The Strange and Wonderful Story of Our Scriptures pt3

1. As soon as we start taking a hard look at our Bibles and ask ourselves what they are and how they are to be used, we get the (fair and honest) question: what about 2nd Timothy 3:16,17?

2. Here is where we get into some of the weeds of translations. I don't want us to get bogged down here so just be aware that the word "is" is not supplied in any Greek manuscripts. Read it without that word. Hmmm. Other translations place the "is" after the main phrase so that it reads "all scripture that is inspired by God" which makes it mean something very different, indeed. It would be unwise to hang this one verse out there as your single rule for interpretation when the verse can be read three different ways – legitimately!

3. Also, you need to factor in something very, very important here: Paul is talking about the Hebrew scriptures. The NT hadn't been written yet. In fact, Paul wrote quite a few books before other books were written with one or two possible exceptions, so he wasn't talking about the NT but the OT. He may or may not have thought that some of the things he was writing would be considered authoritative scripture, but he often interjected that this or that statement came from him, his viewpoint, and not the Lord's.

4. We also have to factor in that if you think that everything Paul wrote was scripture, how do you handle the fact that we don't have all of it? We do not have two letters to Corinth that he references in the books we have. The standard answer is "if God wanted us to have them, we would have them" which is fair but, to be honest, you have to say that you are taking that entirely on faith without any evidence or statement from God to that effect.

5. Once we get past all of that, we need to look at what Paul actually said in these verses. He said that they were useful and profitable. He doesn't say they were inerrant. In fact, no Christian leader or Jewish leader than I can find in the ancient or medieval world considered scripture to be inerrant in the sense that most churches use that word (not most theologians, but churches and their members). The idea that every number, name and situation in scripture happened exactly as stated, when stated, and in the context stated is a relatively

modern idea. It comes mainly from the rise of fundamentalism at the end of the 1800s that was refined and popularized in the 1900s in the Western World, particularly, the United States.

6. Before that time, scripture was seen as an unfolding story, a narrative, that pointed us to Jesus, the Word of God. We were led to him, we were his community, and the Bible was the community story that led us there. Like all community stories, there were parts we wish didn't happen and there were other parts that differed according to who was telling the story…but they were our story: useful, profitable, valuable, and holy. (my mother's stories, Pam's stories, and mine)

7. Now, let's take what we've learned so far and think for a moment. Since Paul's letters are the first books in what we now call the NT, that means that there were vibrant Christian communities located all over the Roman world long, long before the Gospels and Acts were written. I was told that the church was given its structure by the NT but that is not true. The church predates the NT. The church gave us the NT, not the other way around.

8. Again, the answer I got to this when I mentioned this fact was something like "the apostles traveled around making sure everyone knew what to believe and what to do in worship." Once again, there is zero literature to back that up so it has to be taken on blind, baseless faith. How many times are we asked to do that? Is it wise? Seems like building a skyscraper on a cobweb. Check your foundation.

9. The Good News of Jesus existed and was powerful and was changing the world long before the books of the NT were gathered or even written. It is the STORY that is important, the river in which we are immersed and which sweeps us along with the Holy Spirit's power and guidance.

10. Three arrows must align, just as in the GPS units of old: scripture, the church, and nature. And when we look at scripture, we must look at it in context and let it explain itself. Stripping away layers of fundamentalist preconceptions can be painful but is necessary if we want to be simply the community of Christ on earth. Look at what the Bible actually SAYS.

11. Isaiah 1:18. When I was younger, I asked what this verse meant. They said it meant that when we brought our issues or questions to God, he helped us see His wisdom. It was less “reason together” and more “let Me tell you what must happen.” That seemed a tortured interpretation to me and then I came upon Matthew 18:19. It seems that God’s main desire is that we agree with each other, that we are not in conflict. When we agree, something happens in heaven.

12. God won’t agree with us if we go against anything plainly outside of scripture, the community, or nature, but those things should be obvious to all. If we decide to launch a coup against our government or to rob a pizza place, God is not going to approve of such a thing. He has shown us what He thinks of violence and robbery. But the things that divide us aren’t violence and robbery but interpretations of this or that scripture…and the findings and pronouncements of our religious leaders. Jesus prayed for unity but many religious leaders spend their entire lives making sure that never happens.

13. I love Phillippians 4:2-3. There, Paul tells Euodia and Syntyche to agree with each other in the Lord but never tells them who is right! He just wants them to agree because that is what is important. Paul wasn’t interested in taking sides but in unity and peace.

14. We cannot change the character of God by our agreements, but He DOES choose to work collaboratively with us and we see Him, yes, in scripture, adapting to us as we adapt to Him. The Jubilee? Tremendous idea…but never incorportated or acted on by the Jews as far as we can tell. The synagogue? Never mentioned or endorsed by God in the OT and, still, Jesus shows up and takes part in it. He doesn’t go all Nadab and Abihu on them. He accepts them.

15. Let’s look at one stunning example of what I mean when I say that our story changes and grows and works harder to look like the God of love Who is our God. This case study is the relationship of God and Moabites. I understand that God was protecting His people, Israel, a small, roaming, desert tribe so that it could survive and bring us Jesus, but a lot of what we read about the Moabites seems racist and over the top.

16. In Deuteronomy 23:3-6, Ammonites and Moabites were expressly barred from the assembly of the Lord. They are unsavable and unconvertable. If you had a single Moabite ancestor within the last 10 generations, you were barred from the worship of God.

17. This was not a temporary injunction. The laws against marrying a foreign woman were based on God's desire to keep Moabites out of the tabernacle or temple (Ezra 9, Nehemiah 13:1-13; Deut. 23).

18. God repeats His disapproval of the Moabites again and again (Isaiah 15-16; Jeremiah 48:1-49:6; Ezekiel 21:28-32; 25:3,4; Zephaniah 2:8,9). Ezra was merciless in enforcing these rules. He broke up a huge number of families in a horrific way. Can you even imagine the pain of the wives and children sent out into the desert?

19. And yet, then comes the story of Ruth where a Moabite woman is welcomed, protected, loved and brought into the family of Israel, the very bloodline of David, the King, and Jesus, the Christ. No wonder, then, that Paul would remind the Corinthians that three things remain and the greatest of these is love.

20. The Bible is our story, but we see God break into the story again and again and correct what we thought was right, what we thought He wanted, and what we were certain He decreed. Gently, He moves us toward love and gets our hearts ready for Jesus.

21. He is still doing that today in every heart that is willing to open to Him.