

## CHAPTER 2

### HOW TO APPROACH THE BIBLE

*And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers.*

*1 Thessalonians (RSV)*

<sup>29</sup>*“The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law.*

*Deuteronomy 29:29 (ESV)*

<sup>31</sup>*Jesus then said to the Jews who had believed in him, “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, <sup>32</sup> and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.”*

*John 8:31-32 (RSV)*

<sup>8</sup>*This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success.*

*Joshua 1:8 (ESV)*

*The sum of thy word is truth;  
and every one of thy righteous ordinances endures forever.*

*Psalms 119:160 (RSV)*

*Open my eyes, that I may behold  
wondrous things out of thy law.*

*Psalms 119:18 (RSV)*

<sup>2</sup>*preach the word, be urgent in season and out of season, convince, rebuke, and exhort, be unfailing in patience and in teaching. <sup>3</sup> For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own likings, <sup>4</sup> and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander into myths.*

*2 Timothy 4:2-4 (RSV)*

*“.....But this is the man to whom I will look, he that is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word.”*

*Isaiah 66:2 (b) (RSV)*

**‘Sola Scriptura’ – the Bible is the only proper source of truth and doctrine, not the Church and not other people.**

The Latin phrase ‘Sola Scriptura’ means ‘the Bible alone’. That was one of the great slogans of the Reformation of the sixteenth century. However, it was already well known to genuine, Bible-believing Christians and always had been, long before the Reformation. For example, a long line of men like John Wycliffe and William Tyndale had known it and taught it throughout the fifteen centuries before the Reformation.

So had Christian groups such as the Waldensians who were outside the Catholic church and had never lost the true gospel in the first place. Nevertheless, albeit belatedly, the evangelical reformers came out of the Roman Catholic church in huge numbers when they realised that we are in fact saved:

- a) *by grace alone,*
- b) *through faith alone,*
- c) *in Christ alone* and
- d) that all authority for teaching and doctrine comes *from the Bible alone*, not from the church and not from any man, least of all the Pope.

That last slogan, '*the Bible alone*' is very important. We need to be very clear on the question of where we can validly get our beliefs, doctrines and practices from. Otherwise, we might get them from any number of people or places and could become confused and deceived.

Even the Church itself is not a valid source of any doctrine. It has no authority to add to, take from, or alter anything that the Bible says. That includes the real Church, even where the people concerned are genuine. It is not the purpose of the Church to create, develop or adjust any doctrine whatsoever. All the doctrine that God has chosen to reveal to us is already set out within the Bible. There is no more, and will not be any more, until Jesus returns.

So, neither the Church as a whole, nor anybody within it, has any authority to add to, take away from, or change, anything that the Bible says:

<sup>5</sup> *Every word of God proves true;  
he is a shield to those who take refuge in him.*

<sup>6</sup> *Do not add to his words,  
lest he rebuke you, and you be found a liar.*  
*Proverbs 30:5-6 (RSV)*

<sup>18</sup> *I warn every one who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if any one adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book,<sup>19</sup> and if any one takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book.*

*Revelation 22:18-19 (RSV)*

It is mainly as a result of adding to or taking away from what the Bible says that all the past heresies and false doctrines were invented. That is how things like purgatory, priests and celibacy were thought up and brought into the churches by the so called "Church Fathers". (See below and also see Book Eight in this series)

However, the idea that the church is entitled to add to, take from or adjust what the Bible says is not just something that happened in the past. It is still happening now. Those who do this, even if they are not from the Roman Catholic church, feel entitled to adjust what the Bible says. Their argument is that "*It was the Church that gave us the Bible, so the Church can rewrite or reinterpret the Bible too*".

That line of reasoning is bogus, but it is used to justify changing what the Bible clearly teaches about such things as the need for elders to be male, the prohibition of divorce and remarriage, the wrongness of homosexual activity and so on. All these teachings are being reversed today by liberal churches, and even in many evangelical churches. They do so on the mistaken basis that the church is entitled to do so as it moves with the times and tries to keep in line with changing public opinion and fashions. However, it is *not* true that the Church has the right to revise or update the Bible.

It is not even true that the Church *gave* us the Bible to begin with. It did not. God Himself gave us the Bible through the prophets and apostles and it was He who inspired them. He was the real author of the Bible and therefore nobody has the right to alter anything the Bible says, not even the Church.

I emphasise this because it is no longer only the Pope who claims this supposed right to add to and alter what the Bible says. The practice has spread much farther afield. Therefore, even in evangelical churches, we must be on our guard against this illegitimate practice.

I emphasise this point about not adding to or taking away from God's Word because I have recently been corresponding with someone I know who is a member of the Roman Catholic church. I gave her a draft copy of Book One and she replied, criticising me on the basis that I rely solely on what the Bible says and never on what the Church says.

Her argument was that the Bible is not the *only* authority and that we need the Church as well. By that she meant the Roman Catholic church, which teaches that the Pope has equal authority to the Bible and can speak on God's behalf in order to add to what the Bible says.

I will quote a few of the objections that she made. I have edited out some of her points, because they are about other unrelated issues, but I have kept the meaning fully intact for those that are reproduced below. I will set out some extracts from her email to me (in italics) and then I will put my replies below them in ordinary font:

### **Objection 1**

*My problem is that the God you are writing about is not the one I know and love. My overall impression is that the one you are writing about is the God of the Old Testament whom the people of Israel were beginning to glimpse and whom the prophets by and large recognised more truthfully in his absolute "otherness" from our (humanity's) sad and woefully limited expectations. This is one reason why the leaders of the people by and large failed to recognise the true revelation of God in Jesus, he was so not what they were expecting.*

### **Response 1**

Let me begin by challenging your phrase '*the God of the Old Testament*'. It is widely used but it wrongly implies that God used to be a certain kind of person but that He is now different, or at least that He behaves differently. That is not the case. God was the same at every stage in the past and He will remain the same at all future times. We know from the book of Malachi that God does not change:

***"For I, the LORD, do not change..."***  
***Malachi 4:6(a)***

I gather that the particular aspects of God's nature and future intentions that you do not accept are primarily to do with Him being about to judge the world, punish sin and sentence vast numbers of people to spend eternity in the Lake of Fire. You approach all of that, as many people do, by suggesting that that was how He *used to* operate in the days of the Old Testament but that He no longer does.

The problem is that the Bible does not support what you say. On the contrary, the vast majority of what we know about Hell and the Lake of Fire (two separate places) was told to us directly out of the mouth of Jesus Christ Himself. Therefore it comes from the *New Testament*, for example:

<sup>21</sup>“You have heard that the ancients were told, ‘You shall not commit murder’ and ‘Whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court.’ <sup>22</sup>But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court; and whoever says to his brother, ‘You good-for-nothing,’ shall be guilty before the supreme court; and whoever says, ‘You fool,’ shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell.”

*Matthew 5:21-22 (NASB)*

<sup>27</sup>“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery’; <sup>28</sup>but I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart. <sup>29</sup>If your right eye makes you stumble, tear it out and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. <sup>30</sup>If your right hand makes you stumble, cut it off and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to go into hell.

*Matthew 5:27-30 (NASB)*

<sup>28</sup>Do not fear those who kill the body but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell. <sup>29</sup>Are not two sparrows sold for a cent? And yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. <sup>30</sup>But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. <sup>31</sup>So do not fear; you are more valuable than many sparrows. <sup>32</sup>“Therefore everyone who confesses Me before men, I will also confess him before My Father who is in heaven. <sup>33</sup>But whoever denies Me before men, I will also deny him before My Father who is in heaven.

*Matthew 10:28-33 (NASB)*

<sup>20</sup>Then He began to denounce the cities in which most of His miracles were done, because they did not repent. <sup>21</sup>“Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles had occurred in Tyre and Sidon which occurred in you, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. <sup>22</sup>Nevertheless I say to you, it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon in the day of judgment than for you. <sup>23</sup>And you, Capernaum, will not be exalted to heaven, will you? You will descend to Hades; for if the miracles had occurred in Sodom which occurred in you, it would have remained to this day. <sup>24</sup>Nevertheless I say to you that it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment, than for you.”

*Matthew 11:20-24 (NASB)*

These are just a few examples. There are many more that could have been quoted. Note that all of those statements are from the *New Testament*. Moreover, they were made by Jesus Himself, not by a prophet on His behalf. Thus we have to accept that that is how the judgment will be. Jesus is very clear about it. What is more, we are told in various places that it is *Jesus Himself* who is going to be the Judge. He is the one who will sentence people:

<sup>42</sup>And He ordered us to preach to the people, and solemnly to testify that this is the One who has been appointed by God as Judge of the living and the dead. <sup>43</sup>Of Him all the prophets bear witness that through His name everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins.”

*Acts 10:42-43 (NASB)*

Many people prefer to focus on what verse 43 above says about Jesus and forgiveness. Yet verse 42, which concerns judgment, is equally true. Moreover it is specifically speaking of *Jesus Himself* being the Judge, not God the Father. That point is made even more clearly later in Acts:

<sup>31</sup>because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead.”

*Acts 17:31 (NASB)*

Accordingly, however much it might distress us to think about judgment and punishment, we cannot and must not hide the fact that those are things that God will do. Indeed, Jesus Himself will be the

Judge. If we do hide, or even understate those facts, then we are constructing a false image of God based on what we would *prefer Him to be*, rather than what *He says He is*. We have no right to do that. Neither does it help ourselves, nor anybody else, if we do so.

You are correct that the majority of the Jewish people of Jesus' day did not recognise Him. However that was primarily because they had focused their minds on one aspect of how they expected the Messiah to be, i.e. a conquering King who will judge the nations and lift Israel up to be the leading nation on earth.

They focused on that, *all of which is perfectly true*, because they *liked* those aspects of what the Messiah would be. They did not like the idea of Him also (and firstly) being a suffering servant who would die for His people and for the world. They did not relish such an image of the Messiah, even though Isaiah clearly prophesied that He would also be like that.

So, the Jewish people of the first century were wrong to reject the idea of the Messiah being a suffering servant and to insist on Him being *only* a conquering King and Judge. But we are equally wrong today if we insist on seeing Jesus *only* as a suffering servant and not as a conquering King and Judge. The truth is that He is *all* of those things, and more besides.

Therefore we see the real Jesus not by restricting ourselves only to those features of His which we prefer, but by accepting *everything* that the Bible says about Him, whether or not we like the sound of it. To do otherwise is to come dangerously close to disobeying what apostle John said in Revelation chapter 22. He warned us not to add anything to, or take anything away from, what the book of Revelation was saying. The same applies to all of God's Word. We must take it as it is, without adding, subtracting or altering anything:

***<sup>18</sup>I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues which are written in this book; <sup>19</sup>and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his part from the tree of life and from the holy city, which are written in this book.***

***Revelation 22:18-19 (NASB)***

## **Objection 2**

*The Bible without a Christian community to which it belongs and out of which it grew is like a chap with one leg - unbalanced. I agree with you that the Bible is of vital importance, but so is the church (Christian community in its many shapes, forms and guises) and one without the other leads to all sorts of imbalance - as we see with the myriad of exclusively Bible-focused denominations, each with their own unique interpretation of Scripture, or with a church like the Roman Catholic which is also unbalanced because its people don't read the Bible in order to get to know Jesus better. All are losers. I see the two, Scripture and church, as totally interdependent.*

## **Response 2**

If all you mean is that we need the Bible and we also need Church, or Christian community as you put it, then that is clearly correct. Who could argue otherwise? We are plainly told that we need the Bible. We are also plainly told that we need to be part of the Church and to be actively involved in it as a setting within which we can learn and grow. So far, so good. Where the difficulty arises is if we start to say, as the Roman Catholic church does say, any of the following things:

- a) that each of us individually is not '*qualified*' to understand the Bible for ourselves and that its meaning has to be decided for us, and explained to us, by the leaders of the Roman Catholic church. In fact, we do not need the Roman Catholic church to do this on our behalf. Nor do we need any other church, for that matter.

b) that the leadership of the Roman Catholic church is entitled to add to what the Bible says and to provide new teaching and form new doctrine which is not found anywhere in the Bible. Examples of this would include the concepts of:

- the papacy
- the priesthood
- purgatory
- limbo (for unbaptised babies)
- oral confession to a ‘priest’, instead of confessing our sins directly to God, or to one another, as the Bible tells us to do.
- ‘saints’
- the veneration (or even worship) of Mary
- the veneration of ‘saints’
- praying to ‘saints’
- the supposed sinlessness of Mary
- indulgences
- the wearing of scapulars
- relics
- infant baptism
- the idea of the church being a huge hierarchy, with layer upon layer of people in authority over others. Instead, what the Bible presents to us is a network of individual, local churches, all of which are fully independent and equal and not under the authority of any outsider.
- the idea of a single bishop (*episkopos*) ruling over a whole region (called a diocese) instead of being simply one of a *group* of elders or overseers who are all *within* an individual local church, as they are described in the Bible.
- the concept of there being such a thing as ‘clergy’, as distinct from ‘lay’ people (the Bible creates no such distinctions or groups and treats all Christians exactly the same)
- the supposed *eternal virginity of Mary* (even though she was a married woman and the Bible expressly states that Joseph did not ‘know’ Mary *until* after Jesus was born. It also refers to, and even names, other sons that she had. It refers to Jesus having sisters too. It could hardly be any clearer that they lived as a normal married couple. Moreover, Jewish law, and indeed the law of virtually every nation, requires consummation in order for there to be a marriage. If there is no consummation there is no marriage. At any rate, there are grounds for an annulment. On that basis, if Mary and Joseph did not consummate their marriage, which they clearly did after Jesus was born, they would have remained unmarried. Had that been the case, Jesus would have been brought up by a couple who were not validly married. That state of affairs would have been dishonouring to Jesus and also to Mary and Joseph.)

The above list of man-made doctrines is far from being exhaustive. There are many other practices and doctrines within Roman Catholicism which are nowhere to be found in the Bible. It is not merely a question of interpretation; the things they do and teach simply *aren't in the Bible at all*. Indeed, in many cases they are the *direct opposite* of what is taught in the Bible.

The Roman Catholic church actually accepts the fact that many of that these things are not in the Bible. It meets that objection head on by saying that the leaders of the Roman Catholic church are *entitled* to develop and add to the teachings of the Bible. During the Middle Ages they began to teach that the Popes were not only equal to the Bible, but effectively higher than it. Thus they claim to be entitled to rule on what it means and also to add to it. When they do so they claim that those new teachings are equal to, or even higher than, what the Bible says.

So, while I would fully agree with you that we need both the Bible and the Church, I cannot accept that they should interact in the ways described above. The Church cannot give rise to wholly new teachings and practices not found in the Bible. The Church is not a supplement to the Bible. Neither is it a source of ongoing additional revelation from God. The canon of Scripture is closed. Therefore no new doctrine will be revealed to us, at least not until after Jesus returns to the earth.

In short, the Bible is the Bible and the Church is the Church. They are entirely different things and were created for different purposes and roles. Thus we are to obtain all our doctrine from the Bible and none at all from the Church or from anybody within it. Men can, of course, *teach* the Bible.

But when they do so they are merely to set out their views as to its meaning and application. They are not to add to it or create their own brand new or additional doctrines. Moreover, it is then the duty of every individual believer, to decide for himself whether that teacher is right or wrong on any given point.

One cannot and must not delegate that duty to any other man, whatever title or role he claims for himself. Nobody has ‘*authority*’ over us to tell us what we must believe or how we must interpret anything. On the contrary, every teacher must simply give out his teaching in an attitude of humility and gentleness. Then he must leave it to each individual to judge for himself what is right and to reject whatever is not right.

The classic example of this is seen in the book of Acts, where Paul himself, probably the greatest teacher and Bible scholar who ever lived, was teaching at Berea, having just left Thessalonica. Luke tells us that the people of Berea listened to Paul *but then went away and checked everything he said* against the Scriptures (the Old Testament) to see whether it was true or not:

***<sup>10</sup>The brethren immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea, and when they arrived, they went into the synagogue of the Jews. <sup>11</sup>Now these were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so.***

*Acts 17:10-11 (NASB)*

Far from criticising the people of Berea for this testing of Paul’s teaching, or being affronted by it, Luke praised them highly. We should all be like the Bereans and exercise the same diligent scrutiny of everything we hear or read, *whoever it comes from*. That is the proper duty of each individual member of the Church.

We are meant to decide *for ourselves* what is true and what is false. We can certainly be helped by leaders and teachers but we can never abdicate our own personal responsibility or accept any other man as being “*in authority*” over us in relation to the Bible or within the church generally.

You may wish to refer to Book Eight on “*Biblical and unbiblical churches*” for a fuller examination of the whole subject of authority and what it means and doesn’t mean. What the Catholic church and also most Protestant churches do, whereby certain men are supposedly in authority over us, is an idea created solely by men. It is nowhere to be found in the Bible. Indeed, it is the very opposite of what the Bible teaches.

### Objection 3

*I'm saying this as the impression I got from your writing is that the Bible is of supreme and overriding importance and I question that. Jesus did not come to give us the Bible but to inaugurate God's kingdom on earth, a kingdom which is continuing, developing, growing and which the Spirit is guiding, even with all the mistakes and misunderstandings we all contribute to it! This kingdom is not set in stone but in the blueprint of the life of Jesus and then the early Church, which we read about in Scripture and which is lived out in each age and culture in a slightly different way - God is a God of tremendous variety after all. The principles are of course true for all time but their expression will be richly varied.*

### Response 3

It depends what you mean when you suggest that I present the Bible as being “*of supreme and overriding importance.*” It clearly is that, in the sense set out in my responses above. However, the Bible *itself* is not something which we are to worship. Its value and importance is derived from the fact that it is *God's Word*. Every page of it contains what He is saying to us. Nevertheless, we are not to focus on the Bible for its own sake, as if it was some relic or shrine. We do so because it contains, in written form, the very thoughts and words of God. He not only desires, but commands, us to study these.

So, we are to pore over the Bible with great care and attentiveness, because of *who* wrote it and sent it to us, just as a young woman would do with letters sent to her by her fiancé. The letters themselves are not the issue, nor the paper, nor the ink, but the one who wrote them and sent them to her. Thus, when we see her reading and re-reading his letters, we do not say, “*There's a woman who loves letters.*” We say “*There's a woman who is in love with the sender of those letters.*”

Accordingly, we would not misunderstand her emphasis on those letters or criticise her for the time she spends re-reading them. We know full well that her real devotion is directed towards her fiancé, not the letters themselves. The letters are only valued because *he* sent them and because they contain *his* words, *his* feelings and *his* thoughts.

Indeed, far from criticising her for the attention she pays to his letters, we would be surprised and concerned if she did *not* read them and re-read them. Imagine her leaving his letters partly or totally unread, or perhaps reading them only once and then putting them away in some drawer, not to be thought of any further. We would question the true extent of her love for that young man, and with good reason.

So, we are not to worship or idolise the Bible. However the time we spend studying the Bible, and the diligence we show in doing so, can rightly be seen as a form of worship of God Himself. Indeed, amongst the Jewish people, study of the Bible was seen by many as being the very highest form of worship. Worship is to “*ascribe worth*” to God and what more sincere way is there to do that than by *studying* His Word - learning it, memorising it and applying it?

