

Some Important Questions for Andy Stanley About the Bible

In the midst of a multi-part preaching series, megachurch pastor Andy Stanley said, “So I need you to listen really carefully and the reason is this—perhaps you were taught, as I was taught, ‘Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.’ That is where our trouble began.”

What exactly did he mean?

For Southern Baptist leader Dr. Al Mohler, these words were a cause for real concern, stating, “If Scripture cannot be trusted, then we are doomed.”

He ended his critique saying, “‘For the Bible tells me so’ is not ‘where our trouble began.’ To the contrary, it is right where God wants us.”

Pastor Stanley has now written a lengthy article explaining his statement, and New Testament scholar Scot McKnight has come to Stanley’s defense, concluding that the issue is really one of order. In other words, what comes first, our faith in Jesus, hence in the Bible, or the reverse?

Prof. McKnight writes succinctly, “In the beginning was the gospel, and the New Testament comes into existence because of that gospel. Yes, we know that gospel through the New Testament.”

I asked Pastor Stanley about his statement, and he was kind enough to reply immediately and refer me to his new article, which at the time of our interaction, was not yet published.

After reading his article, I told Pastor Stanley that I would discuss the controversy between him and Dr. Mohler in a public, constructive setting, clarifying issues and raising

further questions for consideration.

This way, we can make the controversy into a productive, teachable moment.

In short, I appreciate Pastor Stanley's desire to reach the unreached and the "deconverted," and I believe him when he affirms his confidence in the authority of the Scriptures, yet I share some of Dr. Mohler's concerns.

First, let's consider what Pastor Stanley does affirm.

To his credit, he immediately addresses the "elephant in the room," namely, the question of what he believes about the Bible, and he states unequivocally, "I believe the Bible is without error in everything it affirms. I believe what the Bible says is true, is true."

Even Dr. Mohler agrees that "Andy Stanley does not mean to deny the central truth claims of Christianity. In his message, 'Who Needs God? The Bible Told Me So,' he affirms the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. But," Dr. Mohler continues, "he does so while undercutting our only means of knowing of Christ and His resurrection from the dead—the Bible."

Is Dr. Mohler's critique fair? We'll return to that question shortly.

Second, it's important that we recognize what is motivating Pastor Stanley. As he explains, "Changing times call for changing approaches in order to accomplish our unchanging mission of making disciples."

Pastor Stanley's concern is that we are dealing with increasingly large numbers of Americans who do not believe the Bible is God's Word, people who have heard all kinds of attacks against the reliability and historicity of the Scriptures, people who have either left the church or never

been part of the church.

To say, "We know it's so because the Bible tells us so," means nothing to them.

Moreover, Pastor Stanley claims, with this approach, we are taking on ourselves the impossible burden of defending every attack against the Bible in order to preserve people's faith, whereas if their faith is grounded in the resurrection of Jesus, they won't feel the need to defend all of Scripture.

Third, Pastor Stanley feels he is following a biblical paradigm, since Peter used Scripture when preaching to Jews in Acts 2 but didn't quote Scripture when preaching to Gentiles in Acts 10. Similarly, Paul quoted from the Hebrew Scriptures when preaching to his fellow Jews in the synagogue (Acts 13) but quoted secular poets when preaching to Gentiles in Athens (Acts 17). Yes, Pastor Stanley states, "Paul summarizes the Genesis account of creation, including a reference to Adam, without referencing Genesis or Adam. He teaches Scripture without referencing Scripture."

Fourth, Pastor Stanley urges all of his readers to reconsider the effectiveness of their methods, asking with passion, "Are we ready to acknowledge the new normal and adjust? If we genuinely care about the unchurched and the post-churched, we will. If we genuinely care, we will adopt the apostle Paul's mantra: So that by all possible means I might save some."

And, he asks, "What is the faith of the next generation worth?

"What is the faith of your children worth? Your grandchildren? Think about it. What is the faith of the next generation worth? I say everything. I say it's worth any change necessary to ensure the version of faith the next generation leaves home with is the enduring version—the faith of our first-century fathers. The version that was harder than steel and tougher than nails. The version rooted in an event, not a book."

This, then, is the approach that he advocates: "Shifting the conversation away from the authority of Scripture to the authority, courage and faithfulness of the men and women behind our Scriptures has not only enabled me to better connect with post-Christians, it's done wonders for the faith of the faithful."

In response, let me raise five major concerns, all in the context of my appreciation of: 1) Pastor Stanley's reaffirmation of his confidence in the authority of Scripture; 2) his zeal to reach the lost and build up the saved; 3) his penning a lengthy article of explanation with the goal of advancing understanding; and 4) his accessibility despite his busy schedule.

Here, then, are my concerns.

