

CHAPTER 10

FURTHER POINTS ON HOW TO DEAL WITH THE BIBLE CORRECTLY

⁴⁶ “Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and not do what I tell you? ⁴⁷ Everyone who comes to me and hears my words and does them, I will show you what he is like: ⁴⁸ 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. ⁴⁹ 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)

⁵ 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. ⁶ 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.’ ⁷ 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? ⁸ 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)

⁹ For they are a rebellious people,
lying sons,
sons who will not hear
the instruction of the Lord;
¹⁰ 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,
¹¹ 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. If so, then 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 it is 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 clearer.

That way, the easier or clearer passages will clarify or explain the harder ones. It's really just plainly obvious 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 utterly obvious, but it is not what millions of us actually do. Instead, we bring to the Bible our own pre-conceived ideas. We then 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. Let's 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 they all 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 summarized 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, ‘replacement theology’ 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’).

However, 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.

Accordingly, although they had no idea whatsoever as to what the verses did actually mean, 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.

These were, in some indecipherable way, 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.

More to the point, you need to 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, in order 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, plainly and straight forwardly, what the text of the Bible *actually says* and to 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 that 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 interconnectedness 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 and avoid error:

***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 indirect inferences or deductions

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 also 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.

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?" ¹⁴And they said, "Some say John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; but still others, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets." ¹⁵He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" ¹⁶Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." ¹⁷And 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. ¹⁸I 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.

We do so until we build up a comprehensive and balanced understanding of that topic. This requires us to make sure that we also 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, provided you choose the *right ones*. 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. Firstly, 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 skeptic, 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 skeptic, 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 of his own fanciful theories about deep 'hidden meanings' that he imagines he can see in the text. If so, that will 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? Therefore, even if the writer is a real Christian, you should still avoid commentaries which are 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 also likely to ignore any words or verses that they themselves 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 dreaming up some meaning for themselves and persuading themselves that it is correct. So, all 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 a 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, and by listening to their teaching CDs or MP3s, 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, I also make clear that none of them are perfect. I feel quite sure of that, because I have seen and heard every one of them make mistakes, or display blind-spots, where they lack knowledge or experience. When you come to think of it, how could it be otherwise? Even the best teacher on Earth has only got limited knowledge.

We all have areas of relative weakness or ignorance, where we need the input of other men. That is also true of leaders, not just ordinary church members. Therefore, because every teacher is fallible, and has gaps in his knowledge, it is not safe to rely on just one commentary writer.

It is not even safe to use a number of commentaries, if they are all written by men from one school of thought or denomination. For example, very many people, including leaders, will only ever read books if they are sure that they are written by men who are from their own denomination and who therefore share all their own views. They basically want to have their all of own existing views and opinions fed back to them.

They imagine that that keeps them safe from error. In fact, it really just makes error all the more likely. It also prevents you from seeing where you are mistaken or uninformed and thereby correcting those errors, or doing something to plug the gaps. Therefore you actually need the safety that comes from reading *several* books and commentaries that are written by different men and from *different backgrounds* and denominations.

Then they can correct you and also correct each other and make up for each other's blind spots, 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. In particular, 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.

However, 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, competent Bible teachers around who fear God and have the love of the truth.

Even if they are sincere, most church leaders are generalists, trying to be a 'jack of all trades' and they may 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, and theological approaches 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 prioritize 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 does *not* want us to be moderate. On the contrary, in many areas, He wants us to be radical, passionate and wholehearted and to do what we do with all our heart, mind and soul. Two obvious examples of that are our love for God and our devotion to the Scriptures, both of which are 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 with, 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 study and 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 and, in particular, not just those parts that we find agreeable, or like the sound of
- b) what God says about *every other issue*, not just those issues 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 apostle John died, or when the last book of the New Testament was written, such that they 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 or instead of 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 *everybody* should speak in tongues
- f) that *nobody* 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 their own mistaken starting assumptions which are, in turn, caused by faulty teaching. Therefore they may read what the Bible says, but they 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 wrong 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 majority only ever point to the second half of the verse which says “....*decently and in order*”?

They seem to ignore the first half of the verse which says “*but all things should be done....*” Therefore they effectively ban, ignore or discourage, all sorts of things which are genuinely from the Holy Spirit. It is this group which has done so much to stifle the *genuine* gifts of the Holy Spirit and to make them into a virtual swear word.

Then again, there are others who might notice and focus on the first half of the verse, such that they are determined that all things should be done. However, they aren't interested in, or don't notice, or don't remember, the second part, which is about how those things must be done “*decently and in order*”.

Thus they will allow, or even encourage, all sorts of excess or foolishness, which are plainly not from the Holy Spirit but are either from people's own flesh or even demonic counterfeits. It is from this group that we get the *abuses* which have come to be known as ‘*charismania*’ which have done so much to discredit the genuine gifts of the Holy Spirit.