Turning next to your assertion that Jesus “*did not come to give us the Bible, but to inaugurate God's Kingdom on earth...*” it seems to me that you are confusing two separate things and/or assuming that the latter precludes the former. You say that Jesus did not come to bring us the Bible. However, one of His very names is “*the Word*”:

***In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.***

***John 1:1 (NASB)***

***<sup>14</sup>And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.***

***John 1:14 (NASB)***

Moreover, Jesus Himself was involved in the process by which the Bible was given to us, for example:

- a) The gospels contain His teaching and He is directly quoted within them as well as written about.
- b) Apostle Paul received His teaching by direct revelation given to him personally by Jesus Christ Himself when he was carried up into Heaven. Paul was shown and told things that went far beyond what the other apostles knew:

*Boasting is necessary, though it is not profitable; but I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. <sup>2</sup>I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago—whether in the body I do not know, or out of the body I do not know, God knows—such a man was caught up to the third heaven. <sup>3</sup>And I know how such a man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, God knows <sup>4</sup>was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which a man is not permitted to speak. <sup>5</sup>On behalf of such a man I will boast; but on my own behalf I will not boast, except in regard to my weaknesses. <sup>6</sup>For if I do wish to boast I will not be foolish, for I will be speaking the truth; but I refrain from this, so that no one will credit me with more than he sees in me or hears from me. <sup>7</sup>Because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me—to keep me from exalting myself!*

*2 Corinthians 12:1-7 (NASB)*

- c) Likewise, apostle John was given a major revelation on the island of Patmos. Jesus appeared to him and showed him what would happen in the future. He wrote what Jesus told him to write:

*The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show to His bond-servants, the things which must soon take place; and He sent and communicated it by His angel to His bond-servant John, <sup>2</sup>who testified to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw.*

*Revelation 1:1-2 (NASB)*

*<sup>9</sup>I, John, your brother and fellow partaker in the tribulation and kingdom and perseverance which are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. <sup>10</sup>I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like the sound of a trumpet, <sup>11</sup>saying, "Write in a book what you see, and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea."*

*Revelation 1:9-11 (NASB)*

*<sup>17</sup>When I saw Him, I fell at His feet like a dead man. And He placed His right hand on me, saying, "Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, <sup>18</sup>and the living One; and I was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of death and of Hades. <sup>19</sup>Therefore write the things which you have seen, and the things which are, and the things which will take place after these things."*

*Revelation 1:17-19 (NASB)*

- d) There is also very good reason to believe that Jesus was directly involved in the giving of the Law to Moses. In particular, it seems that it was He who wrote the 10 commandments on the tablets of stone for Moses with His own finger.

*<sup>10</sup>The Lord gave me the two tablets of stone written by the finger of God; and on them were all the words which the Lord had spoken with you at the mountain from the midst of the fire on the day of the assembly.*

*Deuteronomy 9:10 (NASB)*

This passage is probably being alluded to in John's gospel when Jesus writes in the dust on the ground with His finger when dealing with the men who were holding the woman who had been caught in the act of adultery:

*<sup>3</sup>The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman caught in adultery, and having set her in the center of the court, <sup>4</sup>they said to Him, "Teacher, this woman has been caught in adultery, in the very act. <sup>5</sup>Now in the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women; what then do You say?" <sup>6</sup>They were saying this, testing Him, so that they might have grounds for accusing Him. But Jesus stooped down and with His finger wrote on the ground. <sup>7</sup>But when they persisted in asking Him, He straightened up, and said to them, "He who is without sin among you, let him be the first to throw a stone at her." <sup>8</sup>Again He stooped down and wrote on the ground.*

*John 8:3-8 (NASB)*

As Jesus wrote with His finger it would appear that He was drawing their attention to the fact that it was He Himself who had written the commandments in the first place. Thus He was far better placed than those men to say what ought to happen to that woman.

Let's turn now to your final point when you say:

*"This kingdom is not set in stone but in the blueprint of the life of Jesus and then the early Church, which we read about in Scripture and which is lived out in each age and culture in a slightly different way - God is a God of tremendous variety after all. The principles are of course true for all time but their expression will be richly varied."*

You said all this in the context of arguing that Jesus did not come to give us the Bible, but to inaugurate God's Kingdom and also in the context of questioning whether the Bible is of supreme and overriding importance. What you appear to be saying, or hinting at, is that:

- a) What the Bible says is not the highest or final authority that we have.
- b) What the Bible says is not permanent or unchangeable. Therefore what it teaches can be added to, or even altered, by the pronouncements of Popes over the centuries, such that doctrine can grow and develop.
- c) Taking together a) and b) above, one has to conclude that the ultimate or highest authority is not what the Bible says, but what the church says. More precisely, it is what the Popes say. Although you suggest at various points that the Bible and the church exist alongside each other as equal sources of authority, the reality is that there can never be two highest authorities. One or other must ultimately prevail. The Roman Catholic church believes that the Pope is not only equal to, but effectively higher than, the Bible. That must be so, because he can not only interpret it but also add to it, and even alter it. By contrast, I believe that the Bible reveals all that God has chosen to tell us and that nothing at all will be added to it until after Jesus returns. Therefore no man, least of all the Pope, is qualified to add to or subtract from what it says or to alter its meaning in any way.

You also imply that what the Bible teaches must be allowed to adapt and move around with flexibility as time passes and also depending on what culture or race we belong to. That is a popular view and is often advocated. However, it cannot be right. The Bible does not merely teach *principles* which we (or our leaders) can then implement and adapt as seems most appropriate in the context of our culture or our time in history. Biblical principles are permanent. That said, the Bible also teaches *facts* as well as principles. Those cannot be moulded, edited, reinterpreted or added to by anybody.

Therefore, for example, when the Bible teaches that salvation can be found only in Jesus Christ, that is equally true in the twenty first century as in the first. It is also equally true in Europe, Asia, Africa,

America and so on. There is no scope for modifying or relaxing that fact so as to accommodate other people's views or traditions. What Jesus said is either true or it isn't. Likewise, all of what the apostles said is either true or it isn't. Our proper task therefore is not to reinterpret, modernise or modify what they said, but simply to *find out* what they said and then to obey it.

#### **Objection 4**

*...your claim that "God wants you to read it all" (i.e. the whole Bible) Do please tell me how you can make this categorical statement about what God wants - on the basis of what? "Who can know the mind of the Lord or who can be his counsellor?"*

#### **Response 4**

There are many reasons why I feel able to say that God wants all of us, not just leaders and teachers, to read the whole Bible rather than just limit ourselves to favourite passages. Firstly, we only see the whole truth when we read the whole Bible and realise how inter-connected it is. The Bible regularly alludes to other passages or events. Therefore you could only understand any part of it properly if you also knew about those other passages to which it is referring. But those are all over the Bible. Therefore, as I mentioned earlier, we need the whole Bible to be able to say we have the truth because only the whole Bible provides the full picture and the whole truth:

*The sum of thy word is truth;  
and every one of thy righteous ordinances endures for ever  
Psalm 119:160 (RSV)*

In other words, whereas every verse of the Bible is "true", only the Bible as a whole can be called "the truth." That is because everything the Bible says needs to be read and understood within the context of the whole book or letter within which it is said and also within the wider context of the whole Bible. Jesus and His disciples were constantly quoting from, or obliquely alluding to, passages from the Old Testament. But you would never know that unless you knew about those other passages or events which are being referred to.

A second reason is that God has commanded that His laws and precepts should be kept diligently. But how can anybody *keep them diligently* unless they first *know exactly what they are*? And how can one know all that without *reading them all*?

*You have commanded your precepts  
to be kept diligently.*

*<sup>5</sup>Oh that my ways may be steadfast  
in keeping your statutes!*

*<sup>6</sup>Then I shall not be put to shame,  
having my eyes fixed on all your commandments.*

*<sup>7</sup>I will praise you with an upright heart,  
when I learn your righteous rules.*

*<sup>8</sup>I will keep your statutes;  
do not utterly forsake me!*

*Beth*

*<sup>9</sup>How can a young man keep his way pure?  
By guarding it according to your word.*

*<sup>10</sup>With my whole heart I seek you;  
let me not wander from your commandments!*

*<sup>11</sup>I have stored up your word in my heart,  
that I might not sin against you.*

*<sup>12</sup>Blessed are you, O Lord;*

*teach me your statutes!*  
<sup>13</sup>*With my lips I declare*  
*all the rules of your mouth.*  
<sup>14</sup>*In the way of your testimonies I delight*  
*as much as in all riches.*  
<sup>15</sup>*I will meditate on your precepts*  
*and fix my eyes on your ways.*  
<sup>16</sup>*I will delight in your statutes;*  
*I will not forget your word.*  
*Psalm 119:4-16 (ESV)*

Note also that in verse 13 above, the Psalmist says that he will *declare all* of God's rules/decrees. How could he possibly do that unless he *reads all* of God's Word?

The above is just one sample passage. There are many others where we are commanded to rely on and abide by *all* of God's laws, decrees, precepts, statutes, commands, promises, ways, principles, words, testimonies, instructions, ordinances etc. That obligation is beyond dispute. But how can we obey or abide by all of those things unless we first know what they all are? And how can we know what they all are without reading them all? Moreover, how can we know whether or not a book or letter contains any of the precepts, principles, decrees, ways and so on that we are meant to learn and abide by unless we have read all of it?

In other words, how can we say, until after we have read them, that the less well known books like Isaiah or Ezekiel or Romans and so on are unnecessary or unprofitable? The only way you could reach that conclusion would be by reading them. No fair-minded person could advocate a policy of rejecting or discrediting them before they have even been read. That being so, it follows logically that we must read all of the Bible, even if only to decide whether to obey it.

Thirdly, if one stops to think about it for a moment, it is self-evident that God wants us to read and study the whole Bible rather than just parts (or none) of it. The clue comes from the fact that it is *God's Word* as opposed to anybody else's word. If we accept that what is written is God's own Word, not just men's writings, then why do we even need to ask whether we *should* read it all, or whether we *need* to read it all or are *obliged* to do so etc? It is completely obvious.

Surely the burden of proof is entirely the other way round. It is for those who believe that we do *not* need to read all of God's Word to prove that we *don't* need to do so. In the absence of such proof, then we are safe to assume that the very status of the writer, i.e. God Himself, makes it plain what we are to do and how highly we are to value what He has written, or caused to be written. That should clearly be our general default-setting.

Nevertheless, if you would like to see some verses which directly support the proposition that we should read *all* of God's Word, not just parts of it, then let's look at a few. There are many others too. The best place to start might be Paul's second letter to Timothy:

*<sup>16</sup>All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, <sup>17</sup>that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.*  
*2 Timothy 3:16-17 (RSV)*

Paul says that these various attributes and benefits apply to *all* Scripture. How much clearer could he be? Paul means that it is *all inspired* and that it is *all profitable*. That being so, why would we want to leave any of it unread? He then sets out various reasons why it is so profitable, as we saw earlier.

The Psalmist greatly expands on those reasons, particularly within Psalm 119. It is no coincidence that the longest psalm is the one which sets out the Psalmist's love for the Scriptures and lists the numerous different benefits which it brings to us if we study it and cherish it. I go into these in some

detail in chapter one of this book, so please refer to that chapter. However, these two short extracts would be especially useful to look at here:

<sup>7</sup> *I will praise thee with an upright heart,  
when I learn thy righteous ordinances.*  
<sup>8</sup> *I will observe thy statutes;  
O forsake me not utterly!*  
<sup>9</sup> *How can a young man keep his way pure?  
By guarding it according to thy word.*  
<sup>10</sup> *With my whole heart I seek thee;  
let me not wander from thy commandments!*  
<sup>11</sup> *I have laid up thy word in my heart,  
that I might not sin against thee.*  
*Psalm 119:7-11 (RSV)*

<sup>33</sup> *Teach me, O Lord, the way of thy statutes;  
and I will keep it to the end.*  
<sup>34</sup> *Give me understanding, that I may keep thy law  
and observe it with my whole heart.*  
<sup>35</sup> *Lead me in the path of thy commandments,  
for I delight in it.*  
<sup>36</sup> *Incline my heart to thy testimonies,  
and not to gain!*  
<sup>37</sup> *Turn my eyes from looking at vanities;  
and give me life in thy ways.*  
<sup>38</sup> *Confirm to thy servant thy promise,  
which is for those who fear thee.*  
*Psalm 119:33-38 (RSV)*

These extracts indicate the attitude the Psalmist had to all of God's Word, not just to certain parts of it. Also, how could anybody say that God wants only the Psalmist to feel that way about His Word and that the rest of us should not or need not? Likewise, if the Psalmist was right to feel that way, as he clearly was, then how can we say that he was only referring to certain favourite passages of Scripture? He plainly means the whole Bible.

The Psalmist uses virtually every word you can think of to list the different features or qualities of Scripture that he cherishes. Can you imagine the Psalmist, if he was alive today, limiting himself to reading bits of the gospels but ignoring Paul's letters and most of the Old Testament? Yet that is exactly what many people do. I know because they have told me.

You go on to challenge my assertion that we should study all of God's Word by asking "*Who can know the mind of the LORD or who can be His counselor.*" You imply that because we do not know *all* of God's mind, we cannot know *any* of what he wants or thinks? We clearly do not know all of God's thoughts on all subjects, because He has not disclosed all of them to us. Nevertheless, we can certainly know His mind *on those thoughts which He has disclosed to us*. The Bible sets out very clearly where God stands and what He thinks on a host of issues. It is particularly clear concerning His wish for us to know and cherish His written Word, as Ezra did:

<sup>10</sup> *For Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach his statutes and ordinances in Israel.*  
*Ezra 7:10 (RSV)*

Finally, let us take note of what the prophet Samuel said to King Saul when Saul had disobeyed God's instructions. Saul sought to justify himself by saying that although he hadn't done what he had been commanded to do, he and the people had, nonetheless, offered sacrifices to the LORD. Samuel

replied by making it clear to Saul that even if we do offer sacrifices to the LORD or the equivalent in terms of worship etc, what really counts to God is that we should:

- a) *hear* His voice (hearken) and
- b) *obey* what He says.

<sup>21</sup> ***But the people took of the spoil, sheep and oxen, the best of the things devoted to destruction, to sacrifice to the Lord your God in Gilgal.*** <sup>22</sup> ***And Samuel said,***

***“Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams.***

<sup>23</sup> ***For rebellion is as the sin of divination, and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the Lord, he has also rejected you from being king.”***

***1 Samuel 15:21-23 (RSV)***

Now, if God is telling us through this episode that He wants us to hear and obey His Word, then what other conclusion can we reach but that we must seek to find out what He has said? But that requires us to read His written Word. How else can we know it in order to obey it? Or, are you going to argue that what Samuel said only applied to *King Saul*, or that it only applied to situations where God's Word is spoken to you *verbally* by one of His prophets? If so, what would be your authority for that? Moreover, if that was the case, why would Jesus have rebuked His own generation for failing to pay attention to the *written* prophecies of Daniel which spelled out when the Messiah would come?

We know for sure that God wants us to *obey* His written Word. That cannot be denied. But if we accept that we are meant to obey it then it must follow that we are to read it, and to read all of it. Imagine a soldier who has been given written orders from his commanding officer which he is supposed to carry out. What would be said to that officer if, on receiving the written orders, which run to many pages with maps, diagrams and explanatory text, he was to put them to one side without reading them? Or what if he was just to skim-read some of the main parts of the orders? What would happen to him at his Court Martial if his defence was conducted along these two lines of reasoning:

*“Firstly, I do of course accept that I am supposed to obey orders, but I didn't realise that I was actually meant to read them. Secondly, I would have obeyed if the General had been present and had spoken his instructions to me, but I didn't realise that he expected me to treat his written orders as being equal to him instructing me verbally, face to face.”*

Look now at this passage from 2 Kings. It relates to the way the people of Israel failed to listen to, or obey, what God had said through Moses and the prophets:

<sup>13</sup> ***Yet the Lord warned Israel and Judah through all His prophets and every seer, saying, “Turn from your evil ways and keep My commandments, My statutes according to all the law which I commanded your fathers, and which I sent to you through My servants the prophets.”***

***2 Kings 17:13 (NASB)***

Note that in the above verse we are told that God wanted His people, Israel, to keep His commandments and statutes according to *all* the law, i.e. all the Law of Moses. That means all of the first five books of the Bible. It also states that they were meant to keep all that was sent to them via the prophets. So, that means the whole of the rest of the Old Testament, because it was all written by a variety of different prophets.

In other words, the people are being rebuked because they did not abide by what God had said to them via *the whole Old Testament*, not just the five books of Moses and not just any particular prophet. So God does not distinguish between the books of the Bible or imply that some are more important and others less so. They are all to be taken note of and obeyed. But if that was God's expectation of them, why should we assume that He would expect less of us? Surely He would require at least the same of us, or even more, since it is so much easier for us to get access to God's Word than it was for them.

In this next verse the people are criticised because they did not obey *all* that Moses had commanded, i.e. all of the five books he wrote. Admittedly it is only referring to those five books, but the point here is that God expected them to listen to, and do, *all* that Moses had said, not just parts of it:

*<sup>12</sup>because they did not obey the voice of the Lord their God, but transgressed His covenant, even all that Moses the servant of the Lord commanded; they would neither listen nor do it*

*2 Kings 18:12 (NASB)*

If the people disobeyed *all* of what Moses said, then that must imply that they were obliged to obey *all* that he said. But how could they obey or disobey *all* of it without first reading/hearing *all* of it? Surely I am just stating the downright obvious? If so, why argue against it, unless one's real motive is that one actually dislikes some of the things that the Bible says, or else that one simply doesn't want to make the effort to read it all?

## **Objection 5**

*This gives the impression that one can become a Christian in isolation from any Christian community, in which case we can expect a billion or so new denominations!*

## **Response 5**

Strictly speaking, a person can, and does, *become* a Christian entirely on their own. It is an individual decision which each person can and must take by themselves. They have to repent, believe, be baptised in water and receive the Holy Spirit. All of that is done by and to the individual without necessarily involving any community, though fellow believers can certainly help.

However, from that point on, if we speak of *growing* as a disciple or *continuing* in the Christian life, then there is undoubtedly a need for the Church. That is one reason why we are commanded to meet together with other believers locally:

*<sup>24</sup>and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, <sup>25</sup>not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near.*

*Hebrews 10:24-25 (NASB)*

Accordingly, we are definitely meant to meet together with other believers for fellowship, discipling, teaching, worship, and so on. But that does not mean that we delegate to that group, or to its leadership, any of our own personal responsibility to read, study and interpret the Scriptures for ourselves (see Book Eight for more detail).

As for the forming of 'denominations', they do sometimes arise as a result of people reading the Bible and seeing that their current Church is teaching error. However, that would only justify the establishment of a new *local church*, not a denomination. They tend to arise as a consequence of the unbiblical way in which most churches are conducted. Biblically, there is only one Church. It consists of all *genuine* believers, wherever and whenever they live/lived. That is what the Bible means by *the Church*.

However, there are multitudes of individual, independent, self-governing, local churches. These are small groups of people “*assembled together.*” Indeed, the Greek word ‘*ekklesia*’, which is translated as ‘church’, means an ‘*assembly*’, i.e. a group of people who meet. It does not mean a denomination.

The concept of a ‘denomination’ is alien to the Bible and does not occur within it. All churches referred to in the Bible are independent, self-governing and led by their own local elders. Denominations are a man-made idea, the first of which was the Roman Catholic Church. All the others which have been formed since share, though to a lesser extent, its authoritarian and hierarchical characteristics.

At any rate, the point under discussion is that all of us are simultaneously under a duty to study the Bible for ourselves and yet, *also*, to meet together with other believers locally. These are by no means contradictory or mutually exclusive objectives. Otherwise the Bible would not have told us to do both.

As to why denominations arise, it has very little to do with individual Christians studying and interpreting the Bible for themselves. Instead, denominations tend to arise because sinful men have a craving for power, authority and control. They like to build empires consisting of many local churches over which they can then rule. They are not meant to do that. The Bible provides for each local church to be wholly independent. They are not meant to be led by one man. Neither are they meant to be supervised by any regional bishop, nor any national or international headquarters or Pope figure. No such things or people exist in the Bible.

