



## But What Does the Bible Say?

In one of his [mini-talks](#) about the history of Anglicanism, Professor Ron Dart speaks of Erasmus and the the Church Fathers. In that talk, Professor Dart relates a bit of correspondence between St. Augustine of Hippo and St. Jerome, translator of the Vulgate (the Latin translation of the Bible that was used by western Christianity for almost 1500 years).

In this correspondence Augustine asks Jerome how to translate a particular passage from a letter of St. Paul. Jerome responds by citing several different Church Fathers saying this one says one thing, that one says another and a third says something else. Augustine writes back, “But what does the Bible say?”

Jerome responds, that the very reason why we read the Holy Fathers is that the Bible is not clear. Many passages can and have been read one way by one holy Father and differently by another holy Father.

When I was a young Protestant, I was told that the Bible is God’s handbook. It is the guide to Christian life. Certainly this is true, but a problem lies in what we think a handbook is. If we think that the Bible is a handbook like the Betty Crocker Cookbook, then we cannot help twisting and perverting what the Bible says to fit our expectations and then denouncing as fools or demoniacs those who twist the Bible differently to meet their expectations. And that, pretty much, was my Protestant experience. People read the Bible and get something from it that is different from what their neighbor is getting and end up condemning their neighbor because they read some biblical passages differently. This is where the thousands of different Protestant denominations have come from.

But what if we understand “guidebook” differently? What if the Bible is a guide book like the diary of a pioneer might be considered a guide book for those who follow. Such a diary would certainly be a valuable guide to those who plan to follow the pioneer, even though the diary was not written to be a guide. It was written as a diary. And certainly, letters written by other pioneers would also be useful to help guide those who follow. But again, as useful as these letters might be as a guide, they were not written as a guidebook, but as letters to specific people about specific matters at a specific time. And what if we were to add to this guidebook poetry, historical records, songs, records of dire warnings of historic events now long past and other writings—all written over a 1500 year period in three languages. Certainly, all of this would be useful, but it would not be easy to interpret, understand and apply.

And yes, even with the Holy Spirit breathing through the pages of such a guidebook, still it would not be easy to interpret, understand, and apply. All we have to do is look at the evidence. Holy people who have spent most of their lives reading and studying the Bible still do not agree on everything.

And I think that was St. Jerome’s point.

We want so much to have something firm to base our syllogisms on. We want to remove mystery from our foundations so that we can rely on our speculations, on our logical extrapolations of first principles. We much prefer being philosophers to being theologians. Philosophy extrapolates from firm givens, theology (in the Eastern Orthodox sense) only knows, knows from experience of God. Very little can be proven, yet much is known. And much is messy.

I think that may have been what bothered St. Augustine about St. Jerome’s response. St. Jerome



acknowledged the messiness of theology. St. Jerome could be at peace with three holy Fathers each interpreting a passage differently; perhaps St. Augustine couldn't. And perhaps all of us (especially in the West) struggle at times with the messiness of Orthodox Christian theology. We want to know *the* answer, as though the answer were a statement and not a Person. We want to know the right position on some matter, a matter that perhaps even the Holy Fathers have seen differently. We want to know which ones are right.

But Christ is the only sinless One. Our righteousness and rightness is in Christ alone—not in being correct over against someone else. The Orthodox Church puts a great deal of emphasis on right believing. But the actual dogma that the Orthodox Church demands us to rightly believe is not very large—it is all found in the Creed of Nicaea. And as important as it is to believe the right doctrines, the Orthodox Church teaches us that in the Last Judgement before God, no one will be questioned about what they did or did not believe.

In the end, what will matter is how we have loved, how we have cared for “the least of these, and how what we have believed has helped us enter the Mystery of Life in the Incarnate God.

The prophets of the Old Testament warned God's people in the past that right belief, as important as it is, is not enough. In fact, even those without right faith—Ninivites, Moabites, Samaritains and others—found salvation from God through repentance and trust in God. How easily we forget the teaching of Jesus: Judgement is not based on what we believe but on whom we believe.

Perhaps that's why God has allowed Orthodox theology to be so messy: to remind us that Transfiguration comes through communion with God, love of neighbor and humility (knowledge of self), not through being right.