

How to study the Bible and why you should

BOOK 3 IN THE REAL CHRISTIANITY SERIES

SEAN KEHOE

realchristianity.com

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How to study the Bible and why you should – Book 3 in the Real Christianity series

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DEDICATION

This book is affectionately dedicated to Dave Brown, an American missionary from Oklahoma. It was he who first taught me how to study the Bible and got me started on a process that has never stopped.

I shall always be grateful for the sacrifice he made in coming to work as a missionary in England, for the time he spent with me, and the patience he showed towards me.

With his help I gradually came to realise that the Bible we were studying together was God's Word and of infinite importance. I therefore decided that I wanted to do as Ezra did and to set my heart to study God's Word as thoroughly as I could.

¹⁰ For Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the Lord and to practice it, and to teach His statutes and ordinances in Israel.

Ezra 7:10 (NASB)

HOW TO STUDY THE BIBLE AND WHY YOU SHOULD

BOOK 3 IN THE REAL CHRISTIANITY SERIES

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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;
⁸the precepts of the Lord are right,
rejoicing the heart;
the commandment of the Lord is pure,
enlightening the eyes;
⁹the fear of the Lord is clean,
enduring for ever;
the ordinances of the Lord are true,
and righteous altogether.
¹⁰More to be desired are they than gold,
even much fine gold;
sweeter also than honey
and drippings of the honeycomb.
¹¹Moreover 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)*

Sean Kehoe

11 September 2015

CHAPTER 1

WHY YOU SHOULD BECOME A SERIOUS AND DILIGENT STUDENT OF THE WHOLE BIBLE

*⁹How can a young man keep his way pure?
By keeping it according to Your word.
Psalm 119:9 (NASB)*

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

*¹⁰For Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the LORD and to practice it, and to teach His statutes and ordinances in Israel.
Ezra 7:10 (NASB)*

*¹³Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching.
1 Timothy 4:13 (ESV)*

*¹³Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.
2 Timothy 1:13 (ESV)*

*²⁰And they rose early in the morning and went out into the wilderness of Teko'a; and as they went out, Jehosh'aphat stood and said, "Hear me, Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem! Believe in the Lord your God, and you will be established; believe his prophets, and you will succeed."
2 Chronicles 20:20 (RSV)*

*He who despises the word brings destruction on himself,
but he who respects the commandment will be rewarded.
Proverbs 13:13 (RSV)*

*"He who gives heed to the word will prosper....."
Proverbs 16:20 (a) (RSV)*

*"Hear, O earth: behold, I am bringing disaster on this people,
The fruit of their plans,
Because they have not listened to My words,
And as for My law, they have rejected it also.
Jeremiah 6:19 (NASB)*

For the average 'churchgoer', in the West, the Bible is just dipped into at a shallow, surface level. Very few people study it seriously or deeply. We do also hear short readings in church, but generally only of well-known passages. Some of us read the Bible for ourselves, but usually we are only looking at favourite books and avoiding the rest.

That's the inadequate and superficial way that most of us handle the Bible, even assuming we look at it at all. I spoke recently to a young woman of about 24 who told me she had read "*Genesis, the gospels, some of the Psalms and Proverbs, and bits of Corinthians*". That was all. Yet she claimed to have been a Christian for many years.

When she told me how much (or rather how little) she had read, she wasn't embarrassed. On the contrary, she felt she was doing rather well, as she had read more than most other people in her church. She expected me to be impressed and didn't feel she was failing in any way.

The truth is that most of us need to take the Bible much more seriously than we do. It is the most important book in the world. Without it you cannot grow as a Christian. It is our greatest possession and the key to finding eternal life and to being effective as a disciple. In fact, it is the key to everything.

The advantages and benefits that come from studying the Bible.

God makes many promises about how you will grow if you are willing to study the Bible persistently and thoroughly. It will change your life, mainly by changing your character. It does this by re-shaping all your attitudes, habits, values, thoughts, speech and actions. When you read the Bible, it is 'reading' *you* and working on you, to bring about change wherever it is needed.

We are also promised that if we fear the LORD and take delight in His commandments, then a wide range of blessings will come to us. These come firstly as a direct reward for our love of the Bible and our obedience to it. They also come indirectly, from the changes that the diligent study of God's Word makes to our character. Those changes alter the way we live and therefore bring God's blessing on us as a consequence:

*¹Blessed is the man who fears the LORD,
who greatly delights in his commandments!
²His descendants will be mighty in the land;
the generation of the upright will be blessed.
³Wealth and riches are in his house;
and his righteousness endures forever.
Psalm 112:1-3 (RSV)*

Psalm 119 is famous for being the longest psalm. It is filled with a wide variety of statements about the many benefits that flow from studying God's Word. Let's look at just some of the main claims that the Bible makes for itself and let's take them seriously. For starters, we see from verses 1-7, that studying the Bible will cause us to:

- a) be blessed,
- b) walk in God's ways,
- c) avoid unrighteousness,
- d) not be ashamed,
- e) have uprightness of heart.

*¹How blessed are those whose way is blameless,
Who walk in the law of the LORD.
²How blessed are those who observe His testimonies,
Who seek Him with all their heart.
³They also do no unrighteousness;
They walk in His ways.
⁴You have ordained Your precepts,
That we should keep them diligently.
⁵Oh that my ways may be
established
To keep Your statutes!
⁶Then I shall not be ashamed
When I look upon all Your commandments.
⁷I shall give thanks to You with uprightness of heart,*

***When I learn Your righteous judgments.
Psalm 119:1-7 (NASB)***

According to verses 98-105, the Bible will also:

- f) make us wiser than our enemies,
- g) give us more insight than our teachers,
- h) give us more understanding than the aged,
- i) enable us to hate every false way,
- j) be a lamp to our feet and a light to our path.

***⁹⁸Your commandments make me wiser than my enemies,
For they are ever mine.***

***⁹⁹I have more insight than all my teachers,
For Your testimonies are my meditation.***

***¹⁰⁰I understand more than the aged,
Because I have observed Your precepts.***

***¹⁰¹I have restrained my feet from every evil way,
That I may keep Your word.***

***¹⁰²I have not turned aside from Your ordinances,
For You Yourself have taught me.***

***¹⁰³How sweet are Your words to my taste!
Yes, sweeter than honey to my mouth!***

***¹⁰⁴From Your precepts I get understanding;
Therefore I hate every false way.***

***¹⁰⁵Your word is a lamp to my feet
And a light to my path.***

Psalm 119:98-105 (NASB)

Every one of these claims is important in itself, but when they are all combined together, they are truly life-changing. Why not work your way through all 176 verses of Psalm 119? There are many other assertions about how the Bible helps, guides, informs, instructs, improves and strengthens us. For example, here is another verse which refers to two more benefits, i.e. that the Bible will give us great peace and prevent us from stumbling. Let's examine each of these claims a little more closely:

***Those who love Your law have great peace,
And nothing causes them to stumble.***

Psalm 119:165 (NASB)

So, the Bible will also:

- k) give us great peace:

The only way we can ever get real peace is from knowing God. We get to know Him primarily by knowing His Word, or His 'law', as the Psalmist refers to it. However, we can only get that knowledge if we *love* the Bible. It will not come to people who merely read it passively.

It applies only to those who love God's Word. It takes time for us to develop such a love, but anyone can get it, provided they really *want it* and are willing to study the Bible *diligently*, like the Psalmist did.

1) prevent us from stumbling:

The Bible tells us of very many things which would otherwise trip us up if we had not been forewarned. These warnings enable us to benefit from the wisdom of God without having to learn every lesson for ourselves, first-hand, through bitter experience. That is assuming that we could ever learn such things for ourselves, which is most unlikely.

Consider the situation of the prophet Daniel and his three friends, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. They were all young men from the tribe of Judah who were taken into captivity by the King of Babylon. They were taken to work for the King and that meant they had to spend some years in study and preparation. They did that alongside other young men, most of whom were Babylonian. However these four young Hebrew men also had the Scriptures to study. Their knowledge of the Bible gave them a huge advantage over all their competitors. It enabled them to operate at a far higher level in terms of wisdom and understanding:

¹⁷As for these four youths, God gave them learning and skill in all letters and wisdom; and Daniel had understanding in all visions and dreams. ¹⁸At the end of the time, when the king had commanded that they should be brought in, the chief of the eunuchs brought them in before Nebuchadnezzar. ¹⁹And the king spoke with them, and among them all none was found like Daniel, Hanani'ah, Mish'ael, and Azari'ah; therefore they stood before the king. ²⁰And in every matter of wisdom and understanding concerning which the king inquired of them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters that were in all his kingdom.

Daniel 1:17-20 (RSV)

The consequences of ignoring or despising God's Word

We have seen some of the many and varied benefits that come from loving and studying God's written Word. It follows therefore that if we ignore, undervalue or despise God's Word then those benefits will not come to us. However, we need to put it more strongly than that. If a person avoids or ignores God's Word then there will also be direct adverse consequences. In fact, if a person claims to be a believer but ignores, or does not bother, to read God's Word, then we are told that the prayers of such a person are an 'abomination' to God:

*If one turns away his ear from hearing the law,
even his prayer is an abomination.*

Proverbs 28:9 (ESV)

What exactly does this mean? There are two possible groups to whom it could apply:

- a) Those who claim to be Christians, but who are not really. They say they believe, and they may attend church etc, but they are not genuine.
- b) Those who really are saved but who, for one reason or another, ignore God's Word and do not value it. Therefore they do not read it diligently, or even at all

I personally believe that the above verse applies to both groups. That is that the prayers of people in either group are unacceptable to God. We cannot afford to be so complacent as to assume that it only concerns unbelievers. If it does refer to us all then it is of profound importance to every genuine believer. In short, it means we cannot ignore or despise God's Word and yet still expect Him to hear our prayers and to answer them

Moreover, to despise God's Word, (i.e. to be casual about it, devalue it or treat it as unimportant) will also lead us into all sorts of other sins. There are always consequences. People who ignore God's Word and disobey it will usually end up doing so to a greater and greater extent, committing ever larger sins.

That is the reality, as we see in this next passage. Such people begin by despising God's Word, but their sins then develop and become increasingly gross:

¹³ Yet the LORD warned Israel and Judah by every prophet and every seer, saying, "Turn from your evil ways and keep my commandments and my statutes, in accordance with all the law which I commanded your fathers, and which I sent to you by my servants the prophets." ¹⁴ But they would not listen, but were stubborn, as their fathers had been, who did not believe in the LORD their God. ¹⁵ They despised his statutes, and his covenant that he made with their fathers, and the warnings which he gave them. They went after false idols, and became false, and they followed the nations that were round about them, concerning whom the LORD had commanded them that they should not do like them. ¹⁶ And they forsook all the commandments of the LORD their God, and made for themselves molten images of two calves; and they made an Ashe'rah, and worshiped all the host of heaven, and served Ba'al. ¹⁷ And they burned their sons and their daughters as offerings, and used divination and sorcery, and sold themselves to do evil in the sight of the LORD, provoking him to anger. ¹⁸ Therefore the LORD was very angry with Israel, and removed them out of his sight; none was left but the tribe of Judah only.

¹⁹ Judah also did not keep the commandments of the LORD their God, but walked in the customs which Israel had introduced. ²⁰ And the LORD rejected all the descendants of Israel, and afflicted them, and gave them into the hand of spoilers, until he had cast them out of his sight.

2 Kings 17:13-20 (RSV)

The Bible contains God's Word to us. It is full of His promises, instructions and warnings. It reflects Him and what He stands for. Therefore, to be casual about the Bible is to be casual about God. To neglect it is to neglect Him. To ignore it is to ignore Him. Many would deny that and insist that they are very devoted to God, in their own way, but that the Bible is just "not my thing" or that they "don't get much from it" and so on.

They might seek to justify themselves in those ways, but the fact is that that is not how God sees it. God strongly approves of those people who value Him to such an extent that they take His Word seriously. He loves it when we really believe His promises and rely on them. Conversely, it angers Him when we are flippant or casual about His promises and instructions.

An example of this is Isaac's son, Esau, who was a few minutes older than his twin brother Jacob. Therefore the promises made to Abraham and to Isaac were due to be inherited by Esau. One could say that he should have been the son through whose family line the promises of God would pass. If Esau had valued God's promises properly and if they had mattered to him sufficiently, then he would have been longing for God to build a nation through him.

His descendants (the Arabs) were, at that time, in line to be the chosen people and to inherit the Promised Land. In theory, the Messiah could then have been born into Esau's family line. Of course, that could not have actually happened, because God's intention, all along, was to operate through Jacob, and the Jewish people, not through Esau or the Arabs.

Those things are just some of the enormous promises that were made to Abraham and Isaac and, as things stood at that time, it was Esau's birthright that these should be fulfilled through him. You might imagine that that extraordinary privilege would have really mattered to him and that his mind would have been constantly focused on God's promises, as was the case with Abraham and Isaac. However, that was not how Esau saw it.

Esau's principal fault was not that he did not *believe* God's promises. He certainly did believe them. He also believed in God. His fault was that God's promises did not really *matter* to him. Esau was casual. He obviously knew all about the promises. We can be sure that he heard all the stories told many times over as he sat around the camp-fire with Abraham and Isaac as he grew up. He must have known them all by heart, just as Jacob did.

Nevertheless, by the time Esau had become a man he had begun to take these momentous promises for granted. He had grown dismissive and even uninterested. The promises did not grip him as they did Jacob, or as they had gripped Abraham and Isaac. Esau's lack of regard for God's promises must have been apparent to his younger brother, Jacob. He sorely wished that they could be fulfilled through him.

He longed to be the one who could inherit the Promised Land and become the ancestor of God's chosen people and of the Messiah who would one day bless the whole world. The prospect of all of that excited Jacob and it held his attention deeply. He could not have failed to notice Esau's complacent attitude and it must therefore have rankled with Jacob all the more to think of Esau inheriting all of that rather than him.

Then, one day, Jacob made the request of Esau, as recorded in Genesis chapter 25 that Esau should "sell" the birthright to him in exchange for a bowl of soup (pottage). That was a strange offer, but it did not come from nowhere. There was a history to it. Jacob already knew that Esau cared very little for God's promises and that it was not unrealistic to think that he might actually be willing to accept such an absurd offer:

29 Once when Jacob was boiling pottage, Esau came in from the field, and he was famished. 30 And Esau said to Jacob, "Let me eat some of that red pottage, for I am famished!" (Therefore his name was called Edom.) 31 Jacob said, "First sell me your birthright." 32 Esau said, "I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?" 33 Jacob said, "Swear to me first." So he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob. 34 Then Jacob gave Esau bread and pottage of lentils, and he ate and drank, and rose and went his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright.

Genesis 25:29-34 (RSV)

That whole conversation about the soup and the birthright must have seemed light-hearted to Esau. No doubt he did not really mean what he was saying, and would not have said it if he had only paused to think for a moment. But he did not stop to think and he did say it. In doing so, he "*despised his birthright*".

In that apparently unimportant conversation, Esau spoke disrespectful words about the promises of God. In doing so, he altered the whole course of his life and of world history. All of the promises of God were then transferred from Esau to the family line of Jacob and then onwards, from him, to the whole Jewish people. That had, actually, been God's intention from the outset. Nevertheless, it was Esau's own actions and attitude which brought about the circumstances that caused the transfer to take place. Therefore it was Esau's own fault.

Although that 'sale' of his birthright may have seemed insignificant to Esau, or even a joke, that was not how God saw it. God was appalled by Esau's indifference to the enormous promises that He had made. They were Esau's to inherit, if only he had *valued* them. That is why God was so angry with Esau. It was not because he did not believe the promises but because they weren't *important* to him.

We must all learn a vital lesson from the way that Esau despised God's promises. Or, you could say, from the way he despised God's *Word*. We must ensure that, unlike Esau, we truly value all of God's Word. We must cherish it, long for it and be preoccupied with it, as Jacob was.

Jacob obviously chose the wrong *way* to go about getting God's promises transferred to him, behaving carnally and dishonestly in the process. Later on he also tricked Isaac into giving the blessing of the first born to him, rather than to Esau (See Genesis 27:1-40). That dishonesty obviously displeased God and it was not what God had wanted Esau to do.

However, the operative point is that, although Jacob behaved badly in the *way* he sought to get the promises transferred to himself, his underlying attitude did please God. The fact that Jacob valued the promises and cared about them touched God's heart. Jacob believed what God had promised and took

it really seriously. That is what pleased God and caused him to value Jacob highly, for precisely the same reason that Esau's indifference had angered Him.

The same wholehearted attitude that Jacob had was also seen in his son, Joseph. He too had character faults, even though he was highly gifted. For example he was insensitive and tactless in the way he spoke to his brothers. That partly explains why they hated him so much that they sold him into slavery. However, the fact remains that Joseph shared his father's passionate interest in the promises that God had made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

He believed God and fully expected those promises to be fulfilled. Joseph did not doubt that the family line of Jacob would become a nation and would live in the Promised Land at some time in the future. He took it completely seriously. Joseph also expected that he personally would, one day, be resurrected and that he himself would live in the Land.

His devotion to God's promises, and his seriousness about them, is illustrated by the fact that when Joseph was about to die he gave strict instructions to his family to preserve his *bones*. He told them to bring them to the Promised Land and bury them there when they eventually went to live in it. He knew that would not be until over 400 years in the future, because that had already been told to Abraham by God.

But that fact did not prevent Joseph from taking God's promises completely seriously and *acting on them*. He knew that one day the Israelites would possess the Promised Land and he wanted to be buried in it. More than that, Joseph wanted to be resurrected in the Promise Land. That was how seriously he took all of God's promises. They were utterly real to him:

²⁴ And Joseph said to his brothers, "I am about to die; but God will visit you, and bring you up out of this land to the land which he swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob." ²⁵ Then Joseph took an oath of the sons of Israel, saying, "God will visit you, and you shall carry up my bones from here." ²⁶ So Joseph died, being a hundred and ten years old; and they embalmed him, and he was put in a coffin in Egypt.

Genesis 50:24-26 (RSV)

The seriousness with which Joseph had viewed this request concerning his bones, such that he required his brothers to swear an oath about them, is also reflected in the way that Moses, over 400 years later, carried out Joseph's wishes. He brought the bones with him when they all left Egypt to go to the Promised Land:

¹⁷ When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although that was near; for God said, "Lest the people repent when they see war, and return to Egypt." ¹⁸ But God led the people round by the way of the wilderness toward the Red Sea. And the people of Israel went up out of the land of Egypt equipped for battle. ¹⁹ And Moses took the bones of Joseph with him; for Joseph had solemnly sworn the people of Israel, saying, "God will visit you; then you must carry my bones with you from here."

Exodus 13:17-19 (RSV)

Likewise, in the next generation, when the Israelites were allowed to enter the Land, Joshua took this request absolutely seriously and had Joseph's bones buried in the Promised Land:

³² The bones of Joseph which the people of Israel brought up from Egypt were buried at Shechem, in the portion of ground which Jacob bought from the sons of Hamor the father of Shechem for a hundred pieces of money; it became an inheritance of the descendants of Joseph.

Joshua 24:32 (RSV)

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews also refers to Joseph's request concerning his bones. He describes it as *faith* and includes Joseph within the 'hall of fame' of Hebrews chapter 11. He does so

because the earnest way that Joseph viewed the matter, and the care he took over his burial requests, demonstrated how very seriously he took God's Word, just as Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had done before him:

¹⁷ By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had embraced the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, ¹⁸ even though God had said to him, "It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned." ¹⁹ Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead, and so in a manner of speaking he did receive Isaac back from death. ²⁰ By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau in regard to their future. ²¹ By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of Joseph's sons, and worshiped as he leaned on the top of his staff. ²² By faith Joseph, when his end was near, spoke about the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt and gave instructions concerning the burial of his bones.

Hebrews 11:17-22 (NIV)

Which of these two attitudes most closely resembles yours? Do you care deeply about God's Word as Jacob and Joseph did? Or are you casual, such that you can take it or leave it, like Esau? That is a question which each of us needs to reflect on. And we must not be too quick in answering it, because the truth is that, even in the church, there are far more Esaus than there are Jacobs. Therefore each of us needs to consider very seriously the possibility that God may view us as an Esau rather than a Jacob.

For every Christian who spends many hours every week studying their Bible there are probably nine, or 19, or even 99, who spend only minutes on it, even assuming they open their Bibles at all. If that is the case, then on what basis can such a person assume that God will be any less angry and displeased with them than He was with Esau? That is a question for us all to reflect upon carefully.

The effect that study of the Bible will have on your life and character

It is impossible to exaggerate the improving effect that the Bible will have on every part of your life if you are willing to study it properly. Good qualities and habits will grow. Bad ones will fade, or even disappear. The Bible will also help you to resist sin and to reduce its grip on your life:

*¹¹Your word I have treasured in my heart,
That I may not sin against You.*

Psalm 119:11 (NASB)

Knowledge of God's Word is also able to save us from perishing. It does that firstly by showing us how to find salvation through Jesus, and secondly by helping us in every kind of difficulty:

*⁹²If Your law had not been my delight,
Then I would have perished in my affliction.*

*⁹³I will never forget Your precepts,
For by them You have revived me.*

Psalm 119:92-93 (NASB)

God is able to use the Bible to change your character, but only if you will allow that. He will not impose these benefits on us. It is purely voluntary. We need to cooperate with the Holy Spirit and allow Him to use the Bible to its maximum effect. In fact, we should positively ask Him to do so, and go on asking, for the rest of our lives. It is a process, and it does not end until we die. It is up to us to make sure we don't miss out on any of it.

You need to long, with all your heart, for understanding of the Bible and to ask God to open your eyes to grasp it

Note the wholehearted intensity of the Psalmist's love for the Bible. He doesn't just like it, he treasures it. That is the attitude that God will really bless. So, if we are to benefit fully from the Bible, we must do much more than merely skim its surface. We must pursue with zeal everything that it has to offer. Seek to imitate the Psalmist's passionate heart-attitude, as revealed in this next passage:

*¹⁰With all my heart I have sought You;
Do not let me wander from Your commandments.
¹¹Your word I have treasured in my heart,
That I may not sin against You.
¹²Blessed are You, O LORD;
Teach me Your statutes.
¹³With my lips I have told of
All the ordinances of Your mouth.
¹⁴I have rejoiced in the way of Your testimonies,
As much as in all riches.
¹⁵I will meditate on Your precepts
And regard Your ways.
¹⁶I shall delight in Your statutes;
I shall not forget Your word.
¹⁷Deal bountifully with Your servant,
That I may live and keep Your word.
¹⁸Open my eyes, that I may behold
Wonderful things from Your law.
¹⁹I am a stranger in the earth;
Do not hide Your commandments from me.
²⁰My soul is crushed with longing
After Your ordinances at all times.
²¹You rebuke the arrogant, the cursed,
Who wander from Your commandments.
²²Take away reproach and contempt from me,
For I observe Your testimonies.
²³Even though princes sit and talk against me,
Your servant meditates on Your statutes.
²⁴Your testimonies also are my delight;
They are my counsellors.*

Psalm 119:10-24 (NASB)

We need the same heart-attitude as the Psalmist. However, it will not come automatically. Neither is anybody born with it. It is up to us to acquire it, mainly by effort, choice and persistent diligence. We must also ask God to help us to value His Word, and to love it more and more. Make a decision to pursue the greatest possible knowledge of God's Word and to learn to take delight in it.

This should not be done moderately or reluctantly, but abundantly. The Psalmist did not merely dabble in God's Word. He wanted everything that it has to offer and with an intensity that puts most of us to shame. Here he continues to express how strongly he feels:

*²⁵My soul cleaves to the dust;
Revive me according to Your word.
²⁶I have told of my ways, and You have answered me;
Teach me Your statutes.
²⁷Make me understand the way of Your precepts,
So I will meditate on Your wonders.*

²⁸*My soul weeps because of grief;
Strengthen me according to Your word.*
²⁹*Remove the false way from me,
And graciously grant me Your law.*
³⁰*I have chosen the faithful way;
I have placed Your ordinances before me.*
³¹*I cling to Your testimonies;
O LORD, do not put me to shame!*
³²*I shall run the way of Your commandments,
For You will enlarge my heart.*
Psalm 119:25-32 (NASB)

Although your own effort in studying the Bible is essential, you can't rely solely on yourself to find your own way through the Bible. Cry out to God for Him to give you the ability to understand it. Ask Him to open it up to you so that you can fully grasp all that He wishes to teach you. The Bible is a supernatural book. Therefore, although effort is needed, it can only properly be understood with God's help:

³³*Teach me, O LORD, the way of Your statutes,
And I shall observe it to the end.*
³⁴*Give me understanding, that I may observe Your law
And keep it with all my heart.*
³⁵*Make me walk in the path of Your commandments,
For I delight in it.*
³⁶*Incline my heart to Your testimonies
And not to dishonest gain.*
³⁷*Turn away my eyes from looking at vanity,
And revive me in Your ways.*
³⁸*Establish Your word to Your servant,
As that which produces reverence for You.*
Psalm 119:33-38 (NASB)

Resolve to do whatever is necessary to develop a longing for God's Word, such that you cannot live without it

This deep longing and passion for God's Word does not come overnight, or by a single decision. It comes from intensive, ongoing study of the Bible and from persistently asking God, over many years, to give you that kind of heart. It will never come merely by the passage of time alone. We have to seek for it actively.

But however long that process takes, it always has to begin with an initial decision of your will. That requires a setting of your heart to study God's Word with determination. If all you have is a mild or half-hearted desire to learn the Bible, you will never achieve what the Psalmist did. There must be no half measures or lukewarmness:

⁴⁴*So I will keep Your law continually,
Forever and ever.*
⁴⁵*And I will walk at liberty,
For I seek Your precepts.*
⁴⁶*I will also speak of Your testimonies before kings
And shall not be ashamed.*
⁴⁷*I shall delight in Your commandments,
Which I love.*
⁴⁸*And I shall lift up my hands to Your commandments,*

*Which I love;
And I will meditate on Your statutes.
Psalm 119:44-48 (NASB)*

Unless we ask God to give us a proper understanding of His Word we will miss a lot of what it is saying. Many of us read the Bible too passively, just picking up whatever is easy to grasp because it is on the surface, and ignoring anything more complicated.

Instead we need to ask God to give us deeper and deeper insights and we must keep on and on asking, until we have them. Even within Psalm 119, the Psalmist asks repeatedly for more understanding, despite already being an accomplished scholar of the Bible by anybody's standards:

*Your hands made me and fashioned me;
Give me understanding,
that I may learn Your commandments.
Psalm 119:73 (NASB)*

*Let my cry come before You, O LORD;
Give me understanding according to Your word.
Psalm 119:169 (NASB)*

Many of us see reading the Bible as if it was a chore, and therefore don't look forward to it. Instead, we need to get to a place where we long for God's Word intensely, in the same way that a man in a desert would thirst for water:

*I opened my mouth wide and panted,
For I longed for Your commandments.
Psalm 119:131 (NASB)*

Anyone who prays for understanding of God's Word with that kind of commitment, and who is willing to keep on and on doing so, will certainly receive what they have requested. God delights to answer such a prayer. He will pour out understanding on any person who really wants it. However, He will not do so for the casual or passive person who is only mildly interested.

Therefore, from now on, ask God to help you to match the zeal of the Psalmist. Why shouldn't you? He was only an ordinary person like us. He just had an extraordinarily good attitude. Therefore there is no reason why you cannot be like him. You are free, and able, to adopt any attitude, if you really want to.

Remember that when the Psalmist was pleading with God for more understanding of the Scriptures, he had already got enough understanding to have written Psalm 119, plus other psalms. Most of us would consider that he had already fully 'arrived' as a student of the Bible and that he did not need to go any farther or deeper.

But the Psalmist clearly did not think so. He never stopped seeking for more and more knowledge of God's Word. Therefore we must never imagine that we have reached a point where we do not need anything more from the Scriptures. Such a time will never come, at least not until after we die.

King David's passionate, wholehearted attitude to the Bible

We are told that King David was "a man after God's heart". It makes sense therefore to imitate him, as well, not just the writer of Psalm 119. David sets out the intensity of his own feelings about God's Word in Psalm 19:

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

Look as well at what King David says in Psalm 139 about the preciousness of God's thoughts:

*¹⁷How precious to me are your thoughts, God!
How vast is the sum of them!
¹⁸Were I to count them,
they would outnumber the grains of sand.....*
Psalm 139:17-18(a) (NIV)

King David was on the same wavelength as the writer of Psalm 119. That is one of the main reasons why God felt such approval for David and made him so successful. However, that heart-attitude is entirely available for you to adopt as your own, just like David. You do not need to be gifted or clever. It is purely a matter of *choice*. It has nothing to do with ability or genetics. If you really wanted to, you could choose to be like King David, at least in this respect.

Nothing is stopping you, except your own lack of willingness. The Bible needs to become something you love and value above every other possession. Remember what it is - God's own Word to us, containing the key to everything we need in life. It is worth more than any other asset, even fine gold. David says so above, and so does the Psalmist:

*¹²⁷Therefore I love Your commandments
Above gold, yes, above fine gold.*
Psalm 119:127 (NASB)

This is not exaggerated poetic language. It is plain fact. God literally intends that the Bible should become our delight, and our greatest treasure. That applies to all of us, not just to supposedly 'special' people like King David and the Psalmist.

The need for effort and diligence in studying God's Word

What you get out of the Bible will be directly proportional to the effort you put in and the intensity of your desire for understanding. It requires persistence and enthusiasm. It particularly means long and regular periods of time spent alone studying God's Word. That is the kind of person God is looking for, and to whom He will respond.

He will not give deep knowledge of the Bible to anybody who is not willing to work hard to get it. God's heart is touched by those whom He sees making an ongoing effort to study His Word. He has

put so much of Himself into the Bible that to seek for knowledge of the Bible is the same as to seek for *Him*. It contains His very words:

¹⁴⁷I rise before dawn and cry for help;

I wait for Your words.

¹⁴⁸My eyes anticipate the night watches,

That I may meditate on Your word.

Psalm 119:147-148 (NASB)

Only the Bible is totally and perfectly true. Every other book, however worthy, contains only the ideas and opinions of human beings who are as flawed as we are. But the Bible as a whole is the infallible truth. Even if you reach the age of 90, you will still be nowhere near to exhausting what the Bible has to offer. Like a coalmine, there are things available to be dug out at all levels.

Some of it is on the surface and can be picked up quite easily by anyone. The rest is deeper and requires varying levels of excavation work. Some truths are very deep indeed, like coal which is 1000 metres underground, and can only be found by those who are willing to keep digging for decades, not just for years.

God actually hides things in the Bible deliberately, as if it was a 'treasure hunt'. He wants to find out whether you are willing to keep on searching for those things, for as long as it takes, until you find them. It is a contest. God hides things intentionally and it is then up to us to find them, if we are sufficiently motivated to do so:

²It is the glory of God to conceal a matter,

But the glory of kings is to search out a matter.

Proverbs 25:2 (NASB)

Never lose heart or stop searching, just because some parts of the Bible are hard to understand. Some of it is meant to be difficult, so do not be surprised or discouraged by the fact that you struggle. Sometimes God wants you to struggle, even for a long period of time, to see whether you will be tenacious enough to overcome your difficulties.

He also wants to find out how much it matters to you to find the truth and how long you are willing to go on searching. However, most of the time, if we come across passages which do not make sense to us, it is because of one or more problems or errors on our part. It is certainly not the fault of the Bible. When we meet such problems God expects us to deal with them. Some examples of these are as follows:

- a) wrong ideas about how to interpret the Bible
- b) unbelief or scepticism
- c) factual errors and wrong ideas that are fixed in our minds due to poor teaching
- d) wrong ideas which are fixed in our minds due to church traditions. These come from men, not from the Bible
- e) lack of diligence in searching for answers
- f) errors by the translators
- g) lack of knowledge of ancient history
- h) lack of knowledge of the culture and conventions of Bible times

Therefore persist and deal with every one of these potential stumbling blocks. Deep understanding of God's ways will only come to those who are willing to keep on and on working to find it. God has said that He is *"a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him"*:

But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.

Hebrews 11:6 (NKJV)

The importance of doctrinal accuracy and having a correct understanding of Scripture

There is a widespread view in Western churches, even among some real Christians, that it doesn't really matter much what we believe, *"as long as we love God"*. Getting our doctrine right, i.e. correctly understanding what the Bible teaches, is not generally considered important. The minority who do consider doctrine to be important are frequently viewed as narrow-minded or dogmatic. But the truth is that it really does matter whether we understand or misunderstand the Bible.

All sorts of consequences will flow from getting it right and, likewise, from getting it wrong. It is not just an academic subject that can be left to theologians to worry about. On the contrary, it is every individual's solemn responsibility to gain a correct understanding of Scripture and to avoid being mistaken or deceived. Otherwise you could find that you are believing things that are not true. If so, you could be labouring in vain and *"to no avail"*:

⁸Behold, you are trusting in deceptive words to no avail.
Jeremiah 7:8 (NASB)

What we believe, or don't believe, in the Bible and what we know, or don't know, about it will have a profound impact at every level of our lives. The Psalmist was not satisfied to have just a "rough idea" of what the Bible means. Neither should you be. Aim for exact definitions, and for full knowledge and understanding. Seek to fill all gaps, and eliminate all errors, so far as you possibly can.

Likewise, we are commanded to be on the alert, watching out for any false teaching so that we can recognize it and reject it. This is really important, because what we believe has profound consequences in our lives. That is why Jesus warned the disciples to beware of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees, because their teaching was false and would do them great harm if they believed it:

⁵When the disciples reached the other side, they had forgotten to bring any bread. ⁶Jesus said to them, "Watch and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees." ⁷And they began discussing it among themselves, saying, "We brought no bread." ⁸But Jesus, aware of this, said, "O you of little faith, why are you discussing among yourselves the fact that you have no bread? ⁹Do you not yet perceive? Do you not remember the five loaves for the five thousand, and how many baskets you gathered? ¹⁰Or the seven loaves for the four thousand, and how many baskets you gathered? ¹¹How is it that you fail to understand that I did not speak about bread? Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees." ¹²Then they understood that he did not tell them to beware of the leaven of bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

Matthew 16:5-12 (ESV)

God expects and requires us to know the whole Bible very well

God has gone to enormous trouble to give us His Word and He expects us to make the effort to know it thoroughly. He will hold us individually accountable for how hard we try to gain a full and accurate knowledge. That is not just true for Bible teachers, though they will be judged more strictly. It applies to all of us. It is true that He will judge each one of us according to what we personally knew.

He will also judge us according to how diligently, or casually, we pursued a thorough knowledge of His Word. Thus, we cannot avoid God's disapproval by deliberately avoiding knowledge, so that we cannot be held accountable for it. That trick won't work. God would judge us instead for the fact that we deliberately chose not to learn. Apostle Paul tells Timothy that one of the things he should do, in order to be approved, is to study God's Word to such an extent that he can handle it correctly:

Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.

2 Timothy 2:15 (NIV)

We must not neglect or ignore God's Word or harden our hearts to it

God will hold us accountable for the attitude that we choose to adopt towards His Word. As we have seen, the way we treat His Word is a very accurate proxy for how we treat Him. Therefore we cannot claim to love God any more strongly than we love His Word. We cannot pay Him any higher honour than to study his Word.

Conversely, to ignore or despise His Word is to ignore or despise Him. Thus it is crucially important that we adopt the right heart-attitude towards the Bible. The Bible summarizes this by saying that we should "*listen diligently*". In the original Hebrew this is expressed by repeating the verb to 'listen'.

Thus it is rendered in Hebrew idiom as to "*listen listening*", because the way they emphasize a word is to repeat it. It then means that you are doing that activity very emphatically or diligently. So, to "listen listening" means to *really* listen or to listen *very attentively*. The thought behind it is that we are to humble ourselves in the sense that we incline our heads to the side, as we do when we are really trying hard to listen to a very quiet sound:

***Give ear, O my people, to my teaching;
incline your ears to the words of my mouth!
Psalm 78:1 (RSV).***

That that is how God wants us to act towards His Word. The attitude He wants us to have is one where we so strongly want to hear what God is saying that we are straining our ears and inclining our heads to the side to listen as closely as possible. Anyone who does that is paying a compliment to the speaker. They are showing that they are hanging on his every word, not wanting to miss the slightest bit of what is being said.

A person who has that attitude towards God and wants to hear and understand everything that God is saying can be described as having a soft or tender heart. They are open to all that God has to say. They value the Bible and respect it very highly. The opposite of that is to be hard-hearted or indifferent, such that we despise His Word. If we adopt that attitude we will bring destruction upon ourselves:

***Whoever despises the word brings destruction on himself,
but he who reveres the commandment will be rewarded.
Proverbs 13:13 (ESV)***

This 'destruction' will arise in two ways, i.e. directly and indirectly. Firstly, we need to make clear that to despise God's Word doesn't mean that we hate it or are strongly opposed to it. It means that we ignore, neglect or undervalue it. If we have that attitude we will miss out on the guidance and wisdom that the Bible contains. Therefore we will encounter all sorts of additional and unnecessary problems in our lives due to our ignorance of what God wants us to know, or our failure to take it seriously.

Thus, we would have brought destruction upon ourselves indirectly. However, there is also a secondary meaning to it. Anyone who despises God's Word will also bring destruction upon himself directly by

incurring God's anger and causing Him to oppose us, punish us and even destroy us. We see an example of this in the life of King Rehoboam, the son of King Solomon. We are told that he "*forsook the law of the LORD*":

When the rule of Rehobo'am was established and was strong, he forsook the law of the LORD, and all Israel with him.

2 Chronicles 12:1 (RSV)

That casual attitude which caused Rehoboam to neglect and ignore God's Word led to his downfall. He lost nine of the twelve tribes of Israel. The northern tribes rebelled against him and the nation was split into two parts, with Rehoboam only having the small Southern Kingdom consisting of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin, plus many of the Levites who moved south.

The prophet Zechariah spoke to the people of Judah about the way that they and their ancestors had neglected and ignored God's Word, as expressed by all the earlier prophets. They had hardened their hearts and deliberately resisted and ignored God's Word because they did not want to hear it:

⁴Then the word of the Lord of hosts came to me: ⁵"Say to all the people of the land and the priests, When you fasted and mourned in the fifth month and in the seventh, for these seventy years, was it for me that you fasted? ⁶And when you eat and when you drink, do you not eat for yourselves and drink for yourselves? ⁷Were not these the words that the Lord proclaimed by the former prophets, when Jerusalem was inhabited and prosperous, with her cities around her, and the South and the lowland were inhabited?"

⁸And the word of the Lord came to Zechariah, saying, ⁹"Thus says the Lord of hosts, Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another, ¹⁰do not oppress the widow, the fatherless, the sojourner, or the poor, and let none of you devise evil against another in your heart." ¹¹But they refused to pay attention and turned a stubborn shoulder and stopped their ears that they might not hear. ¹²They made their hearts diamond-hard lest they should hear the law and the words that the Lord of hosts had sent by his Spirit through the former prophets. Therefore great anger came from the Lord of hosts. ¹³"As I called, and they would not hear, so they called, and I would not hear," says the Lord of hosts,

Zechariah 7:4-13 (ESV)

The Jewish people hardened their hearts to God's Word and He responded in judgement and showed His anger towards them. It resulted in them losing their right to live in the Land and being exiled from it for many years. If that is how strongly God felt about their neglect of His Word, what basis have we got to assume that He will view our attitude to His Word any less seriously?