First century local churches were each led by a group of about 3-10 mature men from *within* each church. They were called ‘*elders*’ or ‘*bishops*’. None of them were paid. Neither did they have any titles like ‘Reverend’ or ‘Father’. They were not priests and they did not wear special clothes or conduct rituals or special liturgies. They were ordinary local men and they were not subject to, or subservient to, any external person, structure, group or hierarchy.

There is another less sinister reason why denominations arise. Despite the fact that the Church is not meant to consist of hierarchical organisations, even sincere people have sometimes felt that the only way to differentiate themselves from denominations teaching false doctrine was to set up new ones teaching true doctrine. They don’t know that the concept of denominations is not biblical and therefore they see them as a good way to uphold right doctrine. It is viewed almost like a kite-mark which guarantees the authenticity of a product.

A classic example of this is the Methodists. John Wesley led a movement in the eighteenth century which was a reaction against the laxity, error and false teaching of the Church of England. After his death (*not before*) that movement became an organisation, or denomination, with a hierarchical structure of its own. Then, in due course, it too fell into error, became lax, and taught false doctrine. Sadly, that decline prompted many sincere people to leave Methodism and set up new churches. Alas, they too eventually made the same error of turning these into denominations, thus keeping the unfortunate cycle going.

So, your point is based on what I would consider to be a mistaken assumption. That is that you imply that the Church is meant to be one in the sense of being a single, organised, hierarchical structure led by one man, i.e. the Pope. Those who advocate this believe that we can then rely on him to keep our doctrines correct for us. That is the position of the Roman Catholic church. But it is wrong, as explained above. It is not the biblical basis or model for church. Indeed, it is the very opposite thereof.

Therefore the practice whereby each believer learns the Bible for himself and takes seriously his own responsibility to weigh the teaching of others and decide for himself what the Bible is saying, does not create denominations. How could it, given that the Bible does not tell us to create denominations?

It only ever tells us to start independent, self-governing local churches. What reading the Bible does is to create mature, responsible, biblically-literate individuals. They can then function as they are meant to within those independent, self-governing local churches. It has nothing to do with the forming of denominations.

Whereas you appear to see that autonomy, freedom and independence as a bad thing, or at least as a dangerous thing, I see it as good. At any rate, I see it as *biblical*. It is the only way for us to act like Bereans (see above) and to *contend earnestly for the faith*. That is what we are commanded to do, i.e. confronting and responding to error wherever we come across it:

***<sup>3</sup>Beloved, while I was making every effort to write you about our common salvation, I felt the necessity to write to you appealing that you contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all handed down to the saints.***

***Jude 3 (NASB)***

### **Objection 6**

*...Millions of practising pagans who "joined the church, not because they believed in the Bible or had repented." Of course not - they joined the church because they believed in the person Jesus Christ as God's Son, Saviour of the world, who died and rose again so that we might again enjoy fellowship with God. The New Testament had hardly been assembled at that point - people joined for the new life in Jesus that Christians witnessed to - it had absolutely nothing to do with believing in the Bible. Nowhere will you find any apostle saying belief in the Bible was essential; the Good News is not "believe in the Bible" but believe in the person Jesus Christ. The Bible is supplementary, important of course, but it is itself NOT the message, and without the Christian community, i.e. the church, there wouldn't have been the Bible - the two, Bible and community, go together.*

### **Response 6**

Let me deal with your various points in turn. Firstly you appear to be challenging my assertion that when the Emperor Constantine claimed to have become a Christian and effectively took over the visible church, multitudes of pagans came into the church but kept their pagan beliefs. I'm not sure what evidence you have to support your view that those pagans "*believed in the person Jesus Christ as God's Son...*" The evidence is that most of them did not believe anything of the sort, or at least not genuinely. In support of those assertions I would make two main points

a) If the flood of people who joined the church from A.D. 315 onwards were genuine, then why did they delay doing so until after the Emperor Constantine had joined the church and made it legal? Why didn't they join earlier when doing so would have invited persecution?

b) If those pagans were genuinely and thoroughly converted then why did they not immediately abandon their pagan beliefs and practices on joining the church? Instead, they brought their pagan beliefs and practices with them and kept them. Those were then incorporated into many (not all) of the churches so as to create the hybrid that we now know as the Roman Catholic Church. I say '*hybrid*' because Roman Catholicism is a combination of some elements of Christianity together with an equally large, or even larger, amount of paganism, plus other man-made ideas and traditions too. That mixing together of incompatible beliefs is where the things set out below came from. Like the longer list I made above, these are now central parts of Roman Catholicism:

- *Priests* – these are not found anywhere in the New Testament but they were found in the pagan temples.
- The many pagan and self-aggrandizing *titles* which the Popes adopted, for example '*Pontifex Maximus*', which was previously one of Caesar's titles.

- The word *Easter*, which comes from the goddess *Ishtar*, also known as Ashtaroth.
- *Saints* – a similar point arises with the misuse of this word. In Roman Catholicism a saint is believed to be a very special person who is elevated to that exalted status after their death. They are seen as someone to whom we can and should pray. But in the Bible the word ‘*saint*’ is only ever used to refer to *every ordinary believer*, in much the same way as we would use the word ‘Christian’. Moreover, it means *while they are still alive*. It does not carry any suggestion of having a special status.
- The *vestments* worn by priests. The New Testament contains no reference to priests, i.e. there is no such role. There is also no reference to special garments. However, the pagan priests did wear such garments, which match exactly what Roman Catholic priests still wear. This issue of vestments is not a minor point. It adds to the wider error of the creation of a special “*clergy class*,” which is nowhere to be found in the Bible. Indeed, Jesus deplores it, when speaking to apostle John in Revelation chapter two.

The very concept of a priest is not biblical. The only biblical way in which the word ‘priest’ is still in operation (until Jesus returns and sets up the Millennial Temple) is in the sense of *the priesthood of all believers*. In other words, every believer is described in the Bible as a priest:

***<sup>5</sup> and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the first-born of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth. To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood <sup>6</sup> and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.***  
***Revelation 1:5-6 (RSV)***

The Bible says that to indicate that we no longer require a priest, or anybody else, to represent us before God or to act as our intermediary. Every real Christian is now a priest and Jesus Himself is our High Priest and intercessor.

- The *veneration of Mary and child* – Mary is barely mentioned in the New Testament after the early chapters of Matthew and Luke. The same is true of Jesus as a baby. In fact, the first century Church paid little or no attention to Mary or to the infant Jesus. The ancient images which we see of a woman and child are not of Mary and the infant Jesus, but of *Semiramis and Tammuz* of Babylon or their Greek or Roman equivalents.

The worship of the ‘*Madonna*’ figure, i.e. the mother with child, dates all the way back to very early Babylon. Semiramis was the wife of *Nimrod*, who was the first world dictator, and therefore a ‘type’ of antichrist. His wife, Semiramis, was a brothel keeper and she became pregnant by another man. But to prevent any retribution from her husband, Nimrod, she had him, and the Babylonian priests, drugged. Then she had Nimrod killed by being torn apart and dismembered. When her child, Tammuz, was born she claimed that he was Nimrod reborn, i.e. reincarnated.

Therefore the figures of Semiramis and Tammuz, the mother and infant, became gods in pagan Babylonian religion. Moreover, the worship of these gods was transmitted onwards to virtually every other false religion in Greece, Rome, Scandinavia, India and many other places. That is why, all over the world, and in particular in Rome, there were statues of a woman with a baby. But the point is that these were not Mary and Jesus. They were Semiramis and Tammuz, or their Greek, Roman or other equivalents.

Moreover, because Nimrod’s body was torn apart the Babylonians made another monument in the form of a huge phallic symbol to represent his male member. This became known as an ‘*obelisk*’ and several of these were constructed in many different countries. Centuries later, in the European

colonial era, many of these were taken away and shipped over to the West. That is why there are now obelisks in Paris, London and even Washington DC.

Like the obelisks, the veneration of the statues of the mother and child began in Babylon and then spread all over the world, long before the time of Christ. In fact, the origin of the word 'Madonna' is as follows: The name given to Nimrod was 'Baal' meaning 'Lord'. The name given to Semiramis was 'Baalti' meaning 'My Lady'. That was subsequently Latinised and thus became 'Madonna', which is the name now used for statues of Mary.

However, the term was first used for *Semiramis*, not *Mary*. Moreover, it was not a term that first century Christians ever used in relation to Mary and, of course, she is not referred to in that way in the Bible. The apostles and first century Christians would have been horrified to see what later transpired and how the veneration (and worship) of Mary was imported into the churches by the pagans who joined it after the emperor Constantine's alleged conversion.

Mary is also referred to within the Catholic church, but *not* the Bible, as "*the Queen of heaven*". That is not an appropriate way to refer to the real Mary. It is not what she actually is and it is not how she would describe herself. Neither did anybody in the Bible or in the early church ever call her that. Who then is the real "*Queen of heaven*" and where does the phrase come from? The answer is that it is *Semiramis*, also known as *Ishtar*, the Babylonian fertility goddess, who was also later called *Venus* by the Romans.

When the early Roman Catholic church began to absorb and adopt the beliefs and practices of the pagans, it took over this concept of the Queen of heaven. They 'Christianized' the practice and applied it to Mary instead of Venus, Ishtar or Semiramis. Surely, no right-thinking person can deny that it was wrong for them to do that. It is equally wrong for any of us today to continue to use that title, 'Queen of heaven', for Mary, or indeed to idolize her in any way whatsoever.

Here is what God had to say about the so called Queen of heaven via the prophet Jeremiah. She is clearly identified as a false goddess and we see that the people's worship of her appalled and angered God:

***17 Do you not see what they do in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem? 18 The children gather wood, the fathers kindle the fire, and the women knead dough, to make cakes for the queen of heaven; and they pour out drink offerings to other gods, that they may provoke Me to anger. 19 Do they provoke Me to anger?" says the Lord. "Do they not provoke themselves, to the shame of their own faces?" 20 Therefore thus says the Lord God: "Behold, My anger and My fury will be poured out on this place—on man and on beast, on the trees of the field and on the fruit of the ground. And it will burn and not be quenched."***

***Jeremiah 7:17-20 (NKJV)***

We also see that the people of Jeremiah's day had the same stubborn determination to emphasise the Queen of heaven that we see today within Catholicism. They preferred to rely on her and trust in her than God Himself. They also insisted on believing that it was she who helped them and that they should continue to worship her and offer sacrifices to her, despite everything that the prophets had said about how this idolatry angered God.

***15 Then all the men who knew that their wives had burned incense to other gods, with all the women who stood by, a great multitude, and all the people who dwelt in the land of Egypt, in Pathros, answered Jeremiah, saying: 16 "As for the word that you have spoken to us in the name of the Lord, we will not listen to you! 17 But we will certainly do whatever has gone out of our own mouth, to burn incense to the queen of heaven and pour out drink offerings to her, as we have done, we and our fathers, our kings and our princes, in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem. For then we had plenty of food, were well-off, and saw no trouble. 18 But since we***

*stopped burning incense to the queen of heaven and pouring out drink offerings to her, we have lacked everything and have been consumed by the sword and by famine.”*

*<sup>19</sup> The women also said, “And when we burned incense to the queen of heaven and poured out drink offerings to her, did we make cakes for her, to worship her, and pour out drink offerings to her without our husbands’ permission?”*

*<sup>20</sup> Then Jeremiah spoke to all the people—the men, the women, and all the people who had given him that answer—saying: <sup>21</sup> “The incense that you burned in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem, you and your fathers, your kings and your princes, and the people of the land, did not the Lord remember them, and did it not come into His mind? <sup>22</sup> So the Lord could no longer bear it, because of the evil of your doings and because of the abominations which you committed. Therefore your land is a desolation, an astonishment, a curse, and without an inhabitant, as it is this day. <sup>23</sup> Because you have burned incense and because you have sinned against the Lord, and have not obeyed the voice of the Lord or walked in His law, in His statutes or in His testimonies, therefore this calamity has happened to you, as at this day.”*

*Jeremiah 44:15-23 (NKJV)*

You say that as at the year A.D. 315 “*the New Testament had hardly been assembled...*” You are mistaken. I assume that you are referring to the Council of Carthage in A.D. 397 when the Canon of the New Testament was officially recognised by those present at the Council.. However, the findings of that church council were merely a formal acknowledgment of what was *already well known by all the churches*

The gospels and the other books and letters of the New Testament were already recognised as Scripture, i.e. divinely inspired and equal to the Old Testament books, even during the first century. In fact they were so recognised even during the lifetime of the apostles. For example, the apostle Peter, when discussing Paul’s letters, says:

*<sup>14</sup>Therefore, beloved, since you look for these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, spotless and blameless, <sup>15</sup>and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation; just as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given him, wrote to you, <sup>16</sup>as also in all his letters, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which the untaught and unstable distort, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures, to their own destruction.*

*2 Peter 3:14-14 (NASB)*

Thus, Peter declares, even while Paul is still alive, that Paul’s letters are Scripture. He compares people’s distortion of them with how they also treat “*the rest of the Scriptures...*” During the first century, from the very day when the apostles’ letters were written, they were faithfully copied by hand and sent all over the Roman Empire, not just to the original recipients.

That is why we have, even today, over 5000 surviving copies of the New Testament books and letters, even back to the first century. So, let’s be clear that the first century church most certainly did value and focus upon the Scriptures, both Old and New Testament. And they did so from the very beginning of the Church, not merely from AD 397.

Moreover, we do not owe anything to the Roman Catholic church when it comes to either preserving or propagating the Scriptures. On the contrary, far from promoting the reading of the Scriptures, or even the teaching of them, the Roman Catholic church has always been a major hindrance. From the outset they did all they could to prevent the translation or distribution of the Scriptures. They did not want them to be read by ordinary people.

Their reason for obstructing the distribution of the Bible to the people was simple. It was that they knew very well that what the Bible says did not correspond to their teachings and practices. It provoked far too many uncomfortable questions. They were also well aware of the fact that people

who read the Bible tend to end up leaving the Roman Catholic church. That has been the case throughout history and it is still the case now. I am an example of that myself. They didn't just fail to promote the Bible. They literally *banned* so called "lay" people from reading the Bible at all. Only the priests were allowed to read it.

That said, though technically permitted to do so, the vast majority of priests rarely looked at the Bible either. It barely featured in their training or their thinking, for the same reasons that it was withheld from lay members. The hierarchy of the Catholic church did not want priests to start getting ideas or asking awkward questions, any more than they wanted their congregations to do so.

Even today, only a tiny proportion of the Bible is ever read out aloud in Catholic churches and it is always carefully selected extracts from a few books. They do not read it all out on any kind of rota, because too many questions would arise if the people were to read or hear *all* of it.

When priests are trained today the overwhelming emphasis is on the *traditions and rules* of the Roman Catholic church, not on the Bible. All of the priests that I have ever met, which is a very large number, have known very little of the Bible. They don't read much of it, just as all the lay Catholics that I have ever met don't read it either.

I personally never opened a Bible until I was 18, despite having been brought up in a Catholic home and school. Nobody I ever knew or met had ever read it either. So, although the official ban on reading the Bible has technically been lifted, it makes very little practical difference. The tradition of ignoring the Bible is so firmly established that, even today, the vast majority of Catholics do not read the Bible anyway, whether they are officially allowed to or not. Indeed, you concede yourself that they don't read it.

Next you say that "*Nowhere will you find any apostle saying that belief in the Bible was essential.*" Again I think there is confusion here, because you go on to say, "*The Good News is not 'believe in the Bible' but believe in the person Jesus Christ.*"

Neither I, nor anybody I have ever met, would suggest that we should believe in the Bible in the same way that we are to believe in Jesus Himself. Of course not. Jesus is the *object* of our belief and the person in whom, or upon whom, we are to believe and put our trust. We do not believe in the Bible in that sense. However that is not an argument against believing the Bible. Neither does it diminish its importance in any way.

The Bible is a unique book, given to us by God, which is the one and only valid source of teaching and practice. It is the one and only way that God has chosen to impart His thinking to us and to tell us what we need to know, believe and do. Thus it makes no sense at all to purport to follow or believe in Jesus, whilst minimising or down-playing the importance of the only book which contains His Word, and which He gave to us.

Imagine a soldier was to say that he does not believe in/follow/obey the *written orders* of General Eisenhower because he believes that he only needs to accept orders that are given to him verbally, face to face, by General Eisenhower himself. That would not be viewed as respect or right thinking but as foolishness, neglect of duty and even insubordination.

Winston Churchill made it a rule in World War II that he would not be held accountable for any order purporting to come from him unless it was in writing. In that way he sought to protect the accuracy and reliability of the onward transmission of his orders.

God's approach is rather similar. He has given us everything that we *need* to know and believe in written form. Anything beyond that may or may not be a good idea. But, whatever it is, it cannot be *guaranteed* to have come from Him. The written Word of God is our safeguard, or quality control, to

prevent us adopting the false beliefs and practices of mere men in place of what God Himself is telling us.

Therefore, returning to your point, if we are to say in any meaningful way that we believe in/follow/obey/focus on Jesus Christ Himself, then we really must have careful regard to His written Word which He procured for us and gave to us. The Bible makes this point frequently:

***<sup>8</sup>This book of the law shall not depart out of your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it; for then you shall make your way prosperous, and then you shall have good success.***

*Joshua 1:8 (RSV)*

***<sup>45</sup>“Do not think that I shall accuse you to the Father; it is Moses who accuses you, on whom you set your hope. <sup>46</sup>If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote of me. <sup>47</sup>But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe my words?”***

*John 5:45-47 (RSV)*

***<sup>31</sup>Jesus then said to the Jews who had believed in him, “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, <sup>32</sup>and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.”***

*John 8:31-32 (RSV)*

***<sup>23</sup>Jesus answered him, “If a man loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. <sup>24</sup>He who does not love me does not keep my words; and the word which you hear is not mine but the Father’s who sent me.***

*John 14:23-24 (RSV)*

***<sup>14</sup>I have given them thy word; and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. <sup>15</sup>I do not pray that thou shouldst take them out of the world, but that thou shouldst keep them from the evil one. <sup>16</sup>They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. <sup>17</sup>Sanctify them in the truth; thy word is truth.***

*John 17:14-17 (RSV)*

***<sup>3</sup>And by this we may be sure that we know him, if we keep his commandments. <sup>4</sup>He who says “I know him” but disobeys his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him; <sup>5</sup>but whoever keeps his word, in him truly love for God is perfected. By this we may be sure that we are in him:***

*1 John 2:3-5 (RSV)*

***<sup>16</sup>All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, <sup>17</sup>that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.***

*2 Timothy 3:16-17 (RSV)*

***“Not every one who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.***

*Matthew 7:21 (RSV)*

I have included a pretty long list of passages above but it could have been much longer. I see no way around this. Those who say they love God and love Jesus are speaking foolishly if they then go on to say anything which relegates the importance of God’s written Word. Obeying it is obeying Him. Devotion to it is devotion to Him. Neglect of it is neglect of Him. That is the case, notwithstanding the fact that God and His written Word are manifestly not the same thing, as we all know.

## **Objection 7**

*Your idea that every person should be a Bible student is not how Jesus says we are to follow him.*

## Response 7

Please refer to the responses I have given above. Hopefully you will now agree that both Jesus and His disciples, not to mention the Old Testament prophets and writers, placed huge importance on the need to know and believe the written Word of God. Jesus Himself exemplified that. He made the effort all His life to memorize God's Word. Therefore, when He was tempted by the Devil His response every time began "*It is written...*" He could not have done that unless He had first learned particular passages by heart, which is one of the best things we can ever do.

So, being a *Bible student* is not the same thing as being a *disciple*. The latter is obviously a wider concept. Being a disciple *involves* study of the Bible, i.e. the whole Bible, but it is not limited *only* to that. I have never suggested that it is. As to whether we should study the whole Bible, it seems to me that the burden of proof is very much on you to demonstrate that study of the whole Bible is *not* what we are all called to do. The only exceptions I can readily think of are the illiterate, the mentally handicapped and those who are too poor to possess a Bible at all.

