

CHAPTER 5

THE GRAVE ERROR OF FOLLOWING MEN'S IDEAS AND TRADITIONS, CATHOLIC OR OTHERWISE, INSTEAD OF THE BIBLE

⁷ *in vain do they worship me,
teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.'*

⁸ *You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men."*

⁹ *And he said to them, "You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition!"*

Mark 7:7-9 (ESV)

²⁹ *I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; ³⁰ and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them.*

Acts 20:29-30 (ESV)

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

Have you ever heard anybody use the phrase "the Church Fathers"? It does not mean the apostles of the first century A.D. who knew Jesus and wrote the New Testament. It refers to men who came later, in the third, fourth and fifth centuries mainly. They include men like Origen, Ambrose, Chrysostom, Augustine and others. They were leading figures in the Church in the early centuries after the apostles had all died.

In relation to these men a dangerous error has arisen. That is to suppose that these men, by reason of being closer in time to the apostles than we are, have a particularly enhanced authority. Therefore it is widely, but wrongly, assumed that what they taught and wrote was especially accurate and that they reflect the views of the apostles more closely, and thus are better able to interpret the Bible, than the men who lived in later centuries.

Many go even further and treat these men almost as if they were divinely inspired, as the writers of the Scriptures were. At the very least, they are often treated as though they are more authoritative, and more reliable, than a Bible teacher or commentator who lived later in history or who is writing today. For example one writer I know of, in the introduction to his three volume systematic theology, goes to some lengths to proclaim the fact that he places greater weight on ancient writings, i.e. from the third and fourth centuries, than on more modern writings.

He appears to take some pride in this and implies that what those writers had to say is more worthy and more reliable merely by virtue of their books being ancient. However, the accuracy and reliability of what a man has to say about the Bible cannot be gauged by reference to when he lived. The age of the book is irrelevant.

The only appropriate way to assess the accuracy of any statement, whenever it may have been written, is to compare it to what the Bible says. That being so, you can test the merit of something written 1800 years ago just as easily as something written yesterday. Both pieces of writing are valid if they agree with the Bible and invalid if they don't.

Therefore the century in which they were written is quite irrelevant to the question of whether their theology is true or false. Ancientness does not imply any greater likelihood of accuracy. Indeed, there were people teaching and writing, even in the middle of the first century, whose ideas were profoundly heretical. We know that because the very reason why many of the New Testament letters were written was to rebut their false teachings.

Such men were as ancient as it is possible to be, because they were contemporaries of the apostles. Yet they were still heretics. So, even living in the middle of the first century didn't prevent them from going wrong. The net effect of this error is that within Roman Catholicism, but also within most of the Reformed and Protestant denominations, the teachings of these men, the so called Church Fathers, is illegitimately elevated. It is often treated as if it was divinely inspired truth, rather than just their own fallible, human opinions.

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

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

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

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

The mere fact that someone lived in the middle of the first century, let alone the third, fourth or fifth centuries, does not imply that their teaching will be sound or biblical. On the contrary, as we have seen, much of the New Testament was written to tackle the abundance of false teaching that was already being put about.

That was the case even in the 50s and 60s of the first century, while most of the apostles were still alive. If false teachings and "*doctrines of demons*" were already capable of being produced in such abundance, even by that early stage, then they were even easier to put about in the third to fifth centuries. Many of the errors of Roman Catholicism came from these men, to whose teaching I am objecting.

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

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

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

In the same way, the traditions and practices of any church or denomination, whatever their origin or source, and no matter how long established they might be, are no authority for anything at all. We cannot base any doctrine upon tradition, or accept anybody else’s teaching or practice, merely because it is what they have always done.

It may well be that they have done it for centuries. However that still means absolutely nothing unless that doctrine or practice is *biblical*, i.e. in accordance with what the Bible says. If not, it is simply an old error as opposed to a new error. The net effect is exactly the same.

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

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

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

That is obvious when you think of an absurd example like that. However, the point is equally true with examples which are not absurd, such as infant baptism. That is not found anywhere in the Bible. Yet it is the long established practice, or tradition, of millions of people. Therefore many people automatically assume, without thinking, that it must be valid.

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

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

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

¹Now when the Pharisees gathered together to him, with some of the scribes, who had come from Jerusalem, ²they saw that some of his disciples ate with hands defiled, that is, unwashed. ³(For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they wash their hands, observing the tradition of the elders; ⁴and when they come from the market place, they do not eat unless they purify themselves; and there are many other traditions which they observe, the washing of cups and pots and vessels of bronze.)

⁵And the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, "Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with hands defiled?" ⁶And he said to them, "Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, 'This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; ⁷in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men.' ⁸You leave the commandment of God, and hold fast the tradition of men." ⁹And he said to them, "You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God, in order to keep your tradition!"

Mark 7: 1-9 (RSV)

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

Man-made traditions and practices do not tend to co-exist alongside valid biblical doctrines and practices. Like weeds in a flower bed, they have a rampant nature and will generally take over in due course. Thus the biblical belief or practice will usually get driven out and be replaced by the traditional/man-made one.

Our sin nature and worldliness means that what is man-made will automatically appeal to us and therefore push out what is biblical. Like a cuckoo's egg which is laid in another bird's nest, a man-made tradition will naturally tend to supplant and replace the true doctrine over a period of time. In the end, that tradition will become central and will come to be seen as more important than what the Bible says.

Indeed, eventually, it will be the only thing that is taught. What the Bible says will be ignored or relegated in status. That was the case in the past and it is still the case today. The Jewish people of Jesus' day had developed what was known as the 'oral law'. This was a vastly long and complicated series of man-made rules, regulations and procedures which the Jewish religious leaders said must be kept.

