

How Do We Know?

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[0 : 00] All right, it is once again good to be with you. Every week I am a little bit surprised at how excited I am to be in this place.

I just want to say again that I am excited to be with you and to be before you. Today we're going to continue the sermon series that Pastor Anthony started for us last week.

We're calling this series A More Beautiful Gospel. And in it our preaching team, really for the rest of the summer, is going to spend some time describing some of the foundational ideas that we think make up this more beautiful gospel.

Now last week Anthony kicked off this series by kind of re-performing a well-known sermon called The Gospel in Chairs. And that in that he gave us this kind of large overview of how to understand the whole of the Christian story in a way that is more faithful to kind of our patient and ever-loving God.

And I definitely, I'm one of those people, I'm not great at memorizing lots of things. It was an amazing sermon. So if you missed it, I encourage you to go back and to listen to it.

[1 : 24] And if you are getting caught up a little bit overall, you know, you've been, you know, you've been at the beach a few sudden days, you've been out and about on the National Mall, you're just getting caught up overall.

You may remember that our last sermon series was called Call to Gather. And it was this attempt to think a little bit about what it means to be church, to kind of get back to the basics of what it means to be church during the pandemic.

We looked at the first half of the book of Acts in order to think about that and what it means to be community in a diverse place and in many ways a difficult time.

And now that we've revisited all of that, it seems to make sense to move to this discussion, this exploration now of what a church like ours actually believes.

Now, I'm going to say this because there's a little bit of trepidation in the sermon series, so I want to say this really clearly, that it's always dangerous to talk about what a group as a whole believes, right?

[2 : 29] I want to say that really clearly church belief statements, they have a way of kind of papering over differences, of not being particularly nuanced, of maybe like squashing down and squelching dissent and just conversation in general.

So our goal in the series is not a church belief statement. It's not to suggest that everybody sitting in this room or watching online believes the same thing. It's not to suggest that to be a faithful part of this community, you have to hold this theology.

But we do want to give a sense of the kinds of ideas that the table church is moving away from and is moving toward in a pretty clear, clear way.

These are the beliefs that you will encounter over and over again in that the preaching team and the leaders here think are worthy ideas. It's worthy theology that leads to greater health and greater liberation.

These are trustworthy ideas. We want to make explicit what lots of churches leave implicit. And I know I talk to people all the time who, for years, gave their money to a place and then realized, oh, you believe that?

[3 : 44] Because they weren't explicit. So we want to be explicit in this series. And we want to let you know what you've gotten yourself into. This kind of, I like to think of it as like holy trouble.

Like when you're encountering these deep theological ideas that people have been wrestling with for centuries. I think there's deep freedom and deep discomfort in this place.

But there's also just amazing beauty and joy and freedom. So we'll talk about things like the Trinity. We'll talk about what that means here and now for how we think about community.

We'll talk some about our understanding of creation in the beginning. And what does that have to do with kind of new creation? And the ways that we talk about being creative. We'll talk about the character of God as fundamentally non-coercive and as fundamentally restorative.

And we'll talk some, too, in our very last sermon. We'll talk about Christocentric universalism and kind of what might be the future of all created things.

[4 : 52] Anthony's taken that one, I'm happy to say. And there's a bunch of others. We'll talk about several other things, too. But those are some of the things that you're going to hear. And I also recognize that for some people, talking about theology can be a turnoff.

Like many of us have been burned out on versions of the Christian faith that have been centered just in the head and not in the heart. And all about what we believe and very little about what we feel or what we embody in our walking around lives.

But true spiritual formation, which I hope we're all engaged in, is very much about being and becoming. It's about the interior life as much as about the exterior life.

Being and becoming like Jesus. Because ideas matter. They really do matter. And I'll admit, I mean, I thought of myself as somebody who liked theology before.

But it wasn't until the Resurrection City for a Revolutionary Reads book discussion that I read Mariam Kaba's *We Do This Till We Free Us*. And that book is about, and Mariam Kaba is an activist.