If one is not in any of those groups, how could one justify deliberately choosing *not* to study the whole Bible? Surely one would need a reason? You haven't given any so far. By the same token, how and why could a person justify limiting themselves only to certain portions of God's Word that they find easy, agreeable, non-threatening, non-convicting etc?

What reason is there *not* to study the Bible, or not to study all of it, given *what* it is and *who* gave it to us? The main ones I can think of are laziness, lack of interest, unbelief or unwillingness to obey? But those are all invalid. Can you think of any *valid* reasons? In all my years in the Catholic church I was never told of any. The reason I personally never looked at the Bible until I was 18 is that I never saw anybody else do so.

### **What is the relevance of all this information about Roman Catholicism if you are not a Catholic?**

If you are not from a Catholic background you might possibly be wondering what the relevance is of all this material about the errors and problems of the Roman Catholic church. For example, people from a Reformed/Protestant background, and even more so Non-Conformists, Pentecostals and Charismatics, tend to think that they have nothing in common with Catholicism and that they do not share any of its errors. They assume that all of that was left behind at the Reformation in the sixteenth century.

Actually, that's not true. All the denominational churches share at least some of the features and errors of Catholicism. They just don't realise it. The Reformation did not achieve a complete removal of the errors of the Roman Catholic church. Far from it. If only it had. The Reformation was actually quite limited in its scope. It exposed and removed *some* unbiblical beliefs and practices, but *by no means all*. Therefore, all of this information about Catholicism may be far more relevant to you than you might imagine.

Take for example the Roman Catholic doctrine that says that their leaders are the only people on Earth who are qualified to interpret the Bible and even that their leadership, the so called *Magisterium*, is infallible in all matters of faith and practice. The reality is that every non-Catholic denomination also has an element of that kind of warped thinking. They would not say any of it explicitly, as the Catholic church does, but it is what many leaders think, deep down.

The majority of the church leaders that I have ever met have shared this feature to one extent or another, whether they were Catholic or not. In other words, they are '*clergy-minded*' to some degree. They see themselves as specially anointed and set apart, such that what they say is obviously right and should not be contradicted. I have referred to this attitude, when it is found in non-Catholic clergy, as being '*Magisterium-lite*'

Moreover, to one extent or another, the majority of the leaders of all the denominational churches share the same hierarchical, authoritarian, ‘*Nicolaitan*’ attitudes of the Catholic church. Very many leaders in non-Catholic churches feel that it is their right to rule over their people. At any rate, many of them do so, as much, or almost as much, as any Catholic priest does.

I have spent about 20 years of my life in the Catholic church and just over 30 years outside of it, in various denominations. Regretably, I have to say that I have seen all the same authoritarian attitudes and haughty behaviour on the part of leaders in *every* denomination. It is partly because they all struggle with the same flesh nature. However, it is also because they have inherited far more of the beliefs and practices of Catholicism than they realise. They simply don’t see it in themselves, or recognise where it comes from.

Therefore, I would urge you not to dismiss these issues, or the further points set out below from the Catholic Catechism, as having no relevance to you. They are very likely to be playing a part in your life, whatever denomination you come from. Even if you have no church background at all, you still need to know about the errors of Catholicism.

Firstly you need to be able to recognise and identify those errors in order to avoid being misled about points of doctrine. Secondly, you also need to be aware of this in order to avoid the dangers of Nicolaitanism, i.e. being dominated by authoritarian clergy who see themselves as having the right to rule over you. The more you understand the nature and origins of this kind of thinking, the better you will be able to recognise it when you see it, and to protect yourself and your family from it.

If you are from any kind of non-Catholic denomination, even by background or upbringing, you are likely to find that the unbiblical doctrines and practices that come from Catholicism have affected you and are still affecting you to some degree, even if you feel sure that you are immune to them. Imagine that the colour orange was to deny that it is related to the colour red or that it shares any of red’s characteristics. What if it said: “*I am orange through and through – there’s no red in me*”

We would smile because we know that the colour orange is actually about 50% red and 50% yellow by its ‘background’. Therefore the colour red is still playing a major part in the life of the colour orange, even though that fact may not be apparent to itself, or even to others. In the same way, many Protestants and also Pentecostals, Charismatics and others are unaware that much of what they do and believe is of unbiblical origins and has its roots in Catholicism.

Much of it comes originally from the so called ‘*Church Fathers*’, rather than from the Bible (see below). The errors and false teachings of those men of the second to fifth centuries, still affect the way that people today interpret the Bible, and also the way they operate as churches. Please see Book Eight in this series for a full discussion of the differences between biblical and unbiblical churches and why those differences matter.

**The so called ‘Church Fathers’, such as Origen, Ambrose, Chrysostom, Augustine etc are not a valid authority for any doctrine. Their teachings are a mixture of truth and error and must not be treated as if they were Scripture.**

Have you ever heard anybody use the phrase “*the Church Fathers*”? It does not mean the apostles of the first century A.D. who knew Jesus and wrote the New Testament. It refers to men who came later, in the third, fourth and fifth centuries mainly. They include men like Origen, Ambrose, Chrysostom, Augustine and others. They were leading figures in the Church in the early centuries after the apostles had all died. In relation to these men a dangerous error has arisen. That is to suppose that these men, by reason of being closer in time to the apostles than we are, have a particularly enhanced authority.

Therefore it is widely, but wrongly, assumed that what they taught and wrote was especially accurate and that they reflect the views of the apostles more closely, and thus are better able to interpret the Bible, than the men who lived in later centuries. Many go even further and treat these men almost as if they were divinely inspired, as the writers of the Scriptures were. At the very least, they are often treated as though they are more authoritative, and more reliable, than a Bible teacher or commentator who lived later in history or who is writing today.

For example one writer I know of, in the introduction to his three volume systematic theology, goes to some lengths to proclaim the fact that he places greater weight on ancient writings, i.e. from the third and fourth centuries, than on more modern writings. He appears to take some pride in this and implies that what those writers had to say is more worthy and more reliable merely by virtue of their books being ancient. However, the accuracy and reliability of what a man has to say about the Bible cannot be gauged by reference to when he lived. The age of the book is irrelevant.

The only appropriate way to assess the accuracy of any statement, whenever it may have been written, is to *compare it to what the Bible says*. That being so, you can test the merit of something written 1800 years ago just as easily as something written yesterday. Both pieces of writing are *valid if they agree with the Bible and invalid if they don't*. Therefore the century in which they were written is quite irrelevant to the question of whether their theology is true or false.

Ancientness does not imply any greater likelihood of accuracy. Indeed, there were people teaching and writing, even in the middle of the first century, whose ideas were profoundly heretical. We know that because the very reason why many of the New Testament letters were written was to rebut their false teachings. But such men were as ancient as it is possible to be, because they were contemporaries of the apostles. Yet they were still heretics. So, even living in the middle of the first century didn't prevent them from going wrong.

The net effect of this error is that within Roman Catholicism, but also within most of the Reformed and Protestant denominations, the teachings of these men, the so called Church Fathers, is illegitimately elevated. It is often treated as if it was divinely inspired truth, rather than just their own fallible, human opinions.

The problem is that although some of the things that these men taught were biblical and helpful, much of it wasn't. The unwarranted reverence shown to these men has meant that many of their mistaken ideas have been brought into the Church and accepted without proper scrutiny. Consequently, many of their ideas have become doctrines. Such errors arise where:

- a) entirely *new* ideas, concepts and practices, which were not in the Bible at all, were created based solely on what these men taught, or where
- b) undue *weight* was given to the interpretations that these men of the second to fifth centuries gave to certain passages of Scripture, as if they were divinely inspired commentators on, or interpreters of, the New Testament, which they were not.

The net effect of the mistaken and distorted way that so many of us, even today, view the so-called Church Fathers is that most churches now have many doctrines and practices which they assume are biblical but actually come from their teachings. They would actually be better described as the "*Church great, great, great grandchildren*", because they did not live in the first century and did not know the apostles any more than we do.

That said, even if they had known the apostles, that would still not make any difference at all. If what they said contradicts what the New (or Old) Testament says, then we must reject their teaching and stick with what the Bible says. They should be treated no differently from Bible commentators who lived in any of the other centuries, or those who are alive today.

The mere fact that someone lived in the middle of the first century, let alone the third, fourth or fifth centuries, does not imply that their teaching will be sound or biblical. On the contrary, as we have seen, much of the New Testament was written to tackle the abundance of false teaching that was *already being put about*. That was the case even in the 50s and 60s of the first century, while most of the apostles were still alive.

If false teachings and “*doctrines of demons*” were already capable of being produced in such abundance, even by that early stage, then they were even easier to put about in the third to fifth centuries. Many of the errors of Roman Catholicism came from these men, to whose teaching I am objecting.

But, my principal point is that their ideas have also seeped into all of the Protestant, Reformed, Evangelical, Pentecostal and Charismatic denominations too. That is because when Martin Luther and John Calvin left Roman Catholicism they did not abandon all of its wrong teaching. They kept a great deal of it, without realizing that it was just as unbiblical as the ideas they did throw away. See my book on Calvinism later in this series for more detail about what these ongoing errors are and how they were allowed to remain.

### **Likewise, church *tradition*, from whatever source, is not a valid basis for any doctrine or practice**

Accordingly, the writings and teachings of the so called “Church Fathers” are not equal to Scripture. They are not a basis upon which to construct any doctrine. They provide no authority for anything at all because they were just ordinary men producing their own writings. They were not divinely inspired as the apostles were.

In the same way, the traditions and practices of any church or denomination, whatever their origin or source and no matter how long established they might be, are no authority for anything. We cannot base any doctrine upon tradition or accept anybody else’s teaching or practice merely because it is what they have always done. It may well be that they have done it for centuries, but that still means nothing whatsoever unless that doctrine or practice is *biblical*, i.e. in accordance with what the Bible says. If not, it is simply an old error as opposed to a new error. The net effect is exactly the same.

Therefore, you can only judge the validity of any belief or practice by checking whether it is in the Bible, not by finding out how long ago the tradition was established, or by whom. If it isn’t clearly taught in the Bible then it is not authoritative, especially if it expressly contradicts the Bible. If it is in the Bible then it is valid, *not because we have always done it, but because the Bible says it*.

If it is some practice about which the Bible has nothing to say then it may not necessarily be wrong. It could be harmless. However, what we can say clearly is that it has *no authority*. Therefore it cannot be taught as if it was authoritative. It is just the idea of some man at some point in the past. That idea is as good or bad as it happens to be. But, either way, whether good or bad, it is still just some man’s opinion. If it is not what God says, then there is no authority for saying it or doing it.

So, going for a jog in the morning may be a good idea. Imagine that it caught on and increasing numbers of us were to do it, such that over the centuries a morning jog became the daily habit of most ‘churchgoers’. That could be a beneficial practice, but that would still not make it a biblical requirement for Christians.

That is obvious when you think of an absurd example like that. But the point is equally true with examples which are not absurd, such as infant baptism. That is not found anywhere in the Bible. Yet it is the long established practice, or tradition, of millions of people. Therefore many people assume it must be valid.

However, to decide whether infant baptism is right or wrong, i.e. the baptizing of babies who do not know or believe anything, the only thing which we have to ask ourselves is *whether it is in the Bible*. If it is *not*, then the next question we must ask is *whether it is consistent* with what the Bible *does* say about baptism. If it is consistent then we could accept it. But if it isn't we must reject it. What you must never allow to influence your judgment on this, or any other matter, is:

- a) how many people believe in it and practice it;
- b) how many years or centuries people have had that tradition;
- c) how upset people would get if you were to challenge their practice or tradition

The very same problem with unbiblical traditions and practices existed in Jesus' day. But He didn't accommodate or respect any of these traditions. He tackled them head on, as in this case where He dealt with some Pharisees:

*<sup>7</sup>Now when the Pharisees gathered together to him, with some of the scribes, who had come from Jerusalem, <sup>2</sup>they saw that some of his disciples ate with hands defiled, that is, unwashed. <sup>3</sup>(For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they wash their hands, observing the tradition of the elders; <sup>4</sup>and when they come from the market place, they do not eat unless they purify themselves; and there are many other traditions which they observe, the washing of cups and pots and vessels of bronze.) <sup>5</sup>And the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, "Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with hands defiled?" <sup>6</sup>And he said to them, "Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, 'This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; <sup>7</sup>in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men.' <sup>8</sup>You leave the commandment of God, and hold fast the tradition of men." <sup>9</sup>And he said to them, "You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God, in order to keep your tradition!"*

*Mark 7: 1-9 (RSV)*

Jesus did not view man-made traditions and practices as being harmless. Neither did He try to humour the people who believed in them or practiced them. On the contrary, He often confronted such things directly and contradicted people's cherished beliefs, even where doing that would cause offence. He was not prepared to allow any man-made ideas or practices to be elevated and treated as if it was equal to, let alone higher than, what God's Word said.

Man-made traditions and practices do not tend to co-exist *alongside* valid biblical doctrines and practices. Like weeds in a flower bed, they have a rampant nature and will generally *take over* in due course. Thus the biblical belief or practice will usually get driven out and be replaced by the traditional/man-made one. Our sin nature and worldliness means that what is man-made will automatically appeal to us and therefore push out what is biblical.

Like a cuckoo's egg which is laid in another bird's nest, a man-made tradition will naturally tend to supplant and replace the true doctrine over a period of time. In the end, that tradition will become central and will come to be seen as more important than what the Bible says. Indeed, eventually, it will be the *only* thing that is taught. What the Bible says will be ignored or relegated in status. That was the case in the past and it is still the case today.

The Jewish people of Jesus' day had developed what was known as the 'oral law'. This was a vastly long and complicated series of man-made rules, regulations and procedures which the Jewish religious leaders said must be kept. At first these additions were introduced and practiced *alongside* what the Bible taught. But, eventually, and inevitably, they came to be seen as *more important* than what the Bible said.

That is why, in the passage above from Mark chapter seven, the Pharisees were so incensed that Jesus' disciples did not observe their elaborate hand-washing regulations. They were preoccupied with irrelevant things like that, rather than paying attention to what Jesus had to say.

Indeed, the main reason why they resented Jesus, and even hated Him, was probably because He would not observe the man-made rules and regulations that their ancestors had invented. They could see that Jesus regularly went out of His way to break their rules deliberately and to demonstrate, as publicly as possible, that He would not accept their traditions, or pay any respect to them. That infuriated those Pharisees far more than if Jesus had denied or disobeyed a biblical command which, of course, He never did.

Jesus kept every one of the 613 requirements of the Law of Moses. He also obeyed every other command or instruction contained anywhere else in the Bible. Yet, *He intentionally and conspicuously broke the oral law* of the Jewish leaders which had been created by the Rabbis and Scribes as a supplement to the Law of Moses. Jesus had no time for any of that and was not willing to put up with any of it or pay any respect to it.

It would have made things vastly easier for Him if He had quietly gone along with their rules and complicated procedures, but He would not. For one thing, any observance by Him of those man-made traditions would have implied that they were valid and thus binding on us. Thus He went out of His way to avoid giving that false impression by deliberately breaking every extra-biblical rule or regulation as publicly as possible.

We must therefore imitate the approach that Jesus took and be vigilant to avoid accepting any man-made tradition or practice or behaving as if we were *obliged* to observe it. It is a good idea also to question yourself continually about your own beliefs and practices and to ask "*Where did I get this idea from? Is it in the Bible? If so, where?*"

If you do that, you will be surprised at how often you will realise that familiar things, which you have been saying, doing and believing for years, aren't actually in the Bible at all. They may even be expressly contradicted by the Bible. If so, then it means that you have absorbed a false, man-made tradition, or created one of your own, without ever realising it.

This devotion to man-made teachings and practices is not only found within Judaism and Roman Catholicism, as if the rest of us were immune to it. Far from it. We are *all* prone to making this error, including people who are in Protestant, Reformed, Evangelical, Pentecostal, Charismatic or home churches. For example, I was at a meeting some time ago where the question of idols was being discussed. It turned out that there was a couple present who believed very strongly in the teachings of John Calvin.

I discovered their allegiance to Calvin when I said that one of the idols we also need to watch out for is our tendency to revere the teachings of a particular man or group. I then mentioned Calvinism as an example of this. The couple became quite incensed. They were far more concerned by my comment about Calvin than they would have been if I had criticised the apostle Paul.

So, devotion to the teachings and practices of Calvinism is an area where many people today make the same error as the Pharisees did. They got upset when Jesus would not abide by their rules. Likewise, many Calvinists today get angry if their equally man-made teachings are challenged. The same tendency is potentially present in all of us, *whatever our background*. Therefore we need to be on the lookout for it. We must never assume that we are immune to this failing or think that it only ever affects other people or other denominations.

So, when any of us are involved in any debate we must continually ask ourselves whether we are saying what the Bible actually says, or just following man-made traditions which we have absorbed,

or our own opinions and preferences. Whichever it may be, if what we are saying is not consistent with the Bible, we need to rethink our position and be willing to abandon that practice or belief.

**Always judge men's ideas and church traditions by reference to the Bible, never the other way round.**

In short, our practice must always be to use the Bible as our yardstick to measure everything and everybody else. It has to be in that direction, never the reverse. We must never allow ourselves to measure the Bible by the yardstick of other men's traditions, practices or opinions, even if those are accepted by the majority. It doesn't matter if 99% of other people, even within the Church, hold a certain opinion or belief. If it is not what the Bible says, then we must take the Bible's side, rather than trust what people say, no matter how numerous or eminent they may be.

Indeed, if a person or group is teaching false doctrine or unbiblical practices then we must be willing to separate ourselves from them if they repeatedly refuse to accept the truth of what the Bible says and go on teaching their false beliefs to others:

*<sup>17</sup>I appeal to you, brethren, to take note of those who create dissensions and difficulties, in opposition to the doctrine which you have been taught; avoid them. <sup>18</sup>For such persons do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites, and by fair and flattering words they deceive the hearts of the simple-minded.*

*Romans 16:17-18 (RSV)*

Truth really matters and having accurate biblical doctrine is the most important truth there is. Too many Christians are willing to compromise on the truth and fudge issues in order to avoid controversy, the breakdown of relationships or the loss of their position. However, it is far more important to hold to the truth than to be popular, or even to keep one's position within a church. Doctrine is not a trivial matter involving little details. It really is vital that we find the truth and hold onto it, whatever the cost may be of doing so.

**Whose responsibility is it to interpret what the Bible means? Is it up to each individual Christian, or do we have to rely on some other person or group?**

This is a fundamental question which has to be faced. Yet it has generated some very different opinions. For example, the Roman Catholic church teaches that no 'lay' person has either the right or the ability to interpret the Bible for themselves. They teach that only the combined leadership of the Roman Catholic church, operating as what they call '*the Magisterium*', can do so. They alone must hand down the meaning to the people, who must then accept, without question, what those leaders say. In other words, they say that ordinary people must not attempt to form their own conclusions based on their own private study.

Some readers may find it hard to believe that any institution could really teach something as arrogant and patronizing as that. So, it may assist to quote from some of the relevant sections of what is known as '*The Catechism of the Catholic Church*'. This is a large book which sets out their official teaching. I shall set out some of their key pronouncements and then discuss why I believe that they are misguided and unjustified.

Article 2 of the Catechism includes a section dealing with this theme. It speaks of the "*Apostolic Tradition*" and says, at paragraph 76:

*76 "In keeping with the Lord's command, the Gospel was handed on in two ways:*

*orally* by the apostles who handed on, by the spoken word of their preaching, by the example they gave, by the institutions they established, what they themselves had received – whether from the lips of Christ, from his way of life and his works, or whether they had learned it at the prompting of the Holy Spirit

--- *in writing* by those apostles and other men associated with the apostles who, under the inspiration of the same Holy Spirit, committed the message of salvation to writing.”