The main reason Jesus spoke in parables was to withhold the truth from those who did not want it or care about it

Have you ever wondered why Jesus spoke in parables, especially in the latter stages of His ministry? He tells us Himself that He was doing so because there were many people in His audiences who did not really want the truth, or care about it. Such people do not have the love of the truth. They have no genuine desire to understand what God is saying. God will eventually take steps to hide the truth from those who have already shown that His Word does not matter much to them. Here is how Jesus explained this:

¹⁰Then the disciples came and said to him, "Why do you speak to them in parables?" ¹¹And he answered them, "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. ¹²For to the one who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance, but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. ¹³This is why I speak to them in

parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand.
¹⁴*Indeed, in their case the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled that says:*

*““You will indeed hear but never understand,
and you will indeed see but never perceive.”*

¹⁵*For this people's heart has grown dull,
and with their ears they can barely hear,
and their eyes they have closed,
lest they should see with their eyes
and hear with their ears
and understand with their heart
and turn, and I would heal them.’*

Matthew 13:10-15 (ESV)

It is important to get the sequence of events in the right order. It does not begin with God hiding or withholding the truth. On the contrary, it begins with Him speaking clearly to us. It could be through His written Word, or our consciences, or even through the wonder of His creation. However, if we are uninterested or indifferent, or if we aren't willing to obey the things we do already understand, then eventually God will begin to hide all further truth from us.

In the end, He will even take away the very ability to understand at all. However, that only happens if we first despise or ignore what we *already know* about His Word, in the way Isaiah prophesied about. Thus we need to take this very seriously and not allow ourselves to be complacent or to assume that Jesus is only referring to other people and not to us.

We see another examples of this principle in operation in the way Jesus deals with the Pharisees in Matthew chapter 21. They had refused to face up to the truth that had already been revealed to them concerning John the Baptist. Therefore Jesus refused to answer their questions and would not give them any further information:

²³*And when he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came up to him as he was teaching, and said, “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?”*²⁴*Jesus answered them, “I also will ask you one question, and if you tell me the answer, then I also will tell you by what authority I do these things.*²⁵*The baptism of John, from where did it come? From heaven or from man?” And they discussed it among themselves, saying, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will say to us, ‘Why then did you not believe him?’*²⁶*But if we say, ‘From man,’ we are afraid of the crowd, for they all hold that John was a prophet.”*²⁷*So they answered Jesus, “We do not know.” And he said to them, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.*

Matthew 21:23-27 (ESV)

If they had been honest enough to admit that John the Baptist was sent by God, and that his message of repentance applied to them, then Jesus would have revealed more truth to them concerning Himself. But they would not, so He would not.

It is essential that we recognize this vital principle and begin to take seriously, and obey, whatever we currently know about God's will, however little that may be. If we will do that, then God will reveal more of His will to us and correct any errors in our current understanding of His will.

God's inevitable response when we despise Him by disobeying or ignoring His commandments

Consider also what God did to bring judgment on the people of the Northern Kingdom of Israel and note His reasons for doing so. God caused the King of Assyria to invade the Northern Kingdom because of the way the Israelites had *"despised His statutes and His covenant"*:

¹⁴But they would not listen, but were stubborn, as their fathers had been, who did not believe in the Lord their God. ¹⁵They despised his statutes and his covenant that he made with their fathers and the warnings that he gave them. They went after false idols and became false, and they followed the nations that were around them, concerning whom the Lord had commanded them that they should not do like them.

2 Kings 17:14-15 (ESV)

Their neglect of God's Word had caused the Northern Kingdom of Israel to degenerate further into all kinds of other sins. Let's look at a lengthy passage which addresses this. It is a clear warning to us today about how strongly God feels. The Assyrians were therefore allowed by God to invade the Northern Kingdom. This was God's deliberate punishment upon them for their sin but, in particular, for their neglect of His Word:

⁵Then the king of Assyria invaded all the land and came to Sama'ria, and for three years he besieged it. ⁶In the ninth year of Hoshe'a the king of Assyria captured Sama'ria, and he carried the Israelites away to Assyria, and placed them in Halah, and on the Habor, the river of Gozan, and in the cities of the Medes.

2 Kings 17:5-6 (RSV)

This invasion by the Assyrians arose because the Northern Israelites were unfaithful to God. In particular, they served other gods in the form of idols and imitated the ways of the neighbouring pagan nations:

⁷And this was so, because the people of Israel had sinned against the LORD their God, who had brought them up out of the land of Egypt from under the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt, and had feared other gods ⁸and walked in the customs of the nations whom the LORD drove out before the people of Israel, and in the customs which the kings of Israel had introduced. ⁹And the people of Israel did secretly against the LORD their God things that were not right. They built for themselves high places at all their towns, from watchtower to fortified city; ¹⁰they set up for themselves pillars and Ashe'rim on every high hill and under every green tree; ¹¹and there they burned incense on all the high places, as the nations did whom the LORD carried away before them. And they did wicked things, provoking the LORD to anger, ¹²and they served idols, of which the LORD had said to them, "You shall not do this."

2 Kings 17:7-12 (RSV)

In doing all these wicked things the people of the Northern Kingdom of Israel had ignored and disobeyed God's commands. These were set out clearly in the Bible by the prophets whom God had sent. As God saw it, their sinful behaviour meant the people had "*despised His statutes*". He viewed their actions as sinful enough in themselves.

However, they also signified a deliberate rejection of His written Word, which He had given them. That is why God took it even more seriously. We need therefore to learn from what happened to them as a result of ignoring the Scriptures. And we must take care not to do likewise:

¹³Yet the LORD warned Israel and Judah by every prophet and every seer, saying, "Turn from your evil ways and keep my commandments and my statutes, in accordance with all the law which I commanded your fathers, and which I sent to you by my servants the prophets." ¹⁴But they would not listen, but were stubborn, as their fathers had been, who did not believe in the LORD their God.

¹⁵They despised his statutes, and his covenant that he made with their fathers, and the warnings which he gave them. They went after false idols, and became false, and they followed the nations that were round about them, concerning whom the LORD had commanded them that they should not do like them.

¹⁶And they forsook all the commandments of the LORD their God, and made for themselves molten images of two calves; and they made an Ashe'rah, and worshiped all the host of heaven, and served Ba'al. ¹⁷And they burned their sons and their daughters as offerings, and used divination and sorcery, and sold themselves to do evil in the sight of the LORD, provoking him to anger.

2 Kings 17:13-17 (RSV)

The evil things that the Israelites did, especially in the Northern Kingdom, are basically the same as what our own generation is now doing. If anything, our own generation's disregard for the Bible is even greater than that of Northern Israel. Therefore, I see no alternative but to conclude that our generation will be judged just as severely as they were, if not more so:

Therefore the LORD was very angry with Israel, and removed them out of his sight; none was left but the tribe of Judah only.

2 Kings 17:18 (RSV)

Let's look briefly at each of the main things the Israelites did. Then let's consider how well, or how badly, we do today in the Western churches in comparison to them:

- a) They "*sinned against the LORD their God*". But surely our modern Western churches sin more than they did, and we are even less ashamed about it than they were. They did not have the same levels of pornography, dishonesty, adultery, fornication, divorce, materialism, and financial corruption that we have today.
- b) They "*walked in the customs of the nations*" (i.e. the pagan Gentile world). That means they were worldly, rather than being holy and set apart for God. Again, we seem to be even more worldly, carnal, compromised and hypocritical than the people of Israel were. One also doubts if they could have been as brazen about their sin as our generation is, in particular concerning homosexuality.
- c) They "*served idols*". But we in the Western churches also serve idols. The only difference is that our idols are not made of wood or stone. We serve things like self, money, comfort, leisure, denominational tradition, career, ambition, power, status, possessions, etc etc. Can you or I truly say that none of those things are idols to us?
- d) They "*would not listen* (to God's warnings by the prophets) *but were stubborn.....*" Here we can make a very direct comparison. The Israelites refused to listen to the prophets, but we have far greater access than they had to what those same prophets said and wrote. Plus we also have the later prophets and the apostles. We even have the direct words of Jesus, which they had not got. Yet we undervalue, ignore, and even disobey, all of these. Therefore many of us are ignoring more of God's Word than they did, and with less excuse.
- e) They "*burned their sons and their daughters as offerings*". Some of the Israelites did this as part of their pagan worship, sacrificing their own babies as burnt offerings to demon gods like Molech and Baal. Some would protest that we are, at least, innocent of this. But are we? Even in Great Britain alone, 200,000 babies are killed every year in abortion. In America it is over 1,400,000 babies per year.

For the vast majority of those abortions the only real reason is the convenience of the mother and/or the father and/or grandparents. It is done because it doesn't fit in with their career plans, or their social life, or because it is economically difficult. If so, quite apart from being murder, it is being done for the sake of those 'gods' or 'idols', i.e. career, finance, convenience, self-interest etc. Therefore, how is the abortion industry of our day any less sinful than sacrificing babies to the god Molech?

If anything we are far worse than them, because the numbers are so much larger in our case. The Jewish people, even in the Northern Kingdom, never killed anywhere near the number of children

that we kill in the Western world today. Our abortions are conducted on an industrial scale. Worst of all, abortion is happening today even amongst those who claim to be part of the Church.

Israel degenerated because they ignored God's Word

What is the cause of all this? Why did Israel degenerate into such dreadful sins? The answer is contained within the passage above from 2 Kings. It is that:

- a) they did not listen to the warnings of God's prophets;
- b) they were stubborn;
- c) they despised God's statutes;
- d) they despised the covenant God had made with them through Moses.

The prophet Hosea also alludes to this problem when he says:

My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge; because you have rejected knowledge, I reject you from being a priest to me. And since you have forgotten the law of your God, I also will forget your children.

Hosea 4:6 (RSV)

Hosea then adds:

"..... and a people without understanding shall come to ruin..."

Hosea 4 14(b) (RSV)

When it says in 2 Kings 17:15 above that the people of Israel "*despised*" God's statutes, it does not mean that they hated or actively opposed them. It simply means that, like Esau, they considered them to be of little importance. But that is exactly what our own generation does, at least in the West. The Israelites also put too little importance on the covenant which God had made with them through Moses.

Although the Law of Moses is no longer in operation, we now have a much greater and even more important covenant. That is the '*New Covenant*', which Jesus brought into operation by His death on the cross. That covenant is permanent. The Church in our own day is despising and undervaluing the New Covenant far more blatantly than either Israel or Judah despised the lesser (and only temporary) covenant that God made with Moses.

Alongside the covenant made with Abraham, the New Covenant is now one of the two main covenants which concern us today. Unlike the covenant made with Moses, it is eternal. But, the Western churches today place far too little importance on this. Most of them rarely even mention, let alone emphasize, the cross, or the death of Jesus, or His blood which was shed in order to bring the New Covenant into being.

If the Jewish people's sin in despising the temporary covenant with Moses angered God, how much more angry must He be when so many of us in the Western churches in our day undervalue, ignore, or even deny, what Jesus did for us on the cross? The main way that we devalue or despise the New Covenant is when we ignore or fail to study God's Word. Remember that the very name we use for the books of the Bible from Matthew through to Revelation is the '*New Testament*'.

That is simply another way of saying the '*New Covenant*'. The words '*covenant*' and '*testament*' mean the same. So, when we despise God's Word, especially in the New Testament, we are automatically

also despising the New Covenant itself, that Jesus made for our benefit when He died on the cross. What is more, in despising the New Covenant, we are also despising the earlier covenants too.

CHAPTER 2

THE UNIQUE AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE AND THE IMPORTANCE OF ACCURATE DOCTRINE

*Surely the Lord GOD does nothing,
without revealing his secret
to his servants the prophets.
Amos 3:7 (RSV)*

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

*Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.
Matthew 24:35 (ESV)*

*¹⁷ I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them. ¹⁸ For such persons do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites, and by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the naive.
Romans 16:17-18 (ESV)*

*³¹ but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name
John 20:31(RSV)*

*²⁴for "All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, ²⁵but the word of the Lord remains forever." And this word is the good news that was preached to you
1 Peter 1:24-25 (ESV)*

It is our duty to try to understand God and it is possible to do so

Although there is always more to learn, we can, reasonably expect to reach a place where we do genuinely have a good understanding of God and His Word. It is not a hopeless project, at which we can never succeed. It can be done. We can realistically aim to reach a place of maturity and thorough knowledge, even though that knowledge is never complete or perfect. But most of us are not achieving that. Our problems, and our failures to achieve God's purposes, mainly come from not understanding God. In particular we fail to understand the following things about Him:

- a) His character and nature
- b) His ways
- c) His principles
- d) His aims and objectives
- e) His priorities
- f) His standards
- g) His holiness and righteousness

- h) His hatred of sin and wickedness
- i) His judgment and anger
- j) His mercy and grace
- k) His love for the Jewish people
- l) His love for the Church
- m) His love for the lost
- n) His ultimate plans and purposes for world history

The importance of accurate doctrine

The above list of subjects, and more besides, which we are all meant to know and understand, is what we might call ‘*doctrine*’. It is largely about understanding God's character, ways, plans and intentions, so that we can truly know Him. If our doctrine is wrong, then our view of God will also be wrong. If so, then we are in deep trouble, because wrong beliefs about God always have some adverse consequence.

We are likely to end up degenerating further into more error, or even into apostasy, whereby we cease to believe the truth and live in such a way that we are worse than those who have never believed. The Bible speaks of a generation on this earth in the last days, before Jesus returns, who will display all these characteristics. Consider the following passages from Paul's second letter to Timothy. Ask yourself whether we might, perhaps, be that particularly apostate and godless generation which Paul describes:

¹But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come: ²For men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, ³unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good, ⁴traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, ⁵having a form of godliness but denying its power. And from such people turn away!

2 Timothy 3:1-5 (NKJV)

If there was ever a generation in the Church who were "*lovers of themselves*", it is surely us in the Western churches. Plus, the sins and characteristics that Paul lists seem to fit today's Church exactly, more so than with any previous age. Given the awfulness of what Paul describes, note his proposed response to it all. Paul's advice to Timothy is to focus on the Bible.

He urges him, in the face of all that is coming, to devote himself to the Scriptures. But Timothy already knew the Scriptures better than most of us do. Therefore, Paul's advice to us would surely be even more emphatic. Paul then sets out what the Bible has to offer and why we need it:

¹⁰But you have carefully followed my doctrine, manner of life, purpose, faith, longsuffering, love, perseverance, ¹¹persecutions, afflictions, which happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium, at Lystra— what persecutions I endured. And out of them all the Lord delivered me. ¹²Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution. ¹³But evil men and impostors will grow worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived. ¹⁴But you must continue in the things which you have learned and been assured of, knowing from whom you have learned them, ¹⁵and that from childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. ¹⁶All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for

reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, ¹⁷that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.

2 Timothy 3:10-17 (NKJV)

Also, when Paul is telling Titus what qualities and characteristics an elder or overseer needs to have, he places great emphasis on his being able to hold firm to God's Word and *sound doctrine*:

⁷For an overseer, as God's steward, must be above reproach. He must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or a drunkard or violent or greedy for gain, ⁸but hospitable, a lover of good, self-controlled, upright, holy, and disciplined. ⁹He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.

Titus 1:7-9 (ESV)

But as for you, teach what accords with sound doctrine.

Titus 2:1 (ESV)

Furthermore, have you noticed in 2 Timothy 3:10 above that when he refers to how Timothy has imitated his life, Paul focuses, first and foremost, on doctrine? He puts it ahead of all the other qualities that Timothy was also seeking to acquire. That would surprise many people today. If you were seeking to imitate Paul, as we all should be, what single characteristic would you put at the top of the list? You might choose any of his other qualities such as faith, courage, perseverance etc, but you probably wouldn't have said doctrine. Yet that was first on the list for Paul, and also for Timothy.

It should therefore be first on our list too. But most of us would have to admit that it isn't, and that we are often shaky and vague about what we believe. Indeed, many of us are in an even worse condition. We live in an age when sound, biblical teaching and accurate doctrine are particularly rare and undervalued. In fact many of us seek the very opposite and immerse ourselves in false doctrine and foolish myths. Apostle Paul prophesied that the churches would one day degenerate in this way:

I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: ²preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. ³For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, ⁴and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths.

2 Timothy 4:1-4 (ESV)

Paul did not view doctrine as being something obscure or technical, the study of which we can safely leave to others. His approach was the opposite of what we see today. In the modern Western churches, standing up for accurate doctrine is often seen as 'hair splitting', or even bigotry. Anyone who stands up for truth today, even within the Church, let alone outside it, will receive more abuse than praise.

We are a generation which has little or no regard for truth and which cannot see why it matters so much to get our beliefs right. It actually makes sense for Paul to place so much emphasis on the accuracy of our doctrine. Ultimately, everything we do stems from what we believe. Therefore if our beliefs are wrong, then other things will also end up being wrong.

It is absurd to suggest that nothing is objectively true or false and that all things are relative or subjective. The reality is that some things are true and some are false in objective terms. There are some things about which we have to be 'black and white' and where any wooliness or compromise is wrong. Therefore we must change our attitude towards doctrine and make the pursuit of objective truth a very high priority, especially when it comes to gaining a correct understanding of God's Word.

Note also the very troubling words written by apostle John in his second letter about any person who "*does not abide in the doctrine of Christ.*" John warns us to avoid such a person, i.e. not to let them

into our homes, or even greet them, because of the serious harm that false doctrine causes. He even refers to what they teach as “*wicked work*”:

⁹ Anyone who goes ahead and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God; he who abides in the doctrine has both the Father and the Son. ¹⁰ If any one comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into the house or give him any greeting; ¹¹ for he who greets him shares his wicked work.

2 John 9-11 (RSV)

The excellent Bible teacher, Jacob Prasch, says that there are twice as many verses in the New Testament which urge us to develop accurate doctrine than there are verses which urge us to good behaviour. Jacob makes the further point that that is probably because it is accurate doctrine which leads us to good conduct, whereas false doctrine will always lead us to bad conduct and wrong lifestyles. In other words, there is a strong correlation between what we believe and how we live.

The authority of Scripture

Let's remind ourselves of what Paul said to Timothy about what Scripture is:

¹⁶All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, ¹⁷that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.

2 Timothy 3:16-17 (NASB)

This second letter to Timothy was written very shortly before Paul was executed. He knew he was imminently about to die. He was taking his last opportunity to advise and encourage his right-hand man, on whom so much depended. That fact alone must give this passage a special significance. Therefore, note carefully what Paul chooses to emphasise.

Ahead of all the other things he could have emphasised, Paul zooms in on the importance of the Bible. He tells Timothy that“*All Scripture is given by inspiration of God.....*”. Paul means that every verse is inspired by God. It is all God-given and it all reveals what God thinks. It is not just the thoughts and ideas of men.

That is the uniqueness of Scripture. We have to remember that it is God's own Word and realise, therefore, what immense authority and importance it has. Some of us might respond that we already know that the Bible is God's Word. But do we really? For many of us our actions don't suggest that that is what we really believe.

Surely, if we truly believed that Scripture was God speaking to us, then it would play a far greater role in our lives? It would be at the centre of all that we do. But for very many of us who claim to be Christians, the Bible is only at the margins of our daily lives and has very little influence on our decisions and actions.

The Bible is not merely to be “*taken into account*” or applied “*to the extent that we agree with it, or consider it to be relevant*”. It has infinite authority. There is nothing else that is equal to it, let alone higher than it. We must always bring our lives into line with it, never the other way round. What else can we do if we believe that it sets out God's thoughts and commands? Anything less than full obedience would be illogical.

How can any of us be so ridiculous as to ‘*disagree*’ with God? Likewise, how can we have the arrogance to pick and choose which parts of His Word to accept? Only a fool would do those things. The reality is, however, that most of us do all of those things, much of the time, without even realizing it. If we did ever stop to think about it, we would have to admit that such an attitude is absurd.

The infallibility of Scripture - it contains no errors at all

The Bible has total authority. It is completely infallible, and there are no errors in it, i.e. in the original Hebrew or Greek. Many ordinary books are authoritative, to some extent, even though they are only written by men. But the Bible goes much further than that. It claims to be all of the following and more:

- a) perfect - it is never wrong and contains no mistakes or inaccuracies at all;
- b) morally/ethically accurate;
- c) historically accurate;
- d) scientifically accurate;
- e) prophetically accurate - it tells us what will happen in the future;
- f) totally reliable - it will never fail or let you down.

Many of us, including church leaders, have lost sight of the truth about the infallibility of the Bible. The majority of professing Christians in our day, even real ones, do not believe that the Bible is totally true, accurate and reliable. Few churches teach that at all, let alone emphasize it. Most Western church leaders today do not have enough confidence in the Bible to be able to say any of (a) to (f) above.

On BBC Radio 4 in 2011, they were doing a series of readings from the King James Bible to mark its 400th anniversary. Each reading was introduced and discussed by a supposed expert who commented on it. On one particular day the theological "expert" was being very patronising and condescending about the Bible. He informed us that although the reading for that day was: *"of course, not literally true, but merely myth, that 'myth' still has importance for us"*.

That was how that theologian saw the Bible. He spoke as if it was a book of children's stories and fables. He is not alone. Millions would agree with him, even within the churches. But his view of the Bible was illogical. If the Bible isn't true, but is merely a 'myth', then we should not honour it at all. We should get rid of it.

We would be better off reading the newspaper because that does, at least, contain some facts. Myths have no use at all, especially if they are falsely pretending to be facts. If the Bible is just myth, rather than genuine, literal truth, then we should leave it alone completely. We need the truth, not interesting stories.

How do we know that the Bible is true?

The truth may be what we are looking for, but the question is does the Bible provide it? Is the Bible really infallible or isn't it and how can we know? What proof is there? The answer is that there are many ways in which we can know that the Bible is absolutely true. Let's consider just a few of these:

- a) Jesus said it is true

On many occasions Jesus quoted from the Hebrew Scriptures, which we call the Old Testament. When He did so, it was always with full and unqualified approval. He also endorsed it as true and spoke of it as fact, never as mere stories. For example he spoke of Satan's fall, creation, Adam, Noah, the worldwide flood, Lot, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, Moses and his miracles, the Exodus from Egypt, Jonah and the huge fish, and much more. There is not a single example of Jesus failing to take the Bible literally.

Jesus also validated the prophets. In particular, He validated Daniel, by referring to him as "*the prophet Daniel*". But if Jesus endorsed Daniel in that way, and accepted his prophecies as genuine, as He also did with many other prophets, then who are we to doubt them or to reject what they wrote? Jesus knew the whole Old Testament and He never called any of it into question. So why should we?

b) Apostle Paul said it is all true

As we've seen above, Paul said that all Scripture is inspired by God. That is simple enough. It means *all* of it, without any exception. That being so, how can *any* of it be wrong? God does not make mistakes. Neither does He lie or exaggerate.

c) Apostle Peter validated the writings of Paul and referred to them as 'Scripture'.

There is an important passage in Peter's second letter in which he refers to the letters of apostle Paul. Peter commends Paul's letters to us and equates them with "*the other Scriptures*". Thus, he clearly saw Paul's writings as being equal in authority to the Old Testament Scriptures, even when they were first written:

¹⁵And count the forbearance of our Lord as salvation. So also our beloved brother Paul wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, ¹⁶speaking of this as he does in all his letters. There are some things in them hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures.

2 Peter 3:15-16 (RSV)

Note, by the way, that even apostle Peter recognized that Paul's letters are sometimes "*hard to understand*". That remark ought at least to encourage those of us who have ever found Paul complicated. We are in good company.

d) Apostle Peter also validates all the Old Testament prophets and all the other apostles too

Consider this next passage from Peter. He tells us that *every* prophecy in the Bible is from God:

²⁰First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, ²¹because no prophecy ever came by the impulse of man, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.

2 Peter 1:20-21 (RSV)

If that isn't clear enough, Peter then goes on to give his personal seal of approval to all the Old Testament prophets and to all the apostles too. He refers to the LORD Jesus as having given *His* commandments *through* the apostles:

¹This is now the second letter that I have written to you, beloved, and in both of them I have aroused your sincere mind by way of reminder; ²that you should remember the predictions of the holy prophets and the commandment of the Lord and Saviour through your apostles.

2 Peter 3:1-2 (RSV)

The sufficiency of Scripture

The Bible may be authoritative, and it may be infallible, but is it *sufficient*? Does it provide *all* that we need, or do we need something else as well? Does it have any deficiencies, such that we need to fill the gaps by also looking at the teachings of men? The answer is that the Bible contains everything we need in order to achieve all the objectives that God has set for us. But what are those objectives? What exactly is the Bible sufficient for? We can answer that by looking, once more, at what Paul told Timothy:

¹⁶All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; ¹⁷so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.

2 Timothy 3:16-17 (NASB)

Let us take each of these things in turn and examine what exactly the Bible is profitable for:

1) for teaching (i.e. doctrine)

The Bible contains all the doctrine that we need to be taught. There is nothing missing from the Bible that we *need* to know about. Of course, there are hundreds of other things we would *like* to know, but which God doesn't choose to tell us about. There are also some secret things that God does not want us to know about yet. Or they may be dangerous for us to dabble with. It is just as in a family, where the parents do not choose to share all their thoughts, concerns or plans with their children. God does the same with us.

Some things are too deep or complicated for us. They may fascinate us, but they could distract us, or even harm us, if we looked into them. It would be like telling a five year old child all about nuclear weapons, cancer, witchcraft and pornography. There are some things which it is best for a child not even to know about, let alone dwell upon. We are like children in God's eyes. He wants to shelter us from certain things. It is for our good, and we should be thankful for it.

So, God has filled the Bible with every doctrine that we need to know in order to do His will and achieve His purposes for us. But He chooses not to go very far beyond that. God deliberately ignores some issues and leaves certain intriguing questions unanswered. Even so, the Bible is still '*sufficient*'. It contains all that we *need* to know in order to do the things that God wants us to achieve, which is all that really matters.

2) for reproof

'Reproof' is an unfashionable word, especially to our petulant and self-obsessed generation. However, the Bible also contains all that we need in order to be able to challenge or confront ourselves, and also those under our care, or to whom we minister. Few people, if asked, would have put reproof second on their list of the things for which the Bible is useful. Not many would give it that much significance, or indeed any significance.

Few would even see reproof as a benefit at all, but Paul does, because God sees our great need for it. He intends the Bible to be used for that purpose. In other words, the Bible contains all that we need in order to expose and challenge our own faults, sins, foolishness, transgressions, iniquities and rebellion. Then we can reprove ourselves, and each other, about those things.

So, we may not have been looking for a 'manual of reproof', but we have got one, and it is perfect for that purpose. Our problem is that we don't like reproof. But that is another matter. Whether we like it or not, we need it. Therefore, from now on, as you read the Bible, begin to pray for the ability to see its reproof in relation to your own life.

Go out of your way to ask God for such reproof. Also ask Him to help you to receive it well, and to be willing to repent and to change. You could pray along these lines:

"Lord, please show me today, from your Word, some of my own sins, character faults, bad habits, or anything that displeases you. Open my eyes and help me to see your reproof as applying to me, not just to other people. Help me also to become willing to admit my sins, to repent and to change."

3) for correction

Correction is similar to reproof, but here the emphasis is not on our *sin*, but on the mistakes, gaps and misunderstandings in our *beliefs*. The aim is to correct the errors in our doctrine. The Bible puts us right when we are mistaken, or where we have been wrongly taught, or deceived. No matter what we may have been told by others, and however wrong or incomplete our views may be, the Bible is sufficient to correct us.

It can get us back on the right track, with the right doctrinal understanding, if we will allow it to. But that will only work if we are determined to believe the Bible rather than believing what men say, or clinging to our own opinions or traditions. We must get all our views, beliefs, priorities and understanding from the Bible, rather than from tradition, or from the teachings of our particular denomination.

Unless we make a determined effort to do otherwise, most of us will unconsciously absorb our beliefs and practices from the people around us, not from the Bible. Therefore, if they are wrong, you will be wrong. Instead, we need to be like the Bereans (see Acts 17:11) and check carefully in the Bible for ourselves to see whether things are true or false, rather than just relying on our church's traditional stance. Then we will be capable of correcting ourselves. We can also identify any errors in what we are taught.

However, if you aren't seeking for the Bible to correct you, rather than to affirm your existing opinions, then you will probably remain in error. You would not even notice, the correction that the Bible contains. What is lacking, for most of us, is a heart that is even *willing* to be corrected, let alone seeking to be. To change that you could regularly pray something like this:

"Lord please speak to me today from your Word. Help me to see any mistakes, gaps, or wrong teaching in the things I currently think or believe. Show me my own errors and those of my teachers. Also show me the things I have not yet seen, or not yet been taught, so that I can change my thinking and enlarge my knowledge and understanding."

4) for instruction in righteousness

The Bible is profitable for achieving *God's* objectives, not necessarily *our own*. We may have all sorts of plans and objectives for our lives, but they may not be the things that God concentrates on in the Bible. Its main focus is on changing us to become like Jesus. That is what God aims for, and that is what the Bible is designed to achieve.

So, the Bible is capable of instructing us in righteousness. It contains all that we need to be able to understand what righteousness is. Firstly it shows us how to get imputed righteousness. That is the righteousness that is transferred to us by our being justified. It comes through repenting and believing in Jesus Christ.

Secondly the Bible tells us how to become sanctified, by gradually changing to become more and more like Jesus in practice, in the way we live and the quality of our character. Again, the only thing in doubt is whether we really want such righteousness. We ought to, because much is promised in the Bible to anybody who really wants to obtain righteousness, to the extent that they hunger and thirst for it and are willing to be persecuted for it:

***⁶"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.
Matthew 5:6 (RSV)***

***¹⁰"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
¹¹"Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you
falsely on my account. ¹²Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so men
persecuted the prophets who were before you.***

Matthew 5:10-12 (RSV)

There are numerous things that we ask God for, but righteousness is very rarely one of them. For most of us, it is not even on our agenda. It needs to be much more highly emphasised and valued. We need to start pursuing it earnestly. Therefore, if you have already been born again, i.e. justified, by receiving the imputed righteousness of Jesus, you should now begin to pray for practical righteousness, i.e. sanctification. You could perhaps pray something along these lines:

"Father, thank you that Jesus has transferred His own righteousness to me, so that you now see me as if I had all His sinless perfection. Now please also change me in my daily behaviour, speech and attitudes. Please sanctify me. Give me the power and the grace to change and become more like Him, especially in those parts of my character where, at present, I am least like Him."

However, perhaps you realise, even as you read this, that you are not yet a real Christian at all and have not even had the imputed righteousness of Jesus transferred to you. If so then please refer back to Book One of this series, which explains how to become a Christian and be saved.

5) to equip us for every good work

Finally, the Bible equips and enables us to do every kind of good work that God has planned for us. It sets out what God wants us to do, and how to do it. Again, the only thing in question is whether or not we actually want to do those good works. Many of us, at least in the West, are uninterested in such things and don't even consider good works, let alone dwell upon the subject.

The Bible is the main way that God has chosen to make Himself known to us. And it is the one and only place from which to get our doctrines.

The Bible is the only reliable source of true, accurate doctrine. However, many people actually get their beliefs about God from all sorts of other places as well, such as church leaders, traditions, their own opinions, other people's opinions and even from the use of spiritual gifts. That is, they accept as doctrine things which were said by some person in their church as a word of prophecy, or as an interpretation of tongues.

None of these things, however genuine and valid they may be, can ever be a source of any doctrine. We must get those solely from the Bible. If not, we will inevitably become confused and deceived. We will also end up redesigning God and even creating our own god to match up with our own opinions, or the things we have been told, rather than accept the real God who is revealed in the pages of the Bible.

Moreover, we must accept the *whole* Bible and allow all of it to tell us about God and about what He thinks and says. For example, I come across many people who pick and choose which parts of the Bible they are going to accept and believe and which parts they won't. People rarely do that openly and explicitly. Not many people say express words to the effect of "*I do not believe, and will not accept, what the Bible says about.....*"

At any rate I rarely ever hear anyone who claims to be a Christian speaking as blatantly as that. They are more subtle, and less honest, about it. They therefore operate as if the Bible was a buffet bar, or a pick and mix sweet stall. They feel entitled to choose which parts of the Bible to believe and which parts not to believe.

The net effect of this approach is that you will end up making your own god for yourself, in your own image, who shares all your opinions and priorities. For example, I have heard people say "*for me, God is love*" and that "*love is what we need to focus on*". However, they ignore, or even deny, a host of other things about God's character which are equally real and important, such as His holiness, righteousness, judgment etc.

I was discussing this with two different people recently and describing God's holiness and impending judgment. Both of them, separately, said to me "*I don't recognise the God you speak of*". Neither of them were willing to believe that God would ever judge us or send anyone to the Lake of Fire. They had therefore both created a different god, of their own making, who does not do those things.

They felt more comfortable with that alternative god than with the real God, who is as He describes Himself in the pages of the Bible. Islam does the same thing. The god whom Muslims call '*Allah*' is not the God of the Bible. He is profoundly different in many ways. Therefore he cannot be the same person as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The nature and characteristics of the real God are revealed to us in the Bible, not within the Koran.

In other words, we are not free to design our own god to suit ourselves, removing from the God of the Bible any characteristics or features which we don't like. Many of us do that, but what we end up with is a false god of our own making. Such a god is not worth having because it cannot save you. So, the Bible is sufficient for everything that God designed it for. Therefore we can have full confidence that the Bible is all we need to enable us to do those things that God is calling us to do. We do not need any further man-made ideas to supplement the Bible.

An example of such things being added to the Bible, or substituted in place of what it teaches, is psychological counselling and psychotherapy. These are said to be fields of science, though they are actually just pseudo-science. What we now call psychology has only really come into existence as a subject over the last 100 years. It has then ballooned in size over the last 50 years. It uses self-centred ideas to attempt to address the problems that come from our sinful, selfish, carnal natures. Psychology is a man-made way of looking at people and their problems, which is not found in the Bible.

In fact it is often the direct opposite of what the Bible says. That is why psychology and psychotherapy are so ineffective in dealing with the problems caused by our sins, especially our selfishness and pride. Apostle Paul says the Bible has provided all that we need for teaching, reproof, correction and training in righteousness. Accordingly, the Bible is all we need to counsel ourselves, and others, about our personal problems, weaknesses and sins. What else could we need?

We certainly do not need the atheistic, and even occultic, ideas of misguided men like Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow. They were the main founders of what we now call psychology. Regrettably, the beliefs, values and practices of such men have taken deep root in many of the churches in the West. It is now commonplace for Christians to seek to counsel people using the unbiblical, man-made ideas of psychology, rather than the God-given truth of the Bible.

Many churches even regard a degree in psychology as being necessary before one person can be allowed to counsel another. Therefore many theological colleges now offer psychology as a subject choice. They fear that students would not enrol if they did not offer it. This is particularly true in the USA, where it is said that churches are the biggest referral agencies to psychological counsellors, instead of counselling their own people themselves, from the Bible.

Therefore psychology could be said to be the biggest heresy in the world today, because what other false teaching is so widely accepted, even within the real Church? The majority of what psychology has to say is not true, at least when it comes to sin. At its best, it is a pale imitation of the truth, because it originates from men's minds, not from God. At its worst, it is distorted and deceptive.

If you would like to know more about the errors of psychology, please go to the Real Christianity website and find the section for recommended ministries and Bible teachers. There is a section there about Martin and Deirdre Bobgan. They are both former psychologists who became Christians and now expose the falseness of psychology.

Psychology presents us with a false view of ourselves and of our faults, sins, duties and responsibilities. It may have some accurate insights into our behaviour and thinking, which may be of relevance in such

areas as marketing or advertising etc. But, in all of the areas that really matter, it teaches the opposite of what the Bible says.

Thus, choose to put your trust and confidence in the Bible, not in man-made ways of thinking such as psychology. Let the Bible alone be your guide. Rely solely on it for instruction on all issues relating to human nature. If you want a manual on how to repair your car, you will need to look outside of the Bible, but if you want to know about the nature and ways of people, their problems, sins and foolishness, then your enquiries should begin, and end, with the Bible. It is all you need.

However, we need to study the whole Bible if we want the whole truth. We need the sum total of what the entire Bible says, not just a selection of short passages or verses, here and there, especially if they are taken out of context. In other words, although every verse of the Bible is *true*, only the whole Bible is *the truth*.

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

The power of Scripture

The Bible stands alone in all literature. No other book is 'living and active'. The rest are all dead works containing the frozen, captured thoughts of mere men. Other books may well have some value, sometimes a great deal of value, but they are not alive like the Bible is. The Bible is unique in this regard. Its words are filled with power to achieve all of the purposes which God has for it. The reason it is 'alive' is because it has been inspired by God.

He has put within its pages the power to convict us, move us, correct us and reach deep into us. No other book can do any of that. When we take into account the whole of God's Word and hold it all in a healthy tension, then each part qualifies, amplifies or clarifies the other parts. That way we get the complete truth, without distortions, omissions or errors:

¹²For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. ¹³And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do.

Hebrews 4:12-13 (NASB)

Whenever you read the Bible, the Bible is also reading you. It is engaging with you, responding to you, and probing into you. It is supernatural. God has put into the pages of the Bible some of His own power. He chooses to allow Himself to be represented by it, such that it says what He wants to say. He has chosen to give to the Bible the power to speak to us on His behalf. In addition to all of that God stands ready to bring to life any specific verse at the right moment for us.

Then it can stand out to us on the very day when we particularly need to see it. It could be a verse which you have read 20 or 30 times before, but which has never previously moved or affected you. Then, all of a sudden, God amplifies it or "makes it go fluorescent" for you. It then speaks to your need, matches your situation and "comes alive" for you. That is a common experience for anybody who loves God's Word and who prays for God to open their hearts to understand it.

CHAPTER 3

THE INFALLIBILITY OF SCRIPTURE – DEALING WITH APPARENT OR ALLEGED ‘ERRORS’ IN THE BIBLE

¹⁷ *Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth.
John 17:17 (ESV)*

*The sum of your word is truth,
and every one of your righteous rules endures forever.
Psalm 119:160 (ESV)*

⁴ *But he answered, “It is written,
“Man shall not live by bread alone,
but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.”
Matthew 4:4 (ESV)*

*“Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?
Tell me, if you have understanding.
Job 38:4 (ESV)*

*The words of the Lord are pure words,
like silver refined in a furnace on the ground,
purified seven times.
Psalm 12:6 (ESV)*

*And the Lord said to Job:
² “Shall a faultfinder contend with the Almighty?
He who argues with God, let him answer it.”
Job 40:1-2 (ESV)*

⁵ *Trust in the Lord with all your heart,
and do not lean on your own understanding.*

⁶ *In all your ways acknowledge him,
and he will make straight your paths.*

⁷ *Be not wise in your own eyes;
fear the Lord, and turn away from evil.
Proverbs 3:5-7 (ESV)*

⁸ *All the words of my mouth are righteous;
there is nothing twisted or crooked in them.*

⁹ *They are all straight to him who understands,
and right to those who find knowledge.*

¹⁰ *Take my instruction instead of silver,
and knowledge rather than choice gold,
Proverbs 8:8-10 (ESV)*

*Whoever despises the word brings destruction on himself,
but he who reveres the commandment will be rewarded.
Proverbs 13:13 (ESV)*

Apparent mistakes or contradictions in the Bible

The Bible is a perfect, flawless book. In its original Hebrew or Greek, it contains no errors or contradictions. However, it is not necessarily perfect, or without errors, when you read it *in translation*, such as in English. Then, what you are reading is not the original text of the Bible, which God inspired. Instead it is the work of some committee, doing their best to translate into their own language what the original Hebrew or Greek says.

That is not always easy, to put it mildly. God certainly inspired the prophets and apostles when they wrote the Scriptures, but He does not necessarily inspire the *translators*. They make many mistakes, because translation is a very hard job. Sometimes it is almost impossible. There are therefore times where the way they choose to translate a Hebrew or Greek phrase into English is wrong, or confusing, or at least misses the real point.

So, we need to be clear about what we mean when we refer to the Bible as being the *infallible* Word of God. It is only infallible *in the original languages*, as set out above. However, some people, including many theologians and church leaders, would challenge even that. They would say that the Bible is "full of contradictions", even in the original Hebrew or Greek.