At first these additions were introduced and practiced *alongside* what the Bible taught. But, eventually, and inevitably, they came to be seen as more important than what the Bible said. That is why, in the passage above from Mark chapter seven, the Pharisees were so incensed that Jesus' disciples did not observe their elaborate hand-washing regulations.

They were preoccupied with irrelevant things like that, rather than paying attention to what Jesus had to say. Indeed, the main reason why they resented Jesus, and even hated Him, was probably because He would not observe the man-made rules and regulations that their ancestors had invented.

They could see that Jesus regularly went out of His way to break their rules deliberately and to demonstrate, as publicly as possible, that He would not accept their traditions, or pay any respect to them. That infuriated those Pharisees far more than if Jesus had denied or disobeyed a biblical command which, of course, He never did.

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

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

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

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

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

It turned out that there was a couple present who believed very strongly in the teachings of John Calvin. I discovered their allegiance to Calvin when I said that one of the idols we also need to watch out for is our tendency to revere the teachings of a particular man or group. I then mentioned Calvinism as an example of this. The couple became quite incensed.

They were far more concerned by my comment about Calvin than they would have been if I had criticized the apostle Paul. So, devotion to the teachings and practices of Calvinism is an area where many people today make the same error as the Pharisees did. They got upset when Jesus would not abide by their rules.

Likewise, many Calvinists today get angry if their equally man-made teachings are challenged. The same tendency is potentially present in all of us, whatever our background. Therefore we need to be on the lookout for it. We must never assume that we are immune to this failing or think that it only ever affects other people or other denominations.

So, when any of us are involved in any debate we must continually ask ourselves whether we are saying what the Bible actually says, or just following man-made traditions which we have absorbed, or our own opinions and preferences. Whichever it may be, if what we are saying is not consistent with the Bible, we need to rethink our position and be willing to abandon that practice or belief.

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

In short, our practice must always be to use the Bible as our yardstick to measure everything and everybody else. It has to be in that direction, never the reverse. We must never allow ourselves to measure the Bible by the yardstick of other men’s traditions, practices or opinions, even if those are

accepted by the majority. It doesn't matter if 99% of other people, even within the Church, hold a certain opinion or belief.

If it is not what the Bible says, then we must take the Bible's side, rather than trust what people say, no matter how numerous or eminent they may be. Indeed, if a person or group is teaching false doctrine or unbiblical practices then we must be willing to separate ourselves from them if they repeatedly refuse to accept the truth of what the Bible says and go on teaching their false beliefs to others:

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

Romans 16:17-18 (RSV)

Truth really matters and having accurate biblical doctrine is the most important truth there is. Too many Christians are willing to compromise on the truth and fudge issues in order to avoid controversy, the breakdown of relationships or the loss of their position.

However, it is far more important to hold to the truth than to be popular, or even to keep one's position within a church. Doctrine is not a trivial matter involving little details. It really is vital that we find the truth and hold onto it, whatever the cost may be of doing so.

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

This is a fundamental question which has to be faced. Yet it has generated some very different opinions. For example, the Roman Catholic church teaches that no 'lay' person has either the right or the ability to interpret the Bible for themselves. They teach that only the combined leadership of the Roman Catholic church can do so, when it is operating as what they call '*the Magisterium*'.

They alone must hand down the meaning to the people, who must then accept, without question, what those leaders say. In other words, they say that ordinary people must not attempt to form their own conclusions based on their own private study.

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

I shall set out some of their key pronouncements and then discuss why I believe that they are misguided and unjustified. When I quote from the Catechism I shall do so in a distinctly different font, so that you can distinguish it more easily from everything else. Article 2 of the Catechism includes a section dealing with this theme of authority. It speaks of the "*Apostolic Tradition*" and says, at paragraph 76:

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

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

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

So, what they claim is that *in addition* to the written Word of God, i.e. the Bible, Jesus also told certain additional things to the apostles *orally*. The apostles then, allegedly, passed these further teachings on verbally to the first century church. They supposedly did all of this without ever seeing fit to confirm any of it in writing, or even to mention that they had been given these supposedly vital supplementary teachings.

Neither did they ever say why they were limiting themselves solely to speaking about these things rather than writing about them, as they did with all the rest of what Jesus had said to them, and also their own teachings. The Catholic church claims that these extra teachings were preserved by them, within what they call '*Tradition*', and are still available to us now, because they have remembered all of this and put it into operation.

In other words, all these unbiblical things that Jesus and the apostles are alleged to have said and done are now reflected in the customs, traditions, doctrines and institutions of their church. That is their explanation for where all their extra-biblical teachings and practices came from and for why it's not a problem that these are nowhere to be found in the Bible, or even that they contradict the Bible.

Their answer to every objection is that this supposed *oral* teaching of Jesus and/or of the apostles includes whatever unbiblical doctrine or practice one is objecting to. That's a very convenient argument. If you are willing to believe this claim it is capable of justifying virtually anything that they might ever want to teach or do.

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

Paragraphs 77 and 78 of the Catechism state the following:

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

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

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

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

Instead, what the Bible does do is to warn us very strongly about people who will come along later and add to, take from or alter what the Bible says. This doctrine of the oral Tradition fits exactly with what apostle John and others were warning us about. At any rate, given that the Bible gives no support to this idea, we are therefore expected to rely solely upon the supposed additional, oral teaching itself to explain and justify its own alleged role.

It is entirely its own authority and has to rely solely upon itself to be its own foundation. It has absolutely nothing else to rest upon. That is a remarkably circular argument. Indeed, it is so implausible as to be an insult to one's intelligence. However, it does not end there. The Catechism actually goes on to state that the Tradition and teachings of the Catholic church are *equal in status to the Bible!* Let's look at where they say this:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Who were the ‘Nicolaitans’ and why did Jesus hate their deeds?