So, what they claim is that *in addition* to the written Word of God, i.e. the Bible, Jesus also told certain additional things to the apostles *orally*. The apostles then, allegedly, passed these further teachings on verbally to the first century church. They supposedly did all of this without ever seeing fit to confirm any of it in writing, or even to mention that they had been given these supposedly vital supplementary teachings. Neither did they ever say why they were limiting themselves solely to *speaking* about these things rather than *writing* about them, as they did with all the rest of what Jesus had said to them, and also their own teachings.

The Catholic church claims that these extra teachings were preserved by them, within what they call ‘*Tradition*’, and are still available to us now, because they have remembered all of this and put it into operation. In other words, all these unbiblical things that Jesus and the apostles are alleged to have said and done are now reflected in the customs, traditions, doctrines and institutions of their church.

That is their explanation for where all their extra-biblical teachings and practices come from and for why it’s not a problem that these are nowhere to be found in the Bible, or even that they *contradict* the Bible. Their answer to every objection is that the *oral* teaching of Jesus and/or of the apostles included whatever unbiblical doctrine or practice one is objecting to. That’s a very convenient argument. If you are willing to believe this claim it is capable of justifying virtually anything that they might ever want to teach or do.

The Catechism then goes on to elaborate on why they claim that the senior leadership of the Roman Catholic church are the only people who can tell us what this alleged additional, oral teaching was. It also explains why they claim to be the only people on this Earth who can tell us what the Bible means.

Paragraphs 77 and 78 state the following:

77 *“In order that the full and living Gospel might always be preserved in the Church the apostles left bishops as their successors. They gave them “their own position of teaching authority”. Indeed, “the apostolic preaching, which is expressed in a special way in the inspired books, was to be preserved in a continuous line of succession until the end of time”*

78 *This living transmission, accomplished in the Holy Spirit, is called Tradition, since it is distinct from Sacred Scripture, though closely connected to it. Through Tradition, “the Church, in her doctrine, life and worship, perpetuates and transmits to every generation all that she herself is, all that she believes.-----”*

So, we are told that this additional, extra-biblical, oral teaching is made available to us today through the bishops of the Roman Catholic church. The idea is that they are the ‘*successors*’ of the apostles. Of course, the Bible doesn’t say any of this. It doesn’t appoint anybody to be the successors of the apostles, or of anybody at all for that matter. Neither does it say that this alleged line of succession is to go on from generation to generation.

The Bible does not even refer to the existence of this alleged oral teaching, the basis of their Tradition, upon which so much reliance is placed. One would imagine that if God was going to establish this crucially important thing called ‘*Tradition*’ and give it equal status with His own written Word, then He would have said so *within* His written Word. But He doesn’t. It never even gets a mention.

Instead, what the Bible does do is to warn us very strongly about people who will come along later and add to, take from or alter what the Bible says. This doctrine of the oral Tradition fits exactly with what apostle John and others were warning us about.

At any rate, given that the Bible gives no support to this idea, we are therefore expected to rely solely upon the supposed additional, oral teaching itself to explain and justify its own alleged role. It is its own authority and has to rely solely upon itself to be its own foundation. It has nothing else to rest upon. That is a remarkably circular argument. Indeed, it is so implausible as to be an insult to one's intelligence.

However, it does not end there. The Catechism goes on to state that the Tradition and teachings of the Catholic church are *equal in status to the Bible*:

80 "*Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture, then, are bound closely together, and communicate one with the other.-----*"

81 "*Sacred Scripture is the speech of God as it is put down in writing under the breath of the Holy Spirit. And [Holy] Tradition transmits in its entirety the Word of God which has been entrusted to the apostles by Christ the Lord and the Holy Spirit.-----*"

82 "*As a result the Church, to whom the transmission and interpretation of Revelation is entrusted, does not derive her certainty about all revealed truths from the Holy Scriptures alone. Both Scripture and Tradition must be accepted and honoured with equal sentiments of devotion and reverence*"

One wonders how the men, who first invented these false teachings had the nerve to make such breath-takingly blasphemous statements. They effectively granted themselves the status of being *equal to Scripture*. That is they told people to listen to them, and to treat their words, as if they had equal authority with God's Word. I tremble on their behalf for what will be said to them on the Day of Judgment for having made these presumptuous and self-promoting assertions.

Now we return to the concept which they refer to as "*the Magisterium*." It is this which, they allege, gives the leadership of the Roman Catholic church the sole right, and ability, to interpret the Word of God. Here it is, spelled out in their own words, from the Catechism at paragraph 85:

85 "*The task of giving an authentic interpretation of the Word of God, whether in its written form or in the form of Tradition, has been entrusted to the living teaching office of the Church alone. Its authority in this matter is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ. This means that the task of interpretation has been entrusted to the bishops in communion with the successor of Peter, the Bishop of Rome.*"

In fairness to the Catechism, it does then go on to state, in paragraph 86, that this alleged Magisterium, i.e. the exclusive ability and right of the bishops, when acting collectively, to declare authoritatively what Scripture means, is:

*"not superior to the Word of God, but is its servant. It teaches only what has been handed on to it---*"

However, this qualifying statement is not made from any attitude of humility. The Catechism then goes on to assert that the bishops of the Roman Catholic church are the only people who can interpret God's Word. What they say is extraordinarily arrogant. Their haughtiness and self-importance is further demonstrated in paragraphs 87, 88 and 100, which state:

87 "*Mindful of Christ's words to his apostles: 'He who hears you, hears me', the faithful receive with docility the teachings and directions that their pastors give them in different forms.*"

88 “The Church’s Magisterium exercises the authority it holds from Christ to the fullest extent when it defines dogmas, that is when it proposes truths contained in divine Revelation or having a necessary connection with them, in a form obliging the Christian people to an irreversible adherence of faith.”

100 “The task of interpreting the Word of God authentically has been entrusted to the Magisterium of the Church, that is, to the Pope and to the bishops in communion with him”

What they are saying above is that the ordinary ‘lay’ people within the Roman Catholic church are expected to accept the pronouncements of their leaders. Moreover, they are told to do so ‘with docility’. They are not meant to argue with, contradict, or even check, what they are told. They are instructed simply to receive it all passively, without question or protest.

This authoritarian approach taken by the Roman Catholic is exactly what Jesus was condemning in Revelation chapter two. The word ‘Nicolaitans’ occurs within Jesus’ letter to the church in Ephesus and it would be worthwhile to examine that passage closely:

<sup>1</sup> “To the angel of the church in Ephesus write:

*The One who holds the seven stars in His right hand, the One who walks among the seven golden lampstands, says this:*

<sup>2</sup> *I know your deeds and your toil and]perseverance, and that you cannot tolerate evil men, and you put to the test those who call themselves apostles, and they are not, and you found them to be false;*

<sup>3</sup> *and you have perseverance and have endured for My name’s sake, and have not grown weary. <sup>4</sup>*

*But I have this against you, that you have left your first love. <sup>5</sup> Therefore remember from where you have fallen, and repent and do the deeds you did at first; or else I am coming to you and will remove your lampstand out of its place—unless you repent. <sup>6</sup> Yet this you do have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.*

*Revelation 2:1-6 (NASB)*

The question is, who were these people that Jesus refers to as ‘the Nicolaitians’? There is no trace of any group or sect, in either biblical or secular records, which has referred to itself by that name. It is not a reference to a group as such, but to a type or category of leadership which was authoritarian and which sought to impose its views, and its authority, on members of the Church

The word ‘Nicolaitans’ is not a translation. It has just been transliterated from the original Greek word *Nicolaites*. That word has two roots. The first is ‘nike’ which means a ‘victor’ or ‘conqueror’ (It is also the origin of the sportswear brand.) The second word is ‘laos’, which means ‘people’. Therefore the combined, overall meaning of the term is “to be victorious over the people” or ‘to conquer the people’.

The people whom Jesus described as Nicolaitans were, evidently, those leaders who dominate the people in their churches, instead of being self-sacrificial, humble, gentle shepherds of God’s people. There were already developing, even in the last decade of the first century, a group of authoritarian leaders of that type. They became a ruling, priestly class or what we would now call ‘clergy’. That is a concept which the Bible does not recognise or condone. On the contrary, it is an aspect of Nicolaitanism, which Jesus tells us He *hates*.

He hates it because it is the natural outworking of the flesh nature. Nicolaitanism is what the sinful flesh nature of any leader will naturally and inevitably lead him towards. He will end up like that unless he is determined to crucify his own flesh and to refuse to allow himself to give in to the temptation to lead in a carnal, self-promoting manner. The biblical standard of a leader is a servant who lays down his own life for those whom he teaches, cares for and leads. Such a man does not use people and is not a tyrant. Moreover, he is certainly not a ‘priest’. That, in itself, is another man-made and unbiblical concept, which is not found anywhere in the New Testament churches.

So, 'Nicolaitanism' is a corrupt, carnal and authoritarian form of leadership. It seeks to use, exploit and dominate the people from above, rather than serve them as co-equals, as the apostles did. One could equally say that it is a 'worldly form of leadership' which is based on pomp, privilege and prestige. It has nothing to do with humility or servanthood. Instead of being shepherds, the worst of these men are the *wolves*, of whose coming Jesus and the apostles warned us. A much higher proportion of them are *hirelings*, performing a man-made job for a wage in an unbiblical and carnal manner.

Can you even imagine any of the apostles conducting themselves as so many of the Roman Catholic (and also Protestant) clergy do? There is no way that Peter or Paul or any of the others would have dressed up in dazzling costumes, sat on 'thrones' or allowed people to kiss their rings or bow to them. Yet, in some services, Roman Catholic priests and bishops lie face down on the floor prostrating themselves before the Pope in subjection to him. When they do that they demean themselves, quite apart from participating in the blasphemy of exalting the Pope and treating him, a mere man, in a way that is only appropriate for God.

What a stark contrast there is between all this showiness, and insistence on subservience, on the part of the Catholic clergy and the humility and sincerity of Luke. Far from requiring docility or deference from people, he praised the believers in Berea for carefully checking what they were taught, even when the speaker was apostle Paul:

***Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with all eagerness, examining the scriptures daily to see if these things were so.***

*Acts 17:11 (RSV)*

Neither Luke nor Paul nor any of the apostles would have had any time for teaching of the sort that is propagated by the Catholic church and others. They would have condemned the words of the Catechism and identified it as false teaching.

However, from the perspective of the so called 'Magisterium' of the Catholic church, there is no need, or reason, for anybody to disagree with them, or to doubt what they say. That is because they believe themselves to be 'infallible'. This is another man-made idea, with no biblical basis.

This is how they define and explain, in their own words, the idea that we must listen to them and do as they say. It even culminates, in paragraph 862, with this remarkable claim on behalf of their pope and bishops:

*"...whoever listens to them is listening to Christ and whoever despises them despises Christ and him who sent Christ."*

Here are the paragraphs in full:

***113 "Read the Scripture within 'the living Tradition of the whole Church'.***

*According to a saying of the Fathers, Sacred Scripture is written principally in the Church's heart rather than in documents and records, for the Church carries in her Tradition the living memorial of God's Word, and it is the Holy Spirit who gives her the spiritual interpretation of the Scripture ('...according to the spiritual meaning which the Spirit grants to the Church')*

*861 "In order that the mission entrusted to them might be continued after death, [the apostles] consigned, by will and testament, as it were, to their immediate collaborators the duty of completing and consolidating the work they had begun, urging them to tend to the whole flock, in which the Holy Spirit had appointed them to shepherd the Church of God. They*

accordingly designated such men and then made the ruling that likewise on their death other proven men should take over their ministry.”

862 “Just as the office which the Lord confided to Peter alone, as first of the apostles, destined to be transmitted to his successors, is a permanent one, so also endures the office, which the apostles received, of shepherding the Church, a charge destined to be exercised without interruption by the sacred order of the bishops.’ Hence the Church teaches that ‘the bishops have by divine institution taken the place of the apostles as pastors of the Church, in such wise that whoever listens to them is listening to Christ and whoever despises them despises Christ and him who sent Christ.”

They then go on to explain and justify their claim that their own teaching is infallible. They don’t mean that the *Bible* is infallible, which it obviously is. They mean *their own teaching*, and they mean that even where it goes beyond, or contradicts, what the Bible says. They claim to have what they call: “*the charism of infallibility in matters of faith and morals.*” Here it is set out in full in their own words:

889 “In order to preserve the Church in the purity of the faith handed on by the apostles, Christ who is the Truth willed to confer on her a share in his own infallibility. By a ‘supernatural sense of faith’ the People of God, under the guidance of the Church’s living Magisterium, ‘unfailingly adheres to the faith’”.

890 “The mission of the Magisterium is linked to the definitive nature of the covenant established by God with his people in Christ. It is this Magisterium’s task to preserve God’s people from deviations and defections and to guarantee them the objective possibility of professing the true faith without error. Thus, the pastoral duty of the Magisterium is aimed at seeing to it that the People of God abides in the truth that liberates. To fulfil this service, Christ endowed the Church’s shepherds with the charism of infallibility in matters of faith and morals.”

891 “The Roman Pontiff, head of the college of bishops, enjoys this infallibility in virtue of his office, when, as supreme pastor and teacher of all the faithful – who confirms his brethren in the faith he proclaims by a definitive act a doctrine pertaining to faith or morals...The infallibility promised to the Church is also present in the body of bishops when, together with Peter’s successor, they exercise the supreme Magisterium’ above all in an Ecumenical Council. When the Church through her supreme Magisterium proposes a doctrine ‘for belief as being divinely revealed’, and as the teaching of Christ, the definitions ‘must be adhered to with the obedience of faith’. This infallibility extends as far as the deposit of divine Revelation itself.”

The words of the Catechism are shocking. Mere men are taking to themselves supposed equality with God’s Word. They have the nerve to claim that *what they say* has the same authority as God’s Word. Yet they have no biblical basis, whatsoever, for saying any of this.

Perhaps the most outrageous section of all is this next passage in which they maintain that God’s Word is *unable to stand by itself*, i.e. without being propped up by their contribution, in the form of their ‘Tradition’ and their ‘Magisterium’:

<sup>95</sup> “It is clear therefore that, in the supremely wise arrangement of God, sacred Tradition, Sacred Scripture and the Magisterium of the Church are so connected and associated that one of them cannot stand without the others. Working together, each in its own way, under the action of the one Holy Spirit, they all contribute effectively to the salvation of Souls”

What they are saying is that there are three equal things, each of which need the other two and “cannot stand without the others”. These three supposedly equal things are said to be:

- a) the *tradition* of the Roman Catholic church, which they claim was passed on to them, by word of mouth, from the apostles.
- b) The *Magisterium* of the church, i.e. their supposedly infallible teaching function in ‘matters of faith and morals’.
- c) Sacred Scripture, i.e. the *Bible*. However, even this is undermined because they have added to the Bible a set of other books, called “*the apochrypha*”, which are not inspired and have no place being put alongside the books of the Bible. They were added in the sixteenth century as part of an attempt to counteract the Reformation.

The point is that they seriously claim that what God has said in His Word is incapable of standing by itself, such that it needs them. One can only marvel at anyone who has the audacity to say such things.

Moreover, how can it be that the popes and bishops of the Catholic church can claim to have the ‘*charism of infallibility in matters of faith and morals*’ and yet either fail to know about, or fail to deal with, the worldwide scandal of paedophile priests? Strictly speaking, they would reply that they do not claim infallibility in terms of what misconduct they know about, or how they should handle such situations. I fully accept that when they claim infallibility they are speaking primarily in terms of doctrine and ethical questions, not their administrative abilities, or even their own personal morals.

Be that as it may, it is still a fair question to ask how they can seriously claim to have this ‘infallibility’, however narrowly they might define its scope, and yet behave so appallingly, in so many countries and for so long. At the very least, one has to say that their credibility has been drastically reduced by the way they have acted, or rather failed to act.

Can any person really believe that the entire leadership of the Catholic church knew nothing about the paedophilia? It is no exaggeration to say that thousands of priests, all over the world, have been sexually abusing children, both boys and girls, and over many decades. Indeed, it has been happening for centuries. Yet, no pope or bishop did anything at all about it until they were forced to do so by the modern, secular media. Even then, they only acted slowly and reluctantly and did the very least that they could get away with.

To give you an idea of the scale of the child abuse, you need only look at the figures from just one organization called SNAP, which stands for ‘*Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests*’. They alone represent 18,000 victims of abuse from 79 countries (at the time of writing) and that number is growing. Moreover, it only represents the tip of the iceberg because many victims choose to keep it all bottled up. Many never even tell their families, let alone make any formal complaint or go to the police.

But even those who do formally complain are silenced by the Catholic church. They do all they can to get the victims to stay quiet, when what they ought to be doing is bringing the corruption out into the open. That is what any right-thinking institution would do if it was genuinely remorseful and concerned to prevent further abuse. So, the fact that the Catholic church takes the very opposite approach is highly significant. It demonstrates what their real motives and priorities are.

For example, in Austria, which is a very small country, 1800 people (so far) have been given token compensation for the abuse they endured. But it was given *on condition that from now on they remain silent about it*. So, even when forced to deal with the issue, the main concern of the Catholic authorities was still to protect the reputation of their institution.

They wanted to ‘contain’ the spread of the bad news rather than help the victims, who might well benefit from speaking freely about their ordeals. What is more shocking is that of all those cases in Austria, *not even one priest has been removed from his position*. They have all just carried on in

ministry, as if nothing had ever happened. I am not picking on Austria when I refer to them. What has been done in Austria is typical of what has been done in every other country too.

So, my point is that the leaders of the Catholic church, including bishops, cardinals and popes, must have *known about this abuse all along and yet they have done nothing* to stop it, or to expose it, or to assist with the prosecution of the priests doing the abuse. Moreover, not even one bishop spoke out to denounce that systematic cover-up by the other bishops, and by the popes too, because they must each have known about it.

At any rate, if anybody is minded to argue about this, the point is that no bishop ever *spoke publicly* or *went to the police or the media*. If they ever had, we would have heard of it because it would have been worldwide news. They very probably did speak *privately to their superiors* i.e. to the cardinals above them, and even to successive popes. But if so, that would only compound the guilt of the institution as a whole, because the cardinals and popes did nothing about it. Actually, the Catholic church itself denies that Pope John-Paul II, who 'reigned' for 27 years, was ever told anything about what was happening.

They have to say that, or otherwise it would incriminate him for doing nothing about it. The truth is, surely, that he must have known all along, at least the basic facts. But, if, somehow, he really didn't know then it shows, all the more forcefully, that the bishops and cardinals failed in their clear duty to report these crimes to him.

In short, they cannot have it both ways. Either Pope John-Paul II *was* told or he *wasn't*. Either way, the Catholic church as a whole behaved disgracefully, either in their failure to tell him, or his failure to act when told. On top of that, if he was told, then it was a lie to claim not to have been.

The same point applies to the next two popes, Benedict XVI and Francis I. During their time the scandal came out into the open, due to the media, so they were forced to do something, albeit very little. As for Pope Benedict, who was previously known as Cardinal Ratzinger, he was Pope John-Paul's right-hand man for very many years and was in charge of discipline. So, he would have known all that John-Paul knew and possibly more.

The reality is that the leadership of the Catholic church, all the way up to the top, did all they could to obstruct police investigations and civil claims and to silence both victims and witnesses. When complaints were made, they covered things up and, at best, simply moved the priests to other parishes. They would then begin again to abuse other children, as could easily have been predicted.

It was not that those bishops *wanted* such abuse to occur, and to continue. I am entirely willing to accept that most of them had no such intention. Their principal sin was that they felt that *their loyalty to the institution of the Catholic church came ahead of everything else*, including the welfare of abused children. Their silence, dishonesty and lack of compassion, throughout most of the countries in the world, indicates the real nature of these men.

