

## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this third book in the Real Christianity series is to encourage you to become a lifelong student of the Bible and also to help you to approach the Bible correctly. The sad truth is that most people, even within evangelical churches, neglect the Bible and give it far too little of their time. That problem is then compounded by the fact that even those who do read the Bible often go about it the wrong way. Consequently, they misunderstand it and even fail to believe it.

To read the Bible properly requires some skill and especially that you approach it with the right attitude and method. The Bible is there to be understood. It is meant to be clear. However, far too many people find it very unclear, mainly because nobody has ever shown them how to study it. Even worse, many have been taught wrong ways to approach it, some of which we shall examine in this book.

As a result, many Christians give up on the Bible altogether. Others just limit themselves to their favourite passages such as Psalms or John's gospel, which they are used to and find easier. The first thing we need to get really clear on is that the Bible is completely true and we are meant to believe it. It is not just another book. It is absolutely unique because it is inspired by God and is entirely reliable and accurate.

That cannot be said of any other book that has ever been written. That is the truth. Yet it is not what most people think, even in churches. Far too many of us have been taught, if only by example, that we should doubt the Bible or view it as out of date. I shall therefore seek to demonstrate that you can, and should, rely on the Bible completely.

Throughout this book we will come back at various points to addressing the widespread problem of unbelief. That is a generic, umbrella term for something which comes in a variety of forms. Moreover, unbelief arises for a number of different reasons. So we will look at some of those reasons and try to explain people's failure to accept, at face value, the plain truth of what the Bible says.

Those who have this problem of unbelief tend to fall into three broad groups, namely liberals, sceptics and allegorists. Though separate and distinct, these groups also overlap significantly. We shall seek to define and differentiate each of these three illegitimate ways of thinking, whilst remembering the fact that they frequently overlap. Indeed, many people make two, or even all three, of these mistakes at the same time.

The first group, theological *liberals*, tend not to believe what the Bible says about issues related to the Gospel, such as sin, judgment, Hell, the Lake of Fire, and the fact that salvation can only be found in Jesus and nobody else. They don't like the sound of those things. Liberals also tend to reject what the Bible says about social and moral issues and adopt instead the values and standards of this world. This would include subjects such as marriage, divorce, abortion, sexual ethics, homosexuality, gender confusion and so on.

The second broad group, *sceptics*, tend not to believe the Bible when it comes to anything miraculous or in any way supernatural. Therefore they don't believe in the miracles recorded in the Bible and they don't expect to see any miracles occurring today either. Furthermore, they tend not to believe that God created the universe in six literal 24 hour days.

They also don't accept the biblical account of the worldwide flood at the time of Noah. Many of them are also '*cessationists*'. That is they don't accept the reality of spiritual gifts, or believe that they are still in operation today. That last error is also made by the third group, as discussed below.

The third major cause of unbelief, which cripples very many people, is the mistake of assuming that the Bible is generally speaking '*symbolically*' or '*allegorically*'. In fact, the truth is that, for the vast majority of the time, it isn't. That third error alone, which I shall call '*allegorism*', has caused

multitudes of people to misunderstand and then ignore most of the prophecies in both the Old and New Testaments. When you bear in mind that about 30 per cent of the whole Bible consists of prophecy it indicates the enormous scale of the problem and shows why unbelief in this area is so damaging.

Therefore, in addressing all these errors, but especially the third, I shall argue that our *starting point* in understanding the Bible should be to realise that it is usually meant to be taken literally, i.e. as plain fact. Most of the time, unless the context clearly indicates otherwise, God intends us to take the Bible at face value and to assume that it means what it says and says what it means.

That is we are meant to accept and believe the ordinary, straightforward, everyday meaning of the words being used. We shall see in Chapter Three below that this is the basis for what is known as “*the golden rule*” of Bible interpretation.

The exceptions to this golden rule would be where the Bible is clearly using a figure of speech, or a metaphor, or even a genuine allegory. There are some of these in the Bible, just as there are in all literature. That said, our general default-setting, for the vast majority of the time, should be to treat what we read in the Bible as literal fact.

However, it does need to be emphasized that the golden rule is only our starting point. Therefore, we begin by accepting that the Bible is to be taken literally. So, if a future event is prophesied then we are to expect it to literally occur. If something is said to have happened in the past, then we are to believe that it literally happened, even if it is remarkable or miraculous.

