

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **FURTHER POINTS ON HOW TO DEAL WITH THE BIBLE CORRECTLY**

<sup>46</sup> “Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and not do what I tell you? <sup>47</sup> Everyone who comes to me and hears my words and does them, I will show you what he is like: <sup>48</sup> he is like a man building a house, who dug deep, and laid the foundation upon rock; and when a flood arose, the stream broke against that house, and could not shake it, because it had been well built. <sup>49</sup> But he who hears and does not do them is like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation; against which the stream broke, and immediately it fell, and the ruin of that house was great.”

*Luke 6:46-49 (RSV)*

<sup>5</sup> Behold, I have taught you statutes and ordinances, as the LORD my God commanded me, that you should do them in the land which you are entering to take possession of it. <sup>6</sup> Keep them and do them; for that will be your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, ‘Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.’ <sup>7</sup> For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as the LORD our God is to us, whenever we call upon him? <sup>8</sup> And what great nation is there, that has statutes and ordinances so righteous as all this law which I set before you this day?

*Deuteronomy 4:5-8 (RSV)*

*They read from the book, from the law of God, translating to give the sense so that they understood the reading.*

*Nehemiah 8:8 (NASB)*

<sup>9</sup> For they are a rebellious people,  
lying sons,  
sons who will not hear  
the instruction of the Lord;  
<sup>10</sup> who say to the seers, “See not”;  
and to the prophets, “Prophesy not to us what is right;  
speak to us smooth things,  
prophesy illusions,  
<sup>11</sup> leave the way, turn aside from the path,  
let us hear no more of the Holy One of Israel.”

*Isaiah 30:9-11 (RSV)*

#### **Read everything in its proper context**

This is another essential rule of interpretation. It simply means that whenever we read a verse we must look at it in the context of the immediate surrounding verses, both before it and after it. Better still, it needs to be read in the context of the whole letter or book in which it is found. So, if apostle Paul makes a comment, you can only safely interpret it if you read the *whole letter* in which he said it.

It is dangerous to quote verses in isolation, out of their immediate, or even their wider, context. If you do, you can so easily misunderstand them. We could even go further and say that when you read any particular verse you actually need to interpret it and understand it in the light of the *whole Bible*, not only the book or letter in which it is found.

The Bible is an ongoing commentary on itself. Each book refers to earlier books and uses phrases from other prophets, or makes indirect references to what previous prophets have said. In doing this it is assumed that you know all of the Bible and will recognise these allusions or references, such that you will be able to interpret any single verse in the context of the whole Bible. That way, any ambiguity can be resolved by looking elsewhere in the Bible for clarification. That may sound ambitious, but that is how God wants, and expects, us to operate. He sets the bar very high when it comes to knowing the Bible, because so much depends on how well you understand it.

### **Always interpret complicated or obscure passages in the light of clearer ones.**

The heading above is a very simple statement, but if applied, it can save us from a lot of trouble and avoid many errors. The fact is that some verses in the Bible are very plain and clear, whereas some are less so. Some are even obscure and difficult. They may require you to have more knowledge than you currently have. Or, they might require you to cross reference an obscure or complex verse with other related passages in order to grasp the correct meaning.

Therefore, whenever a verse seems complicated, or unclear, or where it may have two or more possible meanings, always interpret it in the light of other verses which are more clear. That way, the easier or clearer passages will clarify or explain the harder ones. It's really just common sense, which we all seem to be able to apply to everything else we ever read, but not always to the Bible.

### **'Exegesis' - reading *from* the text what the Bible actually says**

The word '*exegesis*', which comes from a Greek word, means the practice of interpreting the Bible by taking the meaning *from* or *out of* what the text actually says. The very prefix '*ex*' means *out of*. So, when we approach the Bible, our only aim should be to find out what the text *actually says*, not whether we *agree with it*, or what it suggests to us personally. God wants us to agree with the text, not to try to make the text agree with us.

That may sound obvious, but it is not what millions of us actually do. Instead, we bring to the Bible our own pre-conceived ideas. We read the text the way we have been taught to read it. Therefore we give it the meaning we have been told it has, or that we prefer it to have, even when a plain reading of the text itself would oblige us to give it another meaning.

So, '*exegesis*' involves reading *from* the Bible *only what it actually says, no more and no less*. That is the right approach. The key to valid exegesis is to let the Bible itself be your guide and your plumb line. Read it the way it is written, regardless of your denominational tradition, or what you have always done in the past, or what other people have told you, no matter how authoritative such people may seem to be.

### **'Eisegesis' - reading *into* the text things which *aren't there*, i.e. seeing what you expect to see**

'*Eisegesis*' is the Greek word for the practice to which I'm objecting. It is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as "*The interpretation of a word or passage (of the Scriptures) by reading into it one's own ideas.*" The prefix '*eis*' means '*in*' or '*into*'. So, eisegesis is the exact opposite of exegesis.

It involves coming to the Bible with pre-conceived ideas and squeezing those existing ideas *into* whatever you are reading, no matter what the text actually says. If you take that approach then *you will always see what you expect to see*. You actually have to try very hard to avoid this, or you will find that you do it automatically, without even realising.

Never try to force the Bible to fit in with your views. Just as importantly, never make the Bible fit in with your denominational traditions and practices or your cultural expectations. Always let the Bible correct you, rather than you correcting it. Equally, let the Bible correct your Pastor, or Vicar, or whoever else has told you things. Never allow them to correct or modify the Bible.

So, if there is ever a contradiction or misalignment between what the Bible says and what your denomination teaches or practises, then train yourself to assume that the Bible is right and that your denomination or culture, or whatever else, is wrong. Make sure you always get it that way round, never the other way. The Bible is infallible, and has absolute authority. No other book, person, or denomination, can claim that.

### **When reading the Bible we have a tendency only to see what we *expect to see* and are blind to anything else**

It is a feature of human nature that people tend only to see what they expect to see. Thus when reading a passage people tend not even to register anything which is new to them or which differs from what they have been taught or brought up to think. So, it is not that they consciously see the point and choose to reject it. *They generally don't even notice it.* They are blind to it, due to their rigidly fixed expectations.

For example, I was once at a men's breakfast meeting and the speaker was dealing with the book of Joel. He focused on chapter two and the first part of chapter three. I was intrigued to find out what the speaker would say about verses 1-2 of chapter three, which we saw earlier. However, he just made some vague comments about the passage as a whole, but *did not say anything at all about these two verses.* Take another look at them:

***“For behold, in those days and at that time,  
When I restore the fortunes of Judah and Jerusalem,  
I will gather all the nations  
And bring them down to the valley of Jehoshaphat.  
Then I will enter into judgment with them there  
On behalf of My people and My inheritance, Israel,  
Whom they have scattered among the nations;  
And they have divided up My land.”  
Joel 3:1-2 (NASB)***

During the whole teaching session, the real meaning of verses 1-2 was never brought out by the speaker, not even in part. Therefore I later asked the men on my table what *they* thought verses 1-2 meant. I never gave my own view. I just wanted to know theirs. However, none of them were able to give any coherent answer. Like the speaker, they made some vague, woolly comments, but completely missed the point of the verses. What those verses are actually saying is as follows:

- a) At the time called ‘the day of the LORD’, God will “*restore the fortunes of Judah and Jerusalem.*”
- b) At that point He will also “*gather all the nations*”, i.e. the Gentiles, and “*bring them down to the valley of Jehoshaphat*”. That is a literal place in Israel.
- c) Then He will “*enter into judgment with them there*”, i.e. in Israel.
- d) He will do so on behalf of His people, *Israel*.
- e) He will do so because the Gentiles have “*scattered [Israel] among the nations*”.

- f) And He will do so because they (the Gentile nations) “*have divided up my land*” (i.e. the Land of Israel).

Now, take another look at verses 1-2 and ask yourself whether I have fairly and accurately summarised what the verses are saying. The point is that the men I asked did not come up with *any* of the points set out above. They were entirely blind to all of it. They made instead some nebulous, religious-sounding remarks, but those were all about the *Church*, which is not even being referred to in that passage. They made no mention whatsoever of *Israel*, or the *Land*, or God’s *judgment* on the Gentile nations for *dividing up that Land*. None of that ever entered their minds to the slightest extent.

Actually, I was not surprised by any of this. It was what I was expecting, even before the Bible study began, because I have come across it before. The problem was that the men in that room were mostly from a Reformed Protestant background. Thus they had all been brought up to believe in “*replacement theology*”. Indeed, they took that set of beliefs entirely for granted. It was a fixed set of background facts which coloured everything that they read in the Bible. As we saw earlier, it includes the following beliefs and assumptions:

- a) the belief that *God has finished with Israel*;
- b) that the Church has now *replaced Israel*;
- c) that there is no future for a literal nation of Israel and that *it plays no part in God’s plans*;
- d) that all the *promises* God made to Israel have been *transferred to the Church* and now belong to the Church;
- e) but that all the *curses* which God warned Israel about have *remained upon Israel* and have not been transferred to the Church;
- f) therefore we who are in the Church get all the blessings but Israel still gets all the curses. We have a bright future but they don’t have any future. We are now at the centre of God’s plans but they aren’t in God’s plans at all.

Therefore the men on my breakfast table could read Joel 3:1-2, and even re-read it at my request, but still have no idea at all that it had anything to do with:

- a) Israel;
- b) Israel’s future;
- c) the Gentile nations;
- d) God’s judgment of the Gentiles;
- e) the scattering of the Jewish people worldwide (as no other people group has ever been scattered);
- f) the fact that the Land of Israel has been divided (i.e. between Israel and Transjordan, now called Jordan) and that it is going to be divided again (to create the so-called nation of ‘Palestine’).

But if the passage was not about those things, then what on Earth could it possibly be about? The main reason they didn’t see any of those things in the passage is because they weren’t *expecting* to see them. That was because they had been brought up to accept replacement theology. Thus their expectation was that these verses (indeed, virtually all other verses too) are now referring *only to the Church and not to Israel*. That is their default-setting.

But, those verses were all about land, and about it being divided up and people being scattered etc. Given that the Church has no land and hasn't ever been scattered, then, in their minds, it had to follow that those verses either meant something symbolic. If not, they would find them totally incomprehensible. The only thing they felt they did 'know' for sure was that the verses had nothing to do with:

- a) Israel
- b) land
- c) dividing up land
- d) scattering people
- e) God judging anybody

They therefore automatically saw the verses as symbolic or spiritual, rather than taking them literally. Thus they had no expectation that any of those things spoken of in verses 1-2, whatever they might refer to, are going to be fulfilled literally. Their assumption was that these verses contained woolly, fuzzy, 'spiritual' statements which, in some indecipherable way, were somehow saying something or other about the Church, but were obviously not meant to be taken literally.

That was the extent of the confusion and error in that meeting. There was a room full of men, all of whom had got blinkers on, like what one puts on a horse to stop it seeing things that might frighten it. Those blinkers stopped them seeing what was clearly written on the page because they expected to see something else. This difficulty of preconceived ideas is a major problem and applies in all sorts of other areas and themes, not just about Israel.

The only hope you have of overcoming this problem is to actively seek to find all of these wrong beliefs in yourself. *Ask God to point them all out to you and to help you to get rid of them.* Therefore you need God's help, plus your own determined effort, to:

- a) recognise each of these blinkers in yourself;
- b) remove them;
- c) replace them with the right kind of 'spectacles', i.e. those which will enable you to read the Bible and see *what is really there on the page*, rather than what you are *expecting to see*.

**God expects you to read the *whole Bible* and to understand the many cross-references which are made to other passages in the Bible**

God both requires, and assumes, that you will read the whole Bible, not just parts of it. Thus the Bible has been written in such a way that each book or letter deliberately refers to other books and quotes from them. Or, one passage will say things which clarify or expand upon what has been said elsewhere in some other book or letter.

Thus, if something is puzzling you, or if some facts seem to be missing, the likelihood is that you will find the answer, or the missing ingredient, somewhere else in the Bible. For example, in Ephesians 6:17 apostle Paul says "*take the helmet of salvation.....*". But he doesn't say what that '*helmet*' is. He assumes you know that already.

That's because Paul had taught widely in Ephesus and must have explained the meaning of that figure of speech previously. So, it's not explained anywhere in that letter to the Ephesians. That's a problem to you if you happen to be reading Ephesians. The solution is found by looking in 1 Thessalonians 5:8, where Paul gives a definition of the 'helmet'. This is one of those relatively rare cases where a word actually does have a metaphorical meaning. However, we are told what it is.

Clearly, Paul doesn't want you to start wearing a literal helmet. It is an expression which he borrowed from Isaiah and it means the "*hope of salvation*", or simply *hope*. So, hope is what protects our minds from anxiety, depression, fear and discouragement. That's what Paul meant in Ephesians 6, but you'd only find it out by reading either 1 Thessalonians, or Isaiah. There are many other examples of this. Therefore we need to read the whole Bible, so that the inter-connectedness of it all can become apparent to us.

### **Every verse in the Bible is *true*, but the Bible as a whole is *the truth***

Yet another reason why we need to read and know the whole Bible, rather than just parts of it, is that it is only when you have the Bible as a whole that you have got *the truth*. Every single verse in the Bible is *true* and yet it is only the whole Bible, i.e. *the sum total of God's Word*, which is *the truth*. It is so easy to go wrong in your theology by building a doctrine on one verse and not allowing it to be tempered or clarified by other passages which could be found absolutely anywhere in the rest of the Bible. So it is only when we take into account all of God's Word, the clear and the less clear, the pleasant and the unpleasant, the comforting and the worrying, that we see the whole picture:

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

### **The difference between *direct statements* and *inferences or deductions*, which are *indirect***

It is also important to realise that there are two different types or levels of information in the Bible. In most cases the Bible makes a *direct statement*. If so, then what has been said is a fact and can be accepted, by itself, at face value. For example we are told that Abraham lived to be 175. That is a simple, direct statement.