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

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

¹ *“To the angel of the church in Ephesus write:*

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

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

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

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

Revelation 2:1-6 (NASB)

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

That word has two roots. The first is ‘nike’ which means a ‘victor’ or ‘conqueror’ (It is also the origin of the sportswear brand.) The second word is ‘laos’, which means ‘people’. Therefore the combined, overall meaning of the term is “to be victorious over the people” or ‘to conquer the people’. A better way to put it would be “to rule over the people”.

The people whom Jesus described as Nicolaitans were, evidently, those leaders who dominate the people in their churches, instead of being self-sacrificial, humble, gentle shepherds of God’s people. There were already developing, even in the last decade of the first century, a group of authoritarian leaders of that type.

They became a ruling, priestly class or what we would now call ‘clergy’. That is a concept which the Bible does not recognise or condone. On the contrary, it is an aspect of Nicolaitanism, which Jesus tells us He *hates*. He hates it because it is the natural outworking of the flesh nature.

Nicolaitanism is what the sinful flesh nature of any leader will naturally and inevitably lead him towards. He will end up like that unless he is determined to crucify his own flesh and to refuse to allow himself to give in to the temptation to lead in a carnal, self-promoting manner.

The biblical standard of a leader is a servant who lays down his own life for those whom he teaches, cares for and leads. Such a man does not use people and is not a tyrant. Moreover, he is certainly not a ‘priest’. That, in itself, is another man-made and unbiblical concept, which is not found anywhere in the New Testament churches.

So, ‘Nicolaitanism’ is a corrupt, carnal and authoritarian form of leadership. It seeks to use, exploit and dominate the people from above, rather than serve them as co-equals, as the apostles did. One

could equally say that it is a worldly form of leadership which is based on pomp, privilege and prestige. It has nothing to do with humility or servanthood.

Instead of being shepherds, the worst of these men are the wolves, of whose coming Jesus and the apostles warned us. A much higher proportion of them are hirelings, performing a man-made job for a wage in an unbiblical and carnal manner. Can you even imagine any of the apostles conducting themselves as so many of the Roman Catholic (and also Protestant) clergy do?

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

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

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

Acts 17:11 (RSV)

The leaders of the Roman Catholic church are 'Nicolaitans' because they rule over the people and even claim to be infallible!

Neither Luke nor Paul nor any of the apostles would have had any time for teaching of the sort that is propagated by the Catholic church and others. They would have condemned the words of the Catechism and identified it as false teaching. However, from the perspective of the so called 'Magisterium' of the Catholic church, there is no need, or reason, for anybody to disagree with them, or to doubt what they say.

That is because they believe themselves to be '*infallible*'. This is another man-made idea, with no biblical basis whatsoever. This is how they define and explain, in their own words, the idea that we must listen to them and do as they say. It even culminates, in paragraph 862, with this remarkable claim on behalf of their pope and bishops:

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

Here are the paragraphs in full:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The words of the Catechism are shocking. Mere men are taking to themselves supposed equality with God’s Word. They have the nerve to claim that *what they say* has the same authority as God’s Word. Yet they have no biblical basis, whatsoever, for saying any of this. Perhaps the most outrageous section of all is this next passage in which they maintain that God’s Word is *unable to stand by itself*, i.e. without being propped up by their contribution, in the form of their *‘Tradition’* and their *‘Magisterium’*:

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

The Roman Catholic church claims that its traditions, and its own leadership, are equal to Scripture in terms of authority.

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

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

The point is that they seriously claim that what God has said in His Word is incapable of standing by itself, such that it needs them. One can only marvel at anyone who has the audacity to say such things. Moreover, how can it be that the popes and bishops of the Catholic church can claim to have the “*charism of infallibility in matters of faith and morals*” and yet either fail to know about, or fail to deal with, the worldwide scandal of paedophile priests?

Strictly speaking, they would reply that they do not claim infallibility in terms of what misconduct they know about, or how they should handle such situations. I fully accept that when they claim infallibility they are speaking primarily in terms of doctrine and ethical questions, not their administrative abilities, or even their own personal morals.

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

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

Even then, they only acted slowly and reluctantly and did the very least that they could get away with. To give you an idea of the scale of the child abuse, you need only look at the figures from just one organization called SNAP, which stands for ‘*Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests*’. They alone represent 18,000 victims of abuse from 79 countries (at the time of writing) and that number is growing.

Moreover, it only represents the tip of the iceberg because many victims choose to keep it all bottled up. Many never even tell their families, let alone make any formal complaint or go to the police, but even those who do formally complain are silenced by the Catholic church. They do all they can to get the victims to stay quiet, when what they ought to be doing is bringing the corruption out into the open.

That is what any right-thinking institution would do if it was genuinely remorseful and concerned to prevent further abuse. So, the fact that the Catholic church takes the very opposite approach has to be significant. It demonstrates what their real motives and priorities are. For example, in Austria, which

is a very small country, 1800 people (so far) have been given token compensation for the abuse they endured.

However, it was given on condition that from now on they remain *silent* about it. So, even when forced to deal with the issue, the main concern of the Catholic authorities was still to protect the reputation of their own institution. They wanted to ‘contain’ the spread of the bad news rather than help the victims, who might well benefit from speaking freely about their ordeals.

What is more shocking is that of all those cases in Austria, not even one priest has been removed from his position. They have all just carried on in ministry, as if nothing had ever happened. I am not picking on Austria when I refer to them. What has been done in Austria is typical of what has been done in every other country too.

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

At any rate, if anybody is minded to argue about this, the point is that no bishop ever spoke publicly or went to the police or the media. If they ever had, we would have heard of it because it would have been worldwide news. They very probably did speak privately to their superiors i.e. to the cardinals above them, and even to successive popes.

