

I will begin with a prayer. [May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be pleasing to you, my Rock and my Redeemer. May you guide us in wisdom and truth, now and always. Amen]

I recall as a child being *so* grateful that I had been born into my family- a sort of divine lottery-winner that I happened to belong to a minority of people who knew, beyond the shadow of any doubt, who God was, what he wanted of us, and how to be saved into Heaven. Our beliefs about salvation were, of course, the most important, but there was a forerunner belief, an undercurrent that held perhaps equal significance- the doctrine of inerrancy.

(To explain this doctrine, I've taken the liberty of copying this from my sister's church's website, where her husband is the lead pastor.)

We believe the Holy Scriptures, the 66 books of the Old and New Testaments, to be verbally inspired by God and inerrant in the original writings, that they are of supreme and final authority in faith and life, and that they will be used to settle all matters not specifically addressed in this statement of faith. | *2 Timothy 3:16-17; 2 Peter 1:19-21*

There is an important subtext of this statement of belief. When we talk about the Bible in this way, what is really meant is that we read the Bible as *one* book that is:

- *historically* and *scientifically* inerrant
- universally moral and directly applicable to our modern context
- that we prioritize literal-often supernatural- interpretations over metaphorical ones
- and that all of this is obviously clear.

Let's look at a couple of these inerrant and obviously clear passages. How about the accounts of Jesus's resurrection? [Explain differences]. If you find this confusing, I encourage you to read in parallel Genesis 1 and Genesis 2 to see if you can figure out whether God created plants or humans first.

I remember my dad explaining the doctrine of inerrancy to me; that you had to accept the entire Bible as infallible or else you would have *no choice* but to pick and choose the verses to follow based on your own sinful desires; a la Thomas Jefferson, who doubted the divinity of Jesus and famously cut out all the parts of the Bible that favored the miraculous. In my understanding, either the Bible had to be perfect- *without error*. Or it was unusable garbage. (A standard, it's worth mentioning, we don't apply to any other area of life- not news, not relationships... imagine holding your spouse to be either

perfect and 100% right about everything, or completely untrustworthy. But so it was with the Bible. Inerrancy was simply the non-negotiable starting point from which all else in our belief system followed.

I never doubted the Bible for the first 23 years of my life. “I was a true believer- saved at age 3, I agreed with everything my family believed, gave the control over my life to God, and even rededicated myself to Jesus in my teens and did an evangelism training at Moody Bible Institute, where I briefly engaged in street preaching. I got married at age 23 to the love of my life, a fellow Christian whom you all know. And then.

There was just one problem. But it was one problem I had never prepared for. Mark had noticed contradictions in the Bible. Opposite, contradictory statements in our *had-to-be-perfect-without-any-errors* Bible upon which the foundation of my faith was entirely built.

My mom somehow suspected this and did as good evangelical mother-in-laws do; she gifted Mark Norman Geisler’s *Big Book of Bible Difficulties*. It is indeed a *big* book- 624 pages. Now, one might argue that if you need 624 pages to explain why the problems in the Bible aren’t problems, that... there is in fact a problem. But in any case, this book did essentially two things for us;

- 1) It made us aware of how many Biblical contradictions there were- more than we had even discovered on our own.
- 2) It showed us the type of logic that people use to reconcile these contradictions; unfortunately, they rely heavily on logical fallacies, and we discovered that if you begin with the assumption that something must be true, you can reconcile any contradictory evidence using these tactics. [Video Slide]

Clearly it’s *possible* to reconcile these things. But it just feels like such a stretch to me. How would you come upon that interpretation from reading each passage, if you weren’t beginning with the assumption that they *must* both be telling the exact same story? And so we realized that just because something *can* be reconciled doesn’t mean that it *should* be. So there I was- no longer able to believe in inerrancy and lost in a pile of rubble that used to be my faith, now in complete wreckage from this discovery.

Contradictions welled up from within me- my reality was something that wasn't allowed to be true. Different parts of me believed different things. I was fractured. Dysfunctional. Broken into contradictory pieces, each part of myself hating the other.

Little by little, I found others who shared this story with me. I found Biblical scholars, like Pete Enns, who studied the Bible honestly for what it really is and not what they required it to be, and yet found a way to continue to follow Jesus- perhaps more honestly than before. I also found a therapist who did internal family systems work with me... she convinced me not to solve my problems by getting rid of the disagreeing part, but to listen to it and give it a job. Not unlike human relationships, the parts of myself that weren't heard were becoming angrier. Listening to and accepting these contradictory parts as important pieces of my whole self allowed me to heal. I found this community here, and a way forward.

And now, to circle back to the Bible and its contradictions, I want to ask; what if these contradictions are not a bug, but a feature? If we feel we have to "fix" contradictions, we treat them as problems to be wiped away; it's a sort of conversation-ender, a narrowing of perspective. But if we treat contradictions as virtues, they draw us into deeper conversation and richer relationships- opening our minds and allowing us to grow.

