

How Do You Know The Bible Is True?

By:

David Kupelian

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In the United States of America, most Christian ministers don't really believe the Bible.

Don't stop the presses – this is not breaking news. In fact, back in the 1960s, University of Virginia professor and sociologist Jeffrey Hadden conducted a survey of 10,000 US. pastors – to which 7,441 replied. Their responses revealed what many had long suspected: A large number of the ministers polled openly denied core tenets of the Christian faith, such as Jesus' virgin birth and physical resurrection.

Although Hadden, when I contacted him to verify the poll numbers bandied about on different websites, couldn't confirm them after 35 years, here are a few of the shocking findings he made, according to Rev. D. James Kennedy's Coral Ridge Ministries.

Asked whether they believed that the Old and New Testament Scriptures were the "inspired and inerrant Word of God in faith, history and secular matters," mainline ministers responded "**NO**" in overwhelming numbers:

- Episcopalians, 95 percent
- Methodists, 87 percent
- Presbyterians, 82 percent

Remember, those are "**NO**" responses.

Such was the state of the church in America during the doubt-plagued '60s and the "God is dead" movement that mushroomed during that tumultuous era. As Time magazine's notorious "Is God Dead?" cover story proclaimed in 1966: "There is an acute feeling that the churches on Sunday are preaching the existence of a God who is nowhere visible in their daily lives." Surveying the religious malaise and uncertainty infecting mainstream Christianity at the time, Time quoted Francis B. Sayre, then Episcopal dean of Washington's famed National Cathedral, as saying, "I'm confused as to what God is – but so is the rest of America."

What about today? With the cascading scandals involving predatory homosexual Roman Catholic priests, Protestant denominations' ordination of practicing homosexuals and even (in at least one case) a man-to-woman surgically altered transsexual, and other equally dramatic breaks with traditional values and teachings that have led to multiple schisms in mainline denominations, it's clear the church's "confused" state has only worsened since the '60s.

But as I say, this is old news. So rather than join the choir bewailing the ever-more-blatant apostasy of mainline churches, let's take a look at those remaining ministers who claim to stand firmly on the Word of God.

"If it's in the Bible, you can believe it. If you can't find it in Scripture, forget it." That's probably the most fundamental and frequent admonition you hear from Bible-believing Christian ministers. "If your faith is not founded on Scripture," they exhort, "you're building your house on sand. But if it's founded firmly on Scripture, you're building your house on a rock, and it will stand."

Great words. But let's delve a little deeper.

Even among those who claim the Bible is the "inspired, inerrant Word of God," there are vast differences in what they believe the Bible actually says.

There are hundreds and even thousands of distinct Christian denominations and sects. Virtually all of these denominations profess to base their beliefs and practices substantially on the Holy Bible, and many consider themselves the true church – to the exclusion of all others.

Some differences, of course, are relatively minor and understandable variations of emphasis; others deal with significant matters of doctrine, from baptism to divorce to eternal life. But even more to the point, different denominations' profiles tend to match nicely the pre-existing worldview of the congregants. There's something for everyone.

Thus, there's a politically liberal Christianity and a politically conservative Christianity – both supposedly based on the same Bible. There's an acutely activist Christianity and an utterly apolitical Christianity, a Christianity that holds up a high standard of ethical behavior and service, and a Christianity for which both personal ethics and good works are irrelevant. There's a loving Christianity and a hateful, racist Christianity, a Christianity that honors Jews as God's chosen people and a Christianity that maligns Jews as Satan's children – either overtly or subtly.

The variations are endless and sometimes bizarre. Out on the fringes of Pentecostalism, there are churches that believe in handling poisonous snakes and drinking poison as a test and proof of their faith. Mostly located in the Southeastern US., these churches stake their identity on Jesus' words recorded in the Gospel according to Mark: "And these signs will follow those who believe: In My name they will cast out demons; they will speak with new tongues; they will take up serpents; and if they drink anything deadly, it will by no means hurt them; they will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover." (Mark 16:17-18)

Well, Jesus did say, "these signs will follow those who believe," so what's wrong with handling vipers and drinking poison?

Of course, our common sense tell us – regardless of what Jesus' actual meaning was – that He didn't intend for the faithful to "tempt God" by drinking strychnine and strutting around on stage with rattlers and cottonmouths, practices that every year result in one or more deaths being reported from these churches.

So, let's come back to our basic question of "How do we know the Bible is true?" and add a second one, "How do we know how to interpret the Bible?" so we can avoid being bitten by a deadly snake or falling prey to a subtler but equally poisonous misinterpretation.

To bring this heavenly question down to earth a bit, consider the difficulty people have in agreeing on the meaning of a much shorter, more recent and more concrete document – the US. Constitution. Unlike the Bible, which is mystical, written by many different authors in different languages over the course of many centuries, the Constitution was written with simplicity and clarity of expression in mind, by the same group, and only two centuries ago (except for the later amendments). Moreover, it was written in English, so translation is not an issue.

To top it off, there's a plethora of contemporaneous writings, most importantly "The Federalist Papers," explaining clearly and pointedly what the Founding Fathers meant.

And yet – politicians, judges, lawyers, special interest groups and ordinary citizens manage to come up with fantastically divergent interpretations of the same document that is meant to be our country's common

rulebook.

One example – an obvious and egregious one, though only one of many – is the Second Amendment. It clearly articulates the right of individual citizens to own and carry guns. ("A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed.") As if such clear language wasn't sufficient to assure a common understanding of its meaning, even a cursory investigation of the historical background of the amendment and contemporaneous statements of the Constitution's framers leaves zero doubt as to their intent.