However, there are also very many occasions when there is no direct statement. Nevertheless, information can be reasonably inferred or deduced from what has been said. For example, as we have seen earlier, in 2 Peter chapter 3, apostle Peter is speaking about apostle Paul's letters, which he recognises are sometimes hard to understand. Peter then says something from which we can validly draw an indirect *inference* or *deduction*:

***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.***  
*2 Peter 3:16 (RSV)*

Note that Peter ends with the words "*..... as they do the other Scriptures.*" So, although Peter has not directly stated that Paul's letters are Scripture, what he says entitles us to come to that conclusion indirectly. It is a legitimate inference which we can, and should, draw from his use of the word '*other*'.

So, direct statements and indirect inferences are both valid ways of receiving information from the Bible. We are meant to use both methods, albeit that we must be even more careful when dealing with indirect inferences than we are with direct statements.

Therefore, when we are merely drawing an inference, we must be aware that that is all we are doing. We must not make the error of treating it as if it was a direct statement. That approach will enable us to evaluate more accurately the status or weight that can be given to a particular point. We are less likely to go wrong if we take care to be very certain as to whether something is a direct statement or an indirect inference. The former is clearer, and more empathic, than the latter and carries greater weight.

Therefore, though inferences are valid, we need to handle them very carefully. We need to make sure that the deduction is correct and we have not picked up something which is not actually meant. For example, when Jesus spoke to apostle Peter in Matthew 16, He made a statement which millions of people have misunderstood. To begin with, they have got a mistaken understanding of the meaning of the direct statement, but they have also made some invalid deductions as well:

***Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, He was asking His disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" <sup>14</sup>And they said, "Some say John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; but still others, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets." <sup>15</sup>He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" <sup>16</sup>Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." <sup>17</sup>And Jesus said to him, "Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven. <sup>18</sup>I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it.***

***Matthew 16:13-18 (NASB)***

Verse 18 above has been claimed by the Roman Catholic church as meaning that Jesus Christ was going to build His Church on the foundation of *Peter*. That assumption is relied upon to help to justify the misguided idea that Peter was the first 'Pope' and that subsequent Popes, likewise, have the same exalted status that Peter is alleged to have had.

However that is not what Jesus was saying. If we wish to be kind to the Catholic church we could say that their error is due to sloppy interpretation of Jesus' words. However, it is more likely that it is a result of the Catholic church deliberately seeking to force Jesus' words to have the meaning that they *want them to have*. It suits them that Peter (and the Popes) should be the rock or foundation upon which the whole Church is built. In fact, Jesus was not talking about Peter at all, but about his divinely inspired statement of faith.

Let us look closely at Jesus' exact words in verse 18 and we shall see what He really meant. Verse 18 involves a play on words, in that Jesus uses two similar sounding words in the same sentence, both of which refer to rock. He says:

*"And I also say to you that you are Peter (**petros**), and upon this rock (**petra**) I will build My church..."*

The word *petros* means a small stone or pebble. It was Peter's personal name, or nickname, in Greek. (His equivalent name in Hebrew was Cephas.) However, the word *petra*, though linked, is quite different. It means a large slab of rock or a rock structure. So, the white cliffs of Dover are a *petra*, not a *petros*. Conversely, a stone that you might throw is a *petros*, not a *petra*.

When Jesus said these words to Peter it was immediately after Peter had just answered Jesus' question as to who He (Jesus) was. Peter replied that Jesus was the Christ (Messiah) and *the Son of the living God*. This second point, about Jesus being the Son of God, and thus equal to God Himself, was a revelation that God had given directly to Peter. At that point Jesus had not yet told His disciples that. So, what Jesus actually meant was this:

*"...you are Petros (i.e. your name means a small stone) but on this petra (a huge slab of stone which represents the realisation that I am the Son of God) I will build My Church..."*

In short, all Jesus meant was that He was going to build His Church *upon the fact of Him being the Son of God and equal to God*. Therefore, only those who believe that crucial fact about Him, and are aware of *who* and *what* He is, can be a part of His Church. So, that fundamental statement of faith that Peter had just expressed as to *who Jesus is*, was like a huge layer of rock, upon which the whole Christian Church was to be built.

That is what we are meant to infer from Jesus' play on words. What we are *not* meant to infer from it is the idea that *Peter himself*, let alone a long string of so-called Popes after him, is to be the foundation of the Church. That line of reasoning about Peter and popes is wholly man-made. It is also illogical and mistaken. It comes from very sloppy reasoning and from reading into the text what certain people *want* it to mean, rather than just asking honestly what the verse *actually* means. Anybody who sincerely examines the verse in that way will find the meaning is very clear.

### **How the Bible came to be written and by whom**

The Bible was indirectly written by the Holy Spirit. It was He who inspired 40 different men, over a period of about 1500 years, to write 66 different books or letters. They are written in many different forms and styles. Yet they all connect together and inter-relate. Each book also acts as a commentary on all the others.

An infinitely large and complex mind put the Bible together. No man could have done so, not even with the greatest computers. God inspired all of the human authors, but they each wrote their separate parts in their own unique, personal style.

The Bible was then steadily built up, over 15 centuries, with the Holy Spirit as the 'Editor in Chief'. Eventually it covered all that God wishes us to know. God's purposes in putting the Bible together were not theoretical or highbrow, but intensely practical. He gave us the Bible so that we could *use it* and *be changed by it*, not for mere academic interest. It must therefore be raised up in our estimation, until it becomes our consuming passion for us to know it, apply it, and teach it.

### **The different methods of Bible study**

There are various ways to study the Bible, each of which have their own advantages and purposes. We shall examine some of them below. However, when I say 'Bible study' I do not mean our ordinary daily Bible reading as part of our devotional time. I am referring to a more intense and structured attempt to get deeper into the Bible by studying a book, or a theme, or a particular word and learning all that you can about it. This kind of intense and targeted study is necessary, in addition to methodical daily Bible reading, if you are to really grow. Such study can be done on your own, or as part of a small group, or both.

### **Studying a single theme throughout the whole Bible**

Studying a theme or topic is one of the main methods of Bible study. Here, instead of staying in one book or letter, we move from book to book, as we search for different verses or passages which relate to the particular theme we are studying. For example it could be prayer, or giving, or forgiveness etc. We then gather together a wide range of verses which touch upon that theme from every possible angle until we build up a comprehensive and balanced understanding of that topic.

This requires us to make sure we look for passages which contradict, counter-balance, or correct what we already think. We must not just look for those verses which support our existing opinions, or which match what we've been told previously.

### **Word studies - i.e. looking at many, or all, of the verses where a particular word is used**

This method of study is along the same lines, except that now you are looking not at a theme, but at one single word. It could be a Greek or Hebrew word, or it could be an English word. You get a large book called a 'concordance', i.e. Strongs or Youngs, and look at the list of all the times that a particular word is used. For example, in Book One, I have included a very brief (and incomplete) study on the word "fruit". I simply looked down the list in the concordance, checked all the verses where the word "fruit" occurs and then chose a number of them which were relevant to the purpose I had in mind.

This is a good technique and surprisingly easy to do. It enables you to see an important word or concept from many angles and get it more fully covered. It also helps you to avoid staying only within the boundaries of what you already know or believe. If you go so far as to look up every single verse where that word occurs, you are inevitably going to end up seeing the wider picture. That will make you much less likely to make errors.

### **Expository Bible study - a whole book at a time**

This is a quite different approach. Here we study the Bible a book at a time. It is the opposite of studying a theme or word. Here we are staying in one place, i.e. in one book or letter, but dealing with all of the various themes and subjects which crop up in that book or letter. There could be several. The good thing about expository Bible study is that it prevents you from focusing excessively on any 'pet' themes or favourite 'hobby-horses'. It also stops you avoiding difficult or controversial issues. It forces you to look at a wide variety of subjects, as they naturally arise, without being selective.

Even so, do not let the expository approach become your only method of study either. If you do, you could fall into the opposite problem, where you only focus on particular books and ignore others. Many people do that. For example I heard a man some time ago who foolishly said: "*I don't like apostle Paul*". For that reason he said he avoids Paul's letters because "*Paul and I don't get on*".

One advantage, therefore, of a theme-based study is that it forces you to move around the Bible and to cover less preferred books which you might, otherwise, have avoided or neglected. Thus we need all of the different study methods, not just one. That way we can cover every book and theme in the whole Bible and from every direction.

### **The need for Bible commentaries and how to use them**

There is great value in Bible commentaries and I strongly recommend that you use them. These are books in which someone has written a running commentary, verse by verse, of a whole book or letter from the Bible. If you read a commentary alongside the book or letter in the Bible that you are studying, then you will get a lot more out of it. The key is, however, to ensure that it is a *good* commentary. There are far too many bad ones. Make sure it is written by a man who really *believes* the Bible. It cannot just be assumed that he will be a genuine Christian. He may well be a sceptic, a liberal, an apostate, or even a complete atheist. Many such people study theology, and teach it, and they also write commentaries.

To ensure that the writer of the commentary is a real Christian with a real faith, you must be very discerning. You cannot just use any commentary that you happen to come across. It could have been written by such a liberal or sceptic, who has little or no faith, or who is struggling with doubts and errors of his own. Or it could be that he takes the allegorical approach and will take you on a wild goose chase and distort your understanding of prophecy or of eschatology generally, i.e. the study of

things to come. How can a man help you if he is thoroughly misguided or confused himself? Even if they are a real Christian, you should still avoid commentaries by men who are labouring under any of these handicaps.

They are highly likely to confuse you, because they are so confused themselves. Moreover, they are likely to ignore words or verses that they find confusing. Even worse, in order to avoid embarrassing themselves by saying that they don't know what a passage means, they are prone to thinking up some meaning for themselves and persuading themselves that it is correct. So, such men are to be avoided.

At the other end of the spectrum, I have also heard people, even quite well known teachers, who speak of how they prefer to just read the Bible by itself without ever looking at any commentaries. That is said as if it implies that they have a high view of Scripture and a determination to focus on the Bible, rather than on the views of mere men. However, it is still a naive and even foolish attitude. The reality is that we all need other men to teach us and correct us. Even if we don't need it in one area, or with one particular doctrine or issue on which we are relatively strong, we will certainly need it for others, where we know less.

The truth is that God spreads knowledge around widely. He will never give all of it to me, or all of it to you. He wants us all to need the help of other men. They can teach us and we can also teach them. They then help to sharpen our understanding and correct our errors and we can help them too:

*Iron sharpens iron,  
So one man sharpens another.  
Proverbs 27:17 (NASB)*

By reading other men's books, and especially Bible commentaries, we can be greatly strengthened, even if that other man is not right in everything he says. Nobody is always right, whoever they may be. In the Real Christianity website I recommend a series of good Bible teachers. However, none of them are perfect. I have seen and heard every one of them make mistakes, or display blind-spots, where they lack knowledge or experience. How could it be otherwise? Even the best teacher on the Earth has only got limited knowledge. We all have areas of relative weakness or ignorance, where we need the input of other men.

Because every teacher is fallible and has gaps in his knowledge, it is not safe to rely on just one commentary writer, or even to use a number of commentaries which are all written by men from one school of thought or denomination. You need the safety that comes from reading several commentaries that are written by different men and from different backgrounds and denominations. Then they can correct each other and make up for each other's gaps, deficiencies or mistakes. It is like eating a balanced diet of different kinds of foods so that one fruit or vegetable will provide vitamins and minerals that are not to be found in others.

**Make the effort to search for good Bible teachers and to avoid bad ones. The teaching in most churches is of a dismally poor standard.**

On the same theme, you also need a wide variety of good Bible teachers. That means honest and well informed men who can explain the Bible to you and extend your knowledge and understanding. In the past the only way you could hear a Bible teacher was to go and listen to them speaking live. That was not always easy, or even possible. Now it is so much easier. Just get yourself lots of good material on CDs/MP3s, audio downloads etc.

Deliberately develop the habit of listening to such teaching every day. Do it at "dead times", when you are already busy driving, cooking, bathing, walking the dog, gardening, decorating etc etc. Basically, do it while you are already obliged to be doing something else with your hands.

That way, listening to such teaching doesn't take up any extra time. It's amazing how much you can listen to on that basis. You could easily manage to fit in one, two, or even three hours per day, without interfering in any way with your other work or duties. It depends what your personal saturation point is for taking in information. The important point is that if you are willing to listen regularly, over a long period, then it will radically increase your wisdom, knowledge and understanding.

It's not only the *quantity* of teaching that you are hearing that matters but also the fact that it is coming from such a *wide range* of teachers. Plus you can ensure that they are all of high quality, which you cannot do when you attend church. But, to ensure that they are competent teachers, you will need to become very discerning. See the Real Christianity website for a list of good teachers whose materials would benefit you hugely. Then order as much as you can from their websites.

One does not wish to be rude or unfairly critical, but the standard of teaching in probably 95% or more of British churches, is somewhere between mediocre and abysmal. There are very few genuinely skilled, honest, reliable, diligent Bible teachers around who have the love of the truth. Even if they are sincere, most church leaders have little or no skill at teaching. Many preachers also spend far too little time studying the Bible, which is one reason why it is apparent that they don't have the love of the truth. That being the case, they can't teach you to develop the love of the truth either.

You need to recognise those facts and set out to find good quality teaching wherever it can be found. You are unlikely to come across it by pure chance. You will need to search for it carefully and persistently and be very discerning about what you hear or read. That is why I included the recommended Bible teachers section on the Real Christianity website, because the reality is that most of us lack discernment and cannot tell the difference between good and bad teachers. I hope that that section will therefore help you, because the men I have recommended are all superb teachers and honest men too.

**Make it your deliberate policy to listen to a very broad range of (good) Bible teachers, not just your regular favourites**

You definitely need to listen to good, competent Bible teachers who love the truth. God made all of us with a need for that. None of us are self-sufficient. He made teachers, because we all need them. Even teachers need teachers. However, it's also very important not to get all the teaching MP3s or CDs from only one person. No matter how good they might be, do not limit yourself solely to your favourite teacher, or even to those who are from your own denomination. You need a much wider range than that, or you will miss important things.