On the face of it they can appear to have a point, because there are times when, quite apart from the translation problems, the Bible does seem to contradict itself. It also contains some statements which sound to us to be wrong, or even impossible. However, when that occurs, you will find that there is always an explanation which completely solves the apparent problem, provided you are willing to dig for long enough until you find it.

Every time you look closely at these apparent contradictions or errors, it turns out that the Bible is correct after all. When you discover that, especially if you realize it many times over, it is actually faith-building. You realise afresh just how astonishing the Bible is. Let us look at a few examples of what some people have thought were errors or contradictions, but which aren't actually errors, or contradictions, at all. On the contrary, they further prove the infallibility and inspired nature of the Bible:

Example 1 - The '*grammatical error*' in the very first verse of the Bible, Genesis 1:1

The book of Genesis opens with what looks like a very peculiar grammatical error. It seems to be a clear mistake, until you realise that it's actually deliberate. The verse uses the plural noun '*Elohim*', which is the Hebrew word for God, immediately alongside the singular form of the verb '*to create*'. So it basically reads "*In the beginning, God (plural noun) He (singular) created the heavens and the earth*".

So, the noun indicates that God is plural, i.e. three or more persons. But then the verb ending used indicates that He is one, or singular. It would be like saying "*The issue was put to the committee and he decided to.....*" We would all call that a mistake. However, that apparent 'error' in the Hebrew text of the first line of Genesis is no mistake. It is a deliberately provocative statement.

It hints, at the very start of the Bible, that God is three Persons and yet one God. The rest of the Bible eventually makes that clear. But the first verse of the book of Genesis just uses this apparent mismatch of plural noun and singular verb, without giving any explanation. God leaves it until much later to explain why. So, if you were to reject the Bible on the basis of that supposed 'mistake', you'd be making a big mistake yourself.

Example 2 - Was Jesus going to Jericho or from Jericho?

In the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, we are told of how Jesus restored the sight of an old blind man, Bartimaeus. The problem is that, according to Matthew and Mark, it was done as Jesus was *leaving* Jericho but, according to Luke, it happened as Jesus was *approaching* Jericho. So, who is right? We shall firstly set out the verses which say it was as He was leaving. The capital letters have been added by me to highlight the key words:

²⁹ And as they WENT OUT OF Jericho, a great crowd followed him. ³⁰ And behold, two blind men sitting by the roadside, when they heard that Jesus was passing by, cried out, "Have mercy on us, Son of David!" ³¹ The crowd rebuked them, telling them to be silent; but they cried out the more, "Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David!" ³² And Jesus stopped and called them, saying, "What do you want me to do for you?" ³³ They said to him, "Lord, let our eyes be opened." ³⁴ And Jesus in pity touched their eyes, and immediately they received their sight and followed him.

Matthew 20:29-34 (RSV)

And they came to Jericho; and AS HE WAS LEAVING Jericho with his disciples and a great multitude, Bartimae'us, a blind beggar, the son of Timae'us, was sitting by the roadside.

Mark 10:46 (RSV)

But now look at how Luke seems to say the opposite:

As he DREW NEAR TO Jericho, a blind man was sitting by the roadside begging;

Luke 18:35 (RSV)

This seems like a definite error, for which there can surely be no possible explanation. But it isn't. The answer is quite simple once you realise that there are *two Jerichos*, right alongside each other. One is *old* Jericho, which was destroyed at the time of Joshua. The other is *new* Jericho. That is because Jericho was subsequently rebuilt by Hiel of Bethel (see 1 Kings 16:34).

So, all it means is that Jesus was leaving one Jericho and going to the other when He came across blind Bartimaeus. So, He was both leaving and arriving. Therefore, Matthew, Mark and Luke are all correct. They just have different places in mind when they use the word 'Jericho', i.e. the old one or the new one.

Example 3 – Lack of any evidence of the existence of Pontius Pilate – until a stone slab with an inscription about him was discovered upside down.

During Jesus' active ministry, and at the time of His trial and crucifixion, the Roman Governor of Judea was a man called Pontius Pilate. We first hear of him in Luke chapter three when John the Baptist was starting out on his ministry:

¹ In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, ² during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness.

Luke 3:1-2 (ESV)

Then when Jesus was put on trial, this man, Pontius Pilate, the Roman Governor, was one of the people who tried Jesus. It was he who sentenced Jesus to death:

¹ Then the whole company of them arose and brought him before Pilate. ² And they began to accuse him, saying, "We found this man misleading our nation and forbidding us to give tribute to Caesar, and saying that he himself is Christ, a king." ³ And Pilate asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?"

And he answered him, "You have said so." ⁴Then Pilate said to the chief priests and the crowds, "I find no guilt in this man."

Luke 23:1-4 (ESV)

²³But they were urgent, demanding with loud cries that he should be crucified. And their voices prevailed. ²⁴So Pilate decided that their demand should be granted. ²⁵He released the man who had been thrown into prison for insurrection and murder, for whom they asked, but he delivered Jesus over to their will.

Luke 23:23-25 (ESV)

So, that's who Pontius Pilate was and that's what he did. But there's a problem. Although he is referred to very clearly in all four gospels, there is no mention of him in any historical records. That's actually because he fell out with Caesar who then ordered that every trace of the existence of Pontius Pilate should be destroyed so that his name would be blotted out.

Therefore, for most of the history of the Church, the only evidence that we had for the existence of this man was in the Bible. He is not referred to anywhere else. Some might say that that calls the Bible into question. That was how things stood for 19 centuries, until after the State of Israel had been recreated in 1948.

Then, some years later, when archaeological work was being carried out at Caesarea, a large stone slab was found upside down. It had been lost since the first century. On the underside of it was an inscription in Latin which was about Pontius Pilate! It had been discarded but then used as a piece of stone when making another building. So, archaeology yet again proved that what the Bible says is true, regardless of whether there are any other historical records.

Example 4 - Is God peaceful or warlike?

This is typical of the kind of problem which people raise, where the Bible describes God in one way in one passage and then describes Him in the opposite way somewhere else. For example in Exodus we are told:

The LORD is a man of war; the LORD is his name.
Exodus 15:3 (RSV)

However, in Paul's letter to the Romans, he speaks of God as the "God of peace":

The God of peace be with you all. Amen.
Romans 15:33 (RSV)

One might ask how God can be both a '*man of war*' and '*the God of peace*' at the same time? Is it a contradiction? Not at all. It is really simple, as are all the other examples where God is described in two opposite ways in different passages. The explanation here is that in relation to His enemies, i.e. the wicked, God is warlike. He has said He will destroy them (See Books Five and Six). He will also judge and punish them.

However, with those who love Him, God is at peace. He is therefore full of love, mercy, grace and kindness in relation to them. There is actually no inconsistency. God simply treats the wicked and the righteous in different ways. The difference is not really in Him, but in the people He is dealing with. It also depends on what God is doing at a particular time.

Example 5 – Does Jesus’ date of birth match up with what the Bible says about the timings of the reigns of Herod the Great and Governor Quirinius ?

I am indebted to the late Dave Hunt of The Berean Call and also the nineteenth and early twentieth century writer, Sir Robert Anderson, the former head of CID at Scotland Yard, for this slightly complicated example. This seems at first sight to be an error in the Bible, but then, when you examine it carefully, you discover that the details are completely consistent.

Indeed, it proves that the men who wrote the Bible were eye witnesses who wrote their accounts shortly afterwards, while the information was still fresh in their minds. That’s an important point to note because some critics of the Bible allege that it was written “centuries later” and therefore cannot be relied upon as accurate history. However, apostle Peter specifically tells us that he and the other apostles were eye witnesses of the things they wrote about:

¹⁶For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. ¹⁷For when he received honor and glory from God the Father and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased," ¹⁸we heard this voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain.

2 Peter 1: 16-18 (RSV)

So let us turn now to the question of *when* Jesus was born and how that fits in with the other facts we are told in the Bible about the dates of the reigns of King Herod (the Great) and Governor Quirinius of Syria. If we look firstly at Matthew chapter two, it says that when Jesus was born, King Herod the Great was still alive and ruling over Israel:

¹Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, saying, ²"Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the East, and have come to worship him."

Matthew 2:1-2 (RSV)

We also know that Herod the Great tried to kill Jesus and that Jesus’ mother Mary fled with Joseph to Egypt to hide Him from Herod:

¹³Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there till I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." ¹⁴And he rose and took the child and his mother by night, and departed to Egypt, ¹⁵and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfil what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, "Out of Egypt have I called my son." ¹⁶Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, was in a furious rage, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time which he had ascertained from the wise men.

Matthew 2:13-16 (RSV)

However, shortly afterwards, when Herod the Great died, Mary and Joseph took Jesus back to Israel, to live in Nazareth:

¹⁹But when Herod died, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, saying, ²⁰"Rise, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the child's life are dead." ²¹And he rose and took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. ²²But when he heard that Archelaus reigned over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there, and being warned in a dream he withdrew to the district of Galilee. ²³And he went and dwelt in a city called Nazareth, that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled, "He shall be called a Nazarene."

Matthew 2:19-23 (RSV)

All of that is fair enough so far, but the problem is that we know that Herod the Great died in the year that we call 3BC. Therefore, for Jesus to have been born while Herod the Great was still alive, and for Mary and Joseph to need to spend some time hiding in Egypt to avoid Herod, then Jesus would have to have been born earlier than 3 BC, in say 4 or 5 BC. But that presents a timing problem as a result of this next passage from Luke's gospel:

¹In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled. ²This was the first enrollment, when Quirin'i-us was governor of Syria. ³And all went to be enrolled, each to his own city. ⁴And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, ⁵to be enrolled with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. ⁶And while they were there, the time came for her to be delivered. ⁷And she gave birth to her first-born son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

Luke 2: 1-7 (RSV)

We are told by Luke that Quirinius was Governor of Syria when the decree was made by Caesar Augustus about the census, which required Joseph to travel to Bethlehem in order to enrol. The problem is that the history books said (until the late nineteenth century) that Quirinius was Governor of Syria *from AD 6 onwards*. Therefore our problem is that Matthew chapter two requires Jesus to have been born *before 3 BC*, but Luke chapter two seemed to require Him to have been born *after AD 6*.

The solution is simple, though it was not discovered by archaeologists until quite recently. It is that Quirinius was Governor of Syria *twice*. His second period in office began in AD 6, but he had had an earlier period in office from 4 BC to 1 BC. That therefore fits perfectly with the time when King Herod the Great died in 3BC. It is also perfectly consistent with Jesus being born, as He was, in the autumn of the year we call 4 BC.

That is actually where our calendar ought to start from. However, when our calendar was calculated in the fourth century they got the start point wrong. They thought that Jesus was born in what we might call the year zero. In fact He was born earlier than that in what we would call 4 BC. Thus the real year 2000 was actually in what we call 1996.

We could summarize the problem as follows:

- 1) To fit in with the time when we know King Herod the Great died, in 3 BC, Jesus would have to have been born *before 3B C*, i.e. in 4 BC or earlier.
- 2) But if Quirinius only became Governor of Syria in AD 6, as was thought until recently, then Jesus would have to have been born *after AD 6*.
- 3) However, given what we now know, i.e. that Quirinius had an earlier period in office as Governor of Syria from 4 BC to about 1 BC, then the dates actually fit perfectly.

Therefore we see that these passages from Luke and Matthew, which were thought by some to be contradictory and irreconcilable, match up perfectly once you realise the correct facts. The intricacy and complexity of all of that background detail, and the fact that the Bible turns out in the end to be exactly right on every single point, proves two things:

- a) that the Bible is flawlessly accurate and thus inspired by God;
- b) that it had to have been written at the time by eye-witnesses. It would have been impossible for any bogus writer to have fabricated a false story even 20-30 years later, let alone centuries later. There is no way that such an imposter writing later on, and pretending to be Luke or Matthew, could have got all of these tiny details to match up with each other. It would be impossible. Nobody would have been aware of all these little facts at any later time, so as to be able to get the dates of King

Herod's death and of Governor Quirinius's first term in office to line up correctly, without making any errors.

Example 6 – Why did apostle Paul not seem to know who the High Priest was in Acts chapter 23? How could he have been unaware of who and what Ananias was when he was right in front of him in the Sanhedrin in all his robes etc?

One passage of Scripture that used to puzzle me was in Acts chapter 23 where apostle Paul was brought before the Council known as the Sanhedrin, over which the Jewish High Priest presided. What is curious about it is that it gives the impression that Paul does not realise that Ananias is the High Priest, even though it is a meeting of the Sanhedrin and Ananias was presiding over it. Presumably Ananias was wearing the robes of his office and was also surrounded by elaborately dressed officials and priests. That would make it unmistakably obvious who and what he was. This is what happened:

But on the morrow, desiring to know the real reason why the Jews accused him, he unbound him, and commanded the chief priests and all the council to meet, and he brought Paul down and set him before them. ¹And Paul, looking intently at the council, said, "Brethren, I have lived before God in all good conscience up to this day." ²And the high priest Anani'as commanded those who stood by him to strike him on the mouth. ³Then Paul said to him, "God shall strike you, you whitewashed wall! Are you sitting to judge me according to the law, and yet contrary to the law you order me to be struck?" ⁴Those who stood by said, "Would you revile God's high priest?"

Acts 22:30–23:4 (RSV)

So, Ananias strikes Paul in the face and Paul rebukes him for doing so, because Ananias was breaking the law. But when those around condemn Paul for daring to rebuke the High Priest, Paul makes this strange reply:

And Paul said, "I did not know, brethren, that he was the high priest; for it is written, 'You shall not speak evil of a ruler of your people.'"

Acts 23: 5 (RSV)

I always used to assume that somehow Paul did not realise who or what Ananias was, despite Paul being a former Pharisee himself and also the official setting and the elaborate garments being worn. Yet I also felt it was odd, because it would be like sitting in front of a High Court Judge, dressed in his red robes, and somehow not being aware that he was a Judge. However, it turns out that there is a simple explanation which comes from the Jewish historian, Josephus.

It is that Ananias had previously been the High Priest, but he had then been replaced by another man. Later on his successor was murdered and Ananias came back and *illegitimately* usurped the position of High Priest. Thus he became High Priest again, but only by grabbing the role for himself by corruption and manipulation, without ever being validly appointed. Therefore, once you realise all of that, Paul's strange remark makes perfect sense. It was said *ironically*, as a side swipe at Ananias, referring to the illegitimacy of his usurped position. It means:

- a) It would have been wrong to publicly rebuke Ananias if he had been the High Priest.
- b) However, Paul did not accept that Ananias was validly appointed. Thus he was not truly the High Priest at all. Those present on that day probably knew that very well, though they were not bold enough to say so. At any rate, they would have understood the irony in Paul's voice.
- c) What's more, in the light of all that, it was right for Paul to rebuke him in public as he did.

Again we see a level of precise detail which proves that the book of Acts was written at the time by eye-witnesses. Who could possibly have known of that small detail about Ananias' illegitimacy as a

usurper if the book had been written decades or centuries later? Moreover, the fact that that tiny detail turns out to be so perfectly accurate once you examine it clearly, gives us confidence that the rest of the book of Acts is equally accurate and true.

Example 7 - How much money did King David pay for the threshing floor and surrounding land in Jerusalem and whom did he pay?

We are told that King David bought a threshing floor and the surrounding land. The question is how much did David pay for it and whom did he pay? Let's look at two passages which refer to this incident, firstly 2 Samuel. In each passage *I have put the key words in capital letters*:

*¹⁸So Gad came to David that day and said to him, "Go up, erect an altar to the LORD on the threshing floor of ARAUNAH THE JEBUSITE." ¹⁹David went up according to the word of Gad, just as the LORD had commanded. ²⁰Araunah looked down and saw the king and his servants crossing over toward him; and Araunah went out and bowed his face to the ground before the king. ²¹Then Araunah said, "Why has my lord the king come to his servant?" And David said, "To buy the threshing floor from you, in order to build an altar to the LORD, that the plague may be held back from the people." ²²Araunah said to David, "Let my lord the king take and offer up what is good in his sight. Look, the oxen for the burnt offering, the threshing sledges and the yokes of the oxen for the wood. ²³Everything, O king, Araunah gives to the king." And Araunah said to the king, "May the LORD your God accept you." ²⁴However, the king said to Araunah, "No, but I will surely buy it from you for a price, for I will not offer burnt offerings to the LORD my God which cost me nothing." **SO DAVID BOUGHT THE THRESHING FLOOR AND THE OXEN FOR FIFTY SHEKELS OF SILVER.** ²⁵David built there an altar to the LORD and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings. Thus the LORD was moved by prayer for the land, and the plague was held back from Israel.*

2 Samuel 24:18-25 (NASB)

Now look at the seemingly different account in 1 Chronicles:

*¹⁸ Then the angel of the LORD commanded Gad to say to David, that David should go up and build an altar to the LORD on the threshing floor of ORNAN THE JEBUSITE. ¹⁹ So David went up at the word of Gad, which he spoke in the name of the LORD. ²⁰ Now Ornan turned back and saw the angel, and his four sons who were with him hid themselves. And Ornan was threshing wheat. ²¹ As David came to Ornan, Ornan looked and saw David, and went out from the threshing floor and prostrated himself before David with his face to the ground. ²² Then David said to Ornan, "Give me the site of this threshing floor, that I may build on it an altar to the LORD; for the full price you shall give it to me, that the plague may be restrained from the people." ²³ Ornan said to David, "Take it for yourself; and let my lord the king do what is good in his sight. See, I will give the oxen for burnt offerings and the threshing sledges for wood and the wheat for the grain offering; I will give it all." ²⁴ But King David said to Ornan, "No, but I will surely buy it for the full price; for I will not take what is yours for the LORD, or offer a burnt offering which costs me nothing." ²⁵ **SO DAVID GAVE ORNAN 600 SHEKELS OF GOLD BY WEIGHT FOR THE SITE.** ²⁶ Then David built an altar to the LORD there and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings. And he called to the LORD and He answered him with fire from heaven on the altar of burnt offering.*

1 Chronicles 21:18-26 (NASB)

So, we see in 2 Samuel that David paid 50 shekels of silver to a man called Araunah. However, in 1 Chronicles we are told that David paid 600 shekels of gold to a man called Ornan. Which is right? The answer is that both are right. The solution to the first point is that Araunah and Ornan are two alternative renderings of the same name. As for the price, David *initially* paid 50 shekels of silver for the oxen and for part of the land, i.e. just for the 'threshing floor', where he quickly built an altar. However he *later* paid 600 shekels of gold for the whole site, which was much larger.

It had to be large, because the whole Temple was subsequently built on that site. David's initial wish was simply to erect an altar on the threshing floor, where he had seen the angel of the LORD. Later David decided he wanted to build an entire Temple, which meant the whole site was needed. The land, which was the size of a farm, was then purchased and David's son, Solomon, later built the Temple on it. So the solution is that there was one seller, but two transactions – the first smaller, and the second larger. Therefore, there is no error or contradiction at all.

Example 8 - Did Absalom have sons or not?

In 2 Samuel we are told that King David's rebellious son, Absalom, had *three* sons, but later we are told that he had *no* sons. Here are the passages, which appear to contradict each other:

²⁷To Absalom there were born three sons, and one daughter whose name was Tamar; she was a woman of beautiful appearance.

2 Samuel 14:27 (NASB)

¹⁸Now Absalom in his lifetime had taken and set up for himself a pillar which is in the King's Valley, for he said, "I have no son to preserve my name." So he named the pillar after his own name, and it is called Absalom's Monument to this day.

2 Samuel 18:18 (NASB)

The solution to this is very simple. Absalom *did* have three sons, but they all died in infancy. Thus their names were not recorded, which they would have been if they had lived to adulthood. So, when Absalom was older he built a pillar to commemorate himself. He did so precisely because he no longer had any sons to continue his name, given that they had all died as children.

If we had the time and the space we could go on and on giving more examples of apparent contradictions and then solving, or explaining them, as above. There are lots of these, but what is extraordinary is that absolutely all of them have an explanation. I have never yet come across even one that could not be fully explained. Doesn't that strike you as odd?

If the Bible was an ordinary book like any other, and was written only by fallible men, it would contain at least some mistakes. I have never come across any book that didn't have some mistakes, however hard the writer may have tried to eliminate them. The fact that the Bible has none is, in itself, proof of supernatural inspiration. It even seems likely that God deliberately put these apparent contradictions into the Bible precisely in order to enable this point to be made.

One benefit of these apparent contradictions is that they prove that each book of the Bible was written at the time by eye-witnesses, not years later, as some liberals and sceptics think they were.

I spent nearly 30 years practising law of one kind or another. I have had particular exposure to the law, and practice, of evidence. When I represent a client and am examining documents or verbal testimony or written statements, one of the key ways of determining whether evidence is genuine or false is to look to see whether it fits alongside, or contradicts, other evidence.

If one sees a series of identical witness statements which use exactly the same phrases, one is inclined to doubt the evidence. That's because it is too similar and is likely to be contrived. The witnesses have probably got together and decided what their story is going to be.

However, if various documents, letters and statements are all written by different people in different ways with their own styles, emphasising different issues or events, and if they even seem, at first sight,

to contradict each other, but on closer examination, are actually consistent, then that evidence is very solid. That is exactly how the Bible is.

One's initial impression is that some things seem not to fit, but then it turns out that they do. Even the smallest details tally exactly, including names, dates and places. Moreover, where such small but precise factual details are included in an account, and yet they are completely consistent with various other facts, it is conclusive evidence that it was written *at the time, by eye-witnesses*.

That's because even a few years or decades later, let alone centuries later, nobody would have the precise knowledge of those small details that would be needed if they were to try to invent the account without making any errors or including any inconsistencies or anachronisms. Imagine that you were to try to write a fictional account now of some event in the year 1850, or even 1950. How could you do it without getting some things wrong about the customs of the day, or dates, or technology, or what was the name of the Company's accountant or what was on the radio at the time and so on?

That is why novelists always fail to get 100% of the small background details exactly right, however hard they try to research their facts. So, when we see the prophets and the apostles *always* getting *all* the little details exactly right, we can be sure they wrote the books or letters themselves, at the time. It verifies their authenticity.

Conversely, if you examine the Koran, it contains very clear and obvious errors. That is because it was composed in the seventh century by Mohammed. He did not have direct, first-hand knowledge of the people and places he spoke about. He therefore made some really major mistakes. For example he confused two women, both called Miriam, and thought they were the same woman. The first was Moses' sister, Miriam who lived about 1500 years BC. The other was Jesus' mother Mary, whose name in Hebrew is Miriam.

So, because Mohammed was not inspired by God, and also because he could not read and write, he had to rely on his own hazy recollection of what he had heard from others about the Old and New Testaments. Therefore he got the facts very wrong on this point, and on many other things as well.

CHAPTER 4

THE ERRORS OF THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH IN RELATION TO THE BIBLE, AND MY RESPONSES TO SOME OBJECTIONS MADE BY A CATHOLIC LADY

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

1 Thessalonians 2:13 (RSV)

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

Deuteronomy 29:29 (ESV)

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

John 8:31-32 (RSV)

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

Psalm 119:160 (RSV)

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

Psalm 119:18 (RSV)

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

2 Timothy 4:2-4 (RSV)

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

Isaiah 66:2 (b) (RSV)

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

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

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

a) by grace alone,

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

That last slogan, ‘*the Bible alone*’ is very important. We need to be very clear on the question of where we can validly get our beliefs, doctrines and practices from. Otherwise, we might get them from any number of people or places and could become confused and deceived. Even the Church itself is not a valid source of any doctrine. It has no authority to add to, take from, or alter anything that the Bible says.

That includes the real Church, even where the people concerned are genuine. It is not the purpose of the Church to create, develop or adjust any doctrine whatsoever. All the doctrine that God has chosen to reveal to us is already set out within the Bible. There is no more, and will not be any more, until Jesus returns. So, neither the Church as a whole, nor anybody within it, has any authority to add to, take away from, or change, anything that the Bible says:

⁵ *Every word of God proves true;
he is a shield to those who take refuge in him.*
⁶ *Do not add to his words,
lest he rebuke you, and you be found a liar.*
Proverbs 30:5-6 (RSV)

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

Revelation 22:18-19 (RSV)

It is mainly as a result of adding to or taking away from what the Bible says that all the past heresies and false doctrines were invented. That is how things like purgatory, priests and celibacy were thought up and brought into the churches by the so called “Church Fathers”. (See below and also see Book Eight in this series) However, the idea that the church is entitled to add to, take from or adjust what the Bible says is not just something that happened in the past. It is still happening now.

Those who do this, even if they are not from the Roman Catholic church, feel entitled to adjust what the Bible says. Their argument is that “*It was the Church that gave us the Bible, so the Church can rewrite or reinterpret the Bible too*”. That line of reasoning is bogus, but it is used to justify changing what the Bible clearly teaches about such things as the need for elders to be male, the prohibition of divorce and remarriage, the wrongness of homosexual activity and so on.

All these teachings are being reversed today by liberal churches, and even in many evangelical churches. They do so on the mistaken basis that the church is entitled to do so as it moves with the times and tries to keep in line with changing public opinion and fashions. However, it is *not* true that the Church has the right to revise or update the Bible. It is not even true that the Church *gave* us the Bible to begin with. It did not.

God Himself gave us the Bible through the prophets and apostles and it was He who inspired them. He was the real author of the Bible and therefore nobody has the right to alter anything the Bible says, not even the Church. I emphasize this because it is no longer only the Pope who claims this supposed right to add to and alter what the Bible says. The practice has spread much farther afield. Therefore, even in evangelical churches, we must be on our guard against this illegitimate practice.

I emphasize this point about not adding to or taking away from God's Word because I have recently been corresponding with someone I know, who is a member of the Roman Catholic church. I gave her a draft copy of Book One and she replied, criticizing me on the basis that I rely solely on what the Bible says and never on what the Church says. Her argument was that the Bible is not the *only* authority and that we need the Church as well.

By that she meant the Roman Catholic church, which teaches that the Pope has equal authority to the Bible and can speak on God's behalf in order to add to what the Bible says. I will quote a few of the objections that she made. I have edited out some of her points, because they are about other unrelated issues, but I have kept the meaning fully intact for those that are reproduced below. I will set out some extracts from her email to me (in italics) and then I will put my replies below them in ordinary font:

Objection 1

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

Response 1

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

"For I, the LORD, do not change..."
Malachi 3:6(a) (RSV)

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

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

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

Matthew 5:21-22 (NASB)

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

Matthew 5:27-30 (NASB)

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

Matthew 10:28-33 (NASB)

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

Matthew 11:20-24 (NASB)

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

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

Acts 10:42-43 (NASB)

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

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

Acts 17:31 (NASB)

Accordingly, however much it might distress us to think about judgment and punishment, we cannot and must not hide the fact that those are things that God will do. Indeed, Jesus Himself will be the Judge. If we do hide, or even understate those facts, then we are constructing a false image of God based on what we would *prefer Him to be*, rather than what *He says He is*. We have no right to do that. Neither does it help ourselves, nor anybody else, if we do so.

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

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

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

Therefore we see the real Jesus not by restricting ourselves only to those features of His which we prefer, but by accepting *everything* that the Bible says about Him, whether or not we like the sound of it. To do otherwise is to come dangerously close to disobeying what apostle John said in Revelation chapter 22.

He warned us not to add anything to, or take anything away from, what the book of Revelation was saying. The same applies to all of God's Word. We must take it as it is, without adding, subtracting or altering anything:

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

Revelation 22:18-19 (NASB)

Objection 2

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

Response 2

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

- a) that each of us individually is not '*qualified*' to understand the Bible for ourselves and that its meaning has to be decided for us, and explained to us, by the leaders of the Roman Catholic church. In fact, we do not need the Roman Catholic church to do this on our behalf. Nor do we need any other church, for that matter.
- b) that the leadership of the Roman Catholic church is entitled to add to what the Bible says and to provide new teaching and form new doctrine which is not found anywhere in the Bible. Examples of this would include the concepts of:
 - the papacy
 - the priesthood
 - purgatory

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

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

The Roman Catholic church actually accepts the fact that many of these things are not in the Bible. It meets that objection head on by saying that the leaders of the Roman Catholic church are *entitled* to develop and add to the teachings of the Bible. During the Middle Ages they began to teach that the Popes were not only equal to the Bible, but effectively higher than it.

Thus they claim to be entitled to rule on what it means and also to add to it. When they do so they claim that those new teachings are equal to, or even higher than, what the Bible says. So, while I would fully agree with you that we need both the Bible and the Church, I cannot accept that they should interact in the ways described above.

The Church cannot give rise to wholly new teachings and practices not found in the Bible. The Church is not a supplement to the Bible. Neither is it a source of ongoing additional revelation from God. The canon of Scripture is closed. Therefore no new doctrine will be revealed to us, at least not until after Jesus returns to the earth.

In short, the Bible is the Bible and the Church is the Church. They are entirely different things and were created for different purposes and roles. Thus we are to obtain all our doctrine from the Bible and none at all from the Church or from anybody within it. Men can, of course, *teach* the Bible, but when they do so they are merely to set out their views as to its meaning and application. They are not to add to it or create their own brand new or additional doctrines.

Moreover, it is then the duty of every individual believer, to decide for himself whether that teacher is right or wrong on any given point. One cannot and must not delegate that duty to any other man, whatever title or role he claims for himself. Nobody has ‘authority’ over us to tell us what we must believe or how we must interpret anything. On the contrary, every teacher must simply give out his teaching in an attitude of humility and gentleness.

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

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

Acts 17:10-11 (NASB)

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

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

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

Objection 3

I'm saying this as the impression I got from your writing is that the Bible is of supreme and overriding importance and I question that. Jesus did not come to give us the Bible but to inaugurate God's kingdom on earth, a kingdom which is continuing, developing, growing and which the Spirit is guiding, even

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

Response 3

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

John 1:1 (NASB)

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

John 1:14 (NASB)

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

a) The gospels contain His teaching and He is directly quoted within them as well as written about.

- b) Apostle Paul received His teaching by direct revelation given to him personally by Jesus Christ Himself when he was carried up into Heaven. Paul was shown and told things that went far beyond what the other apostles knew:

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

2 Corinthians 12:1-7 (NASB)

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

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

Revelation 1:1-2 (NASB)

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

Revelation 1:9-11 (NASB)

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

Revelation 1:17-19 (NASB)

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

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

Deuteronomy 9:10 (NASB)

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

³The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman caught in adultery, and having set her in the center of the court, ⁴they said to Him, "Teacher, this woman has been caught in adultery, in the very act. ⁵Now in the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women; what then do You say?" ⁶They were saying this, testing Him, so that they might have grounds for accusing Him. But Jesus stooped down

and with His finger wrote on the ground. ⁷But when they persisted in asking Him, He straightened up, and said to them, “He who is without sin among you, let him be the first to throw a stone at her.” ⁸Again He stooped down and wrote on the ground.

John 8:3-8 (NASB)

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

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

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

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

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

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

Biblical principles are permanent. That said, the Bible also teaches *facts* as well as principles. Those cannot be moulded, edited, reinterpreted or added to by anybody. Therefore, for example, when the Bible teaches that salvation can be found only in Jesus Christ, that is equally true in the twenty first century as in the first. It is also equally true in Europe, Asia, Africa, America and so on.

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

Objection 4

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

Response 4

There are many reasons why I feel able to say that God wants all of us, not just leaders and teachers, to read the whole Bible rather than just limit ourselves to favourite passages. Firstly, we only see the whole truth when we read the whole Bible and realise how inter-connected it is. The Bible regularly alludes to other passages or events.

Therefore you could only understand any part of it properly if you also knew about those other passages to which it is referring. But those are all over the Bible. Therefore, as I mentioned earlier, we need the whole Bible to be able to say we have the truth because only the whole Bible provides the full picture and the whole truth:

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

In other words, whereas every verse of the Bible is "true", only the Bible as a whole can be called "the truth." That is because everything the Bible says needs to be read and understood within the context of the whole book or letter within which it is said and also within the wider context of the whole Bible. Jesus and His disciples were constantly quoting from, or obliquely alluding to, passages from the Old Testament.

However, you would never know that unless you knew about those other passages or events which are being referred to. A second reason is that God has commanded that His laws and precepts should be kept diligently. But how can anybody *keep them diligently* unless they first know exactly what they are? And how can one know all that without reading *all* of them?

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

⁵*Oh that my ways may be steadfast
in keeping your statutes!*

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

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

⁸*I will keep your statutes;
do not utterly forsake me!*

Beth

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

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

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

¹²*Blessed are you, O Lord;
teach me your statutes!*

¹³*With my lips I declare*

all the rules of your mouth.
¹⁴*In the way of your testimonies I delight
as much as in all riches.*
¹⁵*I will meditate on your precepts
and fix my eyes on your ways.*
¹⁶*I will delight in your statutes;
I will not forget your word.*

Psalm 119:4-16 (ESV)

Note also that in verse 13 above, the Psalmist says that he will declare *all* of God's rules/decrees. How could he possibly do that unless he reads *all* of God's Word? The above is just one sample passage. There are many others where we are commanded to rely on and abide by *all* of God's laws, decrees, precepts, statutes, commands, promises, ways, principles, words, testimonies, instructions, ordinances etc.

That obligation is beyond dispute, but how can we obey or abide by all of those things unless we first know what they all are? And how can we know what they all are without reading them all? Moreover, how can we know whether or not a book or letter contains any of the precepts, principles, decrees, ways and so on that we are meant to learn and abide by unless we have read all of it?

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

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

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

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

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

Paul says that these various attributes and benefits apply to all Scripture. How much clearer could he be? Paul means that it is *all inspired* and that it is *all profitable*. That being so, why would we want to leave any of it unread? He then sets out various reasons why it is so profitable, as we saw earlier. The Psalmist greatly expands on those reasons, particularly within Psalm 119.

It is no coincidence that the longest psalm is the one which sets out the Psalmist's love for the Scriptures and lists the numerous different benefits which it brings to us if we study it and cherish it. I go into these in some detail in chapter one of this book, so please refer to that chapter. However, these two short extracts would be especially useful to look at here:

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

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

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

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

You go on to challenge my assertion that we should study all of God's Word by asking "*Who can know the mind of the LORD or who can be His counselor.*" You imply that because we do not know *all* of God's mind, we cannot know *any* of what he wants or thinks? We clearly do not know all of God's thoughts on all subjects, because He has not disclosed all of them to us.

Nevertheless, we can certainly know His mind on those thoughts which He has disclosed to us. The Bible sets out very clearly where God stands and what He thinks on a host of issues. It is particularly clear concerning His wish for us to know and cherish His written Word, as Ezra did:

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

Finally, let us take note of what the prophet Samuel said to King Saul when Saul had disobeyed God's instructions. Saul sought to justify himself by saying that although he hadn't done what he had been commanded to do, he and the people had, nonetheless, offered sacrifices to the LORD. Samuel replied by making it clear to Saul that even if we do offer sacrifices to the LORD or the equivalent in terms of worship etc, what really counts to God is that we should:

a) *hear* His voice (hearken) and

b) *obey* what He says.

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

“Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the Lord?

Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams.

²³ For rebellion is as the sin of divination, and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry.

Because you have rejected the word of the Lord, he has also rejected you from being king.”

1 Samuel 15:21-23 (RSV)

Now, if God is telling us through this episode that He wants us to hear and obey His Word, then what other conclusion can we reach but that we must seek to find out what He has said? But that requires us to read His written Word. How else can we know it in order to obey it? Or, are you going to argue that what Samuel said only applied to *King Saul*, or that it only applied to situations where God’s Word is spoken to you *verbally* by one of His prophets?

If so, what would be your authority for that? Moreover, if that was the case, why would Jesus have rebuked His own generation for failing to pay attention to the *written* prophecies of Daniel which spelled out when the Messiah would come?

We know for sure that God wants us to *obey* His written Word. That cannot be denied. However, if we accept that we are meant to obey it then it must follow that we are to read it, and to read all of it. Imagine a soldier who has been given written orders from his commanding officer which he is supposed to carry out.

What would be said to that officer if, on receiving the written orders, which run to many pages with maps, diagrams and explanatory text, he was to put them to one side without reading them? Or what if he was just to skim-read some of the main parts of the orders? What would happen to him at his Court Martial if his defence was conducted along these two lines of reasoning:

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

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

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

2 Kings 17:13 (NASB)

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

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

Surely He would require at least the same of us, or even more, since it is so much easier for us to get access to God's Word than it was for them. In this next verse the people are criticised because they did not obey *all* that Moses had commanded, i.e. all of the five books he wrote. Admittedly it is only referring to those five books, but the point here is that God expected them to listen to, and do, *all* that Moses had said, not just parts of it:

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

2 Kings 18:12 (NASB)

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

Objection 5

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

Response 5

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

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

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

Hebrews 10:24-25 (NASB)

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

As for the forming of 'denominations', they do sometimes arise as a result of people reading the Bible and seeing that their current Church is teaching error. However, that would only justify the establishment of a new *local church*, not a denomination. They tend to arise as a consequence of the unbiblical way in which most churches are conducted.

Biblically, there is only one Church. It consists of all *genuine* believers, wherever and whenever they live/lived. That is what the Bible means by *the* Church. However, there are multitudes of individual, independent, self-governing, local churches. These are small groups of people “*assembled together.*” Indeed, the Greek word ‘*ekklesia*’, which is translated as ‘church’, means an ‘*assembly*’, i.e. a group of people who meet. It does not mean a denomination.

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

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

As to why denominations arise, it has very little to do with individual Christians studying and interpreting the Bible for themselves. Instead, denominations tend to arise because sinful men have a craving for power, authority and control. They like to build empires consisting of many local churches over which they can then rule. They are not meant to do that. The Bible provides for each local church to be wholly independent. They are not meant to be led by one man.

Neither are they meant to be supervised by any regional bishop, nor any national or international headquarters or Pope figure. No such things or people exist in the Bible. First century local churches were each led by a group of about 3-10 mature men from *within* each church. They were called ‘*elders*’ or ‘*bishops*’. None of them were paid.

Neither did they have any titles like ‘Reverend’ or ‘Father’. They were not ‘priests’ and they did not wear special clothes, say mass, or conduct any other rituals or special liturgies. They were ordinary local men and they were not subject to, or subservient to, any external person, structure, group or hierarchy. There is another less sinister reason why denominations arise.

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

A classic example of this is the Methodists. John Wesley led a movement in the eighteenth century which was a reaction against the laxity, error and false teaching of the Church of England. After his death (*not before*) that movement became an organisation, or denomination, with a hierarchical structure of its own.

Then, in due course, it too fell into error, became lax, and taught false doctrine. Sadly, that decline prompted many sincere people to leave Methodism and set up new churches. Alas, they too eventually made the same error of turning these into denominations, thus keeping the unfortunate cycle going.

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

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

only ever tells us to start independent, self-governing local churches. What reading the Bible does is to create mature, responsible, biblically-literate individuals.

They can then function as they are meant to within those independent, self-governing local churches. It has nothing to do with the forming of denominations. Whereas you appear to see that autonomy, freedom and independence as a bad thing, or at least as a dangerous thing, I see it as good.

At any rate, I see it as *biblical*. It is the only way for us to act like Bereans (see above) and to contend earnestly for the faith. That is what we are commanded to do, i.e. confronting and responding to error wherever we come across it:

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

Jude 3 (NASB)

Objection 6

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

Response 6

Let me deal with your various points in turn. Firstly you appear to be challenging my assertion that when the Emperor Constantine claimed to have become a Christian and effectively took over the visible church, multitudes of pagans came into the church but kept their pagan beliefs.

I'm not sure what evidence you have to support your view that those pagans "*believed in the person Jesus Christ as God's Son...*" The evidence is that most of them did not believe anything of the sort, or at least not genuinely. In support of those assertions I would make two main points:

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

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

- *Priests* – these are not found anywhere in the New Testament but they were found in the pagan temples.

