

God Said It, I Believe It, That Settles It- Half Truth Series

- I. I want to introduce some Bumper Sticker Theology- (**bumper sticker images**) On the surface this is what I would call a “half-truth”, might sound like complete the truth, right? If God came to us right now and said that we should invest in a company that makes cassette tapes because they are coming back in vogue, we might scratch our heads for a minute but then quickly agree to fork out the cash because, well it is God after all. He says it, I believe it and that settles it. So, what is wrong with this bumper sticker theology or half-truth?
- II. As Hamilton points out, people who embrace this are not talking about God making a direct statement to them personally, like calling them up on their cell, but rather referencing God speaking to them through the bible. It really raises the question, **“How do we understand the inspiration of Scripture? Or how does God speak through it?”** God showing up at your door step and giving you a command, as opposed to reading what we believe God says to us in Scripture...at the very least it is like the difference between having a face to face conversation with your mom as opposed to getting a letter from her. (BTW- for those in their twenties or younger, a letter was a hand-written form of communication widely used before the advent of texting and snap chat ☺) A face to face conversation is in real time, you can see clearly it is your mom not someone pretending to be your mother, and she can clarify if you don’t understand something she says and respond immediately to your questions. A letter can do none of that. But before we go any further let me show you a clip.
- III. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=68Ha62ISivI> (1-30 secs) Yes, even though this came out a few years ago, researchers estimate there are still over a hundred small churches that practice snake handling in the US. Some of those churches are in NC. G3 is now one of them. “Steph bring out the rattlers!” Kidding! But this really is not a laughing matter because each year people die during these worship services and many more have lost fingers and the use of a hand from a snake bite. This, of course, is an extreme example but these certainly are people who embrace the “God said it, I believe it, that settles it” approach to Scripture. Why do I say that? Because they take the bible literally. Let’s read **Mark 16:17-18 NIV**. If you have a physical bible, please turn with me as I am going to point out something important in a bit.
- IV. If we take this passage word for word we must admit our fellow Christians we just saw in the video are living out Jesus’ teaching more faithfully than we are. But not so fast. Let’s say you came across the following journal entry in your grandfather’s attic. You flip to a page and begin to read. *“A doll (woman) and I went to the talkies (movie theater) tonight. It was a real brodie (mistake.) There were some brunos (tough guys) there harassing all the pretty kittens (women.) I felt like going back and getting my roscoe (gun) and chasing them out of dodge. Instead we just left early and went to the 5 and Dime (drug store/soda shop) and bumped gums (chatted.) I wanted to follow all the alligators (fans of swing music) to the club but she was feeling joed (tired.) And since she was a cute as a bug’s ear (gorgeous) and I was down to my last sawbuck (\$10 bill) for the month we just hung tight and cozied up like two minks peeper to peeper (eye to eye) in the booth till closing time.”* Did anyone

understand that? Let's say we that entry read it literally? What do we come up with? That some likely relative of yours took a toy doll to a place to have conversation but then a bunch of guys named Bruno started pestering some attractive cats at this location which made this relative upset so they wanted to go get their friend Roscoe to chase all these cats harassing Brunos away. And then this relative wanted to trail some alligators to some kind of club for reptiles. But instead they decided to hang out with their toy doll that was as attractive as a body part on an insect and then go into hibernation in a coin store with this doll like a small mammal until that location closed. So do you think that interpretation is even remotely correct? Very literal, yes. Accurate? Probably not. So how could we go about translating that journal entry into modern English? First, we need to know when it was written. This should be easy. Go up to the top where the journal entry begins, right? We discover it was written June 25, 1932. As we look more carefully we find it was signed by your great-grandfather, Stewey. Now we know it is from a male perspective. Then we discover from Ancestry.com that Stewey was born in 1915. So he would have been 17 years old. Since the author was a male and a late teenager, it's highly unlikely he was carting around a baby doll with him, even if the doll was striking. And Stewey, despite being a teenage boy, was probably not chasing after alligators. Well, actually that is more likely than the doll, but not following said reptiles into clubs. At this point we should conclude that Stewey is not using several of these words or terms literally. And to read it so would totally throw us off in trying to figure out what Stewey really did that day. Since we live in the world of google all we must do is take all the words we are unclear about, like doll, talkie, alligators and such, and see if they had a double meaning in the 1930's. Ah ha! Now we have the real translation. (read it above with the 1930's terms translated.)