If you only ever listen to one man, or men from one denomination, there will be all sorts of doctrines, issues, themes, styles, approaches etc. that you will never come across. You would be fishing in too small a pool. This is the theological equivalent of in-breeding in farming. Livestock farmers need to bring in additional animals from other herds, or there will eventually be genetic problems.

Likewise, you need a wide range of teachers so that they can both complement and correct each other. Also, it means they can each prioritise what they personally are most interested in without you having to miss out on the other things that they rarely, or never, cover.

**The vital importance of balance in our doctrines and practices, believing *all* that the Bible has to say and holding *everything* in a healthy tension *at the same time***

In the introduction I briefly referred to the concept of *balance*. I shall now look at this in more detail and give some examples of balance, and imbalance, concerning particular issues. Let us firstly make very clear what balance is *not* about. It does *not* involve any of a) - c) below:

a) being ‘*moderate*’, “*doing everything in moderation*”, “*moderation in all things*” or any other equivalent phrase. Though it can be good to be moderate, for example in our intake of alcohol, moderation is not always a good thing. There are many issues about which God wants us to be radical, passionate and wholehearted and to do what we do with all our heart, mind and soul. An obvious example of that is our love for God, which is meant to be anything but ‘*moderate*’.

b) positioning yourself at the *mid-point between two opposing points of view*. If we take this half way-house approach we will frequently be wrong because the truth, on any given issue, may well be at one or other end of the scale, not in the middle. Seeking the middle ground would also put you in danger of being what Jesus calls ‘*lukewarm*’, such that He would spit you out of His mouth. For example, if you were to decide that from now on you will serve all drinks to your guests at 50° centigrade, how many people would accept either a glass of lemonade or a cup of tea from you? There are times when the only right thing to be is either very cold or very hot. The mid-point is sometimes no good at all, as Jesus said:

***15 “I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were cold or hot! 16 So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of my mouth.***

***Revelation 3:15-16 (RSV)***

c) aiming for ‘*consensus*’. This means adopting a belief with which you expect that the largest possible number of people will agree and the fewest possible number will disagree, such that you get an easy life. Such a policy involves seeking the lowest common denominator and opting for whatever avoids arguments and calms people down.

There are times when this approach can be appropriate, such as when deciding what family-size pizza to order for your household, or which film to watch. However, it is not appropriate when dealing with the Bible. Other people’s agreement or disagreement has no bearing on the question of what is true. Neither does it validate or invalidate what the Bible is saying. So, the Bible could be saying something with which 99% of people disagree, but it would still be right and they would all be wrong.

Therefore, in a situation like that, the proper place for any Christian who has the love of the truth and fears God, is with the 1% not the 99%. So, a person can be in a room with a hundred people, all of whom agree with each other and disagree with him, and yet he could still be the only balanced person among them. That is because being balanced has nothing to do with fitting in or being accepted by those around us.

It is not like the soldier who mistakenly thinks that he is the only member of his platoon who is marching in step and that all the rest are out of step. It does not work that way when it comes to God’s Word. A man is right when he agrees with God’s Word and he is wrong when he doesn’t. That is because God is always right, no matter what any person or group might say, not even if every person on Earth was disagreeing with Him. As apostle Paul says:

***.....Let God be true and every man a liar.....***

***Romans 3:4(a) (NIV)***

So, if we agree with all of God’s Word then that makes us *right*. It also helps to make us *balanced*, because God Himself is perfectly balanced and so is His Word, i.e. if we read *all* of it. That’s because all of His Word is true and all of it is necessary and important. Moreover, it was designed by God to fit together as a whole, as a perfectly balanced package.

We have looked at what balance *isn’t*. Now let us seek to define more precisely what balance *is*. To assist in that process we shall also look at some examples of both balance and imbalance by reference to particular doctrines or practices. To be balanced means that we believe, and take seriously:

- a) *all* that God says about *a particular issue*, not just parts of what He says
- b) what God says about *every other issue*, not just those which we are interested in, agree with, or consider important

### **Example 1 - balance about the use of spiritual gifts**

Let us consider how we could aim for, and achieve, balance in our beliefs and practices concerning spiritual gifts. We would need to read *everything* that the Bible says about when, how, and by whom, spiritual gifts are meant to be used. Then we would need to believe *all* of that, at the same time, and seek to put *all* of it into practice.

In so doing, we would take seriously all that the Bible says about how the gifts should, and should not, be used. Moreover, we would take note of the fact that they *are a good thing* and are meant to be used, not avoided or prohibited. If we have read, believed and implemented *everything* that the Bible says about spiritual gifts, we would find it virtually impossible to arrive at any of the following conclusions, all of which are mistaken and unbalanced:

- a) that the gifts of the Holy Spirit are something *bad or dangerous*, which should be avoided or banned, even if they still exist
- b) that the gifts of the Holy Spirit *ceased* at some early point in the life of the Church, for example when the last book of the New Testament was written and are, therefore, no longer in operation or available to us.
- c) that the gifts of the Holy Spirit are *the most important thing* in the life of a church and should be focused upon and elevated, even above the Bible, such that they come to be seen as the central thing, around which the whole life of the Church revolves.
- d) that the gifts of the Holy Spirit should be *used without any restraints*, limitations or guidelines, such that every person can, and should, do whatever they want to do, whenever they want to do it.
- e) that *every person* should speak in tongues
- f) that *no person* should speak in tongues

Every one of the above positions is wrong and can be seen to be wrong by anyone who reads and believes the *whole* of what the New Testament says about spiritual gifts. Sadly, the fact is that there are very many people who subscribe to each of those positions. They can only do so by making one or more of these errors:

- a) not *reading* the whole Bible and relying instead on what they are taught by others, or see others doing, or on the traditions of their denomination
- b) not *accepting* certain parts of the Bible which contradict their own opinions or preferences
- c) not even *noticing* those parts of the Bible which contradict their own opinions or preferences
- d) not *understanding* certain parts of the Bible, usually due to wrong starting assumptions caused by faulty teaching, such that they do read what the Bible says, but misunderstand it.

So, a person can only arrive at any of those mistaken positions by ignoring, disobeying, overlooking or misunderstanding some or all of what the Bible says. If they had read, noticed, understood and obeyed *every* relevant passage then they could not arrive at any of those conclusions, or endorse any

of those practices. If you want a single verse which concisely sums up how we should handle the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and what our attitude and approach should be, you could look at this one:

***but all things should be done decently and in order.***

***1 Corinthians 14:40 (RSV)***

This is a verse which is sometimes quoted by those who object (correctly) to the *misuse* of spiritual gifts. However, of those who quote it, have you noticed that the vast majority only ever point to the second half of the verse which says “....*decently and in order*”? They always seem to ignore the first half of the verse which says “*but all things should be done.....*”.

### **Example 2 - balance about demons**

Another classic example of a subject which produces imbalance is demons. This is an issue about which people tend to hold very strong views and become either allergic or obsessed. Therefore some don't believe that demons have any part to play in our lives today, and perhaps that they don't even exist. Others believe that demons are central to just about everything that ever happens and are the sole or main cause of virtually all our problems. Neither of these views is correct, as any honest, sensible reading of the *whole* Bible will demonstrate. So, a person with a *balanced* view of demons will believe:

- a) that demons exist and are active today, not just in the past
- b) that they are active in the lives of *both saved and unsaved people*
- c) that demons have the power to do *very significant levels of harm*
- d) that, nevertheless, they *do not have unlimited power* and are subject to various boundaries and restrictions
- e) that they are *a* cause of our problems
- f) that they are *not the only* cause so that, for example, we must also fight the battles against our own flesh, and the world system, as well as resisting demons
- g) that some people *do* require deliverance from demons
- h) that some people do not
- i) that we *are* to be *concerned* about demons
- j) but that we are *not* to *fear* them
- k) that we *are* to take them *seriously*
- l) but that we are *not* to be *obsessed or pre-occupied* with them
- m) that we are to resist them in the ways that the Bible commands
- n) but not in unbiblical ways, which the Bible never speaks of

Again, you will come to realise all of these things if you read the *whole* Bible and take it *all* seriously, without leaving anything out.

### **Example 3 - balance about God's grace and our own good works**

It is undoubtedly true that every Christian is saved:

- a) *by grace* alone
- b) *through faith* alone
- c) *in Christ* alone

However, many people, in particular those who are from a Reformed/Protestant background, tend to become unbalanced on the issue of God's grace. They focus on it disproportionately, i.e. emphasizing grace more than the Bible does. That is, they speak about grace all the time, to the exclusion of other things. They over-emphasise it to such an extent that they begin to make the following errors:

- a) They become overly concerned about the possibility that any good works done by a Christian might be mistakenly thought to be capable of creating merit or righteousness. They fear that the people they are dealing with might imagine that they could be saved (justified) by their own good works, rather than by having Jesus' righteousness imputed to them.
- b) To guard against the possibility of that error, they then begin to over-emphasise God's grace and down-play the importance of good works. They do so to the extent of choosing not to advocate the doing of good works, or even refusing to say the very word '*works*' at all. They fear that any reference to works, other than to denounce the concept, might be taken to mean that salvation (justification) can be achieved by good works, which it clearly can't.
- c) In this way, they end up under-emphasising, or even denigrating, the concept of good works. They speak as if good works were unnecessary, or even a bad thing. Many people actually recoil from the word '*works*', almost as if it was a swear word.
- d) By so doing they then ignore, or even undermine, the Bible's many instructions to us that we *should* engage in good works. They forget, or fail to realise, that good works are *commanded of us*, and that they have *a number of purposes* which have nothing whatsoever to do with achieving righteousness in God's eyes, i.e. being justified. On the contrary, good works are firstly for the quite separate purposes of helping others, for whom God cares deeply. They are also for enabling us to grow in obedience and character, so as to be '*sanctified*'. This concept of sanctification is discussed in some detail within chapter 22 of Book One and I would urge you to read that for further clarification.

So, this hyper-sensitivity to the possibility of being thought to be advocating justification by works, causes many people to speak too much about God's grace and avoid speaking about good works at all, or explaining their proper purposes. Consequently, a large part of what the Bible has to say to us is under-emphasised or even ignored, all because of a fear of being misunderstood and a lack of proper balance.

### **Example 4 – balance about poverty and wealth**

I have been in many churches over the last thirty odd years and have probably heard more than 2,000 live sermons. I also read a lot of books and listened to a huge number of teaching tapes and CDs by a very wide range of people, both good and bad, biblical and unbiblical, wise and unwise.

Therefore, I have seen or heard many unbalanced positions being adopted about how a Christian ought to view the issues of how we should view the poor, what we ought to do about their poverty,

and also whether it is right or wrong for a Christian to be, or seek to be, wealthy. I have heard each of the following *unbalanced*, and incorrect, views being expressed in one form or another:

- a) that God wants *every* Christian to be wealthy
- b) that wealth is proof of God's blessing and *approval*, and that the absence of wealth means that God *disapproves* of you, or that you lack faith.
- c) that every Christian can, and should, pray for wealth and *claim it* in faith as a *right or entitlement*. The phrase often used is "*Name it and claim it*".
- d) Conversely, others believe that it is *wrong and sinful* to be wealthy and that any wealthy Christian must therefore be *covetous* and *worldly*. Therefore they maintain that we should all expect to be poor and to remain so. There was a famous book written in the 1980s by a man called *Ron Sider*. It was called '*Rich Christians in an age of hunger*' and it had a strong condemning effect on many people. It was a profoundly unbalanced book even though, in places, it contained some truth. The problem was that his overall message, and his conclusions, were wrong and misguided.
- e) that our main focus should be on helping the poor, *ahead of*, or even *instead of*, preaching the gospel. They therefore advocate a "*social gospel*" which revolves primarily around giving to the poor, helping the needy and doing good deeds.
- f) conversely, that our focus should be *entirely on the gospel* and that any mention of the poor, or our duty to help the needy, is a distraction and puts us in danger of preaching a 'social gospel', as described above.
- g) that it is *good for us to be poor*, as if it was a privileged position, to which we should all aspire. In fact, the Bible always presents material poverty as a bad thing.

All of the above positions, and their many other variations, are wrong and unbiblical. At the very least, they are unbalanced. One reason why they arise is because people inject their own views and desires into their theology instead of simply hearing what God says. Alternatively, they zoom in on something which the Bible does say and then exaggerate it, while forgetting any *counter-balancing* points which the Bible *also* makes. So, a *balanced* position on the subject of poverty/wealth and dealing with the poor would be along these lines:

- a) Poverty is a *bad thing* and God does *not* want Christians, or indeed anybody, to be in poverty.
- b) God wants Christians to *share their wealth generously* with the poor, especially within the Church, i.e. with fellow Christians who are in need, but also with unbelievers too
- c) It is right and proper to *earn as much as one can*, provided it can be done honestly and righteously and without neglecting our other responsibilities.
- d) It is also right and proper to *save money* for our future needs, or for our family provided, likewise, that it can be done righteously, proportionately and without neglecting other responsibilities such as giving to God's work and to the poor. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, put it well when he said "*Earn all you can. Save all you can. Give all you can.*"
- e) Yet it is wrong to be *covetous* in the sense of having an inappropriate or unhealthy desire for wealth or possessions *in this life*, such that they become a pre-occupation or fixation and are in your thoughts excessively.
- f) Nevertheless, it is entirely right to seek to lay up treasures for oneself *in Heaven*, i.e. to seek for rewards and crowns and for an inheritance in the Kingdom of Heaven. These will be given out at

the Judgment Seat of Christ to those who have been faithful and fruitful as disciples. See Book Four.