More to the point, it shows the real nature of the whole *institution* which they represent and it gives the lie to their claims to infallibility, however they might wish to define it. The way in which the leadership of the Catholic church, at all levels, has conducted itself, far from being an example to us all, does not even reach the standard of the average man in the street.

The mythical '*man on the Clapham omnibus*' would never have done, or permitted, let alone covered up, the things which the bishops, cardinals and popes did. So, if God really was looking around for some person or group to act as His infallible mouthpiece, which He wasn't, He would hardly choose them. That is surely putting it mildly.

If anybody thinks there is anything new in any of this immorality on the part of Catholic clergy, they are sadly mistaken. The Catholic church has always operated in this way, throughout its history.

That is why visitors to Rome, even centuries ago, were amazed to discover the many brothels that existed to serve the Catholic clergy. Martin Luther himself was shocked by this when he first visited Rome.

This kind of behaviour went on at the very highest levels, such that many popes and cardinals had illegitimate children by the women they kept. They also promoted their own children to senior positions within the Catholic church. Some of their illegitimate children became cardinals and even popes. They obviously did not all engage in such corrupt behaviour, but even those bishops, cardinals and popes who did not personally participate in this immorality did nothing to expose or oppose it.

The whole package of authoritarian Roman Catholic teaching, as outlined earlier, was deliberately developed for self-serving reasons. Its real purpose was not to propound the truth, but to ensure that control and privilege were kept firmly in the hands of their own hierarchical leadership. The only conceivably biblical basis for any of what they teach about their own alleged authority comes from their misuse of a passage from the second letter of Peter which reads as follows:

*<sup>19</sup> And we have the prophetic word made more sure. You will do well to pay attention to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. <sup>20</sup> First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, <sup>21</sup> because no prophecy ever came by the impulse of man, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.*

*2 Peter 1:19-21 (RSV)*

However, the verses quoted above have nothing to do with the question of whether an individual can read and interpret the Bible by himself, as opposed to relying on his leaders to tell him what any given passage means. What Peter is actually saying is that the meaning of any given passage from the Bible, in particular any prophetic passage, is what *God means by it*. It is not what each individual reader takes from it or *what it means to him or her*.

This approach that Peter takes is in stark contrast to how, by convention, we approach a novel or poem. So, for example, when my 'A' level English class was studying 'The Wasteland', our English teacher told us that it was not simply a matter of finding out what *T.S. Eliot* himself meant by his strange and cryptic poem. We were told that our individual opinions were just as important as his. In other words, once the poem had been published, it ceased to be the property of its author. Therefore he was no longer the sole arbiter of its meaning and it belonged to us just as much as to him.

Therefore, if a particular line or phrase from the poem suggested something to one of us, we were encouraged to believe that *what we took from it* was just as valid as what *T.S. Eliot meant by it*, even if what he intended by it was nothing like our own personal interpretation. Within English literature generally, and especially poetry, that is felt by many to be a valid approach. And it is how English Literature is often taught. But that is *not* how the Bible is meant to be handled.

Your task therefore, as an individual reader of the Bible, is not to develop your own personal meaning for things but to find out *what God means* by that passage. You are not at liberty to impose upon it some personal interpretation of your own invention, which suits your opinions or preferences, but which is not what God means by it.

So, if a passage is referring to the Second Coming of Christ, then that is what it means. You are not authorised to substitute some other meaning in place of that, though you can, and should, be alert and open to see any types or prophetic patterns which are present, *alongside* the literal meaning. However even when you see those types and prophetic patterns, you are still only meant to take from the text of the Bible *what God means by it*, not your own private or invented meanings.

In other words, even whilst being open-minded to see types and prophetic patterns, you are not at liberty to 'allegorise' or 'spiritualise' the text so as to give it some other meaning than what God

intended. Peter goes on, later in his second letter, to refer to how some people twist the meaning of Scripture in that way to suit their own opinions or to follow the errors of other men:

*<sup>15</sup> And count the forbearance of our Lord as salvation. So also our beloved brother Paul wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, <sup>16</sup> speaking of this as he does in all his letters. There are some things in them hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other scriptures. <sup>17</sup> You therefore, beloved, knowing this beforehand, beware lest you be carried away with the error of lawless men and lose your own stability.*

*2 Peter 3:15-17 (RSV)*

Therefore, what Peter is forbidding is the very practice of ‘*allegorising*’, which we have mentioned earlier and which we will examine more closely below. He is not forbidding people to read the Bible for themselves so as to find out what God means by it. It is very clear that that is not what Peter means. As we have seen in the book of Acts, the Christians in Berea are praised for carefully checking Paul’s preaching and for looking in the Scriptures for themselves to find out whether Paul’s preaching was biblical. That is they were examining what Paul said to see whether it was in line with the real/true meaning of the existing Scriptures, which we call the Old Testament.

Clearly, the Bereans were not relying uncritically on whoever preached in their church, not even if it was Paul. They were relying solely on the Scriptures, which they examined for themselves. They knew that it was their own individual responsibility to check what things meant and that they did not need any man’s permission or authorization to do so. Moreover, as we saw earlier, Luke, the author of Acts, praises them for the careful and vigilant approach which they took.

Therefore we must never allow any person, group or denomination to tell us that we need to rely on them, or indeed on anybody else, to interpret the Bible *for us*. Neither can anybody tell us that only their interpretation is valid. Our own interpretation of the Bible is valid and correct *if it accords with what the Bible actually means* and it is wrong if it doesn’t.

That true meaning, i.e. what *God* means by it, is to be found by examining the passage carefully, using as our starting point the ‘*golden rule*’, which we saw earlier. It is also by considering the passage in the context of all other relevant passages which might have a bearing on it.

The true meaning is certainly not to be found by simply looking to see what some leader or author or denomination *says* it means. They could be either right or wrong and it is your own individual duty to decide which they are, after careful study of your own, and also after prayerfully seeking God’s guidance for yourself.

**Always be careful to distinguish very clearly between your own opinions and what the Bible says.**

It is very important, whenever you express any point, to be clear as to whether you are saying that it is what the *Bible* says or merely what *you* believe. In other words, you need to be clear as to whether you are repeating a point which God is making, i.e. passing on *His* message, or just expressing *your own* opinion.

So, for example, if you believe that a Christian should not drink alcohol then be careful how you express it. Make sure you say “*My personal opinion is that it is better for a Christian not to drink alcohol.*” Don’t say, “*The Bible says we must not drink alcohol*” or “*God does not want us to drink alcohol*”.

You cannot say either of those things, because they would not be true. The Bible never says anywhere that a Christian must not, or even ought not, to drink alcohol. Drunkenness is clearly forbidden, but drinking alcohol in moderation is not. On the contrary, responsible and sensible drinking is approved.

Indeed, apostle Paul told Timothy to take a little wine to help settle his stomach. Alcohol kills the bacteria in water and makes it safe to drink. Moreover, Jesus Himself turned water into wine at a wedding when the wine ran out. He would not have done that if He did not approve of us drinking alcohol.

My point here is not to debate the issue of alcoholic drink in itself, but to focus on the wider issue of being careful not to misrepresent God or misquote what the Bible says on any issue. We have a solemn responsibility, as ambassadors of Christ, to represent Him and His words very carefully and accurately. We must never take one of our own opinions and portray it as being what God thinks or says. Yet people do that regularly, in order to add extra authority to their own personal opinions.

They also do it in relation to their own cultural preferences, habits, styles, tastes, and also the man-made traditions and customs that they have grown used to and with which they feel comfortable. They frequently say outright, or imply indirectly, *“That is how God wants things to be done.”* Instead we should take care to say something along these lines: *“I do not know of any biblical teaching on this issue, but my own preferred method/approach is.....”*

Too many of us are unaware of, or don't care about, our heavy responsibility not to misrepresent God. Have you ever heard anybody in your church even mention this duty, let alone emphasise it? If a person wants to win an argument or get his own way on some question of policy or procedure, there is a temptation to try to add weight to one's own opinion or preference by making it sound like it is what God has said. We really must resist the temptation to do that. We should therefore make clear, as apostle Paul did, whether we are speaking on God's behalf, or just expressing our own view. Observe how carefully, and differently, Paul expresses a number of points in the following passages:

*<sup>1</sup>Now concerning the things about which you wrote, it is good for a man not to touch a woman. <sup>2</sup>But because of immoralities, each man is to have his own wife, and each woman is to have her own husband. <sup>3</sup>The husband must fulfill his duty to his wife, and likewise also the wife to her husband. <sup>4</sup>The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does; and likewise also the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. <sup>5</sup>Stop depriving one another, except by agreement for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer, and come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control. <sup>6</sup>But this I say by way of concession, not of command. <sup>7</sup>Yet I wish that all men were even as I myself am. However, each man has his own gift from God, one in this manner, and another in that. <sup>8</sup>But I say to the unmarried and to widows that it is good for them if they remain even as I. <sup>9</sup>But if they do not have self-control, let them marry; for it is better to marry than to burn with passion. <sup>10</sup>But to the married I give instructions, not I, but the Lord, that the wife should not leave her husband <sup>11</sup>(but if she does leave, she must remain unmarried, or else be reconciled to her husband), and that the husband should not divorce his wife*

*1 Corinthians 7:1-11 (NASB)*

In the above passage apostle Paul makes it clear in verse 10 that he is passing on an instruction which is *not from himself but from God*. He says, *“...I give instructions, not I, but the Lord, that.....”* He also says in verse 7 that *he* wishes all men were as he was, i.e. unmarried. However, he recognises that each person has his own gift from God, such that not all are called to celibacy. Paul goes on in verse 12 below to make himself even clearer on that distinction between his own personal opinions and what God has authorised or instructed him to say:

*<sup>12</sup>But to the rest I say, not the Lord, that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he must not divorce her. <sup>13</sup>And a woman who has an unbelieving husband, and he consents to live with her, she must not send her husband away. <sup>14</sup>For the unbelieving husband is sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified through her believing husband; for otherwise your children are unclean, but now they are holy. <sup>15</sup>Yet if the unbelieving one leaves, let him leave; the brother or the sister is not under bondage in such cases, but God has called us to peace. <sup>16</sup>For how do you know, O wife, whether you will save your*

husband? Or how do you know, O husband, whether you will save your wife? <sup>17</sup>Only, as the Lord has assigned to each one, as God has called each, in this manner let him walk. And so I direct in all the churches. <sup>18</sup>Was any man called when he was already circumcised? He is not to become uncircumcised. Has anyone been called in uncircumcision? He is not to be circumcised. <sup>19</sup>Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but what matters is the keeping of the commandments of God. <sup>20</sup>Each man must remain in that condition in which he was called. <sup>21</sup>Were you called while a slave? Do not worry about it; but if you are able also to become free, rather do that. <sup>22</sup>For he who was called in the Lord while a slave, is the Lord's freedman; likewise he who was called while free, is Christ's slave. <sup>23</sup>You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of men. <sup>24</sup>Brethren, each one is to remain with God in that condition in which he was called.

*1 Corinthians 7:12-24 (NASB)*

Paul says in verse 12 “*But to the rest I say, not the Lord, that.....*” He is emphasising that this is *only his own opinion and not God's command*. This is the very opposite of the phrase he used in verse 10 which we looked at earlier. Look also at this next passage, and in particular at verse 25 where he sets out his own personal opinion on what young unmarried women should do. He makes clear again that this is only his own personal opinion and *that he has no specific command from God* to pass on to them:

<sup>25</sup>*Now concerning virgins I have no command of the Lord, but I give an opinion as one who by the mercy of the Lord is trustworthy.* <sup>26</sup>*I think then that this is good in view of the present distress, that it is good for a man to remain as he is.* <sup>27</sup>*Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be released. Are you released from a wife? Do not seek a wife.* <sup>28</sup>*But if you marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin marries, she has not sinned. Yet such will have trouble in this life, and I am trying to spare you.* <sup>29</sup>*But this I say, brethren, the time has been shortened, so that from now on those who have wives should be as though they had none;* <sup>30</sup>*and those who weep, as though they did not weep; and those who rejoice, as though they did not rejoice; and those who buy, as though they did not possess;* <sup>31</sup>*and those who use the world, as though they did not make full use of it; for the form of this world is passing away.*

*1 Corinthians 7: 25-31 (NASB)*

Now look how Paul continues in this next passage. Note again how he makes it very clear that in this instance he is only setting out what *he* wants, rather than claiming that it is what God wants:

<sup>32</sup>*But I want you to be free from concern. One who is unmarried is concerned about the things of the Lord, how he may please the Lord;* <sup>33</sup>*but one who is married is concerned about the things of the world, how he may please his wife,* <sup>34</sup>*and his interests are divided. The woman who is unmarried, and the virgin, is concerned about the things of the Lord, that she may be holy both in body and spirit; but one who is married is concerned about the things of the world, how she may please her husband.* <sup>35</sup>*This I say for your own benefit; not to put a restraint upon you, but to promote what is appropriate and to secure undistracted devotion to the Lord.*

*1 Corinthians 7: 32-35 (NASB)*

See how at verse 32 Paul carefully says, “*But I want.....*” and, in verse 35, “*This I say.....*” Then again, in verse 40 below, Paul states explicitly that in “*my opinion* it is better for a widow to remain unmarried:

<sup>36</sup>*But if any man thinks that he is acting unbecomingly toward his virgin daughter, if she is past her youth, and if it must be so, let him do what he wishes, he does not sin; let her marry.* <sup>37</sup>*But he who stands firm in his heart, being under no constraint, but has authority over his own will, and has decided this in his own heart, to keep his own virgin daughter, he will do well.* <sup>38</sup>*So then both he who gives his own virgin daughter in marriage does well, and he who does not give her in marriage will do better.* <sup>39</sup>*A wife is bound as long as her husband lives; but if her husband is dead,*

*she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord. <sup>40</sup> But in my opinion she is happier if she remains as she is; and I think that I also have the Spirit of God.*

*1 Corinthians 7: 36-40 (NASB)*

It is apparent how extremely careful Paul is in all the verses we have looked at to distinguish between passing on God's commands and expressing his own (Paul's) opinions. He even adds a further nuance at the end of verse 40 where he says:

*"...and I think that I also have the Spirit of God."*

Paul still does not present his opinion on what widows ought to do as if it was a command from God. However he does put it more weightily than he did earlier when he was expressing his own opinion on other issues.

He still accepts that it is only his own opinion, and that this is an area where we therefore have freedom to seek God's specific direction for ourselves. However, he also suggests that he has a high level of confidence that on this point his opinion is right and that he believes he has had God's help in arriving at that personal opinion.

Nevertheless, despite having that enhanced confidence on that point, he still does not attempt to portray his opinion as if it was God's command. Paul is meticulous in 1 Corinthians chapter 7, as always, to handle God's instructions with great precision. He is very careful not to over-state or over-emphasise anything, or to claim that he is passing on God's instruction when he is actually only giving his own personal view.

An analogy might assist to illustrate why it matters so much for each of us to differentiate between passing on God's commands and expressing our own opinions. Imagine that you worked for the Prime Minister as his Chief of Staff and he gave you an important message and asked you to pass it on to the Foreign Secretary. You would go to the Foreign Office and say:

*"The Prime Minister says he wants you to....."*

When you say that, you are passing on what you *know* to be the Prime Minister's *direct instruction or message*. Therefore you know that it is his will. You might even be quoting his exact words.

However, what if the Foreign Secretary was then to say to you:

*"When does it need to be done by?"*

Let us suppose that the Prime Minister never actually gave you any specific deadline to pass on. What could you say in reply? You couldn't say:

*"The Prime Minister says....."*

You can't say that because he didn't say anything about the timing. So you would have to say something like:

*"He didn't say, but in my own personal view, it is urgent and is needed by 9.00 am tomorrow morning."*

To reply in that way is precisely what apostle Paul was doing in the passages we looked at above. So you would, likewise, want to be very clear to the Foreign Secretary as to which parts of what you were saying to him came directly from the Prime Minister and which parts came from you and were only your own opinions or advice.

Imagine a variation to that. Perhaps the Prime Minister gave no specific deadline but did give the distinct impression by his tone and manner that it was urgent for today. You might then say:

*“He didn’t specify any deadline, but I picked up the clear impression from him that it is needed urgently for today and I think I understood him correctly.”*

That would correspond quite well to how apostle Paul spoke in 1 Corinthians 7:40 above when he said:

*“...and I think that I also have the Spirit of God.”*

He was giving his impression as to what *he believes God thinks*, rather than saying only what he himself thinks. Yet he still did not feel entitled to be emphatic about it.

### **Other illegitimate sources of authority which are not a valid basis for doctrine**

We have seen that one’s own opinions and the opinions of others are not a valid basis for any doctrine. Let us now consider some other invalid, illegitimate sources of authority upon which we must never base any doctrine:

#### **a) things said through the exercise of spiritual gifts**

Although spiritual gifts such as prophecy, words of knowledge, words of wisdom and interpretation of tongues are valid and biblical, *they are never to be seen as a source of new doctrine*. No teaching should ever be based on anything said via the exercise of spiritual gifts. That needs to be very strongly emphasized, because many people have been led into false teachings in precisely that way.

Spiritual gifts are legitimate and useful and they are meant to be used today, just as they were in the first century. But *what is said must always be consistent with what the Bible says*. They must never contain anything new or different, which contradicts the Bible. If they do, then we know for sure that what has been said is false.

That is the main way that we have to test the genuineness or otherwise of spiritual gifts, i.e. does what has been said match what the Bible already says? The Holy Spirit will *never* contradict the Bible in any way, however small. Therefore, any person who gives a prophecy which contradicts the Bible is immediately recognizable as a *false prophet*.

#### **b) Things said by other Christians, including teachers and leaders, no matter how famous they may be**

Obviously, if even the Church as a whole has no authority to create or develop new doctrines different from those set out in the Bible, then neither does any individual Christian. That is the case even if he is a teacher or leader and even if he is genuine and excellent in every way. No matter how eminent or learned he may be, he cannot create any new doctrine. If he attempts to do so then he is a *false teacher*.

#### **c) the Roman Catholic church**

The Roman Catholic church is an institution which is based upon a mixture of Christianity, paganism and various other man-made ideas and practices. It is not, and never will be, a valid source of doctrine. Neither does it have any authority to say or teach anything contrary to what the Bible says, despite its claims to be entitled to do so. Therefore it always has been, and still continues to be, a source of numerous false doctrines and practices. Some of those have been listed earlier.

#### **d) the Pope**

As we saw earlier, the Roman Catholic church teaches that the Pope is the direct *successor* of apostle Peter. It also alleges, quite wrongly, that Peter was the first ‘Bishop’ of Rome and also the leader of the entire Church, both in Rome and everywhere else. Accordingly, the whole man-made institution known as ‘the Papacy’ is unbiblical and invalid. It is based on a series of lies and errors, both historical and theological. To begin with, Peter was never the “*Bishop of Rome*”. Neither was anybody else, at least not in the first century. There was no such office. (See Book Eight for fuller details).

Indeed, when Paul wrote his letter to the Romans, probably in the fifties or early sixties of the first century, he greeted by name a long list of people who were known to him in Rome. But he does not even mention Peter. (See Romans chapter 16.) Had Peter, or anybody else, been the ‘Bishop’ of Rome in the sense of being an overall leader, then that leader would surely have been mentioned. In fact the letter would have been *addressed to him* and it would have been written in a deferential tone, i.e. as apostle Paul writing to his ‘boss’, Peter. But it clearly wasn’t. It was sent to the whole church in Rome and no leader was singled out, whether Peter or anyone else.