Yet many educated and sophisticated people have convinced themselves the Second Amendment doesn't really say what it says. For that matter, a majority of congressmen evidently believe the "promote the general Welfare" clause from the Constitution's Preamble justifies the modern welfare state. A majority of the justices on the United States Supreme Court have discovered the right to murder unborn babies in the 14th Amendment. (If it's really in there, then the 14th Amendment is even more mystical than the book of Revelation.)

In short, people believe what they want to believe.

Just as politicians, bureaucrats and judges interpret the Constitution the way they want – to accommodate their particular beliefs, desires, ambitions and worldview, no matter how deluded or corrupt – so do millions of Christians, including their clergy, interpret the Bible – their religion's "constitution," if you will – in ways that are comfortable and pleasing to them, but not necessarily reflecting the genuine meaning of the text.

You don't agree that homosexuality is an "abomination"? Well, just interpret the Bible to mean something other than what it clearly says. ("Thou shalt not lie with mankind, as with womankind: it [is] abomination." -- Lev. 18:22. I don't think it's humanly possible to phrase it more succinctly or unambiguously than that.) If something happens to rub you a bit the wrong way, doesn't fit in with your prideful worldview, prohibits some behavior you enjoy, or holds up a standard of conduct with which you disagree – hey, just de-emphasize it, claim it was imperfectly translated, ignore it, or say it was intended for the people of an ancient time and place, but not for us, here and now.

How do we know the Bible is true? Please don't tell me it's because the Bible says so. No disrespect intended, but that's circular reasoning. The Koran and every other supposed holy book also claim to be the true revealed text directly from God. So how do you really know the Bible, and not the Koran, is the revealed word of God?

And again, even if we do believe the Bible is God's sacred textbook, how do we know how to interpret what it really means?

Let's get down to brass tacks.

Question: Is stealing wrong because the Bible says it's wrong, or does the Bible say stealing is wrong because it is wrong? Which came first?

What about murder? Was murder wrong before God gave Moses the Ten Commandments? When Cain slew Abel, there was no Bible and no Ten Commandments. Yet God held Cain accountable, and set a curse upon him. But why should Cain have known killing his brother was wrong, if there was no law?

The truth, of course, is that God's living law, the inborn ability to discern right from wrong, was written in Cain's heart, as it is in every human being who's ever lived. The word "conscience" literally means "with knowing." We all know.

We all know right from wrong, deep down. We're self-contained truth machines, if only we'd pay attention. It's only our pride, our willfulness to have our own way, to be the god of our own lives, to rationalize our compulsions and sins – and the inevitable denial of truth that follows – that disconnects us from it.

When my daughter was 3 years old, I used the occasion of her misbehaving with her younger brother to introduce her to the Golden Rule. I remember being amazed when I realized she clearly understood what I was saying. The "do-unto-others-as-you-would-have-them-do-onto-you" message went right home, immediately and full force, into her heart. I remember thinking to myself, "My gosh, a 3-year-old can understand Jesus' message!" The fact that she could recognize the truth and rightness of the Golden Rule when she heard it for the first time in her life means she had the essence of its message already inside of her, though perhaps dormant. Otherwise, how could she recognize it and respond to it when I spoke those few words to her?

We're talking about the beginning of faith – our invisible connection to our Creator.

Did you ever do the wrong thing, and then, looking back to the moments just before you made the mistake, recall that you had experienced an intuitive flash, a little bit of a wordless warning, like an aversion or feeling not to do it? Like most of us, you ignored it and did the wrong thing anyway. But that "still small voice" – a voiceless voice, really – tried to steer you away from a wrong action. That's from God. Typically, people learn to honor and respect such intuitive leadings first in hindsight, as they realize they ignored God's loving nudge – and later in foresight, as they discover by experience which impulses to obey and which to resist in life.

Inside every truly sincere person ("sincere" as in humble-before-your-Creator, not as in so-deluded-you-can't-see-your-delusions) there is an inner witness, a wordless knowing, a quiet confirmation of all truth, including the Bible. Indeed, when all is said and done, you know the Bible is true because you just know deep down that it is true. It's a matter of quiet inner revelation, direct to your heart and mind from the source of all true revelation.

Although as a youth your belief in the Bible may have been the direct consequence of the loving guidance of your parents, ultimately you reverence the Bible not because they told you to do so. After all, they could have been wrong – they've been wrong about other things, haven't they? Moreover, as we grow up, each of us must revisit the beliefs we adopted from our parents, so that those "grafted-on" beliefs can become truly our own convictions.

For the same reasons, you reverence the Bible not because your minister or youth group or church or anybody or anything else on this earth told you to – they also could be wrong. You reverence the Bible because, as a child of God, you are connected directly to your Creator, and He puts it in your heart that this is indeed the sacred history and mystery, the past, present and future of mankind – a book from another dimension, if you will, put here for our edification and instruction.

When you reverently inquire into the meaning, not only of the Holy Scriptures, but of everything in life, and – very important – when you have the courage actually to believe what you see revealed in your "heart of hearts" in response to your sincere searching, you are living by faith.

Our quiet inner belief that stealing and murder are wrong just because we can plainly see they're wrong, this instant embrace of the Golden Rule just because we can see for ourselves that it's right, this wordless quality of discernment between ethical and unethical behavior, this deep and wordless understanding of both life and Scripture that graces us from beyond the borders of our education and experience – which we regard too lightly as just "common sense" – is in reality God's communication with us through faith.

And since its source is beyond all earthly culture and authority, indeed from beyond space and time, it is our true compass for all things. The Bible is our map. But we need the compass of the living God within us to

understand the words of the Bible.

"Then opened He their understanding, that they might understand the scriptures." (Luke 24:45)

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David Kupelian is vice president and managing editor of WorldNetDaily.com and Whistleblower magazine.

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