- g) Although there is no ‘*entitlement*’ to be wealthy, a person who lives right, diligently studies the Bible, humbles himself, fears the LORD and puts biblical principles into practice, is *likely*, over a period of years, or even decades, to become prosperous. That is the main reason why, after the Reformation, the countries which embraced the Bible and the true gospel became very wealthy. It is partly just cause and effect and it is also because God promises many blessings to those who fear and obey Him and honour His Word. These blessings include, but are by no means limited to, material prosperity.
- h) Nevertheless, it is a fact that some of us are called to do more than just give money away generously to the poor. Some of us are to go further and *make major sacrifices*, including financial sacrifices, in order to obey God. For example, a person who is called to missionary work, or to be an evangelist or youth worker etc, may well need to accept a severe cut in his income and even live entirely by faith. That is not the case for everybody, but it is true for some. That is one reason why the rest of the Church needs to take seriously their duty to give generously, so as to support such workers, as well as giving to the poor.
- i) Although material prosperity is one of God’s blessings and it is valid for us to seek for it, it is not right to do so *presumptuously*, or covetously, or with any sense of entitlement. God really does ‘*repay*’ those who give to the poor, but He does not do so *on demand*, whenever you snap your fingers at Him. You cannot give orders to God or make claims of Him, as if He was a waiter. It may be that God will wait for decades to repay us for our generosity. Indeed, He may even choose to leave it until the Judgment Seat of Christ. If so, we are at no disadvantage. On the contrary, any rewards given there will last forever, whereas those given now, though good, are only temporary.
- j) Preaching the gospel, and thus enabling people to know how to be saved, must be the highest priority of the Church. We need to preach the real gospel, not a social gospel, or any other kind of man-made substitute for the gospel.
- k) Nevertheless, caring for the poor and needy ‘comes a close second’ and certainly must not be overlooked or treated as unimportant or peripheral. Caring for the poor is good and right in itself, but it is also remarkably effective at opening the door to enable the gospel to be preached to a person or community so that they can be saved.

### **Example 5 – balance about predestination and free will**

I shall only address this issue briefly because I have alluded to it earlier in this book and I shall also deal with it very fully in a later book in this series about the errors of Calvinism. Please refer to that for more information. There are many people who come from a Reformed/Protestant background who hold some or all of the following unbalanced and/or incorrect views about the meaning and implication of God’s *foreknowledge, predestination and election*. They are unable to reconcile these, or make no apparent attempt to reconcile them, with what the Bible *also says about our free will*:

- a) They refer to the (relatively rare) passages in the Bible which speak of foreknowledge, predestination and election. In particular they quote Romans 8:28-29 and Ephesians 1:4-5, and look at them in isolation. They then wrongly define these concepts. Furthermore, they apply misguided *human logic and reasoning* to them, in an attempt to work out what the *wider implications* of these passages must be.

- b) In so doing they ignore, overlook, misunderstand, or fail to take seriously, what the Bible *also* says about our free will, i.e. *our freedom to choose whether to believe* and, in particular, *whether to repent*.
- c) Mainly by the misapplication or over-extension of human reasoning, they conclude that the fact that God *calls* us, and *predestines* us, to be saved must also mean that He *forces us* to be saved, whether we wish to be or not. On that basis there is nothing we can do to prevent our own salvation. They hold that view even though the Bible never says anything remotely like that. In short, they rely solely on their own powers of logical deduction. They cannot point to any express statement in the Bible which supports their conclusions, even slightly or indirectly. Indeed, they make their sweeping statements about how God operates, even in the face of clear passages which say, or at least imply, *the direct opposite*.
- d) Even worse, many Calvinists deduce, without any express biblical mandate whatsoever, that God also *predestines people to 'be damned'*. They believe that He created them with the express intention that they would be condemned and sent to the Lake of Fire, *irrespective* of whether they choose to believe and repent. This is the logical extension of their initial conclusion, i.e. that God alone chooses who will be saved. In short, they believe that God alone chose, before time began, who would be condemned. That is they claim that He created some people *in order to condemn them*, and *with no intention of ever showing His mercy to them*, whatever they might do, say or believe.
- e) It doesn't end there. Many Calvinists also believe that because God is '*sovereign*' (as they wrongly define sovereignty) it must follow that His will cannot be thwarted, prevented or avoided by anybody. Otherwise, they think it would mean that He could not be all-powerful or sovereign. Accordingly, they deduce that absolutely everything that ever happens, however small, must be God's will. They claim that He ordained, before time began, that that event would occur, and exactly how and when. So they believe that every incident, however trivial, and whether good or bad, can automatically be assumed to be God's will and to have been *directly caused by God*.
- f) It gets worse. They even conclude that God is the ultimate author and cause of all our sin. Again, this is based on pure human reasoning, with no biblical authority to support it. It is based on the same logical, or rather illogical, deductions about God's sovereignty (as they wrongly define it). That is that even our sins must be His will because it is impossible for anybody to resist His will, otherwise He would not be '*sovereign*'. They think therefore that all of us are doing God's will at all times, *even when we sin*. Otherwise, if sin was contrary to His will, then our decision to sin would be to defy His will, which would mean that He was not '*sovereign*'. That is how absurd our conclusions can become when we operate on the basis of flawed human logic rather than being guided by what the Bible actually says. No person can arrive at John Calvin's conclusions by simply believing what the Bible says.
- g) By the way, this misguided thinking about God's sovereignty would also include every accident, injury or illness and every little action, decision or mistake that anybody ever makes. All of these, including the apparently random bounces of a tennis ball or the mistakes of a typist, are thought to have been intentionally caused by God. Indeed, they go further and say that they could not have been prevented, no matter what anybody may have done. In effect, according to that confused human reasoning, we are all just reading from a pre-ordained script, playing the parts that God predestined for us, down to the tiniest details, and we are unable to alter anything, however trivial.

The reality is very different from all of that. The balanced way to understand what the Bible teaches about the interaction between predestination and free will is that what God says about His foreknowledge and election is true, but that what he says about our free will is *also true*.

Accordingly, each must be read and understood in conjunction with the other, and in the context of the other. That is, the meaning of each area of doctrine must be allowed to be tempered and balanced by the other. So, a more *balanced* way to address these deep and complex issues would be to say:

- a) God clearly *does* foreknow, call, predestine and elect people to be conformed to the image of His Son and to be justified and glorified. We know all of that because *the Bible says so*.
- b) However, the Bible says nothing at all to suggest, or even to imply to the slightest extent, that God also predestines or elects people *to be condemned*. That conclusion *does not* follow, by any proper logic, even if God does predestine people to be saved.
- c) God *does* confer free will on every human being. Indeed, such freedom is an essential part of what is meant by being made in the image of God. We have a genuine freedom to choose, which God takes very seriously. He will not violate our free will, at least not in the context of our choosing whether to repent or believe. Having said that, He does sometimes reduce our room for manoeuvre in other ways.
- d) Although He genuinely gives us free will, God can and does intervene in our lives to seek to *influence* us and even to *convict* us and *draw* us to Himself. He frequently does these things in response to the prayers of others who are asking Him to open our eyes and enable us to be saved. That is all plainly true. The Bible says so. We also see it happening in the Bible and in our own lives. Indeed, none of us could ever have believed and repented if God had not helped us, or even enabled us, to do so. Even so that does not, in any way, violate, or even undermine, the validity and reality of our freedom to choose.
- e) Whatever it means exactly for God to predestine us, and there are many differences of view about that, it does not mean, and cannot mean, that *he alone decides* who will be saved. Even less does it mean that He decides and fixes in stone who will *not* be saved. The definition of predestination must, therefore, be consistent with, i.e. capable of accommodating, what God also says about giving us free will.

### **Example 6 - balance about Israel and the Church**

Then, take the subject of Israel, another subject about which very few people adopt a balanced and properly informed position. To begin with, most Christians, at least in the West, make the error of believing that the Church has replaced Israel and that God no longer has any plans or purposes for the nation or Land of Israel, or the Jewish people as a whole. This overall error is known as '*replacement theology*'. That view is completely wrong, because none of those assumptions are true. That being so, replacement theology is not exactly 'unbalanced' as such. That would not be the best way to put it. It is simply *wrong in its entirety*. So, you could say that it is a very extreme form of imbalance.

However, if we were to look instead at the people who *don't* subscribe to replacement theology and examine their views, we would find that some of them are also unbalanced about Israel, in the opposite direction, even if their basic beliefs are broadly correct. So, let's take a person who is supportive of Israel. Some of those people, perhaps as a reaction against the grievously damaging error of replacement theology, become *obsessed* with Israel to one extent or another.

I heard a young Christian speaking of this trait recently and she described such people as being "*Israel crazy*". For example, amongst that minority of Christians who support Israel and love the Jewish people, *which are entirely right and proper things to do*, a number of them become pre-occupied with Israel to the extent that:

- a) They act as if they were Jewish themselves, when they are not. So they try to dress like Jewish people and to speak and act as if they were Jews. In so doing, they actually make themselves appear ridiculous to real Jews.
- b) They go to synagogues and participate in their services, forgetting that what they are getting involved with is 'Rabbinic Judaism'. That is just as much a false religion as any other, because it consists of a multitude of extra-biblical and unbiblical beliefs and practices. Above all, the Jews in those synagogues do not accept that Jesus is their Messiah. The point is that Rabbinic Judaism is not the same as Mosaic Judaism. It evolved after the destruction of the Temple in AD 70 and is very different from what was practised by Jesus and the apostles. It is also very different from what is practised today by *Messianic Jews*, i.e. those who do accept Jesus as their Messiah.
- c) They put themselves under the Law of Moses, at least in certain ways. Thus, they observe the Sabbath and kosher dietary rules and so on. They forget, or do not realise, that neither we, nor even the Jews themselves, are any longer obliged to keep the Law of Moses.
- d) They make the opposite error to that of replacement theology, whose proponents believe that *Israel* is not important. That is, they begin to think and act as if the *Church* was not important, or at least as if it is *less* important than Israel. That is not the case. Both Israel and the Church are of immense importance. So far as I can see, the Bible gives us no reason to suppose that God loves either Israel or the Church any more than the other. He loves both, and so should we.

In contrast to all this, a more balanced and biblically accurate approach to Israel would be to say:

- a) Israel and the Church are two *distinct and different* things
- b) The Church has *not* replaced Israel
- c) God has specific *plans for Israel*
- d) God has *different plans* for the Church
- e) God loves both Israel and the Church *equally*
- f) That God wants us to *love* Israel and the Jewish people and to  *bless, support and pray* for them
- g) But He does *not* want us to become Jews or to act like Jews
- h) That a Jewish person can only be saved by believing in Jesus, just like those of us who are Gentiles. There is no other way to be saved. Therefore a Jewish person needs to be told the gospel, and accept Jesus as Messiah, just as much as Gentiles do.
- i) Nevertheless, that a Jew who accepts Jesus as Messiah and is saved *continues to be a Jew*, whilst *also* being part of the Church
- j) Israel is very important to God
- k) The Church is also very important to God
- l) Therefore we are meant to be interested in, and supportive of, *both* Israel and the Church and to try to see both as God sees them

**Your heart attitude must be to seek for the *real truth*, not just for what confirms your existing opinions, or makes you feel good about yourself.**

The main reason so many of us go astray, or get deceived, or fail to understand the Bible properly, is that we do not have "*the love of the truth*". That means that we do not love the truth *for its own sake*. Most of us do not pursue, or even want, the truth if it might give us bad news, or tell us things about ourselves that we don't like to hear. We tend to like preachers and teachers who make us laugh, or make us feel we are doing well and that God is pleased with us. But we don't like those who say critical things, or rebuke us, or suggest that we need to change.

Above all, many of us hate being told that we need to repent. We like our sins and don't want to give them up. But the problem is that repentance is God's main message to us. That is why the word '*repent*' was the very first word spoken in public by both John the Baptist and Jesus. It was also virtually the first word that Peter said in his first public speech after the resurrection. Our problem is that we tend to reject the genuine prophets and teachers that God sends. We prefer the false, smooth men who are not from God and who don't tell us uncomfortable things.

Such men may be our pastors or leaders, or they may be famous preachers with international ministries. However, if all they are doing is giving a popular, comfortable, reassuring message, then you can be quite sure they are not saying the things that God wants them to say. Consider the following passages which express how appalled God is by false teachers who misrepresent Him and preach things that are not true. It was a major problem in the past, and it is still a major problem today:

*<sup>16</sup>Thus says the LORD of hosts: "Do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you, filling you with vain hopes; they speak visions of their own minds, not from the mouth of the LORD. <sup>17</sup>They say continually to those who despise the word of the LORD, 'It shall be well with you'; and to everyone who stubbornly follows his own heart, they say, 'No evil shall come upon you.'"*

*Jeremiah 23:16-17 (RSV)*

*<sup>9</sup>Their partiality witnesses against them; they proclaim their sin like Sodom, they do not hide it. Woe to them! For they have brought evil upon themselves. <sup>10</sup>Tell the righteous that it shall be well with them, for they shall eat the fruit of their deeds. <sup>11</sup>Woe to the wicked! It shall be ill with him, for what his hands have done shall be done to him.*

*Isaiah 3:9-11 (RSV)*

*the prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests rule at their direction; my people love to have it so, but what will you do when the end comes?*

*Jeremiah 5:31 (RSV)*

*They have healed the wound of my people lightly, saying, 'Peace, peace,' when there is no peace.*

*Jeremiah 6:14 (RSV)*

*<sup>3</sup> Thus says the Lord GOD, Woe to the foolish prophets who follow their own spirit, and have seen nothing! <sup>4</sup> Your prophets have been like foxes among ruins, O Israel. <sup>5</sup> You have not gone up into the breaches, or built up a wall for the house of Israel, that it might stand in battle in the day of the LORD. <sup>6</sup> They have spoken falsehood and divined a lie; they say, 'Says the LORD,' when the LORD has not sent them, and yet they expect him to fulfil their word. <sup>7</sup> Have you not seen a delusive vision, and uttered a lying divination, whenever you have said, 'Says the LORD,' although I have not spoken?"*

*<sup>8</sup> Therefore thus says the Lord God: "Because you have uttered delusions and seen lies, therefore behold, I am against you, says the Lord GOD. <sup>9</sup> My hand will be against the prophets who see delusive visions and who give lying divinations; they shall not be in the council of my people, nor*

*be enrolled in the register of the house of Israel, nor shall they enter the land of Israel; and you shall know that I am the Lord GOD. <sup>10</sup> Because, yea, because they have misled my people, saying, 'Peace,' when there is no peace; and because, when the people build a wall, these prophets daub it with whitewash;*

*Ezekiel 13:3-10 (RSV)*

Our aim must always be simply to find out what God is actually saying in His Word, regardless of whether it is good news or bad news, and regardless of whether it is praising us or criticising us. We must love the truth for its own sake, and accept it, whatever it may be. If we do, God will increasingly guide us into further truth. He will also point us towards genuine, sincere teachers.