Moreover, when the early church had a council meeting in Jerusalem (in Acts chapter 15) *at which Peter was present*, it was James, not Peter, who chaired the meeting and it was James who spoke last to sum up. So Peter was not even the leader in Jerusalem, let alone in the Church as a whole. Besides all of that, even if Peter individually had been given some kind of enhanced authority, such that he was the overall leader of the entire Church, (which he wasn’t) there would still be no basis for supposing that anybody else was meant to *succeed him* in such a role.

The truth is that there is nothing at all in the Bible to support the idea of any kind of apostolic line of succession, whether for Peter or any of the other apostles. It is a false teaching created centuries later by the Roman Catholic church itself to justify its own practices and benefit itself. It has no validity or authority whatsoever.

#### **e) other denominations and their leaders**

In the same way that the Roman Catholic church has no authority to create any new doctrine or teaching, *neither has any other group or denomination*. That is the case even if it is made up of genuine believers whose doctrines are otherwise sound.

None of the above people or groups can provide us with any of our beliefs or doctrines. All of those must come solely from the Bible. No man, group or church, whether genuine or otherwise, has any authority to redefine, alter, modify, qualify, improve, add to, take from, mitigate, maximise, minimise, enhance or down-play anything which the Bible says.

Instead, we are to take what the whole Bible says and to believe it all and to seek to understand it all to the best of our ability. Moreover, we are to give to any issue, theme or point whatever level of emphasis the Bible gives it, no more and no less. To do otherwise will lead us into error.

#### **How can we justify saying that the Word of God, the Bible, is the only source of authority and truth and that it towers above any person, church or group?**

Recently I was listening to a recording of a debate some years ago between the late Dave Hunt of the Berean Call (see the list of approved ministries on our website) and a Roman Catholic called Carl Keating. Dave Hunt was arguing that the Word of God, i.e. the Bible, is unique. He said that it is the only valid source of authority and truth, and that nobody, whether a Pope or not, can add to it or take from it etc.

Carl Keating was arguing, as per the teaching of the Catechism which we quoted from earlier, that the Pope can add new doctrines. He then put a question to Dave Hunt which immediately stood out to me. He asked Dave Hunt:

*"Can you point me to even one verse where the Bible claims that the Word of God is unique?"*

Dave Hunt replied with a detailed and scholarly answer which was fair enough. However, he forgot to make one vital additional point. Carl Keating was arguing that the Bible doesn't *actually say* that the Word of God is on a higher level than what the Pope or Magisterium says, or that it has unique, unrivalled authority. Of course, one reason why the Bible makes no mention of God's Word being higher than the Pope or Magisterium is that no such person or thing even existed when the Bible was written. They were both invented by men centuries later.

However, my principal point is that Carl Keating did not realise the significance of the phrase he had just used, i.e. *"the Word of God..."* It is already self-evident, even from those four words, that the Word of God is uniquely authoritative. Therefore it does not even *need* to be said. The fact that it is so authoritative is already plainly implied by the very phrase *"the Word of God,"* as opposed to the word of some man, or group of men.

In other words, if the Bible is *God's Word*, and records what *God* is saying, then why does anything further need to be said in its support to tell us that it has supreme and unique authority? How could it *not* have supreme, unique authority over everyone and everything if it is *God's Word*, as opposed to the words of a mere man or group of men, however eminent? That point evidently had not occurred to Carl Keating. He had forgotten *whose* Word he was dealing with and the significance of that.

So, the clue is in the phrase *"the Word of God."* If that is *who* is speaking, then it automatically follows that it has infinite authority, simply because of *whose* Word it is. The Bible does not need to make the obvious point that God's Word has authority above every man or organisation. We are, quite reasonably, expected to regard that as self-evident, by virtue of the fact that it is God Himself who is speaking to us. That fact alone gives His message all the authority it could ever need, such that He should not have to spell it out for us by telling us that what He says is authoritative.

It would be like you receiving a written order from General Eisenhower about the Normandy landings and then reading through his order, carefully looking for some line where he says:

*"This order is to be treated as being authoritative".*

He does not need to say that. The authority of his written order comes from the very fact that *he* is the writer and from the fact of *who he is and what his rank is*.

In other words, *his name* on the order or memorandum is what validates the message and gives it its authority. It is plainly obvious that anything he says automatically outweighs anything that is said by any other person of lower rank. Eisenhower was the only 5 star general on the Allied side in the European theatre. He was the Supreme Commander of all Allied forces at sea, on land and in the air.

Therefore, to question why the written Word of God should be preferred to the word of a Pope, or Magisterium of bishops, is like asking why the written word of General Eisenhower should be preferred to the views and opinions of some private or corporal in your unit, or even to the views and opinions of some high-ranking officer or group of officers. General Eisenhower does not, or should not, need to say:

*"Listen to me and do what I say rather than what other people say".*

It is obvious from the fact of his rank alone that you are to listen to him and that nobody can countermand or alter his orders.

Accordingly, we need to fully grasp the fact that if something is the Word of God, as opposed to the words of a mere man, then that fact alone has profound implications for how seriously we need to take it. A written order from General Eisenhower would not be left unread or ignored, and would never have its importance or its authority questioned or challenged.

Likewise the Word of God stands alone. It has unique, supreme authority and towers over every other person or group, no matter what they might claim about themselves. This ought to be so utterly obvious that it did not need to be said. But unfortunately, it does need to be said, because of the false claims that are being made by many people, in particular, by the Roman Catholic church, but also by many others as well.

**Be willing to consider it possible that there are gaps and errors in your own doctrines and beliefs and ask God to expose those to you**

In my experience, an alarmingly high percentage of people within churches make the following automatic assumptions:

- a) that whatever they believe is obviously correct
- b) that what their own pastor or denomination teaches is obviously correct
- c) that if an idea, or particular point of doctrine, is new to them then it cannot be right, because if it was true they would have already heard it within their own church or denomination.
- d) that if an idea or doctrine is being advocated by someone from outside their own church or denomination then it probably isn't right.

I don't suppose that even one person in a million would ever consciously think any of those things, let alone say them out loud. They are just unconsciously thought. However, you can tell that a person has those unconscious beliefs, and is making such assumptions, by observing the way they act, and react, when an unfamiliar or unsettling idea is first suggested to them. They will instinctively reject it, and close their mind to it, without giving the proposition any conscious thought at all.

It is as though they were reacting to it with the nerve endings under their knee cap rather than by the conscious exercise of their mind. I remember once being at a house group meeting at an evangelical church we used to belong to. A young man called James was leading the house group and about 10 other people were present. I had been asked to lead a section of the meeting when we were looking at a particular passage of Scripture. The passage contained prophecy about the end times. In particular, it was about the 1000 year period when Jesus will rule on this earth as King after He returns. It is commonly called the Millennium, though the Bible does not give it that name.

When I spoke briefly to set out my understanding of the passage, James became agitated and defensive. He was not familiar with any teaching that said that Jesus would literally reign as King of Israel for 1000 years or that Israel will be the leading nation on the earth. James had been brought up in a church which taught *amillennialism*, i.e. that there will not be any literal 1000 year reign of Jesus on the Earth and that what is said in Revelation chapter 20 was just figurative, symbolic language, like poetry.

Leave aside for a moment whether it was James or me that was right. The point is we never got so far as to be able to arrive at any conclusion about that, because James could not cope with even discussing it. He therefore leapt in and closed down the discussion before it could get anywhere.

He was afraid even to allow it be discussed because he did not have enough knowledge or understanding to be able to argue against me in a constructive way or even to hear me out openly. If I could paraphrase, I think James' unconscious thoughts were probably as follows:

- a) *"This isn't what I've been taught"*
- b) *"therefore it must be wrong"*
- c) *"but I don't know how to disprove it"*
- d) *"so I'll close down the discussion"*
- e) *"then nobody will be able to say anything in my presence that I don't believe."*

On that occasion James was able to stop a discussion from continuing. However, this kind of reaction also happens when a person is on their own. A person can prevent themselves from hearing something that someone says in a book or sermon or from noticing something that is written in the Bible. They can even prevent a new thought from forming in their own mind.

Usually the unfamiliar idea or controversial suggestion is rejected internally without any word needing to be spoken. The person hearing it or reading it just unconsciously and immediately edits it out. He probably doesn't even register that it was ever heard or read. It does not get past the bone at the front of the skull. It just bounces off, rather than being carefully considered in the light of what the Bible says and then rejected or accepted for known, biblical reasons.

A friend of mine told me of an occasion where she made a comment about a certain issue to some ladies at a particular church. One of the ladies there was from a very strong Reformed, Calvinist background. That therefore coloured the way she saw things. It had also had a severely limiting effect on what teaching she had been exposed to, and on what teachings she had *never* heard. All she had ever been taught was whatever was consistent with the approach taken by Reformed, Calvinistic church leaders. They were the only teachers she had ever heard.

At any rate, my friend made an observation about something in the Bible. The problem is that this lady had never heard anybody express that view before. She therefore responded immediately in a sharp, aggressive tone saying *"Well, I've never heard that before!"* She didn't say that as a neutral statement of fact, i.e. simply to indicate that the idea being expressed was new to her. She meant it as a rebuke and as a means of abruptly ending the conversation by indicating that what had been said was wrong.

But, in her eyes, it was not wrong because it wasn't in the Bible, or because it contradicted the Bible. It was automatically wrong, as she saw it, *simply because she had never heard anybody say it before.* But whether or not something is familiar to you personally is no basis for concluding that it is either right or wrong. The correct question is not: *"Is this idea new to me?"* It should be: *"Is this idea expressly stated in the Bible, or at least consistent with what the Bible does say?"*

The problem with having a closed mind which operates as set out above is that it is an abdication of our individual responsibility to scrutinise and evaluate everything in the light of Scripture. Doing that involves effort and work over a long period, and is based on testing everything against the Bible. Instead of taking the time to do this, too many of us take the short cut of just accepting whatever is *familiar* and rejecting whatever is *unfamiliar*. But we are not commanded to test things on the basis of whether they *sound familiar*. That is not a reliable test at all. What is familiar could easily be false and what is unfamiliar could well be true.

The point is that the issue of familiarity or unfamiliarity is not what matters. It proves nothing and disproves nothing. That is why apostle Paul praised the people of Berea who *"examined the*

*Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so.*” They even scrutinised what Paul said. But they did so solely on the basis of whether it was *consistent with the Scriptures*, irrespective of the fact that his teaching was new to them. Otherwise, nobody would ever be able to learn anything new or be corrected where their existing knowledge or understanding is mistaken or incomplete.

It is very important therefore to be open-minded and to consider it possible that what you currently believe or understand may be inadequate, or even wrong. We have to be more than just *willing* to be corrected. We need to go out of our way to *seek for* correction. That includes examining (and cross-examining) ourselves to look for and expose gaps in our own knowledge and errors in our own thinking. In other words, you need to be your own most intense critic and to interrogate yourself robustly:

***Examine yourselves, to see whether you are holding to your faith. Test yourselves. Do you not realize that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you fail to meet the test!***

***2 Corinthians 13:5 (RSV)***

There are other reasons too why people reject what the Bible says and instead cling on to ideas and beliefs of their own. Here are another two examples:

- a) People often reject what the Bible says if believing it would require them to think something *critical or uncomplimentary* about themselves or about those whom they care about.
- b) People often reject what the Bible says merely because what it speaks of is currently *outside of their own experience*, i.e. it has not yet happened to them, or they have not yet seen it happen.

An example of the first point is that I was at a meeting once and someone was speaking about their experiences as a pastor dealing with sick and dying people. The meeting opened up into a discussion. One man, who had a lot of theological knowledge and knew the Bible extremely well, asked a question to the group about the issue of how some people (not all) get sick because of a demonic attack on their lives. That is clearly biblical and there are many instances of it in the Bible, not least what Satan did to make Job ill. That sickness was entirely due to Satan.

When he raised this perfectly legitimate question one man at the meeting, who had a long term illness, became agitated. He felt offended that this other man had even raised this issue at all. Therefore he spoke up quite sharply and shot him down in flames. Then I heard him later, still grumbling and muttering about that man, for having said something so “*outrageous*.” The man was upset and from what I heard him say, I believe his chain of logic was broadly as follows:

- a) *This man is suggesting that demons can (sometimes) be the cause of people getting ill.*
- b) *I’m ill.*
- c) *He could be implying that my illness was caused by a demon.*
- d) *If so, that would suggest there is something bad about me (actually it wouldn’t – Job was said by God to be very righteous, yet Satan was still given permission to afflict him in various ways, including making him ill).*
- e) *I don’t want anybody to think that there could be something bad about me, or that a demon could ever be involved in my life. And I don’t even want to think it myself.*
- f) *Therefore I won’t believe it.*
- g) *Therefore it can’t be what the Bible is saying.*

- h) *Therefore this man must be wrong.*
- i) *And I am entitled to be angry with him for even suggesting it.*

So, the man with the illness closed his own ears and mind. He refused even to hear, let alone consider the question that the other man was asking. The questioner was a sincere and scholarly man. Yet the man with the illness could not, and would not, hear him and saw no need to check anything out in the Bible.

It probably never even occurred to him to do so. Checking things in the Bible was not on his agenda. He was evaluating what had been said merely on the basis of *how it made him feel about himself*. But ones feelings are not a valid basis for establishing the truth or otherwise of any idea, least of all a point of doctrine.

Let us turn now to the second point, i.e. where people judge the truth or otherwise of an idea or doctrine on the basis of whether it fits in, or doesn't fit in, with their own *experiences* to date. An example of this might be the question of whether the baptism in the Holy Spirit and the use of spiritual gifts is meant to be for today or just for the first century.

Or you could put it another way, i.e. to ask whether spiritual gifts, if used today, come from God, or from the demons, or from a person's own imagination. To answer questions like that we need to search the Scriptures and find out what they say about this subject. Then we must make our decision based on:

- a) a careful and comprehensive search to find all that the Bible has to say on the point, and;
- b) a careful analysis of those passages, applying what they say in a logical way, and (generally) adopting a literal approach to interpreting them.

However, what too many people do instead is to simply focus on what has and hasn't as yet *happened to themselves*. So, if a thing hasn't happened to them, or isn't what they normally do, then it cannot be valid. But, if it is something they have experienced, then it must be valid. So, taking their thinking (or perhaps their unconscious thoughts) step by step, they might be something like this:

- a) *"Such a person or such a group claims to have been baptized in the Holy Spirit and to speak in tongues and operate in other spiritual gifts."*
- b) *"I haven't ever experienced that or done those things."*
- c) *"If such things were valid they would have happened to me."*
- d) *"Therefore they can't be valid."*
- e) *"Therefore such things are either:*
  - i. not really happening to them at all, or;*
  - ii. they are only faking it or pretending, or;*
  - iii. it must come from the Devil or a demon."*

Now, it is certainly true that spiritual gifts can be faked by the person themselves. It is also true that demons can give counterfeit gifts. However, it is not valid or logical to arrive at such conclusions based solely on the fact that we ourselves have not yet experienced these things or operated in those gifts. That, in itself, proves nothing.

Therefore you cannot come to a valid conclusion about any point of biblical doctrine or teaching if your thinking is based solely on your own *experiences*. Your own experience, or what you have seen, or not seen, others do could mislead you. It could lead you to false conclusions for any of the following reasons:

- a) The thing could be valid but it just hasn't happened to you yet or;
- b) It could be that you have been baptized in the Holy Spirit but have not, as yet, realised that fact. Therefore it could be that you have not, as yet, chosen to speak in tongues because you don't realise that you can or;
- c) You could genuinely believe you have had an experience or seen someone else have one but be mistaken. Thus you think something has happened, but you are wrong or you were misled. Thus it has not really happened at all or;
- d) It could be a demonic counterfeit and thus what you have experienced was not actually from God but from a demon.

All of the above options are possibilities. I believe I have come across all of them, either in my own experience or from people I have known.

Therefore you can't make a judgment as to whether the baptism in the Holy Spirit and the exercise of spiritual gifts is valid, and/or meant to be used today, based solely on what has happened to you (or on what hasn't yet happened). Neither can your conclusion be based on what you have *seen others do* or claim to do. Such experiences may help you to have a better understanding and a better application of what the Bible says. But they cannot, in themselves, be the *basis* or *authority* for any conclusions that you reach, either way, about this or any other point of doctrine.

**Make it your central priority to do God's will and to know His will. Then you will be better able to tell whether men's teaching is false or genuine**

It is not always easy to tell the difference between true and false teaching. Sometimes what is being taught sounds very similar to the truth. Or it may be that 90% of it is accurate doctrine and that only one tenth of it is wrong. That means that to be able to identify wrong or false teaching you need to know the Bible well. However, while you are learning it, you will be greatly helped if it is your sincere *desire* to know God's will and to do it. If that is what you really want, such that you have a genuine determination to find out the truth about what God is saying and to obey it, then God will give you His help and will guide you into the truth:

*<sup>14</sup> About the middle of the feast Jesus went up into the temple and taught. <sup>15</sup> The Jews marveled at it, saying, "How is it that this man has learning, when he has never studied?" <sup>16</sup> So Jesus answered them, "My teaching is not mine, but his who sent me; <sup>17</sup> if any man's will is to do his will, he shall know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own authority. <sup>18</sup> He who speaks on his own authority seeks his own glory; but he who seeks the glory of him who sent him is true, and in him there is no falsehood.*

*John 7:14-18 (RSV)*

I have found this to be true in my own experience. Many times I have been mistaken, or have been badly taught, or have been told wrong doctrine, but God has alerted me to it and corrected me. He did so *because I wanted Him to*. He knew that that was my sincere desire, and that my will was to do His will, as Jesus put it. Conversely I have seen many people go deeper and deeper into error and not come out of it.

My own assessment, so far as I could tell, was that in many cases those people who degenerated into error *didn't really care much what the truth was anyway*. That being so, God did not take steps to open their eyes and expose their errors. Had they genuinely *wanted* Him to do so, then He would have. But they did not have the love of the truth. Therefore *it did not matter to them to find out what was true and what wasn't*.

### **Ask God to guide you by His Holy Spirit so as to understand the Bible correctly**

Therefore make a decision that from now on you are really going to care about finding out what the truth is and what a verse or passage really means. Resolve that you will not be passive about what the truth really is, or indifferent as to whether you have found it. Be passionate and committed about truth. Let that be particularly so when the issue has to do with what the Bible really means. Ask God to open your eyes to see things in His Word that you have not previously noticed or understood:

*Open my eyes, that I may behold  
wondrous things out of thy law.  
Psalm 119:18 (RSV)*

Also ask God to guide you and to correct you wherever you are in error or are confused about what is true or about what the Bible is saying:

*<sup>13</sup> When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. <sup>14</sup> He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. <sup>15</sup> All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.*

*John 16:13-15 (RSV)*

However, God will not give understanding unconditionally to absolutely everybody. He only promises to guide, answer and correct us *if we genuinely care what the truth is* and really do want to know His will. God is a rewarder of those who *diligently seek Him*, not those who are casual, indifferent or flippant. We can take it that the same applies to those who diligently seek to find out His will and what His Word means:

*<sup>6</sup>But without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him.*

*Hebrews 11:6 (KJV)*

Indeed, the principle that God rewards the diligent probably applies more strongly than ever to those who are diligent in seeking to understand His Word correctly, because that is so important to Him.

### **The importance of memorising passages of Scripture**

Our generation has lost the art of memorising anything, whether Scripture, or poetry, or otherwise. It seems like too much effort, and we don't see others doing it, so most of us don't bother. It's quite rare even to hear of memorisation being suggested today. That wasn't always the case. Past generations saw the value of it and they made the effort. Even at school, our grandparents were required to memorise vast amounts of poetry, plus other facts and figures, which schools today wouldn't even attempt to get children to learn.