If so, that would only compound the guilt of the institution as a whole, because the cardinals and popes did nothing about it. Actually, the Catholic church itself denies that Pope John-Paul II, who ‘reigned’ for 27 years, was ever told anything about what was happening. That is completely impossible to believe, but they have to say it, or it would otherwise incriminate him for doing nothing about it.

The truth is, surely, that John Paul II must have known all along, at least the basic facts. However, if, somehow, he really didn’t know, then it shows, all the more forcefully, that the bishops and cardinals failed in their clear duty to report these crimes to him.

The paedophilia scandals in the Catholic church, and the systematic cover up, do not lend support to the idea of an infallible leadership.

In short, they cannot have it both ways. Either Pope John-Paul II *was* told or he *wasn’t*. Either way, the Catholic church as a whole behaved disgracefully, either in their failure to tell him, or in his failure to act when told. On top of that, if he was told, then it was a lie for him to claim not to have been. The same point applies to the next two popes, Benedict XVI and Francis I.

During their time the scandal came out into the open, due to the media, so they were forced to do something about it, albeit very little. As for Pope Benedict, who was previously known as Cardinal Ratzinger, he was Pope John-Paul II’s right-hand man. More to the point, for very many years he was in charge of church discipline. So, he would have known everything that John-Paul knew and possibly even more.

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

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

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

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

If anybody thinks there is anything new in any of this immorality on the part of Catholic clergy, they are sadly mistaken. The Catholic church has always operated in this way, throughout its entire history. That is why visitors to Rome, even centuries ago, were amazed to discover the many brothels that existed to serve the Catholic clergy.

Martin Luther himself was shocked by this when he first visited Rome. This kind of behaviour went on at the very highest levels, such that many popes and cardinals had illegitimate children by the women they kept. They also promoted their own children to senior positions within the Catholic church. Some of their illegitimate children became cardinals and even popes.

Who has the right to interpret Scripture?

They obviously did not all engage in such corrupt behavior. However, even those bishops, cardinals and popes who did not personally participate in this immorality throughout the centuries did nothing to expose or oppose it. On the contrary, they either covered it up or brazenly ignored it.

The whole package of Roman Catholic teaching about their supposed authority and infallibility, as outlined earlier, was deliberately developed for self-serving reasons. Its real purpose was not to propound the truth, but to ensure that control and privilege were kept firmly in the hands of their own hierarchical leadership.

The only conceivably biblical basis for any of what they teach about their own alleged authority comes from their grievous misuse of a passage from the second letter of Peter which reads as follows:

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

2 Peter 1:19-21 (RSV)

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

This approach that Peter takes is in stark contrast to how, by convention, we approach a novel or poem. So, for example, when my 'A' level English class was studying *'The Wasteland'*, our English teacher told us that it was not simply a matter of finding out what T.S. Eliot himself meant by his strange and cryptic poem. We were told that our individual opinions were just as important as his.

In other words, once the poem had been published, it ceased to be the property of its author. Therefore he was no longer the sole arbiter of its meaning and it belonged to us just as much as to him. Therefore, if a particular line or phrase from the poem suggested something to one of us, we were encouraged to believe that what we *took from it* was just as valid as what T.S. Eliot *meant by it*.

That was thought to be so, even if what he intended by it was nothing like our own personal interpretation. Within English literature generally, and especially poetry, that is felt by many to be a valid approach. Therefore it is how English Literature is often taught. However, that is not how the Bible is meant to be handled.

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

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

In other words, even whilst being open-minded to see types and prophetic patterns, you are not at liberty to 'allegorise' or 'spiritualise' the text so as to give it some other meaning than what God intended. Peter goes on, later in his second letter, to refer to how some people twist the meaning of Scripture in that way to suit their own opinions or to follow the errors of other men:

¹⁵ And count the forbearance of our Lord as salvation. So also our beloved brother Paul wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, ¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ You therefore, beloved, knowing this beforehand, beware lest you be carried away with the error of lawless men and lose your own stability.

2 Peter 3:15-17 (RSV)

Therefore, what Peter is forbidding is the very practice of 'allegorising', which we have mentioned earlier and which we will examine more closely below. He is not forbidding people to read the Bible for themselves so as to find out what God means by it. It is very clear that that is not what Peter means.

On the contrary, as we have seen in the book of Acts, the Christians in Berea were praised by Luke for carefully checking Paul's preaching and for looking in the Scriptures for themselves to find out whether Paul's preaching was biblical. That is they were examining what Paul said to see whether it was in line with the real/true meaning of the existing Scriptures, which we call the Old Testament.

Clearly, the Bereans were not relying uncritically on whoever preached in their church, not even if it was Paul. They were relying solely on the Scriptures, which they examined for themselves. They knew that it was their own individual responsibility to check what things meant and that they did not need any man's permission or authorization to do so.

Moreover, as we saw earlier, Luke, the author of Acts, praises them for the careful and vigilant approach which they took. Therefore we must never allow any person, group or denomination to tell

us that we need to rely on them, or indeed on anybody else, to interpret the Bible *for us*. Neither can anybody tell us that only their interpretation is valid.

In short, our own interpretation of the Bible is valid and correct if it accords with what the Bible *actually means* and it is wrong if it doesn't. That true meaning, i.e. what *God* means by it, is to be found by examining the passage carefully, using as our starting point the '*golden rule*', which we saw earlier. It is also by considering the passage in the context of all other relevant passages which might have a bearing on it.

The true meaning is certainly not to be found by simply looking to see what some leader or author or denomination *says* it means. No matter who they are, they could be either right or wrong in their opinions. That is why, the Bible clearly makes it your own individual duty to decide what the meaning of any text is, after careful study of your own, and also after prayerfully seeking God's guidance for yourself.