If we don't have the love of the truth and we prefer instead to be flattered and to have our 'ears tickled' with comforting, feel-good sermons, then we will inevitably be deceived. That is why so many people are going to be deceived at the time of the antichrist, because they do not have the love of the truth:

*<sup>9</sup>that is, the one whose coming is in accord with the activity of Satan, with all power and signs and false wonders, <sup>10</sup>and with all the deception of wickedness for those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth so as to be saved. <sup>11</sup>For this reason God will send upon them a deluding influence so that they will believe what is false, <sup>12</sup>in order that they all may be judged who did not believe the truth, but took pleasure in wickedness.*

*2 Thessalonians 2:9-12 (NASB)*

**You need to come to the Bible with an open mind, such that you are ready and willing to be corrected and instructed, not determined to defend your own existing beliefs and opinions.**

Many of us come to the Bible with our minds closed and our beliefs already set in stone. Due to pride, laziness or complacency, many of us are not willing to be challenged or corrected by what we read. You may have got fixed ideas and opinions that you have formed for yourself, or picked up from others. If so, then even if you do read the Bible, what it says will just wash over you and roll off again like water off a duck's back. That is not an unusual condition to be in. It is the norm, unless you have the love of the truth and are determined to seek the truth for its own sake, and to accept it, *regardless of whether it confirms or contradicts your existing beliefs and practices.*

It is rare for a person who holds belief X to read the Bible and see that it actually says Y and then abandon belief X and adopt belief Y in its place. Very few people will do that. Most of us would just maintain belief X, regardless of what the Bible says. Of those who do that, few are honest enough to admit it to themselves, or even to notice, that they are doing it.

Instead, the average person just unconsciously ignores, or edits out, anything which contradicts his existing beliefs and practices. It is as if he was wearing a pair of spectacles with special lenses that make him blind to anything which is new or challenging, or which suggests that he is wrong. So, it is rare even to notice that the Bible is disagreeing with you or with your denomination. It is even rarer to be willing to *do* anything about that, i.e. to consciously alter your belief so as to get into line with what the Bible is saying.

Doesn't that complacency or obstinacy seem odd to you? Isn't it absurd to prefer to maintain one's own current belief, even when the Bible shows it to be wrong? Surely only a fool would do that? But the problem is that a very high percentage of us are fools. At least we are still foolish in this respect, even if we are real Christians. Please refer to Book Five in this series for a detailed discussion of what a fool is, what fools do, and why fools are also to be found inside churches, not just in the world.

Take for example the mistaken belief that the Church has replaced Israel, as we referred to earlier. The only reason that any person would ever hold that view is that they have been *told* that by

somebody else. They have either been taught that by their church or denomination or else they have read it in some book.

It cannot possibly have come from reading the Bible, because the Bible never says that. It does not remotely suggest it, not even indirectly. On the contrary, the Bible draws a clear distinction between Israel and the Church. It never confuses the two and it also makes it very clear that both are permanent.

How then can a person arrive at the unbiblical belief that the Church has replaced Israel and is now “*spiritual Israel*”? Likewise, how can they form the thought that God no longer has any plan or purpose for the ethnic group that we see before us called the Jews? More particularly, how can a person *continue in those views* even while reading their Bible, given that the Bible never says any of those things? On the contrary, it makes it very clear that the Church is *not* Israel and that God *has not, and never will*, either replace or abandon Israel?

One can only persist in those misconceived views by being blind and deaf to what the Bible does say. If you do *not* have the love of the truth then you are likely to choose in any situation to do the following things, each of which will prevent you from seeing the truth or realizing your own errors:

- a) To assume without question that any belief or view that you hold is obviously correct;
- b) Not even to notice anything in the Bible which contradicts you;
- c) If you do somehow notice a contradiction, then to assume that you cannot be understanding the verse correctly and that its real (or ‘spiritual’) meaning must actually be in line with the belief you currently hold or have been taught;
- d) To read every verse in the Bible through the lens or filter of your existing view or belief. That filter will modify whatever you read and supply the missing meaning until what you read matches up with what you already believe;
- e) If you do *not* have the love of the truth you will not allow the Bible verses that you read to be a lens or filter through which you test your existing views. That is what we should always do. The Bible should be the ruler by which we measure, check and correct all our existing beliefs and opinions, not the other way round.

So, we should never allow the views of leaders, our denominational traditions, the books we read, or the sermons we hear, to define the way that we understand the Bible. We must always test all of them against the Bible, not the Bible against them.

We must not get our beliefs from any person or denomination. Whoever they may be, their teaching can never be the basis for anything. No doctrine can ever be based upon, or flow from, the teachings of any person or group. If a thing is not in the Bible, then the best that can be said of it is that it is some man’s opinion. That is all. It may be right or wrong. But either way, it cannot be treated as if the Bible had said it.

Most of us are, to a large extent, imprisoned within our existing set of beliefs, opinions and assumptions. Moreover, there is no mechanism by which we can escape from them if they are wrong, because we don’t realise they are wrong. The main reason for that is that most of us never stop and ask ourselves *whether we really are correct*. We just assume that it is obvious that we are correct. Therefore we do not see any need to challenge or question ourselves, or our views, or the evidence they are based on.

Doing so does not come naturally to most of us because our own ‘rightness’ is assumed as an absolute given. Therefore, to develop this trait of questioning or cross-examining yourself, you have to *make*

yourself do it, even against your own wishes, until it has become a settled habit. It does not come naturally.

Even more importantly than that, we need to pray that God will step in and correct us wherever He sees that our beliefs, attitudes or assumptions are wrong. You need to *ask God to do this*. Pray that He will open your eyes so that you can see your own errors and blind spots. You might imagine that that would be a common prayer, made by lots of people all the time. In fact, very few people ever ask God to do that for them.

You are not likely to make such a prayer until it has occurred to you that you *could be* wrong. But most of us do not consider that to be likely, or even possible. I remember meeting a young Mormon in a town centre in the South of England over ten years ago. I attempted to explain the real gospel to him, as opposed to the distorted Mormon version of it. His name was ‘Elder’ Neese, though he was only about 18.

He was entirely deaf and blind to everything that I had to say and I concluded by asking him to at least consider the possibility of him being wrong or deceived. I said that at least one of us has to be mistaken. I therefore urged him to be willing to question himself and his beliefs. But he would not. He saw no need. His eyes were completely closed, and so was his mind. However if he had prayed a sincere prayer to the real God, *not the false god of Mormonism*, then I believe the real God would have very willingly opened his eyes for him.

He was an extreme case. But the same basic fault is found in most of us unless we have taken the trouble to develop the love of the truth. If we have that character quality we will be more interested in finding out *whether* we are right than in proving that we already are. I would be most grateful if you could join with me in praying for that Mormon. He will be in his early thirties by now. He is still on my prayer list. Please pray that God would open his eyes to the real gospel.

Another extremely important way of finding and eliminating your own blind spots is, as we saw earlier, to ensure that you listen to and read a wide range of Christian teachers/authors. Do not just limit yourself to people who agree with you, or with whose views you are already familiar. Many people restrict themselves, whether consciously or unconsciously, to people from within their own church or denomination. Thus they never get challenged and never hear anything new or different. That is a major omission which will keep you stunted and prevent you from discovering your own errors or the gaps in your knowledge.

Take for example the three main views that people hold as to when Jesus Christ will return to the Earth, i.e. whether it will be:

- a) before the 1000 year Millennium begins, or
- b) after it ends, or
- c) that there won't be any such period of time at all, (because the events described in the book of Revelation have already occurred in the first century AD and involved the Emperor Nero and the Roman Empire etc).

These three broad viewpoints are known as:

- a) *Pre-millennialism* – the belief that Jesus will return *before* the Millennium and that He will then cause that period to begin and make the world the way it should be;
- b) *Post-millennialism* – the belief that Jesus will only come back to the Earth *after* the Millennium is already over, such that it is up to the Church to make this world into a fit place for Him to return to;

- c) *Amillennialism* – the belief that *there won't be any literal Millennium at all* and that the period we are now living in is the period the Bible speaks of.

The first of these viewpoints, pre-millennialism, is the one that I believe in. And I would maintain that it is the view that anybody will naturally arrive at if they take the Bible literally. The other two views, post-millennialism and amillennialism, can only be arrived at as a result of you *being told about them* by somebody else or by reading something *other than the Bible*. You could never get those beliefs from reading the Bible itself, because they are simply not in there.

That then raises the question as to how a person who holds a post-millennial or amillennial viewpoint can manage to read through the Bible without repeatedly saying to himself "*This doesn't match what I believe*". The answer is that the person who holds those views never sees any need to ask himself those questions because:

- a) He already knows for sure that he's right, such that no questions of that kind are needed;
- b) He edits out, ignores, or explains away any apparent contradictions;
- c) He doesn't even see the contradiction in the first place because, whatever he reads, he sees only what he expects to see, rather than what the words in the Bible actually say.
- d) Even worse, in some cases, he *does not actually care* whether he is wrong. He is determined not to be contradicted, and to hold onto his views, *regardless of whether they are right or wrong*. That is either because he prefers them, or because he is proud or stubborn.

I remember once going to a conference organised by a group of churches which held to the post-millennial view. They believed that this world is going to get better and better and that the Church is going to get more and more victorious. They also believed that we Christians shall therefore take over the governments of the world at some point and hand a 'Christianized' world over to Jesus when He eventually returns.

In their view that will be at some point when we, the Church, have done that job of 'Christianizing' the world for Him. I spoke to one senior leader and queried this with him. I said that, on the contrary, I believe that:

- a) things will get worse and worse as the end approaches;
- b) that the real Church will actually be persecuted and will not rule over the governments of the world;
- c) that the antichrist will take over the world first, before Jesus returns;
- d) that the antichrist will wear out the Christians and will destroy most of them;
- e) that only after all of that will Jesus return visibly to the Earth to take over.

He became agitated at all that and considered me to be '*negative*' and '*defeatist*'. Actually I wasn't being either of those things. It is just that I expect that what will happen is *what the Bible says will happen*, not the things that I *would like to happen*. I am just being realistic about what is coming. That man had read his Bible many times but had never seen any of these things in it. They simply did not fit in with what he hoped for and had been taught to expect and so they didn't feel comfortable to him.

## **What ever happened to civilized debate and open, constructive argument?**

Have you ever wondered why there is so little debate within our churches, or even between Christians from different churches? In fact, one virtually never sees or hears any genuine debate taking place between any Christians at all today. There are a number of possible reasons for its absence:

- a) Many of us assume that our own 'rightness' is so obvious that no debate is needed;
- b) Many church leaders are afraid of allowing any debate to occur in case people might prove them to be wrong;
- c) Or, they fear that open and honest debate could lead to conflict or tension within the church
- d) Many of us are too fleshly and too insecure to be able to control our tempers in a debate, so we avoid discussing anything which might cause ourselves to become abusive or ungracious. More to the point, we fear that others will not be able to control their tempers.
- e) Many of us aren't interested or motivated enough to be bothered to prepare for, engage in, or even listen to, any debate
- f) Many people don't have the love of the truth. Therefore the question of what is true or false just doesn't matter much to them.

However, that is not how the Church conducted itself in the first century. Consider the Council, which met in Jerusalem, as described in Acts 15. They were not afraid or reluctant to debate issues. And they did so publicly, involving *the whole local church*. It was not restricted to leaders or kept behind closed doors. Yet it was still conducted in a civil, courteous and self-controlled manner, with nobody losing their temper or getting upset or insecure:

*<sup>1</sup>But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brethren, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." <sup>2</sup>And when Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question. <sup>3</sup>So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, reporting the conversion of the Gentiles, and they gave great joy to all the brethren. <sup>4</sup>When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they declared all that God had done with them. <sup>5</sup>But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up, and said, "It is necessary to circumcise them, and to charge them to keep the law of Moses."*

*<sup>6</sup>The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter. <sup>7</sup>And after there had been much debate, Peter rose and said to them, "Brethren, you know that in the early days God made choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. <sup>8</sup>And God who knows the heart bore witness to them, giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us; <sup>9</sup>and he made no distinction between us and them, but cleansed their hearts by faith. <sup>10</sup>Now therefore why do you make trial of God by putting a yoke upon the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? <sup>11</sup>But we believe that we shall be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will." <sup>12</sup>And all the assembly kept silence; and they listened to Barnabas and Paul as they related what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles.*

*<sup>13</sup>After they finished speaking, James replied, "Brethren, listen to me. <sup>14</sup>Simeon has related how God first visited the Gentiles, to take out of them a people for his name. <sup>15</sup>And with this the words of the prophets agree, as it is written, <sup>16</sup>'After this I will return, and I will rebuild the dwelling of David, which has fallen; I will rebuild its ruins, and I will set it up, <sup>17</sup> that the rest of men may seek*

*the Lord, and all the Gentiles who are called by my name, <sup>18</sup>says the Lord, who has made these things known from of old.' <sup>19</sup>Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, <sup>20</sup>but should write to them to abstain from the pollutions of idols and from unchastity and from what is strangled and from blood. <sup>21</sup>For from early generations Moses has had in every city those who preach him, for he is read every sabbath in the synagogues." <sup>22</sup>Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They sent Judas called Barsab'bas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren,*

*Acts 15:1-22 (RSV)*

As we saw in the passage above, the early church in Jerusalem had to deal with the contentious issue of whether circumcision was required for Gentile Christians. However, they did so by *discussing it*. And they did all of that *openly, in front of the whole church, not just among the leaders*. They were not afraid of controversy when it related to important matters of doctrine and they did not hide from it.