[6 : 10] She's, I don't know, for like three decades been working toward prison abolition. When you read her, you get this incredible sense of, like, grace and humility.

But as I read that book, I realized how deeply, she doesn't say this, but it brought out in me this realization of how much our culture's views of retribution and punishment as holy are linked to our prison system.

And how out of control it is. You can talk about and link these ideas about crime and punishment and how we deal with offenders to how we think about justice.

And as Christians, our idea of justice has been pretty influential. Our idea of God and how God embodies justice has affected our country deeply.

And you don't have to agree with Mariam Kaba to see that. Ideas really matter. A couple of examples. So, to extend the one I was just using.

[7 : 19] So, think about the idea of God being punitive. If you believe that God is punitive, then you are more likely to create robust systems of punishment rather than robust systems of restoration.

If you believe in a God who can violate human freedom by completely taking over people or taking over situations without invitation, then you have theological grounds for coercion and manipulation.

If you believe in a God who is actually more faithfully expressed as a man than as any other gender, then it's not going to be that big of a leap to think of men as more like God and therefore more worthy of honor.

And there are so, so many more examples. These are just a few of them. Bottom line, ideas matter. That's what we're going to explore in this series.

Ideas matter because they become embodied in the world. And whatever communities you're involved with, in the city or otherwise, their ideas are shaping you.

[8 : 30] And thinking through that is deeply important. They are forming you. Okay, so today, what I'm going to do is talk a little bit about an issue that I personally think is at kind of the tap root of all these other issues we're going to be talking about through the series.

And that is basically how we know what we think we know. How we know what we think we know. Philosophers often call this epistemology.

And then Christians usually just think a bit about it through the lens of revelation. This idea that God has disclosed God's self to us.

And how do we know what the content of that revelation is? How do we know what's true? And for many of us, the answer to that question of how we know what is true, the standard answer in many churches is just that, for the Bible tells me so, right?

For the Bible tells me so. And we have been taught to understand the Bible as this sole carrier of truth and how we know what we know, this ultimate pathway to truth.

[9 : 42] This idea that the Bible attests to really all that we need to know, like fundamentally need to know. But I always think it's interesting that when we look at some of the church's historic creeds, like the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene's Creed, they don't say anything about the Bible.

They make statements. They don't say, I believe in the inerrancy of Scripture. They say, I believe in God the Father or something like that often. And there's not really a strong sense of that they feel the need to explain exactly how they have arrived there.

And yet, for many people in Protestant Christianity, particularly in evangelical Christianity, the Bible bears the sole weight of getting us to truth.

And the truth is, often, at least I have been in spaces where it's clear, other sources were used. But if I can just find a verse, you know, to publicly talk about, because I don't know how to talk well about those other sources of truth.

So what I'm describing is called biblicism. There's an ethicist, I really love his book, After Evangelicalism. He says, essentially, that it is a stance in which the Bible is understood as a definitive, if not the only source of authoritative guidance for life, sometimes tipping over into near idolatry of the Bible.

[11 : 10] Christian Smith puts it like this. It's a theory about the Bible that emphasizes together its exclusive authority, infallibility, purpose-cuity, which just means clarity, like that is really clear when you read it, self-sufficiency, which I think I have a sense of why you're laughing.

Yeah. Self-sufficiency, internal consistency, self-evident meaning, and universal applicability. And let's just look at some of those words, right? This idea that it's completely self-sufficient, that it's completely consistent, that it is universal to all situations.

Those are important words that it is the exclusive source of authority. So what I want to suggest today is that a more beautiful gospel has to get us past Biblicism in terms of how we know what we know.

It has, we have to let it go for this more expanded sense of revelation. This letting go of kind of easy answers and moving toward discernment, which honestly, lots of our siblings outside of the Protestant world have much more developed traditions of discernment.

And then we have to ultimately let go of this false security that this one source of authority gives us for the sense of transformative trust.

[12 : 36] At the end of the day, it's always about trust. Okay, so here's our scripture for today. Feel free to open a Bible or a device. It'll also be on the screen.