- The many pagan and self-aggrandizing *titles* which the Popes adopted, for example '*Pontifex Maximus*', which was previously one of Caesar's titles.
- The word *Easter*, which comes from the goddess *Ishtar*, also known as Ashtaroth.
- *Saints* – a similar point arises with the misuse of this word. In Roman Catholicism, a saint is believed to be a very special person who is elevated to that exalted status after their death. They are seen as someone to whom we can and should pray. But in the Bible the word '*saint*' is only ever used to refer to *every ordinary believer*, in much the same way as we would use the word '*Christian*'. Moreover, it means *while they are still alive*, not after they have died. In particular, it does not carry any suggestion of having a special status.
- The *vestments* worn by priests. The New Testament contains no reference to priests, i.e. there is no such role. There is also no reference to special garments. However, the pagan priests did wear such garments, which match exactly what Roman Catholic priests still wear. This issue of vestments is not a minor point. It adds to the wider error of the creation of a special "*clergy class*". This is nowhere to be found in the Bible. Indeed, Jesus deploras it, when speaking to apostle John in Revelation chapter two.
- The veneration of statues of *Mary and child* – The real Mary, as seen in the Bible, is barely mentioned in the New Testament after the early chapters of Matthew and Luke. The same is true of Jesus as a baby. In fact, the first century Church paid little or no attention to Mary or to the infant Jesus at all, least of all to statues of them. The ancient images which we see of a woman and child are not actually of Mary and the infant Jesus. They are of '*Semiramis*', the wife of Nimrod of Babylon, and of '*Tammuz*', her infant son, or their Greek or Roman equivalents. These statues were then adopted by the early Roman Catholic church and 'rebranded' as Mary and Jesus. See below.

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

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

Revelation 1:5-6 (RSV)

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

e) The worship of the '*Madonna*' figure, i.e. the mother with child, dates all the way back to very early Babylon. Semiramis was the wife of *Nimrod*, who was the first world dictator, and therefore a 'type' of antichrist. His wife, Semiramis, was a brothel keeper and she became pregnant by another man. But to prevent any retribution from her husband, Nimrod, she had him, and the Babylonian priests, drugged. Then she had Nimrod killed by being torn apart and dismembered. When her child, Tammuz, was born she claimed that he was Nimrod reborn, i.e. reincarnated. Therefore the figures of Semiramis and Tammuz, the mother and infant, became gods in pagan Babylonian religion. Moreover, the worship of these gods was transmitted onwards to virtually every other false religion in Greece, Rome, Scandinavia, India and many other places.

f) That is why, all over the world, and in particular in Rome, there were statues of a woman with a baby. But the point is that these were not Mary and Jesus. They were Semiramis and Tammuz, or their Greek, Roman or other equivalents. Moreover, because Nimrod's body was torn apart the Babylonians made another monument in the form of a huge phallic symbol to represent his male member. This

became known as an *'obelisk'* and several of these were constructed in many different countries. Centuries later, in the European colonial era, many of these were taken away and shipped over to the West. That is why there are now obelisks in Paris, London and even Washington DC.

g) Like the obelisks, the veneration of the statues of the mother and child began in Babylon and then spread all over the world, long before the time of Christ. In fact, the origin of the word 'Madonna' is as follows: The name given to Nimrod was '*Baal*' meaning '*Lord*'. The name given to Semiramis was '*Baalti*' meaning '*My Lady*'. That was subsequently Latinised and thus became 'Madonna', which is the name now used for statues of Mary. However, the term was first used for *Semiramis*, not *Mary*. Moreover, it was not a term that first century Christians ever used in relation to Mary and, of course, she is not referred to in that way in the Bible.

h) The apostles and first century Christians would have been horrified to see what later transpired and how the veneration (and worship) of Mary was imported into the churches by the pagans who joined it after the emperor Constantine's alleged conversion. Mary is also referred to within the Catholic church, but *not* the Bible, as "*the Queen of heaven*". That is not an appropriate way to refer to the real Mary. It is not what she actually is and it is not how she would describe herself. Neither did anybody in the Bible or in the early church ever call her that. Who then is the real "*Queen of heaven*" and where does the phrase come from? Again, the answer is that it is *Semiramis*, also known as *Ishtar*, the Babylonian fertility goddess, who was also later called *Venus* by the Romans.

i) When the early Roman Catholic church began to absorb and adopt the beliefs and practices of the pagans, it took over this concept of the Queen of heaven. They 'Christianized' the practice and applied it to Mary instead of Venus, Ishtar or Semiramis. Surely, no right-thinking person can deny that it was wrong for them to do that. It is equally wrong for any of us today to continue to use that title, 'Queen of heaven', for Mary, or indeed to idolize her in any way whatsoever. Here is what God had to say about the so called Queen of heaven via the prophet Jeremiah. She is clearly identified as a false goddess and we see that the people's worship of her appalled and angered God:

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

Jeremiah 7:17-20 (NKJV)

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

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

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

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

Jeremiah 44:15-23 (NKJV)

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

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

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

2 Peter 3:14-16 (NASB)

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

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

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

Their reason for obstructing the distribution of the Bible to the people was simple. It was that they knew very well that what the Bible says did not correspond to their teachings and practices. It provoked far too many uncomfortable questions. They were also acutely aware of the fact that people who read the Bible tend to end up leaving the Roman Catholic church.

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

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

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

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

I personally never opened a Bible until I was 18, despite having been brought up in a Catholic home and school. Nobody that I ever knew, in all my years in Catholicism, and ever since for that matter, has ever read it either. So, although the official ban on reading the Bible has technically been lifted, it makes very little practical difference.

The tradition of ignoring the Bible is so firmly entrenched in Catholic culture that, even today, the vast majority of Catholics do not read the Bible anyway, whether they are officially allowed to or not. Indeed, you concede yourself that they don't read it.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Joshua 1:8 (RSV)

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

John 5:45-47 (RSV)

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

John 8:31-32 (RSV)

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

John 14:23-24 (RSV)

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

John 17:14-17 (RSV)

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

1 John 2:3-5 (RSV)

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

2 Timothy 3:16-17 (RSV)

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

Matthew 7:21 (RSV)

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

Objection 7

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

Response 7

Please refer to the responses I have given above. Hopefully you will now agree that both Jesus and His disciples, not to mention the Old Testament prophets and writers, placed huge importance on the need to know and believe the written Word of God. Jesus Himself exemplified that. He made the effort all His life to memorize God's Word.

Therefore, when He was tempted by the Devil His response every time began "*It is written...*" He could not have done that unless He had first learned particular passages by heart, which is one of the best things we can ever do. Nevertheless, being a Bible student is not the same thing as being a disciple. The latter is obviously a wider concept.

Being a disciple *involves* study of the Bible, i.e. the whole Bible, but it is not limited *only* to that. However, I have never suggested that it is. As to whether we should study the whole Bible, it seems to me that the burden of proof is very much on you to demonstrate that study of the whole Bible is *not* what we are all called to do.

The only exceptions I can readily think of are the illiterate, the mentally handicapped and those who are too poor to possess a Bible at all. If one is not in any of those groups, how could one justify deliberately choosing *not* to study the whole Bible? Surely one would need a reason? You haven't given any so far.

By the same token, how and why could a person justify limiting themselves only to certain portions of God's Word that they find easy, agreeable, non-threatening, non-convicting etc? What reason is there *not* to study the Bible, or not to study all of it, given *what* it is and *who* gave it to us?

The main ones I can think of are laziness, lack of interest, unbelief or unwillingness to obey? But those are all invalid. Can you think of any valid reasons? In all my years in the Catholic church I was never told of any. The main reason I personally never looked at the Bible until I was 18 is that I never saw anybody else do so.

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

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

They assume that all of that was left behind at the Reformation in the sixteenth century. Actually, that's not true. All the denominational churches share at least some of the features and errors of Catholicism. They just don't realise it. The Reformation did not achieve a complete removal of the errors of the Roman Catholic church. Far from it. If only it had.

The Reformation was actually quite limited in its scope. It exposed and removed some unbiblical beliefs and practices, but by no means all. Therefore, all of this information about Catholicism may be far more relevant to you than you might imagine. Take for example the Roman Catholic doctrine that says that their leaders are the only people on Earth who are qualified to interpret the Bible and even that their leadership, the so called *Magisterium*, is infallible in all matters of faith and practice.

The reality is that every non-Catholic denomination also has an element of that kind of warped thinking. They would not say any of it explicitly, as the Catholic church does, but it is, nevertheless, what many leaders think, deep down. The majority of the church leaders that I have ever met have shared this feature to one extent or another, whether they were Catholic or not.

In other words, they are ‘clergy-minded’ to one degree or another. That is they see themselves as specially anointed and set apart, such that what they say is obviously right and should not be contradicted. I have referred to this attitude, when it is found in *non*-Catholic clergy, as being ‘*Magisterium-lite*’.

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

I have spent about 20 years of my life in the Catholic church and just over 30 years outside of it, in various denominations. Regrettably, I have to say that I have seen all the same authoritarian attitudes and haughty behaviour on the part of leaders in *every* denomination that I have ever had dealings with.

It is partly because they all struggle with the same flesh nature. However, it is also because they have inherited far more of the beliefs and practices of Catholicism than they realise. They simply don’t see it in themselves, or recognise where it comes from.

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

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

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

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

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

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 breathtakingly 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.¹⁰ But 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:

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

1 Corinthians 7: 36-40 (NASB)

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

Paul still does not present his opinion on what widows ought to do as if it was a command from God. However he does put it more weightily 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:

‘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.

CHAPTER 6

HOW TO MEMORISE AND MEDITATE ON SCRIPTURE AND WHY YOU SHOULD DO BOTH

“And Isaac went out to meditate in the field toward evening.....”
Genesis 26:63(a)(ESV)

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

Joshua 1:8 (ESV)

²⁶ *But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.*

John 14:26 (ESV)

¹¹ *I will remember the deeds of the Lord;
yes, I will remember your wonders of old.*

¹² *I will ponder all your work,
and meditate on your mighty deeds.*
Psalm 77:11-12 (ESV)

*I will meditate on your precepts
and fix my eyes on your ways.*
Psalm 119:15 (ESV)

⁵ *I remember the days of old;
I meditate on all that you have done;
I ponder the work of your hands.*
Psalm 143:5 (ESV)

The importance of memorizing passages of Scripture

Our generation has lost the art of memorizing anything, whether Scripture, or poetry, or otherwise. It seems like too much effort, and we don't see others doing it, so most of us don't bother. It's quite rare even to hear of memorization being suggested today. That wasn't always the case. Past generations saw the value of it and they made the effort.

Even at school, our grandparents were required to memorise vast amounts of poetry, plus other facts and figures, which schools today wouldn't even attempt to get children to learn. Teachers assume now that it is asking too much of children. However, it isn't too difficult, and it really is worth the effort. If we can memorise individual verses, but better still longer passages, we will benefit greatly from it. Therefore the Bible urges us to do so. The Psalmist speaks of this:

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

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

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

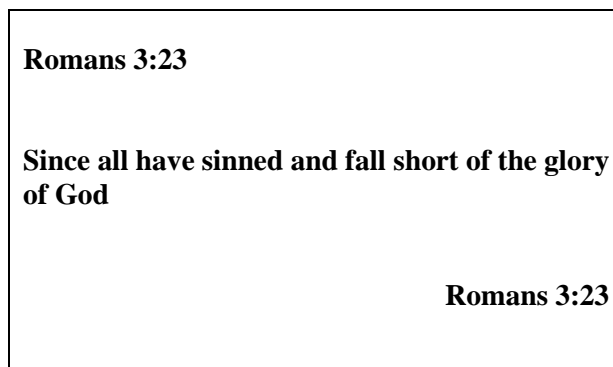
It then ceases to be something we have merely heard of, or are aware of, and becomes something we really know. That is far deeper and more significant. We are changed by verses that we have memorized far more than by those with which we are merely familiar. If you now set yourself the objective of starting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

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

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

How to memorise Scripture

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



The reason to include the reference as well as the verse is that you need to be able to remember exactly where it comes from, not just what it says. Then you can immediately refer to it, and point to where it comes from. That is particularly helpful if you are sharing the Gospel with an unsaved person. It enables you to turn to the right passage in the Bible with no delay or difficulty.

The reason for quoting the reference twice, i.e. at the beginning and the end, is that it helps to fix it in your mind much better. It is a tried and tested method and it really works. So, you choose appropriate verses and then write them out and begin to memorize them at the rate of perhaps one or two a week or,

at most, three or four per week. If you try to do any more than that it is likely to fall apart after a few weeks.

The best method it is to learn the passages "*by mouth*", as the Jewish people say. That means to say the verses *out loud*, not just silently in your head. That fixes it far more solidly in your memory. However, it is not always possible to speak out loud. If so, then whisper the verses very quietly so that only you can hear. Even that is much better than doing it silently, entirely within your head.

When I was a new believer, in 1981, I got a job in Paris for the summer, working in a shop. That involved me travelling on the Metro for nearly two hours per day, because I had to make two return trips. I used that travel time for Scripture memory work and memorized 60 separate passages during that summer. I couldn't speak out loud on the Metro, but I could mouth the words quietly to myself.

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

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

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

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

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

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

A good selection of verses to begin memorizing might be the ones set out in Appendix Two at the end of the *online* version of this book, which is on our website: www.realchristianity.com Please look this up on there. I have put lots of verses into little boxes, which are about the size of business cards. If you wish, you could print off some or all of them, preferably using a fairly thick card, and then cut them up and use them to memorize.

Please note that all of the verses on the cards in Appendix Two on our website are from the *English Standard Version* (ESV). Details of this version can be found in chapter 11 below. It is a good and accurate translation and is becoming more widely used. Moreover, it should be around for the long term.

Moving on to memorizing whole chapters, or even whole books, of the Bible

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

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

Moreover, you will find that even if, with your mind, you are sometimes unsure what the next line is going to be, your *mouth* knows it. So, as with 'finger memory' with the piano, your mouth knows what the next line is and says it automatically. You get that benefit of 'mouth memory' far more strongly when memorizing whole chapters than with single verses or even short passages. That is because each of the verses in the chapter are hooked together.

So the ending of one verse prompts you, or at least your mouth, to know what the next word is. Then, that word leads you on and you flow automatically into the next verse or section. Let me now give a few tips, from my own experience, about how best to memorize whole chapters and series of chapters. Begin by choosing a chapter, or a whole letter or book, that particularly interests you, and which you are eager to learn. That will help with motivation.

Then go on to the internet to a website called *Bible Gateway* on **www.biblegateway.com** and get the Bible translation that you wish to use up on screen. Then print off the chapter that you want onto sheets of A4 paper. Use a very large font size, so that the words are easy to read, even from a distance. That is important, because you may want to learn the verses while doing something else, such as cooking or going on the exercise treadmill etc. If so, you will need to be able to see the text from some distance away.

Also, make sure you print off a number of copies of each chapter, so that you can put them in different rooms, ready for whenever you go in there. I recommend that you use these loose sheets of paper, rather than the whole Bible, as they are much easier to carry around with you. Plus you will find that the process of learning will eventually wear out the sheets, because you will need to take them around the house with you into the kitchen, bathroom, garage etc.

You may even choose to take them outdoors, such as when you walk the dog, work in the garden, travel by train or bus, or even drive your car. I keep spare copies available so that they can be used in all those places. For example, I will clip a sheet or sheets up by the mirror in the bathroom or on the outside of the shower. Then I can refer to the sheets when reciting the chapter. So, if I get stuck, I can immediately get re-started and can also avoid reinforcing errors.

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

If I am driving I will keep sheets on the passenger seat so that I can pick them up and refer to them as and when necessary i.e. when the traffic stops for a red light, or where there is a queue. If I am walking the dog I keep sheets in my hand or pocket. Even if I run on the treadmill, I clip sheets to the display stand and I recite while running. Memorizing while you are already doing something else means that

it doesn't use up any extra time, because you were already travelling, gardening, cooking, showering, walking the dog etc anyway.

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

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

If it is a very long verse of say 3 or 4 lines, you may find it helpful to split that verse into two parts so that the series of words you are trying to learn is not too long to remember in one go. If you try to memorize too much in one go, it will actually slow you down. Also, don't try to do it from memory at this very early stage, without looking at the sheet, because you haven't yet learned it.

If you do, you are likely to make little errors which you would then need to 'unlearn'. Therefore keep the sheet nearby or in your hand to read from until you are confident that you can say it unaided. That first verse is then sufficiently familiar to enable you to recite it without looking at the sheet. Then recite it without the sheet, say another 15-20 times, until you are really fluent.

By this point you have reached the *first* stage of memorizing. That is you know it well enough to recite it without the sheet. But you still have much farther to go to get it really ingrained into your memory. So, you can't just stop there. As you do all this, you should initially try different ways of saying the words and emphasize or stress different words or syllables until you settle upon what seems to you be the right rhythm and have decided where to lay the emphasis/stress.

You want it to read well and sound natural, with feeling, as a good reader would speak it out. Don't say it in a lifeless, monotonous tone of voice. That liveliness of tone and rhythm is actually important. It is necessary in order to convey the meaning in the best way, but it also helps you to memorize. The rhythm and lilt of your voice, and the choices you make as to the particular words or syllables to stress, all combine to hold the entire verse together.

They also help to link it to the verses around it. The rhythm and emphasis etc become an integral part of the memorizing process. They help to 'glue' the words to each other and to fix them in your memory, in particular your '*mouth memory*', more so than in your mind. It is very much like the way that a tune helps you to memorise the words of a song. The way you pronounce and express the words as you speak becomes almost a form of spoken tune.

I try to express the words as I imagine the writer, for example apostle Paul, may have spoken them when he was dictating them out loud, or as an actor might say them if speaking on stage. It makes the verse much more meaningful and vivid but, above all, it helps you to memorize it. So, once you are reasonably fluent with the first verse, then, likewise, do the second verse *on its own* about 20-25 times, *while reading it*, as with the first verse.

Then, once you are fluent and error-free, say it about 20 times while not reading it, i.e. from memory alone. Then do the same for the third and perhaps the fourth verse in that section. Once you have got familiar with each verse *on its own*. You can begin to learn that whole section, reciting all 2-4 verses, together in a continuous flow.

It is very important that you break the process up in this way and learn the verses on their own first, because each section has to hold together as a short passage by itself if you are to learn the whole chapter or book. It is much easier to put the verses of each section together to make a whole section if each verse is already familiar on its own.

It prevents you from fizzling out and getting stuck in the second or third verse and thus being unable to complete the whole section. It also prevents you from giving excessive or disproportionate attention to the first verse in each section, which is what you would do if you tried to learn all 2-4 verses as a whole in one go rather than one verse at a time.

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

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

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

However, that too must be learned on its own first, not in conjunction with the ones you have already learned. Then you can add that third section, as above, until you can recite the first three sections all together, one after the other.

That is how you build up, stage by stage, and 'assemble' the whole chapter. It is as if you were constructing a building using pre-fabricated sections of concrete which are each built on their own and then put together. The advantage of this system is that you give equal weight to each section and thoroughly learn each one.

That would not occur if you always began reciting at verse one every time. The later verses in the middle and end of a chapter would inevitably be neglected, or at least given less attention by comparison with the earlier ones. If you did that you might learn the beginning extremely well, but you would be unable to get right to the end without losing your way in the middle or end of the chapter and getting stuck.

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

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

Then, verse 9, which starts the next section, reads "*But you are not in the flesh, you are in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you.*" Then it continues for three more verses. The point is that if

you are currently learning the section consisting of verses 9-11 then it helps if you *lead into that* by reciting the final verse of the previous section, i.e. verse 8, or even the last few words, if it happens to be a very long verse.

The lead up then creates a link in your memory between verse 8 and verse 9 and joins them together like two railway carriages. Then, later on when you are reciting the whole chapter, or a whole book, the end of each section and the start of the next will be connected in your mind. Therefore you won't grind to a halt at the end of one section, having no idea of what comes next.

That can easily occur, even if you have memorized each of them well, if you haven't taken the trouble to link the sections together. Indeed, I often also recite just the last verse of one section and the first verse of the next, just by themselves, to really underline and strengthen that link.

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

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

When choosing which version of the Bible to use for memory work, you mainly need to consider which gives the most accurate rendering of the verse. Refer to chapter 11 below which addresses that question. You would also be wise to use a version which is likely to remain in use long term, rather than one which may only be a temporary fashion, and might no longer be in print in 20 years. So, you may be best to use versions like the NASB, or King James, because they are tried and tested and are here to stay.

Before you memorize a passage, it may be a good idea to read it in different versions and choose the one which is the clearest. You need not necessarily choose the same version for all your memory work, though it is probably best to use one version most of the time. You may also want to consider buying sets of cards with passages of Scripture already printed on them.

These are produced by an evangelical group called '*The Navigators*'. Their cards are useful and make it a lot easier for you, because the passages they choose are set out in sensible groupings. You can get these cards from Christian bookshops or from the internet at www.navigators.org/us

What it means to 'meditate' on a passage of Scripture

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

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

I remember an alarming incident which occurred when our son was 7 years old and at primary school. One day, without our knowledge, or any warning, the teacher got the children to do some yoga, which

is an occult practice. She said to the children *“empty your minds of all thoughts”*. We had not warned our son of such things, because we hadn’t even imagined that it would ever arise as an issue for him. We asked him what he had done, fearing that he may have taken part in it.

However, God had obviously stepped in to protect him, because he said: *“I didn’t do it. When Mrs..... said “empty your minds”, I just decided to think about Jesus instead”*. That had not come from us. Clearly, God had spoken directly to our seven year old to protect him from doing wrong and from being harmed.

Meditation, in the biblical sense, has got nothing to do with the occultic practices of yoga or Buddhism. It means focusing on a passage of Scripture and *‘ruminating’* on it, rather like a cow does when it chews its cud. The way a cow digests grass is to chew it and then swallow it and then to bring it back up again two or more times, so as to chew it again, repeatedly. That way it can break the grass up more and get extra nutrients from it.

So, with a passage of Scripture, if we meditate or ruminate on it, it means we keep going back to it and reflecting on it, seeking to gain more insights from it, and additional ways of applying it. The point is that, even in a single verse, there can be so much meaning, and so many potential insights and angles from which to view it, that it cannot always be picked up in one reading.

A good idea is to practise the discipline of repeating the verse or passage, but emphasising a different word each time. It is surprising how many more nuances will emerge as a result of doing that. Also, ask yourself questions and even write down your questions as they occur to you. One of the ways God guides us, and illuminates the Scriptures to us, is to help us to think of the right questions to ask, i.e. those which open up the passage and are most probing and insightful.

How to meditate on a passage of Scripture

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

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

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

- c) Ask God to reveal more of the meaning of the passage to you and to put into your mind relevant and insightful questions about it.
- d) Consider the scene or the circumstances being described in the passage and reflect on how each of the characters in the passage may have felt. For example, if you were to meditate on the passage about the prodigal son, you could ponder on how the father felt, and then how the prodigal son and the elder brother must have felt. Imagine how the position may have seemed to each of them as events progressed. In doing this, thoughts will occur to you which may assist you to understand the passage more fully. However, not all the thoughts you have will be worthwhile or valid. It depends whether they are consistent with Scripture. If not, then discard them.

- e) You may even wish to look at some commentaries on the passage in question and see what various commentators in the past have said. Each one will inevitably put forward some insights that have not occurred to you, or even to other commentators.

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

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

CHAPTER 7

IS THE BIBLE TRUE AND SHOULD IT GENERALLY BE INTERPRETED LITERALLY OR SYMBOLICALLY?

*Sanctify them in the truth; thy word is truth.
John 17:17 (RSV)*

³*What if some did not have faith? Will their lack of faith nullify God's faithfulness? ⁴Not at all! Let God be true, and every man a liar.....*
Romans 3:3-4(a) (NIV)

⁵*Every word of God proves true;
he is a shield to those who take refuge in him.
⁶Do not add to his words,
lest he rebuke you,
and you be found a liar.
Proverbs 30:5-6 (RSV)*

*But what God foretold by the mouth of all the prophets, that his Christ should suffer, he thus fulfilled.
Acts 3:18 (RSV)*

*For the Lord GOD does nothing
without revealing his secret
to his servants the prophets
Amos 3:7 (ESV)*

²⁹ *“Brethren, I may say to you confidently of the patriarch David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. ³⁰ Being therefore a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would set one of his descendants upon his throne, ³¹ he foresaw and spoke of the resurrection of the Christ, that he was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh see corruption.
Acts 2:29-31 (RSV)*

*You have been born anew, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God;
1 Peter 1:23 (RSV)*

*You shall not add to the word which I command you, nor take from it; that you may keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you.
Deuteronomy 4:2(RSV)*

¹⁸ *I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues which are written in this book; ¹⁹ and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his part from the tree of life and from the holy city, which are written in this book.
Revelation 22:18-19 (NASB)*

³¹ *And taking the twelve, he said to them, “Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written of the Son of man by the prophets will be accomplished. ³² For he will be delivered to the Gentiles, and will be mocked and shamefully treated and spit upon; ³³ they will scourge him and kill him, and on the third day he will rise.”
Luke 18:31-33 (RSV)*

For I tell you that this scripture must be fulfilled in me, 'And he was reckoned with transgressors'; for what is written about me has its fulfilment.

Luke 22:37 (RSV)

Why are so few people willing to take the Bible literally and to simply believe what it says?

'*Hermeneutics*' is defined as the art or science of interpretation, especially of Scripture. So, we all need to decide how we are going to interpret the Bible, i.e. with what method or approach. The primary question in that regard is whether we believe the Bible should ordinarily be taken

- a) literally or
- b) figuratively/symbolically/metaphorically/allegorically.

My own position is that our *starting point* when interpreting the Bible is that we should *generally* take it literally. However, most people do not take the Bible literally and do not believe that it really means what it says. Instead, for one reason or another, they substitute some other meaning in place of the plain words that the Bible uses.

In each case, whatever their individual reasons may be, they have got the problem (and the sin) of unbelief. That is they are unwilling, or perhaps unable, to believe what God's Word says. For simplicity, we could separate this problem into three main schools of thought, all of which create this handicap of unbelief and lead to faulty interpretation. We shall examine each of them separately in this chapter.

What they all have in common is that they *don't* have it as their starting point that the plain words of the Bible are generally to be taken as literal fact. However, they tend to adopt that misguided approach for different reasons and there are different parts of the Bible that they each particularly disbelieve or misinterpret.

So, let's look at the three main errors that people make in approaching the Bible, which cause them not to believe it at all, or to take it less literally than they should. At the risk of over-simplifying matters, we could say that most of the people who *don't* believe the Bible, or who don't take accept that it means exactly what it says, fall into one or more of the following broad groups:

- a) ***liberals*** – these tend to reject what the Bible says about social, moral or ethical issues and adopt more permissive views of their own instead. Often these are just the current fashions and views of the secular world which they have absorbed. They also tend to reject parts of the Gospel and don't like things such as sin, judgment and Hell. They also tend to object to the idea of Jesus being *the* only way to salvation and the claims that the Bible makes to being the exclusive truth.
- b) ***sceptics*** – these tend not to believe that the Bible is true, or are not willing to take it literally, in areas which involve the miraculous or the supernatural. Thus they reject, or doubt, what the Bible says about creation, the flood, Noah, angels, demons, and the miracles of Moses, Elijah, Elisha and even Jesus. They also tend not to believe in the spiritual gifts, or they at least deny that spiritual gifts are still in operation and meant to be used today.
- c) ***allegorists*** – these don't believe that the prophecies in the Bible are meant to be taken literally. They believe instead that the prophecies are 'allegorical', or 'symbolic', representing some deeper, hidden meaning, rather than accepting the plain words used.

I have presented these three broad points of view as if they were entirely separate, stand-alone errors. However, the reality is that they actually often overlap and many people make two, or even all three, of these mistakes simultaneously. Actually, the Bible is entirely true and factual and is *generally* meant

to be taken literally, whether it is dealing with salvation or with moral, historical, supernatural or prophetic issues.

Therefore, most of the time the Bible is meant to be taken completely literally. It means exactly what it says and says exactly what it means. It sets out what God is telling us on a range of social or moral issues and is very clear, even if we don't like what it says. It also tells us about God's supernatural power and miracles. Finally, it means exactly what it says about what happened historically, and also what will happen in the future.

In all of these areas it is generally meant to be taken literally. At least as our starting point, we are supposed to read the Bible in the same way as we would read a text book, letter or newspaper. We should generally take it at face value and assume that the apparent meaning is the intended meaning, as we do when we read almost everything else.

Once we have understood and accepted the plain, literal meaning of the words used and the factual nature of the events described, whether past or future, we can then go further. We can then be entirely open to look for and accept a number of different layers of meaning and content which are *in addition to* the plain, literal meaning.

We find a lot of '*typology*' in the Bible, whereby one literal, historical event or person is a '*type*' of some later or future event or person. There are patterns in the events described in the Bible and these patterns are very useful. However, they can never be the basis for any doctrine, because any doctrine must be based upon clear words that are plainly stated in the Bible. Nevertheless, such things can help to illustrate and explain doctrines that we already know about.

So, it is right to engage in what the Jewish people call '*midrash*' and to be alert to see types, patterns and figures wherever they arise in the Bible. But they have to be seen alongside, or *in addition to*, the plain, literal facts of the events or people described. The figurative or typological aspects of the Bible do not negate or contradict the plain, literal truth of what the Bible says. Those patterns and types etc are themselves based upon the underlying facts and they fully accept their literalness and historicity.

Before we enlarge on the right way of interpreting the Bible, let us examine each of these three erroneous schools of thought more closely and see why liberals, sceptics and allegorists are all so mistaken and why they each fail to take the Bible as literal truth. We shall look at how easily we can get into a mess if we use any of these wrong approaches and therefore end up not believing what is said, or at least not taking it literally enough.

A. The 'liberal' view of Scripture - not accepting what God's Word says on a wide range of points, but especially about the nature of the Gospel and various social or moral issues.

A liberal tends to hold views on social or moral issues which have more to do with how the world thinks than with what the Bible says. For example, this would include things like marriage, divorce, sexual ethics, homosexuality, gender confusion, the role of women in the church and in the family, female elders, female ministers, etc. They tend not to like what the Bible says about sin and they prefer instead to accept whatever standards, values or practices the secular world currently endorses.

Liberals usually also object to many aspects of the Gospel. For example, they don't like the idea of God's judgment, Hell or the Lake of Fire. Therefore they tend either to ignore or reject these concepts or else they water them down. They particularly tend to object to the idea that Jesus is the only way to be saved. They prefer instead to believe that there are *other ways* to be saved, or even that we are *all* saved, regardless of whether we believe or not.

In short, liberals tend to pick and choose what they like and dislike about what God says. Then, if God's view offends them, or if they 'disagree' with it, they feel free to substitute their own view instead.

Sometimes a person will be open enough to say explicitly that they do not accept what the Bible says on a certain issue, and state openly that they have substituted their own view in its place.

However, this editing or filtering process is more often done covertly, and even unconsciously. One thing I have noticed is that very few liberals ever call themselves liberal. At any rate, I have never heard anybody do so. Many are not even consciously aware that they have these features, or think in these ways. As with most other mind-sets, it is largely unconscious and owes much to the way they were taught to think by others and what they have seen others doing.

Therefore, as we saw earlier, with the influence of Catholic thinking, this problem of liberal thinking may be affecting you more than you realise. A liberal-minded person does not feel obligated to accept what the Bible says. He therefore 'edits' the Bible as he reads it. If God says something to which he objects, then he simply ignores it, replaces it with his own view, or redefines it to match his own opinions.

In this way a liberal can take what God says about virtually any issue and reject it, alter it, or ignore it, as he sees fit. Moreover, this seems so natural to him that he can easily do it without ever consciously realizing that he is doing so. A liberal comes to the Bible as its critic or judge, to decide whether he agrees with it. Instead he should come to it humbly, like a child, wanting to understand and obey it.

Actually, when one stops to think, one has to accept that the very idea of '*disagreeing*' with God is absurd. We are effectively saying that God is making a mistake and that we are correcting Him. Therefore not many of us would be brash enough to say openly that we disagree with Him. We know that we would sound foolish if we said it explicitly.

It is much easier just to convince oneself, whenever God is saying something unpopular or politically incorrect, that He doesn't really mean what He is saying. Or, we can say that He was speaking only to the people of 2000 years ago, not to our '*more advanced*' society. In each of these ways multitudes of people justify themselves in ignoring, redefining or rejecting what God says.

However, they usually do these things without ever coming clean and admitting it openly to themselves, and to others. If you do not have what the Bible calls '*the love of the truth,*' then such editing, whether conscious or unconscious, will come very easily to you. It will not jar with your conscience.

When a person does have the love of the truth they value truth *for itself*. Therefore they are willing to accept it, whatever it may be, even where the truth brings them inconvenience, cost, unpopularity, or danger. They feel they have no alternative but to do so, because they recognize the obvious fact that if a thing is true then it is true. If so, it must be accepted, regardless of the consequences or implications of believing it.

A person who has the love of the truth simply wants to find out what God really says, *whatever that may be*. Their intention is then to *get into line* with it, wherever that takes them and whatever the implications may be. A person who does not have the love of the truth will feel free to disagree with or ignore God's Word whenever it cuts across their own views. It may be that in some ways you have done this.

Or, perhaps you have bowed to peer pressure and the influence of others who take that '*flexible*' approach to dealing with God's Word. If so, be honest with yourself and openly acknowledge what you are doing. Don't disguise it or call it by any other name. Admit openly to yourself that you are ignoring or misusing God's Word and then repent of it. If you are unsure whether you do any of these things, then ask God to reveal it to you, wherever it applies.

Make a decision that, from today onwards, you will accept and obey *whatever God says* on any issue, however irksome that may be to you, or however unpopular it may make you. It is finding the truth that matters, not justifying our own opinions. If we do not eliminate this problem of liberal thinking,

where we sit in judgement on God's Word and pick and choose which parts of it we will and won't believe, then we will be crippled in our walk with the Lord. We will be unable to do His will, or even to read His Word properly.

B. The sceptical or 'higher critical' view of Scripture – promoting doubt and unbelief about miracles and the supernatural in general, and not accepting the book of Genesis in particular

The *sceptical* or '*higher critical*' approach to Scripture is closely linked to the liberal view. There is an equal unwillingness to accept that God's Word is true and that it is generally meant to be taken literally. Yet it is also distinct from the liberal approach. Its main emphasis is on denying or doubting anything which involves God's *miraculous or supernatural* power.

Therefore, those who approach the Bible this way will be plagued with unbelief wherever the Bible speaks of miraculous or supernatural events. In particular, they will be unable, or unwilling, to believe in the Genesis account of the creation of the universe in six literal days, the fall of Adam and Eve, the worldwide flood and Noah's Ark. Indeed, they tend to reject all of the first eleven chapters of Genesis.

They will also tend to reject or down-play all miracles, wherever they occur throughout the Bible, even those that Jesus performed Himself. Somehow they consider God incapable of doing these things. Or, even if they accept that in theory He *could* perform miracles, they prefer to believe that He didn't *actually do so*.

This group of people also tend to reject the supernatural in general, whatever form it might take. They have no place for it and either don't believe in it or don't take it seriously. So their attitude is to insist that everything that happens has a purely natural explanation and is the result of ordinary, physical factors. For them, the supernatural has no part to play in anything that happens, or at least not in anything that happens today, or to them, or to people they know.

Some sceptics are less absolute than that. They may be willing to accept the supernatural *in theory*, but they tend not to accept it *in practice*. So, they can be got to accept that there have been miracles, or that demons have influenced people's lives, but only if you are referring to:

- a) *The past*, not the present. So miracles and healings can occur in the first century, but not in the twenty first.
- b) *Somewhere else*, never their own locality. So people may, perhaps, be miraculously healed in Africa, but not where they live.
- c) *Someone else*, never themselves or anybody they know. So, someone else might be affected by a demon, but never themselves.

Therefore there are many gradations and variations of this sceptical approach. At the extreme end there is the outright sceptic, or so called 'rationalist'. That is something of a misnomer because, although they give themselves that self-aggrandizing name, their thinking is not actually rational at all. That is because they fail to take account of God's supernatural power, which is just as real as anything else in this universe, if not more so.

At their most extreme, they reject every notion of the supernatural for anybody, in any place, and at any time. Others are less dogmatic, but the net effect is broadly the same, even for them. Whatever level they may be at, the bottom line is that they never seem to be willing to accept that any miracle can happen *to them* or that God or an angel can speak to them today, or that a demon can deceive or afflict them.

At any rate, none of those things ever seem to be accepted as happening now, or here, or to them, or to anybody they know. So, although the less extreme skeptics may be willing to concede that supernatural things could occur, to somebody else, somewhere else, or at some time in the past, it makes very little practical difference. The point is that in their own day to day lives, the supernatural is not accepted or recognized. It is effectively ruled out as having any part to play.

The miraculous is easy for God, as it is all part of His job description

I have never felt able to identify with other people's skepticism. It always seemed to me, even from an early age, that if God is God, then He can do anything. So, I saw nothing difficult about Him creating the universe instantaneously, just by speaking it into existence. Why should that be any problem at all for God?

The very term '*God*' means that He is, by definition, all-powerful and all-knowing. Therefore He is easily capable of suspending the rules of science and doing anything at all. After all, it was He who formulated all of the rules of science in the first place. Apostle Paul made a similar point to this when he was put on trial before King Agrippa:

Why is it thought incredible by any of you that God raises the dead?

Acts 26:8 (RSV)

So, I have always had the opposite difficulty to the one that sceptics struggle with. I have always struggled to see why they struggle to see. The miraculous and the supernatural, including instantaneous creation, are what God specializes in. So, if the god that you believe in is incapable of such things, then what kind of god is he? He sounds rather small and unimpressive.

Whoever he may be, he cannot be the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Indeed, your god would be failing to satisfy the very terms of God's 'job description'. That requires, as a minimum, that He be omnipotent (all powerful) and omniscient (all knowing). So, if your god doesn't have these attributes then he isn't the real God. If so, why bother dealing with him at all?

The apostle Peter evidently had no difficulty believing that miracles and supernatural events really occur. We know that because in his second letter he refers to the incident in the book of Numbers where Balaam, the carnal and corrupt prophet, was prevented from cursing the people of Israel. The donkey upon which he was riding saw the angel of the LORD (i.e. Jesus in a bodily pre-appearance) and refused to take Balaam any further.

Then, when Balaam came over to beat the donkey it spoke to him with a human voice. That is clearly a miracle, by anybody's standards. Yet Peter accepted it as historical fact, i.e. that it really happened, exactly as the book of Numbers says. He did not explain any of it away as symbolic or as flowery language. He took it all absolutely literally and seriously and we should all do exactly the same as him:

¹⁵ Forsaking the right way they have gone astray; they have followed the way of Balaam, the son of Be'or, who loved gain from wrongdoing, ¹⁶ but was rebuked for his own transgression; a dumb ass spoke with human voice and restrained the prophet's madness.

Peter 2:15-16 (RSV)

Often a person's skepticism arises out of their conceit, as they imagine themselves to be "too sophisticated" to believe in the supernatural

Those who take a skeptical approach to the Bible tend to view themselves as too sophisticated for 'Sunday school stories'. There is a large amount of arrogance in that. However, it is not all down to

pride or a feeling of superiority. It is also the result of getting into the habit of cynicism. However, that mind set only seems to affect them when it comes to the Bible.

They adopt very different standards of appraisal when it comes to believing, or not believing, other things. Skeptics might therefore refuse to accept apostle Paul's word, or even Jesus' word, as being authoritative. Yet they can be remarkably ready to believe, without question, anything they read in newspapers or that they see on the internet or the TV.

One particularly sees this gullibility in the way they accept without question the biased and hostile things that are said about Israel. Most media reporting about Israel consists of lies and misinformation. So, whereas God tells us to believe His Word and to question everything else, a skeptic tends to do the opposite.

