**PARTIAL TRUTH 5**

**GOD SAID IT, I BELIEVE IT, THAT SETTLES IT.**

1st Presbyterian Church

Pittsford, New York

May 21, 2017

6TH Sunday of Easter

Deuteronomy 23:12-14

Matthew 5:17-20

Leviticus 19:19

1 Timothy 2:11-12

Lectionary:

Acts 17:22-31

Psalm 66:8-20

1 Peter 3:33-22

John 14:15-21

In 1969, Glenn “Tex” Evans, a United Methodist minister became one of the first people to connect the energy of youth with the deep needs of the poor. He witnessed a need for home repair assistance in Appalachia and so he recruited 50 teens and adult volunteers to repair homes in Barbourville, Kentucky. They worked on-site during the day and spent time in worship and prayer in the evenings. By summer’s end, four families had safe, warm homes for the winter, fifty young lives had been changed forever.

 Tex was a student of Appalachian culture and a legendary storyteller, he set the tone for what by the late 1970s would become, ASP, or Appalachia Service Project. It is an organization where laughter is king and relationships matter. When I heard about it, I telephoned in 1980 and asked if there might be a place for Presbyterians in this mission work, and he informed me that nearly ½ of the volunteers were Presbyterians and invited us to head to McDowell County in West Virginia, and so I rounded up about six adults and 18 senior highs and headed to the towns of Havaco and Welch.

Among the people I met there were members of the Muncy family. On May 29, 1961, in the little mining town of Welch, West Virginia, the United States Secretary of Agriculture, Orville Freeman delivered $95 of federal food stamps to Mr. and Mrs. Muncy. This was the first issuance of federal food stamps under the Kennedy Administration, and it was the beginning of a rapidly expanding program of federal assistance that would be legislated in the "War on Poverty."

Even then coal production had declined and the closure of US Steel mines a few years later led to an immediate loss of more than 1,200 jobs for Welch. Family income in the country decreased by two-thirds. Real estate values plummeted. Many of the miners just left. This was where we took our Senior High Youth to repair homes for the mission of Appalachia Service Project.

We felt inadequate to meet the needs. I was assigned to be the privy construction specialist. Our first week there my small team built five sturdy outhouses of green cedar boards. The first task in this construction was to dig a hole that was minimally six feet deep. We were advised to make them between 7 and 8 feet. This may not seem like a challenging thing, but if you ever use a shovel to dig a hole that deep, especially where there is shale you will learn that it is harder than it appears.

Certain parasitic worms don’t crawl more than six feet, so if your pit is at least that deep you can cut the potential for an infection from one of these parasites dramatically. We had to measure the correct distances from houses and their placement so as not to contaminate any potential wells. I quickly learned that there was more to privy production than what I first thought. So, you can only imagine how, during one of these ASP mission trips it seemed odd to encounter a portion of the Biblical text from Deuteronomy:

*12You shall have a designated area outside the camp to which you shall go. 13With your utensils you shall have a trowel; when you relieve yourself outside, you shall dig a hole with it and then cover up your excrement. 14Because the Lord your God travels along with your camp, to save you and to hand over your enemies to you, therefore your camp must be holy, so that he may not see anything indecent among you and turn away from you.* (Deut. 23:12-14)

Now I have never preached a sermon on this text. But back when this sanctuary was first built, a number may have started to have been preached in upstate New York. Why? Just a few years later, in the 1880s,[[1]](#footnote-1) indoor plumbing was becoming widely available for the first time, and churches were beginning to debate its merits.[[2]](#footnote-2) Prior to that time, if someone was at church and needed the bathroom, then they would have needed to leave the sanctuary and visit an outdoor privy. Suddenly, all over America people began to think that everyone would benefit if churches modernized with indoor plumbing.

But in the 1880s, when indoor plumbing was an innovation, that passage from Deuteronomy was taken by many faithful folks as the gospel and there were sermons preached where this passage was quoted and the suggestion made that God was against indoor plumbing.

Now when the Israelites were in the wilderness before coming into the Promised Land, the Lord was with them in their camps as they traveled. God made residence in the midst of them. So, according to the instructions in Deuteronomy, the Israelites were to set up an area outside their encampments for bathroom purposes. That way, the Lord would not see anything “indecent” among them. The passage explicitly says that God might “turn away” from the Israelites and divine blessings and protections be stripped away if there was indecency. Human excrement was not allowed in God’s camp. Well, we can certainly imagine why this statute provided practical health protection for all and was not simply a religious duty.