Moreover, note that in the end it was the *whole church*, not just the leaders, who *decided* what to do about that controversial issue. The entire membership was consulted and they listened to speakers from all sides of the debate, but then *the entire membership collectively made the decision*. The church in Jerusalem in Acts chapter 15 would clearly have given short shrift to the Catholic church's idea of the 'Magisterium' and accepting "with docility" what leaders say.

The only place where I have ever come across genuinely open debate is in political parties. In over 30 years I have never yet seen any free, constructive debate take place in any church. If a discussion begins to get controversial, or even if it might do so, it is generally closed down before it goes any further. Political parties feel able to tolerate open debate, and even actively welcome it, whereas most churches cannot cope with it at all.

A large part of the reason for that is to be found in the unbiblical, hierarchical structure of most churches. They have paid leaders, usually operating alone as a one-man leadership, rather than as part of a group of elders. Such men tend to see themselves as 'ruling over' the people instead of being *part of* them and *equal to* them. Indeed, they have been taught at Bible College or seminary to see things that way. Men who go into full time ministry, especially if they have had theological training, are taught to see themselves as a 'clergy class', appointed by God to rule over the lay people in the church.

They don't state any of that formally as the Roman Catholic church does, with its explicit claims about the infallibility of its own teaching when it is given through the 'Magisterium'. Yet, in their own way, even the leaders of Protestant, Reformed, Evangelical, Pentecostal and Charismatic churches tend to develop the same 'clergy-minded' view. They believe that they are appointed by God to rule over the people and that they receive special guidance from Him, whereas the lay people don't.

They therefore develop the same authoritarian mind-set that what they teach and do should not be questioned or challenged. Even if they start out in ministry as young men with a gentle, humble attitude, within a few years a great many of them come to view themselves as rulers over the people and as men who should not be contradicted, or even held accountable.

Therefore many of the **non-Catholic** churches are effectively operating their own 'mini-Magisterium'. You could perhaps call it 'Magisterium lite'. They would not go so far as to assert their authority overtly and explicitly, in the way as the Catholic church does. However, for all intents and purposes, most of the non-Catholic denominations with which I have ever had any involvement could be just as authoritarian and 'Nicolaitan' as any Catholic priest or bishop. Indeed, some have actually been worse.

Their self-aggrandizing titles, and the haughty claims that they make about themselves give them a high standard to live up to. But many of them know, deep down, that they do not actually know everything. Therefore, at least in private, many ‘clergymen’ lack confidence. It is common for them to feel a sense of insecurity and self-doubt. Sadly, instead of addressing that in a healthy way by re-examining themselves and their own assumptions and beliefs, they tend to deal with it by becoming controlling and clamping down on any perceived threat.

Their insecurity means that they can’t cope with their mistakes, or the gaps in their knowledge, being pointed out or challenged. Unfortunately, that means that their errors tend to persist, because there is no constructive way for anybody to address them. They may not expressly forbid such correction, in so many words. However, they may as well do so, because if you do ever try to challenge or correct them you will quickly discover that they will not tolerate it, or you.

For example, I once heard a full time, paid church leader preaching a sermon and in it he made certain references to the Church having replaced Israel. He said this in front of that whole church which, by virtue of unbiblical tradition, has no right of reply. A congregation cannot even ask questions while a preacher is speaking. By contrast, when Jesus taught His disciples, or even large crowds, people regularly questioned Him and He welcomed that. Even today, in Jewish synagogues, the people are free to raise questions and to ‘answer back’ to what the preacher is saying. That is how we should operate, but very few churches do.

At any rate, after the service I went up to him *privately, one to one*, and said, very politely, that I was concerned by what he had said about the Church having replaced Israel etc. I asked him if he could point to anything in the Bible that would justify his assertion. I also said that as far as I could see, the Bible never says that, even indirectly, whereas it does, repeatedly, say the direct opposite and in express words, not just by indirect inferences.

He was immediately uncomfortable and reluctant to discuss it. He just made some vague and unsubstantiated remarks. For example, he said that “*the 12 apostles were appointed by Jesus to replace the 12 tribes of Israel.*” I then asked him to show me anything from the Bible which says that the apostles were appointed for that purpose. But he couldn’t, or at least he didn’t.

I told him that as far as I could see, the Bible does not say any of the things that he was saying about the Church replacing Israel and that his views all appear to come from the teachings of other men and/or from denominational traditions, and are based on human reasoning and deduction, rather than on any express statement in the Bible.

However, he had no interest in the discussion and didn’t want to continue it. He had no desire to find out *whether* he was right. His own rightness appeared to have been assumed as a given. Perhaps he felt that it was inevitable that he was right and that a ‘lay person’ could not possibly tell him something which he didn’t know. Or, maybe he felt that it was not my ‘*place*’ to answer back to him.

Alternatively, it may have been that he *didn’t actually care* whether he was right or wrong and was determined to maintain his opinion regardless. Whatever his precise motives and reasons may have been, the operative point is that *he was not willing to engage in any debate*, however politely it might be conducted. Yet, it was about a subject which *he, not I*, had raised. Indeed, he had just preached a sermon on it. Therefore one would presume that he would have been interested in the issue and well informed about it.

We need to beware of people who stifle honest debate or who don’t want to be questioned or challenged, especially those who are also controlling or authoritarian in other ways. The motive of such people is often to coerce others into accepting that they are right, or at least into remaining silent, even if they do disagree. They especially want to avoid being shown to be wrong.

This aversion to open and honest debate is by no means limited to church leaders. While I was writing this chapter two Jehovah's Witnesses came to my door. They wanted to witness to me and did not expect me to witness to them in return. When I attempted to do so, the one taking the lead backed off and immediately wanted to leave. He said "Well, if you're happy with what you believe, we'll let you get on".

I said "Surely, if you believe me to be wrong you'll want to correct me for my sake, so as to help me". But they didn't want to. They actually became irritable and scornful when I tried to offer them evidence to show that Jesus is the Son of God and thus equal to God. One of them dismissed that claim out of hand and replied, as he backed away, "It's just ridiculous". But he had nothing constructive to say about whether or not Jesus is God.

The main reason why they didn't want to debate with me was that Jehovah's witnesses do not come to your door to help *you*, but to help *themselves*. Theirs is a religion of works which keeps them on a treadmill of knocking on doors so as to earn credit with God. So, it was all being done for their own benefit, not mine. They weren't concerned for my salvation, but only for their own. They had exactly the opposite attitude to that which we, as Christians, are meant to have when we share the real gospel. We are to do it for the other person, not for ourselves.

The other reason they didn't want to discuss or debate anything with me was that their minds were closed to such an alarming extent and they could not break free from that blindness. Many of us who are in churches may not be quite as blind as they were, but at times we are not far off. Thus we fail to benefit from the very Scriptures which are meant to correct us when we are wrong:

***<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)***

I have argued that we need to be open to be challenged, questioned, corrected and taught new things. But where is the boundary between, on the one hand, being *closed-minded* and impervious to any new fact or idea and, on the other hand, being so naïve and impressionable as to be "*tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine*"? We need to avoid both of these wrong positions, so that we are open enough to learn new things and yet wary enough to spot false teaching:

***<sup>11</sup>And his gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, <sup>12</sup>to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, <sup>13</sup>until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ; <sup>14</sup>so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the cunning of men, by their craftiness in deceitful wiles. <sup>15</sup>Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, <sup>16</sup>from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every joint with which it is supplied, when each part is working properly, makes bodily growth and upbuilds itself in love.***

***Ephesians 4:11-16 (RSV)***

The solution is that we are meant to be open to any new fact or idea, *provided it is in the Bible and consistent with the rest of what the Bible says*. That may sound obvious, but it is not how many of us actually operate. Instead we tend to assume that a thing is true because:

- a) It was told to us by someone we trust;
- b) It was said by someone who comes from the same church or denomination as we do;
- c) It feels right.

However none of those criteria are safe or reliable tests for the truth or accuracy of anything. All of the above tests can, and often do, let you down. Therefore we must only accept a fact or idea if:

- a) It is in the Bible (or at least consistent with what is in the Bible) and we are interpreting it in the right way, according to its plain, literal meaning, unless it is clearly appropriate to do otherwise;
- b) We ensure that we are reading it in accordance with the context of the surrounding verses and chapters;
- c) We have checked to rule out the possibility that its meaning is qualified or made clearer by any other passage anywhere else in the Bible. In other words, the complete context for any verse is the whole of the rest of the Bible. Therefore we need to interpret any verse in the light of every other book of the Bible.

### **Choosing the right Bible translations to use**

Another important question, which we all need to consider, is what translation of the Bible we should read. Some nations don't have to face that question, because they have only one translation in their language, or even none. However, for English speakers there is a huge range of translations to choose from. The question for us, therefore, is which of these should we choose, and why?

We therefore need to examine the different ways in which people translate the Bible and consider the advantages and disadvantages of each approach. We could briefly summarise the two main approaches as follows:

- a) '*Formal equivalence*'. This is 'literal' or 'word for word' translation
- b) '*Dynamic equivalence*', also called '*functional equivalence*' or '*paraphrasing*'. This is where the translators try to provide what they think is the fuller or wider meaning of the verse or phrase, rather than a word for word translation. They would say that they are trying to convey the thought behind the words used.

Let us examine each of these two approaches more closely and then look at which Bible translations adopt each of these alternative methods and what significance that has.

#### ***Formal equivalence* – i.e. literal, word for word translation**

Translators who take this approach aim to stay as close as they can to the exact words used in the original Hebrew or Greek text of the Bible. They try to avoid the temptation to add in their own thoughts, ideas and preferences. They achieve all this by trying, as far as they can, to translate the text word for word, with the same meaning, structure, and even word order, as was used in the original. The principle behind this approach is that the more literal the translation is, the less likely it is to corrupt or obscure the intended meaning of the prophet or apostle who wrote it.

The Bible versions which use the literal approach most strongly are the King James Version (KJV) (this is also known as the Authorised Version or AV), the New King James Version (NKJV), the Revised Standard Version (RSV), the English Standard Version (ESV), the American Standard Version (ASV), and the New American Standard Bible (NASB).

On the whole, these six versions listed above are (in my view) the best and safest translations of the Bible to use. They try to keep the fine details of things such as gender or tense, or whether the original word was in the singular or plural etc. Such precise shades of meaning can frequently be highly significant. To change such a detail, whether for the purpose of being 'gender-inclusive', or to

make it easier to read, runs the risk of altering the meaning. It can remove some nuance, or obscure a fine distinction, from which a careful student of the Bible could have drawn a valid inference.

A lot of truth is gained indirectly by looking closely at such things as tense or gender etc. Therefore it really matters to get them exactly right and not to throw away even the smallest details, however worthy one's motives might be for altering it. For one thing, we simply do not have the right or the authority to change God's Word, even if our aim is to 'help' people by simplifying it.

We have even less justification if our aim is to make the Bible less likely to offend them, e.g. by removing references to 'man' or 'men' and putting 'person' or 'people' instead. It is possible that in some instances changes of that sort may not do any harm. However, in some situations they could, and we have no right to take any chances about that.

Imagine you were given the job of translating the battle orders of Field Marshal Montgomery from English into French. He would not be pleased if you took the liberty of altering his exact choice of words, or the precise tenses, or any other such nuance. The only safe and acceptable approach would be an exact translation, so far as you possibly could. Even the slightest change, or simplification, could alter the meaning of the battle orders, the significance of which you may not necessarily foresee at the time.

Likewise, when the shipping forecast is read out on Radio 4 it follows an exact form, structure and rhythm and some very precise technical words are used. Our navy and fishermen would not be happy if someone tried to simplify it for them, such that even the smallest detail was altered, obscured or left out.

However, having said all that, it is not always possible, however much one might desire it, to translate exactly, word for word, from one language into another. That is especially so if the languages have little or nothing in common and have separate origins and structures. For example, French and English have a lot in common, but English and Chinese, or English and Russian do not.

I don't have much experience of any foreign language other than French, but even in translating into or out of French, there are complications which mean that sometimes you just cannot use an exact or literal translation. It could even produce nonsense or error if you tried to do so. At the least, it could be cumbersome and may sound odd. For example if you wanted to translate "*La jupe de ma tante*" from French into English it would look odd if you said "*The skirt of my Aunt*". It would be clumsy and even incorrect because the structure and word order of French is irreconcilably different from English

Likewise if you tried to do it in reverse, and were to translate "*My Aunt's skirt*" as "*Ma tante's jupe*" it just would not work. That would not be proper French. They probably wouldn't know what you meant, unless they also knew some English, because there is no such thing in French as using an apostrophe to indicate possession. English has that device, but French doesn't.

Accordingly, however hard you try, you cannot produce a Bible translation from Hebrew or Greek into English, or into any other language, which in every case completely renders the original meaning in the exact original structure, word order, style etc. Sometimes it just won't fit and some change of the words, or the order, will be needed to avoid writing something which is distorted and makes no sense in the 'target language', i.e. the language you are trying to translate into.

Nevertheless, having said all that, there are many times where, however odd the translation may sound in English, it is still helpful to be able to see exactly what the original language of the Bible said. Where the meaning of the verse is complex, or controversial, then a translation which seeks to reproduce it exactly can be very helpful, and even essential.

***Dynamic equivalence, which is also known as functional equivalence or paraphrasing. This aims to be ‘thought for thought’ translation, rather than ‘word for word’***

We have seen some of the difficulties that arise when trying to translate literally, word for word. The alternative approach, known as *dynamic equivalency*, attempts to address those difficulties, by choosing not to use the exact words, word order, tenses or genders etc of the original Hebrew or Greek. Instead, the translators attempt to convey to the reader the overall thoughts and ideas of the original text, even if not expressed in the exact words or structure of the original language.