In her book "Good Inside", parenting expert, Dr. Becky Kennedy, walks readers through forming healthy relationships through accepting multiple realities at once. She says:

When you're in "one thing is true" mode, you're judgmental of and reactive to someone else's experience, because it feels like an assault on your own...exchanges escalate quickly- each person [thinking] they're arguing about the content of the conversation, when in fact they're trying to defend that they are a real, worthy person with a real, truthful experience. By contrast, when we're in "two things are true" mode, we are *curious about* and *accepting of* someone else's experience...both parties feel seen and heard, and we have an opportunity to deepen connection.

Similarly, in her Ted Talk, Nigerian author Chimamanda Adichie warns people of the dangers of "the single story" where we tell other people's stories in their place, reducing their lives and experiences to a single narrative which we construct and can condense into a stereotype.

Growing up Evangelical, your testimony was expected to follow the approved story form; sin, self-centeredness, and looking for satisfaction in the wrong places, leading to a moment of salvation, followed by a 180-change in direction. For those of us who were raised in the tradition, we had to be a bit more creative to frame our childhood as a rebellious phase;

- Sometimes you can claim to have “not really understood” what you were being taught, allowing you to have a true conversion to your faith later.
- Sometimes you can say you “walked away from the Lord” and then come back.
- (My sister actually lost some points on her testimony assignment at Moody Bible Institute because her true life story did not include enough rebellion).

My testimony of being a true believer who discovered factual contradictions in the Bible and changed course out of genuine desire to find truth and follow Jesus... that story is not permitted in Evangelicalism. It gives me immense grief to know that some of the people I love may never be able to believe my true story because it's too risky for them to embrace; **in this “one thing is true” framework in which they are trapped, my reality threatens theirs.** [Pause]

And yet, before I cast myself as the victim in *this* singular narrative, I must admit that I've also been the *perpetrator* of the single story aggression- telling my friend in college that he couldn't both have *really* believed in Jesus as a child and then *really* become an atheist... [Pause] So on the difficult day when I learned my siblings knew something of my faith shift and were praying for God to “open my eyes” and for me to leave this church, I cut my sister off at the sentence “our concern is that a true believer would-” because I knew what was coming. I had said it myself.

The single story always flattens. It flattens humans and their experiences into a convenient “other,” allowing for scapegoating and division. It lets us feel better than our enemies and avoid the uncomfortable confusion in seeing that someone is complex and not easily known. It lets us ignore the possibility that they could speak truth to us... truth that would be challenging and convicting. In the case of the Bible, when we erase the diverse voices and reconcile the contradictions to turn it into *one* story, we flatten it. It becomes a one-dimensional rulebook and a weapon; a device to paint over human experience and end curiosities, rather than open a world of mystery and wonder.

But there is another way. There's a Jewish idea of "turning the gem" where the sacred Scriptures are not seen as flat, but as a beautiful gemstone that can be turned again and again to reveal many different ways that the light reflects off its surface; bringing beauty and a new perspective with each one. Diverse perspectives will always open the door to contradiction, but again- what if contradiction isn't a bug, but a feature? As it happens, contradictions are everywhere. Let's read and reflect silently together how different people in this congregation have noticed contradictions in our world.

Irish theologian Peter Rollins, speaks at length about contradiction. He notices that in politics, contradiction is democracy, in psychoanalysis it is the unconscious; our *not-at-oneness* with ourselves. Even in the more concrete disciplines such as mathematics and science, you have the incompleteness theorem and the particle-wave contradiction. Even in these same theological traditions that rage against the idea of unresolved contradictions in our holy scriptures- even at the very heart of Orthodoxy, you have a God who is one and a God who is triune. Jesus as fully God and fully man, Jesus, who is one with the Father, crying out "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" God as eternal and God dying on a cross... death ending in resurrection and resurrection ending in separation through ascension, and the promise of the Kingdom of Heaven being both in our midst and always yet to come. Contradiction is woven into the fiber of reality all around us.

I've come to think that if Jesus can be fully divine and fully human that so too might our Scriptures be both divine and human- that the contradictions we see are *not* problems to be solved as much as they are mysteries to be enjoyed. While there are undoubtedly areas of life that present with contradictions that deserve to be resolved, I think we can *embrace* our inner contradictions, the many stories we hear from others, and the contradictions in Scripture as healthy diversity that opens conversation, encourages curiosity, and deepens connection. Embracing contradiction invites us to turn the gem in a continual journey of learning, growth, and rediscovery.

And now, in the spirit of contradiction, having talked at length about multiple things being true, I will end by saying that one thing is true; though we have different ideas and stories and sometimes clash, we are all part of the same symphony, that we are made and known and loved by the same God who enters into our fabric of reality in ways that we will always strive to know yet never understand. But joy is found in the struggle, and may we struggle together in love.