- V. Okay, now you might be saying, "Ron, why in the world did you take so much time to go through a hypothetical journal entry? Instead, we could have gotten to La Carreta ten minutes earlier than the Baptists! And maybe more importantly how does this have anything to do with 'God said it, I believe it and that settles it,' or about the snake handlers?" My response? Everything! Here is a truth. **Every time we read the Scripture, we must interpret.** And everyone does. Even those who claim to read the bible word for word literally. We have no choice! Otherwise we will never eat lobster or shrimp, do any house work on Saturday (the Jewish Sabbath), will kill our children when they roll their eyes at us parents, all have beards like ZZ top (well at least the men), have me as your pastor come over and inspect the mold in your kitchen, juggle rattlesnakes like rings, pet scorpions like puppies, and drink strychnine instead of orange juice for breakfast. Where did I get all of that? All from the bible. We need to do all these things if we are going to see all Scripture as God's literal words and take each command verbatim. The next time I see someone with that bumper sticker, "God said it, I believe it, that settles it", I want to ask him or her, "So when you have to go to the restroom when you are at church, you DO go outside, right?" Well, God said in Deuteronomy 23:12-14 not to relieve yourself in His sanctuary and you believe it, right? Then that settles it. Next Sunday, go claim your tree.
- VI. This all gets us to how we are to understand Scripture and how we interpret it. I really don't mean to make light of this as this is critical to growing in our discipleship or the way we

follow Jesus. But before we look at how to read the bible right, at least in my opinion, let's look at the challenges we face. In many ways it is like trying to read that journal entry from our great-grandfather, but even more difficult. Unlike Muslims who believe Muhammed was God's stenographer and wrote down word for word God's commands in the Koran, Christians acknowledge that the 66 books in the Protestant bible were written by dozens, if not hundreds, of men and women over a period of thousands of years. And most of what we find in Scripture is not divine dictation but rather people like you and me sharing their encounters with a powerful, loving, yet holy God. Yes, I believe Scripture is inspired by God, but not necessarily word for word from God. So unlike our journal found in the basement who has one author who lived in one period of time in one culture, the bible spans multiple cultures, time periods, languages and histories. To complicate things even further, we don't have any of the original letters or manuscripts of the bible. Instead we have copies, or more likely copies of copies, of the original books of the bible. When Meg and I lived in Europe we could bike from our apartment to an abbey (which is larger than a monastery.) This is where monks would spend their days copying manuscripts like in this pic (**image**.) An exciting career path to be sure. So they would have a copy of the copy of the original manuscript from the book of Mark for example and they would be charged to make more copies by hand. As you can imagine a monk not paying close attention could accidentally not dot their "i" or cross their "t" so to speak and the meaning of a verse could change radically.

