A Guided Tour of the Bible, Its Inspiration, Authority and Purpose

By Gary W. Deddo,
John Halford, and Michael D. Morrison

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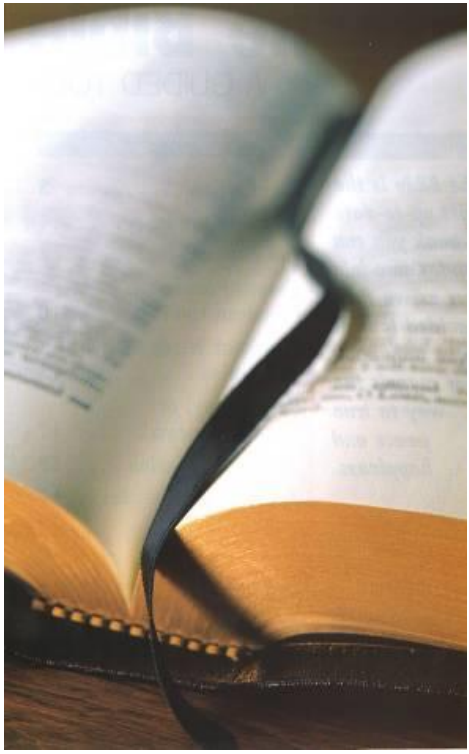
INTRODUCTION



Most Americans have a Bible, but many have never read it. Perhaps they started to read it, but gave up after reading a few chapters.

Why? Maybe because the Bible seems to be such an intimidating book. It even looks difficult to read, with its hundreds of pages of small type and old-

fashioned, hard-to-understand language. This makes it seem dignified, but imposing and not very "user-friendly."

This series is designed to help you explore the Bible and see for yourself what it is like, what it is about and how you can learn to use it.

Ironically, many people respect the Bible even if they aren't religious. Some feel more obliged to tell the truth if they've sworn on a Bible. Some are reluctant to ever throw away a Bible.

The Bible is still a best-seller. Millions of copies are distributed every year in hundreds of different languages. It's a book we keep but don't read, one we often quote but don't understand, one we say we love but don't really like.

It may be "the Good Book," but what is it good for?

Even many religious people know only a few famous passages, like the Ten Commandments, the "Lord's Prayer" and the "Sermon on the Mount." They have only a vague idea of what the rest of the Bible is about. They may know some of the stories, like the one about Noah and the Ark, or Abraham sacrificing Isaac, or Samson and Delilah, or David and Goliath. They've heard of Moses, Elijah, Paul and the scribes and Pharisees. But where — and how — do they all fit together? Or do they?

This booklet is designed to help you explore the Bible and see for yourself what it is like, what it is about and how you can learn to use it.

How do you begin to discover what it is all about?

A good way to feel at home in unfamiliar territory is to take a guided tour. The guide can show you around, answer questions and point out interesting things along the way. You soon get an overview that helps put everything in perspective.

CHAPTER 1: BREAKING THE ICE — GETTING STARTED WITH THE BIBLE

Let's go through the Bible together from start to finish. There is a lot of territory to cover, but we'll move quickly, since the goal is to give you an overview of the book. We'll pause from time to time during this tour to explain some things you might not otherwise understand. (If our tour is a bit too basic for you at times, please bear with us. Some people on this tour may be opening the Bible for the first time in their lives.)

We can't explain everything, of course. The Bible is a big book, and its pages invite a lifetime of study. But this quick, introductory tour will help you see how the Bible fits together and how its basic themes are developed. When we're finished, these hundreds of pages won't seem quite so mysterious. We hope this tour will whet your appetite to come back and explore more thoroughly.

It is important that you follow this tour with a Bible at hand. Make sure that the Bible you will be using is complete. Any Bible that contains both the Old and the New Testaments will be suitable for this quick tour of the Scriptures.

So if you're ready, let's start by looking at the cover. In addition to the words *Holy Bible,* you'll probably see a designation of which version you have. If your Bible is older, it most likely is what is known as the Authorized or King James Version, because it was prepared and published under the patronage of King James VI of England in 1611. Or if you are in the Roman Catholic tradition, it may be a Douay-Rheims Version.

Or your Bible may be an updated version, such as the New International

Version, the New Revised Standard, the New American Standard, the New King James, the Revised English Bible, the English Standard Version and the New Living Translation, or you may have yet another of the many versions available. In this booklet, we are using the New International Version as our reference. If you are using another version, you may find the wording slightly different, but the other essential features will be the same.

Now look at the title page. Under the title you may see words such as *Containing the Old and New Testaments,* showing that the Bible is divided into two main parts. (Some Bibles include other sections, too, but we will stick to the most common two-part arrangement.) The Old Testament tells of events from the creation of humans to a time about 400 years before Jesus Christ was born. An important theme is the rags-to-riches-to-ruin-to-rebuilding story of ancient Israel. These people lived in the Middle East.

The New Testament, much shorter than the Old, contains the four Gospels, each recounting the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. The Gospels are followed by the Acts of the Apostles, which tells the story of the first years of the Christian church. The New Testament also includes many of the letters (known as "epistles") written by the apostles. It concludes with the Apocalypse or Book of Revelation.

The Bible looks at the world from the perspective of the Middle East.

Both testaments of the Bible are important. The writers of the New Testament presumed that their readers were familiar with the Old. You cannot fully understand the New Testament except with some knowledge of what is in the Old, and the Old Testament is incomplete without the light of what is in the New.

You may also notice, on the title page, a paragraph that reads something like this: *Translated out of the original tongues and with former translations diligently compared and revised.* Hebrew and Aramaic were the original languages of the Old Testament. The New Testament was originally written in Greek. What you are looking at is a translation.

After the title page, you may find a list explaining abbreviations and perhaps a pronunciation guide for some of the unfamiliar names and places. There may also be a few pages of introduction or a preface from the publishers. Most King James Bibles reproduce the letter of dedication by the translators in honor of their royal sponsor. These prefaces and forewords are interesting, but they are not part of the actual text of the Bible and need not detain us now.

Next, you should find a table of contents listing the various books of the Bible in order. The word *Bible* derives from a Greek word, *biblon,* which means "book." The Bible is actually a collection of many different writings, written over a period of about 1,400 years by 40 or more authors. And yet the books support each other in a coherent way, which is one reason people who believe and trust the Bible recognize it as God's Word.

This book has been likened to an instruction manual from humanity's manufacturer. It boldly claims that God created human life for a purpose. It tells us that God's plan for us extends far beyond our years of physical existence.

One of the best-known verses in the Bible is the so-called "golden verse," from the third chapter of the Gospel of John: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). You've probably heard that before. But do you understand it? Why is humanity perishing? How does believing in Jesus Christ give us eternal life? What is an eternal life, anyway?

In another New Testament verse, the apostle Paul reminds a young man, "from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (2 Timothy 3:15). In other words, the Scriptures contain all we need to know to be saved. But what are we saved from? And what are we saved for? Our tour will look at these questions.

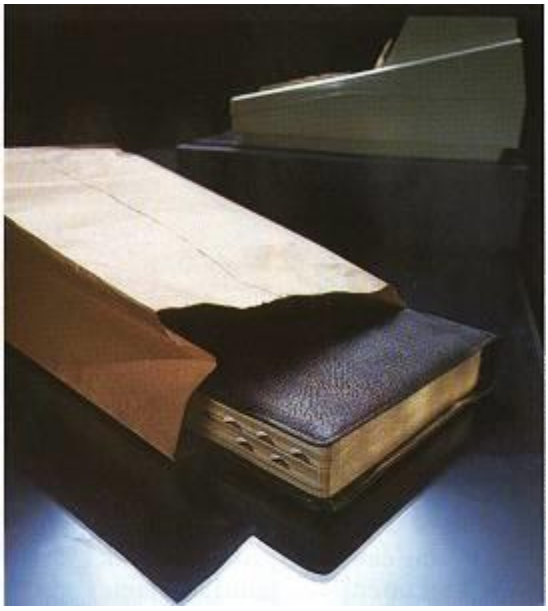
Finding your way

From time to time on this tour, we will suggest you look at some short passages in the Bible. You will need to know how to find them. The Bible is a big book, and locating a specific passage, if you don't know how to look, can be like searching for a needle in a haystack.

Most Bibles have a table of contents near the front. This will help you find a particular reference. The books have been further divided into chapters and verses. A citation will mention the book name, then the chapter number, a colon, and the verse number. For example, Deuteronomy 4:7 refers to the book of Deuteronomy (the fifth book in the Bible), the fourth chapter, and

the seventh verse. Some short (one-chapter) books have only verse numbers; 3 John 4-6 refers to the fourth through sixth verses of the third epistle of John, near the end of the Bible.

When you come to a reference in the text, we suggest you find the passage and read it. It will make the tour more interesting and help you get the feeling and flavor of the Bible. We have also placed additional scriptural references in the graphics. There is no need to stop and read all these references during the tour. They are there to help you follow along as we progress through the Bible and so you can find your place if you get lost. A good guide doesn't want to lose his tour group! You will find these scriptural references helpful if you decide to explore some parts of the Bible more thoroughly later.



So You're Going to Buy a Bible?

As we explained in the Introduction, almost any complete Bible can be used for this quick guided tour. But if you decide to study the Bible more seriously, you may soon want to buy a new Bible.

Buying a Bible used to be as easy as buying a Model T Ford — you could have any color, as long as it was black. Today, the religious section of your local bookstore (or an Internet supplier) may have a bewildering array of Bibles. Which one is right for you?

Each of the many versions of the Bible has its strong and weak points. Some Bibles are translations, while others are paraphrases of the original languages. It is important to know the difference. A paraphrase attempts to render the ancient Scriptures in clear, modern, lively English. However, sometimes this clarity is achieved at the expense of accuracy.

A translation tries to stay closer to the wording of the original languages, even if the result sometimes sound a bit awkward to today's readers. And there are some versions that try to achieve a balance between translation and modern English.

If you want a sound, reliable Bible for everyday use, we recommend that you choose one of the popular, readily available modern translations.

The King James Version has been with us since 1611, and is often called the Authorized Version, because it was authorized to be read in English

churches. It is still widely sold and widely quoted. Its language is sometimes majestic and sometimes rather old-fashioned. Unless you are already familiar with "thee" and "thou" of Elizabethan English, you will probably prefer a more modern version.

The New King James Version was published in 1983. It preserves much of the style of the King James, but has modernized the language. Modern readers will find it easier to read and understand.

The English Standard Version is a fairly literal translation in the King James tradition. Because it stays close to the Greek, it does not always read well in English, but is a good Bible for detailed study.

The New International Version was published in 1978, updated in 1984 and again in 2011. Clear, readable language and helpful subheads and footnotes make the NIV suitable for the new Bible student. It is popular among evangelical Christians.

The New Revised Standard Version was published in 1989 by the National Council of Churches. It is based on extensive scholarship and is common in larger denominations.

The New American Bible was published with an updated New Testament in 1988. This Roman Catholic translation also includes the Deuterocanonical books (see below).

The Contemporary English Version was published in 1990 by the American Bible Society, using the methods they use to translate the Scriptures into the everyday speech of peoples around the world. The result is an easy-to-read version that avoids theological jargon.

The Message Bible is a paraphrase written by Eugene Peterson. It attempts to put the original meaning into more modern phraseology, even if that means adding and deleting words.

For beginning readers, an inexpensive Bible will be suitable. More serious students may choose a leather-bound Bible with wide margins, or a study edition that includes background notes and comments.

Other reference books

Besides Bibles, you may see in the bookstore a variety of Bible study aids. As you become more familiar with the Bible, you may want to buy some of them. Two or more translations of the Bible may be helpful for comparison.

To do further study on a word or concept, a concordance may be helpful. This shows all the verses that use a particular word. Bible dictionaries and handbooks may explain unfamiliar terms and give background information about cities and customs. Bible atlases can help you visualize some of the

events. (Many Bibles include a basic map of the main sites.)

Commentaries give a book-by-book, verse-by-verse explanation. Some are easy for beginners to use; others are scholarly works that discuss Hebrew and Greek terms.

Many Bibles and reference works are also available on computer. These may range from free downloads to $400 libraries. But most of them are designed for detailed work by scholars who are already familiar with the Bible itself. There are a variety of free translations available at www.biblegateway.com and some free study tools at www.biblos.com.

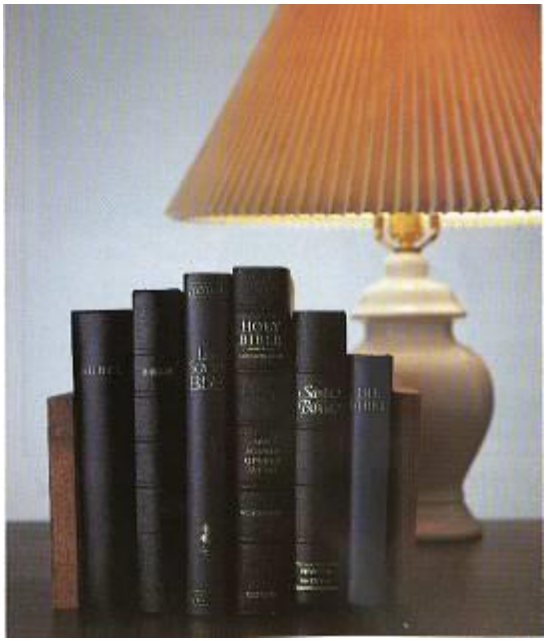
Where to buy

Many cities have Christian bookstores where you can browse several translations and talk to the staff about the merits of each translation. You may also find Bibles at a discount through the Internet:

www.americanbible.org — The American Bible Society

www.christianbook.com — Christian Book Distributors

Both of these suppliers offer printed catalogues, if you prefer. Many smaller suppliers also offer a variety of Bible translations and prices.



CHAPTER 2: THE BEGINNING — THE FIRST FIVE BOOKS OF THE BIBLE

The first book of the Old Testament is Genesis, often subtitled "The First Book of Moses." Tradition says it was written by Moses, though the book itself does not identify its author. "Genesis" means "beginning," which is appropriate, since this book contains a simple but profound story of the creation of the world. This is not intended to be a scientific explanation. The Bible tells us that God did it, but it does not tell us the details of how he did it.

The Bible makes an important distinction between humans and other living creatures. The animals were made after their kind (Genesis 1:25), but humans were made in the likeness and image of God (verse 26).

Genesis tells us that God established an environment for Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden and gave them a choice, symbolized by two trees (Genesis 2:17). Eve decided to eat fruit from the forbidden tree after she listened to the serpent (identified in the New Testament as Satan, the devil), and Adam made the same decision. Their act led to banishment from the garden, leaving them to make their own way in the world, where they and their descendants eventually died, just as God had said.

Adam and Eve were typical of us all. At this early time, and in this simple setting, they showed that humans, if allowed to choose whether to trust and obey God, could choose to take matters into their own hands. Their decision set the course for the grim trail of war, hatred and strife that has marked human history.

We got off to a bad start from the very beginning. Yet by the time we reach the last chapters of the Bible's last book, we will see that in spite of our grim past and uncertain present, we humans face a positive future. God has a plan to save humans, and the Bible tells us about that plan. It is, above all, a story of hope!

God sent them out of the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:23-24)

But we are getting ahead of ourselves. Let's continue in Genesis. The human race became increasingly violent and corrupt over the next few hundred years. Eventually God intervened. God told Noah to build an ark in which Noah, his immediate family and two of each kind of animal could be protected, while other life perished in a great flood. After this flood, it wasn't long before Noah's descendants rebelled again. God again thwarted man's rebellion by confusing his language, making it necessary for peoples to disperse.

In its opening chapters, the Bible uses broad strokes to paint a picture of how and why humanity became alienated from God and started on a way of life that leads to death. The Bible now narrows its focus to tell the story from the point of view of one branch of the human family, the people of Israel. (Whenever we refer to "Israel," we mean the people of *ancient* Israel who lived in the Middle East thousands of years ago, and not the Jewish state that was established in 1947.)

The history of these people begins with Abraham. God ordered Abraham to leave his homeland (in modern-day Iraq) and to journey to a distant promised land that eventually would be given to him and his descendants as an inheritance. God further promised Abraham that if he remained faithful, all the people of the earth would be blessed through him. God used Abraham and his family to play an important role in the plan of salvation for the human race.

Jacob blessed Joseph's sons, Ephraim and Manasseh (Genesis 48:20).

The story continues with the experiences of Abraham's son Isaac, and then of Isaac's son Jacob. God changed Jacob's name to *Israel* (Genesis 35:10). Israel had 12 sons; these sons and their descendants were known as "the children of Israel" or "the twelve tribes of Israel." The remaining chapters of Genesis describe how famine led the children of Israel to move to Egypt. The stage is set for the second book of the Bible.

Exodus

For some time after Joseph's death, the Israelites lived among the Egyptians. They prospered and grew until a later Pharaoh began to see them as a security risk and enslaved them (Exodus 1:8-11). God saw Israel's sufferings and graciously intervened to bring them out of Egypt as his people, to give them the land he had promised to their forefather, Abraham.

Leaving Egypt and slavery behind them, the Israelites arrived at Mt. Sinai, where God made an agreement (or "covenant") with them. The Ten Commandments were the heart of this covenant.

If Israel would obey God, they would be his people (Exodus 19:5-6) and become an example for other nations. But if they chose to disobey, they would forfeit God's blessings. God had rescued them from slavery and given them a new life as a nation.

Aaron's snake swallowed up their snakes (Exodus 7:12).

Do you notice some parallels between this story and that of Adam and Eve? God gave Israel blessings and then a choice: Trust God and everything will go well. Disobey and negative consequences are inevitable.

Leviticus

The third book of Moses, Leviticus, records laws and statutes that would regulate life and worship in the Promised Land. God was teaching these ancient people that sin has serious consequences, but that it can be forgiven.

Leviticus not only has laws about the ceremonial rituals in the temple, it also has laws about how the Israelites were to live in peace and righteousness with one another. Social responsibilities and worship were woven together.

Numbers

The name of this book is derived from a census in which Moses numbered the tribes as the journey began. It is as much a story of Israel's failures as it is their successes. Even with continual evidence of God's support, the children of Israel lacked faith. Time and again on the journey through the wilderness, they complained. Some even threatened to return to Egypt.

The Bible is remarkably honest about Israel's history. In other nations, patriotic epics usually glorify a people's strengths, while minimizing their

failures and weaknesses. Not so the Bible. It is relentlessly realistic about the chosen people's lack of trust and confidence in their God.

After traveling a year or so, Israel arrived on the frontier of the Promised Land. Moses sent scouts to survey the territory, but after 40 days most of them brought back a pessimistic report. Most of the spies did not have faith in God, and they encouraged the people to return to Egypt.

This was an important lesson for Israel. God had promised he would guide Israel to success. But Israel had to learn to trust him. But because of Israel's lack of faith, God said that Israel would have to spend 40 years wandering before they would enter the Promised Land. The people who complained would not receive the land.

Deuteronomy

The name of the fifth book comes from a Greek word meaning "second law." This is the last of the "books of Moses." The law was given again. Just before the Israelites entered the land, the aged Moses reminded them of their covenant with God. He rehearsed their prolonged lack of faith and explained again why they wandered in the desert for 40 years.

Moses carefully rehearsed the laws and statutes that were to undergird the new society. He encouraged the Israelites to remain faithful to God so that their new lives in the Promised Land would be successful (Deuteronomy 30:19).

At the age of 120, Moses died (Deuteronomy 34:5, 9). Before Moses' death, God guided him to appoint Joshua as his successor.

Ancient Laws That Are Not out of Date

Some laws in the Old Testament may at first seem rather old-fashioned. Some are. But others are quite sensible. Many of them confront the same issues that plague society today: crime, corruption, poverty, greed and even the destruction of the environment. Here are timeless, logical, commonsense principles that would help any people at any time build a fair and just society.

Notice, for example, these laws:

Exodus 21:35-36: "If anyone's bull injures someone else's bull and it dies, the two parties are to sell the live one and divide both the money and the dead animal equally. However, if it was known that the bull had the habit of goring, yet the owner did not keep it penned up, the owner must pay, animal for animal, and take the dead animal in exchange."

Exodus 22:7: "If anyone gives a neighbor silver or goods for safekeeping and they are stolen from the neighbor's house, the thief, if caught, must pay

back double."

Exodus 22:26-27: "If you take your neighbor's cloak as a pledge, return it by sunset, because that cloak is the only covering your neighbor has. What else can they sleep in? When they cry out to me, I will hear, for I am compassionate."

Leviticus 19:9-10: "When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Do not go over your vineyard a second time or pick up the grapes that have fallen. Leave them for the poor and the foreigner."

Leviticus 19:15: "Do not pervert justice; do not show partiality to the poor or favoritism to the great, but judge your neighbor fairly."

Deuteronomy 20:19: "When you lay siege to a city for a long time, fighting against it to capture it, do not destroy its trees by putting an ax to them, because you can eat their fruit. Do not cut them down. Are the trees people, that you should besiege them?"

Deuteronomy 22:6-7: "If you come across a bird's nest beside the road, either in a tree or on the ground, and the mother is sitting on the young or on the eggs, do not take the mother with the young. 7 You may take the young, but be sure to let the mother go, so that it may go well with you and you may have a long life."

Deuteronomy 22:8: "When you build a new house, make a parapet around your roof so that you may not bring the guilt of bloodshed on your house if someone falls from the roof."

Deuteronomy 24:6: "Do not take a pair of millstones—not even the upper one—as security for a debt, because that would be taking a person's livelihood as security."

Deuteronomy 25:4: "Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain."

Deuteronomy 25:14-15: "Do not have two differing measures in your house—one large, one small. 15 You must have accurate and honest weights and measures, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you."

CHAPTER 3: CHOSEN PEOPLE, PROMISED LAND — ISRAEL AND JUDAH

Now we come to a section of the Bible that is primarily history. Other sections contain history mixed with laws, poetry or prophecy; this section is almost all history. It follows the people of Israel as they moved into the Promised Land.

Joshua

Under the firm and faithful leadership of Joshua, the Israelites made steady progress in occupying their new territory. The seemingly impregnable city of Jericho fell miraculously into their hands. However, they were unable to gain control of the fortress city of Jerusalem. It remained a stronghold of the Canaanites for several more centuries. Then, as now, this city was a coveted but difficult place to conquer. Before Joshua died, he reminded the people what God had done and would continue to do for them if they remained faithful to the terms of the covenant (Joshua 24:13-14).

The walls fell down (Joshua 6:20).

Judges

Israel's faithfulness did not continue. After Joshua and the pioneers who had shared the wilderness experience died, the tribes began to drift into idolatry (Judges 2:7-11). The book of Judges shows what happened in subsequent generations. It chronicles the tragic results of the people's inability to remain faithful.

Whenever the Israelites forsook God and his commandments, they suffered oppression from

the nations around. Some tribes would be oppressed by one enemy, other tribes by another. In desperation, they would call out to God to save them. God would appoint a strong leader (or "judge," hence the name of the book) to drive out the oppressors. This cycle of unfaithfulness, oppression, repentance and deliverance occurred several times in several regions.

The lives of several judges are featured. You may have heard of some, like Deborah, Gideon and Samson. Others such as Barak and Othniel are not so well known.

If you explore this book in detail, you will discover that the Bible tells both sides of the story — good and bad. Israel agreed to obey God and become a good example to the nations around. But they were no better than anyone else. When they forsook God and his laws, they suffered the results — and became a *bad* example. They were a violent people living in a violent age. By the end of the period of the judges, the Israelites were not much closer to occupying the land than they were when Joshua died.

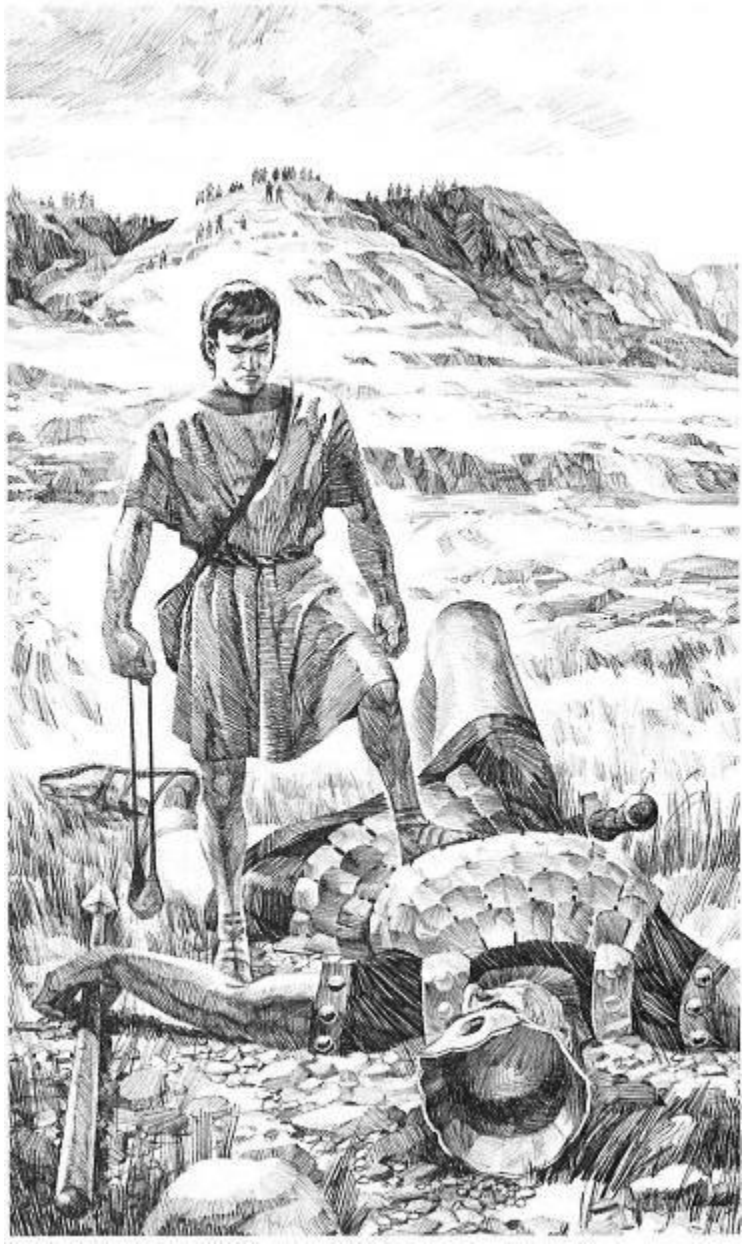
The incidents in this book point to an important lesson. Israel's situation is summarized in the final verse of the last chapter: "In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit" (Judges 21:25).

Ruth

At that time, when most people were doing what was right in their own eyes, the story of Ruth is a refreshing change. Ruth followed the God of Israel even though she was not from Israel (Ruth 1:16). Her inspiring example of loyalty was rewarded in a remarkable way: From her marriage to Boaz came a line of descendants that included Israel's most famous kings, David and Solomon — a line that led to Jesus Christ.

1 and 2 Samuel

The books of Samuel pick up the story where Judges left off. Samuel was the spiritual and political leader used by God to guide the nation. Whereas other nations had a human king, Israel was a theocracy. But the Israelites decided they wanted a king like other nations. A dismayed Samuel warned them of the consequences, but to no avail (2 Samuel 8:7). A monarchy was set up in which a line of kings would determine the fate of the nation.



"David triumphed over the Philistine with a sling and a stone" (1 Samuel 17:50).

Saul, the first king, turned out to be disobedient, and God chose David

as the next king. Most people are acquainted with the faith of David in confronting the Philistine giant, Goliath (1 Samuel 17:37). David demonstrated repeatedly that he was a man after God's own heart, and God promised that his descendants would also be kings.

David was not a perfect leader, but his heart was right. Though the Bible describes many of his sins, David always repented with his whole heart. He expressed many of his deepest emotions in poetry and songs. Many of them are preserved in the book of Psalms. We will take a closer look at that book later.

With David began what some have called the golden age of ancient Israel. For centuries the nation's position in the Promised Land had been precarious, surrounded as they were by war-like and resentful enemies. David subdued these enemies, and captured a strategic city in the center of the nation: Jerusalem. David made it his political and religious capital.

1 and 2 Kings

Solomon inherited from his father David a rich and prosperous kingdom, with secure borders straddling the major trade routes between Egypt and Mesopotamia. Under Solomon, Jerusalem became a showpiece city. He built palaces, parks, government buildings and a magnificent Temple in honor of God. But as Solomon's wealth and reputation grew, he allowed his wives and harem to turn him away from God. Solomon's life began with glittering success but ended in frustration and failure — and in the division of his kingdom.

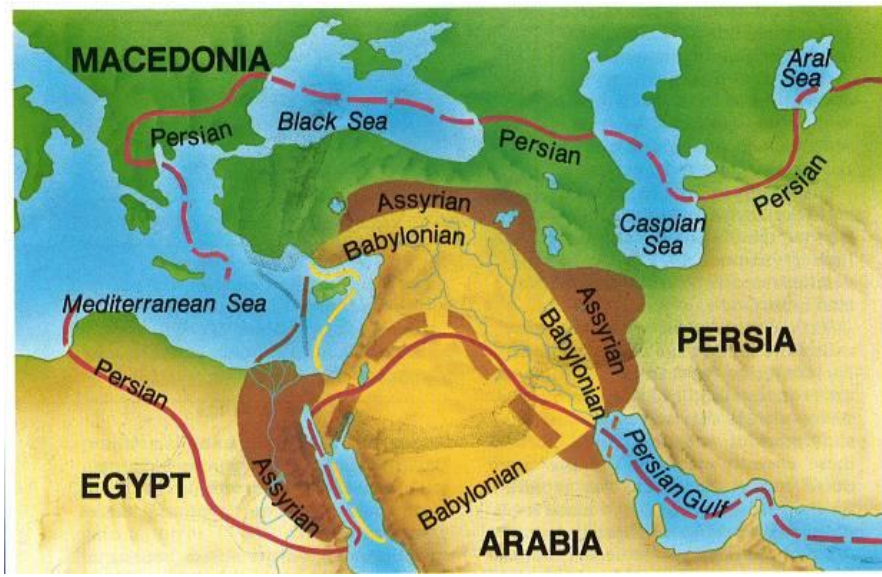
Israel split into two kingdoms. The northern tribes retained the name *Israel,* while the southern tribes became known as the Kingdom of Judah. Two separate lines of kings ruled Israel and Judah. A few of these kings proved faithful to God, but most led their nations further down the road to idolatry and ruin.

God sent prophets to remind his people of their covenant relationship with him. Among the early prophets were Elijah and Elisha. Though accompanied by miracles, their warnings were ignored. The people worshipped other gods, and failed in their social responsibilities.

As Israel and Judah stumbled along, powerful empires stirred around them. To the southwest, Egypt, Israel's old oppressor, was still a powerful nation. To the northeast, the Assyrians, a fierce and aggressive people, became the dominant power. Through the prophets, God warned Israel and Judah to change their ways or lose their inheritance.

God's people ignored the warnings. In the late eighth century B.C., Assyria invaded the northern kingdom, taking the people into captivity and exile (2 Kings 17:6-7, 18). The Assyrians besieged Jerusalem, but Judah's king, Hezekiah, asked God for help. God miraculously turned the Assyrians back and saved Judah. But it was not long before Judah lost their trust in God.

The southern kingdom limped along for another 120 years before being invaded, conquered and enslaved by the Babylonian empire. So the chosen people wound up back where they started — slaves and refugees. They failed to keep their covenant with God. Like Adam and Eve, they chose to disobey, and they suffered the consequences.



Ancient empires: Assyria, Babylon, and Persia

1 and 2 Chronicles

Next in the Bible sequence we find the books of 1 and 2 Chronicles. They parallel the books of Samuel and Kings, with special attention on the reigns of David, Solomon and the kings of Judah.

God brought up against them the Babylonians (2 Chronicles 36:17).

Ezra

In 539 B.C., the Babylonian Empire fell to a combined force of Medes and Persians. Unlike the Babylonians, who deported conquered peoples, the Persian emperors encouraged displaced populations to return to their homelands and reestablish their cultures.

The book of Ezra tells the story of the Jews who, by royal decree, returned to Judea and began to rebuild the Temple for the worship of God (Ezra 1:2-3). When Ezra reached Jerusalem, he found that many of the people had drifted back into the errors of their ancestors. Would they ever learn (Ezra 9:1-3)? Ezra instituted a great revival in which he acknowledged his people's sins and asked God to renew the covenant.

Nehemiah

About this same time, a Jew named Nehemiah attained a high position in the Persian court. When he learned that the work of rebuilding Jerusalem had bogged down, he asked the emperor to allow him to help. Nehemiah and

Ezra worked together to restore the city. They helped the small community of Jews to establish themselves in and around Jerusalem.

Esther

Last among the Old Testament historical books is Esther, which relates how a courageous young Jewish woman saved her people from genocide in Persia. The book of Esther shows that God had not abandoned his people, even though they were in exile.

This completes most of the history of Old Testament Israel, but there is much important material still to notice in the Old Testament. Stick around as we continue our tour!

CHAPTER 4: WORDS OF WISDOM AND PRAISE

Now we arrive at the "poetical books" or "wisdom literature." We turn from God's relationship with the *nation* of Israel and to books that show how God also works with people on a *personal* level.

The wisdom books or writings are filled with spiritual insight, and they offer much inspiration and encouragement. Through the centuries, readers have received special comfort and direction from these books.

Job

First is the story of Job. Job was a wealthy, God-fearing man, "blameless and upright" (Job 1:8). Satan accused him of being faithful to God only because of the prosperity he enjoyed. The message is relevant today, too: Will we worship God only if we get physical benefits from it?