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. Accordingly, 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 *one of* the causes 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 right 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 *biblical* 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 sometimes over-emphasize 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-emphasize 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-emphasized 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 and MP3s 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 pejorative 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 few) 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 mean that He also *forces* us to be saved, whether we wish to be or not. On that basis, they conclude that 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 processes of logical deduction. They cannot point to any express statement in the Bible which actually 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 chose, before time began, all those 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 therefore 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 entirely on human reasoning, with no biblical authority whatsoever 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, by their definition, 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 by and balanced against 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, and 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 profoundly 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 try to 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 any of 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 treats both as being crucially important, 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:

¹⁶Thus 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. ¹⁷They 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)

⁹*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. ¹⁰Tell the righteous that it shall be well with them, for they shall eat the fruit of their deeds. ¹¹Woe 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)

³ *Thus says the Lord GOD, Woe to the foolish prophets who follow their own spirit, and have seen nothing! ⁴ Your prophets have been like foxes among ruins, O Israel. ⁵ 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. ⁶ 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. ⁷ Have you not seen a delusive vision, and uttered a lying divination, whenever you have said, 'Says the LORD,' although I have not spoken?"*

⁸ *Therefore thus says the Lord God: "Because you have uttered delusions and seen lies, therefore behold, I am against you, says the Lord GOD. ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ 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 criticizing 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, precisely because they do not have the love of the truth:

⁹*that is, the one whose coming is in accord with the activity of Satan, with all power and signs and false wonders, ¹⁰and 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. ¹¹For this reason God will send upon them a deluding influence so that they will believe what is false, ¹²in 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 to 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?

However, 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.

They cannot possibly have got that idea 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.

'Replacement theology', and other forms of confusion about the roles of Israel and the Church, come from people misunderstanding the Bible

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 actually makes it abundantly 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, wise or unwise, helpful or unhelpful. But either way, it cannot be treated as if the Bible had said it.

All of us are, to one extent or another, influenced by our mistaken beliefs and opinions and we must seek to identify, expose and correct those

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 positively *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 of the Bible 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 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 to people from your own church or denomination. That 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 that *He* will 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 "*Hang on a moment - this passage that I'm reading doesn't match what I believe*".

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 organized 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* 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, not the Church;
- 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 quite agitated at all that and considered me to be ‘negative’ and ‘defeatist’. However, I wasn’t actually 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 individual 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 that 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:

¹But 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." ²And 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. ³So, 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. ⁴When 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. ⁵But 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."

⁶The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter. ⁷And 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. ⁸And God who knows the heart bore witness to them, giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us; ⁹and he made no distinction between us and them, but cleansed their hearts by faith. ¹⁰Now 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? ¹¹But we believe that we shall be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will." ¹²And 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.

¹³After they finished speaking, James replied, "Brethren, listen to me. ¹⁴Simeon has related how God first visited the Gentiles, to take out of them a people for his name. ¹⁵And with this the words of the prophets agree, as it is written, ¹⁶'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, ¹⁷ that the rest of men may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who are called by my name, ¹⁸says the Lord, who has made these things known from of old.' ¹⁹Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, ²⁰but should write to them to abstain from the pollutions of idols and from unchastity and from what is strangled and from blood. ²¹For from early generations Moses has had in every city those who preach him, for he is read every sabbath in the synagogues." ²²Then 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 Barsabbas, 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 often been taught at Bible College or seminary to see things that way.

Leaders with a 'clergy mentality' have a tendency to close down debate and the free expression of views and questions

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 gradually come to 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 have begun 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 are not what they are portrayed as being. Therefore, at least in private, many 'clergymen' lack confidence. It is common for them to feel a sense of insecurity and self-doubt and even 'imposter syndrome'.

Sadly, instead of addressing that in a healthy way by re-examining themselves and their own assumptions and beliefs, many of them 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. It was actually just a personal opinion being presented as if it was a fact.

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. I also said that his views all appeared to come from the teachings of other men and/or from denominational traditions, and were 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 an absolute given. Perhaps he felt that it was inevitable that he was right and that a mere ‘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 keenly interested in the issue and that he was already thoroughly well informed about it and thus ready to discuss it with anyone.

We need to beware of people who stifle honest debate or who aren’t willing 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*”.

However, he had nothing constructive to say about whether or not Jesus is God. Actually, in their case, 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:

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

We need to find a right balance between being, on the one hand, closed minded and, on the other hand, naïve and gullible

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:

¹¹And his gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, ¹²to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, ¹³until 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; ¹⁴so 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. ¹⁵Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, ¹⁶from 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;

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.