

Fighting for the Bible

Summary: The Bible is often used by Christians with different theological and political beliefs as textual support for their positions. Questions of interpretation have high stakes and include whether to take the Bible as literally true and eternally relevant; as a product of a particular historical context; or as a text that should be read allegorically.

The question of how to interpret the Bible lies at the heart of many controversies in Christianity today. The Christian Bible, consisting of the Old Testament (almost identical to the Hebrew Bible) and the New Testament, begins with the story of creation in Genesis and stretches its vision to the apocalyptic imagery of the book of Revelation. It is not a seamless story, however. The various books of the Bible were written by many authors over the course of many centuries and in different languages—Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. They encompass many different genres—sagas and histories, stories and parables, lyrics and poetry, sermons and letters. And the same narratives are sometimes told from multiple perspectives, as is the case with the four gospels recording the central story of Jesus. There are even differing versions of the Christian Bible itself: Roman Catholic and the Eastern Orthodox bibles include a section called the Apocrypha, which consists of a collection of books not found in most Protestant bibles.

A 2017 Gallup Poll found that 24 percent of Americans agreed with the statement that “[t]he Bible is the actual word of God and is to be taken literally, word for word,” while 47 percent agreed with the formulation, “The Bible is the inspired word of God but not everything in it should be taken literally...” Another 26 percent of Americans said that it is “an ancient book of fables, legends, history and moral precepts recorded by man.”

So how do Christians understand the Bible? This very question is itself controversial. Some Christians, largely from fundamentalist and evangelical traditions, insist that the Bible is literally true, using the term “inerrancy” to convey their stance. A 1974 statement called the Lausanne Covenant expanded upon this view: “We affirm the divine inspiration, truthfulness and authority of both Old and New Testament Scriptures in their entirety as the only written Word of God, without error in all that it affirms, and the only infallible rule of faith and practice.”

Other Christians do not make the claim that the Bible is “infallible” or “without error.” From this perspective, its truth is religious, essential for living, but not necessarily scientific or “historical” truth. These Christians believe that the Bible is to be read not for the literal factuality of each and every statement and verse, but for its long record of the relationship of God with humankind, in covenant and forgiveness, in justice and love, and in the life of Jesus Christ. Such Christians affirm the Bible as a trustworthy guide to faith and practice, inspired by God, but necessarily reinterpreted by faithful Christians of each century, including our own. Some go even further, insisting that the focus on the “inerrancy” of the Bible is a form of Bible-worship that might be construed as unfaithfulness to the Christian witness that “the Word became flesh.” With Christ, the “Word of God” is an embodied and living word, not limited to the particular words of scripture.

For all Christians, however, whether they think the Bible is literally true or inspired, the question of interpretation remains. Precisely because the Bible is so important to Christians, how are its meanings to be understood by Christians today? Many Christian interpreters maintain that the Bible must be read in the historical context of the ancient Near East and the Mediterranean world, in order to understand how the culture of the time informed what the texts say about issues such as the roles of women and men, the practice of slavery, or the status of homosexuality. Without understanding the scriptures in their own times, how can Christians begin to grapple with what they might mean for the churches today? Such “historical criticism,” in the view of Biblical scholars, does not diminish the significance of the scriptures for people today, but brings them to life and enhances Christian insight into what they do and do not mean now. Other Christians, however, maintain that the Bible transcends the culture it originally addressed and speaks directly and clearly beyond the centuries to Christians today.

There are additional forms of study as well. Some readers look at the various textual manuscripts of the Bible. Others study its literary forms and genres in relation to the literature and rhetoric of the periods in which the books of the Bible were written. More recently, some Christian scholars have insisted that the meanings of texts, including the Bible, are shaped not only by the context in which they are written but also by the context in which they are read. The presuppositions, experiences, identities, and political views of those who read the Bible influence what they see in the texts. These scholars would argue, for example, that the poor and oppressed hear the Gospel with a different awareness from that of the wealthy

and powerful. They suggest that unless Christians are careful, the Bible might cease to challenge Christians and become merely a mirror of their particular pre-existing cultural, economic, and social values.

On all sides of every controversy within the Christian churches today, people quote from the Bible as an authoritative source for their views. This itself is further evidence that the issue of what constitutes the proper study and interpretation of the Bible is vital for Christians.