God allowed Satan to destroy Job's possessions, his family and finally his health. Although in physical agony and mental despair, job remained steadfast in his loyalty to God (Job 2:10).

A group of friends tried to comfort Job in speeches that cover the next 35 chapters of the book. Their understanding of God is exposed as inadequate and misleading. It was through God's direct intervention that Job finally came to learn that God is deeper than he could understand.

Psalms

The longest book in the Bible is a collection of poems, songs and prayers on a wide variety of subjects. Many of them were written by David, king of Israel; others were written or edited much later.

The Psalms reflect many moods — happiness, fear, frustration, complaint, triumph, gratitude and even feelings of despair and defeat. It has feelings that each of us can identify with. This book is a delightful and rewarding stop on our tour — an often inspiring source of instruction, encouragement and comfort.

Praise him with the harp (Psalm 33:2).

Proverbs

Proverbs is a collection of wise sayings, most of them compiled by Solomon, according to Jewish traditions. This book is a concentrated course in common sense, covering wealth, family relations, business ethics, getting along with others, personal success and much more. Some proverbs are humorous, others profound. Some may seem obscure, requiring thought before their meaning becomes clear; others express common sense.

Proverbs, like Psalms, tends to become a personal part of the Bible for most readers, so come back and explore later.

"Cut the living child in two" (1 Kings 3:25).

Uncommon sense

A gold mine of wisdom and common sense, the book of Proverbs is filled with witty, humorous and profound truths that can help us lead more productive and satisfying lives. Here are some examples:

"Let love and faithfulness never leave you; bind them around your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart. Then you will win favor and a good name in the sight of God and man" (Prov. 3:3-4).

"As vinegar to the teeth and smoke to the eyes, so are sluggards to those who send them" (Prov. 10:26).

"Anxiety weighs down the heart, but a kind word cheers it up" (Prov. 12:25).

"Dishonest money dwindles away, but whoever gathers money little by little makes it grow" (Prov. 13:11).

"There is a way that appears to be right, but in the end it leads to death" (Prov. 14:12).

"Gray hair is a crown of splendor; it is attained in the way of righteousness" (Prov. 16:31).

"Even fools are thought wise if they keep silent, and discerning if they hold their tongues" (Prov. 17:28).

"A brother wronged is more unyielding than a fortified city; disputes are like the barred gates of a citadel" (Prov. 18:19).

"Houses and wealth are inherited from parents, but a prudent wife is from the Lord" (Prov. 19:14).

"Whoever shuts their ears to the cry of the poor will also cry out and not be answered" (Prov. 21:13).

"Start children off on the way they should go, and even when they are old they will not turn from it" (Prov. 22:6).

"Like a broken tooth or a lame foot is reliance on the unfaithful in a time of trouble" (Prov. 25:19).

"Like a roaring lion or a charging bear is a wicked ruler over a helpless people" (Prov. 28:15).

"As churning cream produces butter, and as twisting the nose produces blood, so stirring up anger produces strife" (Prov. 30:33).

"A wife of noble character who can find? She is worth far more than rubies. Her husband has full confidence in her and lacks nothing of value. She brings him good, not harm, all the days of her life" (Prov. 31:10-12).

Ecclesiastes

Next we find a short book with the strange name *Ecclesiastes,* a Greek word meaning "preacher." The book describes the leader of a strong and prosperous nation who was able to have and do everything he wanted, yet he did not find lasting satisfaction. The book concludes that for ultimate fulfillment, humans need a personal relationship with God:

"Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the duty of all mankind. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil" (Ecclesiastes 12:13-14).

Song of Songs

The Song of Songs, also called the Song of Solomon, bears this name because of its poetic beauty. It is exquisite poetry about sensual love and devotion between a man and a woman.

Its sensuality has often caused embarrassment for scholars, and it has often been taken to picture the love between God and Israel and the love between Christ and the church. The book is noted for both its artistic merits and the message it contains.

Psamples From the Psalms

The book of Psalms has brought comfort and encouragement to people throughout the ages. There are a few verses from the Bible's longest book:

"Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers, but whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and who meditates on his law day and night" (Ps. 1:1-2).

"May these words of my mouth and this meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer" (Ps. 19:14).

"Whoever of you loves life and desires to see many good days, keep your tongue from evil and your lips from telling lies. Turn from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it" (Ps. 34:12-14).

"Take delight in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart. Commit your way to the Lord; trust in him and he will do this" (Ps. 37:4-5).

"Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God" (Ps. 42:5).

"You, God, know my folly; my guilt is not hidden from you" (Ps. 69:5).

"I am poor and needy; come quickly to me, O God. You are my help and my deliverer; Lord, do not delay" (Ps. 70:5).

"Praise the Lord. Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his love endures forever" (Ps. 106:1).

"Teach me, Lord, the way of your decrees, that I may follow it to the end. Give me understanding, so that I may keep your law and obey it with all my heart" (Ps. 119:33-34).

"Unless the Lord builds the house, the builders labor in vain. Unless the Lord watches over the city, the guards stand watch in vain. In vain you rise early and stay up late, toiling for food to eat— for he grants sleep to those he loves" (Ps. 127:1-2).

"How good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity!" (Ps. 133:1).

"I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well" (Ps. 139:14).

CHAPTER 5: HEAR TODAY, OR GONE TOMORROW! — THE PROPHETS

Earlier in this tour of the Bible, we saw how people — even a people who were given much by a patient and generous God — failed to honor God in their worship and in the way they lived. If that were the whole story, the Bible would end on a dismal note. But there is much more.

We come now to the last major section of the Old Testament — the prophets. As Israel and Judah departed from their covenant relationship with God, God sent prophets to remind them of the consequences.

Seventeen books make up this section of the Old Testament. The longest of these are **Isaiah**, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, the "major prophets." They are followed by Daniel and the 12 "minor prophets." There is also the short book of Lamentations, which follows Jeremiah.

The prophets warned the nations to mend their ways to avert disaster (Isaiah 1:16-17). But they proclaimed hope beyond the dark clouds on the horizon. They proclaimed that the entire human family would one day live in harmony and accept God.

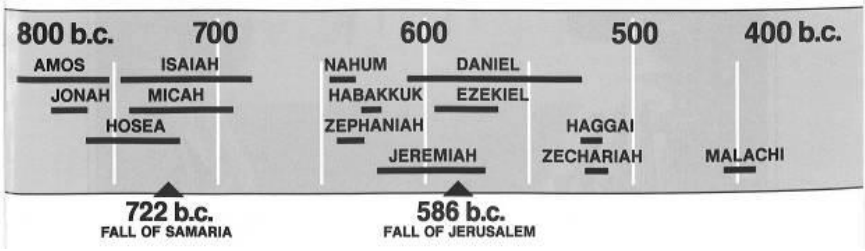
The prophets showed that God would send a Deliverer, not a fallible human deliverer like Samson or Gideon, but a descendant of David with divine honors (Isaiah 9:6-7). He would come to rule all people and nations.

Through the prophets, God showed that his love and mercy were not reduced by his people's unfaithfulness. Though Israel and Judah seemed determined to destroy themselves, God would save them and all humanity from the wreckage of human failures.

Jeremiah, for example, did not mince words when chastising the people (Jeremiah 2:4-7). They had mocked the covenant and would suffer the consequences (Jeremiah 18:15-17). But, said Jeremiah, God would forgive them and cleanse them from their sins (Jeremiah 33:7-8).

God also inspired Jeremiah to write the book of **Lamentations**. In an elegant and poetic style, he lamented the awful consequences of Israel's sins.

No one more sternly criticized the people's behavior than **Ezekiel** (Ezekiel 7:5-9). Yet he also confidently predicted the restoration of Israel's fortunes (Ezekiel 36:24-28).



The prophetic period

Minor Prophets

In most Bibles the book of Daniel appears next. For the purposes of this tour, however, we will first look at the group of books known as the minor prophets. These books are not minor because they are unimportant, but because they are short. When the Bible was written on scrolls, these 12 short books were grouped together as one unit on one scroll.

Hosea is the first of the "minor prophets." His message underscored God's love for Israel in spite of their unfaithfulness. He pleaded with them to return to God (Hosea 14:1-3).

Joel graphically described the "Day of the Lord," a time of judgment on the whole world.

Amos spoke out strongly against corruption and social injustice.

Not all the prophets spoke to Israel. The one-chapter prophecy of **Obadiah** addressed Israel's neighbor Edom.

Jonah is famous for being swallowed by a great fish. He warned Nineveh, the Assyrian capital, to repent. Jonah's mission showed that Israel's enemies were also worthy of God's mercy and compassion.

Micah spoke of the coming Messiah and even announced the town where he would be born (Micah 5:2).

About 150 years after Jonah, **Nahum** predicted the fall of the Assyrian empire, which occurred in 612 B.C.

Habakkuk wrote just before the Babylonians invaded Judah. He urged his people to turn to God in faith for deliverance (Habakkuk 2:2-4).

Zephaniah saw beyond international turmoil to a world at peace under the Messiah's rule.

Haggai and **Zechariah** lived at about the same time as Zerubbabel, a leader of the Jews who returned to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple. They encouraged the people to remain faithful and continue their work. Zechariah had a profound impact on the teachings of the New Testament, especially in

foretelling the coming of the Messiah.

Malachi was the last of the minor prophets. He reminded the returned exiles about the coming Day of the Lord and about their ongoing responsibility to be ready for it (Malachi 3:1).

Now let's turn our attention to the book of **Daniel,** an important link between the Old Testament and the New.

Young Daniel was taken captive when Babylon attacked Judah. Through miraculous circumstances, he came to the attention of the Babylonian emperor, Nebuchadnezzar. When Nebuchadnezzar had a series of strange dreams, only Daniel, with God's help, could interpret them. Daniel showed that Nebuchadnezzar's mighty empire would fall. In its place a succession of other empires would rise to dominate the world. Then God would intervene to deliver his people and establish a kingdom that would bring world peace (Daniel 2:44).

"I see four men walking around in the fire" (Daniel 3:25).

After this, when we meet the Jews in the New Testament, the Jews are a subject people of Rome. In 537 B.C., the Babylonian Empire was crushed by the Persians under Cyrus. The Persians subsequently fell to the Greek armies of Alexander the Great in 331 B.C. In turn, the Greeks succumbed two centuries later to the rising power of Rome. After a brief period of independence, the Jews also became part of the Roman Empire.

As the book of Daniel had described, the Babylonian, Persian and Greek empires came and went. Rome was the fourth and last in the sequence. The Jews began to ask themselves: Was it time for the Messiah to come and lead his people to victory? This was the world into which Jesus Christ was born.

Other books

Some versions of the Bible include a number of books often called the Apocrypha or the Deuterocanonical books. These books are accepted as Scripture by Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Christians, but not by Jews or Protestants. They are well worth reading for their wisdom and historical information. Here are the names of the books as listed in the New Revised Standard Version:

Tobit
Judith
The Additions to the Book of Esther
Wisdom of Solomon
Ecclesiasticus, or the Wisdom of Jesus Son of Sirach
Baruch
The Letter of Jeremiah (= Baruch chapter 6)
The Additions to the Book of Daniel
    The Prayer of Azariah and the Song of the Three Jews
    Susanna
    Bel and the Dragon
1 Maccabees
2 Maccabees

The NRSV also includes these books, which are accepted by some Eastern churches but not the Roman Catholic Church:

1 Esdras (= 3rd book of Ezra)
2 Esdras (= 4th book of Ezra)
Prayer of Manasseh
Psalm 151
3 Maccabees
4 Maccabees

CHAPTER 6: JESUS THE MESSIAH

Now we come to the New Testament. The title page of this section of your Bible probably includes the words *of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.* The New Testament is made up of 27 books, beginning with the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. These Gospels *(gospel is* an old English word meaning "good news") tell the story of Jesus Christ's life.

Jesus Christ is one of the best-known and yet least understood figures of history. He lived on earth for only about 33 years, but he had a profound impact on what has happened since. Today, those who claim to follow his teaching make up the largest of the world's religions — more than one billion.

"I had to be in my Father's house" (Luke 2:49).

Each of the Gospels tells the story from a slightly different point of view. Jesus was born in Bethlehem, a village about six miles south of Jerusalem. However, he spent most of his life working as a carpenter in Nazareth, a town in the northern province of Galilee. At about the age of 30, Jesus began his active ministry. His powerful preaching, accompanied by miracles, soon attracted a popular following.

Jesus incurred the wrath of the religious authorities. His message of love and humility exposed their hypocrisy, and they looked for ways to discredit him.

In spite of mounting opposition, Jesus continued to preach and heal.

Among the common people he became a popular and controversial figure. Many thought he was the long-awaited Messiah. He talked of establishing the "kingdom of God" in which all people could live in peace and freedom.

But, instead of organizing a movement to overthrow the Romans, Jesus emphasized tolerance, peace, humility and submission to civil authorities. He spoke of God as his Father and often referred to himself as "the Son." He said he was the "bread of life" and promised that those who "ate his flesh" and "drank his blood" would have eternal life when he raised them up "at the last day." He said his kingdom was "not of this world," yet he assured those who followed him that they would rule with him. Most disconcerting of all was his insistence that he would die and then be raised from the dead.

Eventually, the authorities schemed to do away with Jesus. They arrested him, tried him for treason and crucified him. After his death, his disciples buried him and resigned themselves to continue their former lives.

"I am innocent of this man's blood" (Matthew 27:24).

Three days later, Jesus rose from the dead. At first the disciples could not believe what had happened. They had witnessed his death and burial. Now the resurrected Jesus was among them. Would he now restore the kingdom to Israel? they wondered (Acts 1:6). "It is not for you to know the times or dates," Jesus responded (Acts 1:7).

First, there was work to be done. Jesus gave them a commission (Matthew 28:19-20) and promised to send the Holy Spirit to guide and support them. He then ascended to his Father in heaven, to return to earth at a time yet in the future.

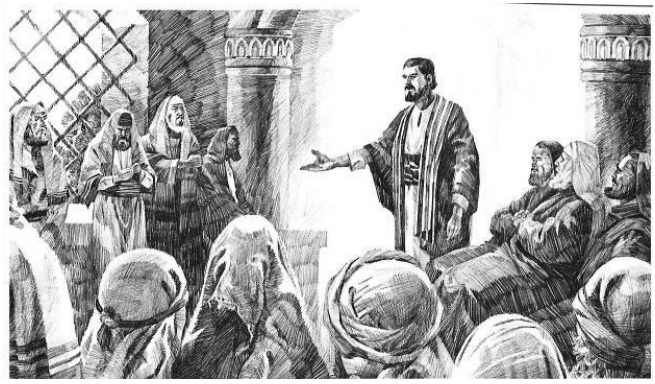
The life and work of Jesus Christ are the central focus of the Bible.

Acts of the Apostles

A few weeks after Jesus' resurrection, on the Day of Pentecost, Jesus' disciples received the Holy Spirit, as promised. Now, filled with spiritual understanding and power, the disciples realized that Jesus had come to rescue, not just a few downtrodden people in Judah, but rather the whole world. His goal was not physical liberation, but spiritual salvation.

The Holy Spirit opened the disciples' understanding to the full meaning of the prophecies concerning the Messiah. Enthusiastically, they began to spread the good news. Much of the book of Acts is concerned with the work of the apostle Paul. After his conversion to Christianity, Paul traveled extensively within the Roman Empire, preaching the gospel and establishing churches. He was constantly persecuted and several times narrowly escaped with his life.

The apostles maintained contact with the new churches by letters, or ("epistles.")



"After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them" (Acts 15:7).

CHAPTER 7: APOSTLES AND EPISTLES

The first Christians were Jews. But as Christianity spread, it reached people in the Greek and Roman world and introduced them to the Holy Scriptures.

One of the church's hardest challenges was to accept the growing number of non-Jewish converts. At first it was hard even for some of the apostles to grasp that this new faith transcended their national, religious and cultural heritage. But God made this obvious through the work of Peter and Paul (Acts 10:34-35). By the middle of the first century, Christianity had reached as far as Rome.

The church in Rome had Jewish and Gentile converts, and in his letter to the Romans Paul admonished them all. "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" said Paul in Romans 3:23). Christ is the Savior of all, Jews and Gentiles, who put their trust in him (Romans 3:29-30).

The **first and second epistles to the Corinthians** were written by Paul to the church at Corinth, a major cosmopolitan center in Greece. Paul had to instruct the Corinthian Christians about recognizing various forms of sin (1 Corinthians 5:1-2). Paul instructed and corrected in love, with deep concern for the young church. The 13th chapter of 1 Corinthians is sometimes called the "love chapter" because of its eloquent description of pure Christian behavior (1 Corinthians 13:4-7).

In the **epistle to the Galatians,** Paul admonished the new converts to stand fast in the gospel (Galatians 5:1). Faith in Christ did not mean that believers had to keep Jewish laws like circumcision (Galatians 3:26-29).

Ephesians was written to the church at Ephesus, the capital of the Roman province of Asia. References to Ephesus in the books of Acts and Revelation testify of the importance of this city (Acts 19, Revelation 2:17).

Even in prison, Paul wrote to the churches under his care.

Philippians is a warm and personal letter of thanks to the first church Paul established on the continent of Europe. In this epistle, Paul expressed his appreciation for their monetary gift and encouraged them to remain faithful in the face of adversity (Philippians 2:3-4).

In the epistle to the **Colossians,** Paul warned the believers to resist the wrong ideas and practices that infiltrated the church in that region. Angel worship and ascetic practices were robbing Christians of the purity of the gospel. Paul stressed that Christians were complete in Jesus Christ, who is "the head over every power and authority" (Colossians 2:8-10).

Christ's return was a main theme of Paul's two letters to the church in the city of Thessalonica. In **1 Thessalonians** Paul reminded the people to be ready for that event (1 Thessalonians 5:2-4). But some members began to abandon their routine responsibilities in anticipation of Christ's immediate return. In **2 Thessalonians** Paul reminded them to wait for Christ in a productive and law-abiding way (2 Thessalonians 3:11-13).

Paul's preaching had taken him through much of the Roman world. His four journeys are marked.

The next three epistles, **1 and 2 Timothy** and **Titus,** are known as the pastoral epistles. They were written to ministers whom Paul had given charge over local congregations. These letters contain advice on church administration and the qualifications and duties of church leaders (1 Timothy 3:2-5).

The short epistle to Philemon is a personal letter from Paul to a member of the church in Colossae concerning a slave who had run away. This little book provides an interesting glimpse into first-century society and is a good example of how Christians should treat one another.

Next you'll come to the epistle to the Hebrews. The contents of the letter suggest that it was directed to Christians of Jewish background. The early church was still greatly influenced by the customs of the Jewish faith. This book helped the church see how the old covenant, with all its rituals, types and symbols, looked forward to fulfillment in Jesus Christ (Hebrews 12:28).

The next five books are known as general epistles. They were written to the church in general, rather than to individual congregations. **James** is an expressive book about practical Christian living (James 1:27).

The epistles of Peter were written to the church during a period of persecution. They offer encouragement to Christians to look forward in hope (1 Peter 1:6-7).

The three letters of John also encourage Christians to remain steadfast in their faith. They were written several decades after Jesus had returned to heaven. As the years passed, false teaching began to affect the churches. These epistles were written at a time of great tension and strain in the church, and they capture the urgency of the situation (1 John 2:18-19).

Roman roads facilitated the spread of the Christian gospel.

The final epistle, **Jude,** is a fitting close to these letters. It is a reminder that in spite of the trials and tribulations that the Christian church was suffering, its faith and patience would be rewarded (Jude 24-25).

Now we come to the last stop on our tour, the **Apocalypse** or **Book of Revelation.** Many people consider this to be the most puzzling book in the Bible. Indeed, the colorful, glorious and often horrific visions, numbers, symbols and characters of the book of Revelation paint a complex and awe-inspiring panorama of the ultimate fulfillment of the purpose of God, including the events leading up to Christ's return and hints about what lies beyond, into eternity, for the saved people of God.

Revelation concludes with the promise that Jesus will return and complete the work of salvation (Revelation 22:20).

Come again soon!

The amazing book we know as the Bible begins with God and humanity in harmony in a beautiful garden. And after the astounding spectacle of human history that is described thereafter, the book ends with God and humans in harmony in a beautiful garden setting where the living waters of

eternal life are freely available.

The Bible, in short, chronicles the story of God saving humans from the ill-advised odyssey they undertook by departing from God. The story ends with the assurance that all human beings, made in the image of God, will learn to live in peace and harmony with God and with each other. Humans will then live forever with God.

On this note, we end this tour of the Bible. You have made a valuable start in getting to know the Scriptures. Do you still have questions? You should. We have barely scratched the surface. As we told you before we began, there is a lifetime of study in these pages.

Remember that the Bible is a challenging book. You can't expect to understand everything all at once. Its contents will make you think and cause you to consider what you believe and how you live. As Paul wrote to Timothy, "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness" (2 Timothy 3:16).There is enormous power in these books of the Bible. They can change your life, if you let them. But that is a decision you must make for yourself.

We hope this guided tour has helped make the Bible a more interesting and valuable book and inspired you to continue studying it. Thank you for coming along!

CHAPTER 8: THE DIVINE DRAMA

Do you know what is God doing in your life? And what he is doing in the world as a whole?

In order for us to see what God is doing, he has to reveal himself to us, and he does that in the Bible. I think that the biblical story can be summarized as a great *drama,* a story about what God is doing in our lives. And I will sketch that story, sort of an overview of the Bible and how it relates to us.

Act 1: God creates humanity

The starting point for the whole story comes in Genesis 1. God made the heavens and the earth, the land and sea, birds, fish and animals. He said, Let there be…, and there was.

And how does it relate to us? In Genesis 1:26-27,

> God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground." So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

God didn't *have* to create us to be a little bit like himself. So why did he do it?

Genesis doesn't tell us. Novels and dramas are sometimes like that, aren't they? They just begin, and we find ourselves in a scene and we have to learn what is going on. As the story progresses, we start to see how everything fits together.

Genesis tells us that God created human beings in his own image so that we can rule over the animals and the earth. God not only created us, he gave us a domain, a kingdom for us to enjoy, and we can be a little bit like God in the domain he has given us.

Why? Genesis doesn't tell us. It is only later in the biblical story that we begin to see why he did it. The Bible says he did it because he loves us.

God is love. He is a Creator, too, but he hasn't always been a creator. But he has always been love. Before he created the universe, he was love. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit loved each other, and they said, "Life is good. Let's make creatures who are similar to us, and can enjoy life the way we do."

So God created human beings in his own image, gave them a wonderful place to live, and gave them everything they needed in order to be happy.

And since God is love, he gave them his friendship. He was ready to help them.

That is the way the story begins. God told Adam and Eve, "You've never had a life before, so you don't know how it works. I'm here to help you. There are a few things that could go wrong, so I will try to steer you clear."

Act 2: Humanity runs away

Genesis 3 tells us that God told the people that a certain kind of fruit in the garden was poisonous. That symbolizes the fact that there are some choices in life that can ruin everything.

The Triune God wants to share a *good* life with us, not a life of frustration and pain. So he tells us, If you treat one another well, you are going to be happy. But if you choose to live some other way, then you are not going to like the results. And God gives us the power to choose.

Every story needs a plot, a danger of some sort, what literary folks call an antagonist, who threatens to turn the drama into a tragedy. And Genesis 3:1 introduces the antagonist:

> The serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden'?"

Who is this serpent, and how did he get in the garden? Genesis doesn't tell us. He just shows up, causes trouble, and disappears for a long time. We find out later that the snake is called Satan — that's a Hebrew word that means "Adversary."

But the Bible really doesn't tell us how he got into the story. That's because the Bible is not about the snake. It's about you, and me, and God's love for us. The snake simply introduces a difficulty that needs to be overcome. He convinces the humans to become antagonistic. By trickery, by deception, he gets human beings to reject the life of love that God offers.

God told Adam and Eve that one tree had bad fruit, and the snake said, "Don't be silly. It's OK — just eat it." And they did, and then they were ashamed. Verse 8:

> Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the Lord God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden.

They had rejected his advice, and now they rejected him. They had chosen to go it alone. So the framework of the story is set: We've got a problem, and the story is about how God is going to fix that problem.

Act 3: God pursues us

God is love, and this story is a *romance,* so God is going to pursue us even when we run away from him. Even though the man and woman tried to go it alone, God still helped them out. He gave them clothes; he gave them instructions; he intervened a few times to prevent the story from turning into a tragedy with everyone dead.

And he showed up every now and then. He told Abraham, "I am going to rescue the whole world through one of your descendants." And he told Israel, "Life could be a lot better if you just followed some basic rules of decency." And Israel said, That's a good idea — now go away. We'd like to worship a golden calf.

And God brought them into the land of Canaan and helped them move in and get started. And they said Thanks — now go away. We'd like to worship Baal. And God let them do what they wanted, and the Baal worshippers took over, and Israel didn't like the results. So they cried out and God rescued them and they said, Thanks — now go away. We'd like to worship Molech.

He rescued them again and again and they kept saying, Go away. We'd like to do something else. We don't like you.

God gave them leaders and they said, We'd rather go our own way and do our own thing. We can do just fine on our own. And God saw that they were lame and blind and sick and not nearly as happy as they could be. They had rejected their own reason for existence: to share in the life and love of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Act 4: The ultimate rejection

And that brings us to the climax of the story. God loves us so much that he sent his own Son into the world so that whoever trusts in him can have a good life, and not a miserable one.

God came to earth and lived among us. And as you know, *we* didn't like it, and we killed him. In Romans, the apostle Paul tells us:

> God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! (Romans 5:8-9)

Many people think that God is angry at them, and they hide themselves from God, because they know they *deserve* to be punished.

God is angry at *sin,* but God does not want to punish *us*. No — he wants to *rescue* us. He wants us to stop doing stupid things that hurt our relationships and destroy our happiness. God's goal is not punishment — his *goal* is that we are created in his image, in his likeness. He wants us to be like he is, to have a life like he does. That is why he shares his Spirit with us — God himself living within us, accepting us and helping us.

He wants people to live in a way that brings them joy and happiness instead of anxiety and frustration. But he doesn't force anyone to do it — he lets them make their own decisions.

So Paul uses a legal metaphor to assure us: We are justified by the death of Christ. That means we have been declared right. Christ experienced the results of our sins, and we are forgiven and we can live.

> For if, while we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! (verse 10)

So, even when we tell God to leave us alone, *he will pursue us.* He loves us so much that there is nothing we can do that will ever make him turn away. Not even killing his Son will make God back off. Nothing can make him change his mind.

Act 5: God persists

God raised Christ from the dead, and he is still pursuing us, eagerly desiring that we will get the picture and try to live the way God does, with mutual respect and love for other persons. He eagerly desires that we stop trying to ignore him, because our stubbornness leads to thousands of mistakes that just end up hurting ourselves and other people.

So God is still pursing us, like a man who is trying to win the love of a woman who finds it hard to make up her mind. It's a drama, a romance, and God is a lot more persistent than any man on earth would be.

In Ephesians 5, Paul compares God's love for his people to a husband's love for his wife. No man on earth has as much love as God does for his people, but Paul is saying that this is the sort of love Christ has for his people:

> Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. (Ephesians 5:25-27)

This is a mystery, he says in verse 32—it's a reflection of Christ and the church. Christ sets the pattern, he loves his people, and he wants them to look good. He knows how to clean messed-up lives — in fact, he knows a lot better than *we* do how to fix messed-lives. We can trust him in that.

It doesn't matter how messed up we used to be — Christ can cleanse us, and we will be clean indeed — we will be a perfect partner for this divine marriage. The Father, working through the Son and the Spirit, ensures that it will happen according to his plan.

Act 6: The new and happy ending

We can see the result in Revelation 19:6-9. In a vision of the future, John sees and hears some wonderful news:

> I heard what sounded like a great multitude…shouting:
> "Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For *the wedding of the Lamb* [Christ] has come, and his bride has made herself ready…. Then the angel said to me, "Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!" And he added, "These are the true words of God."

This will be a wedding far more glorious than any earthly prince could ever dream of. It will be glory, and rejoicing, and beauty like we have never seen. But the best part of it is that *we* will be there.

Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding of the Lamb—and you, and I, have been invited to be there. Not just as a guest who gets to watch. Not just as a groomsman or bridesmaid who gets to be on stage. No, we will be the bride.

Don't take this too literally—we will not all literally be in one white dress, billions of people all in one white dress. This is a metaphor, designed to give us a *truth* that is too good for ordinary words. It's a truth that we will be joined to Christ forever, living in the joy and thrill of the divine life, sharing life not just with the Son but also the Father and the Spirit. We will be where God wanted us to be all along — sharing in the love and life of the Triune God, restored to be like him in the way we live.

So, we have reached the end of the book, and the good news is that we win — and we win big. There could be no happier ending, no more successful story, a dream come true. This is where the story was aiming from the very beginning, the destination that we could see only hints of in Genesis.

The story is about Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and it's about you and me, and the question for us is this: Where are *we* in this story? This part of

the story hasn't been told yet, and God is asking us how we would like it to go.

He is saying, "I love you. I gave you life. I gave you everything you have. I don't want you to use it to hurt yourself. You really have nothing to lose except pain and sorrow and frustration. A life like that isn't worth living, so stop. Let me show you a different life, a happy and glorious ending. *Trust me."*

God loved the world so much that he sent his one and only Son, Jesus, so that all who trust him will not die, but live forever in peace and joy and happiness.

Blessed are all who are invited to the wedding of the Lamb, and blessed are all who accept the invitation!

THE WRITTEN WORD REVEALS THE LIVING WORD

In our *Statement of Beliefs*, in the section concerning the Bible, we say this:

> The Holy Scriptures are by God's grace sanctified to serve as his inspired Word and faithful witness to Jesus Christ and the gospel. They are the fully reliable record of God's revelation to humanity culminating in his self-revelation in the incarnate Son. As such, the Holy Scriptures are foundational to the church and infallible in all matters of faith and salvation.

This is a carefully worded statement, and we took a lot of time to formulate it. It is important in what it does not say as much as in what it does. Although we must take the Bible very seriously, it is also possible to get into trouble by regarding it as more than what it is. It seems that we know that the Bible is not equal to God even when we sometimes mistakenly behave or speak as if this were the case. No one prays to their Bible or believes the Bible will forgive their sin or raise them from the dead. But there have been some well-intended theologians who have regarded the words of the Bible as the highest or most direct revelation from God — in effect worshipping Father, Son and Holy Scriptures. This error even has its own name — bibliolatry.

This was the problem the religious leaders of Jesus' time had. Jesus told them, "You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf. Yet you refuse to come to me to have life" (John 5:39-40).

Notice that Jesus did not say that the written scriptures give life. Regarding the scriptures, of themselves, in this way, misses the point. Scripture testifies to the truth and reality of God's Word becoming incarnate in the person of Jesus Christ. The Scriptures point to Jesus, who is himself the resurrection and the life. This truth was something the religious leaders refused to accept, and so their whole understanding went awry, leading them to reject Jesus as their Messiah. Like many people today, they didn't comprehend the distinction between the written word and the living Word. The Bible is the written revelation that prepares us for and directs us to Jesus himself, who alone is the personal self-revelation of God.

That statement may raise eyebrows in some circles. Some may worry that it downplays the importance of the Bible. But it does nothing of the kind. Rather, it properly relates the two different forms of revelation. I have tried to explain it in sermons by saying that Jesus is the Living Word and the Bible

is the written word. The written word conveys life to us only because its author (the Living Word) is personally present by the Spirit and speaks again to our very spirits when we read and listen to it.

In the Bible, the Living Word is revealed using human language, expressed in multiple literary genres (poetry, prose, etc.), from within various historical and cultural contexts. The Bible tells the story of how God has worked in human history, especially in ancient Israel, preparing people to receive in faith the salvation accomplished on earth by God's Son, the Living Word.

Thinking along these lines, German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, "We must read this book of books with all human methods. But through the fragile and broken Bible, God meets us in the voice of the Risen One" (*Reflections on the Bible*). Indeed, the Bible is the only ancient book you can read where the author is still alive and with you, opening and guiding you to faithful understanding and communion with him.

This is the glorious purpose for the Bible and we err in trying to make it serve other ends. But we also err by not receiving it in faith for all that it is, namely, a God-inspired gift given to reveal a perfect God (and his perfect plan) even while using a limited, human media.

The apostle Paul, who knew the scriptures inside out, spent much time in his letters explaining how what we call the Old Testament needed to be interpreted in the light of Jesus, even if that meant jettisoning some "carved in stone" ideas that people held about Scripture. Ironically, many today still approach the Bible without giving due consideration to the nature of language, the importance of historical context and the particular reason the various authors wrote what they did.

We should not demand that the Bible serve purposes and function in ways that it does not claim for itself. We do not thereby honor Scripture even if we assert that by doing so we are giving it some kind of greater "perfection." Examples of this kind of mistake would be turning the Bible into a textbook of science or history, or regarding it as a handbook of instruction about every aspect of human existence.

Let us value the Bible for what it is—a unique, reliable and authoritative guide that, as Paul wrote to Timothy, can make us "wise unto salvation" (2 Timothy 3:15). How marvelous that God can use human language, with all its limitations, to give us an authentic revelation of his Son! Without him, the Bible could not lead us to eternal life. But since this written word belongs to and faithfully serves the Living Word, as we hear it proclaimed we are led to the Savior in whom we put our faith, hope and love.

Joseph Tkach

ON READING THE BIBLE

Thomas Edison once said, "There is no expedient to which a man will not go to avoid the labor of thinking." My grandfather would have agreed.

Conversations with my grandfather were always entertaining. Although he did not go to college, he was quite smart—he could read and write in seven languages. As a journeyman tool and die maker, he often worked with college graduates. Grandpa was astonished that though some of them were graduate engineers who studied calculus, they were unable to set up the tool and die machinery on which they worked. He would say that their years in college made them "educated idiots."