First, Pastor Stanley ends his article saying, "So come on. If you believe in the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ, that's all I need to know. And in light of what's at stake, in light of who is at stake, perhaps that's all you need to know as well."

But this begs the obvious question of, "Which Jesus Christ?"

To be clear, I do not agree with Dr. Mohler that our "only means of knowing of Christ and His resurrection from the dead" is "the Bible."

Certainly, the Spirit does bear witness with our spirits that we are children of God (Rom. 8:16; Gal. 4:6), and the risen Jesus, by that same Spirit, continues to work wonders on the Earth today (Heb. 13:8). And it is that same Spirit with whom we have intimate fellowship (2 Cor. 13:14).

There is truth, then, to the old hymn that proclaimed,

He lives, He lives, Christ Jesus lives today!

He walks with me and He talks with me

Along life's narrow way.

He lives, He lives, salvation to impart!

You ask me how I know He lives:

He lives within my heart.

But there were many different Jesuses in New Testament times and beyond (2 Cor. 11:4)—many false Christs and false gospels and false apostles—and there are many different Jesuses today. And it is only by the Scripture that we can separate truth from error and expose a counterfeit Christ while following the true Christ.

Paul urged Timothy to “Take heed to yourself and to the doctrine. Continue in them, for in doing this you will save both yourself and those who hear you” (1 Tim. 4:16). How does one do this without constant reference to what is written?

Second, in his earlier message, Pastor Stanley said that the problem with “the Bible says it, that settles it” approach to the faith is that, “if the Bible goes, so goes our faith.”

Indeed, he stated, “If the Bible is the foundation of your faith, here's the problem: It is all or nothing. Christianity becomes a fragile, house of cards religion.”

Unfortunately, he declares, “it is next to impossible to defend the entire Bible.”

But that brings us full circle, since, regardless of what came first—meaning, whether you came to know Jesus as Savior and then realized the Bible was God's Word or whether you were taught God's Word as a result of which you came to know Jesus as Savior—we still find ourselves with the same dilemma, namely, if the Bible is not reliable in what it affirms to be true, then it is not reliable.

Surely Pastor Stanley recognizes the need for solid

apologetics in this age of increasing attack on God's Word, and so in the end, if he and his team are unable to "defend the entire Bible," the faith of many will be lost.

Third, the contemporary attack on Scripture is not simply an attack on the scientific accuracy or historical veracity of the Bible. It is an attack on the character of God, an attack on His standards and His morals. If we fail to respond to these attacks with love and with truth, with grace and with conviction, we will not be able to make real disciples.

Instead, believers will continue to be moved by the moral relativism of today's society, judging the Scriptures by their opinions and feelings rather than judging their opinions and feelings by the Scriptures. I am, therefore, concerned with anything that might potentially undermine the authority of Scripture in the hearts and minds of God's people.

Fourth, writing in support of Pastor Stanley, Prof. McKnight states that, "Before the apostles, during the period of the apostles, and before there were written records, before the Gospels were written, during the time of the apostles' writing and yet before there was anything like a canon or what we now call the New Testament ... before this and during this ... the gospel was alive and well, and the gospel was being preached and taught, and people were being saved. Salvation depends entirely on the truth of the gospel."

Now, Prof. McKnight is a brilliant scholar and will surely have a response to my concern here, but it's important to remember that the first disciples, all Jews, relied on the authority of the Scriptures—what we call the Old Testament today—with Peter stating that, although he and two of his colleagues saw the Lord transfigured, "we have a more reliable word of prophecy, which you would do well to follow, as to a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star arises in your hearts" (2 Pet. 1:19).

These Jewish men knew that the creation accounts and the flood account and promises to the patriarchs were true because God acted in history in the exodus and spoke to the nation at Sinai, giving the nation the Torah and confirming what came before. All the prophets who came after this had to affirm what was written in the Torah, after which the Messiah came, pointing both to His miracles and to what was written. And so the Scriptures affirmed Him and He affirmed the Scriptures.

Also, within a short time of the Lord's death and resurrection, oral traditions were circulating that later became part of the Gospels, and so it is somewhat misleading to state that people were being saved and discipled without the Scriptures.

Fifth, and finally, the gospel remains the power of God to salvation (Rom. 1:16), and as one missionary evangelist once stated, "the power is in the proclamation."

While I am all for looking for the best methods with which to accomplish the Great Commission—which is certainly Pastor Stanley's heart—I fear we have lost faith in the power of the gospel message, proclaimed as truth rather than defended or even explained.

It is amazing to see how God saves and heals and delivers lost sinners around the world, people from every cultural and religious background, through the simple declaration of the gospel.

As Paul wrote, "For the Jews require a sign, and the Greeks seek after wisdom. But we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Greeks. But to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, we preach Christ as the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Cor. 1:22-24). May we never lose sight of this.

Let the discussion continue!