But about 150 years ago an outhouse was literally, outside. It was outside the church building. Indoor plumbing brought toilets inside God’s house. So, it was not unreasonable, based on the Deuteronomy text during a very different time and place to find preachers who would conclude, “God said it. I believe it. That settles it!”

Now if you were to Google, “God said it. I believe it. That settles it,” you would find thousands of web pages that have these words. You can reduce it to a bumper sticker and discover it posted on billboards in some places. Some have even pushed it a little further down the road amending this view with, “God said it. That settles it, whether I believe it or not.” I should think that “God loves you,” is more profound theology and easier to put on your bumper.

Well, like many truths that are only partially so, this one sounds good. Should we not believe what God says? Of course, when we Christians usually mean by “God said it” is that there is something in the Bible that has said this and that should make a pretty shut case of things. Then, what makes this partially true? If we strictly adhere to a “God says it. I believe it. That settles it,” approach to the Bible we are going to find ourselves encountering all kids of unusual limits on our behavior, including whether we should dispense with bathrooms inside.

We’ve even suggested some of the extremes for you in the front of the bulletin. Leviticus 19:19 tells us that we can’t have any silk and linen summer clothing. Blending cotton with rayon or nylon is unacceptable.

We usually have an understanding about the cultural management of these things, but few of us ever think that these Old Testament laws are binding upon us. Then we encounter Jesus’ words in Matthew 5:

*17“Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. 18For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. 19Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. 20For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.*

But, come to think of it, even Jesus thought that the Laws of God needed to be interpreted a bit. He didn’t approach scripture with a “God said it. I believe it. That settles it,” kind of way. overall, he had a far more liberal interpretation of the Sabbath compared to the application of them by Moses who had a man put to death for picking up sticks on the Sabbath. Jesus added this insight, “The Sabbath was created for humans; humans weren’t created for the Sabbath.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

You will find other places like Matthew 19 where Jesus was even more conservative than the Law. This is where he gave a stricter look at divorce than Deuteronomy 24. Yet on this subject with Jesus and his more conservative interpretation, we see his actions toward a woman who had been divorced five times as they are described in the gospel of John.[[4]](#footnote-4) In that gospel account Jesus demonstrated mercy and compassion, not judgment. Likewise, his ministry with “sinners and tax collectors” reflected a more liberal approach toward Scripture and its application than what was found among the Pharisees of his time.

Jesus affirmed the Law and the Prophets, but Jesus actions often indicated a very different, merciful, but just approach toward their application. If we aren’t careful, we may find ourselves doing a tug-of-war between what was more important – what Jesus said or what Jesus did?

So, here is a point to ponder. Whether Christians admit it or not, we seldom actually read the Bible with the thought that “God said it! I believe it! And that settles it!” Sometimes well-meaning folk will try to press a particular text for a strong position with this phrase as if to say, “I have made up my mind about this so don’t confuse me by having me think about it.”

Adam Hamilton, a Methodist Pastor from the Kansas City, Kansas area said that one of his parishioners told him, “I don’t interpret Scripture; I just take it all as God’s Word and try to live it.” Dr. Hamilton asked him, “So, you refrain from eating pork and things like ham and want to begin attending worship on Saturday?” To that question, Dr. Hamilton got the response, “Well, no. That’s in the Old Testament.” “Okay,” said the pastor, so you insist that your wife prays with her head covered, that your daughters not braid their hair, and that you have no savings accounts?” The man said, “No, those passages were about the times when biblical authors lived, but not today.” To this Hamilton replied, “In other words, you interpret Scripture!”

You can only imagine the trouble we could arouse if we begin to explore what the Bible says about women in the church. Just begin by taking 1 Peter 3:3 - “Don’t try to make yourselves beautiful on the outside, with stylish hair or by wearing gold jewelry or fine clothes.” Well, Forsythe Jewelers and Talbots might as well close shop along the canal!

