Admissions Essay (three pages only)

Read the article “Is the Bible True?” by William C. Placher (pages 2-8 of this document).

**Instructions**: After reading the article, write a 3-page essay in which you respond to the questions below. *Your essay is to be double-spaced with standard margins in Times New Roman 12 and must include one citation or reference from an academic source, such as scholarly books, scholarly journals, and other comparable intellectual resources that would be found within a college library.* Biblical references may be used in addition to the academic citation. Citations from websites such as Wikipedia are not acceptable for this essay. Provide full citation information for any sources you reference, including the Bible, following one of the standard formats, e.g. MLA, Chicago, or Turabian.

“When we really know the Bible, we realize its complexities, its diversities, its ambiguities. One of our problems these days, whether we are ‘liberals’ or ‘fundamentalists,’ is how few of us can do that. Fundamentalists quote a single proof text to settle the matter, and liberals can’t remember any passages at all. If we are to get beyond such a state of affairs, we will have to study the Bible much more seriously. But if we believe the Bible is true, if we really trust it, we ought to be willing to do the work.” – William C. Placher

Choose one of the following issues: war, poverty, world hunger, sexism, racism, immigration, the environment, criminal justice, education reform, or healthcare policy in the 21st century. **Discuss your selected issue with reference to one or two biblical texts.** Keeping in mind Dr. Placher’s insights about genres of texts, the attitudes of biblical authors about reporting historical details, and the social context/culture of the Bible, why did you choose the text or texts that you selected? Why is this issue important to you and for the church’s mission in the 21st century? What does the text(s) suggest to you about doing ministry that addresses the issue?

At the end of your essay, please type the pledge below. Your typed initials as well as the date (either next to or underneath the pledge) will suffice as your “signature” certifying that this pledge is true.

"I pledge that this is my own work and I have not received outside help."
Is the Bible True?

by William C. Placher

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Whenever there's a really intense fight among American Protestants, sooner or later it seems to turn into an argument over the truth of scripture. At one extreme, some dismiss any appeal to the Bible out of hand and consider "authority" a dirty word. Others confidently assert that only their literalistic interpretations really count as believing the Bible to be true. Many of us find ourselves wandering around confused in the middle, wanting to believe in the Bible, not thinking of ourselves as biblical literalists, but unsure how to characterize our position. Indeed, much of the notorious malaise of mainstream Protestantism derives from a perception that, to the question, "Is the Bible true?" the moderate answer is, "Well, sort of..." followed by either a lot of confusing talk or an embarrassed silence.

That perception isn't entirely false. Nonfundamentalists' discussions of appeals to the Bible have often consisted principally in ridiculing fundamentalism, without defining any clear Christian alternative to fundamentalism. I'm going to try, in limited space, to sketch an alternative way of saying, "Yes, the Bible is true."

This claim entails two secondary claims.

First: to say that the Bible is true is to say that what it means is true -- and what it means is shaped by (among other things) the genres in which the Bible is expressed, the attitudes it takes to history, and the ways cultural contexts shaped the meanings of the words that it uses.

Second: to say that this particular book is true is to say that we can trust it, trust it as a guide to faith and life which provides not only specific claims about God's faithfulness and how we ought to live our lives in response to it, but also a way of understanding the whole world and a language in which to speak about that world. These secondary claims may seem a bit complicated, but acknowledging complexity is a way not of hedging commitment to the Bible's truth but of fully attending to the complex ways in which the Bible is true.

First, then, let us consider the relation of truth and meaning. It's an obvious point, really - the truth of a statement or a book depends on what it means. Yet the point often gets lost in discussions of biblical truth. Consider the question of genre - the literary term that refers to the kind of work a particular text is. A novel represents a different genre from a work of history, which is different from a lyric poem, and so on. Different genres make different kinds of truth claims.
A work of fiction, for instance, operates differently from a work of history. If David McCullough simply made up some of the episodes recounted in his biography of Harry Truman, then that counts as a fraud—it's not as good a book as we thought. It was not to be trusted after all. But if Charles Dickens made up Oliver Twist, that doesn't make the novel a lie. Since it belongs to the genre "novel," it isn't supposed to report historical facts accurately.