Some of my relatives worried that Grandpa was dissuading me from going to college. They warned me that he was "old school." Actually, he encouraged me to pursue higher education, but he did not want me to become an educated idiot.

I did go to college, eventually earning a doctorate. Rather than learning to use machine tools, I learned to use the most valuable tool of all—Holy Scripture. I'm not saying I have it all figured out, but I learned that there are right and wrong ways to read the Bible. Some of this I learned through academic training—so I am not denying the value of that. However, the most important lessons about reading the Bible have come through experience.

I learned that one of the wrong ways to read the Bible is what I call the Robert's Rules approach. *Robert's Rules* is the recognized authority governing the conduct of meetings and assemblies according to parliamentary procedure. It covers just about every contingency, allowing a meeting to be conducted with order and fairness. Some people look at the Bible like that. They see it as God's Rule Book, and believe all the problems of humanity stem from not following those rules.

The Bible does contain rules. There are commands to wash one another's feet, to remain isolated for a month after childbirth, to not wear jewelry, to trim one's beard in only a certain way, and many more. You can't keep all these rules even if you can remember them. How many of us greet everyone with a "holy kiss"? How many of us build parapets on our roofs?

All of us are selective about which rules we obey and which we ignore. At some level, we realize that certain rules are more important and applicable across all time and for all people than others. But some who worry about this try to specify exactly what is required so as to avoid violating any of the rules. The problem with that approach is that it leads to losing touch with the heart and character of God, thus failing to see God's overriding purpose to be in close, loving relationship with his people. That legalistic approach leads to

think that a relationship with God can be reduced to a list of rules. Reading the Bible from that perspective is a sure-fire way to miss the point.

Another wrong way to read the Bible is what I call the Nostradamus approach. It presumes that the Bible's purpose is to give us detailed prophecies of how world events will unfold in the next few years (it's always "the next few years," no matter when you live). You take the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other, and try to interpret the "signs of the times" from the news of the day. This too leads to missing the point, which is that the purpose of prophecy is to point to Jesus Christ and his work of reconciling all humanity, in every age, to God. The point of prophecy is to help us hope and trust in God, knowing that all of history is in his hands.

Another wrong way to read the Bible is what I call the Rubik's Cube approach. It sees the Bible as a giant puzzle to be decoded. Just as a Rubik's Cube has several color cubes that must be twisted and turned until they go together properly, some mistakenly think the Bible should be contorted into systematic topics, such as a divinely approved diet, the only correct "sacred calendar," or a universal dress code. Some take this to the extreme of looking for coded messages buried within the Bible's text.

The worst way to read the Bible is to combine these wrong approaches. I need not elaborate—many reading this have personal experience with viewing Holy Scripture through this terribly distorted lens.

So how do we correctly read and use the Bible? The key, I believe, is *viewing Scripture as an encounter with God in history*. We have to understand that the Bible uses many literary devices and genres, with multiple layers and mini-stories that yield a single Grand Story telling us who God is and the relationship he desires with us.

Some of this can be learned academically, and we should value sound scholarship. However, it is not just a case of knowing ancient languages, or being able to ponder and argue profound philosophy. Do that and you run the risk of becoming one of my grandfather's educated idiots.

What I have come to learn from experience is that to really understand the Bible, I must become a part of the story—seeing God's story as my story and finding my place in it. The Bible is not just a collection of stories and prophecies from another age. It is about our relationship with God—here and now. It isn't just a story to read, but *a story that we live*.

Gary Deddo has prepared a series of articles on how to study and read the Bible from this perspective, and we include it later in this volume. I think you will find it eye-opening and inspiring.

ABOUT THE BIBLE

Although I have written hundreds of articles, I have written only one book, *Transformed by Truth*. I wanted to chronicle, from our denominational perspective, the transformation God led us through. Writing that book was hard work. I made an outline, and then dictated my thoughts and ideas. Using a transcript of my dictation, I reorganized the material, eliminating repetition while maintaining the story flow. It took months of hard work. Even so, I didn't do a perfect job. I tried to be fair and accurate, explaining why and how our church went through what some have called an unprecedented change in doctrine. With the wisdom of hindsight, I look back over what I wrote and see places where I could have explained things more clearly.

That is the problem with the written word. It is a conversation where one party is absent. The writer and the reader are separated by distance, time, language or culture—sometimes all four. I wish I could sit with each person reading my book and explain what I was trying to communicate. I can't do that, but the Bible's ultimate author does, as I'll explain.

The Bible has rightly been called the greatest story ever told. It is about the greatest person who ever lived, who had the greatest message possible and made the greatest gift ever made. The Bible was written over a 1,500 year span of time by over 40 authors from every walk of life, including kings, peasants, philosophers, fishermen, shepherds, soldiers, poets, statesmen, scholars and more. From beginning to end, these authors wrote on many topics, from many different perspectives. The challenge was to present these testimonies in a way that was coherent and consistent, building up a written record that conveyed the unfolding story of God's love for all humanity in all times—not just those who lived in "Bible times."

The Bible has been read by more people than any other book—it has outsold every book that has ever been written and still sells more copies every year than any other book. The Bible has been translated and published in more languages than any other book in existence. The story had to be told in a way that would be accessible to all these people, whenever they lived and whatever their cultural background.

Some authors offer revised editions of their work, updating their writing as times change or more facts become available. Some have wanted to do that with the Bible, altering the text to make it more "relevant" to their particular culture. We can do that to some extent, but we had better be careful, for we have no authority to alter the meaning of the inspired words of God.

However, the Bible has a significant advantage that no other ancient book can claim: its ultimate author and editor is still alive! Not only that, but he promises to come and be with each reader, guiding his or her understanding. As Gary Deddo explains in his articles, God stands behind his word, helping

us, no matter who we are or where we are in time and space, to grasp more deeply what those uniquely inspired words hold for us.

While Jesus was with his disciples, he could teach them personally, at times giving one-on-one instruction. It was like having the Word of God living among them. Actually, it was not *like* that—it *was* that. However, at the Last Supper, Jesus told his disciples, who had relied so much on his presence:

> I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will glorify me because it is from me that he will receive what he will make known to you. All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will receive from me what he will make known to you. (John 16:12-15)

Today, we can trust that same Spirit to be at work among us, helping us hear just what he spoke to those authorized first apostles.

A recent survey from the Barna Group, commissioned by the American Bible Society, revealed that most Americans esteem the Bible and have access to it. There is a healthy cultural respect for and fascination with Scripture, which helps explain why millions tuned into the television series *The Bible*. People seem to be open to experiencing ancient scriptures in new ways. However, many are not sure how to apply the lessons of the Bible to their own lives and to society at large. Gary's series of articles will help us not only maintain a proper respect for the Holy Scriptures but also apply their timeless wisdom to our lives.

CODED MESSAGES

In our age of smart bombs and unmanned drones, it may seem hard to believe that not so long ago one of the most effective unmanned flying machines used in warfare was the humble pigeon.

The homing, or carrier pigeon, is able to find its way home over hundreds and even thousands of miles. Approximately 250,000 of them were used in World War II as a low-tech but highly effective way to carry messages. Because the enemy would sometimes deploy air-to-air anti-pigeon hawks to bring them down, these messages were often written in code.

In 2012, one of these coded messages was discovered in a canister attached to the leg of a dead pigeon that had become stuck in a chimney. There are few secrets remaining from that war, but this is one of them. The message, which has 27 five-letter code groups, is said to be impossible to crack without its codebook. It may never be deciphered.

There is something fascinating and challenging about coded messages. Some people seem to think the Bible is just as mysterious as that pigeon's message, containing coded information that must somehow be unraveled so the real truth may be known.

In a book published in 1997, *The Bible Code,* the author claimed that secret messages were hidden in the original text of the Hebrew Bible. By looking at the sequence of Hebrew letters—for example, every 50th one—the secret information could be deciphered. That information, encoded into the text thousands of years ago, revealed details about contemporary events.

If you think this sounds far-fetched, you're right. *The Bible Code* failed to predict some important developments, and history has shown it to be wrong in many others. Computer analysis has shown that you can do this with almost any book. One critic, presumably with tongue firmly in cheek, showed how Herman Melville anticipated the assassination of Martin Luther King in the text of *Moby Dick*.

To study the Bible in this way is a waste of time. It is not what it is for. The Bible is profound and repays in-depth study. Ever since it was written, scholars have poured over Holy Scripture in search of a better understanding of God's character and will. Studies of the Hebrew Scriptures by Jewish scholars before the time of Jesus left them with unanswered questions. This is what Paul was referring to when he wrote to the church at Colosse that the word of God was to some extent a "mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations" (Colossians 1:26a). However, as Paul notes, it is no longer a secret, and we are called to proclaim the word: "I have become its

servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness" (verse 25).

That fullness is the core message of the gospel, which, through Paul, "God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. He is the one we proclaim, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ (verses 27-28).

Paul's point is that the Sender has given us the code to the mystery. We don't have to be expert code-breakers and we don't have to be stumped. We can shout the message from the highest hill. We don't have to spend hours struggling to work it out, because the mystery has been revealed. God has come to us through his incarnate Son, Jesus Christ, with unbounded grace for all. God is the Sender and we are the recipients. Jesus, himself, is the deciphered message of God to us.

The essential starting point of correct Bible interpretation is to read and interpret it through the lens of the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus told the biblical scholars of his day, "You search the Scriptures, because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me; yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life" (John 5:39-40, *ESV*).

Sadly, for many, that is still the case. They spend their lives trying to decipher what the Bible "really says," coming up with a never-ending stream of bizarre and inaccurate ideas. The hope of unlocking "secret knowledge" lures them on—like, I suppose, those people who are still trying to decipher the message strapped to the leg of that long-dead carrier pigeon. Though the pigeon's message may never be decoded, we most certainly do not have to be confounded by the message of the Bible. Jesus not only decodes it, he is the code and the message.

WHY STUDY THE BIBLE? "THAT YOU MIGHT HAVE LIFE"

Early in the first century in Palestine a man from Galilee appeared with a message about the need for a dramatic change in the established order. He gathered a number of followers around him and began to advocate a return to some of the laws and commandments of God. Before long, however, he was handed over to the Roman occupation forces and executed.

The man's name was Judas of Galilee. The world, as a whole, has largely forgotten him (Acts 5:37).

Not long after Judas' ill-fated career another man from Galilee attracted a following with a message about a kingdom quite different from the status quo. He too was handed over to the Roman power and executed

His name was Jesus of Nazareth, and the world has never forgotten him. Of him it has been well said that "the names of the past proud statesmen of Greece and Rome have come and gone. The names of the past scientists, philosophers, and theologians have come and gone; but the name of this Man abounds more and more… Herod could not destroy Him, and the grave could not hold Him" (quoted in Josh McDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict,* p. 135).

There is an excellent reason the world remembers Jesus of Nazareth. The reason is his resurrection, his dramatic return from a publicly witnessed and certified death (Matthew 27:65-66). In Acts 1:3 we are told that Jesus showed himself alive after his resurrection by "many convincing proofs." Not the least of these proofs was the fact that the men and women closest to Jesus were willing to die for their belief that he had conquered death (1 Corinthians 15:29-32).

Life to the full

Jesus Christ is the central figure in the 66 books we call the Bible. Years after Jesus' dramatic death, burial and resurrection, one of his disciples spelled out clearly the main reason why you and I should study and restudy the Bible, and why we should come to know its central character more deeply: "Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that *by believing you may have life in his name"* (John 20:30-31).

The Gospel writer John compresses many important truths into these two verses. For one thing, he tells us that the Bible is a highly selective document.

God did not tell us everything we would want to know. But he tells us things that are vital for us to know if we are to enjoy eternal life. Eternal life in and through Jesus Christ is the clear thrust of the Bible and of the message of its central figure, Jesus.

Jesus emphasized this while discussing the intimate and life-preserving relationship that exists between shepherds and their sheep. In a few short words Jesus brilliantly condensed God's will towards his creatures, an intention that existed in the mind of God before there was ever a heaven and earth. "I have come," he said, "that they may have life, and have it to the full" (John 10:10).

The fulcrum of Scripture

The internal evidence of the Bible makes this truth clear: if we human beings want to live forever, we must begin to pay serious attention to the book that claims to give us words from God. The New International Commentary on John's Gospel sheds more light on this thought:

> Life is one of John's characteristic concepts. He uses the term 36 times, whereas no other New Testament writing has it more than 17 times. Thus, in this one writing there occur more than a quarter of all the New Testament references to life. "Life" in John characteristically refers to eternal life, the gift of God through His Son.… It is only because there is life in the Logos (see John 1:1-18) that there is life in anything on earth at all.

This joyous declaration, the good news that God intends human beings to have life in a richness and fullness that is beyond our understanding, this is the fulcrum of Scripture. This glorious announcement is the fulfillment of the message brought by the Old Testament prophets (Acts 3:18, 21). It is the completion of the intention hinted at when God made everything "very good," when he created a physical realm to serve as the staging ground for the great drama of redemption that begins and ends with Jesus Christ (Genesis 1:31; Colossians 1:15-16).

The last book of the Bible describes the glorified Jesus Christ this way: "I am the Alpha and the Omega, says the Lord God, who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty" (Revelation 1:8). The First Letter of John also emphasizes Jesus Christ's role in salvation: "If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in him and he in him.… And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life" (1 John 4:15; 5:11-12).

A written revelation

God inspired the 66 books of the volume we call the Holy Bible as part of a double witness of his intention to do good for the men and women he created. The first witness was Jesus Christ, the living Word of God who "became flesh and made his dwelling among us" (John 1:14). God also fashioned "living words" in the form of the Old and New Testament (Acts 7:38). These inspired words are God's will in writing. The Scriptures make God and his intentions more understandable and accessible. "The words I have spoken to you," Jesus said, "are spirit and they are life" (John 6:63).

With words of great beauty and power, the Bible authors set out to reveal the will and the intention of God, a God who is Spirit (John 4:24) and thus ultimately unfathomable to the human mind — and yet a God who delights in communing with his creatures (Proverbs 15:8). The Bible is the supreme revelation in print of God's will towards us.

As many philosophers and scientists have concluded, this universe cannot explain itself, and humanity has not been able to explain itself beyond all dispute or doubt. This is why we should study the Bible. The Bible sheds light on the "secret wisdom, a wisdom that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began" (1 Corinthians 2:7).

Bridging the gap

The Bible reveals God as an infinitely all-powerful and all-knowing Spirit being. Yet we humans are finite, flesh-and-blood creatures, though we also have a spiritual dimension (1 Thessalonians 5:23). This is why the Bible is necessary. The Bible is one of the ways in which God bridges the gap between the human and the divine. Again, to quote from its pages:

> "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him" — but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit. The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man's spirit within him? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God.... This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words. (1 Corinthians 2:9-13)

Spiritual truths — "the thoughts of God" — are not easy for the human mind to comprehend. The nature of God, the realm of spirit, the ultimate purpose of human life — there are no more important questions than these.

And yet, the Bible is not always an easy book to understand.

God did not inspire his revelation to us in a series of simple theological statements listed in precise "A,B,C" fashion. The Bible is the starting place for all right doctrine, and yet God gave us his written revelation in the form of stories, poems, hymns, battle scenes, scandalous exposes, a voice from a burning bush, brief flashes of insight called "proverbs" and seemingly irrelevant census rolls and genealogies.

Furthermore, the Bible's stories take precedence over everything else. Professional scholars often speak of the Bible's stories as "narrative." The word "story" can convey something that is not true, as in a fairy tale or a myth, and the Bible is certainly not that.

So here is another reason we need to systematically approach the study of the Bible. The book itself admits that it contains "some things that are hard to understand" (2 Peter 3:16). Proverbs 25:2 states: "It is the glory of God to conceal a matter, to search out a matter is the glory of kings." The four Gospels have been similarly described as a life-giving stream which, while deep enough for elephant to drown in, is also shallow enough for a small child to swim across. In studying the Bible the question really is: how deep do we want to go?

The Bible encourages us to seek out "the breadth, and length, and depth, and height" (Ephesians 3:18).

Words of power

Theologian and author James Packer has stated:

> One who fails to read the Bible is at an enormous disadvantage. Rightly are Bible-reading and Bible-based meditation seen as prime means of grace. Not only is Scripture the fountain-head for knowledge of God, Christ and salvation, but it presents this knowledge in an incomparably vivid, powerful and evocative way…
>
> On top of that, the fellowship of God with man to which it testifies is the most momentous reality we can ever know, and the power of the Bible in its readers' lives, a power springing both from its precious subject-matter and from its unique divine inspiration is overwhelming. (*God Has Spoken,* p. 13)

Henry Van Dyke expressed this same point very elegantly:

> Born in the East and clothed in (Ancient Near Eastern) form and imagery, the Bible walks the ways of all the world with familiar

> feet and enters land after land to find its own everywhere. It has learned to speak in hundreds of languages to the heart of man. Children listen to its stories with wonder and delight, and wise men ponder them as parables of life. The wicked and the proud tremble at its warnings, but to the wounded and penitent it has a mother's voice.... No man is poor or desolate who has this treasure for his own. (*Halley's Bible Handbook,* p. 19)

A book of life

Overall, Scripture has a narrative flow, from the beginning, through history, and into the future. But this flow is interrupted by many other forms of literature — the "confessions" of Jeremiah (Jeremiah 17:14-18) or the meditations of the Teacher (Ecclesiastes 1:1), for example. This makes it important to keep in mind the Bible's clear, overarching mandate: to show us the way to life.

The key to the Bible's spiritual architecture is in John 3:16: "God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." This message of the eternal life that is available in and through Jesus Christ is the spiritual heart and core of the biblical documents. The wide-ranging literary structures of the Bible point back to that central, core communication, and this accounts for the book's remarkable unity amidst so much diversity.

> The canonical scriptures are a veritable book of life, showing us God in relation to the most dramatic human crises (births, sicknesses, deaths, loves, losses, wars, falls, risks, disasters, failures, victories), the most elemental human emotions (joy, grief, love, hate, hope, fear, pain, anger, shame, awe) and the most basic human relationships (to parents, spouses, children, friends, neighbors, civil authorities, enemies, fellow-believers).... Scripture is superb (Packer, p. 13).

"The Bible is no mere book," Napoleon Bonaparte is reported to have said, "but a Living Creature with a power that conquers all that oppose it." This is more true than he probably realized.

The God who cares

The word "eternal" in John 3:16 is placed there to point human beings to the eternal communion with God to be enjoyed by his creatures in the new life made possible through Jesus Christ (The New International Commentary, *John,* p. 227). This communion of humanity and its Maker,

shattered by human sin (as described in Genesis 3) is being restored in all its fullness through the atoning and reconciling work of Jesus Christ.

Thus the Bible, though separated by the 1500 years of composition between Moses in Sinai and John on Patmos, is — incredibly — all one Story. The last part of the last book reads like the close of the story begun in the first part of the first book. Thus, the first words in Genesis, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" are mirrored by almost the last words in Revelation: "Then I saw a new heaven and earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away" (Revelation 21:1).

Jesus Christ, the pivot of the whole Bible, is the axis of the plan of salvation. This was stated crisply by the British expositor William Barclay:

> To be a follower of Jesus, to know who he is and what he means, is to have a superabundance of life.... When we walk with Jesus, there comes a new vitality, a superabundance of life. It is only when we live with Christ that life becomes really worth living and we begin to live in the real sense of the word. (*Daily Study Bible: John,* vol. 2, p. 60).

Jesus once replied to his hostile critics: "You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life" (John 5:39).

The *Expositor's Bible Commentary* expounded on the value and virtue in getting to know the living Word of God: "Jesus' main purpose was the salvation (health) of the sheep, which he defined as free access to pasture and fullness of life. Under his protection and by his gift they can experience the best life can offer" (vol. 9, p. 109).

The greatest words ever spoken

Bernard Ramm wrote eloquently about the Bible's proven ability to change human lives, to speak to our hearts as well as our heads:

> Statistically speaking, the Gospels are the greatest literature ever written. They are read by more people, quoted by more authors, translated into more tongues, represented in more art, set to more music, than any other book or books written by any man in any century in any land.... They are read more, quoted more, loved more, believed more, and translated more because they are the greatest words ever spoken.

Yet, as Ramm goes on to maintain, the greatness of the four Gospels and

by extension the whole of Scripture is not limited to sheer statistical terms.

> Their greatness lies in the pure, lucid spirituality in dealing clearly, definitively, and authoritatively with the greatest problems that throb in the human breast; namely, Who is God? Does He love me? What should I do to please Him? How does He look at my sin? How can I be forgiven? Where will I go when I die? How must I treat others? No other man's words have the appeal of Jesus' words because no other man can answer these fundamental human questions as Jesus answered them. They are the kind of words and the kind of answers we would expect God to give. (*Protestant Christian Evidences,* pp. 170-171)

Unity in diversity

These internal and external testimonies lead us to conclude that the Bible is much more than simply a collection of 66 books of widely varying literary style from the Ancient Near East. When we understand that the Bible answers the biggest questions of life, we can only conclude: This is the hand of God. This is why the writers of the Bible referred to the document as *theopneustos* — "God-breathed" (2 Timothy 3:16).

Yet the basic plot of the Bible is simple: it is the theme of redemption given to humanity through Jesus Christ. The written Word of God points us back to the Living Word of God, Jesus Christ. As Jesus himself said centuries ago: "I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. He will come in and go out, and find pasture" (John 10:9). The Bible is that pasture, a divinely prepared source of eternal life for those who want it. Let's enjoy it to the full.

READING THE BIBLE

The Guinness Book of Records calls it the world's best-selling book, with over two billion copies sold so far. It is one of the most quoted (and frequently misquoted) books there is. It is the Bible.

Though we don't know how many people have actually read it, it's safe to say that billions have been affected by the Bible's message. Prior to the 20th century, very few people had access to a Bible. Early in Christian history, churches typically owned only a single copy of the Old Testament (the Septuagint) and copies of various letters written by early church leaders. These were often stored in a cabinet called an "armarion." Seminary professor Timothy Paul Jones comments on its contents:

> It's possible that not all of these texts would have been identical to the twenty-seven books that you find in the New Testament today. To be sure, the four Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles, Paul's letters, and probably John's first letter would have had a place in the armarion. But the cabinet could lack a few writings that your New Testament includes—the letter to the Hebrews and maybe the second epistle that's ascribed to Peter, for example, or a couple of John's letters. A quirky allegory entitled *The Shepherd* might have made an appearance in some areas. You might even find a letter or two from a Roman pastor named Clement. The New Testament canon—that's the twenty-seven texts that you find in your New Testament today—wasn't yet clear to Christians everywhere.

Thankfully, this lack of clarity as to the content of the New Testament was resolved in the fourth century by councils representing the whole church. But sadly, recent surveys indicate that Bible reading in our day has declined significantly. There are numerous reasons for that decline, including the habit of reading the Bible in fragmentary ways, reading it only for personal devotion and failing to recognize the Bible for the amazing literature that it is. Another reason for the decline is the instant communication that has altered the way people engage with all books.

Another reason for the decline in Bible reading is the habit many preachers have of misusing the Bible by lifting out passages in a proof-texting manner to illustrate their own sermon ideas. In that regard, note this from author Peter Mead:

> Not only does proof-texting fall short, but it also steals the

> experience of seeing the bigger picture, the sweeping thoughts, the epic narratives and the heart-stirring poems of Scripture. I often ponder the fact that the biblical men and women whom I most aspire to be like are not those with a ready quiver full of pithy proof-texts, but those who know the God of the Bible because they are washed in the Bible as a whole, book by book.

The Bible is a literary whole, and we gain the most when we read it as such. This means drinking deeply of the text to receive God's message for us. Because the Bible's communication patterns tend to be subtle, complex and nuanced, it takes time, skill and effort to do this. And the more experience you gain in doing so, the more you see the Bible for what it truly is: an unfolding narrative with plot and resolution. It is not a book of isolated bits and pieces for us to draw from in a proof-texting way.

My friend John Halford likened the Bible to a symphony by Beethoven. John came to understand Beethoven well only when he listened to all nine of his symphonies—not just favorite parts of a few. John says that he has had the same experience with the Bible. Just as Beethoven's symphonies fit together as a unified whole, so it is with Holy Scripture. In that regard, note what Paul wrote to Timothy:

> There's nothing like the written Word of God for showing you the way to salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. Every part of Scripture is God-breathed and useful one way or another—showing us truth, exposing our rebellion, correcting our mistakes, training us to live God's way. Through the Word we are put together and shaped up for the tasks God has for us. (2 Timothy 3:15-17, *The Message*)

The Bible is not merely a "to do" list from God. Rather, it is the dynamic and unified story of his love for humanity. In the Bible the Triune God of the universe shares with us his heart and mind, nature, character and purposes. We find there the unfolding of his faithfulness and plan for us, inviting us to participate in what he is doing. The Bible holds out to us his promise of eternal relationship with him—it's our story of hope, redemption and sonship.

I encourage you to read the Bible personally and, as preachers and teachers, to encourage others to do so in order to find answers to life's biggest and most important questions: Who is God? and, Who am I in relation to God?

Joseph Tkach

GOD SPEAKS TO US!

The Bible is a window. Have you opened it lately?

Almost all American households have one or more Bibles. Yet more than half of the adults in these households do not read their Bibles during an average week, and only 10 or 15 percent do so daily.

"Americans revere the Bible—but, by and large, they don't read it," pollster George Gallup Jr. once observed. This seems to be borne out by what Americans know about the Bible. In one survey, only 42 percent of those interviewed could name five of the Ten Commandments. Only 46 percent correctly named the four Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. It is likely that the statistics have gone down since those surveys were taken.

Of course, simple numbers are not important. What is important to know is how the Bible speaks to our lives. "Until people see the Bible as a practical guidebook for their everyday existence, it will probably continue to remain on the shelf," says Christian trend-watcher George Barna.

So why should we read and study an ancient and (in the minds of many) hard-to-understand book? What could the Bible possibly say that is essential to daily life in the modern world?

For our time

Jack Kuhatschek, in his book *Taking the Guesswork out of Applying the Bible,* is frank about the Bible's bad image—referring to its "age problem." He writes: "People wonder what benefit we can possibly derive from a two-thousand-year-old book written in an obscure corner of the Middle East. In a sense I can't blame them. After all, much of the Bible does seem irrelevant today."

Chapter after chapter, the Bible can seem outdated and irrelevant to our needs. It tells the experiences of people like Noah, Moses and Paul, who lived many centuries ago. They faced problems and questions that don't seem directly related to our own.

Not only are the human experiences discussed in the Bible ancient, but the cultures, vocabulary and thought patterns are also dated. For example, the book of Revelation is written in what is called "apocalyptic" style. That is not a literary genre familiar to us modern folks, and it seems strange and confusing. This makes it difficult to understand the message of the book—and easy to misinterpret it. But during the first century, apocalyptic writing was a well-known literary genre or type. The original Christian readers knew

this style of writing and how to understand the message Revelation wanted to convey.

What's our view?

We need to see the Bible's books and literary styles on their terms. If we are to grasp the message of any biblical book, we need to hear the word of God coming from its pages in the same way the first readers heard it. We also need to understand the meaning of the story of the lives of Noah, Moses or Paul, even as the first Christians did. Although our culture may be different, we have the same concerns, needs and problems as they did.

God showed his nearness, his saving grace, and his purpose by involving himself in the lives of these individuals. Their past encounters with God help us understand how God deals with us now.

This is the key to becoming motivated to study the Bible. We need to understand it as the book that reveals God and his way. So we should honestly and frankly ask ourselves about our view of the Bible. Do we see it as an oppressive rule book? An out-of-date and irrelevant ancient writing? Impossible to understand? Filled with boring history in the Old Testament and imponderable theology in the New?

Or do we see the Bible as a book that puts us in touch with God on a personal level? As a book that reveals God's loving and gracious purpose for us?

In an important way, our view of the Bible depends on how we perceive our relationship with God. Do we see him as a distant God uninvolved with human affairs? Or do we see him as a living Being who has something important to tell us about himself and his purpose for us—and our future with him?

Here are three questions to ponder in our relationship to God and to the Bible:

- Do we believe God is interested in communicating himself and his message to human beings?
- Do we believe God revealed his purpose through prophets (Old Testament) and apostles (New Testament)?
- Do we believe that they faithfully wrote down their revelations from God—and that their writings have been preserved in the book we call the Bible?

In his book *Understanding the Bible,* John R. W. Stott asks us: "Do we really believe that *God* has spoken, that *God's* words are recorded in Scripture, and that as we read it we may hear *God's* voice addressing us?" The apostle Paul,

speaking of those books that form the Christian Old Testament, said they could make one "wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (2 Timothy 3:15).

God's word to us

Paul told his young associate Timothy: "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (verses 16-17).

Peter insisted he had not followed "cleverly devised stories" when he told the church about God's plan of salvation (2 Peter 1:16). He had been an eyewitness of Jesus' work and had seen and talked with the resurrected Christ. Peter promised he would make every effort to provide for the preservation of those truths after his death. These would keep the church within the realm of faith and God's grace (verse 15). Peter also spoke of Paul's letters as Scripture. He said they were authoritative writings that conveyed the words of God about things vital to our salvation (2 Peter 3:15-16).

Do we agree that the Bible contains God's word *to us?* If so, the Bible must matter a great deal as a book that can help us come to know God more intimately. How, then, could the Bible not be a book we would want to read and study on a regular basis? Have *you* read the Good Book lately?

More than reading required

You've probably heard statements like the following: "Simply read the Bible for yourself and do what it says," or "Just read, believe, and obey the Bible." While this approach to the Bible reading sounds simple, it's not quite the way that effective study of the Bible proceeds.

We need to learn how to correctly interpret what the Bible says on a particular matter before we apply it to our lives. That's because we don't come to the Bible with a clean slate, free of previous opinions. We are not only readers of Scripture, we are, for better or worse, also interpreters.

Our view of what the Bible says on a given matter may be distorted by what we *think* it says. It's easy to fall into the trap of seeing in the Bible something we already believe, but which it doesn't teach. "We invariably bring to the text all that we are, with all of our experiences, culture, and prior understandings of words and ideas," write biblical scholars Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart in their book *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth.*

That can be dangerous. The authors explain, "Sometimes what we bring to the text, unintentionally to be sure, leads us astray, or else causes us to read all kinds of foreign ideas into the text." To rightly understand the Bible, we

also need to understand the kind of book it is. It was written by and for people who lived centuries ago in cultures far different from our own.

The Bible is relevant to all ages. But we must first understand the context or original situation in which a particular portion of Scripture was written. Then comes the need for right interpretation, understanding how a particular passage of Scripture reflects a broad principle applicable to life situations we face. This requires more than a casual reading of the Scriptures.

After rightly interpreting the original intent of the biblical writings, we need to apply them intelligently to our contemporary situation. When we read the Bible, we need to listen to the voice of God coming through his Word, not our own. We should avoid reading into the Bible ideas it doesn't teach.

Help is available to us as we move along our journey of study. Here are two useful books that tell us how to study the Bible:

- *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth,* by Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart.
- *Understanding Scripture: How to Read and Study the Bible,* by A. Berkeley Mickelson and Alvera M. Mickelson.

Paul Kroll

BIBLE STUDY SECRETS

"I'm not getting as much as I would like to out of my personal Bible study. Do you have any tips on how to study the Bible?"

"Through meditation, the Scriptures challenge your value structure, and that's where spiritual growth takes place." — John Hartley, Professor of Old Testament, Azusa Pacific University, Azusa, California

What advice do biblical scholars give to people who want to improve their Bible study? "People ask me this kind of question often," said Willard Swartley, professor of New Testament at the Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Elkhart. Indiana. "'Usually I ask them if they have any method for studying the Bible."

Douglas Stuart, professor of Old Testament at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary in South Hamilton, Massachusetts, said, "I try to get people alerted to truly systematic Bible study and the methods that go with it."

"Method." The word kept cropping up in the interviews. A method — an organized procedure or system — of studying the Bible is what the scholars discussed.

Getting started

"First, I would recommend a couple of English versions of the Bible," said Robert H. Gundry. "I would use both a more staid, literally translated version and a more loosely translated one and make comparisons as I did my study." Since most of us don't know Hebrew or Greek, we read the Bible in translation. Comparing different translations gives insights into the meaning of the Scriptures.

Gundry recommends the New Revised Standard Version,

"In any kind of Bible study, the key is always to ask questions of what you're reading. You will process the material only to the extent that you ask questions." —Robert H. Gundry, Professor of New Testament and Greek, Westmont College, Santa Barbara, California

the Revised Standard Version and the New American Standard Bible as good literal translations [we could also add the English Standard Version]. For translations that allow some paraphrasing, he recommends the New International Version and the Good News Bible [we could add the Common English Bible]. Checking different translations allows you to see alternatives in text and meaning. These established versions will give you access to the most likely variations of text and nuances of meaning.

> "Ask questions of how the text engages you, at the level of your own way of thinking, your own beliefs, your own attitudes." — Willard Swartley, Professor of New Testament, Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Elkhart, Indiana

After you decide on the Bibles you will use, Dr. John Hartley recommends you choose one version and read it all the way through. "It's important to gain perspective," he said. "This way, when you read the Gospel of Mark, you know what comes before it, what comes after it. Or if you pick up a prophet like Haggai, you have some understanding of where it is in the whole story of the Bible."

Hartley does not think the Bible has to be read in order, book by book. He has known people who have tried to read the Bible in sequence, cover to cover, who invariably got bogged down, usually in the ordinances and genealogies of Leviticus, and then gave up. Thus, Hartley advises that people regularly alternate the sections they read.