However, even where the plain meaning of a Bible passage is literally true, that does not mean that we can never seek any other or further meaning *in addition to* the literal meaning. To rule that out as a possibility would be a major mistake, because the truth is that there are other levels of meaning in the Bible.

As we shall see in this book, there are also many different forms of types and prophetic patterns, which we need to recognise when we see them. However, where these arise, they are meant to be accepted and understood in addition to the plain, literal, ordinary meaning of the words used, not instead of them.

So, people with the handicap of unbelief tend to be divided into these three broad groups. Each of them doubt, disbelieve, or misunderstand the Bible for their own different reasons. Thus, large numbers of people, whether they are in liberal, sceptical, or allegorically-minded churches, refuse to accept the Bible as plain fact and to believe what it says. Their default setting is either that it is not meant to be taken literally, or that it is out of date, or that for various other reasons it cannot be trusted or taken seriously.

With those who allegorise the Scriptures, a high proportion of the Bible is automatically assumed to be figurative, symbolic, or some kind of an allegory. Thus they inappropriately insert some other secondary or ‘spiritual’ meaning *in place of* the plain meaning. Moreover, what makes it such a serious error is that they not only do this now and again, but most of the time

Then there are those who do subscribe to the ‘golden rule’ but make the opposite error. They correctly believe that they are meant to take the Bible literally and to accept the plain meaning of the words used, whether they point to historical events in the past or to prophesied future events. The problem is that some of those people make the alternative mistake of thinking that there cannot be any other meaning in addition to the plain, literal meaning.

A phrase they often use, whereby they slightly misquote the ‘golden rule’ (by omitting the words ‘*you should generally*’) is to say: “*If the plain sense of Scripture makes common sense then seek no other*”

*sense*". It should actually read "...*you should generally* seek no other sense". In omitting those important qualifying words they go too far and thus what they say is not correct.

In particular, it is not biblical. It is a Western way of thinking, based on the heritage of Greek philosophy, which has so strongly influenced European and American culture. That is not the approach which Jesus and the apostles took, because their culture was not Greek, but Hebrew.

So, Jesus and the apostles did accept the plain and literal meaning of the words used in Scripture, whether they referred to historical events or to prophesied future events. However, they did not stop there. They did not limit themselves to speaking *only* of the literal meaning. They were also open to see within the Bible a wealth of prophetic patterns and types which were *also* true, *alongside* the plain, literal meaning.

This open-minded, lateral and potentially multi-layered approach to Bible interpretation is the way Jewish believers think. It is called '*midrash*' and is very different from what is generally practised by most Western churches, whose thinking is rooted in Greek philosophy.

Midrash involves commenting on one or more passages of Scripture and drawing out from them *the* patterns and types that are also contained or alluded to within those passages, in addition to the literal meaning. So, for example, the events in the life of Joseph, the favourite son of Jacob, are literally true and did happen to him. However, it is also true that Joseph was a 'type' of Jesus.

By that we mean that Joseph himself, and the events of his life, also prefigure and point towards events that have subsequently happened, or are yet to happen, in the life of Jesus. By the way, those events in Jesus' life are also historically real. They literally happened, or are going to happen.

Therefore, the fact that such events have literally happened, or are going to happen, does not prevent them from also being types or figures which point towards some other lesson or insight that we can derive from those passages. There is no contradiction between taking the Bible literally and, at the same time, seeing the patterns and types that it contains and which we are also meant to notice.

Liberals and sceptics tend to refuse to see the Bible as literal, historical, theological and scientific fact. Similarly, allegorists are only able/willing to see symbols and hidden meanings instead of the literal facts, people and events that are spoken of in Bible prophecies. They then interpret these alleged symbols for themselves, in whatever way they please. Instead, what they ought to do is to accept the plain words of the prophecies and to expect them to be literally fulfilled.

On the opposite extreme there are many Western conservatives who rightly accept the Bible as containing literal facts but are not willing to look any further than that. They don't realise that they are meant to. Thus, people on both ends of the spectrum miss out on some of what the Bible is saying.

That said, the liberals, sceptics and allegorists are making a much bigger error and they miss far more of the real meaning of the Scriptures. Even so, those conservatives who are unaware that they need to make a place in their thinking for genuine, biblical '*midrash*' and typology are also missing some very important insights. We shall try, therefore, to look at how we can avoid both these errors and achieve a proper balance when interpreting the Bible.