Dynamic equivalence is not my preferred option, because of the dangers it creates. However, one has to concede that it does, sometimes, have certain advantages. It tends to produce a simpler, easier read and it avoids some of the complex or convoluted sentences which a word for word translation often produces. That simplicity often appeals to people whose English is not strong, or whose knowledge of the Bible is limited.

For such people a translation based on dynamic equivalency can be helpful and can make the Bible more accessible. It can even make some of the meaning clearer, by putting thoughts into less complex words or sentences, which amplify the meaning and even explain it. This is especially so where the original text contains figures of speech, or slang which make sense in Hebrew or Greek, but not when translated word for word.

So, for example, if the original Greek text said “*if your eye is good*” it could be helpful for many people if the translation said instead “*if you are generous*”. As we saw in chapter two, that is what that Jewish slang expression means. So that is what Jesus actually meant when He said it. Therefore, to render His expression in those quite different words in English would convey His real meaning, albeit not in His exact original words. That's because we have no equivalent phrase in English. To ‘*have a good eye*’ is a slang expression which simply does not exist in English. Thus it would make no sense to us if it was translated literally, without any explanation.

So, there are some times when the approach of dynamic equivalence can be helpful. It would be churlish to deny that. However, for every time we are helped by that approach, there are probably five or ten other occasions where we are hindered or even harmed by it. In particular we lose some of the precision of the real meaning, or it is distorted or obscured in some way, however slight.

That loss of accuracy or precision would still matter, even if all we were reading was a Russian novel translated into English. But it matters infinitely more when it is God's Word that we are handling. Then, it is not just literature; it is the truth. Our own eternal life, and other people's eternal life, may depend on us understanding a verse or passage accurately.

Therefore, when you read the Bible in English, it is generally (but not always) much better to read a more literal, word for word translation, rather than one which aims to render the thought in a looser way. Dynamic equivalence or paraphrasing has its place, and the translators' motives may be sincere, but it is dangerous. Some translations go much further than others and take very significant liberties with the translation.

They can easily end up bending what the original Hebrew or Greek says to reflect the translator's own personal views, prejudices or denominational ‘blinkers’. These can prevent him seeing what the text actually says because he is so used to reading it through the lens of what his own denomination says about it. That ‘lens’ problem can affect translators just as much as it does ordinary readers of the Bible.

As we have seen, if we were to read the Bible in its original Hebrew or Greek, then it would be infallible and perfect. However, if we read it after it has been translated into English, then it is not. That is the case whatever translation you choose, and whatever approach the translators may have

taken. Although God inspired the original writers of the books of the Bible, He has not necessarily inspired those who do the translating. Sometimes He very obviously hasn't.

Therefore, it is up to you to make sure you read the most reliable and accurate translation available. They differ greatly in their accuracy and in their faithfulness to the original text. Moreover, they vary in accuracy, even within the one translation, because even the best translators make errors and have their '*off days*'.

### **Bible translations that I *would* recommend because they tend to take a more literal, word for word, approach to translation**

In view of that problem of the potential for errors or even just differences of opinion, it is a very good idea to read the Bible in more than one version, i.e. not to use just one version all the time. Why not alternate between each of the *first seven* versions recommended below? Then you will see how different translators have tried to render difficult passages or phrases.

Each version can also help you to notice the errors or confusing sections in the other versions. That is a wise and helpful safeguard. Let's now look at some of the best versions. The *first six* listed below are those which generally translate the Bible most accurately. They use an approach of formal equivalence, i.e. literal, word for word translation:

The first six versions set out below all take a more literal approach to translation, i.e. formal equivalence, rather than aiming for dynamic equivalency or paraphrasing. Though not perfect, these six versions are to be preferred, because they are literal, word for word translations, so far as possible:

#### **1) The "New American Standard Bible" ("NASB") (1995)**

This is a modern American translation which gives a good, accurate, literal, word for word translation of the original text. That makes it less easily readable, but it is generally more reliable, and more faithful to the original text, than most other translations are.

#### **2) The English Standard Version (ESV) (2001)**

This, likewise, is in modern English and attempts to give a direct, literal, word for word translation rather than paraphrasing. It is a good translation and also relatively easy to read. You can also get it in either American or English editions

#### **3) The "King James Version ("KJV") also known as the "Authorised Version" ("AV") (1611)**

This was written in 1611 by command of King James I. It is generally highly accurate, as well as being beautiful in its language. However, it is written in early seventeenth century 'Shakespearian' style English. In some ways that differs in meaning from modern English. Therefore some people find it confusing and difficult. Therefore I rarely quote from it, for the sake of those people who might struggle with it.

#### **4) The New King James Version ("NKJV") (1982)**

This is an attempt to modernise the wording of the 1611 King James Version to make it easier to read. It is generally a good translation.

## 5) The Revised Standard Version (RSV) (1952)

This was a revision produced in the 1880s, and revised again in 1952, to present the King James version in more modern English. It is the main version that I have used since 1981, but it is difficult to find now, as few shops stock it. However, you can get it on the internet.

NB Do not confuse the RSV with the *New Revised Standard Version* (NRSV) which was published in 1989. It claims to be a successor to the KJV and RSV and to take a literal approach to translation. However, I would avoid the NRSV because its proudest boasts about itself are that:

a) It is an '*ecumenical*' translation. By that they mean that it was produced by a committee created from scholars from the Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox branches of the church. They may see that as an advantage, but anybody who loves the truth and wants to see the Bible translated with truth as the main aim, rather than fudge and consensus, will recoil from the idea of an ecumenical Bible, or an ecumenical anything;

b) It inserts *gender-inclusive language* in many of the verses where the male gender is referred to in the original Hebrew or Greek text. There is no valid reason for doing that. It is taking liberties with the text.

Moreover, they also produce a version of the NRSV (called the NRSV common Bible) which contains the *Apocrypha* and the *Deuterocanonical books* (see below). That fact alone ought to make us steer clear of this translation, particularly as they do nothing to draw attention to the fact that these extra books are *not* Scripture. On the contrary they give it the title '*NRSV Common Bible*', which strongly implies that all of those extra books are Scripture, when, in fact, they are not. They are just ordinary, man-made works of literature and are not divinely inspired. Their inclusion is therefore sure to mislead some people.

## 6) The American Standard Version (ASV) (1901)

This was produced in 1901 primarily for an American Audience. The language is still quite old fashioned, resembling the King James. Therefore some people struggle with it. Yet, it is said by some to be the most accurate Bible translation of all. Few shops sell it now, even in America. You would have to buy it on the internet.

**A Bible version (number 7) which claims to take a middle path between literal, word for word translation and dynamic equivalence.**

## 7) The New International Version (NIV) (1978 and 1984) (revised again in 2011)

The NIV was the result of a major project in the 1970s to translate the Bible into modern English, for both British and American readers. This version aims to steer a middle path between formal, literal, word for word translation and dynamic equivalency. Thus there is an element of paraphrasing in the NIV, though far less than in some of the versions listed below, which veer heavily towards that. The NIV is easier to read than the six versions listed above, but some of the accuracy is lost.

Nonetheless, it is still a reasonably good translation, on the whole. It is currently the most popular English version. It has sold more than 215 million copies worldwide. Therefore, I have used the NIV for some of the quotations in this series, especially in Book One, where I have assumed a less experienced reader. From Book Two onwards I use the NIV much less.

The seven versions above are ones which I would recommend. However, those set out below are not accurate enough, in my view, and I would *not* recommend them.

**Bible translations which I would *not* recommend, principally because they take the approach of dynamic equivalency or paraphrasing, but also for some other reasons**

**8) Today's New International Version (TNIV) (2005)**

This is a variation of the NIV which was completed in 2005. Like the NIV, it claims to steer a middle path between literal, word for word translation and dynamic equivalency. Even so, it is claimed that 70% of the changes that have been made move it further in the direction of literal word for word translation, rather than dynamic equivalence. So that would be an improvement, at least in that regard. It also uses the Hebrew word 'Messiah' instead of Christ. That is a helpful change, since that Hebrew title is less misunderstood than the Greek equivalent, 'Christ'.

However, one of the weaknesses (in my view) of the TNIV is that it also uses gender-inclusive language, i.e. avoiding masculine words and using neutral "inclusive" words instead. That suggests that both males or females are being referred to, which may not be the case. That may appeal to some, but it brings with it the serious risk of misrepresenting what God is saying. It's true that sometimes when God says "man" He means mankind, i.e. both sexes. But sometimes He doesn't. Sometimes He is intentionally referring only to men. Therefore to tamper with the wording, for such politically correct reasons, could easily mislead the reader.

The Bible versions in this section may sometimes be easier to read. Indeed, some of them assume that you only have a primary school reading age. However, they are not as accurate as the ones listed 1-7 above. In fact, each of these versions contain a significant amount of very loose paraphrasing. That means that words and phrases are used which do not actually appear in the original Hebrew or Greek at all. That is the most dangerous feature of all, i.e. *adding* to what the Bible says.

This is done because it reflects what the translators feel is the underlying meaning of the original words or phrases used. At times that can be helpful, but it is also very dangerous, because you can end up missing the precise meaning of some of those words or phrases that were in the original text. It can change the meaning of a whole passage if fine details are omitted or altered for the sake of simplicity. That is too high a price to pay just to make the Bible easier to read.

**9) The Good News Bible (1966 and 1979)**

This was first published in 1966 and was originally called "*Good News for Modern Man*". This version leans heavily towards dynamic equivalence and also reflects some liberal/sceptical influence. For example, in Isaiah 7:14, instead of using the word '*virgin*' it says '*young woman*' in relation to the prophecy about Jesus' birth and His mother Mary.

Possibly that had something to do with the influence of one of the translators, Robert Bratcher. He caused controversy when he announced that he did not accept that Jesus was divine. He also rejected the idea of the infallibility and inspiration of Scripture. Some people believe that his liberal/sceptical views influenced the translation, making it reflect his doubts and errors.

Another concern about the GNB is that, since 1979, it has included the Apocrypha and the Deuterocanonical books, which are not part of the Bible. (These are ancient Jewish books which are of historical interest. But they were not inspired by God and are not 'Scripture'.) These books were belatedly inserted into the Bible by the Roman Catholic Church in the sixteenth century, as a reaction to the Reformation. But they do not belong in the Bible at all, because they are *not Scripture*. They

are not inspired. Thus they contaminate rather than enhance the Bible. Yet they are assumed by many readers to be equal to Scripture, which they aren't.

This grave error undermines people's confidence in the Bible as a whole. You should therefore avoid any version which includes these extra books. Thus, the Good News Bible is a version to avoid. If you have it, why not swap now to one of the first six versions above which translate word for word? Or, perhaps you could try the seventh version, the NIV if you are a new Christian or if your English is not strong.

#### **10) The New Living Translation (NLT) (1996)**

This is a revision of what used to be called *The Living Bible*. It mainly aims for dynamic equivalence and paraphrasing. Another problem is that it also leaves out a lot of verses, or parts of verses, which the other versions include. This is another translation which you ought to avoid. If you have it then I suggest you swap to a more literal version from those numbered 1-6 above, or to number 7, the NIV, if you need something simpler.

#### **11) The New English Bible (NEB) (1970)**

This came out in 1970 and was called *The New English Bible*. It leans heavily towards dynamic equivalence/paraphrasing. It also makes the major error of including the Apocrypha and the Deuterocanonical books which are not Scripture. (See the comments made above re the Good News Bible)

#### **12) The Revised English Bible (REB) (1989)**

This is a revised version of the New English Bible referred to above. It takes a very similar approach to the NEB and therefore has the same faults. Again, it should be avoided.

#### **13) God's Word Translation (GW) (1995)**

This version adopts the approach of dynamic equivalence although they have coined a new phrase for that. They call it the '*closest natural equivalence*'. All they really mean is that they seek to convey the *overall thought* rather than translate the literal words used. Some say it takes liberties with the text and over-simplifies it, so as to deviate from the real meaning. In any case, who are they to decide what the 'overall thought' is? That is the job of the *reader* more so than the translator.

#### **14) The Contemporary English Version (CEV) (1995)**

This version is also known as the "*Bible for Today's Family*". Although it is a new translation in its own right, not just a revision, it is very similar to the Good News Bible (GNB) And it is aimed at an even lower reading age. It veers strongly towards dynamic equivalence and paraphrasing. It takes further liberties by adding words by way of explanation which are not in the original text.

It is one thing to do that in marginal notes, which are plainly the commentator's view. But it is quite another thing to do it within the text of the Bible itself. That is very dangerous. Nobody has the right to add words to the Bible. If they wish to give added explanation they should limit themselves strictly to footnotes or marginal notes, not within the text itself.

### **15) The New American Bible (NAB) (1970)**

This is actually a Roman Catholic Bible. It was produced as a result of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). Although it claims to aim for formal equivalence, i.e. word for word translation, it actually reflects the views and practices of the Roman Catholic Church.

It also contains the Apocrypha and the Deuterocanonical books which are not Scripture (see above). If that was not bad enough, it also uses gender-inclusive language. It should be avoided. (However, do not confuse this with the New American *Standard* Bible, (NASB), which is a very good translation - See number one above.)

### **16) The New English Translation (NET) (2005)**

This is rather unusual. It is a completely new 'on line' English translation of the Bible which anybody can download. In its approach to translation this version leans towards dynamic equivalence/paraphrasing. However, it makes up for that, to some degree, by including a vast array of footnotes which explain why it has translated phrases as it has and offers alternative renderings. Even so, it should be avoided.

### **17) The Jerusalem Bible (JB)**

This is another Roman Catholic version and reflects their views and practices. It also contains all of the Apocrypha and the Deuterocanonical books. It should be avoided.