They will not accept what the *Bible* says about Israel, but they will believe anything which the *media* says. The BBC, like almost all of the world's media, is deeply hostile to Israel. It consistently presents unbalanced and distorted reports and refuses to report anything that is supportive of Israel or critical of the Arabs or Palestinians. That bias is plain enough to be seen by anybody who loves the truth, but it is invisible to those who don't.

The same applies with the creation -v- evolution debate, another topic about which most of the media is willfully blind. Skeptics refuse to accept the fact that the universe, and everything in it, has been designed on purpose by someone. The fact that there must have been a Creator is self-evident to any five year old child, but not to them. Skeptics will put aside all logic when listening to the arguments for evolution and ignore everything that their eyes tell them about the immense complexity, beauty and orderliness of nature.

They do so because they are not looking for the real truth, but only for confirmation of what they have already decided they *want* to believe. By the way, it is not merely my personal view that it is self-evident that God created the whole world. God Himself says that it is obvious, such that any person who doesn't see that and believe it is a *fool*. I hasten to add that that is not what I say. It is what God says:

¹⁹ For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. ²⁰ Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse; ²¹ for although they knew God they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking and their senseless minds were darkened. ²² Claiming to be wise, they became fools, ²³ and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man or birds or animals or reptiles.

Romans 1:19-23 (RSV)

Indeed, the book of Job goes even further. We are told that even the animals, birds and fish know what God has done and could teach us about it if we asked them:

*⁷ "But ask the animals, and they will teach you,
or the birds in the sky, and they will tell you;*

*⁸ or speak to the earth, and it will teach you,
or let the fish in the sea inform you.*

*⁹ Which of all these does not know
that the hand of the Lord has done this?
Job 12:7-9 (NIV)*

What happens if we don't believe in creation and don't take Genesis chapters 1-11 literally?

Chapters 1-11 of Genesis deal with enormously important events in world history such as creation, the fall of Adam and Eve, the worldwide flood, and the subsequent repopulating of the world, leading to the forming of separate nations and languages at the time of the tower of Babel. When we look at the widespread refusal of our society to believe in events such as these, we are also discussing people who purport to be Christians, not just outright unbelievers.

Skepticism and all other forms of unbelief have spread right into the heart of the churches, not just the world outside. That is the scale of the problem. We are looking at how little is believed, even by people who say they are part of the Church, and even by church leaders. In fact, many leaders are more skeptical and unbelieving than their congregations are. That is probably due to the harm done to them in their days at Bible College or seminary, many of which tend to spread unbelief like a virus.

Countless young men have gone off as sincere believers to study at such places but come out as hardened liberals and skeptics with major unbelief issues. That is why seminaries are often referred to as *'theological cemeteries'*. Those which take a skeptical approach generally reject all of Genesis chapters 1-11. They justify themselves in that stance by saying that these chapters are not meant to be taken literally, but only symbolically.

Thus, rather than accepting that God created the whole universe in six literal days, as He says He did, they feel entitled to contradict Him and say that it actually took place over *"billions of years"*. Likewise, instead of accepting that there was a worldwide flood, they say it was just a *local* flood in the area of Iraq, or that it never really occurred at all. The Genesis account is, therefore, reduced to the status of myths and fables.

The whole Bible is undermined if we don't take the book of Genesis literally

Until Charles Darwin published his famous book, *'The Origin of Species,'* in 1859, virtually everybody, whatever their background, believed that God created the world. They did so because it is obvious that it was created, due to its order and complexity. Moreover, they also believed that God created it in six literal 24 hour days, as the book of Genesis says. However, Charles Darwin's book struck a chord, especially with those who were already inclined to have a more skeptical frame of mind.

Therefore evolution slowly began to be accepted, over a period of several decades, in place of the biblical account. Initially this was mainly amongst non-Christians but later it spread into the churches as well. Nevertheless, by the middle of the twentieth century, the theory of evolution had become accepted by very large numbers of Christians, especially liberals and skeptics, but also by many allegorists.

Amongst non-Christians, the theory of evolution was welcomed even more uncritically. It seemed to provide a basis for removing God from the picture entirely and for convincing themselves that the world came into being entirely of its own accord, without any Creator. That conclusion was felt to be a very convenient one, because getting rid of God also removes all accountability.

If there is no God, then we do not need to care what He might think about us, or whether He might judge us and punish us. The very concept of us being answerable to someone higher than ourselves is objectionable to many people. So, the chance to remove God altogether and dispense with all judgment and accountability made evolution even more attractive. Indeed, for many people, it is its main attraction.

However, even amongst Christians, the theory of evolution has come to be widely accepted. Having been told it so often at school and in the media, many assume that the theory must surely have been

proved by now and that it has acquired the status of fact. Therefore they feel obliged to make a place for it in their theology.

Actually, the theory of evolution has not been proved at all, nor come anywhere to being proved. As theories go, it is remarkably thin and full of holes. It has never even been effectively argued, let alone proved. It has absolutely nothing going for it and there has never been any credible evidence put forward to support it. At any rate, no scientist would be willing to accept any other theory based on evidence as poor as that which is put forward for evolution.

Actually, 'evidence' is too grand a word to use to describe the pathetically feeble things said in support of evolution. It is not evidence. Neither is it conducted in accordance with the ordinary scientific method, which is used in every field of real science. The theory of evolution is just a set of speculative ideas which are not based on facts but mere guess work and surmising. Indeed, the things they say fly in the face of the real science, rather than being supported by it.

Every argument for evolution that I have ever heard has been inadequate. The reasoning its supporters adopt is circular at best. They also reply to all questions about how creatures can change from one species to another (which is impossible) by simply reciting their favourite phrase. That is they say "*Yes, but over millions of years.....*"

It is assumed that the passage of a very long period of time, by itself, makes everything possible. But an impossible thing does not become possible merely by virtue of the passage of time, however protracted, not even "*over millions of years*", or billions for that matter. If anybody was to try to justify any other scientific theory, or get a drug licensed for use, with the pitiful amount of evidence that has been put forward for evolution, they would be laughed at.

However, there is an unspoken convention amongst the supporters of evolution whereby it is agreed not to ask any awkward questions about it and not to allow anybody else to do so either. Therefore, in the media, those who don't accept evolution are given little or no air time. Nevertheless, despite the weakness of the theory, and the absence of any evidence for it, evolution was an idea whose time had come.

Most of its supporters never really examined it. Evidence was not felt to be necessary. They felt they just had to accept it because others were accepting it. Today we are told so frequently that evolution is "*proven scientific fact*" that many of us passively assume that it must be so and ask no further questions. This has meant that even within many churches, the account of creation in the Bible has been pushed aside.

A lot of Christians are actually afraid to say that they believe in creation, even to other Christians, in case they might look foolish for believing it. Instead of rejecting the Bible's account outright, many Christians felt more comfortable arguing that what the Bible said about God creating the universe in six days was just "*poetic language*".

Thus, allegorical thinking, which had previously been directed mainly towards the prophetic parts of the Bible, (see below) was put to wider use to help explain away the Genesis account as well. There are all sorts of variations and combinations of views. Many people who take an allegorical approach to prophecy would not doubt the Genesis account or the miracles, though a lot of them might doubt the supernatural generally, as skeptics do.

Many people from a Reformed background adopt a confused and contradictory stance. Some take the creation account literally, but don't believe in the Flood. Most of them don't take Bible prophecies literally. Others from Reformed churches don't take *any* of these things literally. Some will accept the biblical accounts of miracles but refuse to believe that any miracles could occur *today*, in particular, most of them don't believe that spiritual gifts are still in operation.

However, when people refuse to believe in the miracles, whether past or present day, most are doing so because of their *skeptical* mind-set, not due to taking the *allegorical* approach. Nevertheless, for our purposes, when looking at Genesis 1-11, we shall combine these three schools of thought together. Ultimately, if a man ceases to take the Bible literally, or to see it as fact, then he is in unbelief and is mishandling the Scriptures. That is so whether he does it because he is a liberal, a skeptic, an allegorist, or all three combined.

Facts and doctrines which are undermined by not believing Genesis chapters 1-11

The following key facts or doctrines are undermined if we do not take Genesis chapters 1-11 literally:

- a) that God created the Earth and the universe.
- b) that he did so in six literal days.
- c) that this culminated in God creating Adam and Eve as fully formed, mature adults on day six.
- d) that they were created sinless and perfect with no sin nature.
- e) that they fell into sin by their own free choice.
- f) that their sin meant they died spiritually, acquired a sin nature and began, from that moment, to die physically.
- g) that all their descendants inherited a sin nature from them and, in due course, became sinners themselves, who must likewise die, both physically and spiritually. This is the position for everybody who has ever lived, including ourselves.
- h) that the evil of mankind became so intense, and so widespread, that God chose (about 1600 years after the Creation) to wipe out all life on earth, except for those who were saved in the Ark that Noah built.
- i) that God flooded the whole planet, also causing massive geological changes in the process and forming the things we now see, such as fossils, rock strata, oil, gas, and other metal or mineral deposits. The Flood also involved the movement of the continents and the formation of separate land masses and islands. In fact, all such things are actually *explained* by the Flood rather than being obstacles to our believing in it.
- j) that prior to Adam and Eve there was no death, not even for animals. Adam and Eve were originally vegetarians, as were all the animals, even the ones we now know as carnivores. (This contradicts one of the key elements of evolutionary thinking. They say that there were millions of years prior to Adam and Eve, assuming they are willing to believe this couple ever existed at all. During those ages of time, according to them, countless people and animals supposedly lived and died while 'evolving' into us.)
- k) that there was a Tower of Babel and a wicked man called Nimrod who founded what came to be known as *Babylon*, which later became a major theme throughout the whole Bible. He sought to be the first world ruler and was thus a type, or forerunner, of the future antichrist.
- l) that God frustrated Nimrod's plans by creating a multitude of languages and dividing the world into separate nations. Until this point the whole world spoke one language (probably Hebrew). From the time of the Tower of Babel onwards, God wanted nations to be separate and distinct from each other. That fact has great relevance to the nations of Europe today. They are being joined together in a Federal Union with the aim of becoming one single super-state. In addition to that, the whole

world is moving towards the formation of a one-world Government, of the type sought for unsuccessfully by Nimrod, but which *the* antichrist will finally achieve.

So, one can see, even from this brief list, that the whole of the rest of Scripture depends on Genesis chapters 1-11 being literally true. If the biblical account is not true, such that Adam and Eve didn't sin, and didn't pass on their sin nature to us, then it would follow that we do not have a sin nature. But we do, and that matters, because it puts us on a collision course with God and in line for His judgment.

More importantly, if we don't believe Genesis 1-11 about how our sin problem began, then why should we believe anything else that the Bible says? For example why believe what the Bible says about how our sin problem can be dealt with by Jesus' death and resurrection? Above all, we should be guided by how Jesus handled the Bible. You will notice that He always accepted it at face value and took it literally.

Examples of occasions where Jesus took the Bible completely literally

God told Noah to build a very large ship. It took him about 100 years. It was not a little boat with a giraffe's head sticking out of the top as it is portrayed so inaccurately in the pictures in most children's books. On the contrary, until the late nineteenth century (AD) with the advent of modern metal ships, nobody had ever built a ship as big as the Ark. So, that is the right way to picture it.

God told Noah to build it so that he and his family, and breeding pairs of all the animals, could survive the worldwide flood that was coming. By the way, God *sent* all the animals and creatures to the Ark. Noah didn't have to go out and catch them, or even herd them together, as some people assume.

Noah was a real man who existed in history. He was born in approximately the year 2948 BC. Many people, even in churches, now assume the account of the Flood to be a mere children's story or a fable. But Jesus didn't. He took it completely seriously. These are His own words:

²⁶"And just as it happened in the days of Noah, so it will be also in the days of the Son of Man: ²⁷they were eating, they were drinking, they were marrying, they were being given in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and the flood came and destroyed them all.

Luke 17:26-27 (NASB)

Jesus ought to know whether the worldwide Flood really happened and whether Noah really built the Ark. Jesus was alive and saw it all happen at the time. He was an eye-witness. He therefore knows for certain whether or not it is true. So, the fact that Jesus spoke of the Flood in such literal terms, and accepted it without any reservation as an historical event, is a profoundly important indicator for us.

Now look at how Jesus also took completely literally the account in the book of Genesis of the destruction of the town of Sodom and the rescue of Abraham's nephew, Lot and his family:

²⁸"It was the same as happened in the days of Lot: they were eating, they were drinking, they were buying, they were selling, they were planting, they were building; ²⁹but on the day that Lot went out from Sodom it rained fire and brimstone from heaven and destroyed them all. ³⁰"It will be just the same on the day that the Son of Man is revealed.

Luke 17:28-30 (NASB)

Jesus is saying that the past judgment by the Flood, and then the fiery judgment on the town of Sodom, were real historical events and so will be the future judgment of this world. Therefore He is warning us to take that future judgment seriously and not to be like Lot's wife. She perished because she looked back.

She hankered after the world as it was and was reluctant to leave Sodom, despite what the angels had said about the judgment that was coming on the city. Note again that Jesus viewed Lot's wife as a literal person who really lived, not as a myth or fable. Moreover, He wasn't embarrassed to say so:

³²"Remember Lot's wife. ³³"Whoever seeks to keep his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life will preserve it.

Luke 17:32-33 (NASB)

On another occasion Jesus was speaking about the prophet Jonah. He was swallowed by a huge fish, having already drowned and died under the water. Jonah's dead body was brought to the shore by that huge fish and God then brought him back to life, so that he could preach to the people of Ninevah and urge them to repent. Note again how Jesus takes the account of Jonah's experience completely literally. He says nothing to doubt or contradict any part of it:

²⁹As the crowds were increasing, He began to say, "This generation is a wicked generation; it seeks for a sign, and yet no sign will be given to it but the sign of Jonah. ³⁰"For just as Jonah became a sign to the Ninevites, so will the Son of Man be to this generation.

Luke 11:29-30 (NASB)

The "sign of Jonah" to which Jesus refers is the fact that Jonah was raised from the dead. Jesus meant that He Himself, like Jonah, would be raised from the dead. Likewise, Jesus also takes literally the account of how the Queen of the South (the Queen of Sheba) came to visit King Solomon. Some people today doubt whether she really existed, but Jesus views her as a real historical figure:

³¹"The Queen of the South will rise up with the men of this generation at the judgment and condemn them, because she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and behold, something greater than Solomon is here. ³²"The men of Nineveh will stand up with this generation at the judgment and condemn it, because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and behold, something greater than Jonah is here.

Luke 11:31-32 (NASB)

Jesus took *all* the historical facts of the Old Testament literally. There is no example of Him ever doing otherwise. That ought to be conclusive, even by itself. We should therefore do exactly the same as Jesus did when the Bible speaks about past events.

If Genesis chapters 1-11 are not literally true, then why should we believe anything else in the rest of the Bible?

If we don't believe in Genesis 1-11, then we undermine the whole of the rest of the Bible too. If the accounts of creation and of the lives of Adam, Noah etc are not literally true and factual, then why did Jesus believe in them and speak of them all as fact? If they are not real, then it must follow that Jesus was either mistaken or lying. If so, He would not be God and we ought not to listen to Him at all.

If evolution is true, and these events described in Genesis 1-11 really are just fables and myths, then what confidence can we have in Jesus, or the apostles? How can we believe *any* of what they say about sin, judgment, Hell, the Lake of Fire, salvation, the future fulfilment of Bible prophecy and so on? Everything else in the Bible becomes unreliable if we can't trust the book of Genesis.

Many people in churches who claim to be Christians do not believe in miracles either. Some are embarrassed by anything supernatural and they ignore it or try to explain it all away. The Bible commentary writer, the late William Barclay, was a classic example of that. In many ways he was sincere and he did have some valuable insights into the Bible. However, his faith was undermined by his background, and by the skeptics and so called 'higher critics' who had taught him.

As a result, he could not bring himself to believe in the miracles, not even those performed by Jesus Himself. He argued, for example, that when Jesus fed the 5000 it was not a miracle at all. Barclay's theory was that the people were inspired, or ashamed, by the boy's example in offering to share his lunch with the crowd.

Therefore he believed that all the other people simply got out their own packed lunches, which they had been hiding, and shared them with each other. So, William Barclay taught that the 'miracle' of Jesus feeding the multitude was actually just an allegorical account of the 'real' miracle, which was how He taught the people to share. That is so lame it is pathetic. Yet, many believe it, because they have been taught, by word and by example, not to believe in miracles, mainly due to the unbelief of their leaders.

One is reminded also of the apochryphal story of a liberal/sceptical theologian. He was preaching about Moses parting the waters of the Red Sea, to enable the people of Israel to walk across the dry sea bed to escape from the pursuing Egyptian army. He explained that it was not really a 'sea' as such, but merely a reed bed, with shallow water, about two feet deep.

Therefore, he said, the Israelites were able to 'paddle' across it, and that it should not really be called the Red Sea at all, but the 'Reed' Sea. As he said this, an elderly black man in the congregation cried out "*Praise the Lord. What a miracle!*" The liberal/skeptical preacher looked at him patronizingly and said "*Didn't you hear me? I said that the water was only two feet deep.*"

The elderly black man replied "*Yes - praise the LORD! What a miracle that God was able to drown the whole Egyptian army in two feet of water*". The story may be apocryphal, but it illustrates how silly it is to try to explain away the miraculous or the supernatural. All you do is create problems for yourself elsewhere.

Ultimately, you have to make your choice and decide whether you are going to believe God's Word or not. However, if you choose not to do so then, like the sceptical preacher above, you will create far more problems for yourself than you solve.

C. The allegorical view of Scripture - not accepting that the prophecies in the Bible are meant to be taken literally

As we saw earlier, our English word '*hermeneutics*' means the approach we take to interpreting the Bible. Ordinarily, we don't find this very difficult when reading every other kind of literature. We use our common sense and it is usually fairly obvious how a text book, business letter, contract or any other document, should be understood.

However, when it comes to the Bible, many of us operate without any of that common sense, especially with prophecy. A number of misguided methods of interpretation have been developed. Each of these are based on not taking the Bible at face value, and instead assuming that in some way it is being symbolic and means something other than what it says.

It is a disastrously mistaken approach and leads to many errors. Sadly, it is the method now used by most churches in the Western world. If the plain words of, the Bible say "ABC", the allegorical method or approach urges you to interpret it as actually meaning "XYZ" instead. This secondary meaning which is assumed to be there, hidden beneath the surface, is usually something obscure and indirect which you would never think of for yourself unless someone told you that it meant that.

People who attend churches which take the allegorical approach are taught not to rely on the ordinary, plain meaning of the words of the Bible. Instead they are told to seek a "deeper underlying meaning" that some teacher says those words have. He then becomes the Bible's interpreter, rather than the Bible speaking for itself. On that basis, without him and his colleagues to tell us what the allegories mean, the Bible cannot be understood at all.

The allegorical approach would be fine if the Bible ever *told* us to understand it that way, but the point is that it doesn't. Likewise, it would be less of a problem if there was only one consistent way of interpreting what the supposed symbols mean, as opposed to the countless variations which people have dreamed up.

Some very specific prophecies about the city of Tyre, which were literally fulfilled

One of the strongest arguments in support of the plain/literal interpretation of prophecy is the fact that all of the prophecies that have been fulfilled so far have been fulfilled literally, with real, tangible events. For example, let's look at some prophecies by Zechariah and Ezekiel concerning Tyre, the proud, wealthy, principal city of Phoenicia.

It was a coastal city and was in two parts. The largest section was on the mainland, but there was also another, smaller part of the city which was on an island, half a mile out to sea. Let's look first at what Zechariah prophesied about Tyre:

*³ For Tyre built herself a fortress
And piled up silver like dust,
And gold like the mire of the streets.
⁴ Behold, the Lord will dispossess her
And cast her wealth into the sea;
And she will be consumed with fire.
Zechariah 9:3-4 (NASB)*

Now let's look at a much more detailed prophecy from the book of Ezekiel. The people of Tyre had been taking pleasure in the misfortunes and sufferings of Israel. Their lack of compassion grieved God, which is a lesson to us not to do as they did. As a punishment for their callous attitude towards His chosen people, God spoke through the prophet Ezekiel in 586 BC. He said that Tyre was going to experience the following specific judgments from God:

- a) Nations (plural) will come and destroy Tyre. The King of the first of these nations is actually named, i.e. Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon.
- b) King Nebuchadnezzar will break down the walls and towers of Tyre
- c) The debris will be scraped away, so as to make Tyre a bare rock.
- d) The stones and timber will be thrown into the sea.
- e) Tyre will cease to be a city and will be uninhabited.
- f) It will never be rebuilt.
- g) It will become a place where fishermen spread their nets (to dry them).

Now consider verses 1-14 below and pick out each aspect of Ezekiel's prophecy:

¹ Now in the eleventh year, on the first of the month, the word of the LORD came to me saying, ² "Son of man, because Tyre has said concerning Jerusalem, 'Aha, the gateway of the peoples is broken; it has opened to me. I shall be filled, now that she is laid waste,' ³ therefore thus says the Lord GOD, 'Behold, I am against you, O Tyre, and I will bring up many nations against you, as the sea brings up its waves. ⁴ They will destroy the walls of Tyre and break down her towers; and I will scrape her debris from her and make her a bare rock. ⁵ She will be a place for the spreading of nets in the midst of the sea, for I have spoken,' declares the Lord GOD, 'and she will become spoil for the

nations. ⁶ Also her daughters who are on the mainland will be slain by the sword, and they will know that I am the LORD.”

⁷For thus says the Lord GOD, “Behold, I will bring upon Tyre from the north Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, king of kings, with horses, chariots, cavalry and a great army. ⁸He will slay your daughters on the mainland with the sword; and he will make siege walls against you, cast up a ramp against you and raise up a large shield against you. ⁹The blow of his battering rams he will direct against your walls, and with his axes he will break down your towers. ¹⁰Because of the multitude of his horses, the dust raised by them will cover you; your walls will shake at the noise of cavalry and wagons and chariots when he enters your gates as men enter a city that is breached.

¹¹With the hoofs of his horses he will trample all your streets. He will slay your people with the sword; and your strong pillars will come down to the ground. ¹²Also they will make a spoil of your riches and a prey of your merchandise, break down your walls and destroy your pleasant houses, and throw your stones and your timbers and your debris into the water. ¹³So I will silence the sound of your songs, and the sound of your harps will be heard no more. ¹⁴I will make you a bare rock; you will be a place for the spreading of nets. You will be built no more, for I the LORD have spoken,” declares the Lord GOD.

Ezekiel 26:1-14 (NASB)

What Zechariah said above about Tyre, plus all of the points (a) - (g) that were prophesied by Ezekiel, were fulfilled literally and exactly, not just metaphorically. To begin with, the part of the city that was on the mainland was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar. He laid siege to it for 13 years until 573 BC. He tore down the land-based part of the city, but did not destroy the rest of it, which was on the island.

However, 254 years later in 332 BC when Alexander the Great was passing by, conquering the known world, the people of Tyre resisted him. Instead of surrendering, they all took shelter on the small island a short distance out to sea. Nebuchadnezzar had never managed to reach that little island all those years before when he had attacked Tyre. The people of Tyre had used it on other occasions in the past as a place to escape to.

Therefore they thought they would be safe there from Alexander’s attack, as their ancestors had been with previous attacks. But they were wrong. God arranged for the remainder of the prophecies to be fulfilled by Alexander, who was a pagan. So, without having any idea that he was fulfilling a prophecy, and knowing nothing of the Hebrew Scriptures, he got his armies to take the rubble and timber of the ruined city of Tyre and throw it all into the sea.

It was exactly as both Zechariah and Ezekiel had prophesied. In that way he built a half-mile long causeway, all the way out to the offshore island. He used all the rubble and debris of Tyre for this purpose, even the dust! How amazing is that? If we had time, we could give many more such examples, from the other prophets, where their various prophecies are literally and exactly fulfilled, just as these were.

The Bible does sometimes use figures of speech, but they are not allegories. They just need to be understood correctly and then taken literally in terms of what they actually mean

The Bible, like any book, does sometimes use figures of speech and colourful, poetic phrases. There can be no doubt about that, because Jesus says so Himself:

²⁵“I have said these things to you in figures of speech. The hour is coming when I will no longer speak to you in figures of speech but will tell you plainly about the Father.

John 16:25 (ESV)

However, even when figures of speech are used, they still mean exactly what the figure of speech is intended to convey. So, when Jesus says "*I am the vine; you are the branches*" He simply means that He is the source of our life and power and that we must be attached to Him and draw our strength and wisdom from Him, or else we can do nothing.

It's not complicated. Even an unsophisticated person can recognise it as a helpful figure of speech. It doesn't need to be "de-coded". So, even on those occasions when the Bible uses such vivid expressions or poetic phrases the meaning is still easy to see. However, it is only easy to see if you are being plain and uncomplicated, and are using your common sense.

If you aren't, then even the simplest statements can be misunderstood. Consider this passage from Isaiah. It contains a figure of speech, but the meaning is plain enough. It refers to the way in which the line of succession of King David, the son of Jesse, will be cut but that in the future David's line will be restored by the Messiah, Jesus:

³³ *Behold, the Lord, the Lord of hosts
will lop the boughs with terrifying power;
the great in height will be hewn down,
and the lofty will be brought low.*
³⁴ *He will cut down the thickets of the forest with an axe,
and Lebanon with its majestic trees will fall.*
¹ *There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.*
² *And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him,
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the spirit of counsel and might,
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.*
³ *And his delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.
He shall not judge by what his eyes see,
or decide by what his ears hear;*
⁴ *but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;
and he shall smite the earth with the rod of his mouth,
and with the breath of his lips he shall slay the wicked.*
Isaiah 10:33 – 11:4 (RSV)

This was a prophecy made by Isaiah about how the Messiah would arise like a shoot from the stump of Jesse, i.e. as if the kingly line of Jesse was a tree which had been chopped down. Obviously, that kingly line of Jesse/David isn't a tree and Jesus isn't a shoot, but the metaphor is clear and expresses Isaiah's point very well.

There are also some more difficult figures of speech that are harder to understand, for example the expression "*a good eye*".

The expression "*a good eye*" is used by Jesus in Matthew chapter six. Very few versions of the Bible translate it correctly, because it is a Jewish figure of speech, or slang expression, which most English speaking translators have not understood properly. That is probably because they didn't ask a Jewish believer to help them to translate it.

The translators of the New King James Version (NKJV) presumably don't understand the meaning of the phrases, '*good eye*' and '*bad eye*'. But they have at least been honest enough just to translate them literally, word for word. They appear to have done that rather than try to guess at their real meaning, which has to do with being generous or stingy. They express it as follows:

²² ***"The lamp of the body is the eye. If therefore your eye is good, your whole body will be full of light.***
²³ ***But if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If therefore the light that is in you is darkness, how great is that darkness!***

Matthew 6:22-23 (NKJV)

The question is what does Jesus actually mean by saying: "If your eye is good, or "..... if your eye is bad....."? Over the years I have heard a number of preachers struggle with that passage. They have generally assumed that Jesus was talking about our "spiritual eyesight", or having "clear vision" or "the ability to see things spiritually".

Most Gentiles have never heard of the Jewish figure of speech "a good eye". Therefore that particular phrase makes no sense to them if translated word for word, without any explanatory footnote. Therefore, most translation committees choose to alter or expand it in translation to try to get it to make some kind of sense.

The problem is that they get it wrong, because they simply don't know what the slang expression actually meant. Let's look at a few other examples of the translation of Matthew 6:22-23 which all elaborate upon it wrongly. They each use embroidered phrases along the lines of how "a pure eye lets sunshine into your soul" and about having a "clear eye" or a "healthy eye" etc.

They go wrong because they alter Jesus' words to try to force them to make some kind of sense, rather than just make enquiries with people who understood the Hebrew language and Jewish slang phrases as to what Jesus actually meant. Had they done so they would have discovered that Jesus was not speaking about eyesight at all, but *generosity*.

At any rate, here are some of the attempts to translate the phrase by a number of translators who did not realise that it was a Jewish figure of speech:

²²***"Your eye is a lamp for your body. A pure eye lets sunshine into your soul.*** ²³***But an evil eye shuts out the light and plunges you into darkness. If the light you think you have is really darkness, how deep that darkness will be!***

Matthew 6:22-23 (New Living Translation)

²² ***"The eye is the lamp of the body; so then if your eye is clear, your whole body will be full of light.***
²³ ***But if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light that is in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!***

Matthew 6:22-23 (NASB)

²²***"The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light,***
²³***but if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!***

Matthew 6:22-23 (ESV)

None of these attempts convey the correct meaning. The phrase 'to have a good eye' just means to be generous, whereas to 'have a bad eye' means to be stingy or mean. It's as simple as that. The meaning comes over most clearly in the Jewish New Testament, translated by a Jewish believer, David H Stern.

He keeps the literal, word for word translation, but then helpfully includes the meaning in brackets afterwards. He does so because he knows that most Gentiles have no idea what the meaning of those phrases is:

²²***The eye is the lamp of the body. 'So if you have a 'good eye' [that is, if you are generous] your whole body will be full of light;*** ²³***but if you have an 'evil eye' [if you are stingy] your whole body will be full of darkness.***

Matthew 6:22-23 (Stern Version)

All we need to do is realise that the phrases 'good eye' and 'bad eye' have to do with being generous or being stingy. Then all the rest of the passage makes sense. Jesus is saying this in the wider context of talking about financial giving and laying up treasures in Heaven. He then goes on to speak of how we cannot serve both God and money, and how we must not be anxious about money and provision etc.

Against that backdrop, it makes perfect sense for Jesus to speak of being generous or stingy and the effect it has on us. The whole passage fits together perfectly once you realise what the figures of speech mean. That example of a translation problem illustrates the fact that where the Bible contains a figure of speech in the original Hebrew or Greek, we just need to find out what that expression actually means in their culture/language.

After that, we must either use some other phrase which conveys the same meaning in English. Or, we could set it out word for word but include a footnote explaining its meaning. Then, from that point on, we should accept the meaning of the expression and believe what it is saying. So, in this example, Jesus intends us to realise that he is not talking about eyesight but generosity or stinginess.

Once we have grasped that, He then wants us to take Him literally, i.e. to believe that the effects of being generous or stingy really will be as He describes them. This point will be dealt with further below when we come to consider right and wrong ways to translate the Bible. We shall examine the differences between the approaches of literal translation, which is done word for word, and '*dynamic equivalency*' which is a looser way of translating.

There are some genuine allegories in the Bible, but when they occur it is usually made very clear that they are allegories

The central belief of those who take the allegorical approach to interpretation is that all, or virtually all, prophecy is assumed to be an enormously long series of allegories. I will freely concede that there are some instances where the Bible does present allegories. Indeed, we shall look at an example of this below, from the book of Ezekiel where the Bible tells us expressly that what is being said is an allegory.

However, the point is that that that is unusual. Therefore, far from giving us any basis for assuming that the rest of the Bible is *generally* meant to be taken as an allegory, this example from Ezekiel suggests the direct opposite. What I mean is that when the allegory is used in Ezekiel we are told so plainly.

That suggests that the rest of the time, unless it is obvious, or where we are explicitly *told* that it is an allegory, then it is *not* intended to be taken as such. That is usually the case. So, allegories are the exception, not the norm. At any rate, look how on this occasion God uses an allegory to make a vivid but clearly understandable point:

¹ In the ninth year, in the tenth month, on the tenth day of the month, the word of the LORD came to me: ² "Son of man, write down the name of this day, this very day. The king of Babylon has laid siege to Jerusalem this very day. ³ And utter an allegory to the rebellious house and say to them, Thus says the Lord GOD: Set on the pot, set it on, pour in water also; ⁴ put in it the pieces of flesh, all the good pieces, the thigh and the shoulder; fill it with choice bones. ⁵ Take the choicest one of the flock, pile the logs under it; boil its pieces, seethe also its bones in it. ⁶ "Therefore thus says the Lord GOD: Woe to the bloody city, to the pot whose rust is in it, and whose rust has not gone out of it! Take out of it piece after piece, without making any choice. ⁷ For the blood she has shed is still in the midst of her; she put it on the bare rock, she did not pour it upon the ground to cover it with dust.

⁸ To rouse my wrath, to take vengeance, I have set on the bare rock the blood she has shed, that it may not be covered. ⁹ Therefore thus says the Lord GOD: Woe to the bloody city! I also will make the pile great. ¹⁰ Heap on the logs, kindle the fire, boil well the flesh, and empty out the broth, and let the bones be burned up. ¹¹ Then set it empty upon the coals, that it may become hot, and its copper

may burn, that its filthiness may be melted in it, its rust consumed. ¹² *In vain I have wearied myself; its thick rust does not go out of it by fire.* ¹³ *Its rust is your filthy lewdness. Because I would have cleansed you and you were not cleansed from your filthiness, you shall not be cleansed any more till I have satisfied my fury upon you.* ¹⁴ *I the LORD have spoken; it shall come to pass, I will do it; I will not go back, I will not spare, I will not repent; according to your ways and your doings I will judge you, says the Lord GOD."*

Ezekiel 24:1-14 (RSV)

In the above passage, God tells Ezekiel to present the people of Jerusalem with this allegory (or parable) about a boiling pot. It was intended to symbolize how Jerusalem would be besieged by the king of Babylon and 'boiled,' as if the city was a pot with meat in it. The meaning of this, and the fact that it is an allegory, is already obvious enough to begin with.

Nevertheless, for the avoidance of all doubt, it is then directly stated to be an allegory. Consider how very different this is from the multitudes of other passages that are *not* allegories but are wrongly assumed to be so. In this next example the Bible goes even further. The passage is not only expressly stated to be an allegory, but the meaning of the allegory is then carefully explained. It leaves us in no doubt that that is what we are dealing with:

¹ *The word of the Lord came to me:* ² *"Son of man, propound a riddle, and speak an allegory to the house of Israel;* ³ *say, Thus says the Lord God: A great eagle with great wings and long pinions, rich in plumage of many colors, came to Lebanon and took the top of the cedar;* ⁴ *he broke off the topmost of its young twigs and carried it to a land of trade, and set it in a city of merchants.* ⁵ *Then he took of the seed of the land and planted it in fertile soil; he placed it beside abundant waters. He set it like a willow twig,* ⁶ *and it sprouted and became a low spreading vine, and its branches turned toward him, and its roots remained where it stood. So it became a vine, and brought forth branches and put forth foliage.*

⁷ *"But there was another great eagle with great wings and much plumage; and behold, this vine bent its roots toward him, and shot forth its branches toward him that he might water it. From the bed where it was planted* ⁸ *he transplanted it to good soil by abundant waters, that it might bring forth branches, and bear fruit, and become a noble vine.* ⁹ *Say, Thus says the Lord God: Will it thrive? Will he not pull up its roots and cut off its branches, so that all its fresh sprouting leaves wither? It will not take a strong arm or many people to pull it from its roots.* ¹⁰ *Behold, when it is transplanted, will it thrive? Will it not utterly wither when the east wind strikes it—wither away on the bed where it grew?"*

Ezekiel 17:1-10 (RSV)

¹¹ *Then the word of the Lord came to me:* ¹² *"Say now to the rebellious house, Do you not know what these things mean? Tell them, Behold, the king of Babylon came to Jerusalem, and took her king and her princes and brought them to him to Babylon.* ¹³ *And he took one of the seed royal and made a covenant with him, putting him under oath. (The chief men of the land he had taken away,* ¹⁴ *that the kingdom might be humble and not lift itself up, and that by keeping his covenant it might stand.)* ¹⁵ *But he rebelled against him by sending ambassadors to Egypt, that they might give him horses and a large army. Will he succeed? Can a man escape who does such things? Can he break the covenant and yet escape?*

¹⁶ *As I live, says the Lord God, surely in the place where the king dwells who made him king, whose oath he despised, and whose covenant with him he broke, in Babylon he shall die.* ¹⁷ *Pharaoh with his mighty army and great company will not help him in war, when mounds are cast up and siege walls built to cut off many lives.* ¹⁸ *Because he despised the oath and broke the covenant, because he gave his hand and yet did all these things, he shall not escape.* ¹⁹ *Therefore thus says the Lord God: As I live, surely my oath which he despised, and my covenant which he broke, I will requite upon his head.* ²⁰ *I will spread my net over him, and he shall be taken in my snare, and I will bring him to Babylon and enter into judgment with him there for the treason he has committed against me.* ²¹ *And*

all the pick of his troops shall fall by the sword, and the survivors shall be scattered to every wind; and you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken.”

Ezekiel 17:11-21 (RSV)

Our general approach to prophecy should be to take it literally. That should always be our starting point, before we begin to look for patterns or types or engage in any midrash.

We saw above that when Ezekiel used these allegories he *said* he was doing so. He even explained their meaning. In other cases the allegory is usually so obvious that it doesn't need to be pointed out. At any rate, what we can say very clearly is that there is no instruction, or even permission, given anywhere in the Bible for us to approach the bulk of Scripture as if it was *generally* symbolic, or as if it *usually* contained secondary, allegorical meanings.

That is not the way that Jesus, or the apostles, or the prophets, approached the Bible. They assumed that a passage was *not* an allegory unless they were specifically told that it *was*, or unless its allegorical nature was totally obvious. Examples of that would be where Jesus spoke of Himself as being a 'door' or a 'Shepherd' or of us being *sheep* and so on.

That consistent example of how Jesus and the prophets and apostles approached the Bible ought, even by itself, to convince us of the wrongness of the allegorical approach, whereby the presence of an allegory is assumed, almost across the board. We hardly need any additional reasons to reject it. Nevertheless, there are plenty of other reasons to say that the allegorical approach is mistaken, some of which we will examine below.

The mistakes and confusion that the allegorical approach causes

The mistake of treating the Bible as allegorical, in instances where the Bible does not instruct us to do so, is mainly made in relation to prophecy. Therefore, the most obvious book which tends to get wrongly allegorized is Revelation. However, it is also done with all the other prophetic passages in both the old and New Testaments, especially Daniel, Ezekiel, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Zechariah and Matthew. Prophecy as a whole adds up to about 30% of the Scriptures and is spread all over the Bible.

However, let's look firstly at an example from the book of Revelation. It shows how people can go badly wrong, and end up with wildly inaccurate beliefs, if they adopt the allegorical approach and assume that passages are allegories when, in fact, they aren't. Then, later in this book, we shall examine five more specific examples of doctrinal errors that come from assuming a passage to be an allegory when it actually isn't.

The error of not accepting that the 1000 year millennial reign of Jesus Christ on the Earth is literally what will happen

Perhaps the most obvious error made by those who allegorize the prophetic Scriptures is in relation to the period called the '*Millennium*'. This is the 1000 year reign of Jesus Christ. It is going to happen on this physical Earth, not in Heaven. Revelation chapter 20 speaks of this future period, but so too do most of the prophetic books in the Old Testament.

The main difference is that Revelation goes further and specifies the *length* of this Kingdom. It tells us six times that it will last for 1,000 years. How many times does that need to be said in the Bible for us to be willing to believe that God means exactly what He says, and that He is not using the device of an allegory?

Due to so many preachers misguidedly treating this passage from Revelation, and other passages from other books, as if they were allegories when in fact they aren't, most people in Britain still don't believe in a literal Millennium, whatever length it may be. Most people do not even know that Jesus will reign on the Earth at all.

Yet it is frequently spoken about, and in great detail, by most of the prophets, not just by apostle John. However, for now, let's read part of Revelation chapter 20 and then pick out some of the other key features of what will happen before, during and after those 1000 years:

¹Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding the key of the abyss and a great chain in his hand. ²And he laid hold of the dragon, the serpent of old, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years; ³and he threw him into the abyss, and shut it and sealed it over him, so that he would not deceive the nations any longer, until the thousand years were completed; after these things he must be released for a short time. ⁴Then I saw thrones, and they sat on them, and judgment was given to them. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony of Jesus and because of the word of God, and those who had not worshiped the beast or his image, and had not received the mark on their forehead and on their hand; and they came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. ⁵The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were completed. This is the first resurrection.