This is kind of your classic text about, well, it's the one that gets used about the Bible. So let's look at this today. It is 2 Timothy 3, verses 10 through 17.

And I should say, before I start, that when we are looking at this and thinking about this book, it is a letter from Paul to a protegee. It's like a final testament.

It's like letters to a young poet, if you've ever encountered that. It's like Between the World and Me by Ta-Nehisi Coates. It's this, like, I want to pass on wisdom from one generation to the next.

Now you have observed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness, my persecutions, and my sufferings.

[13 : 45] The things that happened to me in Antioch, Iconium, and Lystra. What persecutions I endured. Yet the Lord rescued me from them all.

Indeed, all who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. But wicked people and imposters will go from bad to worse, deceiving others and being deceived.

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ.

All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness so the person of God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.

So this author, Paul, writes to this young person, Timothy, and starts by emphasizing this personal connection to him, how Timothy is personally, knows the content and method of his teaching, his way of life, and his faith, and his patience, all about his character and conduct.

[15 : 06] Timothy knows about Paul's sufferings, and in contrast to, he knows about the persecution of Paul, and knows about the fraudulent teachers who are running around in contrast to Paul.

And then we get that, but as for you, Paul basically says, continue in what you have learned doctrinally, be confident, and this all rests on the idea that Timothy's had credible teachers and that their teaching has been grounded in these sacred writings, that they're useful, that they're wise for salvation, they make wise for salvation.

It's like he's envisioning an athlete who is subject to like cardio and weights and all those different things and is being trained.

the credible teaching has done that training and made Timothy ready to do good in the world. A bunch of ink has been spilled on verse 16.

The inspired by God, I hope, I don't know if that's up there. Yeah, okay. The inspired by God, which is often God-breathed. Nobody exactly knows the details of what that means, except that people who believe the Bible is the exact literal words of God and the people who believe the Bible is fully human use that same phrase to justify what they believe.

[16:40] We do know that it's about Scripture being alive. Maybe you remember that in Genesis, God breathes into Adam, the breath of life. It's the same thing. Like, Scripture is enlivened by God and it is able to train your character.

It's a confusing phrase, but I think that there are a couple of, like, key things to say about it for us. So first of all, this phrase, knowing from whom we learned it.

It's really important, and I feel like every time I read it, it resonates with me because it's a hard thing for me to think through. The trustworthiness of those who have shaped our beliefs is critical.

Their character and their transparency and their humility and their willingness to give up power. It's all critical to a sense that our faith has a firm foundation, and this is precisely where a lot of us have gotten stuck.

The sense that we have had good teachers, good people who have passed along what they knew, the best that they could, and yet we often are left in this place that, oh, but they still hold to ideas that are deeply patriarchal, or they're deeply grounded in homophobia, and so how do we, or all kinds of other things, like, so how do we continue in the faith passed on from those people when we know those things?

[18:03] When they don't have the conduct and the character, maybe, that Paul is talking about. Note here, and this is not evident from just reading it in English, but the for whom is plural.

It's actually not singular. The idea is that Timothy has had a bunch of different sources that are credible for him. So there are the sacred writings that have been passed on to him.

There's Paul that he's been able to witness. If you read the rest of the book, you learn his mother and his grandmother are also those credible people. It's not just one person or one thing. He's got both the pulpit and kind of the intimacy of family, a conversation around a table that has shaped his faith.

And one of the things I hope that you will consider coming out of this sermon is who are those people for you that are credible? Who is, like, your canon of saints?

The communities, the people that you have found trustworthy. Maybe you know them personally. Maybe they're not living anymore. Maybe you just read what they've written. Who are those people and communities?

[19:13] And I would encourage you to actually make a list. Because in some ways, you know, those are kind of your gurus. Those are people who are shaping you. And being intentional about letting them form you is really, really important.

Being intentional about realizing that how you know what you know is shaped by those people. I also just want to say that the phrase translated, all scripture is inspired by God and useful for teaching, it doesn't have the is.