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

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

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

You have no authority to make either of those statements, because the Bible does not say those things. Therefore they would not be true. The Bible never says anywhere that a Christian must not, or even ought not, to drink alcohol. Drunkenness is clearly forbidden, but drinking alcohol in moderation is not.

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

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

Yet people do that regularly, in order to add extra authority to their own personal opinions. They also do it in relation to their own cultural preferences, habits, styles, tastes, and also the man-made traditions and customs that they have grown used to and with which they feel comfortable. They then present these things as if they were what God wanted, as opposed to being merely their own opinions and views.

Therefore they will frequently say outright, or imply indirectly: "*That is how God wants things to be done.*" Instead of making such unjustified and unauthorized claims, we should take care to say something along these lines: "*I do not know of any direct biblical teaching on this issue, but, speaking purely personally, for what it's worth, my own preferred method/approach is.....*"

Too many of us are unaware of, or don't care about, our heavy responsibility not to misrepresent God. Have you ever heard anybody in your church even mention this duty, let alone emphasize it? If a person wants to win an argument or get his own way on some question of policy or procedure, there is a temptation to try to add weight to one's own opinion or preference by making it sound like it is what God has said.

However, we really must resist the temptation to do that. We should therefore make clear, as apostle Paul did, whether we are speaking on God's behalf, or just expressing our own view. Observe how carefully, and how differently, Paul expresses a number of points in the following passages:

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

1 Corinthians 7:1-11 (NASB)

In the above passage apostle Paul makes it clear in verse 10 that he is passing on an instruction which is *not from himself but from God*. He says, "...I give instructions, not I, but the Lord, that....." He also says in verse 7 that *he* wishes all men were as he was, i.e. unmarried.

However, he recognizes that each person has his own gift from God, such that not all are called to celibacy. Paul goes on in verse 12 below to make himself even clearer on that distinction between his own personal opinions and what God has authorized or instructed him to say:

¹²But to the rest I say, not the Lord, that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he must not divorce her. ¹³And a woman who has an unbelieving husband, and he consents to live with her, she must not send her husband away. ¹⁴For the unbelieving husband is sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified through her believing husband; for otherwise your children are unclean, but now they are holy. ¹⁵Yet if the unbelieving one leaves, let him leave; the brother or the sister is not under bondage in such cases, but God has called us to peace. ¹⁶For how do you know, O wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, O husband, whether you will save your wife? ¹⁷Only, as the Lord has assigned to each one, as God has called each, in this manner let him walk. And so I direct in all the churches. ¹⁸Was any man called when he was already circumcised? He is not to become uncircumcised. Has anyone been called in uncircumcision? He is not to be circumcised. ¹⁹Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but what matters is the keeping of the commandments of God. ²⁰Each man must remain in that condition in which he was called. ²¹Were you called while a slave? Do not worry about it; but if you are able also to become free, rather do that. ²²For he who was called in the Lord while a slave, is the Lord's freedman; likewise he who was called while free, is Christ's slave. ²³You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of men. ²⁴Brethren, each one is to remain with God in that condition in which he was called.

1 Corinthians 7:12-24 (NASB)

Paul says in verse 12: “*But to the rest I say, not the Lord, that.....*” He is emphasising that this is only *his own opinion, and not God’s command*. This is the very opposite of the phrase he used in verse 10 which we looked at earlier.

Look also at this next passage, and in particular at verse 25 where he sets out his own personal opinion on what young unmarried women should do. He makes clear again that this is only his own personal opinion and that he has *no specific command from God* to pass on to them:

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

1 Corinthians 7: 25-31 (NASB)

Apostle Paul made it clear when he was speaking with God’s authority and when he was only giving his own opinion

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

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

1 Corinthians 7: 32-35 (NASB)

See how at verse 32 Paul carefully says: “*But I want.....*” and, in verse 35, “*This I say.....*” Then again, in verse 40 below, Paul states explicitly that he is only giving his own view, not God’s. He indicates that “*in my opinion*” a widow will be happier if she remains unmarried:

³⁶But if any man thinks that he is acting unbecomingly toward his virgin daughter, if she is past her youth, and if it must be so, let him do what he wishes, he does not sin; let her marry. ³⁷But he who stands firm in his heart, being under no constraint, but has authority over his own will, and has decided this in his own heart, to keep his own virgin daughter, he will do well. ³⁸So then both he who gives his own virgin daughter in marriage does well, and he who does not give her in marriage will do better. ³⁹A wife is bound as long as her husband lives; but if her husband is dead, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord. ⁴⁰But in my opinion she is happier if she remains as she is; and I think that I also have the Spirit of God.

1 Corinthians 7: 36-40 (NASB)

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

Paul still does not present his opinion on what widows ought to do as if it was a command from God. However he does put it more weightily here than he did earlier when he was expressing his own opinion on other issues. He still accepts that it is only his own opinion, and that this is an area where we therefore have freedom to seek God's specific direction for ourselves.

However, he also suggests that he has a high level of confidence that, on this point, his opinion is right and that he believes he has had God's help in arriving at that personal opinion. Nevertheless, despite having that enhanced confidence on that point, he still does not attempt to portray his opinion as if it was God's command.

Paul is meticulous in 1 Corinthians chapter 7, as always, to handle God's instructions with great precision. He is very careful not to over-state or over-emphasize anything, or to claim that he is passing on God's instruction when he is actually only giving his own personal view.