⁶Blessed and holy is the one who has a part in the first resurrection; over these the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with Him for a thousand years. ⁷When the thousand years are completed, Satan will be released from his prison, ⁸and will come out to deceive the nations which are in the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them together for the war; the number of them is like the sand of the seashore. ⁹And they came up on the broad plain of the earth and surrounded the camp of the saints and the beloved city, and fire came down from heaven and devoured them. ¹⁰And the devil who deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet are also; and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever.

Revelation 20:1-10 (NASB)

While Jesus is reigning as King on the Earth, Satan will be put into a prison so that he is not able to deceive people. He will stay locked up until just before the end of that 1000 year period. Moreover, we see that believers who have died are raised from the dead at the start of the Millennium. They will then live on the Earth, in their physical resurrection bodies, and reign with Jesus during the whole period.

We see from verse five that unbelievers, i.e. unsaved non-Christians, are not resurrected until later, at the end of the 1000 years. We learn elsewhere, in various other passages, that at the end of the 1000 years all the unbelievers are also physically raised from the dead. They too are then given resurrection bodies, in order that they can be judged at the Great White Throne judgment.

Before that, towards the end of the 1000 years, Satan will be released for a short period. He will then take his last opportunity to deceive as many people as he can, and to lead a worldwide rebellion against the King, Jesus. He will even attempt to attack Jerusalem. But that revolt will be snuffed out very abruptly by Jesus. After that, Satan himself will finally be thrown into the Lake of Fire, which was prepared for him so long ago.

Now, let us look at how very differently Revelation 20:1-10, and other related passages, are dealt with by those who believe that we are meant to allegorize the Scriptures. Their various misinterpretations produce all sorts of different sequences of events. But none of them are anything like what the text actually says.

The allegorical view of Revelation 20:1-10 and other related passages, and the various mistakes which that approach produces

Those who take the allegorical approach to Bible prophecy look at this same passage, and many other related passages, but come up with a very wide range of mistaken beliefs. We shall now set out some of the most common errors:

- a) They don't believe that there will actually be a 1000 year reign of Jesus on the Earth. They assume instead that that is just a 'metaphor' for Jesus "*reigning on the Earth now, through His body, the church*". They mean that He reigns through us.
- b) Therefore they believe that the 'reign' of Jesus is not in the future, but is already happening now.
- c) So, according to them, the Church is already 'ruling and reigning' now on this Earth. If they are right, then one has to say that it is all a very disappointing damp squib, or anti-climax, in comparison to the glowing terms in which the Bible describes what that time will be like.
- d) They believe that the stated length of Jesus' reign, i.e. 1000 years is not to be taken literally. Instead it is viewed as 'poetic language', just meaning "*a long time*". It is usually taken to refer to the whole Church age, which is already nearly 2000 years.
- e) Amazingly, they also believe that Satan is *already in prison*, even now as you read this. So, they believe that the deception and chaos that we all experience today is not caused, or even increased, by Satan or his demons. It is assumed that if Satan and his demons play any part in our lives at all, then it is only very minor. It therefore follows, in their view, that nobody is 'demonized.' So, according to them, nobody is oppressed, deceived or tormented by demons. Moreover, nobody needs to have any demon cast out of them.
- f) So, the allegorists' specific errors about Bible prophecy also affect their general understanding of the various things that are done by demons, here and now. So, their mistaken 'eschatology' (the study of the end times) also distorts their 'demonology' (the study of demons). This is a good example of how misunderstanding Bible prophecy can spill over and distort all the rest of your theology too. I emphasize that, because the errors and confusion caused by the allegorical approach are by no means confined to the area of prophecy.
- g) Most of those who take the allegorical approach do not believe that resurrected Christians will ever be brought back to live on this physical Earth again. Instead, most of them believe that believers will go to Heaven and stay there permanently. Thus, most Christians who accept the allegorical approach do not believe that we will ever live again on this Earth. There is no place in their thinking for any future role for this physical Earth. Future events after we die are generally assumed to be purely '*spiritual*' and to take place in Heaven.
- h) They do not believe that any literal, military attack will ever be mounted by Satan on King Jesus, or on the city of Jerusalem. Indeed, those who take the allegorical approach basically see no role for Jerusalem at all, either now or in the future. They see no role for Israel or the Jewish people either. These are all assumed to be irrelevant, and to have no further part to play in God's plans. So, Israel is relegated from centre stage, which is how the Bible views it. Instead it is assumed to have little or no part to play in anything. That profound mistake leads them on to all sorts of other related errors in both doctrine and practice. See below and see also later books in this series which deal with Israel and '*replacement theology*', i.e. the mistaken idea that the Church has replaced Israel.

CHAPTER 8

THE ‘GOLDEN RULE’ FOR INTERPRETING SCRIPTURE

⁷ *“For the Lord God does nothing without revealing his secret to his servants the prophets.”*
Amos 3:7 (ESV)

⁴⁰ *For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.*

Matthew 12:40 (ESV)

¹⁵ *Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth.*

2 Timothy 2:15 (ESV)

In the first year of Darius the son of Ahasu-e'rus, by birth a Mede, who became king over the realm of the Chalde'ans—² in the first year of his reign, I, Daniel, perceived in the books the number of years which, according to the word of the Lord to Jeremiah the prophet, must pass before the end of the desolations of Jerusalem, namely, seventy years.

³ *Then I turned my face to the Lord God, seeking him by prayer and supplications with fasting and sackcloth and ashes.*

Daniel 9:1-3 (RSV)

²⁵ *And he said to them, “O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken!*
²⁶ *Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?”²⁷ And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.*

Luke 24:25-27 (ESV)

How then should we interpret the Bible?

The correct approach to interpreting the Bible, or at least the correct *starting point*, is very simple. It is generally meant to be understood literally. Most of the time it is not complicated. It usually means exactly what it says. Therefore you should generally assume that any words used in the Bible are to be given their plain, ordinary, everyday meaning unless there is a good reason to do otherwise.

An example of that would be where the text is clearly a metaphor or figure of speech, or where the text itself says explicitly that an allegory is being used, as we saw above. Do not assume that the words of the Bible *generally have* any special, secret, mysterious or allegorical meaning hidden beneath the surface.

To make such an assumption is both wrong and dangerous, because it treats the exception as if it was the rule. So, let us now set out what is known as the *'golden rule'*. Unless there is a very good reason to do otherwise, this approach should always be taken when interpreting any verse of the Bible, whether it is law, history, poetry, prophecy or a letter. Just use the same simple method almost all the time.

The “golden rule” for interpreting the Bible correctly

One must recognize that the Bible does contain examples of all sorts of figures of speech, metaphors, symbols, analogies, hyperbole and even allegories. That said, we should always *begin* the reading of any passage of the Bible with this as our starting point or default-setting:

“.....take every word at its primary, ordinary, usual, literal meaning, unless the facts of the immediate context, studied in the light of related passages and other [obvious and fundamental] truths, indicate clearly otherwise.”

In short, every word in the Bible is to be understood exactly as it reads, unless there is something in that passage, or in some other passage, which clearly shows that it should be understood in some other, non-literal way. Some examples would be the passage we saw earlier from Matthew 6:22-23, when Jesus used a Jewish figure of speech, about having a 'good eye', i.e. being generous, or when He spoke of Himself as a door or a Shepherd or a vine etc.

I should also add that following this golden rule does not in any way prevent you from also being able to see that a particular passage in the Bible is meant to be taken as a ‘*type*’? That is where a literal event or person which is described in the Bible *also* prefigures, or gives information about, some future event or person.

That is, *as well as being* literally true/factual/historical, the person or event can *also* be a type of someone or something else. For example, Jacob’s son, Joseph is a type of Jesus, because many of the facts and circumstances of his life illustrate events that would later occur in the life of Jesus.

There are very many of these, for example, the way that Joseph suffered in order to save his own people, the way he was sold for pieces of silver, the fact that his brothers did not recognize him, even when he was standing in front of them and the way that Joseph, in the end, suddenly revealed his identity to all of his brothers at the same time.

All of these things literally happened to Joseph. Yet, they do *also* prefigure real, literal events that have occurred, or will one day occur, in the life of Jesus. Thus we learn more from these events in the life of Joseph than just the details of the events themselves. They did all literally happen to Joseph and they are real events in history, but they also point to and help to illustrate other, bigger events as well.

They have a deeper meaning, and you could even say a secondary meaning, by virtue of being a type. But that secondary meaning is *in addition* to the plain, literal meaning. It is *not an alternative* to it. So, the fact that there are more than 20 striking similarities between the events of Joseph’s life and those of Jesus’ life does *not* mean that those events never really happened to Joseph. They did literally happen. It is just that they also have a secondary, typological meaning as well as, not instead of, the literal, surface meaning.

I ought to point out that I have actually slightly shortened the ‘golden rule’ from the way it is usually expressed. Most people begin it with the following words, which I chose to leave out: *“When the plain sense of Scripture makes common sense, you should generally seek no other sense.”* I removed those words because, although strictly correct, at least in one sense, they have the potential to be misunderstood and often are.

What they actually mean is that where the plain sense of the words used makes common sense then you should *generally* seek no other sense instead of that literal meaning. That is correct. However, some people take it too far and wrongly assume that we should *never* expect to see any further or deeper meaning, not even in addition to, or alongside, the literal meaning. In fact, there can be, and quite often there is.

As we have seen, there can be types and prophetic patterns *in addition to* the plain meaning. So, if you understand the words of the first line of the golden rule in that way, then those words are helpful and should be included. However, some people misunderstand them and wrongly take them to be a prohibition against seeing *any* types and patterns etc in the Bible.

Therefore I felt it might be safer to leave the first line out, so as to prevent that error. This golden rule is not a new approach. It has always been the right approach. It was the way that Jesus, the apostles and the Old Testament prophets always interpreted the Bible, though only as a starting point. Let's look at another example which demonstrates that this is how they consistently operated:

The prophet Daniel took Jeremiah's prophecies literally

When the prophet Daniel was a young man he was taken into captivity in Babylon, together with most of the people from the Southern part of Israel called Judah. This catastrophe of being sent into exile had been prophesied earlier by the prophet Jeremiah. He had said it would happen and it did, exactly as he described it:

¹¹'This whole land will be a desolation and a horror, and these nations will serve the king of Babylon seventy years. ¹²'Then it will be when seventy years are completed I will punish the king of Babylon and that nation,' declares the LORD, 'for their iniquity, and the land of the Chaldeans; and I will make it an everlasting desolation.

Jeremiah 25:11-12 (NASB)

Jeremiah said that the captivity in Babylon would last for 70 years and that's exactly how long it did last. However the question, for our purposes, is what did the people at the time think? Did they believe that Jeremiah meant that it would last 70 literal, ordinary years?

Or, did they think that he was just saying something symbolic? We get the answer by looking at how the prophet Daniel, who lived later than Jeremiah, interpreted what Jeremiah had said. As you can see for yourself, he took it all absolutely literally:

¹In the first year of Darius the son of Ahasu-e'rus, by birth a Mede, who became king over the realm of the Chalde'ans-- ²in the first year of his reign, I, Daniel, perceived in the books the number of years which, according to the word of the LORD to Jeremiah the prophet, must pass before the end of the desolations of Jerusalem, namely, seventy years. ³Then I turned my face to the Lord God, seeking him by prayer and supplications with fasting and sackcloth and ashes.

Daniel 9:1-3 (RSV)

When the 70 years that Jeremiah had specified were almost completed, Daniel began to pray and fast and to get the Jewish people ready for the return to the Land. He took the writings of Jeremiah at face value, and believed that 70 years meant 70 literal years, with no symbolism at all. We should approach the Bible exactly as Daniel did.

How should we interpret the remaining, unfulfilled prophecies in the Bible about the future? Should they also be taken literally, as per Daniel's approach?

The answer is yes. We should expect all Bible prophecies to be literally fulfilled. What the Bible says about the future is going to happen exactly as it says it will. God has decided that He will not take any major step without revealing it beforehand to His prophets. Therefore if we want to know what the future holds, we need to look in the Bible:

"For the Lord GOD does nothing without revealing his secret to his servants the prophets.

Amos 3:7 (ESV)

Thus, we are meant to take all the prophecies about the future completely seriously. We must therefore make ourselves aware of all of these things, and get ready for them to happen, exactly as prophesied. Otherwise, what is the point of God putting them in the Bible?

Anybody who thinks that I am advocating an excessively literal approach to prophecy need only look at some of the mistakes the apostles made, when they failed to realise that Jesus was speaking literally. They overlooked or ignored some of the Old Testament prophecies about the Messiah's death and even the things that Jesus told them Himself.

They did not take Him literally enough when He told them quite bluntly that He was going to be put to death. Perhaps that was partly because it was an unpleasant message and they did not *want* to believe it. Yet, it turned out, in the end, that He had meant every word absolutely literally:

³¹And taking the twelve, he said to them, "See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished. ³²For he will be delivered over to the Gentiles and will be mocked and shamefully treated and spit upon. ³³And after flogging him, they will kill him, and on the third day he will rise." ³⁴But they understood none of these things. This saying was hidden from them, and they did not grasp what was said.

Luke 18:31-34 (ESV)

In relation to the suffering and death of the Messiah, the apostles only ever made the mistake of not taking Jesus' words, or the Old Testament prophecies, literally enough. This was especially so in relation to His death and resurrection. At any rate, there is no example of any occasion where Jesus ever had to correct them for taking anything *more* literally than they should have.

In the end, the apostles realised that they should have known all along that Jesus would literally die and rise again. Firstly, the Old Testament prophets, and especially Isaiah, had said that He would do so and, secondly, Jesus Himself had said that He would. They just hadn't noticed it, or rather they hadn't taken it seriously.

Yet Jesus had told them Himself that He would do both these things. They had not realised these facts before, or taken them seriously, because they did not take His words literally enough. Eventually they came to understand that He had meant every word literally. But they only realised that after the resurrection had happened:

⁶And so Simon Peter also came, following him, and entered the tomb; and he saw the linen wrappings lying there, ⁷and the face-cloth which had been on His head, not lying with the linen wrappings, but rolled up in a place by itself. ⁸So the other disciple who had first come to the tomb then also entered, and he saw and believed. ⁹For as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that He must rise again from the dead.

John 20:6-9 (NASB)

Jesus even had to rebuke the disciples for not taking prophecies literally enough

Later, when Jesus met some of His disciples after His resurrection, and walked with them on the road to Emmaus, He gently rebuked them about their failure to understand Scripture properly. They did not recognise Him, even as he spoke to them, partly because they believed Him to be dead and partly because He was now in His resurrection body.

It was also partly because God did not open their eyes so as to be able to realise who He was. They discussed the events of the previous week, when Jesus had been put to death, and also the amazing new rumour that He had risen from the dead. If they had taken His previous words literally then they would have been fully expecting that.

However, they hadn't and so they weren't. Jesus then pointed out their errors. Firstly, all these events had been prophesied in advance by the Hebrew prophets. But, secondly, He had told them Himself:

¹³That very day two of them were going to a village named Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, ¹⁴and they were talking with each other about all these things that had happened. ¹⁵While they were talking and discussing together, Jesus himself drew near and went with them. ¹⁶But their eyes were kept from recognizing him. ¹⁷And he said to them, "What is this conversation that you are holding with each other as you walk?" And they stood still, looking sad. ¹⁸Then one of them, named Cleopas, answered him, "Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?"

¹⁹And he said to them, "What things?" And they said to him, "Concerning Jesus of Nazareth, a man who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, ²⁰and how our chief priests and rulers delivered him up to be condemned to death, and crucified him. ²¹But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things happened. ²²Moreover, some women of our company amazed us. They were at the tomb early in the morning, ²³and when they did not find his body, they came back saying that they had even seen a vision of angels, who said that he was alive. ²⁴Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but him they did not see."

²⁵And he said to them, "O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! ²⁶Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?" ²⁷And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself. ²⁸So they drew near to the village to which they were going. He acted as if he were going farther, ²⁹but they urged him strongly, saying, "Stay with us, for it is toward evening and the day is now far spent." So he went in to stay with them. ³⁰When he was at table with them, he took the bread and blessed and broke it and gave it to them. ³¹And their eyes were opened, and they recognized him. And he vanished from their sight. ³²They said to each other, "Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the Scriptures?"

Luke 24:13-32 (ESV)

The above passage proves to us that there really is a right way and a wrong way to interpret the Bible and that it matters. It is not true to say that all ways are equally valid, or even that they have any merit at all. Some ways of interpreting the Bible are just wrong, and that fact needs to be faced.

What we can clearly say is that every case where the apostles were ever corrected by Jesus for their mishandling of Bible prophecy involved them not taking it literally *enough*. There are no cases where Jesus had to rebuke them for taking prophecy literally when it was *not* supposed to be, or for taking it *too* literally.

Surely, if prophecy was mainly, or even frequently, meant to be symbolic and allegorical then He would have needed to be regularly correcting them to stop them from missing those allegories due to being overly literal. But He never did. Can you think of even one example of Him doing so? So, the apostles had been wrong not to realise that the prophecies in the Old Testament, and also Jesus' own words to them, about dying and rising again, were meant to be taken literally.

My argument is that we are equally wrong if we do not take at face value the prophecies that still remain to be fulfilled in the future. They will all literally happen. If you are not convinced, let's look now at some more examples of the literal fulfilment of Old Testament prophecies about Jesus' first coming.

Some of Zechariah's prophecies concerning Jesus' first coming which were all literally fulfilled, even in the smallest details

The prophet Zechariah said that the Messiah would ride into Jerusalem on a colt, the foal of a donkey. That is typical of the kind of prophecy which those who interpret the Bible allegorically would say is just symbolic. One can imagine allegorically-minded people, in the centuries before Jesus came, seeing this prophecy about the Messiah riding a young donkey as a symbol and coming up with all sorts of ideas as to what the young donkey might 'represent'.

However, we see from the gospels that Zechariah's prophecy did not symbolize or 'represent' anything. That's because it wasn't a symbol. He meant what he said and it was exactly fulfilled, in the plainest possible way. Jesus literally rode into Jerusalem on a real donkey.

It was literally a young colt, which had literally never been ridden before. Zechariah meant exactly what he said on all these points. Not even one detail was merely allegorical or symbolic. Look at Zechariah's prophecy below and then read Matthew's account of how it came to be fulfilled:

***⁹Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion!
Shout in triumph, O daughter of Jerusalem!
Behold, your king is coming to you;
He is just and endowed with salvation,
Humble, and mounted on a donkey,
Even on a colt, the foal of a donkey.
Zechariah 9:9 (NASB)***

¹And when they drew near to Jerusalem, to Beth'phage and Bethany, at the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples, ²and said to them, "Go into the village opposite you, and immediately as you enter it you will find a colt tied, on which no one has ever sat; untie it and bring it. ³If any one says to you, "Why are you doing this?" say, "The Lord has need of it and will send it back here immediately."⁴ And they went away, and found a colt tied at the door out in the open street; and they untied it. ⁵And those who stood there said to them, "What are you doing, untying the colt?" ⁶And they told them what Jesus had said; and they let them go. ⁷And they brought the colt to Jesus, and threw their garments on it; and he sat upon it. ⁸And many spread their garments on the road, and others spread leafy branches which they had cut from the fields. ⁹And those who went before and those who followed cried out, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! ¹⁰Blessed is the kingdom of our father David that is coming! Hosanna in the highest!"

Mark 11:1-10 (RSV)

Now look at what the prophet Zechariah prophesied concerning the 30 pieces of silver and the potter. Zechariah is referring to Judas, who betrayed Jesus to the Chief Priest:

¹²I said to them, "If it is good in your sight, give me my wages; but if not, never mind!" So they weighed out thirty shekels of silver as my wages. ¹³Then the LORD said to me, "Throw it to the potter, that magnificent price at which I was valued by them." So I took the thirty shekels of silver and threw them to the potter in the house of the LORD.

Zechariah 11:12-13 (NASB)

We then see the fulfilment of the prophecy. It is not a metaphor for something else. Neither is it a symbol. It is a plain statement of fact. Judas betrayed Jesus for 30 literal pieces of silver:

¹⁴Then one of the twelve, named Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests ¹⁵and said, "What are you willing to give me to betray Him to you?" And they weighed out thirty pieces of silver to him. ¹⁶From then on he began looking for a good opportunity to betray Jesus.

Matthew 26:14-16 (NASB)

Moreover, after Judas hanged himself, the Chief Priests literally disposed of those 30 pieces of silver. There is no allegory. They gave them to a literal potter in return for his field. Even the fact that Judas 'threw' the coins down is literally fulfilled. So too is the fact that it occurred in the house of the LORD, i.e. in the Temple:

¹Now when morning came, all the chief priests and the elders of the people conferred together against Jesus to put Him to death; ²and they bound Him, and led Him away and delivered Him to Pilate the governor. ³Then when Judas, who had betrayed Him, saw that He had been condemned, he felt remorse and returned the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders, ⁴saying, "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood." But they said, "What is that to us? See to that yourself!" ⁵And he threw the pieces of silver into the temple sanctuary and departed; and he went away and hanged himself. ⁶The chief priests took the pieces of silver and said, "It is not lawful to put them into the temple treasury, since it is the price of blood." ⁷And they conferred together and with the money bought the Potter's Field as a burial place for strangers.

Matthew 27:1-7 (NASB)

Now consider some more Old Testament prophecies about how Jesus would be betrayed by Judas. The first example is from Psalm 41:

*⁹Even my bosom friend in whom I trusted,
who ate of my bread, has lifted his heel against me.
Psalm 41:9 (RSV)*

In case there was any doubt as to whom this prophecy is speaking about, Jesus Himself refers to it, even before His betrayal by Judas. He tells His disciples that it will be fulfilled, and by whom:

¹⁸I am not speaking of you all; I know whom I have chosen; it is that the Scripture may be fulfilled, 'He who ate my bread has lifted his heel against me.' ¹⁹I tell you this now, before it takes place, that when it does take place you may believe that I am he. ²⁰Truly, truly, I say to you, he who receives any one whom I send receives me; and he who receives me receives him who sent me." ²¹When Jesus had thus spoken, he was troubled in spirit, and testified, "Truly, truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me." ²²The disciples looked at one another, uncertain of whom he spoke. ²³One of his disciples, whom Jesus loved, was lying close to the breast of Jesus; ²⁴so Simon Peter beckoned to him and said, "Tell us who it is of whom he speaks." ²⁵So lying thus, close to the breast of Jesus, he said to him, "Lord, who is it?" ²⁶Jesus answered, "It is he to whom I shall give this morsel when I have dipped it." So when he had dipped the morsel, he gave it to Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot. ²⁷Then after the morsel, Satan entered into him. Jesus said to him, "What you are going to do, do quickly."

John 13:18-27 (NASB)

More prophecies, by King David and the prophet Isaiah, which were literally fulfilled

In this next passage King David prophesies, approximately 1000 years BC, that men would divide the Messiah's garments and also that they would cast lots to decide who would get them:

*They divide My garments among them,
And for My clothing they cast lots.
Psalm 22:18 (NKJV)*

This was a very strange thing for David to prophesy. It was extremely specific, and even obscure. It is not the sort of thing that generally happens, or which might happen to anybody. Therefore one can easily imagine why, prior to their fulfilment, people might have viewed these statements as merely symbolic. But they weren't. They were all literally fulfilled. Apostle John even tells us that they had to happen, so that the Scripture could be fulfilled:

²³ *Then the soldiers, when they had crucified Jesus, took His garments and made four parts, to each soldier a part, and also the tunic. Now the tunic was without seam, woven from the top in one piece.*

²⁴ *They said therefore among themselves, "Let us not tear it, but cast lots for it, whose it shall be," that the Scripture might be fulfilled which says:*

*" They divided My garments among them,
And for My clothing they cast lots."*

Therefore the soldiers did these things.

John 19:23-24 (NKJV)

Here are another two very specific prophecies in Psalm 34 and Zechariah chapter 12. They indicate that *no bone* in the Messiah's body will be *broken*, but that He will be *pierced*:

*He keeps all his bones;
not one of them is broken.*

Psalm 34:20 (RSV)

"And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of compassion and supplication, so that, when they look on him whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over him, as one weeps over a first-born.

Zechariah 12: 10 (RSV)

These two prophecies are literally fulfilled in John chapter 19. Note, however, that only the first part of Zechariah 12:10 is fulfilled at the crucifixion, i.e. the fact that body of Jesus is pierced with a spear. The rest of it still remains to be fulfilled, at the end of this present age.

In the future the Jewish people will collectively turn to Jesus and accept Him. All of them will do so together, as a whole nation. Then they will mourn over what was done to Him. That part of this prophecy is still in the future and remains to be fulfilled. But it will be, and just as literally as the first part was fulfilled:

³¹*Since it was the day of Preparation, in order to prevent the bodies from remaining on the cross on the sabbath (for that sabbath was a high day), the Jews asked Pilate that their legs might be broken, and that they might be taken away. ³²So the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first, and of the other who had been crucified with him; ³³but when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs.*

³⁴ *But one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water.*

³⁵*He who saw it has borne witness--his testimony is true, and he knows that he tells the truth--that you also may believe. ³⁶For these things took place that the Scripture might be fulfilled, "Not a bone of him shall be broken."*

John 19:31-36 (RSV)

Now look at this next prophecy made below by Isaiah. It is equally precise and says that He will be *assigned a grave with the wicked*, but that He will actually *be with a rich man* in His death:

*"His grave was assigned with wicked men,
yet He was with a rich man in His death,....."*

Isaiah 53:9(a) (NASB)

The Roman soldiers intended for Jesus to be buried alongside the two thieves who were crucified with Him. Remember that Jesus took the place of the criminal, Barabbas. He was, therefore, *meant* to have the same pauper's grave that Barabbas would have had, in which the two thieves were also buried. Barabbas was *wicked*, and so were the two thieves.

They were all due to be buried together, alongside each other, as *wicked men*. However, there was a last minute change of plan. A *wealthy* man, Joseph of Arimathea, asked to be given Jesus' body. He then put it in the tomb which he had prepared for himself. It was brand new and had been hewn out of solid rock. Therefore, it must have been very expensive.

So, in the end, there was a sudden and unforeseeable change of direction. Jesus was actually buried in the tomb of this *rich man*, Joseph of Arimathea, not with the wicked after all, even though He had been *assigned* a grave with them. This sudden turn of events was contrary to all usual procedure, but it fulfilled the prophecy exactly:

⁵⁷When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who himself had also become a disciple of Jesus. ⁵⁸This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then Pilate ordered it to be given to him. ⁵⁹And Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen cloth, ⁶⁰and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had hewn out in the rock; and he rolled a large stone against the entrance of the tomb and went away.

Matthew 27:57-60 (NASB)

Surely it is reasonable to expect all of the remaining unfulfilled prophecies to be fulfilled literally as well

Surely the pattern in relation to these prophecies is obvious and undeniable and anybody can see it. They were all fulfilled literally. It is reasonable therefore to expect that the same will happen with the remaining prophecies. Therefore God will hold us accountable for the degree to which we believe, and take seriously, the remaining prophecies, which have not yet been fulfilled.

He expects us to know all the unfulfilled prophecies which remain and to take them seriously, and get ourselves ready for their literal fulfilment. Jesus took very seriously the failure of the Jewish people of His own day to recognise that He was their Messiah and to be aware that the day of His visitation, (as prophesied by Daniel) had arrived.

Jesus actually wept when He contemplated the terrible consequences of Israel's failure to believe these prophecies and to be ready for Him. That was especially the case with Daniel's prophecies about the time of His coming. He knew that their neglect and unbelief would, for a time, bring God's judgment on most of the Jewish people:

⁴¹When He approached Jerusalem, He saw the city and wept over it, ⁴²saying, "If you had known in this day, even you, the things which make for peace! But now they have been hidden from your eyes. ⁴³"For the days will come upon you when your enemies will throw up a barricade against you, and surround you and hem you in on every side, ⁴⁴and they will level you to the ground and your children within you, and they will not leave in you one stone upon another, because you did not recognize the time of your visitation."

Luke 19:41-44 (NASB)

There are clearly still many more prophecies which remain to be fulfilled. Thus it matters very much whether these are to happen literally, or only in some allegorical, symbolic way. I have given several examples of literally fulfilled prophecies, and could have given very many more. However, I cannot think of a single prophecy that has ever been fulfilled in a *non-literal* way. Can you?

I have never yet seen anybody give even one credible example of such a fulfillment. But surely, if the allegorical approach was valid, wouldn't there be lots of examples of non-literal fulfillments, all over the Bible, which we could all point to? In fact there are none at all.

To show the vast scale of this subject of prophecy, let us look at just some of the dramatic events which the Bible says will happen. We will just present these in brief outline, because in later books in this

series we shall look at Bible prophecy in much greater detail. Our point, for the moment is just to show how important and numerous these future events are. They will affect the future of the whole Earth and everybody on it.

A brief summary of some of the major prophecies which still remain to be fulfilled in the future

We learn of the following series of events simply by taking literally what the Bible says. However, if we do not take the Bible literally, then we will not realise, or believe, that any of the following events are going to happen. That is how significant this is.

It makes a huge difference whether we take the Bible literally or not, because that will determine whether we know about these future events and are ready for them or are unaware of them and thus unprepared.

There is going to be a particular generation for whom all of this will be especially relevant because it will happen to them. We may or may not be that specific generation, but the point is that we could be. Therefore, whether we are that generation or not, we all need to know what is coming and to be capable of telling others of these future events:

- 1) The real Church is going to be '*raptured*'. That means that Jesus will suddenly appear to all saved people, i.e. genuine believers, but He will not be visible to false believers or unbelievers. This will happen at a time when nobody expects Him. He will then remove His entire Church from the Earth "*in the twinkling of an eye*". The date of this is not known and cannot be known in advance. Those genuine Christians who are alive at the time will then be taken straight up to Heaven, without ever dying.
- 2) At the same moment, all genuine, saved Christians who have already died before this time will be resurrected. This is known as "*the first resurrection*". The era of the Church will then be over. Jesus will give eternal, indestructible, resurrection bodies to all His followers who have died at any stage in the past, and also to those who are taken up alive to Heaven at the rapture.
- 3) From that point on, the many people who go on to become believers in Jesus after the Church has been removed will be called '*tribulation saints*'. They will be real believers, and will be saved, but they will not be part of the privileged group known as '*the Church*'.
- 4) Following the rapture, the whole Church will spend a number of years in Heaven, during which the faithfulness, fruitfulness and effectiveness of every saved person will be judged individually at the *Judgment Seat of Christ*. See Book Four for a full discussion of this judgment for Christians and some of the criteria by which we are going to be judged. The Church will then be joined to Jesus as His 'bride'. This will all happen in Heaven, before Jesus visibly returns to the Earth, accompanied by the Church.
- 5) Meanwhile, on Earth, a very evil man will arise who will gain control over the whole world. The Bible refers to him as the '*antichrist*', '*the Beast*', '*the man of sin*' '*the man of lawlessness*' and by various other titles. Satan himself will enter into him and he will receive all the power of Satan. Through entering the body of this man, Satan will briefly get to be the ruler of the whole world and to receive the worship for which he has always craved.
- 6) During the second half of his seven year reign this evil man, the antichrist, will kill *two thirds* of all the Jewish people on the Earth. During that time, which is called '*the day of Jacob's trouble*', he will do twice as much harm as Adolf Hitler, who killed one third of all the Jews. This whole seven year period is called '*the tribulation*'.

7) However, the second half of it is going to be extraordinarily brutal, at a level of cruelty never seen before in world history. It is therefore called '*the great tribulation*'. Multitudes of Christians and Jews will be executed, either for their faith in Jesus, or merely for being Jewish.

8) At the end of this horrific period the entire Jewish people, i.e. that third of them who survive, will have their eyes opened. They will then, at long last, recognise Jesus (Yeshua) as their Messiah. Thus all Israel (at that time) will be saved. They will be saved collectively, as a whole nation, and all at once.

9) Jesus the Messiah will then return physically and visibly to the Earth to save His surviving Jewish people from the armies of the antichrist who have gathered to attempt to annihilate Israel. This time everybody on Earth will be able to see Him, including unsaved, unbelieving people.

10) All of the genuine Christians and also all the saved, believing Jews who have ever lived, will accompany Jesus from Heaven when He returns to the Earth. They will all be in their eternal, resurrection bodies, such that they cannot get sick or die or grow old.

11) Jesus will depose the antichrist, and his assistant, '*the false prophet*', and throw them both into the Lake of Fire. They will then have it all to themselves for 1000 years. That's a long time. It is longer than the time since the Norman invasion of 1066, if you want to try to imagine it.

12) Then Jesus will reign on this physical Earth for those 1000 years as King of Israel and King of the whole Earth. King David, in his resurrection body, will serve as Jesus' deputy in ruling Israel. The resurrected David is referred to as '*the Prince*' in the book of Ezekiel and it is clear that he will play a major role. The 12 apostles will also serve, under David, ruling over the 12 tribes of Israel.

13) Jesus will reign over all the saved people from all times in history, whether they were Jewish or Gentile believers. They will all be in their resurrection bodies. In addition, living alongside them, but in their mortal bodies, there will be all those Jewish people who finally come to believe in Jesus as a group at the end.

14) There will also be that remnant of Gentiles who become believers and are saved during the tribulation, i.e. during the antichrist's reign. By this we mean those Gentiles who become Christians during the tribulation but still manage to survive to the very end of it, when Jesus returns. They will only be a small minority of those who get saved during the tribulation, because we know that the vast majority of those will be martyred by the antichrist.

15) Those saved believers, whether Jews or Gentiles, who survive through all the years of the tribulation and are still alive on the Earth when Jesus returns, will not be in eternal resurrection bodies. They will be in their ordinary, mortal bodies. But they will still be allowed to continue to live on the Earth under King Jesus during His Millennial Kingdom. They will then have children, just as we do now, and will steadily repopulate the Earth over the 1000 years. Their numbers will eventually be enormous.

16) If you want to get the scale of how the world population will grow under Jesus' reign, just think back to 50 years or so before the Norman invasion of 1066 and look at how many people have been born since then. But then increase that to allow for the fact that under Jesus' rule life expectancy, even for people in their mortal bodies, will be far higher. Plus there will be zero infant mortality as well. So, there could easily be tens of billions of people on the Earth by the end, probably a much larger world population than we have now.

17) No unsaved people will be allowed to enter Jesus' 1000 year Kingdom when it begins. Those who are unsaved will all be killed when He returns to the Earth. They will then be sent to Hell to await their judgment at the Great White Throne. That judgment of the unsaved will take place 1000 years later, at the end of the Millennium.

18) Therefore, at the start on the Millennium, for a period of time, absolutely everybody on Earth will be a genuine Christian. That will be the case for both Gentiles and Jews. They will all be saved and believe in Jesus. In addition, Jesus will be physically present, and providing a perfect Government. It will be an almost ideal world, at least for a time.

19) However, as new babies are born and grow up during the 1000 years, some of them will choose not to follow Jesus. They will all have free will, just as we do now, and some will choose to rebel against Jesus. At first they will do so quietly, in their hearts, but eventually they will rebel openly, and violently, and in large numbers.

20) During Jesus' reign, Satan and all his demons will be bound and prevented from interfering with, or deceiving, anyone living on the Earth. However, towards the very end of the 1000 years, they will all be released and allowed a short period of freedom. Then they can have one last chance to whisper into the minds of human beings.

21) They will then entice large numbers of unsaved people into a final rebellion against King Jesus. They will rebel even though they know who He is, and have seen Him physically reigning on the Earth and providing a perfect government. In doing this they will show just how wicked and foolish human beings can be, in that they would freely choose to rebel, even in those almost perfect conditions. One would think it impossible for people to be so idiotic, but the Bible says it will happen.

22) Jesus will crush that final worldwide rebellion merely by using the power of His own voice. He will have no need for any help from the Church, or Israel, or from any angel.

23) Then Satan will, at long last, be cast into the Lake of Fire, together with all his demons, to join the antichrist and the false prophet. They will all stay there for eternity and will never be released, ever again.

24) Then all the unsaved people who have ever lived will be released from their temporary confinement in Hell and will be physically resurrected, ready to face their judgment, and God's final wrath, at the Great White Throne Judgment. This is known as "*the second resurrection*" and is only for the unsaved. They will all be given eternal resurrection bodies. Their bodies will be just as indestructible and eternal as the resurrection bodies which will be given to saved people.

25) Then the Great White Throne Judgment will occur. This is solely for the unsaved. They will all have to appear before Jesus, to be judged by Him and receive his wrath. Once His judgment of them is complete all unbelievers, from all ages in history, will be thrown into the Lake of Fire. They will then remain there with Satan and all the demons, for all eternity. In fact, Hell itself will be thrown into the Lake of Fire, i.e. the whole place, not just the people in it.

26) This physical Earth, or at least its surface, will then be burned up. Everything that is wicked will be destroyed and a new Heaven and a new Earth will be created. Then God the Father Himself will come to live upon the new planet Earth. He will bring the whole of Heaven with Him and it will come down to rest on the Earth, where it will remain forever. It will be known as the "*New Jerusalem*".

27) There will then begin what we might call the "*eternal state*". It is the permanent, eternal, fully completed Kingdom of God, which will never end. There will no longer be any sin, rebellion, pain, suffering, sadness, sickness, death, Satan, demons, or judgment. All of that will be over and gone forever. Thus, it will be even better than Jesus' Millennial Kingdom is going to be. The eternal state will be entirely perfect, whereas the Millennial Kingdom will still have sinners in it.

One of the most important purposes of prophecy is to enable us to get ready for what is coming

Can you see how important, but also how specific and detailed, each of these predicted events are? Yet I have only given a very brief summary of them here. There is so much more that we are meant to know about, and that we will know about, *if* we take the Bible literally and accept what it says.

But, if we don't, then we won't know about any of these future events, or see the direction in which world history is heading. All of these things predicted in the Bible are going to literally happen. Therefore we all need to be aware of them, getting ready for them and telling others about them.

In other words, we need to take all Bible prophecies seriously, whether they are made by the prophets or the apostles or by Jesus Himself. We must study them all, understand them accurately and remember them. Note what apostle Peter had to say on this:

¹ This is now the second letter that I have written to you, beloved, and in both of them I have aroused your sincere mind by way of reminder; ² that you should remember the predictions of the holy prophets and the commandment of the Lord and Savior through your apostles.

2 Peter 3:1-2 (RSV)

Jude also confirms this and urges us to remember the predictions, i.e. the prophecies given by the apostles:

But you must remember, beloved, the predictions of the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ;
Jude 17 (RSV)

Peter went on to confirm that there would come a time when people would ignore and disparage Bible prophecy, for example they will not believe, in or be expecting, the return of Jesus Christ and the judgments and so on. So, even the unbelief and ignorance of our age fits with what the Bible says will happen.

If there was ever a time in which people would disbelieve the prophecies of the Bible and not believe that Jesus is physically coming back to the Earth, then this would seem to be it. Our own generation, at least in the West, is probably more blind and uninformed about these future events, and has more unbelief, than any past generation:

³ First of all you must understand this, that scoffers will come in the last days with scoffing, following their own passions ⁴ and saying, "Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things have continued as they were from the beginning of creation." ⁵ They deliberately ignore this fact, that by the word of God heavens existed long ago, and an earth formed out of water and by means of water, ⁶ through which the world that then existed was deluged with water and perished. ⁷ But by the same word the heavens and earth that now exist have been stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men.

2 Peter 3:3-7 (RSV)

One of the purposes of Bible prophecy is to inform us about the future and enable us, and those we know, to get ready for what is coming. However, if we take an allegorical approach to Bible prophecy we will not know about, or get ready for, anything.

That is one reason why it matters so much that we know whether these events are going to literally happen, or whether the prophecies are merely symbols and mean something else entirely. We therefore need to know which approach is correct and which is wrong. So, let us look more closely at *why* I maintain that the allegorical approach is wrong and how we can be sure of that.