Clark Pinnock, professor of theology at McMaster Divinity College in Hamilton, Ontario, agrees with Hartley's approach. "One of the things I've done in the past," said Pinnock, "is to put bookmarks in different places of the Bible. For example, I'd start them at Genesis, Ezra, Matthew and Acts. Then I'd work ahead from all of those places, reading a few chapters from one book one day and a few from another book another day. This way I got a cross sampling of the Scriptures, and I covered the Bible in a year or so."

Having four entry places allows you flexibility in your study. If one place is less interesting, you can read from that section one day, and the next day read in a more inspirational place.

Even when you focus your study on individual books, the practice of studying two or more sections is effective. In one book you can study more intensely. In another, perhaps the Psalms or the Gospel of John, you can read

for inspiration. These two approaches to the Bible — one for study and the other for inspiration —complement each other. Sometimes you're ready for a full-course meal; other times you want something lighter and easier to digest.

> "The purpose of Bible study is not to know the Scripture for its own sake, but to allow God to speak to you." — Clark Pinnock, Professor of Theology, McMaster Divinity College, Hamilton, Ontario

A closer focus

An old saying around Bible colleges goes, "When you realize that a story has a beginning, a middle and an end, you're then called a Bible scholar." Overly simple? Maybe not. Lifting verses out of context is often the first step in misunderstanding them. Effective Bible study focuses on the context, or landscape, of the Scriptures, to see what came before and what comes after.

Thus, the next step in Bible study is to focus on individual books, not on individual verses or topics. Imagine a camera with a zoom lens. You start at the wide angle — the entire Bible — and then gradually zoom in on your subject, taking photos as you close in. Each photo will show less landscape but more detail, helping you understand your subject in the context of its surroundings.

"Context is king," continued Stuart. "The context of a word or a phrase or sentence or a paragraph is by far the most important indicator of its meaning." For example, the word *run* has more than a dozen possible meanings. A faucet can run if it needs a new washer, or a candidate can run for president. Words take on different meanings in different contexts, so do sentences and even paragraphs.

Pinnock said, "Generally, you'll want to read an individual book consecutively. You get the discourse of the entire book and see the individual verses in context."

Read inductively

Four of the five professors mentioned the inductive approach to Bible study. This approach has three steps: 1) observe, 2) determine the original meaning and 3) apply the meaning to your own situation. Though the professors had variations in their technique, in general terms, here's how inductive Bible study works.

Step one: observe. Select a book of the Bible; take a short one, like 1

John, to get started. (see sample below). Read through the book to get the flow of ideas. Try to ignore the chapter divisions. Sometimes they unnaturally divide the book, breaking the flow of thought. You might want to take notes of what happens in the book. Don't yet focus on individual verses; focus on the flow of ideas.

Next, reread the book. When you do this, you will often see patterns of organization and thought that you may have missed the first time. Again, you might want to take notes. Try to limit yourself to observing what is happening in the book. Resist the urge to interpret just yet.

Step two: determine the original meaning. After you're familiar with the contents and flow of the book, read background material about it in a survey of the Bible, a commentary or a study Bible. These introductions will help you place the book in historical and cultural context.

Introductions also give outlines of the books of the Bible. An outline helps you see the flow of ideas and subjects in the book and helps you divide it into logical sections. Outlines vary in detail and sometimes in the way they divide the book. Generally, the more detailed the outline, the more useful.

Next, reread the first section of the book as divided by the outline. Here you begin your in-depth study. Start asking questions. "In any kind of Bible study," advises Gundry, "the key is always to ask questions of what you're reading. You will process the material only to the extent that you ask questions."

As a starter list of questions, Swartley recommends asking what the repeated words or the key words of the text are. Since a section may be several chapters long, you may end up with 10 to 15 major words frequently repeated. Look these words up in a Bible dictionary to learn what they meant in biblical times. Add to your list names of places or people mentioned in the text, and look those up.

Continue asking questions. Are there other natural divisions in the section you are studying? How do individual verses fit in the context?

Answers to your questions are often within the Bible itself. If not, check a commentary. "If you go to a commentary just to read what it says, that's somewhat helpful," said Stuart. "But it's far more helpful to go to a commentary with a list of questions." This way you enter into a *dialogue* with the commentary and have more control over what you learn from it. If you go to the commentary first, you may listen to the commentary instead of the Bible.

Step two of the inductive method of Bible study helps you re-create the historical and cultural context of the scriptures. Your goal is to view the

scriptures as their original audience viewed them. (Move to step three for the section of the book you are studying, then repeat steps two and three for the other sections as divided by your outline.)

> "I encourage people to study a passage for all they can personally get out of it," says Douglas Stuart, a professor of the Old Testament.

Step three: apply the meaning to your situation. " The purpose of Bible study is not to know the Scripture for its own sake," said Pinnock, "'but to allow God to speak to you." When the Word of God speaks to you, it challenges your values, your opinions, your actions — you. The Bible challenges you to change. James, the half-brother of Jesus, wrote: "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says" (James 1:22).

In the first two steps of the inductive method, you ask what God was saying to the original audience. Now you ask what he says to you. Take time for spiritual reflection. Meditate on the meaning of the text. At this point, you may want to reread the section in a different Bible version. How does its lesson apply? Is this lesson an inspirational teaching about God? Is it a lesson in the Christian walk with Jesus Christ? Or maybe a lesson in doctrine?

Ask why the writer believed this message to be important. Ask why it is important to you. How will remembering the lesson help you in your day-to-day life? "Through meditation, the Scriptures challenge your value structure, and that's where spiritual growth takes place," said Hartley. To guide the application of Scripture, some people like to take the words they have studied to God in prayer. They ask God to help them apply the biblical lessons for personal growth.

In addition to your private Bible study, spiritual reflection and prayer, you will also benefit when you discuss what you learn with other Christians. Ask how *they* view the original meaning of the text and how it applies today. How have they found the text helpful or challenging?

Meaningful dialogue with other Christians helps you see different perspectives on the Bible and on how to apply its teachings. Gundry said: "We are a community of faith, so we need to ask others what they think the Bible has to say. We need to learn from one another."

Example: an inductive study of 1 John 1:1-4

Step 1: Observe. (note some of the repeated words)

[1]That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched — this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. [2]The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. [3]Weproclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. [4]We write this to make our joy complete.

Step 2: Determine the original meaning

- Read through the book you are studying. Take notes of what the book says. The author of 1 John writes from personal experience. He relates those experiences so that his readers may have assurance of eternal life (5:13).
- Reread the book. Pay special attention to the book's organization and structure.

A. Read an introduction to the book.

B. Study the outline of the book in the introduction.

Outline

I. Introduction 1:1-4

II. Walking in the light 1:5-2:27

a. in pureness 1:5-2:2

b. in fellowship 2:3-2:27

III. Walking as children of God 2:28-4:21

a. in love 2:28-3:24

b. in spirit 4:1-21

IV. Walking with the Son of God 5:1-12

V. Conclusion 5:13-21

C. Read the first section of the book as divided by the outline.

D. Determine repeated and key words of the text and look them up in a Bible dictionary.

E. Ask questions. Look for answers first in the text, then go to commentaries. Sample questions could be:

1. Why did John stress that he heard, saw and touched Jesus?
2. Why does John say that Jesus was "from the beginning"?
3. What is the significance of proclaiming Jesus Christ?
4. Why does John emphasize life and fellowship?

F. From background material and answers to questions, explain why John wrote what he did: John was combating the false notion that Jesus Christ did not come in the flesh. John was emphasizing the centrality of the Incarnation

to the Christian faith.

Step 3: Apply the text

It is important to understand that Jesus Christ was fully God and fully human. God shared in our humanity. Through his atoning life and death, we have fellowship with God and with each other. God also gives us eternal life. Knowing this truth encourages us and makes our "joy complete."

The Bible for All Its Worth: An Interview With Douglas Stuart

Douglas Stuart is professor of Old Testament at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, South Hamilton, Massachusetts. He has written numerous commentaries and books, including the acclaimed introduction to Bible study, How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth, *which he co-authored with Gordon Fee.*

Question: After people determine the original meaning of a biblical text, how should they apply the text they have studied to modern spiritual life?

Douglas Stuart: The first strategy is not to assume the original application has changed. Knowing the cultural background helps a person understand why a thing is said the way it is. But the Scripture was written with the intention that there would be a modern time as well. God knew there would be a 20th century when he inspired the Bible, and the Scripture speaks to the 20th century.

The Bible is largely pancultural, panhistorical in its ability to convey information and in the kinds of ethical and behavioral standards it asks. Where it is culturally specific is more in the particular manifestations of that. For example, nothing in the book of Romans requires you to be a Greek in the ancient Roman Empire to understand it. Any modern person can figure out what he or she needs to know about ancient Greece to follow the descriptions and illustrations.

Q. Even though we need to know about the cultures of the Bible to understand the Scriptures, you're saying the Bible is not culturally bound?

A. I would say the Bible was never really at home in *any* culture. The Old Testament teachings were not at home in ancient Canaan, nor were the teachings of the New Testament at home in the Roman Empire. A true orthodox Israelite's beliefs were completely contrary to the culture. In those days, everybody worshiped by idolatry. We know of no culture at the time that was not idolatrous, and yet the Israelites were told not to be idolatrous. Today, we have plenty of non-idolatrous cultures. In this sense, the Old Testament is closer to some modern societies than to its own.

Likewise, the laws and standards we have in the Old Testament — a classless legal system — were contrary to everything anybody knew about in

ancient times. All other ancient law systems were class conscious. There were different penalties if you were a noble, a free person or a slave. In the modern world, we have classless law, at least in theory. But that was unique in ancient times.

In several areas the Bible was hostile to its native environment, even more in Bible times than now. Of course, in some areas it was less hostile, so I think it evens out. Still, the Bible has never been completely at home in any culture. It is an otherworldly book.

Q. For the Bible to speak to us today, some people believe they need to resort to liberal approaches to Scripture. In your books, you disagree.

A. The vogue in liberalism is what is called the New Hermeneutic. That's not a new term, of course, but it is the vogue. The New Hermeneutic says that since we all read any literature partly through our own filter and bring our own sense of meaning to it, we should go right ahead and do that all the time with Scripture. I disagree with this approach.

In the New Hermeneutic, a person asks: "What do I want Scripture to say? How would I like it to speak to me?" A more objective view of Scripture, which I think should be that of conservatives, is to ask: "What did God put here? And, whether I like it or not, what am I supposed to do about it?"

WILL YOU RESPOND LIKE A BEREAN?

It was Saturday in Berea, although for most of the inhabitants, it was just another day — an ordinary day in a rather ordinary town. Berea had no pretensions about being among the great cities of Greece. There was less of the frantic hustle and bustle of major cities such as Athens, always buzzing with new ideas, or Corinth with its cosmopolitan population and liberal lifestyle.

Life in Berea was quieter. The city was at the foot of Mt. Bermius, in southwest Macedonia. You could catch glimpses of the Aegean Sea through the gaps. On a clear day you could see the summit of Mt. Olympus. The people of Berea regarded this with awe, for the gods lived there: mighty Zeus, chief of the gods; Ares, god of war; and Minerva, goddess of love.

But not everyone in Berea believed that. As in most Greek cities, Berea had a Jewish community — part of the diaspora who had spread throughout the ancient world after the people of the Old Testament nation of Judah had been taken into exile. They clung tenaciously to their own customs, and their religion. They worshipped the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and dreamed of the day when their God would send the Messiah to gather them again in the promised land and lead them into a new golden age.

Meanwhile, they carefully guarded their customs and traditions. So, as the city went about its business that Saturday, a small group of worshippers made their way through the streets to the synagogue that was their center of worship. In accordance with time-honored traditions, the people sang psalms and listened while the rabbi and other elders read scriptures from the sacred scrolls. There was a sermon, delivered by the rabbi. It was also a custom of the synagogue to ask any visitors if they had any words of wisdom or exhortation.

This week there were some strangers in town. Three men had arrived from Thessalonica. Their leader, Paul, was a well-spoken man, and obviously well educated. So, following custom, the leaders of the synagogue asked him if he had anything he would like to say.

Paul accepted eagerly and began to speak with passion and intensity. The Bereans listened, first politely, then with growing interest and amazement. Paul's message centered around someone called Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee. Using the sacred scrolls as evidence, he forcefully supported an astonishing claim: that this Jesus fulfilled the prophecies of their Holy Scriptures concerning the coming of the long-awaited Messiah.

Some of the Bereans had heard of Jesus, the carpenter who had been acclaimed as the Messiah, but who was then crucified like a common criminal. Many false messiahs had come and gone through the years and, to the Bereans, Jesus' shameful death only confirmed him as another one.

But Paul presented the crucifixion as the very evidence that Jesus *was* the Messiah. He told them confidently that if they had understood the scriptures, they would have recognized this. Not only was Jesus crucified, Paul went on to explain, but three days later he was resurrected from the dead! Jesus was alive, and offered forgiveness of sin and eternal life to all who accepted him as their Savior.

Paul explained that many well-known prophecies pointed to Jesus as the Messiah. The message seemed almost like heresy and blasphemy, but the Bereans recognized that Paul knew the Scriptures thoroughly, and was well acquainted with their traditions. It was a challenging idea. As descendants of the chosen people of Israel, these Jews looked for a Messiah who would lead them in a great victory over the Romans and restore them to their former glory. Paul explained, however, that the prophecies showed the Messiah would first come as a lowly servant, to be despised and rejected, even by his own people.

Paul finished speaking and braced himself for a storm of protest. He knew that what he had said was controversial. His audiences often reacted violently. He was used to being attacked, beaten, stoned or thrown in jail. Just days before, his life had been threatened by the Jewish leaders of Thessalonica, and he and his friends had to be smuggled out of the city by night. That was why he had come to Berea.

But this audience seemed to be different. Instead of the usual hostile reception, they swamped Paul with questions. As they dispersed, they eagerly discussed his astonishing message — Paul had given them much to think about.

During the following days, the Bereans continued to discuss Paul's sermon. He had shown them their familiar Scriptures in a way they had never seen before. Paul seemed to be talking about an entirely new relationship with God, through the death and resurrection of Jesus. If he was right, their whole system of belief would be shaken to the core. But was he right?

Most of the people did not have copies of the Scriptures at home. The printing press had not been invented, and handwritten copies of Scripture were extremely expensive. So the Bereans came back to the synagogue during the week, asking the rabbi to help them search the precious scrolls. They wanted to see if Paul was indeed speaking the truth. Scripture after scripture

affirmed that Jesus did indeed fulfill the prophecies of the Messiah. When the Bereans saw with their own eyes the evidence that Paul was speaking the truth, many of them accepted Jesus as the Messiah.

It was an exciting time, but it couldn't last. Paul's enemies from Thessalonica followed him to Berea. Once again, Paul had to be smuggled out of town, down to the coast, and on to Athens. But the memory of those unusual days in Berea live on in the book of Acts. Luke wrote, "The Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true. Many of the Jews believed, as did also a number of prominent Greek women and many Greek men" (Acts 17:11-12).

Why did the Bereans respond so enthusiastically to Paul's message? To answer this question one must first understand something about the social and political climate in the Roman Empire in the first century. This means learning about the influence of the Diaspora.

The Diaspora

The word diaspora is Greek, meaning "dispersion." When the first letter is capitalized, the term refers to the dispersion of the Jews. This dispersion began with the Babylonians, who deported the Jews in four successive exiles, beginning with King Jehoiakim in 606 B.C. (2 Chronicles 36:6-7; Daniel 1:1-3). The second exile, in 597 B.C., involved the greatest migration of population (2 Kings 24:14-16). A third in 586 B.C. followed the burning of Jerusalem (2 Kings 25:8-12; Jeremiah 52:28-30). The fourth and final group was led captive in 581 B.C. (Jeremiah 52:30).

During this 25-year period, a number of Jews fled to Egypt (Jeremiah 43). Very few Jews were left in the land of Judah. They were replaced by Babylonian captives from other lands. When the Medo-Persian Empire, under Cyrus, conquered Babylon (539/8 B.C.), Cyrus allowed some Jews to return to Jerusalem (2 Chronicles 36:22-23; Ezra 1:1-4). Many Jews, however, remained in Babylon, while others migrated to other parts of the world.

Eventually, Jewish communities began to spring up in lands as far away as India to the east and Spain to the west. Their population grew so much that the "number of Jews in the Diaspora far exceeded that of the Jews who lived in the homeland." One scholar estimates that four and a half million Jews lived in the Roman Empire during the reign of Caesar Augustus (30 B.C.-14 A.D.), accounting for 7 percent of the population (Eduard Lohse, *The New Testament Environment*).

By the time of Paul, the Jewish population worldwide may have grown to

6 or 7 million, accounting for as much as 10 percent of the population of the Roman Empire (G.A. Van Alstine, "Dispersion," *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*).

This figure is considerably higher than the number of Jews at the end of the Old Testament period (fifth century B.C.). Because of their unusual circumstances as an exiled people — living among strangers yet unwilling to forsake their God and their religion — the Jews began to view their national purpose differently. They saw themselves in terms of the biblical instruction to be a light to the Gentiles (Isaiah 42:6).

Jews were active everywhere, bringing to conversion many of the people around their communities. Their success was partly due to the nature of religious belief at the time. Most religions fell into one of two categories. Some, like the mystery religions (e.g., the Eleusinian and Andanian mysteries, or the Mysteries of Dionysus), appealed to the emotions but had little or no ethical basis. Others, like Stoicism, were thoroughly ethical but had minimal emotional appeal.

Judaism, on the other hand, blended a supreme ethical law with a rich emotional experience. It satisfied the intellect without sacrificing the heart. And yet, as the Jewish historian Josephus points out, Judaism did not appeal to the baser instincts: "The greatest miracle of all is that our Law holds no seductive bait of sensual pleasure, but has exercised this influence through its own inherent merits" (*Contra Apion* p ii. 38).

Individual communities

In most Roman cities of any size, there was a Jewish community. Although these communities were diverse in structure, they were generally well organized. Furthermore, Jewish communities throughout the Roman world were loosely connected to each other. It did not take long for news, especially news regarding the well-being of a particular community, to travel throughout the Empire.

The heart of any Jewish community was the synagogue, which served primarily as a place where the Law could be read and discussed. Each synagogue had its own copy of the Torah (Law). Some also had copies of the Nevi'im (Prophets) and/or the Kethuvim (Writings). By the first century B.C., Jews had already developed regular patterns for reading from the Torah each Sabbath. These cycles assured that the entire reading of the Law would be completed regularly. The cycle in the Diaspora, covering the Law in one year, differed from the Judean cycle, which covered the Law every three years. Although there is no scholarly consensus about the origin of reading cycles

for the Nevi'im and Kethuvim, most scholars believe there was no standard pattern during the first century.

The highest minister of the synagogue, the *archisynagogos,* determined who would read from the sacred scrolls. He could select anyone educated in the Law to read from the Scripture and to discuss its implications. Paul's credentials would have been impressive, particularly to members of a synagogue in a small, out-of-the-way city like Berea. He had spent years training as a Pharisee, several under the renowned Jewish rabbi Gamaliel. Paul would have been recognized as an educated man.

The Bible found in most synagogues of the Diaspora was the Septuagint, a Greek translation. This translation had become a standard for the many Jews dispersed throughout the Roman Empire, because they no longer spoke or read Hebrew. As a result of the conquests of Alexander the Great, Greek had become the common language. For that reason, during the third century B.C., Jews in Alexandria, Egypt, translated their Holy Scripture into Greek. Later called the Septuagint, this translation was the Bible from which Paul read and preached at Thessalonica and Berea.

A tale of two cities

Thessalonica was one of the first European cities to hear the apostle Paul's message concerning the gospel of Jesus Christ. (Acts 16 tells the story of Paul first crossing into Europe from Asia. Thessalonica was the second European city in which Paul preached the gospel.)

Paul recognized the potential of the city, which was the capital of Macedonia and a metropolitan center of an estimated 200,000 residents. Thessalonica would be ideal as a base of operations from which the gospel could be disseminated. Indeed, other religions, such as the cult of the Egyptian gods, had already spread throughout the region from Thessalonica. In the same way, the city later became a strategic point from which the gospel spread, even though the Thessalonians had first met Paul with hostility.

In A.D. 50 or 51, writing his first letter to the church there, Paul acknowledged this fact: "The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia—your faith in God has become known everywhere" (1 Thessalonians 1:8).

Many Thessalonian Jews undoubtedly resisted Paul because of the recent expulsion of Jews from Rome (A.D. 49 or 50) due to the "constant riots at the instigation of Chrestus," noted by the Roman historian Seutonius (*Vita Claudius* 25.4). *Chrestus* is probably Latin for the Greek *Christos,* or Christ. The emperor Claudius ordered the expulsion to end the riots, which were

presumably the result of Christians coming into conflict with Jews. At any rate, the Thessalonian Jews would have known about the expulsion when Paul arrived.

The strategy of the Jews, who "formed a mob and started a riot" (Acts 17:5), was probably inspired by the events in Rome. The Roman Empire had a longstanding policy of local autonomy, which generally left local rulers in charge of their affairs, provided they could maintain the peace. Perhaps the Jews rioted with the hope that their city rulers would banish Paul quickly in order to avoid Roman intervention.

The Jews in Thessalonica were already aware of the Christian movement (Acts 17:6), though they had not heard Paul or any other minister face-to-face. Instead, they had decided against the gospel based on second-hand information, closing their minds to the truth. Few were willing to approach Paul's ideas with an open mind. Fewer still were willing to examine the Scriptures objectively to see what they said.

The situation was different in Berea, a smaller town located about 40 miles from Thessalonica. The Roman writer Cicero described the city as a "town off the beaten track," probably because Berea is several miles away from the Via Egnatia, the primary road in the region (*In Pisonem* 36.89).

Even so, Berea's position overlooking the Haliacmon plains, and its proximity to the natural springs at the base of Mount Bermius, made it one of the more desirable towns of the region. Its people were of high social standing, as indicated by inscriptions archaeologists have unearthed, as well as Luke's account in Acts, which describes the people as "more noble."

When Paul spoke in the synagogue at Berea, he stood before an assembly of four types of listeners. The crowd consisted of Jews by birth; Greek proselytes to Judaism; Greeks who believed in God and were called "God-fearers," but who had not made the final commitment of circumcision; and finally, curious onlookers.

It was the third category, the God-fearers, that caused much of the trouble in Judaism. The Jews had worked with many of these individuals, bringing them along toward conversion. And although the God-fearers believed, many of them had not accepted circumcision.

The Greeks, unlike many of the ancients, refused to tattoo, mark or scar their bodies. They admired the human form as perfect beauty. Any cutting or marking of the body was distasteful because it detracted from this natural beauty. Of course, circumcision is a cutting of the foreskin that changes the natural appearance of a man's body, and many Greeks therefore thought that circumcision was barbaric.

It was for these reasons that a number of God-fearers met regularly with the Jews, worshipping the same God but not willing to be circumcised. Paul's preaching was a threat to the Jews precisely because he offered these Greeks full acceptance into Christianity, without circumcision. In a sense, the Jews viewed Paul as a thief, reaping the benefit of their long labor.

Furthermore, many of the Jews, because of their traditional understanding of the prophesied Messiah, viewed Paul's message as impossible. Someone who had died could not be their Messiah: "How could a Jew believe that a crucified man was God's Messiah?… Hence it became of cardinal importance for these first Christians to demonstrate that 'Christ crucified' was not a contradiction in terms" (James D.G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*).

Prominent women in Berea

A remarkable aspect of Luke's account of the Berean synagogue, often passed over by the casual reader, is the importance of women. Luke mentions the women first, then the men, reversing the order used when describing the Thessalonian synagogue: "Many of the Jews believed, as did also a number of prominent Greek women and many Greek men" (Acts 17:12).

Unfortunately, not all modern Bibles reflect this distinction. That's because early copies of the scrolls and letters that became the New Testament began to differ from one another. Depending on the language and geographic region in which they were copied and translated, and depending on the theological and cultural biases of the copyists, minor changes in meaning were introduced.

Verse 12 of Acts 17 is a good example. The Western texts reverse the order: "Also many of the Greeks and of the prominent men and women believed." This reversal is typical of the Western text, which downplays the prominence of women. It is an indication of the theological bias in the Western church, which placed women in a subordinate role.

> It appears that there was a concerted effort by some part of the church, perhaps as early as the late first century or beginning of the second, to tone down texts in Luke's second volume [Acts] that indicated

> that women played an important and prominent part in the early days of the Christian community. [W.M.] Ramsay long ago remarked with some justification that in reaction to the conventions in various parts of the Roman Empire, "the Universal and Catholic type of Christianity became confirmed in its dislike of the prominence and public ministration of women. The dislike became abhorrence, and there is every probability that the dislike is as old as the first century, and was intensified to abhorrence before the middle of the second century." In fact, it seems more likely that the "Western" text was simply reflecting Roman and Western ideas about women not playing prominent roles in public life. In any event…Luke's attempt to give women special prominence in Acts soon rubbed people the wrong way. (Ben Witherington III, "The Anti-Feminist Tendencies of the 'Western' Text in Acts," *Journal of Biblical Literature,*1984, pp. 83-84)

The Eastern texts, on the other hand, place the women first. They more accurately reveal the Greek attitude toward women in the early church. The early Christian community accepted women as full members of the congregation. Just as men in the church were "brothers" (Romans 14:10; 1 Corinthians 6:6; James 1:9), women were "sisters" (Romans 16:1; 1 Corinthians 7:15; 9:5; James 2:15).

Women in Macedonia, the province in which both Thessalonica and Berea were located, were known for their independent spirit. The passage in Acts points to this spirit, showing that the women were important supporters of Paul. It's true that the women involved may have been wives of influential men. However, "if some of the women who believed the gospel at this time were the wives of leading citizens, the initiative was theirs, not their husbands: (F.F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*).

The response of faith

Perhaps you are in the same position as the Bereans nearly 2,000 years ago, beginning to learn about the gospel of Jesus Christ. The gospel will

challenge you. Most of us have probably grown up with some distinctive ideas about the gospel. But are those ideas right? It can be a bit unsettling to look into the book to see what it really says, and to find that some of our cherished ideas about God and religion may not be based on the Bible at all.

Like Paul, we want you to know about Jesus Christ. Perhaps, like the Bereans, you have heard of him. But are your ideas about him correct? The Bereans were honest enough to examine Paul's claims to see if they were true. They "examined the Scriptures every day" (Acts 17:11), to prove for themselves the truth of his arguments. Are you willing to do the same?

They did not just cling blindly to their traditions and doctrines either. They were open to the truth and to growth. The response of the Bereans was impressive because "they tested the truth of Paul's message by the touchstone of Scripture rather than judging it by political and cultural considerations" (Richard N. Longenecker, *Expositor's Bible Commentary,* vol. 9).

Unlike the Bereans, you have numerous resources at your disposal: many different Bible translations, reference books, even computer programs. But the Bereans had the most valuable tool of all — a teachable and open mind. Is this what you have?

LITERAL AND FIGURATIVE: HOW TO UNDERSTAND THE LANGUAGE OF THE BIBLE

Jesus took bread and said, "Take and eat; this is my body" (Matthew 26:26). Did Jesus intend for this statement to be taken literally, or was he using symbolic language, a figure of speech? Christianity has been divided on that question for centuries.

Whenever we read the words of the Bible, we are faced with a choice: Does God intend this passage to be taken literally, or is the meaning symbolic or metaphorical? Is the language used strictly literal or is it a figure of speech?

Our goal in understanding the Bible is not to prefer either literal meanings or figurative meanings. It is to understand what God intended the words to mean. Sometimes God intended a literal meaning, sometimes a figurative meaning, and occasionally both. We need to explore each context.

The Bread of Life

When Jesus gave 5,000 people bread and fish (John 6:1-15), for example, he gave them real bread to satisfy their physical need. Here we are reading literally. But just a few verses later, we are told that Jesus is "the bread of life" (verse 35). Here we must read figuratively: Jesus is the source and sustainer of eternal life.

The bread that Jesus gave to the people had symbolic value. It portrayed the important truth that, just as Jesus could miraculously create and give the substance of physical life to humans, he could also give them eternal life. His miracle pointed to a spiritual truth that is much more important than satisfying physical hunger. His miracles were special signs that can help us believe in him and thereby have eternal life (John 20:31).

"Do not work for food that spoils," he told the people, "but for food that endures to eternal life" (John 6:27). What is that life-giving food, the source of eternal life? It is Jesus.

When Jesus told people that they must eat his flesh (verse 53), he did not mean it literally. Even when he said that his flesh was "real food" (verse 55), he did not mean it literally. He explained that flesh is not important (verse 63). To be given eternal life, we need something spiritual. The words of Jesus "are full of the Spirit and life" (same verse). They are vital for our salvation. We must understand them in the right way — in their spirit, their intent, in addition to any literal meaning.

Jesus' figurative language

Jesus called himself a shepherd, a gate, a light. Some of the most theologically important words in the Bible are figures of speech. We should not interpret them literally, because they aren't *meant* to be read literally. In everyday speech, we often use figurative language. We might say, "He was green with envy," or "She really got my goat." By using such figures of speech, we can communicate better than if we had to use words literally.

In the Bible, if we always prefer a literal meaning, we may miss the point. The disciples made this mistake when Jesus told them to beware of the "yeast" of the Jewish leaders (Matthew 16:6). The disciples thought about their failure to bring any bread. So Jesus reminded them that he could create bread for thousands if necessary. He wasn't worried about physical bread. The disciples then understood that Jesus meant doctrine or teaching when he had said "yeast" (verse 12). It was a figure of speech.

Jesus explained his ministry in figurative language rather than in plain words (John 16:25). His parables, for example, often puzzled people. Even his disciples had to ask him to explain what he meant (Mark 4:10, 13). Many of his teachings are still the subject of debate.

"If your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out," Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:29). But can an eye really cause us to sin? No. Jesus was making a bold statement to emphasize an important principle.

Do we believe the Bible? Certainly! We believe what it *means,* the spirit or the principle of what it says, not merely what the words mean literally. We believe that Jesus gave people literal bread, and that he is the bread of life. We can believe a figurative statement just as well as a literal one.

Ethical questions

Let's look briefly at some biblical commands. "You shall not murder," the Ten Commandments tell us (Exodus 20:13). Jesus interpreted this literally and symbolically. This commandment forbids not only murder but also hatred (Matthew 5:21-22). If we insist only on a literal meaning, we miss the more important spiritual intent.

God's laws are not arbitrary rules. They are based on spiritual principles. We should keep the laws of God not with arbitrary exactness, but accordance to the spiritual intent.

"Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain," Deuteronomy 25:4 tells us. The literal meaning is sensible — it is based on a good principle. Paul applied this verse — in principle — to human workers, including those who preach the gospel (1 Corinthians 9:7-12: 1 Timothy 5:17-18).

Sometimes we find that the principle may be applied in the same way. Sometimes we obey both in the letter and according to the principle, sometimes in principle only, when the literal is obsolete.

Prophecies fulfilled in type

Biblical prophecies often include figures of speech. Some predictions came to pass exactly as written. Others were fulfilled in type — one thing representing another. Isaiah 40:3-4, for an extreme example, predicts that valleys will be raised and mountains brought low. Luke 3:4-6 indicates that this prophecy in Isaiah was fulfilled by the preaching of John the Baptist. The valleys and mountains of Isaiah 40:3-4 are apparently symbols for something else and therefore not to be taken literally.

The apostle John saw a beast coming, out of the sea (Revelation 13:1) and another beast out of the earth (verse 11). Were the animals real, or only a vision? If we interpret the prophecy literally, we might worry about mutant dinosaurs. But few students of the Bible interpret these beasts literally as fearsome wild animals. Rather, the beasts symbolize a typological fulfillment.

Is figurative interpretation a second-best approach to the Scriptures? In these cases, certainly not! It is what God intended.

Through Isaiah God prophesied that the Messiah would reign on David's throne with justice and righteousness forever (Isaiah 9:7). But did Jesus fulfill this prophecy? If we had lived then and insisted on a literal interpretation of the prophecies that describe the Messiah as a conquering hero, we would have rejected Christ, the spiritual fulfillment of God's Word.

One part of the Bible says God's people should sacrifice animals; another part says they should not. The new covenant has superseded the old. Christ fulfilled the symbolism of the sacrifices, so they are no longer needed. The Old Testament sacrifices had a literal meaning. People who lived in that time period understood them literally. But those sacrifices also had typological significance, pointing to Christ. The literal meaning was temporary, but the figurative meaning — which was there all along — is more important.

Truth in symbolic language

Some people prefer a literal interpretation of the Bible and defend it to extremes. Before they even see the context, they assume that the literal meaning is closer to the truth. They accept a figure of speech only grudgingly.

Their respect for the Bible is admirable, but a bit misguided. They are afraid that figurative interpretation can go too far. Such people fear that the Bible will be "spiritualized away." For example, for a law that a person doesn't

want to keep, the law might be called culturally obsolete or an exaggeration. Any miracle they don't think happened might be called a parable. Details of prophecies might be waived aside and proclaimed fulfilled in some vague symbolic way. Mary wasn't really a virgin, and Christ won't really come back, and God doesn't really exist, and everything is a big hoax, some might say.

But that is a dishonest way to interpret the Word of God. These examples show figurative interpretation *can* be taken too far. But that does not mean we should reject it or resist its every use. Insisting on the literal meaning as being true and accurate, and figurative interpretation as a watering down of the intended meaning, is an exaggeration.

When we read, we understand words in a literal sense first, then in a figurative sense if the literal doesn't make sense. That's the normal way we use language, and it's a sensible way to start. Literal first, figurative second. But figurative meanings are not second best or inferior, or anything to apologize for. They are often better, closer to the truth. Symbolic meaning is usually more powerful and profound.