A lot of Bibles that you have, if you have a study Bible, it says this. There's no is there. All scripture is. So it could easily be translated, every scripture inspired by God is also useful for teaching. And that gives us a lot more permission to be honest, that many of us have a canon within a canon. Like we have some teachings that we have understood as useful and maybe more useful than other teachings.

And we can start to say that out loud. We can name that like, yeah, we should read the whole Bible. We're all about reading the whole Bible. But most of us would say maybe the list of kings in 1 Kings is not as formative as let's say, let's say like, you know, the Lord's Prayer, right?

[20:35] Like we know this just intuitively. And that scripture kind of gives us a sense of that reality that we read it all and yet there's parts of it that are going to nourish uniquely.

The church has recognized that certain things are useful. And useful is critical here. This is all about the authority of the community. This is all about what you read and your community reads, what your credible teachers experience in the scriptures that they have found useful in terms of formation.

All right. So I'll say just a couple of more, a couple of things more. So to live into this more beautiful gospel, to know what we know, to be honest about what we know, or to be honest about how we think we know what we know, we have to think about the Bible's complexity, let go of Biblicism. And we have to then expand and be okay with an expanded sense of revelation that God discloses God's self in the Bible and through other means than the Bible.

We are invited to let go of sola scriptura, scripture alone for scripture first. Sola, or sorry, for prima scriptura.

[21 : 56] Some of you might know the founder of Methodism is super famous for coming up with this thing called the Wesleyan quadrilateral and saying essentially that truth is refracted through really four lenses, scripture first, but then also reason and experience and tradition and to discern truth, you need them all.

Like you need them all and you need them all in community. They shouldn't be considered suspect. And I'll say that, I mean, I was an adult when I discovered the Wesleyan quadrilateral, but as like, as a black woman, I have often thought, without knowing how to name it, about like the white abolitionists in like the 17 and 1800s who, many of them were Christian.

I'm sure when they came to scripture and saw the issue of slavery, it was confusing. It is, the Bible is very confusing on that issue. And yet there was something in them, into intuition, I would say formed by the Holy Spirit, that led them to like, something doesn't match about this idea that these people are subhuman.

And they took action on that, based just on the sense that truth was being disclosed to them by God through their conscience. And I hope that we all have people around us that we're seeing that kind of faith in.

I hope that we're becoming those kind of people. I'll also say that becoming like that means letting go of these easy answers and moving toward discernment. Because this is all about dialogue.

[23 : 32] It's about dialogue. It's about dialoguing with all of these sources of knowing. And it's about being patient as you cultivate those sources of knowing.

Growing in discernment and recovering the discipline of discernment. Like again, that formal word is something I learned of as an adult and really in contact with Catholic priests who are much more, who tend, from my experience, to be much more attuned to that process of helping people to discern truth.

So we're letting go. We're letting go of false security. We're letting go of easy answers. Yeah. So the last thing I just want to say is this.

Leading into a more beautiful gospel in terms of how we know what we know means letting go of this sense of security. this belief that we've been taught that we can know the answers.

If we believe that the Bible is not, it is capable of being wrong. It's called an errancy, which we can talk about. There's a whole series on the table podcast about this.

[24 : 48] The problem is we also have to recognize that all the other sources of knowing, reason, tradition, they also are capable of being wrong. And we also, even if we get perfect revelation, we often don't receive it perfectly.

We're subjective. We have to ask things like, whose reason, whose tradition, and whose experience, whose interpretation of scripture? Which means, which means, and I feel like this is one of those kind of pastory things people say, but I have to say it, which means that there's this golden opportunity to lean into trust, to let go of security and control, which in many ways is how we are hardwired, and to move into being held and comforted by God, because we won't know perfectly ever.

The more beautiful gospel is that God has revealed God's self, and God has entrusted us with that revelation to hold that revelation, however tentatively we hold it.

And the question is, can we grow in trust in return? Can we discover the discipline of discernment and discover patience?

Can we expand? Those are the questions before us. Amen. Amen. Amen.