CHAPTER 9

A MORE DETAILED LOOK AT WHY THE ALLEGORICAL APPROACH IS SO WRONG

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)

that you should remember the predictions of the holy prophets and the commandment of the Lord and Savior through your apostles.

2 Peter 3:2 (RSV)

*Every word of God proves true;
he is a shield to those who take refuge in him.
Proverbs 30:5 (RSV)*

⁴⁴ Then he said to them, "These are my words which I spoke to you, while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms must be fulfilled."

⁴⁵ Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures

Luke 24:44-45 (RSV)

A clearer and more detailed definition of what we mean by an *allegory* and the *allegorical approach*

We have seen that there are times when the Bible uses allegories. Indeed, sometimes it even says explicitly that it is using an allegory. So the concept of an allegory is a valid one and there is the potential that a particular passage could contain an allegory. A right-thinking person will therefore be open-minded to that possibility.

So, my opposition to the practice of allegorising the Bible is not based on any rejection of the concept of an allegory, or any denial that they are ever used in the Bible. Allegories can be valid and they do sometimes arise in the Bible. What I am opposing is the idea that we should allegorize the Scriptures *across the board*, in a general sense, and see allegories when they are *not* there.

That is the error of those who engage in allegorizing. But to examine that we need to take a step back and look at the whole subject of allegories in closer detail. Let us first define more clearly what an allegory is and also consider the views of some other writers on these issues. According to the Bible Handbook an allegory is:

"Any statement of supposed facts which admits of a literal interpretation, and yet requires or justly admits a moral or figurative one, is called an allegory."

So, when we speak of the *allegorical approach*, or 'allegorizing', we are not referring to those people who accept (correctly) that allegories do exist and are to be found, on occasions, in the Bible. We mean the approach taken by those people who wrongly believe that *the whole Bible*, especially prophecy, is *full of allegories* and that allegories and symbols conveying deep secondary meanings are the *norm* rather than the exception.

Allegorizing is the practice of seeing allegories and hidden secondary meanings all over the Bible, even where they do not exist. The person who sees allegories everywhere only tends to do so because he has been *taught* to do so. He would never think of such an approach for himself. Therefore he sees these allegories and hidden meanings, even when they aren't there, because he *expects* them to be there.

A person finds it very hard not to see what they expect to see. They also find it hard to be able to see what they do *not* expect to see, or which they have been *told* is not there. That is how a person who follows the allegorical approach can end up with distorted vision when reading the Bible.

They fail to see the plain, literal meaning which is staring at them from the page and see instead an allegorical meaning which isn't actually there. And it is all because they have always been *told* that it is there.

The allegorical approach to interpreting the Bible has been defined by *Bernard Ramm* as follows:

"Allegorism' is the method of interpreting a literal text that regards the literal sense as the vehicle for a secondary, more spiritual and more profound sense".

These quotes are rather complicated. Perhaps we could simplify this by saying that an allegory is where something has a plain meaning on the surface, but where we are meant to understand it in some other, deeper way. We sometimes see this technique of allegory in literature. It is used in stories which have a surface meaning, but another, more important, meaning underneath. However, the use of allegories causes us no trouble in stories or poems.

We tend to know immediately if there is meant to be a deeper, secondary meaning. It's usually very obvious. Our only problem is in working out whether or not we are supposed to handle *the Bible* in this way. Are we meant to be looking for other meanings? If so, then to what extent? Also, how do we know what they are, and whether those secondary meanings are actually the real meanings?

The dangers of the allegorical method of interpreting the Bible, i.e. "spiritualizing the text".

The allegorical approach to Bible interpretation is sometimes referred to as "*spiritualising the text*". By that its supporters mean that although the Bible may plainly say "ABC", its "*spiritual*" meaning (i.e. its deeper meaning) is actually "XYZ". The Bible never says anything which supports this approach.

It has led people to adopt all sorts of confused and mistaken ideas. Those misinterpretations have then led them into a series of further errors, as the implications of their wrong beliefs and assumptions build up, one on top of another. *Charles T. Fritsch* says of the allegorical approach:

"According to this method the literal and historical sense of Scripture is completely ignored, and every word and event is made an allegory of some kind, either to escape theological difficulties, or to maintain certain peculiar religious views."

The error of those who allegorize the Scriptures generally, i.e. across the board, is that they take a specific literary technique which the Bible uses occasionally and then they treat that exception as if it *was* the *general rule*. They therefore speak as if a large proportion of the Bible was made up of allegories and symbols. In fact they are the exception and only arise here and there, now and again.

It was not the general policy of the men who wrote the Bible, or of the Holy Spirit who inspired them, to write in allegories. Therefore the allegorical approach does not faithfully interpret what the Scripture is actually saying. Instead, it imposes onto the text whatever meaning the reader (or his teacher, or denomination) *wants* it to have, or has been *told* that it has. *Milton S. Terry* has said of the allegorical method:

"... it will be noticed that its habit is to disregard the common (meaning) of words and give wing to all manner of fanciful speculation. It does not draw out the legitimate meaning of an author's language, but foists into it whatever the whim or fancy of an interpreter may desire. As a system, therefore, it puts itself beyond all well-defined principles and laws."

The allegorical method means that instead of the Bible being the authority, the reader himself, or his teacher, has the final say. It can, therefore, take a person absolutely anywhere that their imagination can invent. There are no boundaries and nobody can say whether anybody else is right or wrong.

Each person who pursues the allegorical approach becomes the author of his own theories and ideas. It is all interpreted according to his own personal rules and opinions. Things then mean whatever a man says they mean. So, if there are ten men, then the same passage can be alleged to mean ten different things.

There is no getting away from that, once you go down the road of assuming that the Bible largely consists of allegories. It is difficult to see the difference between this and the approach taken by Humpty Dumpty in *'Through the Looking Glass'*, by Lewis Carroll. In this extract Alice and Humpty Dumpty are speaking about the meaning of words. Their conversation goes as follows:

"I don't know what you mean by 'glory' " Alice said.

Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. *"Of course you don't - till I tell you. I meant 'There's a nice knock-down argument for you!'"*

"But 'glory' doesn't mean 'a nice knock-down argument' ", Alice objected.

"When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in a rather scornful tone, *"it means just what I choose it to mean - neither more nor less."*

When we hear Humpty Dumpty say this to Alice we are meant to consider it absurd. Yet, isn't he basically doing what the allegorical approach does? If not, what is the difference? Humpty Dumpty is a ridiculous figure because he has decided to give words whatever meaning he chooses to give them, rather than abide by their common meaning.

However, that is exactly what the allegorical approach does, which is why it leads us into chaos. What else can be expected from taking such an approach in any context, not just with the Bible? There is no external, objective way of testing what the reader or interpreter says. *Bernard Ramm* has said of this:

"To state that the principal meaning of the Bible is a second-sense meaning, and that the principal method of interpreting is "spiritualizing" is to open the door to almost uncontrolled speculation and imagination. For this reason we have insisted that the control in interpretation is the literal method."

If words are allowed to have secondary meanings instead of what they plainly say, then there are no limits to where we can end up. The only thing which preserves sense and order is to take everything at its ordinary meaning. Then we all know what we mean, what other people mean, and what God means.

That is why we all take that approach in every other area of life. Only in relation to the Bible do people systematically impose allegorical double meanings in place of the plain words that they read or hear. Can you think of any other context in life, or literature, where we ever do so?

Where did the allegorical method/approach come from?

No individual man is solely responsible for devising the allegorical approach. It grew out of the Alexandrian school of theology in North Africa in the second and third centuries. Men like Philo and

Clement of Alexandria were among the first to put it forward. It was then taken up by Origen and later by the so called "Saint" Augustine of Hippo. His influence caused the allegorical approach to become widely accepted within what we now call the Roman Catholic church.

However, it was never accepted or used in the genuine, biblical churches, which continued outside of Catholicism. They carried on meeting in homes, schoolrooms and barns as they always had. By contrast, within Roman Catholicism, the allegorical approach took over completely.

The literal method, i.e. the "*golden rule*", (see above) which had always been followed beforehand, was abandoned by the Catholic church. However, it was kept by the genuine, Bible-believing Christians. They never lost it, just as they never lost the Gospel.

One of the reasons why the allegorical approach, or "spiritualizing" the Scriptures, was so eagerly adopted by the Catholic church was that it placed the responsibility for saying what the Bible means solely in the hands of their leaders. It therefore gave added power to the men at the top of the organization. According to them, only they were "*qualified*" to interpret the Bible.

That was convenient. It enabled them to dispense with any awkward or unwelcome Bible passage by "*spiritualizing*" its meaning and making it mean whatever they wished it to mean. They could then turn it into something more acceptable to the hierarchy of the Catholic church, there being no limits on what they could declare the real, or "*spiritual*", meaning to be.

That was not such a remarkable step to take, given that they had already begun to teach that the authority of the Pope was equal to, or even greater than, that of Scripture anyway. If the Pope is seen as higher than the Bible, then he can just reinterpret anything he wants anyway.

That is precisely what successive Popes did. That ongoing invention of new doctrines and reinterpretation of the Bible caused many more man-made ideas and pagan practices to spring up in place of, or alongside, what the Bible says.

What did the Protestant Reformers, Luther and Calvin, think of the allegorical method?

Despite all their many qualities and good work, especially in their early years, the Protestant reformers, Martin Luther and John Calvin, did not recognise the error of the allegorical approach. They therefore kept it and used it themselves, even though they had rejected many of the other wrong beliefs and practices of Catholicism.

So, the allegorical approach to interpreting the Bible is now adopted, in the Roman Catholic Church and *also* within the Reformed/Protestant, Calvinist/Presbyterian churches. That is the case, even though the Reformed churches assume (wrongly) that Luther and Calvin had got rid of all of the errors of Catholicism. If only they had. Sadly, they actually kept a great many of them.

The fact that Luther and Calvin continued to use the allegorical method is a particularly tragic example of this. It has seriously weakened the Reformed/Protestant churches and has caused them to retain or adopt many wrong and misguided beliefs, especially in relation to Bible prophecy.

However, the majority of Reformed believers today do not realise any of this and are quite unaware that they have a problem on this point. Ironically, Augustine, who was the main founder of the allegorical approach, was also one of the main architects of Roman Catholicism. Again, very few people from the Reformed churches are aware of that.

What they do often know is that Jean Calvin based most of his teachings on the writings of Augustine. Therefore many Christians in the Reformed churches mistakenly assume that Augustine must have been of like mind with the Reformers and that he would oppose Roman Catholicism. On the contrary - he

would not. Augustine was thoroughly Roman Catholic in his theology, so much so that Roman Catholics see him as a pillar of *their* church, and rightly so.

Let us consider for a moment some of the other errors of this man, Augustine, who was also the principal founder of the allegorical approach. He was also the main source of inspiration for the exaggerated and unbalanced ideas, which Calvin later developed further, about what Calvinists call the ‘sovereignty’ of God.

In using that phrase they do not mean that God is simply in charge of the whole universe, or that He is more powerful than, anybody else. No right-thinking person could object if that was all that was meant by the word ‘sovereignty’. The problem is that they mean something very different by it.

They think that God’s sovereignty requires that He Himself must be the *direct cause and author of every event*, as opposed to allowing room for the free choices of human beings. That is a central belief of what is now called Calvinism. However, that belief is nowhere to be found in the Bible.

It is, instead, based on the over-extended application of human reasoning. Indeed, it is based on logic which has been taken to absolute extremes. They therefore end up believing what they believe, not because *the Bible* says any of it, but because it is the conclusion they have arrived at as a result of a series of *logical deductions*.

Moreover, it is a very lengthy and tenuous series of deductions. At any rate, long or short, the point is it is based on purely *human reasoning* rather than on any express statement made in Scripture. Though logical deduction has its place, and is even essential at times, it can lead us to form some very wrong conclusions if we take it too far, or if our own deductive reasoning is flawed.

A classic example of the hazards of pursuing human logic or reasoning beyond its proper limits is the famous ‘*Eleatic paradox*’. In brief, this is the proposition that it is impossible for an arrow ever to arrive at its target. That conclusion is based on the following reasoning. When the arrow is fired at a target which is, say, 100 yards away, the arrow must first travel half the distance and reach the half-way point before it can go any farther.

So, it firstly has to get to the point where it is 50 yards away from the target. Then it must, likewise, reach the point where it is 25 yards away before it can go any farther. This process of halving the remaining distance is then continued forever. So, even when the arrow is only one centimeter from the target, it still can’t ever reach it, because it must first travel half a centimeter, and then a quarter, and then an eighth, and so on and so on.

The logical conclusion is, therefore, that no arrow can ever hit its target. Moreover, the logic is unbreakable, provided you stay within the assumptions upon which that reasoning is based. There is only one snag with this elaborate logic – it is completely untrue and does not work in practice. So, the Eleatic paradox is a good example of how purely human reasoning can lead a person into error and folly.

It was thinking of this type which led Augustine, and later Calvin, into profound error when it came to the subject of the sovereignty of God, i.e. as *they* define it, not as a right-thinking person would define it. The fact that Calvin got his faulty reasoning about God’s sovereignty and ‘election’ from Augustine makes it all the more ironic that Calvinists imagine their beliefs to be far removed from Roman Catholicism.

In fact, in most of his theology, Calvin was drawing from the same flawed and contaminated source, i.e. Augustine, rather than from the Bible itself. In brief, their error about God’s sovereignty comes from their mistaken assumption that if God is sovereign, then that must mean that He always gets what He wants and that His will is always done.

In other words, they assume that for God to be all-powerful, or sovereign, then it must mean that no person, or indeed no animal or object, can ever defy God's will by doing anything that is contrary to His will. Their misguided logic tells them that if anybody or anything was to act contrary to God's will, then it would mean that God was not sovereign.

Therefore they rule out the possibility and tell themselves that it cannot happen. That is they conclude that even when we sin we must still be doing God's will because, otherwise, we would be defying God's will. Their logic tells them that that simply cannot happen.

So, according to their warped logic, that means that God is the author and cause of everything that ever happens, *including our sins*, but also every *accident or chance event*. They see all those things as having been equally pre-ordained by God, before time began and equally impossible to avoid or alter, no matter what we do.

Of course this is all unbiblical nonsense. Millions of things happen every day which are *directly contrary to God's will*. That is precisely why such things grieve and anger Him. But the fact that those things happen does not prove that He is not sovereign. On the contrary, all it proves is that He has given us *free will*, including the *freedom to sin*, which includes the freedom to defy Him.

See chapter 10 below for more details on the errors of Calvinism in relation to God's sovereignty, as they wrongly define it. In particular I include a section there on their misguided belief that God predestines people to be *damned*, irrespective of any faith or repentance on their part. Again, that is a purely man-made doctrine, based on nothing other than over-extended human logic.

The Bible *never* says that God does that. That particular error in Calvin's understanding of the nature and implications of God's sovereignty is profoundly damaging. It leads even good and sincere Christians to believe that God is the *cause* of everything, such that everything that ever happens, whether good or bad, is assumed to be His will.

It is a slander on the good name of God because it states, falsely, that every bad thing that ever happens is God's will. To add further insult, it is assumed that He directly *caused it*, as opposed to merely *allowing* it to be done by some human being or by a demon, or just to occur naturally, by chance.

This error has serious consequences in terms of causing people to misjudge God and to see Him as a cruel, monster-figure, playing games with our lives. For example, a family we know were told, when their young child was diagnosed as diabetic, that this was '*God's will*' and that He had *caused* it to happen for His "*inscrutable purposes*".

Thankfully, the family in question were sensible enough, and knew enough about the Bible and God's character, to realise that what they were being told was not true. They knew that although God had *permitted* this illness to arise, He had neither *caused* it nor *willed* it to happen.

But what if they had not been so sensible and well informed about God's character? What if they had accepted that false teaching and all its misguided implications? It could easily have warped their image of God and even undermined their whole relationship with Him. That is not merely hypothetical. It has had exactly that effect on many other people, and with tragic consequences for their faith.

This error within Calvinist thinking is also shared with Islam. The Calvinists' misconceived definition of the sovereignty of God is virtually the same as the fatalistic view of Allah which is taken by Muslims. They think that their god, Allah, causes absolutely everything, whether good or bad.

I have never been able to detect any material difference between the Muslim view of Allah, (in this specific respect), and the Calvinist view of God's sovereignty. That fact alone ought to identify this as a false teaching, and a misrepresentation of God's real nature.

I am not seeking to digress into a detailed discussion of the wider errors of Augustine and Calvin. I shall do that in a later book in this series, which is all about Calvinism. My only purpose at the moment is to invite you to consider that if Augustine and Calvin could be as mistaken as they clearly were about sovereignty, election, predestination etc, then they can also be wrong in their advocacy of the allegorical approach.

The problem of operating an arbitrary double standard, whereby some things are assumed to be literal, but others are viewed as allegorical

The two most well-known Reformers, Luther and Calvin, adopted a strange double standard, using two contradictory methods of interpretation at the same time. They basically took a literal approach to interpreting everything except prophecy. When handling prophecy, they chose to keep the allegorical approach which the Roman Catholic Church used.

The rest of Scripture, concerning the miracles, or creation, or salvation being based on faith alone, was all taken literally. At least in those areas they got it right. Luther and Calvin, therefore, took two opposite and totally inconsistent approaches to interpreting the Bible, depending on what type of passage they were reading. If it was about creation or sin or repentance or faith or salvation etc, then it was assumed to be literal.

But if it was about prophecy it was assumed to be allegorical. How can that arbitrary distinction make any sense? The Reformed/Protestant churches have continued to operate this misguided double standard for the last 500 years, without any logical basis, and without being able to point to anything at all in the Bible to support it.

Consequently, nearly a third of the Bible ends up being badly misinterpreted. The plain, literal meaning of every verse which contains prophecy is replaced with an unlimited number of man-made allegorical interpretations. Also the number of Reformed/Protestant denominations has grown as they have subdivided. Therefore lots of different denominational viewpoints emerged offering conflicting interpretations of these alleged allegories.

So, the Reformed, Protestant churches are generally far more accurate than the Roman Catholic church when it comes to the *non-prophetic* areas of Scripture. However, they are *not* more accurate when they deal with prophecy. Their main error in that regard is that most of them view the future events described in the book of Revelation, as having *already happened*.

They assume it was *all* fulfilled back in the first century, primarily at the time of the expulsion of the Jewish people from Israel by the Romans in AD 70. Many of them therefore assume that the antichrist was the *Emperor Nero*, or even the *Roman Empire as a whole*. If either of those interpretations is true, then the antichrist has already come and gone, and he need not concern us.

If so, then why is the antichrist in the Bible at all, and why is so much emphasis given to him? Likewise, they assume that the prophecies given by Daniel have all been fulfilled long ago. They do so even though Gabriel specifically told Daniel to seal up the prophecies because they apply to the *very end of world history*, i.e. "*the time of the end*".

Consider carefully what Gabriel actually said:

¹⁷ As he came near the place where I was standing, I was terrified and fell prostrate. "Son of man," he said to me, "understand that the vision concerns the time of the end."¹⁸ While he was speaking to me, I was in a deep sleep, with my face to the ground. Then he touched me and raised me to my feet.¹⁹ He said: "I am going to tell you what will happen later in the time of wrath, because the vision concerns the appointed time of the end.

Daniel 8:17-19 (NIV)

***“But you, Daniel, shut up the words, and seal the book until the time of the end -----“
Daniel 12:4(a) (RSV)***

If what Daniel was prophesying relates to the very end of world history, then how can those events have already occurred thousands of years ago? That would have been long before “the time of the end”. So, that is plainly not the right way to interpret these prophecies. The above verses demonstrate that fact by themselves, quite apart from all the other reasons for rejecting that notion.

The suggestion that these prophesied events are all in the past, and have already been fulfilled, does not fit either the facts of history or the words of the Bible. Nevertheless, many still believe it. Moreover they seem to feel that there is no need to explain or justify their assumptions.

Millions of people have simply been told that that is what it means and they have just accepted that traditional, denominational teaching without question. Therefore, most people in Reformed churches do not stop and ask themselves whether what they have been told is true, i.e. are these events really all in the past?

When people read the Bible after they have been taught these wrong ideas, it is as if they have been programmed to ignore the plain meaning. Instead they superimpose onto the page the meaning they have been *told* it has, without even being aware that they are filtering and editing God’s Word in this way.

Once a person gets mistaken ideas like that fixed in their minds the errors are hard to shift. Moreover, it has a knock-on effect on all sorts of other things as well. It all gets out of line, like a shirt or cardigan which you have started to button up wrongly. All the other buttons then end up out of sequence.

Ironically, the book of Revelation was not even written until about AD 90-100, some 20-30 years after the events of AD 70. The apostle John was a very old man when he wrote it. So, if these events that he was describing really were already in the past he would have *said so*. Yet, he writes of them as clearly future. Some people, recognizing this problem, therefore try to argue that John must have written Revelation much earlier, in the AD 60s, but that is not the case.

**What are the arguments in support of the literal *approach* to interpretation? (the golden rule)
How can we be sure it is the right system to use as our starting point?**

There are many reasons why the literal approach to interpreting the Bible is clearly right and also much safer to use. Let us examine some of these:

Argument 1 - Words having plain, literal meanings is our normal practice in every other part of life

Taking words literally is the normal approach in all types of literature and in every language, almost all of the time. That's hardly surprising. Why would any sensible person adopt a non-literal approach in which words mean whatever the reader feels they mean? What if an insurance policy was written on that basis, or the terms and conditions of a car rental agreement? So why single out the Bible for such an approach, even if only in relation to prophecy?

Argument 2 - Secondary meanings would lead us into chaos

All secondary meanings of parables, types, allegories and symbols etc depend on there being already in place some fixed rules about the ordinary meaning of the words in the passage. Otherwise, any allegories used could not be explained anyway, because no words at all would have any clear meaning.

If when you say "computer" you mean "chair" and when you say "fish" you mean "horse", and so on, how could anybody ever speak to you?

It would be bad enough if you were the only one to have your own private meanings for common words. But what if others operated like that as well, each with their own personal dictionary? It would degenerate into meaninglessness. The Holy Spirit chose to use everyday words and to be bound by the ordinary, plain meanings of those words.

When God says the word "fish" He limits Himself to the common meaning of that word. God does not allow Himself to step outside of the ordinary meaning of any word. So, if even God chooses to operate within the conventional rules of definition and grammar, how can we feel entitled to step outside of those rules ourselves?

What would be our authority for believing that we can do what the Holy Spirit does not even allow Himself to do? Clearly defined words and consistent grammar are the two fundamental requirements of all meaningful speech. That is all the more so when it is the Holy Spirit who is inspiring the writing.

Nature, which God also designed, is laid out according to equally logical patterns. So, why would God change His whole approach and adopt a fluid, and even anarchic, system when inspiring Scripture? If anything, He would use even more order and structure within Scripture than in nature, not less.

Argument 3 - It would be a strange coincidence for the whole Bible to somehow make perfect sense when read literally if it isn't meant to be read literally

Whether or not you agree with what it contains, it surely has to be admitted that the whole Bible makes perfect sense from beginning to end when interpreted literally. That could hardly be the case if God had never intended it to be read in that way. So, for it all to somehow make perfect sense, as it does, would be an amazing coincidence if it was actually meant to be a book full of codes, allegories and symbols.

How can it be that all of it "just happens" to make sense from beginning to end when read literally? That would be like a reverse code that has arisen entirely by accident. It cannot be. I have never heard any adequate response to this point from those who believe in the allegorical approach. It would require an impossible series of coincidences.

Argument 4 –Metaphors and symbols are legitimate. But they are *the exception, not the rule*

Adopting a literal approach does not prevent us from recognizing any *legitimate* figures of speech, symbols, metaphors, analogies, allegories and types that we do genuinely see in the Bible. Obviously there are some of these. But the point is that we are meant to come across them one by one, every now and again.

We are not meant to treat everything, or even most things, as allegorical, any more than we would in any other area of life or literature. So, in opposing the allegorical approach being applied across the board, to the Bible as a whole, we do not need to deny the existence or validity of allegories, or any other device, when they *are* really there in the passage.

We have no need, or reason, to deny any of that. All that we need to object to is the practice of seeing allegories when they are *not* there, due to making the error of thinking that that is how the whole Bible is generally meant to be understood.

Argument 5 - Wouldn't it be rather odd for God to leave it to the fourth century AD to tell us, for the first time, (through Augustine) how to read the Bible?

If somehow the allegorical approach really was the way God wanted us to operate, would He not have said so, at least once, somewhere in the Bible? Wouldn't He have revealed and explained this allegorical method through at least one of His prophets, or apostles? Then we could all understand it and know how to use it. Why would God leave it to Augustine, in the fourth century AD, to tell us, for the very first time, how to read the Bible?

That is 300 years or more after even the latest parts of the New Testament were written, and 1800 years after the earliest books of the Old Testament were written by Moses. It would also mean that Augustine was better informed than Daniel, Paul, and even Jesus, about how to interpret the Bible. One surely has to accept that that would be a very peculiar way for God to operate.

Argument 6 - Augustine was such a misguided and confused man, he is not safe to rely upon

Even if God did, for some unexplained reason, decide to wait for over 1800 years to tell us the right way to read the Bible, wouldn't He choose someone better than Augustine as His vehicle for revealing this alleged new truth? Why would God use such a confused and misguided man as Augustine, whose other ideas were so frequently unbiblical and mistaken, as we have seen with the crazy and fatalistic ideas about God's sovereignty?

He does not sound like the right sort of man for God to use to tell us all, for the first time, how to understand the Scriptures. Surely, if God wanted an allegorical system to be used He would have got someone much more reliable, like Moses, to set it all out for us, not a mixed-up person like Augustine.

Argument 7 - Jesus, the apostles and the prophets all interpreted the Bible literally on every occasion

Jesus Himself, plus all the apostles, and all of the Old Testament prophets always interpreted the Bible literally. Wouldn't it be odd, therefore, for God to operate in that way consistently, from 1500 BC onwards, even during the earthly ministries of Jesus and the apostles, and then suddenly to change His mind and ask us to read the Bible in a totally different way from the fourth century AD onwards? Common sense suggests not, and the fact that it has led to such confusion ever since would corroborate that.

Argument 8 - Some prophecies are so detailed they can't possibly be allegories. For example, consider the nine whole chapters in Ezekiel which describe the measurements and design of the new Temple that will be built in the Millennium

Have you ever read chapters 40-48 of the book of Ezekiel? If you have, you may have wondered why God has gone to such lengths to give us so many highly specific details about the design, shape, dimensions, contents, personnel and procedures of the Millennial Temple that will be built in Jerusalem during Jesus' 1000 year reign.

It is so intricately detailed that it cannot possibly be an allegory for anything. It is far too exact and exhaustive for that. Here is just a short extract, to give you the flavour of it, but remember that it goes on for another eight and a half chapters. This short passage is just dealing with the dimensions of the outer court of the future Millennial Temple. All of the rest of Ezekiel's account is equally detailed:

⁵And behold, there was a wall all around the outside of the temple area, and the length of the measuring reed in the man's hand was six long cubits, each being a cubit and a handbreadth in

length; so he measured the thickness of the wall, one reed; and the height, one reed. ⁶Then he went into the gateway facing east, going up its steps, and measured the threshold of the gate, one reed deep; ⁷and the side rooms, one reed long, and one reed broad; and the space between the side rooms, five cubits; and the threshold of the gate by the vestibule of the gate at the inner end, one reed. ⁸Then he measured the vestibule of the gateway, eight cubits; ⁹and its jambs, two cubits; and the vestibule of the gate was at the inner end. ¹⁰And there were three side rooms on either side of the east gate; the three were of the same size; and the jambs on either side were of the same size.

¹¹Then he measured the breadth of the opening of the gateway, ten cubits; and the breadth of the gateway, thirteen cubits. ¹²There was a barrier before the side rooms, one cubit on either side; and the side rooms were six cubits on either side. ¹³Then he measured the gate from the back of the one side room to the back of the other, a breadth of five and twenty cubits, from door to door. ¹⁴He measured also the vestibule, twenty cubits; and round about the vestibule of the gateway was the court. ¹⁵From the front of the gate at the entrance to the end of the inner vestibule of the gate was fifty cubits. ¹⁶And the gateway had windows round about, narrowing inwards into their jambs in the side rooms, and likewise the vestibule had windows round about inside, and on the jambs were palm trees.

Ezekiel 40:5-16 (RSV)

Given the extraordinary amount of fine detail in the book of Ezekiel, it seems impossible to come to any conclusion other than that God is saying that there will really be a physical Temple during the Millennium and that these will be its actual measurements. I would defy anybody to give those nine chapters any credible allegorical meaning. Nobody can, because if it really was symbolism, it would be absurdly over-detailed.

Another possible reason why God provided so much intricate detail in the book of Ezekiel is precisely in order to create a difficulty for those who allegorize the Bible. It shows that their approach is wrong. They have no way of handling passages like Ezekiel 40-48 other than to ignore them, which is what they generally do. When did you last hear anybody preach on these nine chapters, if ever?

Conclusion

Without wishing to be harsh, one feels obliged to conclude that the allegorical approach has got nothing going for it. It is not just a weak theory, or an argument which has some holes in it. It is entirely misconceived and without merit. I cannot think of even a single point to make in its favour. If I could think of one, I would be honour-bound to include it.

Neither have I ever been able to find anybody else, in any book that I can find, who makes any coherent, credible, authoritative point in its favour. That said, the supporters of the allegorical approach don't generally even attempt to explain or justify it. It is presented as a given.

They just assert it, as if it was self-evidently correct, and does not need to be supported by any authority. Therefore it is surprising that, despite all these problems and weaknesses, so many people still accept the allegorical approach. Most do so passively, just because their denomination teaches it.

That shows the power of tradition and denominational loyalty. Even leaders and preachers seem to see no need to question all of this for themselves. That's another example of why it's never safe to let other men do your thinking, or your interpreting, for you, no matter who they are.

Does it really matter if the allegorical approach is wrong? Can it do us any harm if we don't take the Bible literally?

If you misunderstand or avoid the 30% of the Bible that is made up of prophecy then it matters greatly, even if you understand the rest of the Bible correctly. God gave us the prophetic Scriptures for a good reason. They are not there just to fill up space. It really matters for us to get our doctrines right, and in every area. That includes understanding what the future holds.

That's why God gave us the prophetic Scriptures. Why else would He do so? He wants us to be aware, alert and ready for everything that is coming. If all that the prophecies can do is to create chaos and waste everybody's time, it would be better if they weren't in the Bible at all. Each prophecy means exactly what *God means by it*, no more and no less.

We are not free to create our own private meanings or interpretations. Our only duty is to find out what God means by the prophecy and to believe that. We are not free to create our own meaning in place of that. Neither is our own leader, or the leader of any other church, free to create their own private meaning. See how apostle Peter put this point:

²⁰But know this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, ²¹for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.

2 Peter 1:20-21 (NASB)

As we saw earlier, Peter did not mean, as the Roman Catholic church claims, that ordinary people are not qualified to understand the Bible for themselves, such that they need a Priest to interpret it for them. The real meaning of those verses is simply that we are not meant to create *private meanings* of our own. We are to find out what the Bible *actually means*, which we do by interpreting it in the right way.

We are not to interpret it in our own unique way, as is done by those who take the allegorical approach. Such people have ended up developing a wide range of inaccurate, distorted and invented doctrines. That confusion causes many problems, which really harm the church. Let's look at a few more examples of their wrong doctrines to illustrate this problem more fully:

Examples of wrong doctrines that flow from the allegorical approach to prophecy.

Doctrinal error 1 - Not realising that there will be a Day of Judgment for Christians and not understanding prophecy and eschatology generally

There are many clear statements in the Bible about the judgment that lies ahead for Christians, not just for the unsaved. Nevertheless, multitudes of people, even real Christians, do not know anything about it or do not believe in it. Thus the majority of people who go to church, and probably even the majority of real Christians, have no idea that Jesus is going to judge each of us, one to one.

He will do so primarily on the basis of what fruit our lives produced for Him, the extent of our faithfulness and what we did with the time, the gifts and the talents He gave us. So, in one sense, our whole life is a test or exam and we are being continuously measured.

Obviously, a person is less likely to do well in an exam or test if they don't even know that they are sitting it, or what it is about. (See Book Four in this series for more detail about the Judgment Seat of Christ)

I was recently at a men's meeting when the subject of judgment arose, i.e. for non-Christians. In the course of the discussion that followed I raised the subject of the Judgment Seat of Christ which is for

Christians. I said I felt apprehensive about standing face to face with Jesus in His capacity as Judge and having my whole life as a Christian (i.e. since conversion, not before) scrutinized and evaluated.

However only one person in the group had any idea what I was referring to. The rest had never even heard of it. Yet these were men from a relatively good evangelical church, which is part of the FIEC (Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches). The point is that due to their faulty interpretation of the Bible, and lack of teaching, these men had no knowledge whatsoever of the judgment that awaits each of them.

One man, a PhD student, tried to reassure me that I need not fear having to face God's judgment. He thought I was confused and that I was expecting to have to go to the Great White Throne judgment which is for unsaved people. He truly had no idea what I was referring to.

He had never heard that there is also going to be a separate, quite different, judgment for Christians. That being so, how can that man prepare now, and change the way he lives, so as to achieve a better outcome in that awesome 'interview' with Jesus, at which He will hand us our 'test-results'?

If he was facing a viva with the Head of Department at his university for his PhD, he would want to spend a lot of time, and put in a lot of effort, preparing for it and putting things right now. Yet he did not even know that he faced a far more daunting appraisal, face to face, with Jesus.

Contrary to what its advocates assume, the allegorical approach does not, in general, promote a high view of Scripture. It actually diminishes and even trivializes it. At the very least, it makes it much harder to make sense of the Bible. I have come across quite a few people from Reformed/Protestant/Calvinist/Lutheran/ Presbyterian backgrounds who will privately admit that they find much of the Bible baffling, especially prophecy.

Therefore they either avoid the prophetic parts altogether or they only skim-read them. They have that difficulty because they have been pre-programmed with faulty ideas, which make the Bible confusing and hard to read. As a result, a lot of people from the various Reformed churches end up ignoring or avoiding the prophetic Scriptures entirely.

They realise that what they have been taught doesn't really make any sense, but they don't know why, or what to do about it. So they just leave the whole subject of Bible prophecy well alone. They often blame themselves for that confusion and assume that they are just not clever enough, or spiritual enough, to make sense of it.

It never occurs to them to think that the whole approach could be wrong. Therefore people from the Reformed churches usually know very little about prophecy or about eschatology, (the study of things to come), even from their own denomination's perspective, let alone from any other.

Moreover, prophecy and eschatology are rarely taught in those churches today, primarily because even the leaders find it all so baffling. They don't know how to handle it and sense instinctively that what they have been taught by their own denominational hierarchy doesn't add up. But they don't know why, and they don't know what to do about it either.

Therefore they mostly do nothing and just focus exclusively on other areas instead, where the Bible does make sense to them. I am thinking in particular of two large Reformed evangelical churches which I know. The leaders of both of those churches never preach a sermon on anything to do with Bible prophecy or eschatology. That is not a coincidence.

They are giving 30% of the Bible a wide berth and deliberately avoiding teaching on it, firstly because they can't understand it and, secondly, because they know that if they do ever try to say anything about the prophecies in the Bible somebody will disagree and ask questions which they can't answer.

This is a self-inflicted problem, which could so easily be solved by just extending the range of the literal method of interpretation to cover the whole Bible, including prophecy. However, even the church leaders who have this problem tend to assume that their inability to understand Bible prophecy is their own fault.

It adds to their general sense of insecurity and lack of confidence in handling the Bible. In fact, it is not limited to them. It is a far deeper and wider problem, which has to do with the whole approach that they have been taught to use. However, it does not occur to them to blame their denominational tradition or theological training.

That is partly because many churches have taught, both explicitly and also by example, that the two things you should never challenge are your own leaders and your own denomination. Thus, any errors in their teaching become further entrenched and prolonged. (See Book Eight for more discussion of the problems created by unbiblical church tradition and authoritarian, hierarchical leadership.)

Doctrinal error 2 - Most of those taking an allegorical approach wrongly end up adopting 'replacement theology', i.e. the belief that the Church has replaced Israel

This profound error known as '*replacement theology*' is now very firmly entrenched within most British churches. It began, as so many errors did, with the so called 'Church Fathers' in the third and fourth centuries. Their ideas formed the foundations of the Roman Catholic church.

The idea of the Roman Catholic church replacing Israel appealed to them. It enabled them to elevate their own importance at the expense of Israel. Those who hold to this mistaken idea say that the Church is now the sole beneficiary of God's promised blessings to Israel.

However, in asserting that, they don't also claim for themselves the many curses that God equally promised would come upon Israel if they disobeyed God. These curses are ignored and are not thought to have been transferred to the Church. The Roman Catholic church assumes that it is *their* church which has replaced Israel, but the same mistake is made by the Reformed churches.

The only difference is that in their minds it is *they* who have replaced Israel, rather than the Catholic church. They both make the same error of foisting themselves, uninvited, into the centre of God's plans, illegitimately taking the place of Israel. In doing so, they are both equally presumptuous, and equally wrong.

Doctrinal error 3 - Most of those who take the allegorical approach make the error of concluding that God has finished with Israel and that Israel has no future role.

God has a hugely important plan for Israel, to which He refers hundreds of times in the Bible and it hasn't all taken place yet. There's much more still to happen. Instead of writing off the Jewish people, God wants us to be watching out for their welfare, praying for Israel, protecting their land, speaking up for Israel when it is criticised and generally blessing and supporting the Jewish people.

They were, still are, and always will be, His chosen people. These false ideas about the Church having replaced Israel warp the way that most of us see the Jewish people. As a result of all this, most churches which take an allegorical view are either hostile to Israel, or indifferent at best.

That is so tragic, given how emphatically God assures us that He will never, ever, under any circumstances, abandon His chosen people. He makes Himself unmistakably clear on that issue. (See later books in this series for more detail.) He also commands us repeatedly to love and bless the Jewish people.

Remember that the Lord Jesus Himself was, is, and always will be, *a Jewish man*. Very few people seem to realise that, or remember it. The truth is that most of us actually see Jesus as a Gentile, without ever saying so explicitly. For many of us it is a purely unconscious impression. Nevertheless, it still colours our thinking about the whole Bible.

But if God really had abandoned Israel, then the whole Bible would be a valueless and unreliable book. Moreover, God's promises would be of no use to the Church. We can be sure, therefore, for all those reasons, and many others, that He has not abandoned Israel and that He never will.

Indeed, He has categorically promised that He won't. The theology of those who believe that the Church, whether Catholic or Reformed, has replaced Israel never seems to lead them to care for Israel more. On the contrary, it always points them the other way. Having a belief in replacement theology never promotes love of Israel, only the opposite.

That error really matters, because God takes Israel very seriously. Although the Church is the bride of Christ, the Bible says that Israel is God's wife. It also says that He hates divorce. Moreover, it is Israel, not the Church, that is said to be the apple of God's eye. That is still the case. That means Israel is like the pupil of His eyes, about which He feels extremely sensitive.

It is not a good idea, therefore, to set yourself up as an enemy, or even a critic, of Israel. Indeed, why would you want to be even a neutral or indifferent observer? God has said that He wants you to be their staunch supporter, even if doing so means that you have to stand alone. God wants us to pray for the Jewish people and to help them and love them, not to ignore them.

He certainly does not want us to try to usurp their place in His affection or His plans. Imagine you had a very wealthy friend who felt unbearably sad because he had been rejected by his delinquent son, with whom he was seeking earnestly to be reconciled. Consider how your already heartbroken friend would feel if he discovered that you were telling other people:

- a) that he has disowned his son and written him off,
- b) that he no longer loves his son and has no further plans for him,
- c) that he has chosen to make you his sole heir and beneficiary in his will, in place of his own son,
- d) that he no longer intends to honour any of the solemn promises that he made to his son in the past.