The biggest problem for allegorists is that once you start down the path of assuming that what is being said is not meant to be taken literally, then there is no stopping you. You put yourself onto a steep and slippery slope on which you will keep on sliding. You are therefore likely to end up inventing your own meaning for all sorts of things, or else adopting the meanings that other men have invented. As a result, you will consistently miss what the Bible actually says.

The error of allegorism, just by itself, has messed up countless people's approach to the Bible in general and to prophecy in particular. That matters a great deal when you consider that about 30% of the whole Bible consists of prophecy.

Another crucially important point which I shall seek to bring out in this book is that we all need to aim for *balance* in our beliefs and practices. In particular, we need to be balanced in our knowledge and understanding of the Bible and in the levels of emphasis which we give to each of the issues and themes which are spoken of in it.

In my experience, very few people give any serious thought to the need to aim for balance. Instead, most of us simply emphasise whatever issues or themes are of interest to us and give little or no thought to the question of whether we are being balanced in our overall beliefs and practices.

Even those who do give this objective some thought, frequently misunderstand the meaning of the word balance. Some assume that it means being moderate. Others think that on any given issue or controversy they should seek to position themselves in the middle ground, like baby bear's porridge – not too hot and not too cold. So they will seek to place themselves at the half way point on any controversial issue.

Then there are those who assume that balance is about seeking for consensus, whereby we try to get into line with what most other people think and do. Their aim is to believe and do whatever arouses the least disapproval and causes the highest possible number of people to agree with them. In other words, such people see balance as being part of the mainstream, or majority, rather than being in the minority.

The problem is that there is a consistent theme, running right through the Bible, which is that the majority is almost always wrong and that only a minority, or remnant, believes the truth at any given time. Balance has little or nothing to do with being moderate, seeking the middle ground, or achieving consensus.

It is primarily about believing all of the things that God says and holding them all in a healthy tension at the same time. So, a balanced person does not pick and choose what to believe or consider important. He believes, and takes seriously, the *entire range* of things that God says about a particular issue, and also what He says about other issues, and he seeks to take note of them all.

So, a person who is balanced will believe that Israel is important but also that the Church is important. He believes that demons are real and play a part in every person's life, undermining us and seeking to deceive us. But he will also believe that our own flesh causes us many problems and draws us towards sin and, likewise, that the world is also a malignant influence upon us.

He will recognise that we are saved by God's grace alone, through faith alone. However, he will also realise that good works are important, albeit not to achieve righteousness in God's eyes, or justification. Good works have a vital role to play, not only to prove that our faith is real, but also because the extent of our obedience, faithfulness and fruitfulness will be amongst the criteria by which we will be judged at the Judgment Seat of Christ. They are also one of the means by which we become sanctified, over time, in our character and behaviour.

In the same way, a balanced person has assurance of salvation. He knows that he is secure in God's hands and that nobody can snatch him out of God's hands or take his salvation away from him. Yet, he will also realise that, over a period of time, a person can throw their salvation away themselves, through prolonged indifference to God's Word, disobedience to His commands, and the absence of the fear of the LORD. All of these things can cause a person to fall away from the faith.

Moreover, a balanced person will attempt to give to every point of doctrine, or biblical theme, the same level of emphasis that the Bible gives to it, rather than decide for himself what the hierarchy of

priorities should be. Again, very few people approach the Bible that way, or even consider this objective of balance at all.

One very simple way to gauge how much emphasis God gives to a particular issue or theme, as compared to another, is to look at a concordance like Strong's or Young's and see how many times that word is used in the Bible. This is very easy to do because the concordance will tell you. You don't even need to count them up.

So, for example, the Bible (KJV) contains 207 references to the word '*grace*' or to variants thereof, such as *gracious* or *graciously*, and 361 references to *mercy/merciful/mercies*. Those add up to 568 references overall to grace and mercy combined. Yet, the word *wrath* occurs 200 times and the words for *judgment/judge* etc occur 878 times. Combined, that adds up to 1078 references.

That being so, why does the modern church, at least in the West, limit itself to speaking mainly, or even only, of God's mercy and grace and make little or no mention of His wrath and judgment? By the way, I am not suggesting that these statistics mean that we should speak twice as much about God's wrath and judgment as we do about His mercy and grace. That would be far too simplistic.

