



Half Truths

Week 1: “God Said It. I Believe It. That Settles It.”

Brian Mattson - 09/07/2025

We are starting a new series today called Half Truths, sourced heavily from the book by Adam Hamilton. It’s a super-accessible short read if you’d like to dig deeper. Half truths are these sayings that have become so commonplace in our society, and the Christian lexicon, that we just assume they are straight from scripture, or at least reflect a Biblical truth. In Hamilton’s assessment, these half truths do reflect *some* Biblical truths, but they also have a tendency to hurt people. To separate people, isolate people, offend people. And they have been used to justify some problematic systems, actions, and biases.

That doesn’t mean you can’t find Bible passages to defend some of these sayings, but frankly there are a lot of parts of the Bible that I have trouble defending. The truth is, when I read the Bible, it takes some interpretation. And when I read things, like in Joshua, about the annihilation of citizens—women and children—who are left after a city had been defeated in battle, I’m left to wrestle with these texts. Why was it necessary for God to command this? How do I understand that in the greater message and themes of scripture, and in particular, Jesus’s life and teachings on peace and mutual support. The answer is it takes interpretation. Adam Hamilton says this:

“We interpret all Scripture in the light of Jesus’ life and teachings, as well as with the help of the Spirit’s witness, the wisdom of scholars, and our intellect and life experience.”

I’m sure that you interpret scripture, and I’m sure that there are times you interpret it differently than I do. And you know what? That’s okay. How boring would life be if we all had the same opinions and perspectives? Scratch that. Maybe we should at least try it for a month or two. Just to see what would happen. Let’s have a boring news day every now and then.

But, given that we will never agree on everything or see things the same way, perhaps we can just find it acceptable—and interesting—that we see life and scripture differently. It’s very Wesleyan to “think and let think” as he put it. There are foundational truths, and then there is everything else. Here’s the full quote:

As to all opinions which do not strike at the root of Christianity, we think and let think. So that whatsoever they are, whether right or wrong, they are no distinguishing marks of a Methodist.

When we get to the end of this series, I hope you will rethink those words and phrases you say, that we all say, that may be a roadblock to some. Bumper-sticker sayings that sound like the Bible, but may actually be a barrier. So let’s dive into some of these phrases, put on our scriptural interpretation hats, and have some fun along the way.

Years ago, I was cleaning up some trash in the parking lot before worship. It was about 8 am, and a gentleman was walking along the sidewalk, saw me, and headed straight towards me. You never know who you are going to run into downtown, so I prepared myself for anything: bus tickets, some food, parking issues, conspiracy theories. It could be anything!

He kindly asked that he was looking for a new church and was hoping we would have Bible studies before worship. I let him know he was in luck because we do! But the way he said he was looking for a new church let me

know he was most definitely unhappy with his old church. Not looking to anger or disappoint anyone, I decided to put on my filtering hat and do a little interpreting in our discussion. I asked why he left his old church and he let me know it was because they weren't teaching the Bible.

This is a red flag in my world because I don't read the Bible literally in all areas. In most areas. I told him we indeed teach the Bible here at The Downtown Church, but let me ask you a follow up question. *How do you feel about women pastors?* Like any God-fearing man, I, too, despise female pastors, so I wanted to make sure he and I were on the same page. He told me that there is no such thing as female pastors, to which I nodded in firm agreement.

But unfortunately, my boss at the time was, in fact, a female pastor. My hands were tied. I informed him of our unfortunate situation at The Downtown Church, which was led admirably by Reverend Lori Lampert. He began to sputter some words of disagreement and bewilderment that another congregation was crossed off his list of potential church homes. I let him know that we did take the Bible seriously here, we just interpret scripture differently. He walked away upset, exclaiming that the Bible doesn't need interpretation.

And then, because he was wearing a suit jacket that appeared to be a combination of polyester and wool, I promptly ripped it off and quoted Deuteronomy 22 for his sweet, little literal heart, bless his soul.

All jokes aside, interpretation, in my opinion, is quite necessary. We are reading and studying a collection of books, songs, poems, and stories from a wide variety of people and places, written thousands of years ago. If you think it's easy to read the Bible and make it make sense in our modern context, I envy you. And I'm not supposed to do that. So today, we are going to explore the phrase, *God Said It, I Believe It, That Settles It.*

You've no doubt heard it from people that they just want everyone to do what God says, and by saying that, I think what they really mean is *what the Bible says*. If it's in the Bible, it is from the mouth of God, and therefore that settles the debate. That is a gross oversimplification of scripture, and it shoehorns ancient words into our very different modern world.

Adam Hamilton tells a humorous story about churches and pastors debating whether to have indoor plumbing in their buildings in the late 19th century. They were used to outhouses, the common practice of the time, and this adhered to the passage in Deuteronomy instructing the Israelites to make a designated place outside camp to relieve themselves. If parishioners in the late 1800s were allowed to go to the bathroom inside the church building, would they be breaking one of God's commands?

Some passages of scripture, when taken literally, without interpretation, would cause us to lead quite different lives than we have currently. No blended fabrics, or at least linen and wool. No mowing lawns or cleaning our houses on Saturdays. We couldn't eat pork or shrimp. If kids talk back by cursing or striking their parents, they should be put to death. Men can't trim the edges of our beards. (Luckily, I don't have to worry about that last one.) These are just a few laws that give you an idea of how times have changed.