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

When you say that, you are passing on what you *know* to be the Prime Minister's *direct* instruction or message. Therefore you know that it is his will. You might even be quoting his exact words. However, what if the Foreign Secretary was then to say to you: "*When does it need to be done by?*"

Let us suppose that the Prime Minister never actually gave you any specific deadline to pass on. What could you say in reply? You couldn't say: "*The Prime Minister says.....*" You can't say that because he didn't say anything about the timing. So you might choose to say something like: "*He didn't say, but in my own personal view, it is urgent and is needed by 9.00 am tomorrow morning.*"

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

Imagine a variation to that. Perhaps the Prime Minister gave no specific deadline but did give the distinct impression by his tone and manner that it was urgent for today. You might then say: "*He didn't specify any deadline, but I picked up the clear impression from him that it is needed urgently for today and I think I understood him correctly.*"

That would correspond quite well to how apostle Paul spoke in 1 Corinthians 7:40 above when he said: "...and I think that I also have the Spirit of God." He was giving his impression as to what he believes God thinks, rather than saying only what he himself thinks. Yet, even when doing that, he still did not feel entitled to be emphatic about it.

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

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

a) things said through the exercise of spiritual gifts

Although spiritual gifts such as prophecy, words of knowledge, words of wisdom and interpretation of tongues are valid and biblical, they are never to be seen as a source of new *doctrine*. No teaching should ever be based on anything said via the exercise of spiritual gifts.

That needs to be very strongly emphasized, because many people have been led into false teachings in precisely that way. Spiritual gifts are legitimate and useful and they are meant to be used today, just as they were in the first century, but what is said must always be consistent with what the *Bible says*.

They must never contain anything new or different, which contradicts the Bible. If they do, then we know for sure that what has been said is false. That is the main way that we have to test the genuineness or otherwise of spiritual gifts, i.e. does what has been said match what the Bible already says?

The Holy Spirit will *never* contradict the Bible in any way, however small. Therefore, any person who gives a prophecy which contradicts the Bible is immediately recognizable as a *false prophet*, or at least as giving a false prophecy on that occasion.

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

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

c) the Roman Catholic church

The Roman Catholic church is an institution which is based upon a mixture of Christianity, paganism and various other man-made ideas and practices. It is not, and never will be, a valid source of doctrine.

Neither does it have any authority to say or teach anything contrary to what the Bible says, despite its claims to be entitled to do so. Therefore it always has been, and still continues to be, a source of numerous false doctrines and practices. Some of those have been listed earlier.

d) the Pope

As we saw earlier, the Roman Catholic church teaches that the Pope is the direct *successor* of apostle Peter. It also alleges, quite wrongly, that Peter was the first ‘Bishop’ of Rome and also the leader of the entire Church, both in Rome and everywhere else. Accordingly, the whole man-made institution known as ‘the Papacy’ is unbiblical and invalid. It is based on a series of lies and errors, both historical and theological.

To begin with, Peter was never the “*Bishop of Rome*”. Neither was anybody else, at least not in the first century. There was no such office. (See Book Eight for fuller details). Indeed, when Paul wrote his letter to the Romans, probably in the fifties or early sixties of the first century, he greeted by name a long list of people who were known to him in Rome. But he does not even mention Peter. (See Romans chapter 16.)

Had Peter, or anybody else, been the ‘Bishop’ of Rome in the sense of even being the overall leader there, let alone worldwide, then he would surely have been mentioned. In fact the letter would have been *addressed to Peter* and it would have been written in a very deferential tone, along the lines of apostle Paul writing to the church which was presided over by his ‘boss’, Peter, who was also the head of the entire Church worldwide.

However that is not even remotely the tone of the letter to the Romans. It was sent to the *whole church* in Rome and no leader was singled out, whether Peter or anyone else. Moreover, when the early church had a council meeting in Jerusalem (in Acts chapter 15) at which *Peter was present*, it was Jesus' half-brother, James, not Peter, who chaired the meeting. It was also James who spoke last, to sum up. So Peter was not even the leader of that meeting in Jerusalem, let alone of the Church as a whole.

More to the point, if Peter had ever been a pope, or had any kind of authority, such as the Catholic church claims he had, then apostle Paul would have known all about it. He would then have deferred to Peter unreservedly, as Catholics do to the Pope today. However, Paul never deferred to Peter in any way at all. Far from it - Paul actually contradicted, and even rebuked, Peter to his face. He openly tells us about this incident in his letter to the Galatians.

Moreover, Paul doesn't speak of this episode in terms of himself having behaved wrongly for contradicting 'Pope' Peter, as if it had been an inappropriate outburst of temper, for which he was now apologizing and berating himself. On the contrary, Paul evidently believes that he was absolutely right to rebuke Peter and he does not regret it, or resile from it, in any way. So there is no getting away from this or getting around it.

The plain fact is that Paul unmistakably and unambiguously contradicted Peter and he manifestly did not see him as any kind of authority figure in his own life, or in the Church as a whole. If Paul had seen Peter as being in authority over him, as is alleged, or at all, then he would not have criticized him, even privately, let alone point out his error publicly, as he clearly did within chapter two of that letter.

Can anyone seriously imagine any priest, bishop or even a cardinal, criticizing the Pope today and publicly disagreeing with him and rebuking him? It would never happen, but if, somehow, it ever did happen, then that man would be relieved of his duties immediately. Let's therefore pause and take a look at part of what Paul said to, and about, Peter.

The letter as a whole is about the issue of whether Gentile Christians need to be circumcised and, more generally, whether they need to live in compliance with the Law of Moses. On this issue Peter had made a very grave theological error and had also acted insincerely. Therefore Paul told him so, straight to his face. Moreover, he then told everybody else, including us, that Peter was wrong:

¹¹“But when Cephas (Peter) came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. ¹²For before certain men came from James, he ate with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party. ¹³And with him the rest of the Jews acted insincerely, so that even Barnabas was carried away by their insincerity. ¹⁴But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, “If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?”

Galatians 2:11-14 (RSV)

Indeed, I personally feel that it may well be that one reason why God inspired Paul to include that passage within Galatians was precisely in order to show the falseness of this Catholic doctrine about Peter being a pope, which God knew was going to be invented by men centuries later.