Most of you will think that Paul is becoming a bit feisty in 1 Corinthians when he writes:

*34women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says. 35If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church.*[[5]](#footnote-5)

If that makes you a little uncomfortable, then try these words attributed to Paul in 1 Timothy, just have telling women not to wear gold or pearls or more elaborate hairstyles:

*11Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. 12I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent*.[[6]](#footnote-6)

There are some Christian fellowships who continue to read these verses as though they reflect God’s will for all time. In those congregations, women are not allowed to serve in leadership or in adult education when men are present, or to serve in any capacity during worship that would requirement that would require them to speak to the congregation.

We tend to pick and choose what scripture we want to interpret in a particular way. When reading these passages there would be few in this congregation who would say, “God said it. I believe it. That settles it.”

However, when I go home I can declare, “I am the king of my castle.” And I want you to know that I have my wife’s permission to say so.

Literal interpretations of the Bible were employed in the earlier history of our country when preachers argued that slavery was very much a part of God’s social order. They could point to more than 200 verses in the Bible that address slavery and regulate its practice as acceptable. I suspect that many a slave owner could quote Luke 12:47. That verse reads: “That slave who knew what his master wanted, but did not prepare himself or do what was wanted, will receive a severe beating.”

Jesus was trying to make a very different point about faithfulness and being prepared and eager to serve God. Much earlier in this discourse Jesus even says, “Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes; truly I tell you, the master will fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat, and the master will come himself and serve them.” Now that is a pretty radical image, don’t you think?

Now there are always interesting things in scripture. This past week Carrie and I were in Princeton at the same time. She was there for her 15th class reunion. I was there for my 45th class reunion. We tended to hang around with our own cohort, but on Monday evening, we were all invited to the home of the President, Dr. Craig Barnes for a reception. It was one of those affairs with the bacon-wrapped scallops. Dr. Barnes has two dogs who would catch frisbees in the back yard and we found them to be quite entertaining. They were both bearded collies. Now to give you an image. In the 1959 version of *The Shaggy Dog*, the dog was an Old English Sheepdog. In the 2006 version of *The Shaggy DA*, with Tim Allen the dog was a bearded collie. So, I said to Dr. Barnes, “Craig, what is that one’s name?” And Dr. Barnes said to me, “Genesis 27:11.” Now for some strange reason, I knew that verse in the King James Version. Why? I don’t know. The verse says, “Esau was a hairy man.” So, I called to the dog, “Esau!” and he came right over and brought the frisbee.

We struggle to know the difference between what the Bible says and what the Bible means. When people talk about the Bible, they often refer to its inspiration. Interestingly, the word inspired, regarding Scripture appears only once in the Bible. It is 2 Timothy 3:16-17, where you can read,

*16All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, 17so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.*

The Greek word which the New Revised Standard Version translates as “inspired” is *theopneustos*.[[7]](#footnote-7) It is extremely rare. In fact, it occurs just this one time in all the New Testament. It is unique.

Maybe it would be helpful to know that when Paul here uses the word scripture, he is referring to the documents that make up our Old Testament. He probably didn’t refer to his own letters or the gospels as scripture. And when Paul writes that “every scripture” is inspired by God, he likely is not referring to every word or verse in the Old Testament, but instead is addressing a question of which individual writings circulating among Jewish communities in the first century as holy books were influenced by God.

He may well have been addressing an issue in the Jewish community today. Paul was a Pharisee and Pharisees counted the writings of the Prophets and the history books of the Old Testament to be authoritative. Some of the most conservative Jews at the time, like the Sadducees claimed that only the Torah or the 1st five books of the Old Testament carried this authority.

This Greek phrased, “inspired by God” is written as one word in Greek, t*heopneustos*. It comes from two words: *Theo*, which means God and *pneustos*, which refers to breath, wind, or spirit. In some sense, Paul is saying that all the sacred writings were influenced by God. Paul is not trying to teach a doctrine if inspiration (God said it), but to make clear that God’s influence on the sacred writings makes them useful for teaching, for showing mistakes, for correcting, and for training character, to that people who belong to God can be equipped to do that which is good.

The Bible’s words and teachings are shaping who I am and who I hope to be. If we have trouble with “God said it,” then we’re going to have an even tougher time with “That settles it.”

To most Bible scholars, unpacking the meaning of words, culture, history, and placement presents enormous challenges. Words change. Just think about what has happened over the last 50 years or so.

