Are You Disappointed With the Bible?

1. We start a new series today. We are not anticipating that this will be a long one, but it is a necessary one. We have a book and we hallow that book, but it is a book that has divided us. There are over a thousand denominations whose reason for existence was to "get back to the Bible." How can so many be so divided while claiming to have, as their only authority, this book?

2. When Paul wrote Second Timothy 2:8-16, it seems that we only see verse 15. Let's look at this a bit with more focus and intention. In verse 8, Paul defines his gospel and this isn't the only time he does this. He insists, time and again, that the gospel is the fact that Jesus is the one who came, died for us, and defeated death by being resurrected. THAT is Paul's gospel.

3. Then, Paul quotes a creed or hymn that was already current in his day in verses 11-13. Note what is there and what is not there in the text. He emphasizes living with Christ and enduring with him. Not in these verses is anything about worship styles, organizational principles, or a whole list of "do and do not."

4. While there certainly are "do and do not" passages in scripture, Jesus and Paul and the apostles focused on "be" and not "do."

5. He warns against quarreling about words and religion and tells Timothy to tell others to stop their quarreling – twice! And when he speaks of the scriptures, he doesn't tell Timothy "God said it, I believe it, that settles it" but, rather, "correctly handle" or "rightly divide" the word of truth.

6. When Paul refers to the scriptures in 2 Timothy 3:16,17 he is referring to what we would call the Old Testament. Paul was writing some books and a few others had been written by this time but "scripture" meant the Hebrew scriptures. And the word "is" is not found in Greek manuscripts so it can be moved around a bit or dropped and the meaning changes.

7. Why would Timothy need to be admonished to keep it simple and to correctly handle or divide the word of truth? Let's make a quick side

trip here to remind ourselves that Jesus said that HE was THE way, the truth and the life and that John agrees with that powerful opening passage to his Gospel, John 1:1-4. That said, the written words were sometimes also called the Word of God. Here, Paul refers to the word of truth…but it is a truth that Timothy is going to have to discern with wisdom. It will NOT be spelled out for him.

8. This can be very disappointing to those who decide to deeply study the Bible. Why do we have to approach it with wisdom? Why do we have to divide anything or handle one passage differently than another?

9. Because the Bible is a collection of books written by many different people over a period of maybe 1400-1600 years. Editors used a large variety of documents and books as source material (over a dozen named in scripture), and the books we have show signs of editing and collation. Each book, therefore, in the Hebrew scriptures, at least, might not have one context – that of the author – but also that of an editor. Or two. Or three.

10. Because of that, you can read the Bible and come up with the idea that heaven is out there somewhere…and you can come up with the firm conviction that heaven will be here on a redeemed earth. You can read the Bible and be convinced that 99.9% of all the people God makes in His image will burn in an eternal torture pit for trillions of years and more…and you can come to the firm conviction that God is going to save all of us…or almost all of us. You can be a minimalist, universalist, or an annihilationist and point to scripture as your proof.

11. That's disappointing! Also, you can be disappointed that God didn't just write a rule manual: here are the laws about sex, worship, church organization, what you are allowed to say, which medical treatments are okay, the music you are allowed to sing and play, etc. Early Christians tried to do that with a book that almost made it into the Bible (perhaps I overstate this, fair enough) called the Didache. It's online if you want to read it. I think we would all agree it's a good thing it didn't make it into the Bible.

12. I remember a time when one of my kids asked it was all right to soak up gravy or some kind of sauce with their biscuit. This wouldn't

be an issue in most places but we lived with Miss Kami and she had standards. I said they could, but Miss Kami said it was bad manners. So I called her dad, a Texan. He said it was fine, but he might have been okaying it to get on the good side of his grandkids.

13. The point is: there is no rule…there are several rules and we disagree on which to apply (even with gravy!). Think about First Timothy 2 where men have gone to make sure women couldn't teach. They grab that part out of the chapter but ignore the rest of the passage. (1st Tim. 2:8-15).

14. What do you do when you read Kings and Chronicles back to back and see that the stories change – dramatically?

15. I hear you. I get it. When the dominos began to fall as I found parts of scripture that didn't work with others, or that don't show up in history (the genocides) or that were just shocking and hard to read (Numbers 25, 31), it nearly broke me because I was taught to read the Bible as if God dictated it to each writer, every word. But…

16. …what if we read the Bible as the story of God gently approaching His creation, moving around us with the same wisdom that He showed in carving canyons, raising the Rockies, and bringing His Spirit to hover over us when, as a species, we were ready?

17. The Bible absolutely shows signs of Divine intervention. There is a ton of scientific foreknowledge in here, laws that show a humanity and fairness that was lacking in ancient cultures, and more. Sure, there is also some Bronze and Iron Age horror, as well. Still, there is a central theme: that God wants to approach us and will do so in person in the person of Jesus.

18. Then, we are told to love God and love each other. That's it. That's the job.

19. Note that nowhere in scripture does God ever indicate that He is done inspiring us to write and learn. He never descended from on high, saying "The canon is closed!" He tells us to listen to Jesus (transfiguration).

20. I think one of our problems is that we think of the Bible as a book. In a book, you set your theme, introduce conflict or, perhaps, a task. Then, you place your characters in difficult situations – peril, even. Then, the climax and, perhaps, a short denouement. But the Bible's climax is in the Gospels. It isn't where we expected it so we look at Paul and at Revelation. No wonder we lose the plot!

21. If we read the rest of scripture, following Jesus, and accept his pronouncement that ALL authority has been given to HIM, then we see the rest of scripture as an appendix, as extra reading material showing how the fact of Jesus changed the lives of the early believers. We can see how they struggled to apply the reality of Christ to each situation they faced, individually and collectively.

22. And then we can read the Bible as a fascinating guide to life, God, our history, and more without cringing and without grabbing this or that text to use against others. We would no longer be disappointed it in because we are no longer misusing it.

23. The finger and the dog – look at Jesus. Focus on him.