Besides all of the points made above, even if Peter individually had been given some kind of enhanced authority, such that he was the overall leader of the entire Church, (which he wasn't) there would still be no basis for supposing that anybody else was meant to *succeed* him in such a role.

The truth is that there is nothing at all in the Bible to support the idea of any kind of apostolic line of succession, whether for Peter or any of the other apostles. It is an entirely false teaching, created

centuries later by the Roman Catholic church itself, to justify its own practices and benefit itself. It has no validity or authority whatsoever.

e) other denominations and their leaders

In the same way that the Roman Catholic church has no authority to create any new doctrine or teaching, neither has any other group or denomination. That is the case even if it is made up of genuine believers whose doctrines are otherwise sound. None of the above people or groups, from whatever denomination, can provide us with any of our beliefs or doctrines.

All of those must come *solely* from the Bible. Moreover, no man, group or church, whether genuine or otherwise, has any authority to redefine, alter, modify, qualify, improve, add to, take from, mitigate, maximize, minimize, enhance or down-play anything which the Bible says.

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

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

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

Carl Keating was arguing, as per the teaching of the Catechism which we quoted from earlier, that the Pope can add new doctrines. He then put a question to Dave Hunt which immediately stood out to me. He asked Dave Hunt: "*Can you point me to even one verse where the Bible claims that the Word of God is unique?*"

Dave Hunt replied with a detailed and scholarly answer which was fair enough. However, he forgot to make one vital additional point. Carl Keating was arguing that the Bible doesn't *actually say* that the Word of God is on a higher level than what the Pope or Magisterium says, or that it has unique, unrivalled authority.

Of course, one reason why the Bible makes no mention of God's Word being higher than the Pope or Magisterium is that no such person or thing even existed when the Bible was written. They were both invented by men centuries later. However, my principal point is that Carl Keating did not realise the significance of the phrase he had just used, i.e. "*the Word of God...*"

It is already self-evident, even from those four words, that the Word of God is uniquely authoritative. Therefore it does not even *need* to be said. The fact that it is so authoritative is already plainly implied by the very phrase "*the Word of God,*" as opposed to the word of some man, or group of men.

In other words, if the Bible is *God's Word*, and records what *God* is saying, then why does anything further need to be said in its support to tell us that it has supreme and unique authority? How could it *not* have supreme, unique authority over everyone and everything if it is *God's Word*, as opposed to the words of a mere man or group of men, however eminent?

That point evidently had not occurred to Carl Keating. He had forgotten *whose* Word he was dealing with and the significance of that. So, the clue is in the phrase "*the Word of God.*" If that is *who* is speaking, then it automatically follows that it has infinite authority, simply because of *whose* Word it

is. The Bible does not need to make the obvious point that God's Word has authority above every man or organisation.

We are, quite reasonably, expected to regard that as self-evident, by virtue of the fact that it is *God Himself* who is speaking to us. That fact alone gives His message all the authority it could ever need, without needing to say any more. Therefore God should not have to spell it out for us, by telling us that what He says is authoritative.

It would be like you receiving a written order from General Eisenhower about the Normandy landings and then reading through his order, carefully looking for some line where he says: "*This order is to be treated as being authoritative*". He does not need to say that. The authority of his written order comes from the very fact that *he* is the writer and from the fact of *who he is and what his rank is*.

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

Therefore, to question why the written Word of God should be preferred to the word of a Pope, or Magisterium of bishops, is like asking why the written word of General Eisenhower should be preferred to the views and opinions of some private or corporal in your unit, or even to the views and opinions of some high-ranking officer or group of officers.

General Eisenhower does not, or should not, need to say: "*Listen to me and do what I say, rather than what other people say*". It is already completely obvious, from the fact of his rank alone, that you are to listen to him and that nobody can countermand or alter his orders.

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

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

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

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

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

I don't suppose that even one person in a million would ever consciously think any of those things, let alone say them out loud. They are just unconsciously thought. However, you can tell that a person has those unconscious beliefs, and is making such assumptions, by observing the way they act, and react, when an unfamiliar or unsettling idea is first suggested to them.

They will instinctively reject it, and close their mind to it, without giving the proposition any conscious thought at all. It is as though they were reacting to it with the nerve endings under their knee cap rather than by the conscious exercise of their mind. I remember once being at a house group meeting at an evangelical church we used to belong to.

A young man called James was leading the house group and about 10 other people were present. I had been asked to lead a section of the meeting when we were looking at a particular passage of Scripture. The passage contained prophecy about the end times. In particular, it was about the 1000 year period when Jesus will rule on this earth as King after He returns.

It is commonly called the Millennium, though the Bible does not give it that name. When I spoke briefly to set out my understanding of the passage, James became agitated and defensive. He was not familiar with any teaching that said that Jesus would literally reign as King of Israel for 1000 years or that Israel will be the leading nation on the Earth.

James had been brought up in a church which taught *amillennialism*. That is the belief that there will not be any literal 1000 year reign of Jesus on the Earth and that what is said in Revelation chapter 20 was just figurative, symbolic language, like poetry. Leave aside for a moment whether it was James or me that was right. The point is we never got so far as to be able to arrive at any conclusion about that, because James could not cope with even discussing it.

He therefore leapt in and closed down the discussion before it could get anywhere. He was afraid even to allow it be discussed because he did not have enough knowledge or understanding to be able to argue against me in a constructive way or even to hear me out open-mindedly. If I could paraphrase, I think James' unconscious thoughts were probably as follows:

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

On that occasion James was able to stop a discussion from continuing. However, this kind of reaction also happens when a person is on their own. A person can prevent themselves from hearing something that someone says in a book or sermon or from noticing something that is written in the Bible. They can even prevent a new thought from forming in their own mind. Usually the unfamiliar idea or controversial suggestion is rejected internally without any word needing to be spoken.