The distinction between McCullough and Dickens is obvious. Other cases are more difficult. If we pick up one of James Michener's big historical novels, for instance, we know we're reading a work of fiction. Most of the leading characters are imaginary. But Michener is famous for his thorough research, and we'll expect that the backgrounds, landscapes and historical contexts are presented with considerable accuracy. If not, then Michener hasn't done his usual homework. If we're reading Mark Twain's A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court, on the other hand, we soon recognize that Twain is having all sorts of fun with deliberate anachronisms, and we don't expect any sort of historical accuracy. To take another example, if we're reading a movie star's autobiography, we assume it will have a more casual relation to the facts than an academic historian's biography of a British prime minister. Different genres have their different rules.

The Bible includes a variety of different genres. When we read in Luke's Gospel Jesus' story about the good Samaritan ("A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him, and departed, leaving him half dead") we are not inclined to check the story against the police blotter for the Jerusalem-Jericho highway patrol. We recognize that Jesus is telling a story to illustrate a moral point, and that such stories often don't claim to correspond to actual events.

The opening chapters of Genesis represent a different genre - Karl Barth called it "saga," "an intuitive and poetic picture of a pre-historical reality of history" (Church Dogmatics 3/1). Events get described which no human being could have witnessed. Animals talk. People live for centuries. We're in a different genre here from that represented by, say, the Gospel narratives of Jesus' last days or the stories of the reign of King David in 2 Samuel, which read much more like eyewitness history.

In its intuitive, poetic way, saga communicates truths about the ultimate origins of things, just as the narrative history in the Bible presents truth in a different way, stories with a moral lesson like the good Samaritan in another, and the poetry of the Psalms in yet another. "We are," Barth says, "no less truly summoned to listen to what the Bible has to say here in the form of saga than to what it has to say in other places in the form of history, and elsewhere in the form of address, doctrine, law, epigram, epic and lyric." But we listen faithfully only when we realize what genre we are encountering.

Texts often provide clues as to their genre. When a story begins, "Once upon a time . . ." we expect a fairy tale. When we flip on the television and see someone saying, "A guy walked up to a man in a bar. . ." we know we're watching a comedy club, not the evening news.

But sometimes, particularly when encountering a text from a different culture, it's hard to recognize the genre. For example, Data, the android on Star Trek, can't recognize jokes. He takes them literally, and often finds himself puzzled.
Similarly, when we read an apocalyptic text like Daniel or Revelation, we often find ourselves puzzled, not knowing how we are supposed to understand these particular texts. We’re not taking their truth more seriously if we take them as literal predictions about the future, any more than Data is interpreting more accurately when he misses the joke. To misunderstand the genre is to misinterpret the text.

Somewhat different from the question of genre is the issue of how different cultures and different authors understand history and its recording. In his History of the Peloponnesian War, for example, Thucydides recounts speeches at key points in his narrative: "Cleon ... spoke as follows:... "So Cleon spoke. After him Diodotus ... came forward ... and spoke as follows: ... .” And so on. A modern reader might expect that the reports represent something like transcripts. But in his introduction, Thucydides explains:

> I have found it difficult to remember the precise words used in the speeches which I listened to myself and my various informants have experienced the same difficulty; so my method has been, while keeping as closely as possible to the general sense of the words that were actually used, to make the speakers say what, in my opinion, was called for by each situation.

This explanation involves some ambiguity. Keeping "to the general sense of the words that were actually used" sounds like at least a rough paraphrase. But making the speakers say what "was called for by each situation", implies that he imposed his own view of what ought to have been said by the speaker, whether it bears any relation to an actual speech or not. It’s at least clear that Thucydides, in many ways the most skeptical and careful of ancient historians, adhered to conventions of "reporting" that a modern historian or newspaper reporter would not be permitted to adopt.

Even in his classic account of the plenary inspiration of scripture, the 19th-century Princeton theologian Charles Hodge acknowledged that "the sacred writers impressed their peculiarities on their several productions." "If a Hebrew was inspired, he spake Hebrew; if a Greek, he spake Greek; if an educated man, he spoke as a man of culture; if uneducated, he spoke as such a man is wont to speak."

And, I would go on to argue, if biblical authors wrote in a culture with an attitude different to historical reporting from ours, then they wrote as the products of such a culture. The Gospels, John Calvin once remarked, were not written "in such a manner as to preserve, on all occasions, the exact order of time." "We know that the Evangelists were not very exact as to the order of dates, or even in detailing minutely everything that Christ said or did." The standards of the best modern journalism or critical history were simply not around in the first century, and it's an anachronism to expect the biblical authors to have followed them.

