

# Because Something's in the Bible Doesn't Make it Christian

Not everything the Bible says is Christian. Let me explain.

As a young pastor, every sermon I preached was based on a Bible passage, and most sermons cited several other verses from various parts of the Bible.

After all, back then Billy Graham, the most famous preacher in the world, repeatedly proclaimed, "the Bible says," in all of his powerful sermons.

Later, perhaps much too much later, I realized that the Bible says many things - and that not everything the Bible says is Christian.

As I am using it here, "Christian" means that which is in harmony with the life and teaching of Jesus Christ.

The word "Christian" can, of course, refer to that - or those - associated with the religion known as Christianity. The better use, though, is with direct reference to the Christ from whom the religion sprang.

So, the question becomes "What biblical verses are normative?"

Many years ago, Kaneko Keiichi-sensei was a younger colleague of mine at Seinan Gakuin University in Japan.

More than once, I remember him asserting that it is not how many Bible verses one cites but which verses one cites that is of crucial importance.

At first, I didn't grasp the import of Kaneko-sensei's words, but I later came to appreciate the significance of his assertion. It is possible to quote many Bible verses that are contrary to how Jesus lived and what he taught.

So, again, things can be biblical but not Christian.

As is often noted in this connection, "biblical" support for slavery in the 19th century and the "biblical" support for rejecting women in ministry in the 20th century are good examples for how the Bible has been (mis)used to maintain cultural norms.

Currently, the "hottest" issue is about acceptance and affirmation of LGBTQ people as equals within the church.

In February, the United Methodist Church approved the "traditional plan" on the matter, affirming the "biblical" view of marriage as being between one man and one woman.

Unquestionably, Bible verses can be (and have been) marshaled in support of

slavery, against women in ministry as well as against acceptance of gay, lesbian, and transsexual persons. Those arguments can be touted as biblical.

But are they Christian? It depends on which verses one considers normative.

In late February, Sojourners magazine printed “Not Everything ‘Biblical’ is Christlike,” [a fine article](#) by Stephen Mattson, one of my youngish Facebook friends. I highly recommend that cogent piece.

In light of the recent controversy in the United Methodist Church, earlier last month a retired United Methodist pastor in Georgia wrote [an article](#) titled “Be Careful Using the Bible.”

And then, the first chapter of Chuck Queen’s 2013 book, “Being a Progressive Christian,” is quite good. He begins Chapter 1 with the assertion, “What the Bible says is not necessarily what God says.”

Or, it could be asserted that the Bible may be the “Word of God” but not all of the words in the Bible are the words of God.

This is important to realize, for as Queen says, “The direct identification of God’s voice with what the Bible says has been used to justify all sorts of destructive biases and oppressive practices.”

“It is Christ Himself, not the Bible, who is the true word of God,” C.S. Lewis

observed in a letter published posthumously in “The Collected Letters of C.S. Lewis, Volume 3.”

“The Bible, read in the right spirit and with the guidance of good teachers will bring us to him. ... But we must not use the Bible ... as a sort of Encyclopedia out of which texts (isolated from their context and not read without attention to the whole nature and purport of the books in which they occur) can be taken for use as weapons.”

I have written this article not to discourage reading the Bible. Rather, I am encouraging Christians to read the Bible “Christianly” - and to realize that many things can, indeed, be biblical but not Christian.

*Editor’s note: A [version](#) of this article first appeared on Seat’s [blog](#), A View from this Seat. It is used with permission.*