The person hearing it or reading it just unconsciously and immediately edits it out. He probably doesn't even register that it was ever heard or read. It does not get past the bone at the front of the skull. It just bounces off, rather than being carefully considered in the light of what the Bible says and then rejected or accepted for known, biblical reasons.

Keep an open mind and don't respond aggressively or defensively to people who say things you've not heard before

A friend of mine told me of an occasion where she made a comment about a certain issue to some ladies at a particular church. One of the ladies there was from a very strong Reformed, Calvinist background. That therefore coloured the way she saw things. It had also had a severely limiting effect on what teaching she had been exposed to, and also on what teachings she had *never* heard.

All she had ever been taught was whatever was consistent with the approach taken by Reformed, Calvinistic church leaders. They were the only teachers she had ever heard. At any rate, my friend made an observation about something in the Bible. The problem is that this particular lady had never heard anybody express that view before.

She therefore responded immediately in a sharp, aggressive tone saying “*Well, I’ve never heard that before!*” She didn’t say that as a neutral statement of fact, i.e. simply to indicate that the idea being expressed was new to her. She meant it as a rebuke and as a means of abruptly ending the conversation by indicating that what had been said was wrong.

However, in her eyes, it was not wrong because it wasn’t in the Bible, or because it contradicted the Bible. It was automatically wrong, as she saw it, simply because she had never heard anybody say it before. But whether or not something is familiar to you personally is no basis for concluding that it is either right or wrong. The correct question is not: “*Is this idea new to me?*”

It should be: “*Is this idea expressly stated in the Bible, or at least consistent with what the Bible does say?*” The problem with having a closed mind which operates as set out above is that it is an abdication of our individual responsibility to scrutinize and evaluate everything in the light of Scripture. Doing that involves effort and work over a long period, and is based on testing everything against the Bible.

Instead of taking the time to do this, too many of us take the short cut of just accepting whatever is *familiar* and rejecting whatever is *unfamiliar*. But we are not commanded to test things on the basis of whether they sound familiar. That is not a reliable test at all. What is familiar could easily be false and what is unfamiliar could well be true.

The point is that the issue of familiarity or unfamiliarity is not what matters. It proves nothing and disproves nothing. That is why apostle Paul praised the people of Berea who “*examined the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so.*” They even scrutinized what Paul said. But they did so solely on the basis of whether it was *consistent with the Scriptures*, irrespective of the fact that his teaching was new to them.

Otherwise, nobody would ever be able to learn anything new or be corrected where their existing knowledge or understanding is mistaken or incomplete. It is very important therefore to be open-minded and to consider it possible that what you currently believe or understand may be inadequate, or even wrong.

We have to be more than just *willing* to be corrected. We need to go out of our way to *seek for* correction. That includes examining (and cross-examining) ourselves to look for and expose gaps in our own knowledge and errors in our own thinking. In other words, you need to be your own most intense critic and to interrogate yourself robustly:

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

2 Corinthians 13:5 (RSV)

Many people will reject what the Bible says if it is not complimentary about them.

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

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

An example of the first point is that I was at a meeting once and someone was speaking about their experiences as a pastor dealing with sick and dying people. The meeting opened up into a discussion. One man, who had a lot of theological knowledge and knew the Bible extremely well, asked a question to the group about the issue of how some people (not all) get sick because of a demonic attack on their lives.

That is clearly biblical and there are many instances of it in the Bible, not least what Satan did to make Job ill. That sickness was entirely due to Satan. When he raised this perfectly legitimate question one man at the meeting, who had a long term illness, became agitated. He felt offended that this other man had even raised this issue at all.

Therefore he spoke up quite sharply and shot him down in flames. Then I heard him later, still grumbling and muttering about that man, for having said something so “*outrageous*.” The man was upset and from what I heard him say, I believe his chain of logic was broadly as follows:

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

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

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

Many people also reject things that the Bible says merely because they are outside of their current experience

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

- a) The thing could be valid but it just hasn't happened to you yet or;
- b) It could be that you have been baptized in the Holy Spirit but have not, as yet, realised that fact. Therefore it could be that you have not, as yet, chosen to speak in tongues because you don't realise that you can or;

- c) You could genuinely believe you have had an experience or seen someone else have one but be mistaken. Thus you think something has happened, but you are wrong or you were misled. Thus it has not really happened at all or;
- d) It could be a demonic counterfeit and thus what you have experienced was not actually from God but from a demon.

All of the above options are possibilities. I believe I have come across all of them, either in my own experience or from people I have known. Therefore you can't make a judgment as to whether the baptism in the Holy Spirit and the exercise of spiritual gifts is valid, and/or meant to be used today, based solely on what has happened to you (or on what hasn't yet happened).

Neither can your conclusion be based on what you have seen others do or claim to do. Such experiences may help you to have a better understanding and a better application of what the Bible says. But they cannot, in themselves, be the basis or authority for any conclusions that you reach, either way, about this or any other point of doctrine.

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

It is not always easy to tell the difference between true and false teaching. Sometimes what is being taught sounds very similar to the truth. Or it may be that 90% of it is accurate doctrine and that only one tenth of it is wrong. That means that to be able to identify wrong or false teaching you need to know the Bible well.

However, while you are learning it, you will be greatly helped if it is your sincere *desire* to know God's will and to do it. If that is what you really want, such that you have a genuine determination to find out the truth about what God is saying and to obey it, then God will give you His help and will guide you into the truth:

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

John 7:14-18 (RSV)

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

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

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

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

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

Psalm 119:18 (RSV)

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

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

John 16:13-15 (RSV)

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

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

Hebrews 11:6 (KJV)

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