- VII. So besides the cultural and language barriers, translators and editors over the years have had to look at the copies of the bible manuscripts and decide if there was a variation, which one was correct and which one was due to some sleepy monk. And on a few occasions translators and editors would find a couple of manuscripts that had extra material that most of the other biblical manuscripts didn't. So they had to decide if they kept this in the bible or left it out. Look back at the Mark passage if you have a physical bible. What we will find is that the biblical editors beginning with verse 9 put the rest of the chapter in italics with a note saying most of the earliest copies of Mark don't include these verses. So what happened? It is possible that a monk got creative and added the ending to Mark's gospel. Or material was added by a disciple in the 2nd century? We simply don't know. But scholars don't feel comfortable including these verses without giving the readers a heads up.
- VIII. My purpose in all this is not for us to begin looking at the bible with suspicion but rather to make sure we are reading or interpreting it as properly as we can. I think part of reading it right is to acknowledge that it isn't like having a face to face conversation with God. I have no doubt God speaks through the Bible as He has been speaking to me through Scripture for most of my life, but it's a book (or really a book of books) that is inspired by God but mediated by men and women living in a particular time and culture who spoke and wrote in ancient languages. It's just not as simple as "God said it, I believe it, that settles it." So let me offer **four questions we should ask** so we can read the bible right. First we should ask, **"Who wrote it and why?"** In the question of Mark 16:17-18 that spurs some to dance with serpents, from the earliest Christian tradition we believe it was Mark, or John Mark, a close friend of Peter one of Jesus first disciples who wrote this gospel. Mark essentially tells us in Chapter 1 his purpose: to tell the world the good news about Jesus being the Messiah or

Savior. Second we should ask, “**How did the original audience understand these verses?**” This is where a study bible is critical. And/or even a biblical commentary, hard copy or online. Too often people skip this and end up in dangerous territory. In our case a simple answer could be these verses were not actually part of Mark’s gospel but “add-ons” so the original audience never heard these verses. But let’s say for argument sake these verses are original. With a little study, we find that serpents, scorpions and poison are all references or metaphors of evil and the satanic realm in the New Testament world. The original audience would have understood that. So Jesus would be saying to them, “I am giving you the power to overcome evil and heal in my name,” not encouraging them to do the tango with a copperhead. Third then we should ask, “**What might this passage mean for us today?**” I would say that we are called to confront the evils in our age and bring healing to the hurting...physically, mentally, to the addicted, the poor, the hungry and list goes on. And finally (and don’t forget this part!) we should ask, “**What does God want me to do about what I just read?**” Is there an injustice God wants us to confront in our community? Is there a wrong or an evil that God wants us take on? Is there someone or a people group to which God is calling us to help bring healing? Here in our city or abroad? What are we going to do about that? Sit, or get on it?

- IX.** These four questions can be our guide in hearing God’s voice within the biblical story. And most importantly we should read Scripture through the lens of Jesus. He is our final arbitrator in how we are to understand it. If it opposes His teaching about loving our neighbor, turning our cheek and so on, then we are reading it wrong. In short, if we want to read the bible right, we can’t be lazy. As Hamilton says, we shouldn’t view Scripture as a magic 8 ball (**image**) where we just ask a question and flip it open and expect an immediate answer. I have heard a story where a man was looking for some answers and did just that. He landed on Matthew 27: 5b “and then he went away and hung himself.” That can be as dangerous as doing the mambo with a black mamba.
- X.** I want to close with a story I have shared before but with an addition. My life ambition growing up was to attend West Point, the U.S. Military Academy. I was well on my way when a bad grade in trig crashed my dream as a senior. Even though I had been accepted to several other schools I never had any intention of going anywhere else. I was heartbroken and felt like my someone had slammed the door on my future. It was about this time, with the help of my youth pastor, that I began coming home to God as we say at G3. He told me to memorize **Roman 12:1-2 NIV**. Don’t tell him but I never quite got it down but I have turned to it countless times since then. Let me tell you, while I was in my room with the door shut, kneeling beside my bed, I heard God speak to me through this passage. He was telling me, “Ron, fully commit your life to me, offer it as act of worship, and I will take care of the rest.” And I did. Now, so many years later, here I am. He lived up to His promise again and again. My whole life this book (the bible) has guided me, encouraged me, steered me away from danger, and at times slapped me upside the head when I needed it. Again and again I have experienced God through it. No, it’s not as simple as “God said it, I believe it and that settles it.” But it has always been my north star, my compass, my GPS, and my google directions for my life when I read it right. And may it be that way for you as well.