Regarding historical detail, then, as with respect to understanding genre, we believe in these texts most faithfully when we understand the sort of texts they are and believe what is appropriate in respect to such texts. To treat them as having an attitude to history different from what they do is not to interpret them with maximum accuracy, but to get them wrong.
Another source of confusion in interpreting the Bible, or any text that originated in a culture different from our own, lies in the different social conditions of that different time and the ways those conditions give terms different meanings. For instance, slave owners in the American South regularly cited the positive biblical references to slavery to support the ownership of slaves. But slavery in ancient Israel was a very different sort of institution. It was not based on race. Many slaves were supposed to be freed at the end of seven years, and there was a good bit of movement back and forth between slavery and freedom. Israeliite slavery may have been a bad institution, but it was a very different institution from that of American slavery. It was more like the hiring of indentured servants, if one wants an American analogy. So one can’t simply transfer what the Bible says about "slavery" to an American context where the institution and the circumstances are very different and the word therefore has a different meaning.

Similar issues arise with the much-debated issue of homosexuality. We don’t know much about what forms homosexuality may have taken in ancient Israel. In some surrounding cultures, homosexual prostitution was practiced in conjunction with the worship of Baal, and Hebrew law might have condemned such activities because they were homosexual or because they involved prostitution or because they were connected with Baal worship. Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 focus on the issue of male homosexual intercourse: "You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination." "If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination." However, the word used to condemn these actions, toevah (abomination), usually refers to acts that make you ritually unclean, like eating pork or engaging in intercourse during a woman’s menstruation—in contrast, say, to actions such as theft or murder—and these condemnations occur in the midst of others that have mostly to do with ritual purity. It’s hard to be sure what the practices were or what about them was judged objectionable

If two men in the contemporary U.S. (notice that the Levitical passages do not refer to lesbian relations at all) come to love each other, move in with each other and share their lives while having regular sexual intercourse, they are almost certainly doing something unlike anything anybody in ancient Israel did. The cultural context inevitably generates different practices. So when the Bible condemns some activities that were being done in ancient Israel, should we assume that it also condemns these differently contextualized activities today? I’m not sure I know the answer to that question; my point is simply that it’s a complicated question.

Similar issues arise with Paul’s condemnation of malakoi and arsenokoitai in 1 Corinthians 6:9. The first word derives from a word meaning "soft" and could apparently refer to effeminacy or masturbation. (On this and other points I am drawing on John J. McNeill’s *The Church and the Homosexual* and John Boswell’s *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, though I do not accept all their conclusions.) The second is a very unusual word, which appears in Greek in this grammatical form for the first time in this letter. In its first usage outside the New Testament, in the second-century *Apology* of Aristides, it probably means something like "an obsessive corrupter of boys." In neither case is it obvious that the word refers to all (male) homosexuals.
For that matter, there just isn’t a word in classical Greek (or Hebrew or Aramaic) that exactly corresponds to our modern English word "homosexual," because there wasn’t anything that exactly corresponds to today’s homosexuality—which is itself, of course, a most diverse phenomenon. In part of the ancient Creek world (Kenneth Dover’s Greek Homosexuality provides the best account), it was common for young adult men to be the active partners in sexual relations with adolescent boys. The boy was not supposed to take any pleasure in the sexual act—that would be a disgrace to him—but to experience it passively as a way of expressing his appreciation for the man’s patronage. Homosexual relations represented a stage in some young men’s lives, after which they would settle down to heterosexual marriage. There are all sorts of reasons one might want to condemn such behavior, which represented at least one common pattern of male homosexual behavior Paul would have encountered in his culture—that it involved young boys, that it was not a matter of mutual pleasure, that it was a way of expressing one partner’s superiority over the other, and soon—while perhaps not condemning some of the different forms homosexual activity takes in our culture.

I’m not defending any particular conclusion in the debates on biblical views of homosexuality. Given the logic of my position, arguing for any particular conclusion would require more detailed historical analysis than I can offer here. Many recent discussions seem to assume, however, that the only alternatives are either to quote a few passages, as if what they said ended debate, or else not to care what the Bible says about these matters. I think there is an interpretive middle ground on this and many other issues: to figure out the real point of biblical passages, understood in context. I’m not sure how the debate on homosexuality would turn out if defined that way, but I believe it would be more edifying than many recent discussions of these matters have been. And in proceeding in such fashion, we’re not watering down our fidelity to what the Bible says. On the contrary, by trying to understand its meaning better, we’re trying to be more faithful to it.

To understand how the Bible is true, therefore, we must understand its genres, recognize its attitudes toward the reporting of historical details, and consider the social context in which it was written. This much could be said about any text of sufficient complexity.

