23-96).

\*The Savior said, “Not a jot or a tittle ...”

No, former Southern professor Henlee Barnette was simply wrong when he said,

1. The Bible is errant with many self-contradictions.
2. The Bible has errors in the field of science.
3. The Bible is not historically accurate.
4. The Bible is errant as to cosmology. (*Baptists Today*, 9-21-95).

\*Again, our Lord Jesus Christ said, “Not a jot or a tittle ...”

### **Conclusion**

- 1) I had much of my initial theology formed and influenced by Clark Pinnock. Few lament his theological disintegration more than I. Earlier in his life as he reflected, in my judgment, more clearly on this matter of Jesus and the Bible, I believe he saw the issue with crystal clarity.

“Shall we follow Jesus in his view of Scripture? In the light of this evidence the question calls for another. How can a Christian even consider *not* doing so? Our Lord’s view of inspiration was not an incidental tenet on the border of his theology. His belief in the truthfulness of the Old Testament was the rock on which he based his own sense of vocation and the validity of much of his teachings. The question about the inspiration of Scripture really boils down to the issue of Christology. It is impossible to affirm his authority while at the same time seeking to evade his teachings regarding the divine authority of the Bible. If Christ’s claim to be the Son of God is true, his person guarantees the truth of all the rest of his teachings as well. So long as Jesus Christ is confessed, honored, and adored, we may confidently expect a high view of Scripture to persist in the church. And in the light of a considerable defection from that view amongst professed Christians today we boldly appeal for a return to a proper view of the Bible on the basis of the massive fact of our Lord’s doctrine of inspiration. (p. 215)

- 2) In my early days at Southern, I had lunch with a former professor. Even though we held significantly different theologies, he was always very gracious and supportive of me and I enjoyed the time of fellowship with him. As we sat down to eat he looked at me and said, “I want to ask you a question and I mean no offense.” I told him he could ask me anything that he wanted and his question was simply this, “How did you turn out theologically the way that you are? I mean, why do you think theologically like you do?” I told him I was not offended by the question

at all, but I did not think that my answer would be very satisfying. I then simply shared that when I was a little boy at about the age of eight, I trusted Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior. I told him that as I had grown in the faith, I had come to understand that to be a Christian meant to live under the Lordship of Jesus Christ and that His Lordship should permeate every area of our lives. That would include what I think about all matters of theology, including the Bible. I told him that as I had studied the view of Jesus concerning the Bible, I came to the conclusion that I could do nothing other than hold to its complete truthfulness and reliability. To be anything other than that would be to set aside the Lordship of Jesus Christ. That professor simply responded by saying, “I have never thought of it like that before, but it does make a lot of sense.”

- 3) L. R. Scarborough was a great Texas Baptist who succeeded his hero at SWBTS as president: the Texas giant B. H. Carroll. In his book *Gospel Message* he records in moving and memorable words the death of this Texas Titan:

“B. H. Carroll, the greatest man I ever knew, as he was about to die, a few days before he died, expecting me, as he wanted me, to succeed him as president of the seminary, I was in his room one day and he pulled himself up by my chair with his hands and looked me in the face. There were times when he looked like he was forty feet high. And he looked into my face and said, “My boy, on this Hill orthodoxy, the old truth is making one of its last stands and I want to deliver to you a charge and I do it in the blood of Jesus Christ.” He said, “You will be elected president of this seminary. I want you, if there ever comes heresy in your faculty, to take it to your faculty. If they won’t hear you, take it to the trustees. If they won’t hear you take it to the conventions that appointed them. If they won’t hear you, take it to the common Baptists. They will hear you. And,” he said, “I charge you in the name of Jesus Christ to keep it lashed to the old Gospel of Jesus Christ.” As long as I have influence in that institution, by the grace of God I will stand by the old Book.”

With this Texas Baptist we gladly stand as well.