### **18) The New Jerusalem Bible (NJB) (1985)**

As the name suggests, this is an updated revision of the Jerusalem Bible. It is therefore equally Roman Catholic and also contains the Apocrypha and the Deuterocanonical books. It is largely based on dynamic equivalence and also uses some gender inclusive language. It should be avoided.

### **19) The Complete Jewish Bible, translated by David H. Stern**

This is an unusual Bible version. It was translated by a Messianic Jewish believer called David H. Stern. That means he is a Jew who has accepted that Jesus (Yeshua) is the Messiah. He did so when he was 37 years old, having been brought up as a Jew. He produced his version of the Bible because he felt, with substantial justification, that most versions fail to recognize the Jewishness of the Scriptures because they are translated solely by Gentiles.

David H. Stern is clearly a good and honest man. Moreover, in many ways his translation can be helpful, especially for certain passages where the Hebraic tone or character of what is being said gets missed by other translators. However, his version is very much a paraphrase. That is he focuses on trying to convey what he believes is the intended meaning, rather than the exact words used.

For example, he says in his own introduction that he feels that the usual translation of the Greek words '*upo nomon*', which are generally rendered as '*under the law*', has caused much confusion. He believes that many people have seen that as a basis for being averse to the five books of Moses. So, to counteract that, David H. Stern translates those two Greek words as: "*in subjection to the system which results from perverting the Torah into legalism.*"

That elongated phrase may well be useful and enlightening. However, it travels far beyond what the actual words of the Bible say. In a sense it is almost a commentary on those words rather than a

translation of them. That is fair enough if you *know* that that is what you are getting. In that case, you may well find it useful. However, it is a danger if you wrongly think that it is a translation of the words actually contained in the Bible.

Therefore, although David H. Stern himself is a sincere man, I would recommend that you avoid his translation. You might use it as a quasi-commentary if you are a mature believer and want his input on a complex passage, but it is not a good translation to use a Bible for day to day use.

## **20) 'The Message' by Eugene Peterson (2002)**

I would particularly advise you *not* to read a version of the Bible called “The Message” by Eugene Peterson. It is not even a translation. It is a very distorted paraphrase which heavily reflects the author's own opinions rather than the original text. He changes and simplifies things all over the place and injects his own ideas and theories. This book is popular at the moment, but it is not an accurate translation of the Bible. I would recommend that you avoid it.

Strangely, even the author, Eugene Peterson, expressed his own unease at the idea of The Message being read out in churches as if it was a reading of God's Word. He once said in an interview in Christianity Today:

*“When I'm in a congregation where somebody uses [The Message] in the Scripture reading, it makes me feel a little uneasy. I would never recommend it be used as saying “Hear the Word of God from The Message”. But it surprises me how many do”.*

## **The errors of the 'King James only' school of thought**

You may have heard of a group of people who argue that it is only the King James version of the Bible which can be relied on, and that all other versions are inadequate, or even false. This school of thought is known as the “*King James only*” movement.

There are actually many different strands of opinion within that broad group. Some are more extreme than others. Some even go so far as say that God inspired the King James translators, such that the King James translation itself is the ‘real’ Bible, rather than the original Hebrew and Greek texts. That view is plainly ridiculous.

Other advocates of the King James Version are more moderate. They just feel that the scholarship, faithfulness and sincerity of the KJV translators were higher than anything we have seen since. That may well be true, as the KJV, which closely follows the earlier translation made by William Tyndale, is a superb translation. However, just like all the others, it is not perfect, and it would be foolish to suggest otherwise. It has its own errors and badly phrased verses.

For example, one of its most unfortunate and misleading errors is that it uses the phrase “*possessed*” when speaking of demons. Instead it should simply say “*demonised*,” which is what the Greek says (see Books Seven and Nine for more detail on this and why it matters).

In short, the KJV is a very good translation, but it is not right for it to be idolised, or praised in an unbalanced or unhealthy way. Those who go that far are misguided. Do not allow yourself to be talked into thinking that nothing else can be trusted other than the King James. That is not the case.

Indeed, few people realise that King James himself was both a freemason and a homosexual. Those facts do not undermine the Bible that was translated on his orders. But they may help you to put into proper perspective the question of whether the King James Version should be revered above all other translations. The answer is that it should not.

**Always read every verse of the Bible in its own context. Make sure you are aware of who is speaking, who is being spoken to, who, or what, is being spoken about, and why.**

One of the biggest errors we can make when reading the Bible is to be egocentric. By that I mean to make the assumption, usually unconsciously, that what is written on the page was written *to you* and *about you* and is *intended for you*. Many of us make the mistake of thinking that every promise, warning or assurance and also all advice, guidance or instruction, is intended for us personally and is speaking of our circumstances.

So, for example, God might make a promise to a particular person or group. We might then wrongly imagine that that same promise is automatically applicable to us personally. If so we may assume that we can and should act upon it or be guided by it today, in the particular circumstances that we face. But our own situation may well be entirely different from that faced by the specific person or group to whom the promise, instruction or guidance was originally given.

More to the point, the promise or statement made in the Bible was originally made *to the person concerned* and it might not necessarily apply to anybody else. It depends on the context and on whether it is a general statement which applies to us all, or one made solely to the particular person or group concerned. You must always ask yourself that question. Take for example Jeremiah 1:19. This is a verse which contains a wonderful promise, but it is one that God made *to Jeremiah personally*:

***They will fight against you; but they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you, says the LORD, to deliver you."***

***Jeremiah 1:19 (RSV)***

The question is to what extent, if at all, can you or I, when reading that verse, assume that the promise made to Jeremiah is also applicable to us? It was written to Jeremiah, not to us. That said, it does have some general application, because God will generally assist and protect His other children, not just Jeremiah. So, we can be aware that this is a general statement of how God ordinarily acts, but that still doesn't make it a *specific promise to you*.

However, having said that, it is entirely possible that God could speak to you individually through that verse by causing it to *come alive* for you personally. The instant you read it you might know in your spirit that God has just spoken to you through it. He does that occasionally, though it is the exception, not the rule. Nevertheless, where it happens, it is valid. It is definitely one of the many ways that God can speak to us and it would be wrong to deny that. I have myself, on many occasions, had a verse or passage come alive to me, or *leap out* at me, such that I know that God has just spoken *to me* through it, even though, in the Bible, it is quite clearly only promised or said to the person to whom God was speaking.

The best way that I can describe this phenomenon is to say that it is as if the verse goes '*bold on screen*' or becomes '*fluorescent*'. It leaps out from the page and hits me as something that God is saying *to me, today*. I sense in my spirit that I can claim it for myself and rely upon it. So, that experience *can certainly* be valid. But whether it is actually valid *on any given occasion* is a matter for personal judgment and discernment.

You may be right in thinking that God is speaking to you through that verse. Alternatively, you may be wrong. It depends on how mature, honest and balanced you are and whether you are genuinely hearing God, or are mistaken, or even deceived. It would therefore make sense to ask a mature believer to help you and to give their view as to whether God has really spoken into your situation or not.

As a general rule, in the absence of a clear prompting from God, you should assume, the vast majority of the time, that passages such as the one quoted above where God spoke to Jeremiah, are a message from God to Jeremiah alone. They are not a message to you personally, except insofar as they are relevant to us all in a general, broad sense.

In short, more than 99% of the time you should just seek to absorb the original meaning of the passage and be aware that God made that promise to Jeremiah at that time. God wants you to know what He said and did in the life of Jeremiah. Then you can apply it in your own life, by inference, *to the extent that it is appropriate to do so*. But you cannot usually take it as a direct or personal message to you. It is not a direct reference to the situation you face today, unless God gives a direct prompting to you personally, which most of the time He will not do.

Another example would be where God says something to the people of Israel which is right for them, but not necessarily right for you. The most stark example would be the passages where God tells the Israelites, after they leave Egypt and are about to enter the Promised Land, that they are to drive out and destroy the various Canaanite people. At that time they were entering the Promised Land, which God had set aside for His chosen people, Israel.

It would be very wrong for you to read those verses containing those instructions, which were validly given to the Jewish people, and to assume that God is saying the same thing to you about your enemies, or the people who stand in your way.

God did want the Israelites to destroy the Canaanites because they were very wicked and He wanted to judge them. They were also God's enemies and they stood in the way of God's plans for the nation and land of Israel. However, those points are not true of your enemies or of the people who get in your way at work. Thus to apply such verses to yourself, as if they had been personally written to you, and as if they authorised you to fight and destroy your own personal enemies, would be a grave error.

This is not just an academic point. Many people have actually made this very error with these very passages. For example they were used by the Boers in South Africa to justify seizing the land of indigenous black people, as if God had told them to do it. They are not alone. The same has been done by the British as the Empire was being built and by the Americans as the native Americans were moved off their land and/or wiped out. The mistake has also been made by private individuals who have imagined that those instructions given to Israel applied to them in their own private conflicts and rivalries.

The only way to learn how to hear God's voice and how to recognise those occasions when He is speaking to you personally is to grow in experience and maturity. In part, you will have to learn from your mistakes, as I have had to do. You will gradually become more tuned in and more discerning as time goes by, *provided you have a strong desire to know the truth for its own sake*, rather than just to reinforce your own opinions, preferences and desires.

Anybody who does *not* have the 'love of the truth' will be tempted to find personal messages from God all over the Bible, and elsewhere, telling them to do all the things that they have already decided they want to do. Such people are often just looking for a basis to justify doing what they already want to do.

When you read the Bible you are meant to understand, accept and believe all that it says. But you must always put at the centre whoever it is that the passage is speaking to, or about, not yourself. Then ask yourself who is speaking - is it God Himself, or a person on His behalf? Or is it just someone speaking his own opinions, of which God may not necessarily approve? A good example of this is the book of Job, where a series of different people speak, including God, Satan, Job, Job's wife and Job's four friends.

The point is that they, and the statements they make, are not all equal in accuracy or value. Therefore what they each say is not meant to be treated as being what *God* is saying. In fact, God specifically tells us in the book of Job that what Job's friends say, which takes up many chapters of the book, does *not* represent God's view. In short, what each of them said was wrong and God wants you to realise that what they said was wrong:

***After the LORD had spoken these words to Job, the LORD said to Eli'phaz the Te'manite: "My wrath is kindled against you and against your two friends; for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has.***

***Job 42: 7 (RSV)***

So, the mere fact that Job's four friends, Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar and Elihu, are quoted (at length) in the Bible *does not mean that God agrees with them*. On the contrary, when we get to chapter 42 we are told very plainly that God *disagrees* with them. He says that what they have said is not right. Therefore we would be rather foolish if we relied upon the advice given, and the opinions expressed, by Job's friends.

So, we must be very careful indeed about gaining *specific individual guidance* for our personal day to day decisions from reading the Bible. There is a time and a place for doing that. It can sometimes be valid, but it can also be very invalid, depending on how you go about it.

What you *can* validly do is see a passage which sets out a *general principle* and then apply that general principle to yourself. That is legitimate, because you are going *from the general to the particular*. So if you see a passage which indicates that it is wrong to lie or steal or worry or fear or whatever else, then you can validly say:

- a) The Bible says it is wrong for *anybody* to lie;
- b) Therefore it is wrong for *me* to lie;
- c) Therefore it would be wrong for me to tell *this particular lie* that I am about to tell.

What you *cannot* safely do is to go *from the particular to the general*, even where it is God who is speaking. For example, He may be giving a specific instruction to some individual or group. It may well be that that instruction or promise is only for *them*, or only for *that time*, or only for *those circumstances*. So you could not validly say:

- a) God told *Solomon* to build a house for God, i.e. the Temple;
- b) Therefore, as I read that passage, God is telling *me* to build a house for Him.

You may think that to be an unrealistic and far-fetched example, but there have probably been a great many people who have wrongly thought that God was telling them to build a church building simply because they wrongly applied to themselves an instruction that God gave only to Solomon.

Thus we must be very careful indeed before we take specific guidance about our own lives from particular statements made to individuals or groups in the Bible. The only wise and appropriate way in which it could be done would be where it comes by way of additional confirmation. But that would need to be confirming something which already makes sense and is already evidently God's will for other valid reasons and based on other solid evidence.

A Bible passage should not be relied upon for specific personal guidance in your own individual situation where the passage itself is your *only* reason or basis for thinking that God wants you to do a particular thing or make a specific decision. The more important or life-changing the step or decision

is, the more you would need to see other factors or additional evidence to prove that it is God's will, and the less you would want to rely on a given passage as your only authority for taking a step.

In short, always remember that although in the broadest sense you are definitely *one of the people for whom* the Bible was written, that does not mean that it was written *to or about you* in particular. To assume that it was would be foolishly egocentric and would lead you into many errors and deceptions. Therefore, to summarise, we can say that with any passage that we read we should ask ourselves the following questions, amongst others:

- a) Who is the person speaking in this passage?
- b) Are they right or wrong? Is the passage setting out what is *true*, or merely telling us what someone actually *said or did*, which could be either right or wrong, or a mixture?
- c) Who is being written about?
- d) When and in what circumstances was it written?
- e) What general principle is stated or illustrated by the passage?
- f) What relevance or application does that general principle have for me, or for my particular situation?

So, when reading the Bible it is valid, and even essential, to *end* with personal application, i.e. asking yourself what you need to do as a result of reading the passage. But it is very wrong to *start* with that question. The former approach puts the Bible at the centre. The latter puts you at the centre. But that is a place where none of us should ever be.

Please note that a real Christian will never be entirely right in all that he thinks but he will be getting '*righter*', or less wrong, as each year goes by. It's like a person who is not yet *at* the North Pole but is always getting farther North. In other words, he is not right about everything but he is continually discovering, and removing, his own errors. Therefore he is getting more and more accurate in his understanding of Scripture. That happens because he has the Holy Spirit, loves the truth, and studies the Bible diligently.

Those three features don't make you infallible, but they do ensure that you discover some of your own errors and correct them every year. By doing that, you increase the range and accuracy of your own beliefs and become much more capable of distinguishing truth from error when listening to the teaching of others.