For example, it would be difficult to state literally the profound truth, "I am the resurrection and the life" (John 11:25), or "I am the way and the truth and the life" (John 14:6). Since the Bible discusses spiritual truths, we should expect to find figurative language more often in the Bible than in a history textbook.

The evidence is clear that parts of the Bible are meant figuratively, and we are rejecting the Word of God if we refuse to consider the possibility of figures of speech. We should not refuse to understand a method the Bible itself uses.

It is dishonest to reject figurative meanings when they were intended, just as it is dishonest to read them where they shouldn't be. We should not be hasty to seek a figurative interpretation, nor should we be hasty to reject one. We need to cautiously examine each verse in its context, and to exercise some patience with ourselves – and with interpreters who come to different conclusions.

All students of the Bible need to be aware of the figurative devices in the Bible and interpret accordingly. We need to carefully read and study the Bible to become familiar with the way it uses language.

Figures of speech in the Bible

Simile: A comparison using "like" or "as." Example: "*As* lightning that comes from the east is visible even in the west, so will be the coming of the

Son of Man" (Matthew 24:27).

Metaphor: One thing described in terms of some other thing. "Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom" (Luke 12:32).

Anthropomorphism: God described in human terms. "The *eyes* of the Lord *run* to and fro throughout the whole earth" (2 Chronicles 16:9, English Standard Version).

Words of association: One word stands for something else. Examples: "Circumcision" meaning the Jews (Galatians 2:9, King James Version); "sword" for all weapons (Romans 8:35).

Personification: Personal qualities assigned to an object. "The mountains *leaped* like rams" (Psalm 114:4).

Euphemism: Substituting an inoffensive word for a possibly harsh or crude one. "Adam *knew* Eve his wife, and she conceived" (Genesis 4:1, English Standard Version) means that they had sexual intercourse.

Hyperbole: Exaggeration. "If your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out" (Matthew 5:29).

Irony: The literal meaning is opposite the real meaning. "Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! You have begun to reign—and that without us! How I wish that you really had begun to reign so that we also might reign with you!" (1 Corinthians 4:8).

A feel for the context

We need to get a feel for the context. We need to see the types of literature contained in the Bible, the way it uses poetic language, the way it gives commands and relates history and predicts the future.

To help us in our reading, a simple introduction to the Bible can be helpful. Perhaps you might be able to buy one of the books listed below at your local Christian bookstore, or read them at a library. These short, easy-to-read books have been designed for beginning Bible students.

Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*

Scot McKnight, *The Blue Parakeet: Rethinking How You Read the Bible*

DO WE HAVE THE RIGHT BOOKS IN THE BIBLE?

Who decided which books should be in the New Testament?

In Dan Brown's novel *The Da Vinci Code,* one of the main characters says that the Roman Emperor Constantine decided which books should be in the New Testament. He supposedly "commissioned and financed a new Bible, which omitted those gospels that spoke of Christ's human traits and embellished those gospels that made him godlike. The earlier gospels were outlawed, gathered up, and burned" (p. 234).

The Da Vinci Code, despite its claim to be based on fact, is actually fiction — and so is the above claim. It's not hard to find historical mistakes in the book. Let's look at one — the question of canonization, or the way in which the New Testament books were collected into one book.

A "cannon" is an old-fashioned weapon; a "canon" (notice the difference in spelling) is a list of authoritative books. "Canon" comes from the Greek word *kanon,* meaning measuring stick. A rough definition of the biblical canon is "the list of books that can be used in church to teach doctrine." There were many books and letters written in the early years of the church. So why do we have *these particular books in our present New Testament canon or Bible*?

A process

Historically, canonization can be seen as a process. It was not achieved by people meeting together to determine which books would be authoritative. The process occurred at different times in different places. At first, the apostles and teachers in the early church told stories about Jesus, what he did, what he said, and what his death meant for us. In time, those stories were standardized and written down.

The canonization process, though there was nothing official here in the sense of an approved list, probably began in the first century. For example, some people may have viewed the Gospel of Mark as an authoritative record of the life of Jesus even before the book of Revelation was written. Or they were reading Galatians in church before Romans was written.

As traveling Christians visited different areas, they discovered more writings and said, "That's a good book — can I make a copy?" (Remember, there was no quick communication and no printing press.) The books that

were most useful were copied by hand the most often. "Writings that proved, over time, to be most useful in sustaining, informing, and guiding the church in its worship, preaching, and teaching came to be the most highly valued, and gained a special authority in virtue of their usefulness" (H. Gamble, *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 1, p. 857).

Gradually, various books were accepted as Scripture, and only later did the church begin to draw boundary lines as to which books could be called Scripture and which were part of a collection of authoritative and helpful writings (that is, a canon).

Polycarp, who lived early in the second century, often quoted from the New Testament, but in most cases he introduced the quotes with comments like "Jesus said," "Paul writes," etc. To Polycarp the words of Jesus had authority *as the words of Jesus*, not because they were written down in an approved book.

Irenaeus, around the year 180, quoted the New Testament more than 1,000 times. He clearly believed that the books from which he quoted were authoritative for Christian teaching — and Irenaeus was "quoting Scripture" more than a century before Constantine. However, Irenaeus also called other books Scripture, such as the *Shepherd of Hermas*.

Clement of Alexandria, around the year 200, has over 3,000 quotes from the New Testament, but he doesn't quote several of the non-Pauline, or general epistles; they were apparently not in his canon. Tertullian, who lived in North Africa about the same time, quoted from all New Testament books except 2 Peter, James, and 2-3 John. Similarly, Hippolytus of Rome did not quote from James, 2 Peter, 3 John, and Jude. Cyprian of Carthage (mid third century) quoted almost 900 New Testament verses, but he had nothing from Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2-3 John, or Jude. Each leader had a slightly different collection.

In these writings, well before Constantine, everyone accepted Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts, and the letters of Paul, but there were some uncertainties about the general epistles.

Different sections at different times

The four Gospels were accepted early on, although some people were a little troubled that there were four different-but-authoritative versions of the ministry of Jesus. In Syria, Tatian merged all four Gospels together in his *Diatesseron,* but in the Western Empire, the Gospels were accepted as a group of four. Irenaeus even argued that four is the divinely sanctioned number.

The writings of Paul were accepted early on as definitive for Christian

belief and practice. Although there was a little disagreement about which books he actually wrote, it was agreed that those he wrote were authoritative. Acts was also widely accepted, probably because it was written by Luke, the author of an accepted Gospel.

There was widespread agreement about the vast majority (20 out of 27 books) of the New Testament. The disagreements were about a few smaller books — the tail end of the Bible. Specifically, there were some reservations about Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2 & 3 John, Jude, and Revelation, and this lasted for centuries.

Eusebius recognized only one authentic epistle of Peter, and 2 Peter was rarely used. Second and Third John were little used until the fourth century, and were not in the lists of Origen and Eusebius. The epistle of Jude also had a mixed reception, perhaps because Jude quotes *1 Enoch*, which was rarely considered authoritative.

There were a few additional books that were occasionally counted as authoritative: 3 Corinthians, the Shepherd of Hermas, the Didache, the first letter of Clement of Rome, the letters of Ignatius, Barnabas, the Apocalypse of Peter, the Acts of Paul, the Gospel of Peter, the Gospel of Thomas. Some of these are now in the collection called the apostolic fathers; others are deemed heretical. Some of these were widely recommended, and the extreme boundaries of the canon were somewhat blurred for many years. Even as late as the sixth century, Codex Claromontanus does not include Hebrews, but it does include Barnabas, Hermas, the Acts of Paul, and the Apocalypse of Peter.

Criteria

In general, early church leaders looked at three criteria:

1) antiquity and apostolicity — whether a book had been written by an apostle or someone associated with the apostles, such as Mark or Luke,
2) orthodoxy — the writing must be in agreement with traditional doctrines accepted from the beginning of the church, and
3) consensus — whether many churches in diverse locations were using the book.

Although there was no formula for applying these criteria to various books, these are the kind of principles mentioned when a church leader comments on whether a particular book is to be accepted or rejected.

Often, no reason was given at all for a book to be considered authoritative in a canonical sense — it was simply said that we accept this book, but not

this other one. Some books were widely accepted because many people had found them useful from the time they were written; other books were not. The church fathers said little about the determining factors, because the canon developed gradually, rather than being based on one person's authority.

Surprisingly, "inspiration" was not a factor at all, since that was a much broader and rather indefinite category. Even sermons were considered "inspired"; the fact that a document was inspired was not proof that it was also canonical. Everything in the canon was considered inspired, but not everything considered inspired was in the canon.

Attempts to list the canonical books

The earliest undisputed list of books comes from Eusebius, in the 320s. "Even though he reported that some lists preceded his, including lists supposedly from Clement of Alexandria and Origen…these lists were more likely inventions of Eusebius which he constructed from his own tabulation of the references to the New Testament Scriptures that Clement and Origen cited" (Lee McDonald, *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments*, p. 135).

Eusebius noted that the following books were disputed: James, Jude, 2 Peter, 2-3 John, Acts of Paul, Shepherd of Hermas, Apocalypse of Peter, Epistle of Barnabas, Didache, and possibly Revelation. Eusebius wrote at the time of Constantine, and he gives not even a hint that Constantine had any opinions about which books ought to be accepted. If Constantine did try to settle the question, he was quite unsuccessful. No authoritative list comes from him. He ordered that copies be made, but he did not specify which books were to be in those copies.

The Cheltenham canon (probably mid fourth century) omitted James, Jude, and Hebrews. Codex Sinaiticus (fourth century) includes all the modern canon plus Barnabas and Shepherd of Hermas. The Council of Laodicea (363) omitted some of the general epistles and Revelation. Athanasius of Alexandria gave a list identical to our modern canon in the year 367, but not everyone followed his list.

Canon lists were part of the council of Rome (382), the synod of Hippo (393) and two councils at Carthage (397, 419), but none of these councils represented the church at large. The Trullan synod held in Constantinople in 691-2 ratified the lists of several previous councils, even though they contradicted one another. Carthage had accepted all the general epistles and Revelation, whereas Laodicea had rejected some of them.

Rome did not officially rule on the canon until the Council of Florence (1439-43). The Catholic council of Trent (1546) made the current list of New Testament books an article of faith, but only by a minority vote — 24 in favor, 15 against, and 16 abstentions. But the Greek Orthodox Church certainly did not get its canon from Roman authority.

None of the councils *made* a book canonical — the council could merely affirm that a book had already been used from the earliest history of the church and that it could continue, in fact, to be so used.

Some of the Reformers questioned the canon, and "Luther's lower estimate of four books of the New Testament is disclosed in the Table of Contents, where the first twenty-three books from Matthew to 3 John are each assigned a number, whereas, after a blank space, the column of titles, without numbers, continues with Hebrews, James, Jude, and Revelation" (Bruce Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament,* 242).

'No more' and 'No – more'

What prompted the leaders to draw up a list of books considered to be authoritative for faith? Two factors may have played important roles: 1) heretics such as Marcion had their own list of books, and 2) fourth-century persecutors wanted to burn the Christians' sacred writings, while the Christians wanted to hide them. But exactly which books could be turned over, and which were they to hide?

Marcion had created his own abridged list of books from those accepted by the general church as being authoritative. In effect, he chose his favorites from an already-existing list of Gospels and epistles. The church responded to Marcion's abbreviated canon with, No—*more* than that. But to the Gnostics and Montanists, who wanted to add new books, the church responded with, *No more* than this! The fact that Marcion felt compelled to create a truncated list or canon speaks to the fact that certain books were already considered authoritative for the church even at this early date — long before Constantine.

When Constantine accepted Christianity, he ordered 50 high-quality copies of the Scriptures to be distributed to ensure teaching uniformity throughout his empire. But he apparently had nothing to say about which books were in those copies. Even well after Constantine, Amphilochius of Iconium (in Asia Minor) rejected 2 Peter, 2-3 John, Jude, and Revelation. If Constantine tried to fix the canon, he failed.

John Chrysostom (c. 400) had 11,000 quotes from the New Testament, but none from 2 Peter, 2 or 3 John, Jude or Revelation. Although he may

have seen a list saying that those books were canonical, the list could not make him use them!

In the West, things were more stable, since there was a central authority telling everyone to accept the Vulgate translation, which contains all the New Testament books accepted today. Even so, more than 100 (out of 8,000) manuscripts of the Vulgate include the spurious epistle to the Laodiceans.

Authority today

Is the canon a list of authoritative books, or an authoritative list of books? Does the authority of each book come from itself, or from the fact that it is included in a list? Is the canon independent of church authority, or dependent on church authority? Probably the best answer is a little of both.

Many of the books were recognized as intrinsically authoritative; the early church leaders recognized that the books were authoritative even before anyone voted on anything. They were merely ratifying what was already customary. That was the case with the Gospels, Acts, and the epistles of Paul — the vast majority of the New Testament. On the other hand, some of the disputed books eventually gained widespread acceptance not so much on their own, but because they were included in a list by various church leaders and councils.

The canon was determined by long-standing Christian tradition — a tradition that had been shaped by those very books. Practically speaking, we cannot add any more books, nor take any away from our New Testament canon; the vast majority of the church would resist any such changes. We basically have to trust that God has guided his people in such a way that what we have presents a faithful witness to the gospel and is an accurate record of God's revelation to humanity.

As you can see, *The Da Vinci Code* has little connection with the facts of history. Constantine had nothing to do with choosing which books would be in our Bibles. For the vast majority of the New Testament, the churches had already made the decision (based on an existing long-time tradition of use) more than a century before Constantine. And for the areas of uncertainty, Constantine did not settle anything one way or another.

PRESERVATION OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

How reliable are the manuscripts that we have? What are we working with?

We have more than 5,000 Greek manuscripts (that is, the Greek text copied by hand, before printing was invented), which is far more than for any other ancient writing—there are only 700 manuscripts for Homer's *Iliad*, and only a few for many other classical works. So we have a wealth of documents to support the New Testament.

The problem arises when we notice that no two of those manuscripts are exactly alike—the average copyist makes several minor errors on each page—and the wealth of manuscript evidence means that we have to do a lot of painstaking proofreading to catalogue all the variations.

In addition to those 5,000 Greek manuscripts, there are some 8,000 copies of Latin Bibles, and some in Syriac, Coptic, Armenian, Georgian, and Ethiopic—all of which come from ancient copies of the Greek New Testament.

For historical value, the quality of these manuscripts is very good, compared to other ancient works—some come only 100 to 300 years after the New Testament was written (the interval is closer to 1,000 years for most classical works).

Most Greek manuscripts of the New Testament are also 1,000 years after the fact, but we have quite a few early copies as well. One fragment of John may be only 25 years after the book was written, and several larger portions of the New Testament come from about A.D. 200. So they are only a few generations removed from the original.

Author and date	earliest copy	time span	copies
Julius Caesar, 100-44 BC	900	1000	10
Plato, 427-347 BC	900	1200	7
Tacitus, AD 100	1100	1000	20
Pliny, AD 61-113	850	750	7
Thucydides, 460-400 BC	900	1300	8
Suetonius, AD 75-160	950	800	8
Herodotus, 480-425 BC	900	1300	8
Sophocles, 496-406 BC	1000	1400	100
Catullus, 54 BC	155	1600	3
Euripides, 480-406 BC	1100	1500	9
Demosthenes, 383-322 BC	1100	1300	200
Aristotle, 384-322 BC	1100	1400	5
Aristophanes, 450-385 BC	900	1200	10
[Table adapted from J.P. Moreland, *Scaling the Secular City: A Defense of Christianity* (Baker, 1987), 135.]			

The earliest manuscripts are written on papyrus (a writing material made from the inside of reeds that grow in Egypt). It was fairly common, and not terribly expensive (as can be seen by the large margins that were sometimes used in books). Although papyrus continued to be used until the eighth century, most of the papyrus manuscripts are 4th century or earlier. [Since papyrus reeds grow only in Egypt, papyrus became scarce in the West after the break-up of the Roman Empire.] About 3 percent of the biblical manuscripts are on papyrus. Some of the most famous are the Chester Beatty papyri (P45, P46, and P47) from the third century.

The next oldest group of manuscripts was written in all capital letters on parchment, which was made from animal skins—sheep, goat, or calf skin was soaked in water, stretched until paper thin, and allowed to dry while under tension. The resulting sheets were good writing material, flexible and durable—so durable that in some cases parchments were scraped clean and used again. With a little technology, researchers can read not only the second text, but also some of the erased text.

Since the Greek was written in all-capital letters, this group of manuscripts is called **uncials,** the word for capital letters. About 9 percent of New

Testament manuscripts fall in this category. Some go back to the 2nd and 3rd centuries. The famous ones are Codex Sinaiticus, a fourth-century copy of almost all the Old Testament, and all of the New Testament. Codex Alexandrinus is from the 5th century, and also has both the Old Testament and the New Testament, but it is missing small portions of the New Testament. Codex Vaticanus is from the fourth century, but it is missing a large section after Hebrews 9. Some consider this the most reliable text of all.

About the 9th century, scribes invented **miniscule** writing—kind of a cursive, lower-case Greek. Since this took less time and less space on the page, it caught on quickly, and most subsequent manuscripts are miniscules. About 88 percent of our manuscripts are miniscules and date from the 9th to 15th centuries. Because of their late date, they are of little value for New Testament studies, although they occasionally preserve old readings.

More than 3,000 manuscripts are Bibles—of those, 94 are papyri, 270 are uncials on parchment, and 2,100 are miniscules on parchment, and 650 are miniscules on paper (paper came to be used in the 14th-15th centuries).

However, many of our manuscripts are not Bibles, per se—many of them are lectionaries—the Bible text arranged by the readings appropriate to each week, with emphasis on the Gospels. Most of the biblical text is still there, just in a different order. But these lectionaries are generally later, and since lectionaries were designed for church use, they overwhelmingly reflect the text that was most commonly used where the people still spoke Greek—that is, in the Byzantine empire. They were usually copied from other lectionaries, rather than taking the trouble to flip back and forth in a Bible. A couple of them date from the 4th or 5th century, but the vast majority are much later.

(You might wonder how they date a manuscript. It is often by examining the handwriting, since styles changed slightly from one time period to another. And then there are the occasional marginal notes or dedication pages that give a specific year and help correlate styles with known dates.)

In addition to those manuscripts, we also have a variety of quotes from early Christians. Irenaeus or Origen, for example, quoted quite a few verses in the Bible, and we can see what words are in the quote. But this evidence has to be used cautiously, since Origen might have been quoting from memory, or the person who copied Origen's books may have altered the quote to conform to what the copyist knew. But this kind of evidence can help researchers know the geographical origin of certain variations.

Evidence from versions in other languages can sometimes help, since both Latin and Syriac translations began to be made as early as the late second century. Although the copies we have of those translations are later, they may

preserve readings that date from the second century or earlier. But since languages vary in their grammatical details, nuances of tense are often lost.

We have only two copies of the original Syriac translation. When the Peshitta (the standard Syriac version) was made in the 5th century, most of the older translations were apparently destroyed. Tatian's *Diatessaron* (c. 170) also preserves old Syriac material from the Gospels. We have quite a few more copies of Old Latin readings, since Old Latin continued to be copied even after the Vulgate became standard in the late fourth century. Coptic versions date from the late third century and early fourth; Armenian versions from the early fifth century, based on the Syriac text.

Kinds of variations

No two texts are exactly the same, and the earlier the text, the most likely it is to have variations. That's because the first copies were often made by amateurs. It might have gone something like this: A Christian from Corinth was traveling to Rome, for example, and attended one of the house churches in Rome. There, the people were reading from Paul's epistle to the Romans, and the Corinthian visitor liked what he heard and asked to make a copy of the letter.

Now, he was not a trained copyist, and his materials weren't the best, but he made a copy and took it back to Corinth, where it was read in the church service, and a traveler from Ephesus heard it there and liked it, and made another copy—copying the mistakes the first guy made and accidentally making a few of his own. He's in a hurry, and he misses a few lines here and there, and can't quite read what the first guy wrote, so he makes an educated guess, and so on.

These early Christians were not yet aware that they were dealing with Scripture, and they didn't yet have the training to be really careful. And so they made some mistakes—sometimes the mistakes were obvious, and sometimes not so obvious. Some of their mistakes don't make any sense; others are errors like skipping a line or repeating a word.

Sometimes books were copied by one person reading the book out loud while one or more people wrote down what he said. Words were spelled the way they sounded, and since two words can sometimes sound the same, sometimes the wrong word was written. Sometimes synonyms were used, or the word order was changed, because the writer was trying to remember too many words at a time. Some of these errors may be insignificant in themselves, but they still give us an idea of how good the scribe was, and we can use that bit of evidence when we run across variations that are more

puzzling.

Eventually, Christians started to get better at copying, and they would double-check their work and write their corrections in the margin. Or one person would correct the work done by another, and if he skipped a line, the proofreader would supply the missing text in the margin. Unfortunately, sometimes they also put their own comments in the margin, and the next generation of copyists was not always sure which words were corrections and which were commentary—and in that way material could be added to the text.

And since copyists were used to correcting errors, sometimes they would correct what they only *thought* were errors—they would fix the grammar, sometimes even the theology! Or they would put details from Matthew into the book of Luke—sometimes accidentally, because Matthew was the more familiar form (it was used in churches more than the other three Gospels put together), or sometimes on purpose, to make sure that the witnesses agreed.

Sometimes one letter was substituted for another (scribes sometimes worked in poorly lit areas), or abbreviations were misunderstood. Eldon Epp writes, "At 1 Tim 3:16, e.g., the likely original *hos* (omicron-sigma, meaning "he who") may have been misunderstood as the abbreviation for "God," which was written theta-sigma and would look very much like the relative pronoun omicron-sigma." [Eldon Jay Epp, *Anchor Bible Dictionary,* 6:416.]

Epp lists the following kinds of errors:

confusing one letter with a similar one
putting spaces in the wrong place
misreading abbreviations
interchanging the order of letters or words
putting in a familiar word instead of a rare one
skipping from one occurrence of a word to another, omitting the text in between
repeating words, lines or passages
misspelling from carelessness
using a synonym, a word with a similar meaning
conforming grammatical case endings to a word nearby
including marginal material that was not supposed to be in the text
improving grammar, spelling and style to be more like classical Greek
making a quote from the Old Testament to be more like the Septuagint
fixing discrepancies

combining two readings, making the result longer than either original
adding words such as "Christ" to "Jesus"
protecting the omniscience or omnipotence of Jesus, etc.

As time went on, texts usually got longer rather than shorter.

Deciding which variant is original

Since we have 5,000 Greek manuscripts, and none of them are identical, how are we to know what Paul or Luke originally wrote? By one estimate, there are some 300,000 variations in all. Although most of those are obvious mistakes, we cannot be sure about a small number of them, since several readings may make good sense. How are we to decide?

We can't simply assume that the oldest manuscript is correct, or that the later ones are, or even that the reading found in *most* of the manuscripts is right. After all, the best copy did not necessarily go to the area with the most copyists, or to the place with the lowest humidity (where it would be preserved best). Nor can we assume, without any special revelation, that God somehow entrusted the text to one particular branch of Christianity (of course, even if he did, there are still textual variations within that branch!).

So, no matter whether we have 5 manuscripts or 5,000, whether we have 10 variations or 10,000, we need to make decisions about which reading is more likely to be original. This is called textual criticism, and the goal is a very conservative one—to find out what the original text was. Sometimes the results of textual criticism are perceived as revisionist rather than conservative, simply because people have become more familiar with the error than they are the original.

When the Greek text was brought to the West, many people didn't like it, because they were used to the Vulgate readings. In a similar way, when readings from Codex Sinaiticus were introduced into English versions, many people didn't like it, simply because it was different from the King James Version they had memorized. But they had no knowledge of Greek and no way of making an informed decision as to which version is better—they simply assumed that the version that was most familiar *to them* was the most accurate one—and that isn't necessarily true.

In general, textual critics assume that the true reading has not been totally lost—it is represented somewhere in the manuscripts, preferably an old one. So here are a few rules of thumb that they use:

* Older manuscripts are better than recent ones—a principle used by Jerome.
* Readings supported by many texts are better than a unique reading—a

principle that goes back to Origen. However, these first two principles often contradict.

* Readings are better if they come from a wide geographical area.
* The more unusual reading is more likely to be right, less likely to have been a scribal "correction." The harder reading is to be preferred—the Latin phrase is sometimes used: *difficilior lectio potior*. (Difficult within reason, of course—some readings are "difficult" because they don't make any sense.)
* A shorter reading is better than a longer one, because a longer one is likely to be a combination.
* A reading that contradicts the author's usual style and theology is more likely to be erroneous.
* Koine Greek of the first century is more likely to be original than Classical Greek grammar of the 5th century B.C.
* Semitic or Jewish style of expression is more likely to be original.
* The reading that deviates from orthodoxy may be original, since the orthodox reading may stem from a scribal correction.
* Readings that are similar to a parallel passage, or to the Septuagint, are suspect.
* Readings from a careful scribe are better than unusual readings by a careless one.
* Since the above principles often conflict, the summarizing principle is: The most likely reading is the one that can explain the origin of the others.

Last, we should note that the decision is a subjective one, based on a scholar's guess as to what is most likely. But in most cases there is a good consensus.

Families of texts

Since we do not have the original documents (the autographs), every copy has been made from a previous copy. A mistake made by one copyist often gets copied by subsequent copyists, and therefore all manuscripts come with a genealogy. They come in families. We don't have access to every link in the genealogy, of course, but we can often see similarities. P75 is extremely close to Codex Vaticanus, and both may have been copied from the same original, or some such relationship. Other groups of manuscripts can be grouped together by a variant reading in some verse or another.

Not all texts fit neatly into a group, but textual critics have tried to group most texts into major families: Alexandrian, Western, Caesarean, and

Byzantine. The Caesarean group is really so diverse that it may not be a family, but most critics accept the other three as reasonably distinct groups. Epp suggests calling the groups A, B, C, and D, for Codex A (Alexandrinus, and Byzantine copies), Codex B (Vaticanus and Sinaiticus), Codex D (Codex Bezae and Western texts), and C is half-way between B and D, represented by Codex Washingtonianus. And there are some mixed texts.

These major families reflect the fact that some significant variants were introduced in the first two centuries—in the days of amateur copyists. Of all the variations that have been catalogued, probably the majority go back to those earliest times.

The King James Version stems from the Byzantine group, the group of texts that dominated the Greek Orthodox church, whereas more modern translations generally come from the Sinaiticus group, with a few other readings mixed in as textual critics weigh the evidence.

The King James Version is a result of a series of historical accidents—first, that in the Dark Ages Greek manuscripts were being copied only in one geographical area, the area in which Greek was still spoken, and second, when the Byzantine Empire fell to the Turks, the scholars fled west with their Byzantine-family Greek texts, and consequently when 16th century Western scholars wanted to see the Greek text, all they had access to was a few late Byzantine texts.

They did the best they could with what they had, but they had only a tiny sample to work with. They were not aware that older manuscripts had different readings. That came to light in the 18th century, and as more ancient manuscripts were discovered, people wondered if they might preserve some original readings.

The King James Version depends for the most part on the Greek text of Theodore Beza (1598), who in almost all details agrees with Robert Estienne (1551), who in turn depends largely on Erasmus (1527). His text was based on about six late copies, and the oldest was from the tenth century. Erasmus even made up his own Greek text for the last six verses of Revelation (translating from Latin into Greek), and some of those inventions are still in the King James. As a result, the so-called Textus Receptus of Beza is not exactly the same as the Byzantine text, but it is quite close, since it was based on a few texts in that family.

The Byzantine text is also called the Majority text, since most manuscripts reflect it—that's because most are quite late, and most come from the Greek-speaking churches of the Byzantine empire. Or it is called the Syrian text family (not to be confused with Syriac, which is a different language), since it

seems to have originated in Antioch and was brought to Constantinople by John Chrysostom.

The Byzantine text developed by combining readings found in previous texts, as can be seen by the following facts: Although most Byzantine-text words are found in older papyri, they are not found in the *combination* that Byzantine texts have. For example, some older texts may say "our Lord," and others say "Christ Jesus." But the Byzantine text says "Christ Jesus our Lord." There's no doctrinal error with this kind of combination, but there is a tendency for the text to grow a little longer.

The earlier church fathers quote the older text types, but never in the combinations that are unique to the Byzantine version. Epp writes this about the Byzantine or Majority text:

> [It] is a later text that has developed from the conflation of readings found in the earlier text types. Westcott and Hort rather dramatically documented such conflation in test passages and argued, further, that the Greek and Latin fathers up to the mid-3rd century support one or another of the pre-Syrian texts but do not support the conflate readings or other distinctively Syrian readings…. Westcott and Hort provided an impressive and consistent demonstration of how and why this later, fuller text developed from the older—their loosely genealogical explanation of the patently observable conflation process (Epp, 429).

Some modern translations (for example, the NKJ) footnote major textual differences, and sometimes these footnotes can alert preachers to the fact that some people in the congregation are going to see something different in their Bibles. So if the point we want to make can't be made from *some* of those versions, maybe we need to find a better verse.

Fortunately, the vast majority of textual variants are theologically neutral—there is no Christian doctrine that depends on a disputed reading—the main question is whether the doctrine happens to be supported by this verse, or some other. God simply did not cause every word to be preserved exactly the way that it was first written, but we can still be confident that what we have is very close to the original, and that any areas of uncertainty are inconsequential.

We do not need to be textual critics ourselves—it is far too specialized a field, requiring far too much proofreading and cataloging. But practically speaking, even if we could demonstrate that one reading or another is better, the people in the pews would still have the other one in their translations. So

preachers generally have to take the translations the way they come, for better or for worse (just as the early Christians had to use the Septuagint rather than the Hebrew text). So if most of the members have the NIV, then I'll probably use the NIV for preaching, and if most of them have the NRSV, then I'll use that.

But when people are troubled about variations between the King James and the NIV, for example, then it is helpful for us to know the background I've discussed here. For further reading, you might check out the *Anchor Bible Dictionary* article, or there's one in *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia,* or a book by D.A. Carson, *The King James Version Debate: A Plea for Realism.* See also Bruce Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament.* [The revised edition was co-authored with Bart Ehrman, who later became an agnostic and made some rather exaggerated claims about the (un)reliability of the textual transmission. Timothy Paul Jones provides a good discussion of Ehrman's errors in *Misquoting Truth: A Guide to the Fallacies of Bart Ehrman's Misquoting Jesus* (InterVarsity, 2007). Another rebuttal is in Lee Strobel, *The Case for the Real Jesus* (Zondervan, 2007), 65-100.]

Actually, the biggest problem in biblical interpretation is not to figure out what the original words *were*—it is how to understand what those words *mean* for us today. Questions of interpretation are far more common, and far more significant, than questions of what the text actually is.

Basically, the gospel of salvation through Jesus Christ can be found in any of the versions. Some people might find it better in the New King James, some might find it more clearly in New Living Translation, or whatever. We can see beyond the minor variations to focus on the central core that all versions have in common.

THE WRITTEN WORD OF GOD

How do we know who Jesus is, or what he taught? How do we know when a gospel is false? Where is the authority for sound teaching and right living? The Bible is the inspired and infallible record of what God wants us to know and do.

A witness to Jesus

Perhaps you've seen newspaper reports about the "Jesus Seminar," a group of scholars who claim that Jesus didn't say most of the things the Bible says he did. Or perhaps you've heard of other scholars who say that the Bible is a collection of contradictions and myths.

Many well-educated people dismiss the Bible. Many other equally educated people believe it is a trustworthy record of what God has done and said. If we cannot trust what the Bible says about Jesus, for example, then we will know almost nothing about him.

The Jesus Seminar began with a preconceived idea of what Jesus would have taught. They accepted the sayings that fit this idea, and rejected the sayings that didn't, thereby, in effect, creating a Jesus in their own image. This is not good scholarship, and even many liberal scholars disagree with the Seminar.

Do we have good reason to trust the biblical reports about Jesus? Certainly—they were written within a few decades of Jesus' death, when eyewitnesses were still alive. Jewish disciples often memorized the words of their teachers, so it is quite possible that Jesus' disciples preserved his teachings accurately. We have no evidence that they invented sayings to deal with early church concerns, such as circumcision. This suggests that they are reliable reports of what Jesus taught.

We can also be confident that the manuscripts were well preserved. We have some copies from the fourth century, and smaller sections from the second. This is better than all other historical books. (The oldest copy of Virgil was copied 350 years after Virgil died; of Plato, 1,300 years.) The manuscripts show that the Bible was copied carefully, and we have a highly reliable text.

Jesus' witness to Scripture

Jesus was willing to argue with the Pharisees on many issues, but he did not seem to argue with their view of the Scriptures. Although Jesus disagreed on interpretations and traditions, he apparently agreed with other Jewish

leaders that the Scriptures were authoritative for faith and practice.

Jesus expected every word in Scripture to be fulfilled (Matthew 5:17-18; Mark 14:49). He quoted Scripture to prove his points (Matthew 9:13; 22:31; 26:24; 26:31; John 10:34); he rebuked people for not reading Scripture carefully enough (Matthew 22:29; Luke 24:25; John 5:39). He referred to Old Testament people and events without any hint that they were not real.

Scripture had the authority of God behind it. When Jesus answered Satan's temptations, he said, "It is written" (Matthew 4:4-10). The fact that something was written in Scripture meant, for Jesus, that it was an indisputable authority. The words of David were inspired by the Holy Spirit (Mark 12:36); a prophecy was given "through" Daniel (Matthew 24:15) because its real origin was God.

