
I'm Selling Bibles, Ma'am

An article for the *Cathedral Times* by the Very Rev. Sam Candler

"I'm selling Bibles, ma'am. God's holy word."

Those are the words of young Henry Dampier, in Clyde Edgerton's delightful novel of a few years ago. It's called, simply, *The Bible Salesman*, a kind of coming-of-age story in which a young Bible salesman actually begins to read the Bible.

That's right. He is a Bible salesman before he has even read the Bible. The novel is about his beginning to read the Bible, and about his beginning to grow up, and about his experiencing the good and the evil of human life.

"I'm selling Bibles, ma'am. God's holy word," he says, without ever having read the Bible.

There's a lot of people these days who talk about the authority of the Bible, or who believe in the literal and inerrant authority of the Bible, but who seem never to have actually read it – or at least have never actually pondered, and critiqued, and truly examined it. I am amused by proclamations about the infallibility of scripture that so rarely ever actually use scripture.

The fact is that scripture only occasionally talks about itself! In the Episcopal Church, ordained priests vow that the Holy Scriptures "contain all things necessary to salvation." (See page 526 of *The Book of Common Prayer*.) That sort of vow has been in place a long time; it was part of the *Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion* in sixteenth century England.

But the vow does not say that everything in scripture is necessary to salvation. It says simply that scripture "contains all things necessary to salvation." Furthermore, the vow does not claim that the Bible is inerrant, or without error. That sort of claim has never been a majority claim in the Episcopal Church, or the Anglican Communion of Churches.

The inerrancy of the Bible is not part of our tradition. But let me note something else. The Bible itself never claims to be inerrant! When I am arguing with people who believe in the inerrancy and the authority of the Bible, I ask them for one thing: "If you believe so much in the inerrant authority of the Bible, give the chapter and verse where the Bible itself claims it is inerrant."

It's not there. The Bible itself never claims to be inerrant.

But the Bible does make some extraordinary claims for itself, or at least for the scriptures. One of its major claims for itself is in 2 Timothy. We think it was Paul who was speaking to his young disciple Timothy; it was certainly some authoritative figure speaking to a larger church. And he mentions scripture, the sacred writings. Remember, if he writes during the middle of the first century, AD, much of the rest of the New Testament has not been written yet, or certainly regarded as scripture yet!

He says, "As for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, . . . and how from early childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work." (2 Timothy 3: 14-17).

This is a beautiful passage, speaking of the merits of sacred scripture for teaching and correction and righteousness, yet the passage never claims that the sacred scriptures are inerrant or without error.

Yes, our Christian past is littered with outlandish attempts to interpret the Bible so that it can be symbolized as without error. Some of the more amusing have to do with harmonizing various accounts of the same event. In case you haven't noticed, the Bible contains many different stories which seem to refer to the same event.

Take the Ascension, which we remembered this past week. Luke, chapter 24, seems to indicate that the Ascension of Jesus occurred on the very same day as the Resurrection? Yet, Acts chapter 1 explicitly says that the Ascension occurred forty days after the Resurrection. James Barr, in his book called *Fundamentalism* claims that he has heard conservative scholars offer, in all seriousness, the explanation that Jesus must have ascended twice – once on the Day of Resurrection, then he came back down, and he ascended again forty days later.

Obviously, this is a silly and extreme example. The point is this. There is a difference between inerrancy and inspiration. I believe that sacred scripture is inspired of God. That inspiration is why I read scripture, and contemplate scripture, and study scripture. The words contain the breath and energy of God. I do not read the Bible because it is inerrant and literal; I read the Bible because it is inspired. God breathes through the Bible's words.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Sam Candler". The signature is written in black ink and has a long, horizontal flourish extending to the right.

The Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler
Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip

Sam Candler's program for the parish retreat this weekend, at Kanuga Camp and Conference Center, will be titled, "A Three Hour Tour of the Bible!"