However, what we can say, at the very least, is that God's wrath and judgment are also vital subjects and need to be spoken about as much as, and perhaps more than, God's mercy and grace. The very fact that God does so Himself in the Bible is a pretty good indicator that we should also do so, at least when speaking to unsaved people.

Please note that Jesus and the apostles never concentrated on God's love when addressing unbelievers. They only did so when they were speaking to people who were already believers. When addressing unsaved people they focused on sin, judgment, Hell, the Lake of Fire and repentance. Indeed, the very first word uttered in public by both John the Baptist and Jesus was '*repent*'. Moreover, it was almost the first word spoken by Peter after the ascension.

None of that was coincidental. There is a time to focus on God's wrath and judgment and a time to focus on His mercy and grace. A balanced person knows that and is willing and able to deal with both the bad news and the good news, and in the right proportions.

Taking another example, the words *church* or *churches* occur 117 times, but the word *Israel* alone occurs 2563 times. Moreover, many of those verses speak of Israel's future, not just its past. Why then is Israel ignored in most of the preaching in most Western churches? Please refer to Chapter 10, below in which we shall examine the question of balance in greater detail.

Some other examples of the kinds of imbalance that Christians frequently get themselves into include issues such as spiritual gifts, predestination–v–free will, Bible prophecy, helping the poor, alcohol, whether Christians should be wealthy, and so on. There are many more besides these.

Towards the end of the book we shall then go on to look at a number of other points and principles which will help to keep us on the right track and to avoid making errors in the way we handle the Bible. We shall also look at the vital subject of memorizing Scripture, i.e. both short passages and long ones, including whole chapters or even whole books or letters.

I explain in very practical terms how you can succeed in memorizing Scripture and also why it will benefit you enormously to do so. We shall also look at the various translations of the Bible and consider their respective strengths and weaknesses and give advice on which are safe to use and which are not.

Within this book I shall also make a number of critical statements about the doctrines, practices and style of leadership of the Roman Catholic church and show how far it diverges, in all those ways, from what the Bible says. If you are a Catholic yourself, then I would ask you not to be offended, but

to assess my claims with an open mind. Conversely, if you are not a Catholic, I would ask you not to skip over these sections or to assume that they are no relevance to you.

The truth is that the Reformation did not remove all of the errors of the Roman Catholic church. Far from it. Many errors were kept by the reformers and are still present today, to one extent or another, in all of the Protestant, Reformed, Non-Conformist, Pentecostal and Charismatic denominations.

One finds the same fundamental errors, especially in relation to the interpretation of Scripture, but also in the hierarchical way that churches are structured and the haughty, authoritarian, ‘clergy-minded’ approach to leadership. Most of the errors of the modern churches originated with the same so-called ‘Church Fathers’, whose errors gave rise to the doctrines and practices of the Roman Catholic church. Therefore, an understanding of their errors is essential for all of us, no matter what background we may come from.

My main hope for this book is that you will be persuaded by it that God intends for you to study the *whole* Bible for yourself and on an ongoing, lifelong basis, so that you become confident and proficient in wielding it. That is possible, no matter who you may be, and regardless of the level of your education.

Moreover, it is worth making the effort to study the whole Bible continually, throughout your entire life, because God’s Word has so much to offer you and is of infinite value. Here is how the Psalmist puts it, followed by the resolution that he made to obey God’s Word to the very end of his life:

*The law of the Lord is perfect,  
reviving the soul;  
the testimony of the Lord is sure,  
making wise the simple;  
<sup>8</sup>the precepts of the Lord are right,  
rejoicing the heart;  
the commandment of the Lord is pure,  
enlightening the eyes;  
<sup>9</sup>the fear of the Lord is clean,  
enduring for ever;  
the ordinances of the Lord are true,  
and righteous altogether.  
<sup>10</sup>More to be desired are they than gold,  
even much fine gold;  
sweeter also than honey  
and drippings of the honeycomb.  
<sup>11</sup>Moreover by them is thy servant warned;  
in keeping them there is great reward.  
Psalm 19:7-11 (RSV)*

*My heart is set on keeping your decrees  
to the very end.  
Psalm 119:112 (NIV)*

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