People might argue that a lot of those laws were just Old Testament rules reflecting God's covenant with Israel, but no longer binding. Jesus didn't talk like that, though.

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be

called great in the kingdom of heaven.

-Matthew 5:17-19

So Jesus, the guy who instituted a new covenant with God's people, says the laws remain. He just interpreted them in different ways. And it got him in trouble with other interpreters of his time—the Pharisees. Early in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus and his disciples were walking through a grain field on the sabbath, plucking some to eat. The Pharisees exclaimed that this wasn't allowed on the sabbath. Jesus and the disciples were breaking laws! Jesus reminded them that, "The sabbath was made for humans and not humans for the sabbath."

He then went on into a synagogue where he found a man with a withered hand. The Pharisees watched to see if Jesus would heal the man, which was not allowed. Jesus then said to them:

"Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to kill?" But they were silent. He looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart and said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was restored.

-Mark 3:4-5

The Pharisees' literal and strict interpretation prevented them from even doing good things on the sabbath. That's not to say Jesus took a more liberal interpretation all the time. When it came to divorce, Jesus was more conservative than the Law. Yet still, Jesus continues to treat people who have not followed the Law—all those sinners and tax collectors—with endless mercy and compassion.

Interpretation of the Law and scripture continued in the New Testament with the early Church. One humorous example is in Acts 15 when there was a great debate about whether new Gentile converts needed to be circumcised, as the Law stated, to be true believers. The discussion rose all the way to the

top, to the apostles and elders in Jerusalem, to resolve the debate. It was then decided that these new Gentile believers didn't need to be circumcised, but did need to follow a few of the restrictions. They sent a letter to be read to these early congregations.

When they gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter. When they read it, they rejoiced at the exhortation.

-Acts 15:30-31

I bet they rejoiced! I have no doubt. Adult circumcision is a bit of an ordeal.

We continue to re-interpret these ancient texts today. Paul once wrote, "As in all the churches of the saints. Women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak but should be subordinate, as the law also says... For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church." This one makes me shudder. I consider myself profoundly lucky to have been taught by a woman who spoke up in church. Who taught me and others about God.

There are passages in the Bible that probably cause you to shudder, whether it's the ones that appear to condone slavery, murder, and oppression, or a host of other topics. That doesn't mean we retire the Bible. It means we think bigger and broader. We read between the lines and try to understand the context. And most of all, we pass the words through the lens of Jesus—the Word of God. The Word who became flesh and lived amongst us. Jesus came to be one of us, to teach us, and show us what real love looks like.

In perhaps his most famous example of interpretation, Jesus was asked which is the greatest commandment. He answered the same way we close our worship every week:

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." On these two commandments hang all the

Law and the Prophets.”

-Matthew 22:37-40

It's not that Jesus was throwing the Law and commandments away. It's that he was encouraging us to keep digging. There is more meat on the bone. When we read things that cause us to wonder or question, that's an invitation to continue on. The journey is longer and deeper than a few words on some paper. There are study Bibles to help flesh out the ideas. There are commentaries that help explain the cultural context. If you think *God said it, I believe it, that settles it*, try reading scripture in a group setting. You will quickly realize that we all read the words and come to different conclusions. And that causes us to interpret or re-interpret what we've read and understood before.

Adam Hamilton does a little re-interpreting of that half truth saying. His version sounds like this: "God influenced it. I read, study, and sometimes wrestle with it. And, as I interpret it in the light of Jesus Christ, I hear God speak through it and seek to live its words as best I can."

I recently had a conversation with someone who has been on a journey of re-interpreting all the things he had read and said over the years. He finally came to a place where he was content with his beliefs, but he was afraid they might be considered heretical, so he never joined any small groups or studies. After our discussion, I assured him that his thoughts were shared by many other people and I was absolutely certain I didn't need to excommunicate him. But I did tell him, he might have reached those conclusions earlier if he *had* decided to join a few groups and figure out these ancient texts with other people. Interpreting scripture doesn't need to happen alone.

The big danger of fully embracing "God said it, I believe it, that settles it," is that people use this phrase to defend *their* interpretation of the Bible. As if they are certain beyond the shadow of a doubt about what God has said and

is saying. And often, that leads to an unhealthy posture of control of others. Declaring who's in or who's out. Weaponizing fear to enforce compliance. It's power that so easily corrupts.

The danger of completely throwing out the phrase is in abandoning our faith that God has spoken and is still speaking. It can be easy to trade one kind of certainty for another. The certainty that the Bible is clear and unambiguous and just to be obeyed at surface level for the certainty that God is too mysterious to be known at all, or for the certainty that it's all a hoax. But there is a middle way. Of embracing mystery and process. Being on a path instead of at a destination. The point of the Bible, of God speaking, is for us to engage with God. The perfection is in the attempt, not some illusion of certainty. We encourage questions here, and when we ask those questions together, we tend to come to healthier conclusions that aren't solely shaped by our own perspectives. Life, scripture, and interpretation are all better together.