Teachers assume now that it is asking too much of children. However, it isn't too difficult, and it is worth the effort. If we can memorise individual verses, but better still longer passages, we will benefit greatly from it. Therefore the Bible urges us to do so. The Psalmist speaks of this:

*I have laid up thy word in my heart,  
that I might not sin against thee.  
Psalm 119:11 (RSV)*

*I will delight in thy statutes;  
I will not forget thy word.  
Psalm 119:16 (RSV)*

When we memorize Scripture it becomes part of us. It influences our thinking far more than when we merely hear it or read it, even if we know the gist of it quite well. There is a profound difference between merely being aware of a passage and having it fully memorised. When we have learned a passage word-perfect, and can quote it accurately whenever we wish to, then that passage has sunk into us and become part of our 'software'. It ceases to be something we have heard of, or are aware of, and becomes something we really know.

That is far deeper and more significant. We are changed by verses that we have memorised far more than by those with which we are merely familiar. If you now set yourself the objective of starting to memorise Scripture, you will not regret it, however much effort it requires. It is no exaggeration to say that it will change your life.

The people I have most admired over the years have tended to be those who could accurately quote the Bible, word perfect, in every situation. The classic example would be the late Dave Hunt. He was brought up by godly parents and teachers who instilled in him the habit of Scripture memory, and from an early age. So, when Dave Hunt took part in debates, as he often did, he was far more effective than his opponent.

He had the Word of God at his fingertips and could quote it confidently whenever he needed to. It gave great authority to everything he had to say when he was debating with other Christians, who had not spent a lifetime memorizing Scripture. The difference really showed and I found Dave Hunt to be an inspiration. Jesus had the same approach. He quoted regularly from the Old Testament. So did Apostle Paul.

### **How to memorise Scripture**

The only effective way to memorize Scripture is slowly and steadily. It can't be done in a hurry. The best method is to get some blank cards about the same size as business cards and to write out on them the verses that you wish to memorise. Or you can write them on the back of actual business cards. That is what I do. Put the reference at the beginning and again at the end. For example, this is how you might show a short verse like Romans 3:23:

<p><i>Romans 3:23</i></p> <p><i>Since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of god</i></p> <p><i>Romans 3:23</i></p>
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The reason to include the reference as well as the verse is that you need to be able to remember exactly where it comes from, not just what it says. Then you can immediately refer to it, and point to where it comes from. That is particularly helpful if you are sharing the gospel with an unsaved person. It enables you to turn to the right passage in the Bible with no delay or difficulty. The reason for quoting the reference twice, i.e. at the beginning and the end, is that it helps to fix it in your mind much better. It is a tried and tested method and it really works.

So, you choose appropriate verses and then write them out and begin to memorise them at the rate of perhaps one or two a week or, at most, three or four per week. If you try to do any more than that it is likely to fall apart after a few weeks. The best method is to learn the passages "*by mouth*", as the Jewish people say. That means to say the verses *out loud*, not just silently in your head. That fixes it far more solidly in your memory.

However, it is not always possible to speak out loud. If so, then whisper the verses very quietly so that only you can hear. Even that is much better than doing it silently, entirely within your head. When I was a new believer in 1981 I got a job in Paris for the summer, working in a shop. That involved me travelling on the Metro for nearly two hours per day, because I had to make two return trips. I used that travel time for Scripture memory work and memorised 60 separate passages during that summer. I couldn't speak out loud on the Metro, but I could mouth the words quietly to myself.

The physical movement of the mouth and tongue really helps to fix the words in your memory and also helps when you later wish to quote the verse out loud. Your tongue itself becomes familiar with the words and rhythm and helps you to remember the passage. It is very like the concept of "finger memory" when one is playing the piano.

It works best if you devote one week to learning the new verse in a concentrated way. After that you merely review it to reinforce it and keep it in your memory. So, in week one you should speak the verse perhaps 20 times a day, making a total of 140 repetitions. That should basically get it into your memory.

However, it won't be word-perfect yet. To achieve that you need ongoing review and repetition of the verses you already know. In week one you will only have one or two passages to learn, so it will seem quite easy. However, the problem is that as the weeks go by the numbers build up, because of the need to review verses from previous weeks.

From week two onwards, for say six to ten weeks, repeat the verse out loud about 3-5 times per day. That is perhaps another 200-300 repetitions in total, and will help to reinforce it and make it permanent. After that, you can go down to reviewing your previous passages only about once a month. That will keep your memory topped up.

It is also important to say the verses *in the same way each time* with the same rhythm and pauses and the same expression and emphasis on particular words or syllables. You will find that that approach makes it far easier to speak out a verse from memory. Your tongue will carry you along once you get started because it has become so familiar with the rhythm as well as the words.

It is very important to get the passages *absolutely word-perfect*, without any stumbling or hesitating. Getting them 90%, or even 99% accurate, is not good enough. If you've only got to that level of accuracy you haven't learned them well enough. You are probably going too quickly. It is much better to go slowly and do it properly than to go quickly and do a shoddy job of it.

A good selection of verses to begin memorising might be the ones set out in Appendix Two at the end of this book. I have put lots of verses into little boxes which are about the size of business cards. If you wish, you could print off some or all of them, preferably using a fairly thick card, and then cut them up and use them to memorise.

Please note that all of the verses on the cards in Appendix Two are from the *English Standard Version* (ESV). Details of this can be found in chapter five below. It is a good and accurate translation and is becoming more widely used. Moreover, it should be around for the long term.

### **Moving on to memorising whole chapters or even whole books of the Bible**

Once you have got used to the idea of memorizing short passages of Scripture, it is time to consider learning longer passages such as whole chapters or even entire books or letters. You might imagine that this would be incredibly difficult or even impossible. I thought so myself at one time. However, it is nothing like as hard as you might think, provided you are willing to be diligent and patient.

In fact, learning whole chapters can, in some ways, be easier than learning lots of separate short passages. A whole chapter or book holds together as a structure. Therefore, once you have memorised it, you will find that it flows easily. Each verse leads you into the next as if they were all chained to each other, like the carriages of a train.

Moreover, you will find that even if, with your mind, you are sometimes unsure what the next line is going to be, your *mouth* knows. So, as with ‘finger memory’ with the piano, your mouth knows what the next line is and says it automatically. You get that benefit of ‘mouth memory’ far more strongly when memorising whole chapters than with single verses or even short passages. That is because each of the verses in the chapter are hooked together. So the ending of one verse prompts you, or at least your mouth, to know what the next word is. Then, that word leads you on and you flow automatically into the next verse or section.

Let me now give a few tips, from my own experience, about how best to memorize whole chapters and series of chapters. Begin by choosing a chapter, or a whole letter or book, that particularly interests you, and which you are eager to learn. That will help with motivation. Then go on to the internet to a website called *Bible Gateway* on **www.biblegateway.com** and get the Bible translation that you wish to use up on screen. Then print off the chapter you want onto sheets of A4 paper. Use a very large font size, so that the words are easy to read, even from a distance.

Make sure you print off a number of copies of each chapter. Loose sheets of paper are easier to carry around with you than a whole Bible. Plus you will find that the process of learning will wear out the sheets, because you will need to take them around the house with you into the kitchen, bathroom, garage etc. You may even choose to take them outdoors, such as when you walk the dog, work in the garden or drive your car.

I keep spare copies available so that they can be used in all those places. For example, I will clip a sheet or sheets up by the mirror in the bathroom or on the outside of the shower. Then I can refer to the sheets when reciting the chapter. So, if I get stuck, I can immediately get re-started and can also avoid reinforcing errors. It is essential to have the sheets in front of you when you are first starting to learn a brand new section.

You have to keep them in view so that you can read the verses as you recite the new section. If not you will make mistakes and those errors will start to get ingrained into your memory. So it is important to have the sheet to hand at all times when you first start to memorise a passage in order to avoid remembering any of it wrongly to begin with. Such errors can be very hard to unlearn later on.

If I am driving I will keep sheets on the passenger seat so that I can pick them up and refer to them as and when necessary i.e. when the traffic stops for a red light or where there is a queue. If I am walking the dog I keep sheets in my hand or pocket. Even if I run on the treadmill, I clip sheets to the display stand and I recite while running. All in all, by memorising while you are *already doing something else*, it means that it doesn’t use up any extra time, because you were already gardening, cooking, showering, walking the dog etc anyway.

It is also important before printing them off, to break up the chapter(s) into short sections of about 2-4 verses rather than leave them as one long continuous block. Dividing it up into little blocks makes it so much easier. So a chapter of say 30 verses might be split, on average, into about 10 sections, each of 2-4 verses, depending on the length of the verses and where the natural breaks or changes of subject occur within that chapter.

The point is that each section of 2-4 verses is quite easy to memorise and it breaks the overall task down into about ten manageable parts. It also enables you to set little targets for yourself and it aids motivation. So, you begin with the first section and start to memorise just that, and nothing more, at this stage. This is how I go about it. Even within that section, I will take the first verse by itself and say it, *while reading it*, about 20-25 times.

If it is a very long verse of say 3 or 4 lines, you may find it helpful to split that verse into two parts so that the series of words you are trying to learn is not too long to remember in one go. If you try to memorise too much in one go, it will actually slow you down. Also, don't try to do it from memory at this very early stage because you haven't yet learned it. You are bound to make little errors which you would then need to 'unlearn'. Therefore keep the sheet in your hand to read from until you are confident that you can say it unaided.

That first verse is then sufficiently familiar to enable you to recite it without looking at the sheet. Then recite it without the sheet, say another 15-20 times, until you are really fluent. By this point you have reached the *first* stage of memorizing. That is you know it well enough to recite it without the sheet. But you still have much farther to go to get it really ingrained into your memory. So, you can't just stop there.

As you do all this, you should initially try different ways of saying the words and emphasise or stress different words or syllables until you settle upon what seems to you be the right rhythm and have decided where to lay the emphasis/stress. You want it to read well and sound natural, with feeling, as a good reader would speak it out. Don't say it in a lifeless, monotonous tone of voice.

That liveliness of tone and rhythm is necessary in order to convey the meaning in the best way, but it also helps you to memorise. The rhythm and lilt of your voice and the choices you make as to the particular words or syllables to stress all combine to hold the entire verse together. They also help to link it to the verses around it. The rhythm and emphasis etc become an integral part of the memorising process. They help to 'glue' the words to each other and to fix them in your memory, in particular your '*mouth memory*', more so than in your mind.

It is very much like the way that a tune helps you to memorise the words of a song. The way you pronounce and express the words as you speak becomes almost a form of spoken tune. I try to express the words as I imagine the writer, for example apostle Paul, may have spoken them when he was dictating them out loud, or as an actor might say them if speaking on stage. It makes the verse much more meaningful and vivid but, above all, it helps you to memorise it.

So, once you are reasonably fluent with the first verse, then, likewise, do the second verse *on its own* about 20-25 times, *while reading it*, as with the first verse. Then, once you are fluent and error-free, say it about 20 times while not reading it, i.e. from memory. Then do the same for the third and perhaps the fourth verse in that section. Once you have got familiar with each verse on its own. You can begin to learn that whole section, reciting all 2-4 verses, together in a continuous flow. This is very important because each section has to hold together as a short passage by itself if you are to learn the whole chapter or book.

It is easier to put the verses of each section together if each verse is already familiar on its own. It prevents you from fizzling out and getting stuck in the second or third verse and being unable to complete the whole section. It also prevents you from giving excessive or disproportionate attention

to the first verse in each section, which is what you would do if you tried to learn all 2-4 verses as a whole in one go rather than one verse at a time.

Quite soon you will be able to say that first 2-4 verse section all together, as a whole. At that point, practice reciting all of the 2-4 verses repeatedly, maybe 20-25 times or more. That will cement those verses to each other as a section. When you reach the point where you can recite them flawlessly, you are ready to learn the second section. Do that in the very same way, on its own, just as set out above.

What I mean is don't, at this stage, recite the second section together with the first section, i.e. don't recite the first section and then follow on into the second one. Do the second one by itself, as a stand-alone passage, just as you learned the first one. That way you will ensure that you give it the same amount of time and attention as you gave to the first section.

Then, when you have properly learned the second section, start to recite the two sections together, i.e. with the first one continuing on into the second, so you are speaking perhaps 4-8 verses out loud in one go. Once that has been achieved, so that you can fluently recite the first two sections together, you are ready to start to learn the third section. Then you can add that, as above, until you can recite the first three sections all together, one after the other.

That is how you build up, stage by stage, and 'assemble' the whole chapter. It is as if you were constructing a building using pre-fabricated sections of concrete which are each built on their own and then put together. The advantage of this system is that you give equal weight to each section and thoroughly learn each one. That would not occur if you always began reciting at verse one every time. The later verses in the middle and end of a chapter would inevitably be neglected, or at least given less attention by comparison with the earlier ones. If you did that you might learn the beginning extremely well, but you would be unable to get right to the end without losing your way in the middle of the chapter and getting stuck.

Once I have learned a few sections, what I also do, to equalize the attention I give to each section, and also to help me to link them together, is to begin by reciting the last line, or the last few words, of the previous section before launching into reciting the one I am currently learning. Then it means that the end of one section and the start of the next one are firmly cemented together in your mind. Then each one becomes hooked to the next one

So, as you finish one section, the first word of the next will spring automatically into your mind. For example, it might look like this, taking two sections of Romans chapter eight. Imagine you split the start of that chapter into sections consisting of verses 1-4 then 5-8 and then 9-11. The second section ends with verse 8, which reads "*and those who are in the flesh cannot please God*".

Then, verse 9, which starts the next section, reads "*But you are not in the flesh, you are in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you.*" Then it continues for three more verses. The point is that if you are currently learning the section consisting of verses 9-11 then it helps if you *lead into that* by reciting the final verse of the previous section, i.e. verse 8, or even the last few words, if it happens to be a very long verse. The lead up then creates a link in your memory between verse 8 and verse 9 and joins them together like two railway carriages.

Then, later on when you are reciting the whole chapter, or a whole book, the end of each section and the start of the next will be connected in your mind. Therefore you won't grind to a halt at the end of one section, having no idea of what comes next. That can easily occur, even if you have memorised each of them well, if you haven't taken the trouble to *link the sections together*. Indeed, I often also recite just the last verse of one section and the first verse of the next, just by themselves, to really underline and strengthen that link.

When you get to the end of a chapter it is also essential to say the name of the next chapter before you begin to recite from it. So, actually say out loud “*Romans Chapter Four*” before you press on and begin to recite that chapter. That will help you in future to be able to begin reciting from any chapter in a book, rather than feeling you have to start at chapter one.

You can also use the same device referred to above for linking sections together in order to link *chapters* together. That is you can recite the final verse or phrase of the previous chapter before then saying “Romans Chapter Four” and continuing. That helps to prevent you from getting a mental blockage at the end of any chapter. You will always know what comes next and can then flow naturally into the next chapter.

When choosing which version of the Bible to use for memory work, you need to consider which gives the most accurate rendering of the verse. Refer to chapter five below which addresses that question. You would also be wise to use a version which is likely to remain in use long term, rather than one which may only be a temporary fashion, and might no longer be in print in 20 years.

So, you may be best to use versions like the NASB, or King James, because they are tried and tested and are here to stay. But before you memorize a passage, it may be a good idea to read it in different versions and choose the one which is the clearest. You need not necessarily choose the same version for all your memory work, though it is probably best to use one version most of the time.

You may want to consider buying sets of cards with passages of Scripture already printed on them. These are produced by an evangelical group called '*The Navigators*'. Their cards are useful and make it a lot easier for you, because the passages they choose are set out in sensible groupings. You can get these cards from Christian bookshops or from the internet at [www.navigators.org/us](http://www.navigators.org/us)

### **What it means to ‘*meditate*’ on a passage of Scripture**

The word ‘*meditate*’ conjures up impressions of Eastern religions and sounds a bit weird. However, what the Bible means by meditating on Scripture has got nothing to do with the false practices one sees within Buddhism, yoga etc. What they mean by meditating has to do with ‘*emptying one’s mind*’, but what the Bible speaks of is *the very opposite*. It is to *focus one’s mind* on a passage of Scripture, and to consider it, study it and *reflect on it at length*:

***but his delight is in the law of the LORD,  
and on his law he meditates day and night.  
Psalm 1:2 (RSV)***

I remember an alarming incident when our son was 7 years old and at primary school. One day, without our knowledge, or any warning, the teacher got the children to do some yoga, which is an occult practice. She said to the children “*empty your minds of all thoughts*”. We had not warned our son of such things, because we hadn’t even imagined it would arise as an issue for him. We asked him what he had done, fearing that he may have taken part in it.

However, God had obviously stepped in to protect him, because he said:

*“I didn’t do it. When Mrs..... said “empty your minds”, I just decided to think about Jesus instead”.*

That had not come from us. Clearly, God had spoken directly to our seven year old to protect him from doing wrong and from being harmed.

Meditation, in the biblical sense, has got nothing to do with the occultic practices of yoga or Buddhism. It means focusing on a passage of Scripture and '*ruminating*' on it, rather like a cow does

when it chews its cud. The way a cow digests grass is to chew it and then swallow it and then to bring it back up again two or more times, so as to chew it again, repeatedly.

That way it can break the grass up more and get extra nutrients from it. So, with a passage of Scripture, if we meditate or ruminate on it, it means we keep going back to it and reflecting on it, seeking to gain more insights from it, and additional ways of applying it.

The point is that, even in a single verse, there can be so much meaning, and so many potential insights, that it cannot always be picked up in one reading. A good idea is to practise the discipline of repeating the verse or passage, but emphasising a different word each time. It is surprising how many more nuances will emerge as a result of doing that.

Also, ask yourself questions and even write down your questions as they occur to you. One of the ways God guides us, and illuminates the Scriptures to us, is to help us to think of the right questions to ask, i.e. those which open up the passage and are most probing and insightful.

### **How to meditate on a passage of Scripture**

In practical terms, if you wanted to meditate (or ruminate) on a particular passage, you could go about it as follows:

- a) Write it out by hand onto a card or sheet, or print off the section you need from the internet, using the Bible Gateway website.
- b) Get it out and read it out loud at various times of the day, or at least once or twice. The element of repetition, i.e. going back to think about it again and again, is the key. That is how further insights are gained. Thus, you could keep referring back to it throughout the day or over a series of days as the Psalmist did:

***O how I love Your law!  
It is my meditation all the day.  
Psalm 119:97 (NASB)***

- c) Ask God to reveal more of the meaning of the passage to you and to put into your mind relevant and insightful questions about it.
- d) Consider the scene or the circumstances being described in the passage and reflect on how each of the characters in the passage may have felt. For example, if you were to meditate on the passage about the prodigal son, you could ponder on how the father felt, and then how the prodigal son and the elder brother must have felt. Imagine how the position may have seemed to each of them as events progressed. In doing this, thoughts will occur to you which may assist you to understand the passage more fully. However, not all the thoughts you have will be worthwhile or valid. It depends whether they are consistent with Scripture. If not, then discard them.
- e) You may even wish to look at some commentaries on the passage in question and see what various commentators in the past have said. Each one will inevitably put forward some insights that have not occurred to you, or even to other commentators.

You can buy commentaries in Christian bookshops or via the internet. But be careful. They are not all equally good. Some are very wrong or misguided. They may be written by liberals, sceptics or by people who adopt the allegorical approach. Or it could even be by someone whose interest in the Bible is purely academic and who has no genuine faith at all. Any of these types of writers could easily confuse your own thinking and undermine your faith, especially if you are not aware that they have these various forms of unbelief.

- f) If you go further and memorise the passage it will make it even easier for you to keep bringing it to mind, so as to reflect on it. You will be able to do so even when you do not have a Bible to refer to. For example, you could recite verses out loud while driving, doing the washing up, or walking the dog etc. That will provide you with many more opportunities to reflect on the meaning of the passage.
- g) Write down the thoughts or insights you have in a journal so that you don't forget them.