1) **“Hook up,”** used to mean getting device or service or appliance up and running. Today, it also means connecting with someone and sometimes it means connecting for intimacy.

2) **“Fantastic”** meant “existing only in one’s imagination.” Today, it means something is incredible.

3) **“Bad,”** used to describe someone who’d done something wrong or something that was poor in quality. Today, it also means “good” or “great.”

4) **“Backlog”** meant the biggest log in the fire during colonial times. Today, it means a reserve or a pile of work you still need to plow through.

5) **“Rubbers”** used to be slip-on boots that covered shoes. But if you use the word “rubbers” in Britain, you will be referring to erasers. And I won’t even mention its use in American slang.

6) **“‘Message me!’** wouldn’t have made sense a few years ago... like ‘Letter me’?”

11) **“Cell”** used to mean jail! Or a tiny part of your body. Today, of course, it’s also what you call your phone.

12) **“Awful”**used to mean something that inspired awe. Today, it means something is bad or that someone looks or feels terrible. It also means exceedingly great as in “an awful lot of money.”

Now let’s take words in Aramaic or Greek or Hebrew, go back about two thousand years, and begin to imagine how their meanings have changed. Trying to understand all of this is called textual criticism. And it shouldn’t be surprising to understand that the interpretation of the Old Testament was being done by the writers of the New Testament as they tried to interpret the ancient words after having had the experience and teaching of Jesus.

So, how do we make sense of Scripture today? How do we apply it to our lives? How do we decide that something should be taken figuratively rather than literally or that a verse may not apply to us at all anymore? Well, it isn’t all hopeless.

At one point, Jesus boiled things down to two things when he was asked about the greatest commandment.

*37He said to him, “’You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ 38This is the greatest and first commandment. 39And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ 40On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”[[8]](#footnote-8)*

The first commandment was assumed by most of the New Testament authors. But the second was explicitly repeated and again in the New Testament Epistles. Nearly all the New Testament authors repeat the command to love. When we seek to read, and understand Scripture, Christians should interpret it through the lens of what Jesus teaches us about the heart, character, and will of God and through the commands to love God and others.

The Year of Living Biblically: One Man’s Humble Quest to Follow the Bible as Literally as Possible was written by A. J. Jacobs. Raised in a secular family, but increasingly interested in the relevance of faith in our modern world, Mr. Jacobs decided to dive-in head first and attempt to obey the Bible as literally as possible for one full years. He writes about trying to stone adulterers and the trouble that brings him. For him personally, he had physical as well as mental struggles throughout the year. Just his beard was difficult. Strangers came up to him and petted his beard as if it were a Labrador retriever. He got his beard caught in jacket zippers . . . someone else’s jacket since he wasn’t so sure he could have zippers himself. Toward the end, he raises his doubts about his return to normalcy. “Can I now buy a banana if it isn’t from a tree that is more than four years old? Not to do so seems so wrong. Every day now the guilt recedes a little. Every day I get a bit more accustomed to choice.

One choice is to follow the Bible literally. Another is to use is as a guide for all the choices that we face. It is only partially true to say, “God said it. I believe it. That settles it.” Perhaps another version of that statement might fit you better, but I doubt that you’ll be able to put it on a bumper sticker. It might go like this, “God influenced it. I read, study, and sometimes wrestle with it. And, as I interpret it in the light of Jesus Christ, I hear God speak through it and seek to live is words as best I can.”

I remember someone who had two bumper stickers. One said, “God said it. I believe it. That settles it.” under the left taillight. Under the right it said, “Honk if you love Jesus!” So, I honked. Well, with my car it was more like a little toot. The driver rolled down his window, leaned out and a bit and gestured that his middle finger was the most important.” I decided that God may have said lots, but not all is settled. So, I suggest just sticking with “God loves you” on your bumper sticker. That will settle a lot more.

1. http://theplumber.com/plumbing-in-america/ [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. A point made by Rev. Rich Hinkle First Presbyterian Church, Marysville, California in a sermon he preached there on July 12, 2015 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Mark 2:27. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. John 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. 1 Corinthians 14:34-35. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. 1 Timothy 2:11-12. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.; 10th edition, August 1, 1984, volume VI, page 454. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Matthew 22:37-40. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)