Jesus said in Matthew 19:4-5 that the Creator said in Genesis 2:24: "A man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife." However, Genesis does not describe this verse as the words of God. Jesus could say that God said it simply because it was in Scripture. The assumption is that God is the ultimate author of all of Scripture.

The evidence throughout the Gospels is that Jesus viewed Scripture as reliable and trustworthy. As he reminded the Jewish leaders, "the Scripture cannot be broken" (John 10:35). Jesus expected it to be valid; he even upheld the validity of old covenant commands while the old covenant was still in force (Matthew 8:4; 23:23).

Witness of the apostles

The apostles, like their teacher, considered Scripture authoritative. They quoted it repeatedly, often as proof of an argument. The sayings of Scripture are treated as words of God. Scripture is even personalized as the God who spoke to Abraham and Pharaoh (Romans 9:17; Galatians 3:8). What David or Isaiah or Jeremiah wrote was actually spoken by God, and therefore certain (Acts 1:16; 4:25; 13:35; 28:25; Hebrews 1:6-10; 10:15). The law of Moses is assumed to reflect the mind of God (1 Corinthians 9:9). The real author of Scripture is God (1 Corinthians 6:16; Romans 9:25).

Paul called the Scriptures "the very words of God" (Romans 3:2). Peter says that the prophets "spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:20). The prophets didn't make it up—God inspired them, and he is the real origin of their words. They often wrote, "the word of the Lord came…" or "Thus says the Lord…"

Paul also told Timothy that "all Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness" (2 Timothy

3:16). It is as if God breathed his message through the biblical writers.

However, we must not read into this our modern ideas of what "God-breathed" has to mean. We must remember that Paul said this about the Greek Septuagint *translation* (the Scriptures that Timothy had known since childhood—v. 15), and this translation is in some places considerably different than the Hebrew original. Paul used this translation as the word of God without meaning that it was a perfect text.

Despite its translation discrepancies, it is God-breathed and able to make people "wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" and it is still able to equip believers "for every good work" (v. 17).

Imperfect communication

The original word of God is perfect, and God is certainly able to cause people to state it accurately, to preserve it accurately and (to complete the communication) make us understand it accurately. But God has not done all this. Our copies have grammatical errors, copyist errors, and (far more significantly) humans always make errors in receiving the message. There is "noise" that prevents us from hearing perfectly the word God inspired to be written in Scripture. Nevertheless, God uses Scripture to speak to us today.

Despite the "noise" that puts human mistakes between God and us, the purpose of Scripture is accomplished: to tell us about salvation and about right behavior. God accomplishes his purpose in Scripture: he communicates his word to us with enough clarity that we can be saved and we can learn what he wants us to do.

Scripture, even in a translation, is accurate for its purpose. But we would be wrong to expect more from it than God intended. He is not teaching us astronomy or science. The numbers in Scripture are not always mathematically precise by today's standards. We must look at Scripture for its purpose, not for minor details.

For example, in Acts 21:11, Agabus was inspired to say that the Jews would bind Paul and hand him over to the Gentiles. Some people might assume that Agabus was specifying who would tie Paul up, and what they would do with him. But as it turns out, Paul was actually rescued by the Gentiles and bound by the Gentiles (21:30-33).

Is this a contradiction? Technically, yes. The prediction was true in principle, but not in the details. Of course, when Luke wrote this, he could have easily doctored the prediction to fit the result, but he was willing to let the differences be seen. He did not think that people should expect precision in such details. This should warn us about expecting precision in all the details

of Scripture.

We need to focus on the main point of the message. Similarly, Paul made a mistake when he wrote 1 Corinthians 1:14 — a mistake he corrected in verse 16. The inspired Scriptures contain both the mistake and the correction.

Proof of the Bible

No one can prove that all of the Bible is true. They may show that a particular prophecy came true, but they cannot show that the entire Bible has the same validity. This is based more on faith. We see the historical evidence that Jesus and the apostles accepted the Old Testament as the word of God. The biblical Jesus is the only one we have; other ideas are based on guesswork, not new evidence. We accept the teaching of Jesus that the Holy Spirit would guide the disciples into more truth. We accept the claim of Paul that he wrote with divine authority. We accept that the Bible reveals to us who God is and how we may have fellowship with him.

We accept the testimony of church history, that Christians through the centuries have found the Bible useful for faith and practice. This book tells us who God is, what he did for us, and how we should respond. Tradition also tells us which books are in the biblical canon. We trust that God guided the process so that the end result accomplishes his purpose.

Our experience also testifies to the accuracy of Scripture. This is the book that has the honesty to tell us about our own sinfulness, and the grace to offer us a cleansed conscience. It gives us moral strength not through rules and commands, but in an unexpected way—through grace and the ignominious death of our Lord.

The Bible testifies to the love, joy and peace we may have through faith—feelings that are, just as the Bible describes, beyond our ability to put into words. This book gives us meaning and purpose in life by telling us of divine creation and redemption. These aspects of biblical authority cannot be proven to skeptics, but they help verify the Scriptures that tell us these things that we experience.

The Bible does not sugar-coat its heroes, and this also helps us accept it as honest. It tells us about the failings of Abraham, Moses, David, the nation of Israel, and the disciples. The Bible is a word that bears witness to a more authoritative Word, the Word made flesh, and the good news of God's grace.

The Bible is not simplistic; it does not take the easy way out. The New Testament claims both continuity and discontinuity with the old covenant. It would be simpler to eliminate one or the other, but it is more challenging to have both. Likewise, Jesus is presented as both human and divine, a

combination that does not fit well into Hebrew, Greek or modern thought. This complexity was not created through ignorance of the philosophical problems, but in spite of them.

The Bible is a challenging book, not likely to be the result of fishermen attempting a fraud or trying to make sense of hallucinations. Jesus' resurrection gives additional weight to the book that announces such a phenomenal event. It gives additional weight to the testimony of the disciples as to who Jesus was and to the unexpected logic of conquering death through the death of the Son of God.

Repeatedly, the Bible challenges our thinking about God, ourselves, life, right and wrong. It commands respect by conveying truths to us we do not obtain elsewhere. Just as the proof of the pudding is in the eating, the proof of the Bible is in its application to our lives.

The testimony of Scripture, of tradition, of personal experience and reason all support the authority of the Bible. The fact that it is able to speak across cultures, to address situations that never existed when it was written, is also a testimony to its abiding authority. The proof of the Bible is conveyed to believers as the Holy Spirit uses it to change their hearts and lives.

Inerrancy and Infallibility

Some evangelical Christians believe that Christians should call the Bible inerrant; others prefer to call the Bible infallible. Although in normal usage these words would mean practically the same thing, in theology they are used for different concepts.

Inerrant usually means without error in theology, history or science. *Infallible* (sometimes called limited inerrancy) refers to doctrine; it does not insist on scientific and historical accuracy, since those are outside of the Bible's purpose.

Some believe the Bible is inerrant; others prefer the term infallible. We use the less-specific word, *infallible*. On that we can all agree, since people who believe in inerrancy also believe that the Bible does not fail in its purpose: to teach us about salvation.

John Stott, who accepts inerrancy, nevertheless lists "five reasons why the word *inerrancy* makes me uncomfortable":

> First, God's self-revelation in Scripture is so rich—both in content and in form—that it cannot be reduced to a string of propositions which invite the label 'truth' or 'error.' 'True or false?' would be an inappropriate question to address to a great deal of

> Scripture. [Commands are neither true nor false.]
>
> Second, the word *inerrancy* is a double negative, and I always prefer a single positive to a double negative. It is better to affirm that the Bible is true and therefore trustworthy….
>
> Third, the word inerrancy sends out the wrong signals and develops the wrong attitudes. Instead of encouraging us to search the Scriptures so that we may grow in grace and in the knowledge of God, it seems to turn us into detectives hunting for incriminating clues and to make us excessively defensive in relation to apparent discrepancies.
>
> Fourth, it is unwise and unfair to use *inerrancy* as a shibboleth by which to identify who is an evangelical and who is not. The hallmark of authentic evangelicalism … is not whether we subscribe to an impeccable formula about the Bible but whether we live in practical submission to what the Bible teaches….
>
> Fifth, it is impossible to prove that the Bible contains no errors. When faced with an apparent discrepancy, the most Christian response is neither to make a premature negative judgment nor to resort to a contrived harmonization, but rather to suspend judgment, waiting patiently for further light to be given us (*Evangelical Truth,* pp. 61-62).

There is an additional problem with the word *inerrant:* It must be carefully qualified. Even one of the most conservative statements about Scripture admits that the Bible contains grammatical irregularities, exaggerations, imprecise descriptions, inexact quotations, and observations based on a limited viewpoint ("The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy," Article XIII, printed in Norman L. Geisler, editor, *Inerrancy,* Zondervan, 1979, page 496).

In other words, *inerrant* does not mean "without error of any kind." Further, inerrancy applies only to the autographs, not to the copies that we have today. These qualifications seem to drain *inerrancy* of much of its meaning. When pages have to be written to explain what the word does *not* mean, perhaps we need a different word. The main point, as Millard Erickson says, is that "the Bible's assertions are fully true when judged in accordance with the purpose for which they were written" (*Introducing Christian Doctrine,* p. 64). That is a wise qualification.

For further reading

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ANCIENT WORDS…BUT EVER TRUE? CAN WE STILL TRUST THE BIBLE?

It used to be much easier, didn't it? We had the King James Bible, perhaps with the words of Jesus in red. There was a column down the middle of the page that had some occasionally helpful references, and perhaps a wide margin where you could add your own "inspired" commentary. Like Henry Ford's automobiles, you could have any color you wanted, provided it was black. And there was no question that this was the word of God.

Not now. There are dozens of versions of the Bible that come in a dazzling variety of bindings. Computer programs give us access to hundreds of reference works at the touch of a few buttons. And we have discovered that answers to hard questions and explanations of difficult scriptures are not as clear-cut as we once thought.

Even more ominously, we have seen the Bible itself come under increasing criticism. Ever since *The Da Vinci Code* captured popular imagination, there has been a rash of books about various so-called Gospels, epistles and other ancient writings that never made it into the official Bible. Some writers claim to have discovered coded information buried in the original Bible texts, revealing detailed predictions of major news events of our time.

"We have seen the Bible come under increasing criticism. What are we supposed to make of this flood of information?"

Many of these books are just opportunistic productions, written quickly to cash in on a wave of interest. But others are well researched, and written by serious scholars, well qualified to offer their point of view. Has there been a conspiracy in the church to keep vital information from us? Is the Bible just a collection of old manuscripts gathered together and preserved by human beings? Can we still trust it as the word of God?

We must not be afraid to face these tough questions. And as we do, we will see that there are answers, and there is no reason to lose confidence in the book God gave "to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (2 Timothy 3:15).

But does the Bible contradict itself?

The answer is yes and no. The Bible is written in many literary styles. Some of these styles communicate in ways that we are not used to in the modern world. They use analogies, figures of speech and symbolic language

that don't immediately make sense to us.

If everything in the Bible is taken in a simplistically literal manner, there *will* seem to be some contradictions. Even the most conservative reliable scholarly statements about Scripture admit that the Bible contains grammatical irregularities, exaggerations, imprecise descriptions and inexact quotations. We have to admit that 1 Corinthians 1:14, for example, is an error, because in verse 16 Paul tells us that it is.

Our ability to understand and to reason is shaped by our personal experiences and the traditions and ways of thinking that shape our ideas and worldview. People living thousands of years ago had very different worldviews from ours. Even today, because of different traditions and experiences, equally sincere people come to different conclusions about what the Bible teaches, especially in regard to the details.

The Bible is not always as user-friendly as we have come to expect literature to be in the 21st century. But the main, overarching lessons of Scripture are not controversial. As Mark Twain said, "It ain't the parts of the Bible that I can't understand that bother me, it is the parts that I do understand."

Can we still regard the Bible as a reliable guide to all aspects of life today?

Again, yes and no. The Bible does not claim to tell us everything we need to know about all subjects. When Scripture talks about the sun rising, as in Matthew 5:45 for example, its purpose is not to make a statement about the movements of the earth or sun. When it calls a mustard seed the smallest seed (Matthew 13:31-32), it is not trying to give us a botany lesson.

The Scriptures do claim to be a trustworthy guide for our relationships with God and with other humans. They give truth about faith, worship, salvation, morals and ethics (2 Tim. 3:15-16). But they do it in a way that can be understood by all people at all times.

Remember, the Bible is intended to reach out to people across the ages — in New Testament times, during the Dark and Middle Ages, through the 19th-century industrial revolution, the two World Wars, the last half of the 20th century — as well as today. And unless Jesus Christ returns in the near term, the Bible will still be reaching out with its message to countless future generations, whose technology may make us look like primitives.

But once you say that Scripture has limitations, don't you open up a Pandora's Box?

You can believe some things without having cast-iron proof. There are some things that you must accept on faith. Not blind faith — but faith based

on evidence and substance. A person who is committed to God has a reason to have faith. But you can't necessarily lay out those reasons in a scientific way that proves to an unbeliever that what you believe is true.

But neither can those who doubt lay out a scientific proof for their reasons. An atheist cannot prove that God does not exist, or that Jesus was not resurrected. So don't consider the evidence of your faith as somehow being an inferior kind of evidence in comparison with the faith of the skeptic.

Personal experience helps us understand that the Bible has authority. This is the book that has the courage and honesty to tell us about our own tendency to sin, and the grace to offer us a cleansed conscience and eternal life. It gives us spiritual transformation and strength, not through rules and commands, but in an unexpected way — through grace and the redemptive work of our Lord. The Bible testifies to the love, joy and peace we can have through faith — realities that are, just as the Bible describes, beyond our ability to put into words. This book gives us meaning and purpose in life by telling us of divine creation and redemption.

We realize that not everyone will be comfortable with that understanding. Others come to different conclusions about the reliability of the Bible. Some Christians believe that every word should be taken literally. Others claim that it is *less* reliable than we have described here. We respect their faith in Christ, but we repeat our belief, in summary, that the Bible is the inspired word of God, authoritative and reliable in matters of faith, worship, morals, and ethics.

INSPIRATION, AUTHORITY, AND RELIABILITY OF SCRIPTURE

Inspiration

> Affirmation: We accept the Bible as the inspired Word of God. The writers were inspired, moved by the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:21), and the resultant writings are inspired, as if breathed or spoken by God (2 Timothy 3:16). The Bible is therefore useful as a guide to salvation through faith in Christ, and sufficient for doctrine, correction, moral and ethical instruction (2 Timothy 3:15-17).

The New Testament affirms the inspiration of the Old Testament, especially in its function of pointing to Jesus Christ (Luke 24:44; John 5:46; Acts 10:43). Jesus used the Old Testament as thoroughly reliable words of God (Matthew 5:18; Mark 12:35; John 10:35). The sayings of Jesus are accepted as of divine authority (Matthew 24:35; Mark 8:38; John 6:63), and the letters of Paul are also considered Scripture (2 Peter 3:15-16). The early church quoted the New Testament in the same manner as the Old, treating all these writings as God-given words.[1]

Biblical authors were inspired, and the writings are inspired, but the Bible does not give many details about *how* God worked with humans to produce these documents. Numerous passages claim to be quotes directly from God (e.g., Exodus 20:1-17); others claim to be the result of ordinary research (Luke 1:1-4); some appear to be private letters (Philemon). Regardless of the method of inspiration, all these writings are considered canonical Scripture — an authoritative message from God to humans. The Bible reveals truths about God and about what God does so that we may know God and have a relationship with God.

But grammatical irregularities and stylistic differences indicate that God did not dictate every word. Rather, God allowed the divine message to be given in the phraseology of the human authors. Just as Jesus was God in human form, the Bible is God's word in human words.

Since the Bible is written with human words and grammar, people are able to understand much of the message. But they do not necessarily understand that the message is *true,* because spiritual truths are understood only with divine intervention (1 Corinthians 2:6-16). The written Word of God becomes an effective Word of God only when the Holy Spirit enables a person to understand spiritual truths contained in it.[2] The effectiveness is not

in the grammatical details (which can be understood even by atheists) — it is in the message being conveyed and the God-given willingness to submit to it.

Further details concerning the reliability of Scripture will be discussed below.

Authority

> Affirmation: God has all authority, and we accept the Bible as the primary authority by which God communicates to us what God wants us to believe and to do. The New Testament clarifies and sometimes supersedes the Old Testament guidance on faith and life. The primary purpose of the Bible is its message about salvation, and that is its primary sphere of authority. It is a sufficient guide that tells us how we are given eternal life with God. Those who believe the biblical revelation about God's grace and Jesus Christ are saved; those who do not believe are not saved (John 3:18; 14:6; Acts 4:12; 1 John 5:11-12). This message of salvation is essential.

The Bible also reveals divine commands and principles regarding the way we ought to live. A genuine faith in Christ as Lord and Savior transforms our lives and minds, with the result that our lives are brought progressively into greater submission to the will of God. Biblical instructions give us authoritative guidance on the will of God concerning how we should live and think and interact with one another.[3]

The Bible is an authoritative revelation of truths about God, and we want to worship our Creator with as much understanding as possible. Moreover, we want to obey God's commands, not only to honor God but also because we believe that our all-wise and perfectly loving Creator has given us the best possible commands and guidance for life. Therefore, we want to understand the written message of God as best we can. But this is not always easy.

Humans are limited beings, and our minds are corrupted by sin, so even at our best we know only in part (1 Corinthians 13:12). Thus we find that the authority of God in the Bible is not only mediated by human language but also by our ability to understand its truths. Although our understanding is imperfect, the Bible is the standard by which our misunderstandings are corrected. God is able to give us sufficient understanding of biblical truths for us to have a saving relationship with God.[4]

Biblical interpretation is complicated by the fact that the Bible is written in many literary styles. Some passages are didactic, prescriptive, and concrete;

others are narrative, imaginative and/or poetic. To communicate one spiritual truth, figures of speech may be used that may obscure other equally important truths revealed in other passages. Some commands are historically conditioned and others are timeless. To help us understand and submit to the authority of biblical principles, we humbly seek the guidance of the Author, and study the Scriptures. As well as seeking the guidance of the Spirit, we use reason to understand each biblical passage and point, and to discern what teachings are normative for us today.

Our ability to understand and to reason is shaped in part by our personal experiences and the traditions that have shaped our presuppositions. Reason, tradition, and experience should be subservient to Scripture; they should not contradict biblical authority. Nevertheless, because of different traditions and experiences, equally sincere people come to different conclusions about what the Bible teaches. Therefore we confidently teach our understanding of the Bible and simultaneously respect those who submit to biblical authority in different ways.

Reliability

> Affirmation: The Scriptures are a trustworthy guide for our relationships with God and with other humans. They give truth about faith, worship, salvation, morals and ethics (2 Timothy 3:15-16). But biblical commands cannot be applied simplistically, because some are superseded and some apply only in limited situations. We seek the illumination of the Holy Spirit and ask God to guide our reasoning and our use of tradition and experience so we might understand how to apply biblical principles.

The further we go from the stated purposes of the Bible, the less the Bible says about the subject and the less likely we are to have a complete statement about the subject. Statements about history and science are of special interest.

Historians find the Bible to be an accurate record of many ancient events, more reliable than other ancient writings. But its standard of accuracy is looser than the expectations of modern science and history, as can be discerned from parallel accounts in Scripture. The same event can be attributed to Satan or to God (2 Samuel 24:1; 1 Chronicles 21:1), to Jesus in vision or to Ananias (Acts 22:14-15; 26:16-18). Paul's companions stood and heard, but they also fell down and did not hear (Acts 9:7; 22:7, 9).

Most alleged discrepancies in the Bible are easily resolved, but these parallel accounts show that we must be cautious about taking biblical

statements at face value. Even if we do not have a parallel account, it is hazardous to assume that unnamed intermediaries, for example, were not involved. This means that some biblical statements are true, but imprecise and incomplete, and therefore not a basis for a modern history. They may be used only with caution. Although biblical comments about salvation require the historical truth of certain *events,* such as the resurrection of Jesus, our faith does not require that we accept every biblical comment as historically or scientifically precise. [5]

Even one of the most conservative statements about Scripture admits that the Bible contains grammatical irregularities, exaggerations, imprecise descriptions, inexact quotations, variant selections, observations based on limited viewpoint, and free citations of the Old Testament.[6]

When Scripture talks about the sun rising (Matthew 5:45), its purpose is not to make a statement that the sun moves around the earth. When it calls a mustard seed the smallest seed (Matthew 13:31-32), it is not making a botanical claim. Genealogical lists may be incomplete (Matthew 1:8; 2 Chronicles 22-24), and the length of kings' reigns may be misinterpreted due to co-regencies.[7] Narrated events may be out of sequence (Matthew 4:18-22; 8:14; Luke 4:38-5:11), predicted events may not be fulfilled in every detail (Acts 21:11, 32-33; 27:10, 22), etc. Such irregularities encourage us to focus on the broad picture and the overall meaning, not tangential details.[8]

The truthfulness of the Bible should be evaluated according to its own "usage and purpose."[9] However, the Bible's purpose rarely includes details of history and science.[10] Further, the Bible's demonstrable flexibility in word usage makes it unwise for us to insist on one meaning of a word when other meanings are possible. God inspired the ambiguities as well as the clear statements. Some things we need to know, and others we do not. God is not primarily concerned with whether we understand astrophysics, botany, and chronology. We err if we try to use his inspired book for purposes it was not designed for.

Christians come to different conclusions about the reliability of the Bible. Many insist that the Bible is more reliable in history and science than we do. We respect that view, for it is close to our own, but we do not think it theologically or biblically required. Other Christians insist that the Bible is less reliable than described herein. We respect their faith in Christ, but we repeat our belief, in summary, that the Bible is the inspired Word of God, authoritative and reliable in matters of faith, worship, morals, and ethics. We encourage all Christians to focus on these central and stated purposes of the Scriptures we have in common.

Endnotes

[1] The testimony of the Bible to itself is summarized in I. Howard Marshall, *Biblical Inspiration,* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982, pages 19-30.

[2] Revelation is both propositional and personal. See Marshall, pages 12-15.

[3] Some parts of the Bible are more authoritative than others (for example, commands about circumcision and holy kisses are less authoritative) and do not function as a word of God in the same way other verses do. Marshall says, "The Bible…presents a progressive revelation, parts of which are now superseded in the light of what followed" (58). The Old Testament must be used on the basis of general principles, which suggests a similar approach for the New Testament, too.

[4] Any attempt to know God or Christ without reliance on Scriptural propositions is subjective. "In subjectivism each man is his own authority, and if each man is his own authority there is neither truth nor authority" (Bernard Ramm, "The Pattern of Religious Authority," in Erickson, *Readings in Christian Theology, Volume 1: The Living God,* 1973, page 260).

[5] I am not addressing the question whether there are any historical and scientific errors. I do not yet know a resolution for several passages: Luke 2:1-2, Mark 2:26, Mark 15:25 compared with John 19:14, and Mark 15:65 compared with Luke 22:63. Marshall writes, "One may wish to suspend judgment, which is a perfectly legitimate thing to do…. The Bible does contain what may be regarded as error and contradictions by modern standards but which are not in fact contrary to its own standards and purpose" (89, 71). James Orr writes, "'Inerrancy' can never be demonstrated with a cogency which entitles it to rank as the foundation of a belief in inspiration. It must remain to those who hold it a doctrine of faith; a deduction from what they deem to be implied." (in *Readings in Christian Theology,* 245.)

[6] International Conference on Biblical Inerrancy (ICBI), "The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy," Article XIII. Printed in Norman L. Geisler, editor. *Inerrancy.* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979), 496. The analogy of Jesus, the Word made flesh, may offer a parallel. We accept his statements about God and salvation as completely true, and his life as perfectly sinless, but this does not necessitate that he never made a measurement mistake in his carpentry work. Likewise, the Bible may contain grammatical and other irregularities.

[7] Dewey Beegle, in *Readings in Christian Theology,* 297-299, citing Edwin Thiele.

[8] "One practical purpose for allowing the differences in parallel passages may be to give us a subtle clue that those are the kinds of things not worth quarrelling over!" (Alden Thompson, *Inspiration,* Hagerstown, Maryland: Review and Herald, 1991, 70). Free citations of the Old Testament suggest that *meaning* is more important than individual words, but a problem still arises when the New Testament gives a different meaning to an Old Testament passage.

[9] ICBI, Article XIII. Actually, the qualifications in Article XIII make it difficult to accept some of the other articles, such as XI and XII, which say that Scripture never misleads us in matters of history and science. Galileo would disagree! As James Dunn says, "Having recognized that God's honour is not compromised by use of irregular grammar, etc., why is it so difficult to accept that his honour can be equally unaffected if he chooses to use equivalent irregularities in historical and scientific detail?" ("The Authority of Scripture According to Scripture," *Churchman* 96 [1982] 120.)

[10] "The Bible…nowhere claims to give instruction in (for instance) any of the natural sciences…and it would be an improper use of Scripture to treat it as making pronouncements on these matters" (J.I. Packer, *"Fundamentalism" and the Word of God,* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958, 96). Perhaps we could say that all "scientific" statements in the Bible are (to use a word used by ICBI) phenomenological, observations based on a limited viewpoint, and therefore the concept of inerrancy is irrelevant for them.

TIMELESS TRUTHS IN CULTURAL CLOTHES: THE AUTHORITY OF THE NEW TESTAMENT WRITINGS

Most Christians accept the Bible as authoritative, as a book that gives reliable spiritual guidance. If we took a survey of Christians, asking them, "Do you believe the Bible?," most of them would say, "Yes" — or at least they would try to say yes to some portion of the Bible, such as the New Testament, or the teachings about loving one another. They *want* to say in some sense that they believe the Bible, that they accept it as an authority in their faith.

Protestants in particular respect the Bible as the basis for the Christian faith — the basis for their beliefs about God, Jesus, salvation and the church. Even though they may not have read the Bible, they tend to assume that it is true. Their faith in Christ leads them to accept the book that tells them about Christ. A preacher can say, "The Bible says…" with the expectation that the audience will give favorable weight to a biblical citation. The general tendency is for Christians to trust the Bible.

Some Christians view the Bible skeptically, but this is a more intellectually challenging (and therefore less common) position. It is not immediately apparent to new believers how a person can combine trust and mistrust — faith in Christianity with skepticism about the book that has been the traditional basis of that faith. They might view it as like sawing off the limb on which one's ladder is resting.

Limits to belief

Of course, even believing Christians do not automatically believe everything that the Bible says. For example, if the preacher says, "The Bible says to destroy houses with persistent mildew," most Christians would not take it very seriously. Although the Bible does indeed say that (Leviticus 14:43-45), most Christians would not accept it. Their reasons might vary in sophistication: 1) That would be foolish. 2) No other Christians believe that, so it can't be right. 3) Jesus never said anything like that. 4) That has nothing to do with going to heaven. 5) Old Testament laws don't apply to Christians.

Most Christians reject the teaching about mildew. They are using a filter on the Bible — a filter that in most cases they haven't thought much about. They say they accept the Bible as an authority for their beliefs and practices, yet they do not accept part of the Bible. In this case, the common sense of

most Christians functions as more authoritative than the original meaning of Scripture.

I am not saying that houses should be destroyed. Nor am I saying that we should routinely ignore the Bible and follow our common sense. We do not have to choose between such extremes. But Christians should think about the *kind* of authority the Bible has. If we openly disobey some of its teachings, then in what sense can we say that it is authoritative? Whether we like to think about such tensions or not, we do not read far in the Bible before we are faced with the issue. Why do we stand on some parts of the Bible, but not others? To use the ladder analogy again, we want to be sure that our ladder is resting on the correct branch, a branch that will not be broken by the winds of additional thought.

Let's use a New Testament example. Paul says four times, "Greet one another with a holy kiss" (Romans 16:16; 1 Corinthians 16:20; 2 Corinthians 13:12; 1 Thessalonians 5:26), and Peter also says it (1 Peter 5:14). Nevertheless, the vast majority of Christians who claim to accept the Bible as authoritative do not accept this command as required for Christians today. They greet one another, but not with a holy kiss. Why? Nothing in Scripture says that we can ignore what Peter and Paul wrote. There is no "Third Testament" to tell us that this part of the New Testament is obsolete. So the question remains: How can we say that the Bible is authoritative, and yet consider parts of it as <u>not</u> authoritative? In what way is the authority of the Bible *limited?*

Accidents of history

Christians often call the Bible the Word of God. They view it as revelation from God to humans. The writers "spoke from God" as they were "carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:21). The Old Testament Scriptures were "God-breathed" (2 Timothy 3:16). The New Testament is believed to be inspired in the same as was the Old.

But the Bible is not the supreme revelation of God — Jesus Christ is. The letter to the Hebrews begins by noting that difference: "God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe" (Hebrews 1:1-2). Jesus, the Son, reveals God perfectly: "He is…the exact representation of [God's] being" (v. 3). "In Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form" (Colossians 2:9). Jesus reveals God so well that whoever has seen Jesus has seen the Father (John 14:9).

But this supreme revelation of God came in a very specific form. His hair was a certain color, his skin was a certain color, he wore a certain style of clothes and spoke specific human languages. He was a male Jew living in Galilee and Judea at a particular time in history. So, is this what the Father looks like? Are we to identify a particular style of clothing and language as more God-like than other styles? No, those things do not reveal God to us — they are accidents of history. In speech, dress, and personal appearance, Jesus probably looked much like Judas Iscariot — and in such incidentals, Jesus reveals no more to us about God than Judas does.

Jesus, the supreme revelation of God, came to us in a specific cultural form, and when we discuss the way in which Jesus reveals the Father, we must distinguish between form and substance, between culture and principle. Sometimes it is easy to distinguish Jesus from his culture. But in other cases, Jesus participated in his culture — he went to Jerusalem for Jewish festivals, he told someone to follow a Jewish ritual, he told Peter to pay a tax, he told stories about kings and vineyards, he ate fish and drank wine, and called God *Abba* (John 7:14; 10:22; Matthew 8:4; 17:27; Luke 24:43; Mark 14:36). Did he do these things by conviction, or by custom? Are Christians today to follow his example in these things, or do we overlook them as cultural accidents?

Jesus must be seen within his culture. We do not go to the extreme of imitating everything Jesus did, nor do we go to the other extreme of ignoring everything. We call Jesus our Lord, and we feel that we should obey his teachings, but we also make various exceptions. We do not "sell everything" and give it all to the poor (Luke 18:22). Some of Jesus' teachings were limited to a particular time and place, even a particular person. Even though Jesus has supreme authority, we filter his teachings. We want to ensure that we are responding to the right teachings, not a command intended for someone else. We want to make sure that our ladder is resting against the correct branch of the tree.

Scripture likewise limited

Jesus, the supreme revelation of God, must be interpreted with some allowance for the specifics of his culture. How much more so must the Bible, a less direct revelation! Each writing was given at a particular time and place, in a particular language with words of a particular nuance. Sometimes the text addresses one specific situation *only*. We do not need to obey all the commands God gave to Noah, or to Abraham, or to Moses, or even to Jesus' disciples or to the believers in Corinth.

The command, Bring my cloak and parchments (2 Timothy 4:13), was

given to a specific person. So was the command, Use a little wine because of your stomach (1 Timothy 5:23). The same letter says, "No widow may be put on the list of widows unless she is over sixty" (v. 9). Such commands are rarely obeyed now, even by those who say they accept the Bible as authoritative.

Clearly, Scripture is not a collection of timeless truths. Although *some* of its truths are timeless, others parts of the Bible are designed for a specific situation in a specific culture, and it would be wrong for us to take them out of that context and impose them on modern situations. First-century men were advised to pray with their hands raised (1 Timothy 2:8). Slaves were advised to submit even to harsh masters (1 Peter 2:18). Virgins were advised to remain virgins (1 Corinthians 7:26). Women were told how to dress when they prayed (1 Corinthians 11:5), and men were given advice regarding hair length (v. 14). Similarly, people were told to greet one another with a kiss.

These behaviors were appropriate in first-century Mediterranean culture, but are not necessary in Western culture today. Just as the New Testament was written with Greek words, but we not have to repeat those Greek words in our worship, so also the New Testament was written with a particular culture in mind, but we do not have to repeat all the cultural details. Just as we recognize that the command to destroy mildewed houses was given to a specific people at a specific time, and does not apply to us today, we can also recognize that the command to kiss one another was also given to a specific people at a specific time, and *we* are not those people. Despite the fact that the command is given five times in the New Testament, it is not a command for us today.

The apostle Paul used one style of message in the synagogue and a different style at the Areopagus. If he could speak in our culture, he would change his style again (1 Corinthians 9:19-23). He might cite Old Testament scriptures in a different way, or different scriptures, or at least give a longer explanation of how the verse is relevant to his argument. Parables might refer to urban life more often than to agricultural customs. Advice about slavery would not be included; modern situations would be addressed. The Bible was written *in* a different culture and *for* a different culture. Its truths were given with words and styles shaped by the culture it was given in.

Now, we must also acknowledge that Scripture itself does not warn us when a culturally-specific command is being given. When we read, we do not know in advance which verses are going to be culturally conditioned, so we cannot rule out the possibility in advance. We have to consider the possibility for *all* verses. This may complicate our approach to Scripture, but it is

unavoidable, for this is the way Scripture was inspired. It came with certain extraneous details, just as Jesus had certain personal details about himself that were not essential to his revealing God to us.

Of course, *everything* in Scripture had an original setting, but we do not conclude that the Bible had value *only* in its original setting. It continues to have value. Although the New Testament declares much of the Old Testament obsolete (Hebrews 8:13), it also says that the Old Testament continues to be useful for Christian doctrine and training in righteousness (2 Timothy 3:16). The NT often quotes the OT not just as a reference to ancient history, but for a principle that continues to be important for Christians. The NT is not advocating a wholesale use of old covenant laws, but it is saying that the OT has a less specific but no less important usefulness, a usefulness rooted more in principles and concepts than in specific laws or specific words.