All this makes understanding the Bible sound very complicated. It may also seem that the truth of the Bible is getting lost in a morass of qualifications. The issues are complicated, but we needn’t despair of finding biblical truth because, finally, we can trust the Bible. In this respect, Christians read the Bible differently from the way they read any other book.

Some years ago, Anglican Bishop John A. T. Robinson wrote a book called Can We Trust the New Testament?—and "trust" provides a good category for thinking about the special attitude Christians take to this book. When we trust people, we recognize their jokes as jokes, their metaphors as metaphors, and their fishing stories for the tall tales that they are. We also recognize that on the things that really matter, they won’t lead us astray. So with the Bible. With all qualifications duly noted, we can still think that, as a guide to Christian faith and life, it won’t lead us fundamentally astray. Turning the question "Is the Bible true?" to a question of trust is faithful to the Bible itself, for the Hebrew word we translate as "truth" carries the connotations of "trustworthiness" or "steadiness" or "faithfulness." The true person, in Hebrew, is the one you can trust—and so the true book as well.
Why should we trust this book in particular? That’s a question that admits of no short answer. In part, we trust the Bible because we find that it keeps making sense of the world in which we live. Using nearly every genre and every attitude to historical detail imaginable, the Bible lays out a richly diverse vision of the world, from beginning to end, and says, in effect, "This isn’t some imaginary world, like Tolkien’s Middle Earth. This is the real world, the only one there is. So if you buy into this basic picture of things, then anything real has to fit somewhere into this framework. Your life and the events around you thus will make sense only as they have their place within this grand story."

And Christians find that, if they keep reading this book and live their lives in the context of the community that reads it, that promise keeps getting fulfilled, albeit always tentatively and incompletely. The categories the Bible uses, the models it offers for understanding human life and the world around us, and the God about whom it tells can seem at first strange, but we find them over and again providing clues that put together pieces of our fragmented world in unexpected ways.

Perhaps the most important element in this mix is that we trust the Bible because we have come to trust the God about whom it tells us. The process of coming to this kind of trust moves in a kind of circle: we trust in that God in significant part because of what we learn in the Bible. It’s a mistake to look for a single entry point into this circle. No one doctrine provides the foundation on which we believe all the others. We find ourselves trusting, in the way we sometimes find ourselves in love, without being able to define the steps that led to that state, and the elements that shape our trust are tied together in complicated ways. Even a complete systematic theology will not fully explain such matters, but it follows that we cannot work out even a fairly good doctrine of scripture without, for instance, a doctrine of the Holy Spirit, and then, in turn, a doctrine of the Triune God. If the Bible invites us into the world it narrates and describes, it also gives us a language in which to think about the world. The experience of finding yourself thinking in a previously foreign language offers another analogy for what it is like to learn to trust the Bible. Moving into a new culture or learning a new skill often involves learning a new language. To understand Japan, I need to learn Japanese. To become a lawyer, I need to learn the vocabulary of the law. When I learn these new languages, I’m not just acquiring a new stock of words; I’m learning to think in a different way.

Christians today often think of their world in the vocabularies of contemporary politics or popular culture. But the Bible offers us an alternative. Those poor folk across town are not just "welfare recipients" or even "fellow citizens"; they’re "neighbors." That action wasn’t just "inappropriate behavior" or even "crime"; it was "sin." When we use such a vocabulary, we find ourselves thinking about the world in different ways—and sometimes, at least, we may find common ground with other Christians from whom we were divided when our only language was that of contemporary politics.

To trust the Bible, to let it define our world and provide a language for thinking about the world, can transform our lives. But it does not make understanding the Bible easy. We have to get down to hard work—to reading the Bible and immersing ourselves in its world and its language. We need to know the Bible well enough so that, as was true for Augustine or Luther or Calvin, one
passage reminds us of another that offers a qualification, another that provides support, another that sets out a different frame of reference.

Such immersion in the biblical world and its language leads to much richer interpretation than either quoting proof texts or picking and choosing passages we like. When we really know the Bible, we realize its complexities, its diversities, its ambiguities. One of our problems these days, whether we are "liberals" or "fundamentalists," is how few of us can do that. Fundamentalists quote a single proof text to settle the matter, and liberals can't remember any passages at all. If we are to get beyond such a state of affairs, we will have to study the Bible much more seriously. But if we believe the Bible is true, if we really trust it, we ought to be willing to do the work.