Why have I spent so much time on the Old Testament? Because, when the NT speaks of the inspiration and authority of Scripture, it has the *Old* Testament in view. Our understanding of inspiration for both OT *and* NT is built on scriptures that are about the OT. The New Testament is inspired in the *same* way as the Old Testament. Just as with the OT, the authority of the NT is not in the specific cultural situations it happens to mention, but in the principles and concepts that lay behind the writings.

We not here attempting to show anyone *how* to distinguish cultural details from timeless truths. In some cases the difference will be obvious. In other cases it will take more work to determine whether a teaching applies in other cultures, and in some cases it will be debatable. The point we wish to make now is simply that a discrimination is necessary. There *are* obsolete instructions in the New Testament. The authority of the New Testament must be sought not in a literalistic application of every word (e.g., kiss), but in the level of principles (e.g., greet with affection).

Let me use the analogy of the ladder again. Many new Christians see that the tree is solid and well-rooted. They assume that all its branches are equally solid — even the smallest twigs — and they place their ladder against the tree without realizing that those twigs were never designed to carry such weight. Small branches may support the ladder for a while, but when a wind or an extra weight comes along, the ladder becomes unstable and possibly dangerous. Let me suggest a safer approach: New Christians need to begin at the trunk of the tree, and move out on branches only after testing them for stability. Some parts of the Bible (mildew, kisses, clothing styles) are good for decoration, as it were, but not for support. They are useful, but not always in

the way we assume. They were inspired for one purpose, and we go wrong if we try to make them serve a different purpose. We need to focus on the purpose.

Authority of Scripture

So far, I have shown that Scripture has limitations, in particular the fact that it was written in and *for* other cultures. Some people use that fact to dismiss large portions of the Bible, perhaps Scripture itself. We have shown that biblical authority must be qualified in some way, but we do not jump from there into the opposite ditch, to say that it has no authority at all. We are not forced to choose between all or nothing.

Let me mention some evidence that supports biblical authority. First, Scripture itself claims to be inspired by God. Writers such as Paul claimed to write with authority derived from his commission from God. God is the ultimate authority; Scripture is a derivative authority, but an authority nonetheless because it comes from God and testifies about Christ. This is a faith claim, not a proof. There is no way to prove the Bible's authority beyond all question; not even Jesus convinced everyone.

Tradition supports biblical authority. Christians throughout the centuries have found these writings to be useful and reliable, for both faith and practice. These books tell us what sort of God we believe in, what he did for us, and how we should respond. The biblical Jesus is the only one we have; other reconstructions are based more on presuppositions than on new evidence. Tradition also tells us which books are in the Bible; we trust that God ensured that the right books were included. Since God went to the extreme of revealing himself in flesh, we believe that he would also ensure that the revelation be sufficiently preserved. This cannot be proved, but is based on our understanding of what God is doing with us.

History also shows that Scripture has been useful as a corrective to abuses within the church (for example, abuses in the Middle Ages) and within society (for example, slavery and Nazism). The fact that a moral authority is needed does not prove that the Bible *is* that authority, but history at least shows that the Bible was useful in reforming the problems, and its usefulness came because people accepted it as an authority.

Personal experience also helps us understand that the Bible has authority. This is the book that has the honesty to tell us about our own depravity, and the grace to offer us a cleansed conscience. It gives us moral strength not through rules and commands, but in an unexpected way — through grace and the ignominious death of our Lord. The Bible testifies to the love, joy

and peace we may have through faith — feelings that are, just as the Bible describes, beyond our ability to put into words. This book gives us meaning and purpose in life by telling us of divine creation and redemption. These aspects of biblical authority cannot be proven to skeptics, but they help authenticate the writings that tell us these things we consider true.

The Bible does not sugar-coat its heroes, and this also helps us accept it as honest. It tells us about the failings of Abraham, Moses, David, the nation of Israel, and the twelve disciples. The Bible is a message of grace, and grace resists manipulation. Although some use Scripture as a weapon, the Bible itself gives the message that undercuts such misuse of its authority. The Bible is a word that bears witness to a more authoritative Word, the Word made flesh, and the good news of God's grace.

The Bible's complexity is impressive. It is not simplistic; it does not take the easy way out. The New Testament claims both continuity and radical discontinuity with the old covenant. It would be simpler to eliminate one or the other, but it is more thought-provoking to have both. Likewise, Jesus is presented as both human and divine, a combination that does not fit well into Hebrew, Greek or modern thought. This complexity was not created through naïveté of the philosophical problems, but in spite of them. The Bible is a challenging book, not likely to be the result of peasants attempting a fraud or trying to make sense of hallucinations.

It is evident that the disciples firmly believed Jesus to have been resurrected, and the most likely explanation for their belief is that Jesus was actually raised from the dead. (Fraud, hallucination, and mistake are other options, but all are implausible.) Jesus' resurrection then gives additional weight to the book that announces such a phenomenal event. It gives additional weight to the testimony of the disciples as to who Jesus was and to the unexpected logic of conquering death through a death.

Repeatedly, the Bible challenges our thinking about God, ourselves, life, right and wrong. It commands respect not so much through outright command, but by conveying truths to us we do not obtain elsewhere. The testimony of Scripture, of tradition, of personal experience and reason, all support the authority of the Bible — yet it is an authority given in a particular historical context. The fact that it is able to speak across cultures, to address situations that never existed when it was written, is also a testimony to its abiding authority. Its timeless truths are given to us in cultural clothes.

Bibliography

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contradictory. I recommend here a few introductory books. Perhaps one of these titles will pique your interest, should you want to explore this subject a little more:

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SCRIPTURE: GOD'S GIFT

By Gary W. Deddo

The Christian church down through the ages has always regarded the Bible as indispensable for its worship, devotion and life. Its very existence is bound up with it. The church would not be what it is without it. Holy Scripture is part of the air it breathes and the food it eats.

I learned of the importance of the Bible as a young child and was encouraged and taught to read it and memorize it. I studied it both on my own and with others—I'm glad I did, now years later. The study of the Bible has always been an essential part of my ministry in serving others, whether it was teaching it, preaching from it, studying it with small groups of other Christians, or referring to it when counseling others.

When I attended seminary, my primary focus was the study and interpretation of Scripture. It was so important to me that I was willing to try to learn Hebrew and Greek to see if I could understand Scripture better!

Along the way, I learned that there were various ways the nature and place of Scripture was understood, and various ways to make use of it. Some of these seemed better than others, while some seemed to lead to the misuse of Scripture, or even to making it irrelevant. I read books and took courses to sort out these issues, hoping I could find some wisdom in all this – not only to help me, but to pass on to others.

Scripture is so essential to the Christian faith that most denominations have an official statement concerning the importance and place of Scripture. Grace Communion International is no exception. These summaries can be a good place to start reflection on the nature, purpose and right use of Scripture. GCI's statement is brief, to the point and fairly comprehensive:

> The Holy Scriptures are by God's grace sanctified to serve as his inspired Word and faithful witness to Jesus Christ and the gospel. They are the fully reliable record of God's revelation to humanity culminating in his self-revelation in the incarnate Son. As such, Holy Scripture is foundational to the church and infallible in all matters of faith and salvation.

Let's explore what's behind this theological summary of our understanding of Scripture. We do so not so we can enter into endless debate or prove ourselves superior to other Christians who might have a different

view. And I don't think we simply want a theory about it. We seek understanding of Scripture because we highly value it and want to honor and make proper use of it. We want to handle it well so we can get the most out of it. Holy Scripture itself encourages us to do these very things. We also can recall that others in church history have benefited greatly through a deep understanding of Scripture and how to interpret it. But in the end, I think we want to grasp and use it well because we hope to get to know even better the God of the Bible in whom we put our faith.

By God's grace

Many of us have sung the childhood song that says: "Jesus loves me, this I know—for the Bible tells me so." And that's true enough. However, there's a different way to sing that verse that is also true: "Jesus loves me this I know—*so* the Bible tells me so!" This second way is reflected in the GCI statement that the Bible is God's gift to us, a gift of grace and therefore of his love. Because God loves us in and through Christ, he has graciously provided us his written Word.

God didn't have to do so, but his love for us, his creatures, has moved him to provide us with his Word in written form. God's love for us comes first, then follows his provision of the Bible. We wouldn't really be able to know and love God if God hadn't first loved us and communicated to us through his written Word. God gives us his word in Scripture because he loves us and wants us to know that he does. We should always remember that the Bible is God's gracious gift of love to us.

God continues to empower his Word

But that's not the end of it. Human words in and of themselves don't have the capacity to reveal to us the truth and reality of God. Human words are just that, human. They derive primarily from our human experiences. But God is not a creature and can't be simply grasped in creaturely terms, concepts and ideas. Words, when referring to God, don't mean exactly the same thing as when they refer to creation. So we can say we "love" and we can say God "loves." But God's love far exceeds our love. We use the same word, but we don't mean the same thing when we use it of God compared to when we use it of ourselves. Yet our love can be a dim mirror image of God's love. So God himself has to sanctify, make holy and adequate, our mere human words so we can use them to accurately and faithfully refer to the God of the Bible and not lead us into misunderstandings of God and his ways.

The God of the Bible is active and continually gracious to us by

superintending our reading and interpretation of Scripture, helping us to see how they uniquely make God and his ways known to us. He has not become mute since the Bible came into existence. God continues to speak in and through his written Word, enabling it to refer to him and not just to creaturely ideas or realities. The God of the Bible continues to speak his word to us through this gift of written revelation.

If God ceased to be personally involved and stopped empowering the written word to accomplish the miraculous feat of enabling us to know him, then God would not be truly known. We would simply have human and creaturely ideas about God to consider and nothing more. The result would likely be not much better than the ancient Greek and Roman mythological gods.

Inspired by the Spirit

If we ask, "How has God spoken and made himself known to us?" it turns out that this work involves the whole of God, that is, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The word "inspired" means "God breathed." The Holy Spirit is identified as the wind or breath of God. By the Spirit of God, certain people down through the ages were called, appointed and specially enabled to speak authoritatively for God. They were "inbreathed" by the Spirit. *How* exactly the Spirit works we do not and cannot know. But we have been told that the Spirit can and has empowered first the prophets of the Old Testament and then the apostles of the New Testament.

The Spirit seems to take into account everything about a particular prophetic or apostolic author and graciously makes use of them. The Spirit incorporates their language, culture and social-political background as well as their own relationship with God into his communicative purposes. The Spirit uses the human elements of the selected prophets and apostles. But the Spirit uses these elements in a way that enables them to refer far beyond creaturely realities. The Spirit takes charge of them in a way that gives those words a capacity to communicate that they could never have on their own.

So by the Spirit, Scripture as a whole serves as a written form of communication that God can continually use to make himself and his ways known to his people down through the ages. If the Spirit was not at work with these individuals, we would not have any authoritative and trustworthy access to God's word. So we can thank God for choosing certain individuals down through the ages and, by his Spirit, inspiring them to speak faithfully for him.

Providential preservation

We have these written words because they have somehow been preserved for us down through the ages. This too must be regarded as the gracious work and gift of God. Because of his great love for us the God of the Bible not only kicked things off by selecting and inspiring certain individuals, but also by overseeing them being handed on and finally collected together. We call this form of God's grace his providence.

Apparently an aspect of God's providential oversight also included some inspired editing of preexisting material. God providentially maintained contact with his written word and with the process by which it was canonized (brought together in an authoritative collection). Of course if the God of the Bible wanted us to have a written witness to his Word, then we shouldn't be surprised that God would also have to anticipate and secure its preservation down through the ages (you do, after all, have to be pretty smart to be God!).

The Self-Revelation

The gracious gift of revelation as it traces through history does reach a crucial high-point. All the prophetic words prepare for and look forward to the self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Son of God. And all the apostolic writings look back to the time and place where God himself, as himself, reveals and interprets himself in and through Jesus Christ.

In Jesus, we don't have simply another inspired word about God, but the Living Word of God himself, in person—in time and space and in flesh and blood. So Jesus tells us that he is, himself, the Way, the Truth and the Life. He does not show us a way or tell us about the truth or give us things that lead to life. He himself is these things. Thus God's gracious revelatory work reaches a qualitatively different level with the birth of the Word of God in human form. And, as it turns out, the written word of God's Spirit-inspired prophets and apostles point to the fulfillment of their own word with the coming of the Living Word.

John the Baptist, as the last of the prophets and representative of them all, serves as an authoritative witness when he points to Jesus as being the Light, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, the Messiah and the Son of God (John 1:8; 29-34). John proclaimed that Jesus came before him and is the one who baptizes with the Spirit. Therefore John said he must decrease and Jesus increase, for Jesus is the center of the center of God's revelatory work and thus stands at the very center of Holy Scripture.

Faithful and infallible

The written word, derives its authority and faithfulness from the Father,

through the Son and in the Spirit. Because God is the living and speaking God, we have a written word that puts us in touch with the Living Word of God, all by the Spirit. The Bible's authority is established and maintained by a living and real connection of God to the Bible. Scripture can serve as it does because it remains connected to the infallible God. The Bible's authority and faithfulness is not in itself, apart from God, but in its actual, continuing connection with the Father, Son/Word and Spirit. So when we read or listen to the Bible, we can expect to hear the living, triune God speak to us once again.

DISCERNING THE FOCUS OF SCRIPTURE

In the previous chapter, we considered how Scripture is a gift of the living and speaking God. But this gift is not one that becomes separated from the giver. By the Spirit God spoke through the prophets and then the apostles. But God continues to speak by the same Spirit through those God-breathed written words. In fact if God fell mute, and ceased to actively communicate to us in and through those written words, we would not have a true and authoritative word from God by which he makes himself known. But the living and speaking God of the Bible does not remain at a deistic distance, winding up his Bible and then sending it out to mechanistically convey information about God.

The very nature of God is to communicate himself, making himself known, so that we might communicate with him as his children and so share in holy loving communion.

One further point, made in chapter 1, confirms all this. God's personal act of communication is in and through his Son, the Living Word. The whole of the written words of the prophets and apostles direct our attention to the Living Word, Jesus the incarnate Son of God. This Jesus is God's own self-communication, his own self-revelation to us. Jesus does not give us words from God, he is himself God's Word to us. He expresses the very character of God as a speaking and communicating God. To hear Jesus is to hear God himself speaking to us, directly, in person, face-to-face.

So Jesus is at the center of the written word, Scripture. But he is behind all the words, the whole of the Bible, as its source, as the speech of God to us. He is the original Word and the final Word of God, the Alpha and Omega. In other words, by the incarnation of the Word of God the author of the written word of God has come into the play, he has shown up in the person of Jesus. And as the author, Jesus himself indicates that he is at the center and behind it all. So when the Pharisees attempt to use Scripture (and their interpretation of it against Jesus), he confronts them and says: "You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life and it is they that testify on my behalf. Yet you refuse to come to me to have life" (John 5:39-40, NRSV throughout). Jesus has to tell them that he is the author [Lord] of the Sabbath (Luke 6:5) and that they are in no place to judge him by their pre-understanding of the Sabbath. When the author of Scripture shows up, we have to stop interpreting Jesus in terms of our pre-understandings of Scripture and interpret the written words in terms of Jesus, the Living Word.

Through his interaction with the men on the road to Emmaus after his resurrection, Jesus instructs us how to approach the written word of God. To help these disciples understand who he was and what he had gone through, this is what he did: "Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures" (Luke 24:27). A bit later he explained to them: "'These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.' Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures" (Luke 24:44-45).

The written word of God is to be interpreted in the light of the Living Word, for the purpose of the written word is to direct us to the Living Word so that we might know who God is and what he has done for us. When we approach all of Scripture with Jesus himself as the interpretive key to it all, then we hear the word of God as it was meant to be heard. Thomas F. Torrance used to explain it this way: It's like reading a murder-mystery for the second time. The first time we're looking for clues as to "who-done-it." But not everything is clear. Some things make sense others don't. Some things seem significant, others seem trivial. But in a well-crafted murder mystery there will be plenty of clues—so many clues that when it finally is revealed who committed the crime, we are somewhat surprised but also satisfied that it makes sense. We say, "Yes there were clues all along. We just didn't know which ones to pay attention to and didn't see how they 'added up.'"

Now, what would happen if we were to read the murder mystery for a second time? Now knowing "who-done-it," those early clues would not be irrelevant. Rather we would see how truly significant they were. We would be able to sort out the irrelevant clues from the meaningful ones. Those clues would stand out as even more extraordinary. "No wonder suspect A said X. No wonder suspect B did Y." We would see what they mean; how they point to who committed the crime. We would end up valuing those clues as foreshadowings even more than on the first reading.

And that's much what it's like when properly reading the Bible. Knowing it all leads to what God has done in Jesus Christ, we don't set that recognition aside. Rather we interpret the whole of the written word in terms of its center, the Living Word of God. In that way, the whole of Scripture is properly interpreted; the gift of God is properly received.

Another way to say all this is that the Bible itself tells us whose Scripture this is. We know who the author is. We know where the Bible came from. It is not anonymous. So another analogy would be that reading the Bible is like

reading a letter from someone you know and who knows you, not like getting junk mail from someone you don't know and who doesn't know or care about you. Reading these two types of mail are entirely different experiences, aren't they? Sometimes when I've gotten letters (or emails) from those I know well, as I read what they wrote, I can almost hear their voices. I know just how they'd say it. It sounds "just like them." Reading the Bible should be like that. The more we get to know the heart, mind, purpose and attitudes of Jesus, the more we'll hear his voice throughout all of Scripture and see how it points to him the Son, and to his mission as the self-revelation of the Father and the Spirit.

When reading and trying to understand Scripture out of the center of knowing whose scripture it is, another aspect of a proper approach becomes apparent. The primary purpose of all of Scripture is to reveal to us who this God is. That is, central to the message of all the biblical writers is to convey to us the nature, character, purpose and attitudes of our Creator and Redeemer God. They want us above all to know not just that some kind of god exists, but which God in particular and what this God is like. And they want their hearers to know who God is because the God they know wants to be known and is working though them to accomplish just that.

But the revelation that God is accomplishing is not just aimed at a kind of abstract, impersonal information. It is knowledge that reveals a God who has created us for relationship, communication and holy love. Knowing this God involves interaction of faith, trust, praise, adoration, worship and so fellowship and communion, which includes our following in his ways; that is, our obedience. And this interaction is not just a "knowing about" but a knowing in a sense similar to how we hear of Adam "knowing" Eve and so conceiving a child. By God's acts of revelation, we come to know deeply who this God really is. Love for this God, the worship of this God, trust or faith in this God are our responses to who this God is. True knowledge of God that is accurate and faithful leads to true worship and living trust in God.

Throughout the Old Testament, the most often and widely repeated description of God's nature and character is his "steadfast love." In the Psalms alone, the Lord's steadfast love is highlighted nearly 120 times. Psalm 136 uniquely proclaims God's steadfast love in the refrain of all its 26 verses. An expanded but slightly more comprehensive description found across the Old Testament echoes what the Lord revealed of himself to Moses: "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness." The Old Testament prophets constantly held out to their hearers the nature and character of God, the only one worthy

of their faithfulness and worship. However, the fullness of what God's steadfast love means does not come into full view until we see it embodied and lived out in the incarnation, life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus with his promise to return.

Jesus himself made inquiring about and knowing who he was of paramount importance. His teachings and actions are designed to raise the question: "Who then is this?" His parables prompted his hearers to inquire more deeply. And of course, Jesus even confronts his own disciples with this question at two levels: "Who do people say that I am?" and then even more pointedly "Who do you say that I am?" (Mark 8:27, 29). Jesus himself makes the question of *Who* central. We must do the same if we are to hear the Word of God (Living and so written) as it was meant to be heard.

What is disclosed in Jesus and preserved for us in the responses of the apostles and their writings is that God is not just graciously loving towards us, but is Father, Son and Holy Spirit who have their being in triune holy loving from all eternity, before there ever was a creation. Jesus is who he is in his eternal relationship of holy love to the Father and eternal Spirit. That is the deepest level of God's self-revelation, where we discover who God is in God's inner and eternal triune life.

So we should approach our Bible study with our primary goal being listening and learning from Scripture who our triune God is as revealed to us in Jesus Christ. We can then rightly interpret Scripture out of that center. This approach means that other questions we might like to ask first, or about which we might be anxious, will be secondary. For Scripture, with Jesus at the center, not only provides us with certain answers, it tells us what the right questions are! So the questions of *What*?, *Where*?, *When*?, *Why*? or *How*? must be made relative to the question of *Who*? For it is the key to all these other questions.

We now have laid out the basic orientation for our understanding of Scripture and how best to approach it. We will consider some further implications for listening to the Word of God in the next chapter.

GUIDELINES FOR APPROACHING SCRIPTURE REVERENTLY WITH PRAYER BY FAITH

Since, as we have been discussing, Scripture is the gift of God, where God has graciously promised to speak to us through his living Word, what, then, are some guidelines for approaching it? I think the first thing needing to be said is that we must approach it reverently with a desire to be addressed, to hear a word from God. This attitude is probably best demonstrated when we start with prayer to God, the God of the Bible. In prayer we acknowledge that we look for and anticipate receiving a word from God himself, that is, hearing from the Living Word through the written word by the Spirit. It shows we are ready to listen, to hear. And we express in prayer that we want to hear what the Lord has to say to us. That is, we listen as his children, as his sheep, not as one of his advisers or as an engineer might seek impersonal information about some empirical object or law of physics perhaps to use for some other purpose.

In prayer, we also acknowledge that we depend upon the Lord and his grace to speak in a way that we can receive. That is, we listen by faith, as we trust that the Lord does speak and knows how to get through to us, the dumb sheep! Listening to Scripture as God's holy word is an act of faith in the God whose word it is. We read or listen to Scripture by faith in the grace of God, just as we do in every other response of ours to God. We listen and study Scripture by faith.

This means that we do not put our trust in our techniques for studying the Bible no matter how simple or how sophisticated they are. And we aren't just mining for data, for information, for formulas or principles or for truths that we can possess or use for our own ends or purposes. In prayer we place ourselves before the living Lord trusting that he will make himself known to us and enable us to hear and follow him wherever he takes us. Faithful prayer to the Living God of the Bible is essential for our preparation for listening to Scripture.

God's agenda, not ours

Second, listening to Scripture as God speaking to us means letting it set the agenda for us, according to the nature and purposes God has for giving us the gift of his word. This means that we'll come to Scripture not to give us, first, exactly what we're looking for, such as answers to our current or even pressing questions, but to show us what the right questions are and what issues have priority in God's view. We will not force Scripture to answer

questions that it is not designed to answer nor give priority to some concern or issue we have that does not match with the priorities and central matters of Scripture itself. We'll be open to having our mind reshaped to reflect the mind of Christ and what he views as of first-order importance.

The primacy of the WHO? question

And what is the central thrust of biblical revelation? It is to make known the identity, character, heart, purpose and nature of God. Scripture is primarily designed to answer the question, "Who is God?" So our primary question in reading and listening to Scripture ought to be, "Who are you, Lord?" That's the first and most important question that ought to be on our hearts and minds as we study Scripture. No matter what passage we're dealing with, our primary concern ought to be: "What is God telling me about himself in this passage?"

We'll need to put in second place our questions of *What*? *How*? *Why*? *When*? and *Where*? In fact, these questions can only be rightly answered by putting the *Who*? question first. In many church settings the most difficult question needing to be put on the back burner is this: "What am I supposed to be doing for God?" We are so anxious to discover what God wants us to do for him that we often overlook the most foundational aspect of Scripture which involves revealing, clarifying and reminding us of God's nature, character, heart, purpose and aim. It's far more important to know *who* it is we're obeying, than to attempt to do the right thing. In fact, we can't even accurately discern *what* God wants us to do, and in what way to do it, unless we act out of knowing and trusting in this God according to *who* he is. Only then will our attitude and motives and the character of our actions match or bear witness to God's own character. Only then will we find that his commandments are not burdensome and that his yoke is easy and his burden is light. So we need to read the Bible and listen to preaching in order to see more deeply into who God is.

I should also add that the greatest and most damaging deception we can fall into is being misled about the nature and character of God. Being misled or deceived about who God is undermines our faith, which is in turn the foundation of our whole response to God. With our faith or trust in God undermined or twisted, all the rest will collapse too: our worship, our prayer, our listening to Scripture, our obedience, our hope and our love for God and for neighbor. Our faith is a response to who we perceive God to really be. When that is properly aligned, then the Christian life is enlivened and energized even under difficult situations. When it is distorted, we then

attempt to run the Christian life with ropes tangled around our feet. So being reminded daily of the truth of who God is must be our top priority—matching the priority of the structure and aim of both the written and the Living Word of God.

Jesus Christ, the Center of the center

Third, as we do so, we'll have as the center and norm of our knowledge and trust in God all of what Scripture says about Jesus Christ. Oriented to this living Center of the center, we'll want to see how the Old Testament points and prepares us to recognize him. Jesus Christ is God's answer to the *Who* question—in person, in time and space, in flesh and blood—that ancient Israel sought to know. In Jesus Christ, "What you see is what you get." In him the whole God is personally present, active and speaking. Jesus is the interpretive key to all of Scripture, for in him we see and hear the heartbeat of God. We watch and hear the motions of his heart and mind, even his Spirit, the Holy Spirit. The light we find shining forth from the face of Jesus sheds light on all of Scripture, for in him the God of the whole Bible has personally revealed himself.

So we ought to read and interpret Scripture in a way that through it all, in one way or another, we come to see how it points towards and finds its fulfillment in Jesus Christ. Think of this as a process much like reading a murder mystery novel for the second time. The first time through, at the end, you finally come to discover "who done it." The second time through is a much different experience. You can see in a new light how all the clues early on in the mystery pointed to "who done it." You appreciate the clues (and recognize the false leads) even more the second time through. But the clues are not the solution. Their value is how they indicate or are signs pointing to the resolution of the mystery.

This means that central to our study and understanding of the whole Bible should be the person and acts of Jesus. This calls for giving a certain priority to and focus on the Gospels. This does not mean narrowing our attention simply to the words or teaching of Jesus, as some "red letter" Bibles might tempt us to do. Rather, this means placing at center stage all of what the Gospels tell us about who Jesus is. This will include his own words, actions and self-interpretations (think, for example, of all the "I am" statements in John), but also make use of those texts that answer most directly who Jesus is, not only in the Gospels but also throughout the rest of the New Testament.

Who Jesus is in relationship to the Father and the Holy Spirit

As we prayerfully begin to listen to Scripture concentrating on the *Who* question as answered by God himself in Jesus, you'll find that the primary way Jesus is identified involves his relationship to God the Father and God the Holy Spirit. The answer to the *Who*? question is intrinsically bound up with grasping the nature, character, purpose and aim of Jesus *in relationship* with the Father and Spirit. For Jesus primarily and consistently identifies himself by means of those relationships. He is the one sent from the Father, the one who has been eternally with and eternally loved by the Father. He is the One who has the Spirit and who has come to give us his Holy Spirit.

The highest concentration on the importance of Jesus' relationships with the Father and Spirit comes in the Gospel of John, reaching the apex in John 17. To know Jesus is to know the Father. To know the Father means recognizing who Jesus is. Interacting with Jesus means dealing directly and personally with the Father and the Spirit.

So in our Bible study and preaching we must pay attention to the quality and nature of Jesus' relationship and interactions with the Father and Spirit. For he is, in his being, the Son of the Father, one with his Spirit. Pay special attention to anywhere in Scripture where we're given insight into the relationships of the Father, Son and Spirit. For in those relationships we will see and hear most directly, personally and concretely who the God of the Bible is. And in returning to that living Center of the center, again and again we'll find our faith nourished and growing with a life of joyful obedience flowing out of it.

With the Center of our prayer, faith, devotion and worship set, as a kind of North Star, everything else regarding listening to and studying the Lord's Scripture gets properly oriented.

RULES FOR INTERPRETING SCRIPTURE

As I said at the end of the previous chapter, "With the Center of our prayer, faith, devotion and worship set, as a kind of North Star, everything else regarding listening to and studying the Lord's Scripture then gets properly oriented." So now, let's explore some of those more general implications that can be expressed as certain kinds of rules, which keep us navigating in alignment with our North Star.

Interpret parts in light of the whole

As you know, Jesus is identified in Scripture as the First One and as the Last One. He is also identified as the living Word of God or the *Logos* of God. We could say that Jesus is and speaks both the first word to creation and is and has the last word about creation. Everything was set in motion by him and the ultimate destiny of everything is established in relationship to him, its rightful inheritor.

Perhaps we don't often think of it, but recognizing this about Jesus, our risen and ascended Lord, has implications for our hearing and studying of Scripture. In the past it has been put this way: always interpret the various parts of Scripture (verses, paragraphs, chapters, books, etc.) in terms of the whole of Scripture. No part of Scripture ought to be understood simply on its own, but only in the context of the whole. Some have said that every part of Scripture ought to be interpreted in terms of the fullness of its meaning (its *sensus plenior*).

You may have heard the good advice to not take verses "out of context." That's right. The context includes not only the verses immediately surrounding a certain text, but the chapter, the whole book in which it appears and, in the end, the whole of Scripture. Many false teachings down through the ages and even in our contemporary situation come from taking a passage out of context and then concluding what it means on its own. In reality we can then easily substitute our own context for the actual context provided for us by the whole of Scripture. Our context then becomes the interpretive North Star. So there is no substitute for taking a lifetime to study the whole of Scripture, that is, considering "the whole counsel of God."

But the whole turns out to be not just all the books and verses of the Bible. It turns out that the whole includes Who is before, behind, surrounding and standing at the end of Scripture. This whole is what the Bible says as a whole about who God is. As the *Logos* of all things, including Scripture, Jesus Christ contains it all. So the whole involves all of what we learn through the

whole history of revelation preserved in Scripture. And every part must be grasped in a way that it contributes to the whole (of who God is in Christ) and how the whole includes the parts. That "rule" will help us properly hear and interpret the meaning of Scripture as we listen to its various parts, for it all comes from one and the same whole God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It ought to all sound like it belongs to one and the same God personally known in Jesus Christ.

Interpret the unclear in light of the clear

Another "rule" often recommended in past ages of the church that will help us stay oriented to the North Star is to "interpret unclear passages in terms of the clear." This is a good guideline. Much false teaching has derived from a fascination with the unclear, the obscure, or the opaque passages of Scripture. Teachers can take advantage of those cases because, given the ambiguity of their meaning, lots of meanings can be made to seem plausible. They're not clear enough on their own to rule out a range of speculative understandings. So someone who can give a logical argument can often be persuasive, often actually reading in their own meaning. The rule to make use of clear passages to sort through the various options for interpreting the meaning of difficult parts guards against this danger. We especially should not let the unclear passages, and some particular understanding of them, be used to reinterpret the clearer passages!

But we can take this rule a step farther. Who or what is the clearest expression of the heart, mind, will and character of God? Jesus Christ. He is the Light of all light. All Scripture, in the end, should be understood in his clear Light. He alone shows us the face of God in person.

Let's look at an example. The Pharisees of New Testament times had an understanding of God's Law, the Torah. When Jesus came along they accused him of violating what they considered the highest priority of that Law, namely the keeping of the Sabbath. And they had worked out logically what must be implied in keeping the Sabbath. They interpreted Jesus and his actions in terms of their pre-understanding of the Law of God. How did Jesus respond to their accusations? Did he simply say, "I came to give you another interpretation of how the Law should be applied"? No, he said, "For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath" (Matthew 12:8). The Pharisees gave priority to their understanding of the Law, and interpreted Jesus in terms of it. But Jesus countered by telling them who he was in relationship to the Law and so said, "I created the Law, I gave it its meaning, I know how it is to be honored and when it is being violated. Interpret the Law in terms of me, its

Lord, not me in terms of the Law. It is my servant. I am not its servant, to be judged by it."

So Jesus puts the Pharisees at a crisis point. Will they recognize Jesus as the Living Lord, the Lord of the Law or will they continue to use the Law as "lord" to interpret and judge Jesus? What or who is the whole and what or who is the part? What or who is the clear and what is relatively obscure? We may not regard the Law as the Pharisees did, but we may have other truths or attitudes or viewpoints that we assume and use to interpret or understand Jesus and who God is. Recognizing Jesus as the Center of the center will challenge us to view everything in terms of his interpretation of things, in his light.

We can sum up: we interpret the parts in terms of the whole and the unclear in terms of the clear, and all in terms of Jesus Christ!

Interpret the Old Testament in light of the New

Another implication that has been identified in the past is to interpret the Old Testament in terms of the New Testament. This too is a good "rule" we can follow and further expand. Jesus is the fulfillment of the revelation and provision of God. That is, he is the self-revelation and the self-giving of God for us and for our salvation. He fulfills all the promises of God set up and signaled in the Old Testament. The promises are to be understood in terms of the fulfillment, not the other way around.

But the Old Testament is about more than the promises themselves. It involves an ongoing relationship and interaction of God with Israel over roughly a thousand years, including interaction with numerous prophets at various points in the history of that relationship. God was taking Israel somewhere and Israel knew it. God had not given them the final word. They looked forward to having his Spirit poured out on all flesh (Joel 2:28) being given to reignite life in the dry bones (Ezekiel 37:5) and having new hearts (Ezekiel 11:19; 36:26). They looked forward to the time of God's peace or shalom when they wouldn't have to prepare for war anymore and not have blood on their hands (Isiah 2:4; Joel 3:10; Micah 4:3). They anticipated the completion of the sacrificial worship where they could be in the very presence of the living God and then truly live! The Old Testament revelation included the proclamation that there was much more to come, that God was not finished making himself known and providing everything for them. Even at the conclusion of the last words of the prophets, they knew they were not at the end of the story. The climax had not yet been reached.

The fact that God's revelation involves a history of interacting with Israel

and speaking through selected prophets means that we should interpret any passage in terms of where it comes in the story as it leads up to or down from God's self-revelation and self-giving in Jesus Christ. This rule of interpretation is especially important for particular ethical or liturgical directives given to ancient Israel. What God commands of Israel in a particular instance is not God's final or eternal word.

For instance while the "eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth" saying was far more compassionate than the code of revenge practiced by the surrounding ancient near eastern cultures of the time, it was not God's final word to his people. Rather, the final word is embodied in Christ who loved his enemies to the end and directed us to do the same. So interpretation should take into account where in the story we find the actions, attitude or instructions given. God fills out and clarifies his revelation through a history of interaction with his people, so not every word in the Bible is God's last word on the subject. Providentially, there are many places in the New Testament where significant change or discontinuity, is explicitly spelled out, such as keeping of the Sabbath.

This does not mean that everything said in the Old Testament will necessarily be radically reinterpreted later on. Some insight or instruction may remain largely unchanged, such as principles we identify as broad moral instructions that are linked to our human nature and take into consideration our fallen condition. About rather permanent and universal features of humanity such as marriage, sexual morality and the relations of parents and children that abide throughout history and across differing cultural contexts, we would expect significant continuity of teaching. The New Testament often does spell out particular continuities and redemptive development of expression.

Even if there are some practical or particular differences, at the level of fundamental principles that reflect God's character we should expect to see some continuity between earlier and later application of that same principle in the New Testament. There seems to be a redemptive development in the way God's more general purposes are to be applied in the life of the church after the fulfillment of God's will is accomplished in Christ as compared to before this fulfillment. An example would be that although Israel is directed at times to go to war, she was instructed not to be vengeful and to look forward to a time when her swords would be beaten into plowshares. The Christian church is called to continue along that trajectory to finally be peacemakers and to not regard any human being as their ultimate enemy, but rather forgive and seek reconciliation and restoration.

The issue of slavery seems to fall along the same lines. What was allowed to Israel is no longer to characterize the Christian church. So Paul directed Philemon to emancipate his slave Onesimus (Philemon 16-17). Slavery is a practice that was "passing away." So such instructions as were given Israel cannot be directly picked up by the church now with no regard for our occupying a different place in the story than was ancient Israel. The God of the Bible is a God of life, not death; a God of freedom, not slavery; a God of love, reconciliation and redemption and not enmity and revenge. While we certainly can find signs of these characteristics in the Old Testament, at times some significant ambiguity appears along the way in God's history of interaction with Israel. We now, however, live to bear witness to the clear and complete fulfillment of God's Word in Christ, not to its foreshadowing and preparation. In this way, we interpret the Old Testament in terms of the New.

There we have several guidelines for properly interpreting Scripture with Jesus Christ the Living Word at the center of the Written Word. In the next two chapters we'll continue to offer some more guidelines to help us stay oriented to our North Star.

REALITY AND THE MEANING OF SCRIPTURE

This next-to-last chapter covers several more aspects of listening to, studying and interpreting Scripture that honors its God-given nature and purpose. As we examine these, perhaps we'll find some bad habits that need to be unlearned.

Discovering the meaning that is there

Often when we hear Scripture read or preached or study it for ourselves, we approach it thinking we're going to "try to make sense of it." But I don't think that's really the best way to put it. Rather, we come to realize that as God speaks to us in Scripture it reads us, it makes sense of us! God's Word sheds light on our lives. God's Word is living and active and not a passive collection of data that we probe, organize, arrange and apply and then announce what *we've* made of it. Rather, as we listen to Scripture, we are acted upon by the Word and the Spirit. It comes with its own meaning and sense. So, we don't give it meaning and make sense of it. We *discover* its meaning and sense.

Listening to and studying Scripture is a matter of discovery, not creativity, innovation or theorizing. So hearing Scripture in a way that fosters faith calls for a receptiveness on our part, allowing it to tell us. We do not sit in critical judgment upon it, deciding ahead of time what we will or won't hear or whether we will or won't live by it. St. Augustine long ago realized there was a huge difference in approaching Scripture as *users* compared to being *receivers* who are prepared to enjoy and live under the Word we hear. He advised, just like the book of James does, that we take the posture of hearers of the Word of God, receiving and even delighting in it.

Receptivity, the proper subjectivity

We don't have to guess or sort through a lot of hypothetical options to discover what particular attitude of receptivity we should have towards God's Word. First, Jesus, in his own responsiveness to his Father and the Spirit, demonstrates the proper personal and internal (subjective) orientation we are to have to the Word. Second, the apostles whom Jesus chose, including Paul, embodied the spirit of responsiveness that reflected Jesus' own receptivity. These apostles were not chosen merely because they could be relied upon to convey accurate information (facts). They were appointed because they had the right kind of receptivity (subjective orientation) to the truth that they were given. If we are to hear the Word of God, we must stand in their place, taking

up their attitude of receptivity. We have to have ears to hear in order to grasp what they are saying—to hear what they heard.

Often we think that the biblical revelation given to us by its authors is simply a collection of data, information that sits objectively there on the page, neutrally and in that sense objectively (we say). We then take over that "data," mining it for ourselves with whatever subjective orientation we please, including the attempt to rid ourselves of any subjective element at all. But the biblical preservers of revelation do not simply offer objective information that we then decide how or whether to appropriate or receive. No, the biblical revelation includes the revelation of the nature of its own proper receptivity, its own orientation and attitude. And that subjective aspect is embodied in Jesus and his apostles and is also conveyed in their preserved writings. Revelation as revelation cannot be gained apart from this particular kind of receptivity because it is included in it.

And this subjective orientation is not neutral or abstractly objective. The receptive orientation of the biblical writers is one of trust, readiness to repent, a desire for reconciliation and confidence in the power and faithfulness of God to redeem, renew and put right all things. Revelation itself includes both objective and subjective elements perfectly coordinated with each other. How the revelation is received is perfectly harmonized with what is revealed. In fact, the revelation cannot be grasped at all except in and through that particular subjective orientation. God does not approach us neutrally, but passionately and redemptively. So we cannot approach God neutrally and dispassionately if we are to really receive the content and benefits of his revealed redemption. And that receptivity which is resident in Jesus and resonant in the apostles is given to us as a gift of the Spirit so that we might receive the revelation of God that the apostles of Jesus Christ passed on to the whole church for all time.

The false objectivity of abstract thinking

So much of the information we get, some of which is called scientific, is abstract. It is disconnected from the source of the information, from the object being investigated. Such input can seem to be simply words, concepts, ideas, principles or numbers and mathematical formulas. Sometimes the information comes to us as a line of argument made up of a chain of logical connections. To use an analogy, it would be like studying the wake made by a boat that has long since passed by, but not learning much about the boat itself—which is really what we want to know. Such information rarely helps

us relate to or interact with the object, the reality itself, since it's only indirectly connected to it. We're looking at the effects of something, not the source or cause of the effects.

Often in Christian teaching we're led to consider evidences of something (the wake, the effects) but aren't directed to think about the reality itself (the boat, cause or source of the effects). For example we might be presented evidences for the empty tomb, or for the possibility of Jesus' miracles, but not give much consideration to Jesus himself. Following that path we may learn something *about* him, but we don't get to know Jesus *himself*.

This rather abstract approach is often what we get from "experts." Sometimes we are impressed by the knowledge and insight they impart. But at other times, their abstract information and principles annoy us and leave us cold. It can seem that such information has nothing practical to do with life. We suspect that what they are sharing is the product of overactive minds fueled by over-sized egos!

Though not always, this abstract approach is often characteristic of theological or philosophical thinking, which provides *ideas* or *concepts* about God. Doctrine then becomes a mere collection of ideas or concepts to believe in (or not!). This reduces Christianity to merely understanding Christian ideas—ideas undoubtedly derived from the Bible. But this abstracting and conceptualizing approach sets us up for the disaster that is common in modernity and postmodernity (two periods now existing side-by-side). The modern mindset tends to regard faith as bias that distorts any true knowledge of the reality. The postmodern mindset tends to see faith, like all forms of knowing, as governed by personal/subjective factors (such as race, gender, class, etc.). With this postmodern perspective, all knowing collapses into self-knowing, agnosticism or, more often, a knowledge controlled by the will-to-power.

A biblically-formed mindset acknowledges these barriers to knowing truth, including knowing God. From the biblical perspective, we fallen humans are seen as idolaters who create gods in our own image in order to justify ourselves and our own kind. The prophets of Israel spoke out against this idolatry, which is our attempt to recreate God in our own image or images that we can control and use. The golden calf in Moses' time is an example. All of Scripture teaches that God cannot be found by sheer human effort and that we will only end up deluded by the results of such misguided efforts. Jesus declared, "No one knows the Son except the Father, and no

one knows the Father except the Son" (Matthew 11:27). As the early church used to put it: "Only God knows God." But that does not mean God cannot be known, for it does not rule out God's being smart and motivated enough to figure out how to make himself known. So the early church saying went on: "And only God reveals God." And that is what Jesus goes on to say, "…and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him."

The God of the Bible can and wants to make himself known. He's the Good Shepherd who knows how to get through to the dumb sheep. God's act of self-revelation is required if we are to know God himself, personally and deeply (*epignosis* is the Greek word used in the New Testament, parallel to Adam "knowing" his wife Eve).

Revelation, especially the *self*-revelation of God in Christ, that was borne witness to by Jesus' personally selected apostles and the working of the Spirit, can't be approached in either the modern or postmodern way, by either eliminating the subjective element or declaring that it always in every case hides or distorts the truth. Knowing God in his act of self-revelation calls for a particular subjective orientation that correlates with the nature and purpose of the revelation, namely being reconciled to God. It calls for humility and a mustard seed's worth of faith/trust to get the ball rolling. We have to be willing to orient our ways of knowing, both its objective and subjective elements, to the nature of the revelation. Knowing God calls for a readiness to repent and a desire to be reconciled to God. God's self-revelation rules out the twin errors of either attempting to remove all subjectivity (a false objectivity) or assuming that any subjective stance we might prefer would suffice (a false subjectivity).

Listening in this way to the Living Word through the Written Word by the Spirit puts us into contact with the reality itself, with the living God. In and through Scripture, with Christ at the center, we're not being given information *about* God, but hearing a Word *from* God who makes himself known as Lord and Savior through the medium of those witnesses preserved for us. If we approach Scripture as simply a set of concepts, ideas or principles about God and his ways, we will be missing the boat! Scripture, by the Word and Spirit, does not primarily enable us to know *about* God or his will for us, but to know God, *himself*, in person. That is the case because God is a Living God and a speaking God and has not become mute since the days of Jesus. Listening to and studying Scripture with humility and trust/faith in the God of the Bible is a vital aspect of our living in actual relationship,

communication, and communion with God. If we miss this we miss receiving the gift of God.

Taking the Bible realistically

Now some in the church and its various seminaries have attempted to correct such an abstract approach to the Bible by emphasizing that we take the Bible "literally." Their aim is to achieve a more "objective" approach. Others have recommended that we fix the problem on the subjective side of things by taking Scripture more seriously, more imaginatively, in a more narrative way. Or those seeing the problem on the subjective side might gravitate toward interpreting it more ethically (either personally or socio-politically), more pragmatically or with greater conviction, courage and commitment. While well-intentioned, these commendations seem to me to fall short of what is hoped for and don't align as closely with the actual nature and character of God's Word as we might think.

There are other theologians, most notably Thomas F. Torrance, who said what is needed is that we take the Bible *realistically*. When we listen to or study Scripture we are hearing from those who, by the inspiration of the Spirit of Jesus, are telling us about the *reality* of who God is and what God has done, is doing and will do. Scripture tells us about the nature of reality, reality we *can* have contact with and can access, for example creation, and also reality that we ourselves *cannot* directly access but that can contact us, e.g. the Living Word by the Spirit. The words of Scripture, then, point to, inform us and put us into contact with the reality of who God is and who we are in relationship to him and to creation. By them the Living God tells us what is the real situation. In listening to Scripture we are getting to know God *himself* because God is able to use, by the Spirit, the created medium of divinely appointed human communication to speak again to us through it. When interacting with Scripture, we're dealing with the "boat" itself, not the wake it leaves behind.

So the question we ought to ask in reading any text of Scripture is this: "What reality is this passage telling me about?" This ought to be the central and controlling question whether it's a historical event or a didactic teaching, a narrative or parable, a simile, a metaphor or symbol, a historical person or a hypothetical and representative character. Of every passage we need to ask these questions: What am I being told about the nature of reality, of God, of human nature, of our relationship with God, of right relationship with each other? Of course by "reality" we do not mean simply that which human creatures can see, taste, touch, measure, weigh and calculate. Those features

only have to do with empirical realities, part of what we call *nature* considered as causal and mechanical and impersonal things. But Scripture puts us in touch with realities that cannot be investigated by empirical means. The most important reality is the nature, character and reality of God the Father and God the Holy Spirit and what he has done for us in Jesus. These are not natural or earthly realities at all. The Living and Speaking God continues to reveal the true nature of these realities through his Written Word with the Living Word as its center.

Faith comes by hearing

How do we discover these, to us, invisible realities if we can't see them, touch them, weigh them or experiment with them? The answer is that we *hear* about them from reliable, personal sources or authorities. We encounter their objective reality through being told about them by those who know. We can know about things we cannot empirically explore by being told about them. By having ears to hear we can *see* with spiritual eyes (the eyes of our heart; Ephesians 1:18, Acts 26:18). Jesus' eternal relationship with the Father and the Spirit is an example of such a reality. Other examples are the prophetic words from Jesus and his apostles about God's future intentions for his creation, namely, that God will give us a renewed heavens and earth and that every tear will be wiped away by God's final restorative working. By means of hearing from those who know, we can know and also interact with creaturely and divine realities that cannot be seen and cannot be empirically discovered. Speaking and hearing can be an objective event that conveys to us and thus puts us into contact with a divine transcendent reality. By the Spirit, this encounter corrects our wrong notions and arrogant attitudes. We can know, love, trust, obey and pray to God himself, who speaks an objective word to us in and through his Word.

So we listen to Scripture as a way of getting to know and interact with divine and creaturely reality, not just to have correct truths, ideas, concepts, ideals or doctrines. By hearing we come into contact with the truth and reality of who God is and who we are and discover the true nature of created things. Taking all of Scripture realistically tells us who and how things really were, are and will be.

The meaning of Scripture

Another connection that probably needs to be made, although it perhaps sounds self-evident when articulated, is that what the Bible means is the

reality to which it refers. The words of the Bible point beyond themselves by referring to and, by the Spirit, disclosing to us the reality itself, e.g. who God is. The words of the Bible have their significance (they signify or point to) actual realities. So when we take Holy Scripture realistically we are in fact asking after the meaning and significance of the words. The words don't refer to or mean other words or ideas. The words refer beyond themselves and indicate realities that are far greater than the words themselves. The realities cannot be reduced to the words, but faithful and accurate words authorized by God through the Spirit can indeed put us in actual contact with the reality. We want to know what realities the words point to, for that reality is their meaning. We are not attempting to find or create or give meaning to Scripture or make the Bible meaningful to us or others. Rather, we're discovering the meaning and significance it already has as we recognize the realities to which the words point and, by the Spirit, put us into contact with. That's what God's revelation intends to do and can do, that is its meaning.

Meaning beyond the words through the words

An implication of Scripture's meaning is that the fullness, meaning and significance of the reality exceed the words used to point to it. Even words that are indispensable for discovering and relating to the reality, like biblical revelation, can never substitute for the reality itself. The reality of God especially cannot be reduced to words, even biblical words. But those inspired words are not arbitrary or dispensable. They are the gift of God, the God-given means empowered by the Spirit to refer us to and reveal those realities. The Bible is like an absolutely unique and authoritative map that is essential to guiding us to our destination–which is not a point on the map itself, but an actual location in reality. So the meaning of the texts will always be found beyond the words themselves, although never discovered in any authoritative way except in and through the words spoken to us. That is why Scripture is indispensable to the Christian church, though we don't worship the Bible. We don't pray to the Bible and we don't believe that the Bible will, on the last day, raise us from the dead. The object of our worship, love and faith is not the Bible, but the God who speaks to us uniquely through his written Word.

Our own words (in writing, preaching and teaching), including our doctrines, ought to be evaluated by how well they point to the same reality that Scripture itself points to. And we don't want to be drawn into arguments about our words or those used by others. Rather, we listen for their

meaning—the reality to which they point—realizing that words fall short of the transcendent and divine reality itself. We look for the most faithful words we can find, often with the help of others, in faith hoping to add our non-authoritative witness and testimony to the reality that the words of Scripture point to authoritatively.

These points about reality and the meaning of Scripture are large overarching concerns. But if Scripture is taken to offer simply concepts or ideas about God, or if we think our job is to make sense of it, or think the meaning of the words of Scripture are simply other words or ideas, we'll go off in an unhelpful and confusing direction that will not easily contribute to our faith relationship with its Giver.

There are still a few more detailed, nitty-gritty suggestions we can touch on to wrap up this series on listening to and studying Scripture. We'll take them up in our last chapter.

CONCLUDING PRINCIPLES

We conclude this series with several principles that help us interpret Scripture in ways that honor its God-given nature and purpose.

The written form of biblical texts

God's gift comes to us in the form of writings that were preserved down through the ages in the form of written texts in human languages. To honor Scripture is to honor the *form* in which is it given to us not just the content. Thus to pay careful attention to the Bible, we have to take into consideration its historical, linguistic and literary forms. Our methods have to be able to attune us to the communication offered in those forms. But the methods used to engage the forms of communication cannot be allowed to take over and determine what we are able or are allowed to hear. That's how modern biblical studies and criticism have often gone wrong. However, we can selectively use methods attuned to the form of Scripture in ways that enable us to hear the words as references to the realities that disclose to us its meaning and significance. Methods that impose their own meanings and significance must be set aside; otherwise we are granting them final authority over Scripture, placing our ultimate trust in them and not in the living Word of God.

What are some implications of recognizing the importance of the form of biblical revelation? First, a knowledge of the biblical languages can be helpful for those translating it into other languages (missionary translators), for those translating it into other historical-cultural contexts (pastors and teachers) and for those who equip others to communicate the biblical message and meaning. A familiarity with the customs, the culture, the time period of history and the original audience addressed at the time the various texts were written is also useful. A grasp of the various literary forms used and how they function as means of communication (e.g. history, wisdom literature, letters, gospels, apocalyptic etc.) also helps us better listen to God's Word. Much of scholarship is devoted to these elements of biblical studies. There are a number of good books that assist us in discerning the genre of the various biblical writings and how to approach them.

Methods must serve the message and meaning of the texts

However, the methods have to always be in service of and subservient to the message and the meaning (realities to which they refer) of the biblical

revelation. Whatever methods we use should not: 1) impede our hearing the message or 2) call into question the possibility of actually knowing those realities or 3) impose their own philosophical presuppositions on what we can expect to know or hear before we've listened, or 4) draw us into a false sense of objectivity (which promotes a seeming neutrality or abstract distance between us and the object of revelation's disclosure).

Those methods that do so would need to be ruled out, rejected and repented of. For in those cases the methods have become our religion, our primary object of trust, the authoritative source of our most fundamental assumptions about reality. They will, in fact, have become the controlling reality and therefore serve as conceptual idols that make us into users of and lords over the Word of God.

And they may do this all under the cover of our assumed powers that we have and need for "knowing good and evil." (Just what the serpent tempted Adam and Eve to think they needed.) But such dangers need not rule out a proper use of methods that are ordered to the nature and ends of the good gift of Scripture. We honor the creaturely form of Scripture when our methods correspond to it rather than rule over it. And such methods will pay careful attention to the genre of the various biblical texts as well as the language and historical and cultural background. A resource such as the *IVP Bible Background Commentary* provides such information to assist anyone on any passage of Scripture.

Whole literary units

Another simple implication is that the form of biblical revelation is for the most part conveyed to us as whole literary pieces. The books of the Bible were written, collected and arranged as whole pieces. Thus, harkening back to what we said about interpreting the parts in terms of the whole and the whole as made up of all the parts, we should always consider the whole of the literary unit in which Scripture was written and preserved for us to ascertain the meaning and significance of the various sub-units within.

Individual passages or even chapters should be interpreted in the light of the whole book and the location and order in which each verse, paragraph or section appears in the book. Failing to do so takes the parts out of context and does not honor the coherent form in which God has given and preserved his written word for us. On any topic, every book of the Bible must be taken into consideration along with its particular location in the history of God's revelation and in relation to its revelatory center in Jesus Christ. But that process must start by studying the biblical books as whole units written or

collected and arranged as wholes. In that way we have many pointers, some clearer than others, guiding us to know and properly relate to the realities that God intends them to disclose to us.

Indicatives of grace are the foundation for the imperatives of grace

I have become alert to another bad habit that somehow has sneaked into our biblical interpretation that could use some corrective attention. We are often under conviction that the Bible is primarily there to tell us what to do for God or how to do certain things for God. This is especially true for those who have already become believing people, members of a church. This pull of being obligated to do things for God becomes so strong that often we are drawn into bad habits of biblical interpretation. We end up not really hearing the Word and inadvertently distort what we hear. We end up thinking God is essentially a taskmaster and we are his slaves or worker-bees!

The problem arises when we take something that is simply declared to us so that we might trust in its truth and reality and then turn it into something we are to do, or accomplish or somehow make actual or real. In shorthand and using the terms of grammar, we turn *indicatives* of grace into *imperatives* (commands) of works.

For example, in the Beatitudes in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5), we turn the indicatives that tell us that God has blessed certain folks (the poor in spirit, the meek, those who thirst for righteousness and those who are peacemakers) into commands telling us to try harder to become these things. But Jesus was not using imperatives to command his listeners to work harder at to do or become those things. Rather, he was indicating what God already has done in blessing his people. God blessed some listening to Jesus right then and there. Jesus was then inviting them (and us!) to recognize and marvel at what God had done by his Spirit in his people.

A little later in the Sermon, Jesus does give a command—he issues an unconditional imperative at the end of the Beatitudes: "Rejoice and be glad!" Yes that's what we are obligated to do for God! And why? Jesus tells us: because God has blessed his people so that some are meek, some are longing for righteousness, some are peacemakers. God is a blessing God…rejoice and be glad! But when the indicatives of this passage are twisted into imperatives, by the time we get to the actual imperative in the sermon, we're too burdened down with guilt to even hear Jesus' command. Or if we do hear, we don't obey. "Right," we say, "rejoice and be glad. No way! He can't be serious after haranguing us like that—disappointed that we're not doing

all that we're supposed to do." When we follow that faulty line of reasoning, taking what we think might be the "harder road," we've dismissed the truth of Jesus' message about the blessings of God and missed the actual response he intends to elicit from us!

The Ten Commandments in perspective

I could multiply examples where people take a description in Scripture of what God has done or what he can be trusted for and convert that description (indicative) into an obligation or a command (imperative). This mistake comes from our anxiety to do things for God. The supposed commands are seen as conditions for getting God's approval or his blessing. But as you study Scripture, look to see if it isn't the case that underneath or behind every command there isn't some indication of who God is or what God can be trusted for, which supplies the very foundation and motive for those commands that are given. God does not need to be conditioned to be faithful to himself and his promises to us.

Let me give one more example. Let's go back to the Old Testament to the Ten Commandments given to Israel. Notice that it is not given until 430 years after God established his covenant with Abraham. It amounted to a promise: "I will be your God and you shall be my people." "Through you all the nations of the earth shall be blessed." But even Exodus chapter 20 does not begin with "Thou shalt nots." Note verse two: "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery." This verse indicates who God is and what he can be trusted for. It points out that the God who commands is the kind of God who rescues, redeems, sets free, delivers and saves! Why would Israel have an interest in other gods? Did the frog god do such for them? Did the fly god? The Nile river god? The cow god? The sun god? No, all the gods of Egypt became curses and led to death, not life.

As long as Israel trusted their God to be true to his character as revealed and indicated in the great Exodus, they would not even be tempted to turn to these idols, much less make images of them! Who God is in his nature and character is the foundation and the freedom for obeying his commands that follow. When this God is obeyed by faith in his character as revealed in his acts of deliverance, his commands are easy to obey. They are difficult and perhaps impossible to obey only if and when we don't trust God to be true to his character, the same character we see revealed supremely and in person in Jesus Christ our Ultimate Deliverer.

Look for the indicatives of grace upholding every command of grace

So the simple interpretive rule here is: always interpret the commands of God in terms of indicatives of God's grace and faithful character. Never grab a command apart from its foundation on the indicatives that reveal and remind us who God is. Whenever you find a command, stop and find the indicative of grace upon which it rests and then interpret them together. It should be somewhere nearby, either before or after the command. It might be the whole first half of the book, like Romans where chapters one through eleven lay out the grace of God and chapters 12-16 present the proper response to that grace. And certainly don't turn the indicatives of grace into an obligation of works. Doing so violates the form (grammar, in this case) and meaning of the words of Scripture. Don't let your guilt, fears and anxieties tempt you to turn a truth about God into an obligation to be laid on yourself or others.

Where do warnings come from?

Another bad habit I have run into and been guilty of myself in years past regards how we interpret the warnings in Scripture. For some reason, I don't know why, when reading the warnings in the Bible many have the habit of thinking that it indicates that God has a mean streak (should I say "spirit"?) and wants the horrible outcome spoken of to come to pass. So we might be tempted to think that Jesus wants and delights in sending away those not prepared for the wedding feast, or that he wants the rich man who mistreated Lazarus to suffer eternally, etc. After reading a warning we often conclude, "See, we knew there was a dark and unforgiving side of God—look at that warning right there in Scripture! He delights just as much in punishing, rejecting and being wrathful as in saving, reconciling and restoring."

But what is the meaning, the reality of these warnings? How should we interpret them in the context of all of Scripture and in light of the character of God revealed in our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ? First off, warnings are not the first word God gives. Warnings come as the last word offered to those who reject all the other words of promise and blessing that call for complete trust in and worship of God alone. And they are mostly directed at self-righteous and haughty religious people, not those who are unbelieving and not a part of the community of worshippers.

And then, what is the purpose or aim of a warning and why would someone give a warning? The purpose is to prevent the outcome pictured

from happening! It is not given to assure that it does happen. It is given because the outcome is not wanted, is not desired but to be averted. It is given to help the very one being warned of the danger. Warnings are a sign of love, not rejection. Perhaps it is the last sign given, but nevertheless still one of love. If God didn't care or wanted the anticipated negative outcome to occur, there would no reason for him to issue a warning at all. Why even bother! But, no, warnings are the last words of love to prevent the potential outcome.

Other biblical teaching tells us that God does not delight in the punishment of the wicked (Ezekiel 33:11) and he wants no one to perish but to turn and repent (2 Peter 3:9). Jesus' own explanation that he came not to condemn the world but to save it (John 3:14-18) backs up this understanding of biblical warnings. We have Scripture that tells us in no uncertain terms how God regards the unbeliever, the unrepentant ones. God does not take delight in seeing his good creation come to ruin. Warnings are expressions of love when nothing else has worked. They are not threats God can't wait to carry out. So we ought to interpret biblical warnings in terms of the character of God shown in Christ and according to the purpose of warnings meant to prevent the potential disastrous outcome to those God loves.

Interpret deeds in the light of the interpretive words

And finally one last bad habit of interpretation to consider. In listening to and studying Scripture we can fall into the trap of interpreting an action of God or of God's people apart from the accompanying words that indicate its meaning. The revelation of God involves a Word-Deed event. Certainly, God does things and has his people do certain things. But the deeds cannot be understood apart from the word given that interprets it. Deeds do not interpret themselves.

The significance and meaning of a particular deed is revealed through words that explain what was behind that action. But often we read of God doing something, especially in the Old Testament but sometimes in the New, and immediately react and draw conclusions about what that deed must say about God or his purposes or mind. For example, we read that the Egyptians drowned in the Red Sea or that God hardened Pharaoh's heart. Or we read of Jesus driving out the money-changers from the temple, or cursing the fig tree, or warning those who have not repented, or instructing the disciples to shake the dust off their feet from those villages that refuse to welcome them. Instead of looking for the prophetic and apostolic interpretation of these deeds—seeking to understand what they point to and how they are fulfilled

and perfected (brought to their right and true end or purpose)—we interpret them in the context of what we might mean if we were to do these things today (or perhaps what the worst and meanest person we can think of might mean by it!).

In making this mistake, we are substituting our imagined context for the biblical context and explanation. Although sometimes it's not obvious in every text, when the whole picture is assembled we find that the ultimate purpose of the text is redemption, reconciliation, deliverance—the salvation that is fulfilled in Jesus. Deciding on what a deed of God or his people means apart from God's character and words that interpret such deeds is another way of taking Scripture out of context—it is the grasping of an individual part that is disconnected from the whole. Deeds must never be understood apart from their revealed explanations.

While there are other words surrounding and interpreting for us those deeds mentioned above, I want to conclude by reminding us that Jesus Christ himself is the final Deed and Word of God. Jesus had to interpret his deeds even to his own disciples for them to know what they meant. This is especially true of the saving significance of his death and the hope of the resurrection. Without hearing his spoken words we would not know the meaning of his actions. Both must be taken together.

Jesus, God's final Word and deed

In fact, all the deeds of God in the Bible and other prophetic words should be interpreted in terms of who Jesus is, the Final Word-Deed. The Exodus and Pharaoh must be interpreted in terms of Jesus and his revelation of the heart and mind of God toward all his human creatures. He embodies and explains his very purpose to save. As the Son of God and the Son of Man he worked out that purpose by assuming our human nature as the second Adam and becoming the new head of the race.

So even Jesus' own deeds must be interpreted in terms of his own words, not in terms of our own words/thoughts/imaginations. In other words, all his deeds or work must be interpreted in the light of his person—in the light of who Jesus is. Said another way, we must interpret his works in terms of his person. And who is Jesus in his being and nature? He is the Son of the Father, our Savior, Redeemer and Reconciler. That's what the name Jesus means—the name given to him by his heavenly Father. All of Jesus' deeds indicate who he is as the eternal Son of the Father, become our Brother, Lord and Servant King in order to make us his beloved children. As God's final word and deed, Jesus is the key to interpreting every word and deed in

Scripture—the written word belongs to Jesus and comes from him, God's Living Word to us.

This is exactly what was occurring when Jesus stayed with those he met on the road to Emmaus following his resurrection: "And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself" (Luke 24:27 *ESV*). You'll also recall Jesus' admonition to the Pharisees: "You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me; yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life" (John 5:39-40 *ESV*).

Interpretation of Scripture is the church's responsibility

There is one last word to consider before we end this series. The task of interpreting Scripture is not the responsibility of isolated individuals but the task of the whole church, involving its various members with their gifts and callings, including those gifted as teachers and preachers. Proper interpretation of Scripture takes account of how particular passages of Scripture have been understood by many down through the history of the church and into our own times. We'll want to pay more attention to those teachers and interpreters who follow the kind of guidelines we have laid out in this series.

In presenting this series, I am indebted to many who have gone before me. I have not footnoted these references, but I could have. It is good to consult others before we make final determinations of what a given passage of Scripture means or what a collection of Scriptures add up to mean. We should look for precedents—paying attention to those who have been called by God to assist the church in listening to and understanding Scripture. We ought to be skeptical about esoteric interpretations that have little or no continuity with what the orthodox church as a whole has historically understood. This does not mean that deeper understanding could not be obtained as we stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before. But that understanding should be deeper and fuller than what has gone before, not a departure or wholesale discount of it.

God has many laborers working by faith to understand Scripture. We must not be so arrogant as to think that we alone, individually, can have an independent and final say. While the approach advocated in this series will not guarantee uniformity of interpretation throughout the church, it will help us avoid falling into traps, especially those already identified centuries ago! God gives his Word and his Spirit to the Church as a whole. We must not despise others who approach it with the same honor with which we regard

it, for in doing so we would be rejecting some of the good gifts that God has given to the church in the past for our benefit today.

With those words then, I end this series with the hope that more questions have been answered than raised; more light shed than heat generated.

May the Lord himself sanctify all these words to you. Amen.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Chapters 1-7 and 16 were written by the late **John Halford,** a pastor and a journalist in Indiana. He worked for Grace Communion International for several decades. He wrote hundreds of articles for our magazines and edited *Christian Odyssey* magazine. His chapters were originally published in 1991. They were edited in 2012 by Michael Morrison.

Michael Morrison wrote several chapters and edited this book. He received a PhD from Fuller Theological Seminary in 2006. He is Dean of Faculty and Professor of New Testament for Grace Communion Seminary. He is the author of:

Exploring the Word of God: The Letters of Paul
Sabbath, Circumcision and Tithing: Which Old Testament Laws Apply to Christians?
Who Needs a New Covenant? The Rhetorical Function of the Covenant Motif in the Argument of Hebrews
Evangelism Without Guilt
Exploring the Word of God: The Letters of Paul
Inspiration, Authority, and Reliability of Scripture
The Proverbs 31 Woman and Other Biblical Women (co-author)
The Purpose for Human Life: Learning to Be Like Jesus Christ

Paul Kroll wrote one chapter while he worked for Grace Communion International. He has written more than a hundred articles, including commentaries on Acts and Revelation. He is now retired.

One chapter was written by **George Hague.**

Part 3 was written by **Gary Deddo.** He received his PhD from the University of Aberdeen. He worked for many years as an editor for InterVarsity Press; he now works at Grace Communion International and is president of Grace Communion Seminary. He has written:

George McDonald: A Devotional Guide to His Writing
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