Can you even imagine yourself saying any of those outrageously impertinent things about your friend or his son to your friends and neighbours? Think what your friend's feelings and reaction might be when he learns of what you have been saying. He would be appalled, to say the least.

Yet, isn't that list of things exactly what much of the Church is saying that God has done to Israel? If nothing else, such teaching is an insult to the *character* of God. It contradicts everything God has said in the Bible and makes Him out to be a liar and a promise-breaker whose Word cannot be relied upon.

Because of his mistaken understanding of how to interpret the prophetic Scriptures, Martin Luther held on to the Roman Catholic idea that the Church has replaced Israel. He basically just deleted the word 'Catholic' and inserted the word 'Protestant' instead. If that was not bad enough, Luther went on, just one week before his death, to prepare a sermon in which he said some bloodthirsty anti-Jewish remarks.

He called for Jews to be killed and for synagogues to be burned down, and he meant every word of it. His thinking in this area had gone very far astray. Sadly, it was largely due to his having followed the allegorical approach. What Martin Luther wrote concerning the Jews later became the theological basis for the Nazi holocaust.

Adolf Hitler was able to quote him, *accurately, and in context*, to justify murdering Jewish people. One does not wish to offend those who admire Martin Luther, but facts need to be faced. Therefore, however controversial it may be to say this, Luther has to be seen as one of the architects of the Nazi holocaust.

That illustrates how even a great man, as Luther was in many ways, can become dangerously mistaken, and end up as a false teacher, if he uses a misguided approach to interpreting the Bible. That's how serious this issue of interpretation is and why it is so crucial that we adopt the correct approach. It really does affect every part of our lives.

Doctrinal error 4 - Not accepting that the physical Land of Israel has been set aside and reserved by God for the Jewish people and that it is theirs forever.

God has given the *Land* of Israel to the Jewish people forever. That land is very important indeed. They will possess it during the Millennial Kingdom, and even during the Eternal Kingdom thereafter. It is not only God's promises to the Jewish people that are denied by replacement theology. It is also His promises concerning the *Land itself*.

Whether we like it or not (and why should we dislike it?) that land has been promised to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and to their physical descendants, forever. The word 'forever' is not a complex, technical expression. Neither is it a symbol. It means forever. Given that God has spelled out His position so very clearly, who are we to disagree with it or deny it?

In particular, who are we to say that God has changed His mind or broken His promises concerning the Land? You might only really grasp how offensive this is to God if you think of yourself, if we extend our earlier example, spreading a false rumour that a local farmer has broken his promise to let his son inherit the family farm and is leaving it to you instead.

Imagine spreading that false rumour around a rural village. What would the farmer think of you? How then do you think God feels when we say the same false things about the Land of Israel? Many of us don't see the practical relevance or significance of this, or understand why it angers God when we deny that the Land of Israel belongs to the Jewish people.

However, consider what God says concerning the Gentile nations who will, one day, conspire together to divide up the Land of Israel. Before we look at this passage from the book of Joel, remember that at this very moment, many governments around the world are lobbying and also conspiring to try to force Israel to divide up their land.

The aim of the United Nations is to create what has become known as "*the two-state solution*". By that they mean creating a new Palestinian state, using a large part of Israel's own territory. Remember also that many of the people pushing for our governments to impose this, and criticizing Israel's reluctance to accept it, are churchgoers. Most are in the Roman Catholic church, and in liberal Anglican churches.

However, they are, increasingly, also in evangelical churches too. That is an extremely unwise stance for anybody to take. Look at what God says through the prophet Joel about those who seek to divide up the Land of Israel. Then reconsider whether you really wish to continue to be part of that group, if you are currently in it:

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

And they have divided up My land.

Joel 3:1-2 (NASB)

¹²*Let the nations be aroused*

And come up to the valley of Jehoshaphat,

For there I will sit to judge

All the surrounding nations.

Joel 3:12 (NASB)

¹⁹*Egypt will become a waste,*

And Edom will become a desolate wilderness,

Because of the violence done to the sons of Judah,

In whose land they have shed innocent blood.

²⁰*But Judah will be inhabited forever*

And Jerusalem for all generations.

²¹*And I will avenge their blood which I have not avenged,*

For the LORD dwells in Zion.

Joel 3:19-21 (NASB)

Joel chapter three is a frightening passage, and for two main reasons. Firstly it appears very clearly to refer to our own day, because it was Great Britain which, in the 1920s, first divided up the Land. They had been given responsibility for it by the League of Nations under what was called the "*Mandate*". However, instead of giving it to the Jews, as they had promised, the British Government bowed to Arab pressure.

Therefore they gave 78% of that land to create an Arab state, Transjordan, which we now call Jordan. The land used for creating Jordan was part of the Land of Israel, which Britain had indicated, by the Balfour Declaration in 1917, would be used to create a state for Jewish people to live in, not Arabs. The Arabs already had, and still have, an abundance of land which is *500 times larger* than the whole of Israel.

Tragically, that promise to the Jewish people was broken and I believe that that breach of trust led to God's fierce judgment coming on Great Britain, through the loss of the Empire in particular. That all happened within a couple of decades, after having kept the Empire intact for centuries. I am not asking you to approve of the Empire, but merely to recognise that its rapid dismantling, and the drastic reduction in British power and prestige, was a judgment from God upon Great Britain.

To make matters worse, the Western nations, supported by many misinformed and misguided churches and individual Christians, are now pushing to further divide even the small residue of land that Israel does have. They are trying to force them to give up part of what remains to create a new 'Palestinian' state. This is despite the fact that 99.8% of the land in the Middle East is already in Arab hands and only 0.2% is in Jewish hands.

While using them as a propaganda tool, no Arab nation is willing to offer citizenship, or even a temporary home, to any of the Palestinian refugees anywhere in the 99.8% of the Middle Eastern land that already belongs to the Arabs. Yet those so called 'Palestinians' are actually all Arabs.

They entered the Land of Israel, when it was called Palestine, in the early decades of the twentieth century. However, they were just immigrants from neighbouring Arab countries. They are not 'Palestinians' and most of them had not been in the Land for very long, contrary to what is claimed.

For example, even the late *Yasser Arafat*, the former leader of the Palestine Liberation Organisation, the PLO, was born and brought up in *Egypt*, not 'Palestine'. So, whilst condemning Israel for not wanting to allow the Palestinian Arabs to have any of the tiny area of Israeli land, the Arabs have never

offered any of their own land to provide a home for them, even though they have a vastly larger amount of territory.

Saudi Arabia alone is larger than Germany and there are many other Arab nations too. Any one of them alone could accommodate all the Palestinian Arabs. If they all joined in and shared the burden together it would be very easy for the whole Arab world to find homes for all of the refugees, especially as many of those Arab nations are fabulously wealthy due to their oil.

The main reason why they don't is that it suits the Arab nations, politically, to keep these Arab refugees living in camps, so that they will continue to be a thorn in Israel's side. The world, meanwhile, is determined to further divide that 0.2% of land in the Middle East that is in Jewish hands and to take a large part of it away from Israel.

All of this is being done in direct defiance of what God has said about His promises to His people, Israel, and His plans for the Promised Land. Therefore, we can fully expect God's judgment, and a severe one at that, if we get involved in pressing for the further dividing up of the Land of Israel. Accordingly, we must not do it.

If we had a better understanding of what the Bible says, and did not mistakenly think that the Church has replaced Israel, and that the Land of Israel has no purpose or future, we would not be in this mess. As it is, the nations of the world are moving towards a head on collision with Almighty God over the issue of the Promised Land, which He swore He would give to Israel and to nobody else.

A friend of mine recently went to see the senior leader of an evangelical church which he attends. He had asked to see the leader to ask him about his views on the present role and purpose of Israel and the Jewish people. He asked these questions because he could see that the leader never spoke about Israel.

When pressed, the leader confirmed that he believes that the Church has replaced Israel and that there is now no purpose or place in God's plans either for the Land of Israel or the Jewish people. Both were irrelevant, as far as that leader could see. From the perspective of that leader, it would have been like asking him what his views were about God's plans for the land and people of Norway or Guatemala.

That is effectively how most people see Israel, i.e. as nothing special or unique and not at the centre of God's plans. Therefore it is unsurprising that such leaders spend little or no time thinking anything at all about Israel. It simply isn't on their agenda.

Those who believe in replacement theology do not usually realise that as well as dispensing with the Land of Israel and the Jewish people, they are also getting rid of Jesus' role as the Messiah of Israel. That was, and still is, one of His titles and roles. But, if there is no longer any Land or people of Israel, in which and over which He can be the Messiah, then He too has effectively been made redundant.

At the very least he has been stripped of one of His titles. So, coming back to the point, remember that these grievous errors about Israel and replacement theology would never have arisen were it not for the even deeper problem of the allegorical approach.

Doctrinal error 5 - Not accepting that there will be a literal man, whom the Bible calls "*the antichrist*" or "*the beast*", who will rule over the whole Earth just before Jesus returns.

As we have seen, if the antichrist really was the Emperor Nero, or the Roman Empire as a whole, and if he, or it, came and went in the first century, then none of this would need to trouble us today. It would all be irrelevant to us. That is one reason why most people today ignore the antichrist entirely, and have no understanding of what is coming.

They have no expectation of a real, literal man who will rule the whole world, as a grotesque substitute for Jesus Christ, and bring unprecedented wickedness, suffering and death in the seven year tribulation period. If a person is not a real Christian and is not taken to Heaven by Jesus in the rapture, but left behind, then they are unlikely to see through the deception of the antichrist that will follow when he rises to power after that rapture.

They will then be much more likely to become wrapped up in the one-world religion that the antichrist and his false prophet will establish. It is also more likely that people who don't understand the truth about the antichrist, or Israel, or God's plans for the Jewish people, will find themselves deceived into taking part in the antichrist's attempt to invade Israel and destroy the Jewish people.

We know that the armies of the world will join together to attack Israel in the Armageddon campaign. The Bible says so. The question is whether *you* are going to support that attack ,or even take part in it. Those who understand the Bible properly will not. However, those who do not understand it are likely to support it, to their great cost.

CHAPTER 10

FURTHER POINTS ON HOW TO DEAL WITH THE BIBLE CORRECTLY

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

Luke 6:46-49 (RSV)

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

Deuteronomy 4:5-8 (RSV)

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

Isaiah 30:9-11 (RSV)

Read everything in its proper context

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

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

The Bible is an ongoing commentary on itself. Each book refers to earlier books and uses phrases from other prophets, or makes indirect references to what previous prophets have said. In doing this it is assumed that you know all of the Bible and will recognise these allusions or references. If so, then you will be able to interpret any single verse in the context of the whole Bible.

That way, any ambiguity can be resolved by looking elsewhere in the Bible for clarification. That may sound ambitious, but that is how God wants, and expects, us to operate. He sets the bar very high when it comes to knowing the Bible, because so much depends on how well you understand it.

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

The heading above is a very simple statement, but if it is applied, it can save us from a lot of trouble and avoid many errors. The fact is that some verses in the Bible are very plain and clear, whereas some are less so. Some are even obscure and difficult. They may require you to have more knowledge than you currently have.

Or, they might require you to cross reference an obscure or complex verse with other related passages in order to grasp the correct meaning. Therefore, whenever a verse seems complicated, or unclear, or where it may have two or more possible meanings, always interpret it in the light of other verses, which are clearer.

That way, the easier or clearer passages will clarify or explain the harder ones. It's really just plainly obvious common sense, which we all seem to be able to apply to everything else we ever read, but not always to the Bible.

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

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

God wants us to agree with the text, not to try to make the text agree with us. That may sound utterly obvious, but it is not what millions of us actually do. Instead, we bring to the Bible our own pre-conceived ideas. We then read the text the way we have been taught to read it.

Therefore we give it the meaning we have been told it has, or that we prefer it to have, even when a plain reading of the text itself would oblige us to give it another meaning. So, '*exegesis*' involves reading *from* the Bible only what it *actually says*, no more and no less. That is the right approach.

The key to valid exegesis is to let the Bible itself be your guide and your plumb line. Read it the way it is written, regardless of your denominational tradition, or what you have always done in the past, or what other people have told you, no matter how authoritative such people may seem to be.

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

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

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

Never try to force the Bible to fit in with your views. Just as importantly, never make the Bible fit in with your denominational traditions and practices or your cultural expectations. Always let the Bible

correct you, rather than you correcting it. Equally, let the Bible correct your Pastor, or Vicar, or whoever else has told you things. Never allow them to correct or modify the Bible.

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

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

It is a feature of human nature that people tend only to see what they *expect* to see. Thus when reading a passage people tend not even to register anything which is new to them or which differs from what they have been taught or brought up to think.

So, it is not that they consciously see the point and choose to reject it. They generally don't even *notice* it. They are blind to it, due to their rigidly fixed expectations. For example, I was once at a men's breakfast meeting and the speaker was dealing with the book of Joel. He focused on chapter two and the first part of chapter three.

I was intrigued to find out what the speaker would say about verses 1-2 of chapter three, which we saw earlier. However, he just made some vague comments about the passage as a whole, but did not say anything at all about these two verses. Let's take another look at them:

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

Joel 3:1-2 (NASB)

During the whole teaching session, the real meaning of verses 1-2 was never brought out by the speaker, not even in part. Therefore I later asked the men on my table what *they* thought verses 1-2 meant. I never gave my own view. I just wanted to know theirs.

However, none of them were able to give any coherent answer. Like the speaker, they made some vague, woolly comments, but they all completely missed the point of the verses. What those verses are actually saying is as follows:

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

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

Now, take another look at verses 1-2 and ask yourself whether I have fairly and accurately summarized what the verses are saying. The point is that the men I asked did not come up with *any* of the points set out above. They were entirely blind to all of it. They made instead some nebulous, religious-sounding remarks, but those were all about the *Church*, which is not even being referred to in that passage.

They made no mention whatsoever of *Israel*, or the *Land*, or God’s *judgment* on the Gentile nations for *dividing up* that Land. None of that ever entered their minds to the slightest extent. Actually, I was not surprised by any of this. It was what I was expecting, even before the Bible study began, because I have come across it before.

The problem was that the men in that room were mostly from a Reformed Protestant background. Thus they had all been brought up to believe in “replacement theology”. Indeed, they took that set of beliefs entirely for granted. It was a fixed set of background facts which coloured everything that they read in the Bible.

As we saw earlier, ‘replacement theology’ includes the following beliefs and assumptions:

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

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

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

However, if the passage was *not* about those things, then what on Earth could it possibly be about? The main reason they didn’t see any of those things in the passage is because they weren’t *expecting* to see them. That was because they had been brought up to accept replacement theology. Thus their

expectation was that these verses (indeed, virtually all other verses too) are now referring *only to the Church and not to Israel*. That is their default-setting.

But, those verses were all about land, and about it being divided up and people being scattered etc. Given that the Church has no land and hasn't ever been scattered, then, in their minds, it had to follow that those verses either meant something *symbolic*. If not, they would find them totally incomprehensible.

Accordingly, although they had no idea whatsoever as to what the verses did actually mean, the only thing they felt they did know for sure was that the verses had nothing to do with:

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

They therefore automatically saw the verses as symbolic or spiritual, rather than taking them literally. Thus they had no expectation that any of those things spoken of in verses 1-2, whatever they might refer to, are going to be fulfilled literally. Their assumption was that these verses contained woolly, fuzzy, 'spiritual' statements.

These were, in some indecipherable way, somehow saying something or other about the Church, but were obviously not meant to be taken literally. That was the extent of the confusion and error in that meeting. There was a room full of men, all of whom had got blinkers on, like what one puts on a horse to stop it seeing things that might frighten it.

Those blinkers stopped them seeing what was clearly written on the page because they expected to see something else. This difficulty of preconceived ideas is a major problem and applies in all sorts of other areas and themes, not just about Israel. The only hope you have of overcoming this problem is to actively seek to find all of these wrong beliefs in yourself.

More to the point, you need to ask God to point them all out to you and to help you to get rid of them. Therefore you need God's help, plus your own determined effort, in order to:

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

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

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

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

That's because Paul had taught widely in Ephesus and must have explained the meaning of that figure of speech previously. So, it's not explained anywhere in that letter to the Ephesians. That's a problem to you if you happen to be reading Ephesians.

The solution is found by looking in 1 Thessalonians 5:8, where Paul gives a definition of the '*helmet*'. This is one of those relatively rare cases where a word actually does have a metaphorical meaning. However, we are told what it is. Clearly, Paul doesn't want you to start wearing a literal helmet. It is an expression which he borrowed from Isaiah and it means the "*hope of salvation*", or simply *hope*.

So, hope is what protects our minds from anxiety, depression, fear and discouragement. That's what Paul meant in Ephesians 6, but you'd only find that out by reading either 1 Thessalonians, or Isaiah. There are many other examples of this. Therefore we need to read the whole Bible, so that the interconnectedness of it all can become apparent to us.

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

Yet another reason why we need to read and know the whole Bible, rather than just parts of it, is that it is only when you have the Bible as a whole that you have got *the truth*. Every single verse in the Bible is *true* and yet it is only the whole Bible, i.e. the *sum total* of God's Word, which is *the truth*.

It is so easy to go wrong in your theology by building a doctrine on one verse and not allowing it to be tempered or clarified by other passages which could be found absolutely anywhere in the rest of the Bible. So it is only when we take into account *all* of God's Word, the clear and the less clear, the pleasant and the unpleasant, the comforting and the worrying, that we see the whole picture and avoid error:

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

The difference between direct statements and indirect inferences or deductions

It is also important to realise that there are two different types or levels of information in the Bible. In most cases the Bible makes a direct statement. If so, then what has been said is a fact and can be accepted, by itself, at face value. For example we are told that Abraham lived to be 175. That is a simple, direct statement. However, there are also very many occasions when there is no direct statement.

Nevertheless, information can also be reasonably inferred or deduced from what has been said. For example, as we have seen earlier, in 2 Peter chapter 3, apostle Peter is speaking about apostle Paul's letters, which he recognises are sometimes hard to understand. Peter then says something from which we can validly draw an indirect inference or deduction:

***speaking of this as he does in all his letters. There are some things in them hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures.
2 Peter 3:16 (RSV)***

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

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

Therefore, when we are merely drawing an inference, we must be aware that that is all we are doing. We must not make the error of treating it as if it was a direct statement. That approach will enable us to evaluate more accurately the status or weight that can be given to a particular point.

We are less likely to go wrong if we take care to be very certain as to whether something is a direct statement or an indirect inference. The former is clearer, and more empathic, than the latter and carries greater weight. Therefore, though inferences are valid, we need to handle them very carefully. We need to make sure that the deduction is correct and we have not picked up something which is not actually meant.

For example, when Jesus spoke to apostle Peter in Matthew 16, He made a statement which millions of people have misunderstood. To begin with, they have got a mistaken understanding of the meaning of the direct statement, but they have also made some invalid deductions as well:

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

Matthew 16:13-18 (NASB)

Verse 18 above has been claimed by the Roman Catholic church as meaning that Jesus Christ was going to build His Church on the foundation of *Peter*. That assumption is relied upon to help to justify the misguided idea that Peter was the first 'Pope' and that subsequent Popes, likewise, have the same exalted status that Peter is alleged to have had. However that is not what Jesus was saying.

If we wish to be kind to the Catholic church we could say that their error is due to sloppy interpretation of Jesus' words. However, it is more likely that it is a result of the Catholic church deliberately seeking to force Jesus' words to have the meaning that they *want them to have*. It suits them that Peter (and the Popes) should be the rock or foundation upon which the whole Church is built.

In fact, Jesus was not talking about Peter at all, but about his divinely inspired statement of faith. Let us look closely at Jesus' exact words in verse 18 and we shall see what He really meant. Verse 18 involves a play on words, in that Jesus uses two similar sounding words in the same sentence, both of which refer to rock. He says:

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

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

When Jesus said these words to Peter it was immediately after Peter had just answered Jesus' question as to who He (Jesus) was. Peter replied that Jesus was the Christ (Messiah) and *the Son of the living God*.

This second point, about Jesus being the Son of God, and thus equal to God Himself, was a revelation that God had given directly to Peter. At that point Jesus had not yet told His disciples that. So, what Jesus actually meant was this:

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

In short, all Jesus meant was that He was going to build His Church *upon the fact of Him being the Son of God and equal to God*. Therefore, only those who believe that crucial fact about Him, and are aware of *who* and *what* He is, can be a part of His Church.

So, that fundamental statement of faith that Peter had just expressed as to *who Jesus is*, was like a huge layer of rock, upon which the whole Christian Church was to be built. That is what we are meant to infer from Jesus' play on words. What we are *not* meant to infer from it is the idea that *Peter himself*, let alone a long string of so-called Popes after him, is to be the foundation of the Church.

That line of reasoning about Peter and popes is wholly man-made. It is also illogical and mistaken. It comes from very sloppy reasoning and from reading into the text what certain people want it to mean, rather than just asking honestly what the verse actually means. Anybody who sincerely examines the verse in that way will find the meaning is very clear.

How the Bible came to be written and by whom

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

An infinitely large and complex mind put the Bible together. No man could have done so, not even with the greatest computers. God inspired all of the human authors, but they each wrote their separate parts in their own unique, personal style. The Bible was then steadily built up, over 15 centuries, with the Holy Spirit as the 'Editor in Chief'.

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

The different methods of Bible study

There are various ways to study the Bible, each of which have their own advantages and purposes. We shall examine some of them below. However, when I say 'Bible study' I do not mean our ordinary daily Bible reading as part of our devotional time.

I am referring to a more intense and structured attempt to get deeper into the Bible by studying a book, or a theme, or a particular word and learning all that you can about it. This kind of intense and targeted study is necessary, in addition to methodical daily Bible reading, if you are to really grow. Such study can be done on your own, or as part of a small group, or both.

Studying a single theme throughout the whole Bible

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

We do so until we build up a comprehensive and balanced understanding of that topic. This requires us to make sure that we also look for passages which contradict, counter-balance, or correct what we already think. We must not just look for those verses which support our existing opinions, or which match what we've been told previously.

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

This method of study is along the same lines, except that now you are looking not at a theme, but at one single word. It could be a Greek or Hebrew word, or it could be an English word. You get a large book called a 'concordance', i.e. Strongs or Youngs, and look at the list of all the times that a particular word is used.

For example, in Book One, I have included a very brief (and incomplete) study on the word "*fruit*". I simply looked down the list in the concordance, checked all the verses where the word "*fruit*" occurs and then chose a number of them which were relevant to the purpose I had in mind. This is a good technique and surprisingly easy to do.

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

Expository Bible study - a whole book at a time

This is a quite different approach. Here we study the Bible a book at a time. It is the opposite of studying a theme or word. Here we are staying in one place, i.e. in one book or letter, but dealing with all of the various themes and subjects which crop up in that book or letter. There could be several.

The good thing about expository Bible study is that it prevents you from focusing excessively on any 'pet' themes or favourite 'hobby-horses'. It also stops you avoiding difficult or controversial issues. It forces you to look at a wide variety of subjects, as they naturally arise, without being selective. Even so, do not let the expository approach become your only method of study either.

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

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

The need for Bible commentaries and how to use them

There is great value in Bible commentaries and I strongly recommend that you use them, provided you choose the *right ones*. These are books in which someone has written a running commentary, verse by verse, of a whole book or letter from the Bible. If you read a commentary alongside the book or letter in the Bible that you are studying, then you will get a lot more out of it.

The key is, however, to ensure that it is a *good* commentary. There are far too many bad ones. Firstly, make sure it is written by a man who really *believes* the Bible. It cannot just be assumed that he will be a genuine Christian. He may well be a skeptic, a liberal, an apostate, or even a complete atheist. Many such people study theology, and teach it, and they also write commentaries.

To ensure that the writer of the commentary is a real Christian with a real faith, you must be very discerning. You cannot just use any commentary that you happen to come across. It could have been written by such a liberal or skeptic, who has little or no faith, or who is struggling with doubts and errors of his own.

Or it could be that he takes the allegorical approach and will take you on a wild goose chase of his own fanciful theories about deep ‘hidden meanings’ that he imagines he can see in the text. If so, that will distort your understanding of prophecy or of eschatology generally, i.e. the study of things to come.

How can a man help you if he is thoroughly misguided or confused himself? Therefore, even if the writer is a real Christian, you should still avoid commentaries which are by men who are labouring under any of these handicaps. They are highly likely to confuse you, because they are so confused themselves.

Moreover, they are also likely to ignore any words or verses that they themselves find confusing. Even worse, in order to avoid embarrassing themselves by saying that they don’t know what a passage means, they are prone to dreaming up some meaning for themselves and persuading themselves that it is correct. So, all such men are to be avoided.

At the other end of the spectrum, I have also heard people, even quite well known teachers, who speak of how they prefer to just read the Bible by itself without ever looking at any commentaries. That is said as if it implies that they have a high view of Scripture and a determination to focus on the Bible, rather than on the views of mere men.

However, it is still a naive and even a foolish attitude. The reality is that we all need other men to teach us and correct us. Even if we don’t need it in one area, or with one particular doctrine or issue, on which we are relatively strong, we will certainly need it for others, where we know less.

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

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

By reading other men’s books, and especially Bible commentaries, and by listening to their teaching CDs or MP3s, we can be greatly strengthened, even if that other man is not right in everything he says. Nobody is always right, whoever they may be. In the Real Christianity website I recommend a series of good Bible teachers.

However, I also make clear that none of them are perfect. I feel quite sure of that, because I have seen and heard every one of them make mistakes, or display blind-spots, where they lack knowledge or

experience. When you come to think of it, how could it be otherwise? Even the best teacher on Earth has only got limited knowledge.

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

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

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

Then they can correct you and also correct each other and make up for each other's blind spots, gaps, deficiencies or mistakes. It is like eating a balanced diet of different kinds of foods so that one fruit or vegetable will provide vitamins and minerals that are not to be found in others.

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

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

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

That way, listening to such teaching doesn't take up any extra time. It's amazing how much you can listen to on that basis. You could easily manage to fit in one, two, or even three hours per day, without interfering in any way with your other work or duties. It depends what your personal saturation point is for taking in information.

The important point is that if you are willing to listen regularly, over a long period, then it will radically increase your wisdom, knowledge and understanding. It's not only the *quantity* of teaching that you are hearing that matters but also the fact that it is coming from such a *wide range* of teachers. Plus you can ensure that they are all of high quality, which you cannot do when you attend church.

However, to ensure that they are competent teachers, you will need to become very discerning. See the Real Christianity website for a list of good teachers whose materials would benefit you hugely. Then order as much as you can from their websites.

One does not wish to be rude or unfairly critical, but the standard of teaching in probably 95% or more of British churches, is somewhere between mediocre and abysmal. There are very few genuinely skilled, honest, reliable, diligent, competent Bible teachers around who fear God and have the love of the truth.

Even if they are sincere, most church leaders are generalists, trying to be a ‘jack of all trades’ and they may have little or no skill at teaching. Many preachers also spend far too little time studying the Bible, which is one reason why it is apparent that they don't have the love of the truth. That being the case, they can't teach you to develop the love of the truth either.

You need to recognise those facts and set out to find good quality teaching wherever it can be found. You are unlikely to come across it by pure chance. You will need to search for it carefully and persistently and be very discerning about what you hear or read.

That is why I included the recommended Bible teachers section on the Real Christianity website, because the reality is that most of us lack discernment and cannot tell the difference between good and bad teachers. I hope that that section will therefore help you, because the men I have recommended are all superb teachers and honest men too.

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

You definitely need to listen to good, competent Bible teachers who love the truth. God made all of us with a need for that. None of us are self-sufficient. He made teachers, because we all need them. Even teachers need teachers. However, it's also very important not to get all the teaching MP3s or CDs from only one person.

No matter how good they might be, do not limit yourself solely to your favourite teacher, or even to those who are from your own denomination. You need a much wider range than that, or you will miss important things. If you only ever listen to one man, or men from one denomination, there will be all sorts of doctrines, issues, themes, styles, and theological approaches that you will never come across.

You would be fishing in too small a pool. This is the theological equivalent of in-breeding in farming. Livestock farmers need to bring in additional animals from other herds, or there will eventually be genetic problems.

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

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

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

- a) Being ‘*moderate*’, “*doing everything in moderation*”, “*moderation in all things*” or any other equivalent phrase. Though it can be good to be moderate, for example in our intake of alcohol, moderation is not always a good thing. There are many issues about which God does *not* want us to be moderate. On the contrary, in many areas, He wants us to be radical, passionate and wholehearted and to do what we do with all our heart, mind and soul. Two obvious examples of that are our love for God and our devotion to the Scriptures, both of which are meant to be anything but moderate.
- b) Positioning yourself at the *mid-point between two opposing points of view*. If we take this half way-house approach we will frequently be wrong because the truth, on any given issue, may well be at one or other end of the scale, not in the middle. Seeking the middle ground would also put you in

danger of being what Jesus calls ‘lukewarm’, such that He would spit you out of His mouth. For example, if you were to decide that from now on you will serve all drinks to your guests at 50° centigrade, how many people would accept either a glass of lemonade or a cup of tea from you? There are times when the only right thing to be is either very cold or very hot. The mid-point is sometimes no good at all, as Jesus said:

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

Revelation 3:15-16 (RSV)

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

There are times when this approach can be appropriate, such as when deciding what family-size pizza to order for your household, or which film to watch. However, it is not appropriate when dealing with the Bible. Other people’s agreement or disagreement has no bearing on the question of what is true. Neither does it validate or invalidate what the Bible is saying.

So, the Bible could be saying something with which 99% of people disagree, but it would still be right and they would all be wrong. Therefore, in a situation like that, the proper place for any Christian who has the love of the truth and fears God, is with the 1% not the 99%.

So, a person can be in a room with a hundred people, all of whom agree with each other and disagree with him, and yet he could still be the only balanced person among them. That is because being balanced has nothing to do with fitting in with, or being accepted by, those around us.

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

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

Romans 3:4(a) (NIV)

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

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

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

Example 1 - balance about the use of spiritual gifts

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

In so doing, we would take seriously all that the Bible says about how the gifts *should*, and should *not*, be used. Moreover, we would take note of the fact that they are a good thing and are meant to be used, not avoided or prohibited.

If we have read, believed and implemented everything that the Bible says about spiritual gifts, we would find it virtually impossible to arrive at any of the following conclusions, all of which are mistaken and unbalanced:

- a) that the gifts of the Holy Spirit are something *bad or dangerous*, which should be avoided or banned, even if they still exist
- b) that the gifts of the Holy Spirit *ceased* at some early point in the life of the Church, for example when apostle John died, or when the last book of the New Testament was written, such that they are therefore no longer in operation or available to us.
- c) that the gifts of the Holy Spirit are the *most important* thing in the life of a church and should be focused upon and elevated, even above or instead of the Bible, such that they come to be seen as the central thing, around which the whole life of the Church revolves.
- d) that the gifts of the Holy Spirit should be used *without any restraints*, limitations or guidelines, such that every person can, and should, do whatever they want to do, whenever they want to do it.
- e) that *everybody* should speak in tongues
- f) that *nobody* should speak in tongues

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

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

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

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

but all things should be done decently and in order.
1 Corinthians 14:40 (RSV)

This is a verse which is sometimes quoted by those who object (correctly) to the *misuse* of spiritual gifts. However, of those who quote it, have you noticed that the majority only ever point to the second half of the verse which says “....*decently and in order*”?

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

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

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

Example 2 - balance about demons

Another classic example of a subject which produces imbalance is demons. This is an issue about which people tend to hold very strong views and become either allergic or obsessed. Therefore some don't believe that demons have any part to play in our lives today, and perhaps that they don't even exist.

Others believe that demons are central to just about everything that ever happens and are the sole or main cause of virtually all our problems. Neither of these views is correct, as any honest, sensible reading of the *whole* Bible will demonstrate. Accordingly, a person with a *balanced* view of demons will believe:

- a) that demons exist and are active *today*, not just in the past
- b) that they are active in the lives of both *saved* and *unsaved* people
- c) that demons have the power to do very significant levels of *harm*
- d) that, nevertheless, they do not have *unlimited* power and are subject to various boundaries and restrictions
- e) that they are *one of* the causes of our problems
- f) that they are not the *only* cause so that, for example, we must also fight the battles against our own flesh, and the world system, as well as resisting demons
- g) that some people *do* require deliverance from demons
- h) that some people do *not*
- i) that we are right to be *concerned* about demons

- j) but that we are not to *fear* them
- k) that we are to take them *seriously*
- l) but that we are not to be *obsessed* or pre-occupied with them
- m) that we are to resist them in the *biblical* ways that the Bible commands
- n) but not in *unbiblical* ways, which the Bible never speaks of

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

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

It is undoubtedly true that every Christian is saved:

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

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

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

So, this hyper-sensitivity to the possibility of being thought to be advocating justification by works, causes many people to speak too much about God's grace and avoid speaking about good works at all,

or explaining their proper purposes. Consequently, a large part of what the Bible has to say to us is under-emphasized or even ignored, all because of a fear of being misunderstood and a lack of proper balance.

Example 4 – balance about poverty and wealth

I have been in many churches over the last thirty odd years and have probably heard more than 2,000 live sermons. I also read a lot of books and listened to a huge number of teaching tapes and CDs and MP3s by a very wide range of people, both good and bad, biblical and unbiblical, wise and unwise.

Therefore, I have seen or heard many unbalanced positions being adopted about how a Christian ought to view the issues of how we should view the poor, what we ought to do about their poverty, and also whether it is right or wrong for a Christian to be, or seek to be, wealthy. I have heard each of the following *unbalanced*, and incorrect, views being expressed in one form or another:

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

All of the above positions, and their many other variations, are wrong and unbiblical. At the very least, they are unbalanced. One reason why they arise is because people inject their own views and desires into their theology instead of simply hearing what God says.

Alternatively, they zoom in on something which the Bible does say and then exaggerate it, while forgetting any counter-balancing points which the Bible also makes. So, a balanced position on the subject of poverty/wealth and dealing with the poor would be along these lines:

- a) Poverty is a bad thing and God does *not* want Christians, or indeed anybody, to be in poverty.
- b) God wants Christians to share their wealth *generously* with the poor, especially within the Church, i.e. with fellow Christians who are in need, but also with unbelievers too.

- c) It is right and proper to *earn* as much as one can, provided it can be done honestly and righteously and without neglecting our other responsibilities.
- d) It is also right and proper to *save* money for our future needs, or for our family provided, likewise, that it can be done righteously, proportionately and without neglecting other responsibilities such as giving to God's work and to the poor. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, put it well when he said "*Earn all you can. Save all you can. Give all you can.*"
- e) Yet it is wrong to be covetous in the sense of having an inappropriate or unhealthy desire for wealth or possessions *in this life*, such that they become a pre-occupation or fixation and are in your thoughts excessively.
- f) Nevertheless, it is entirely right to seek to lay up treasures for oneself *in Heaven*, i.e. to seek for rewards and crowns and for an inheritance in the Kingdom of Heaven. These will be given out at the Judgment Seat of Christ to those who have been faithful and fruitful as disciples. See Book Four.
- g) Although there is no entitlement to be wealthy, a person who lives right, diligently studies the Bible, humbles himself, fears the LORD and puts biblical principles into practice, is *likely*, over a period of years, or even decades, to become prosperous. That is the main reason why, after the Reformation, the countries which embraced the Bible and the true Gospel became very wealthy. It is partly just cause and effect and it is also because God promises many blessings to those who fear and obey Him and honour His Word. These blessings include, but are by no means limited to, material prosperity.
- h) Nevertheless, it is a fact that some of us are called to do more than just give money away generously to the poor. Some of us are to go further and make *major sacrifices*, including financial sacrifices, in order to obey God. For example, a person who is called to missionary work, or to be an evangelist or youth worker etc, may well need to accept a severe cut in his income and even live entirely by faith. That is not the case for everybody, but it is true for some. That is one reason why the rest of the Church needs to take seriously their duty to give generously, so as to support such workers, as well as giving to the poor.
- i) Although material prosperity is one of God's blessings and it is valid for us to seek for it, it is not right to do so presumptuously, or covetously, or with any sense of entitlement. God really does '*repay*' those who give to the poor, but He does not do so *on demand*, whenever you snap your fingers at Him. You cannot give orders to God or make claims of Him, as if He was a waiter. It may be that God will wait for decades to repay us for our generosity. Indeed, He may even choose to leave it until the Judgment Seat of Christ. If so, we are at no disadvantage. On the contrary, any rewards given there will last forever, whereas those given now, though good, are only temporary.
- j) Preaching the Gospel, and thus enabling people to know how to be saved, must be the highest priority of the Church. We need to preach the real Gospel, not a social gospel, or any other kind of man-made substitute for the Gospel.
- k) Nevertheless, caring for the poor and needy 'comes a close second' and certainly must not be overlooked or treated as unimportant or peripheral. Caring for the poor is good and right in itself, but it is also remarkably effective at opening the door to enable the Gospel to be preached to a person or community so that they can be saved.

Example 5 – balance about predestination and free will

I shall only address this issue briefly because I have alluded to it earlier in this book and I shall also deal with it very fully in a later book in this series about the errors of Calvinism. Please refer to that for more information.

There are many people who come from a Reformed/Protestant background who hold some or all of the following unbalanced and/or incorrect views about the meaning and implication of God's *foreknowledge, predestination and election*. They are unable to reconcile these, or make no apparent attempt to reconcile them, with what the Bible also says about our *free will*:

- a) They refer to the (relatively few) passages in the Bible which speak of foreknowledge, predestination and election. In particular they quote Romans 8:28-29 and Ephesians 1:4-5, and look at them in isolation. They then wrongly define these concepts. Furthermore, they apply misguided *human logic* and reasoning to them, in an attempt to work out what the wider implications of these passages must be.
- b) In so doing they ignore, overlook, misunderstand, or fail to take seriously, what the Bible *also* says about our *free will*, i.e. our freedom to choose whether to believe and, in particular, whether to repent.
- c) Mainly by the misapplication, or over-extension, of human reasoning they conclude that the fact that God *calls* us, and *predestines* us, to be saved must mean that He also *forces* us to be saved, whether we wish to be or not. On that basis, they conclude that there is nothing we can do to prevent our own salvation. They hold that view even though the Bible never says anything remotely like that. In short, they rely solely on their own processes of logical deduction. They cannot point to any express statement in the Bible which actually supports their conclusions, even slightly or indirectly. Indeed, they make their sweeping statements about how God operates, even in the face of clear passages which say, or at least imply, *the direct opposite*.
- d) Even worse, many Calvinists deduce, without any express biblical mandate whatsoever, that God also predestines people to be *damned*. They believe that He created them with the express intention that they would be condemned and sent to the Lake of Fire, *irrespective* of whether they choose to believe and repent. This is the logical extension of their initial conclusion, i.e. that God alone chooses who will be saved. In short, they believe that God chose, before time began, all those who would be condemned. That is they claim that He created some people *in order* to condemn them, and with *no intention* of ever showing His mercy to them, whatever they might do, say or believe.
- e) It doesn't end there. Many Calvinists also believe that because God is '*sovereign*', as they wrongly define sovereignty, it must follow that His will cannot be thwarted, prevented or avoided by anybody. Otherwise, they think it would mean that He could not be all-powerful or sovereign. Accordingly, they deduce that absolutely everything that ever happens, however small, must be therefore God's will. They claim that He ordained, before time began, that that event would occur, and exactly how and when. So they believe that every incident, however trivial, and whether good or bad, can automatically be assumed to be God's will and to have been *directly caused by God*.
- f) It gets worse. They even conclude that God is the ultimate author and cause of all our *sin*. Again, this is based entirely on human reasoning, with no biblical authority whatsoever to support it. It is based on the same logical, or rather illogical, deductions about God's sovereignty (as they wrongly define it). That is that even our sins must be His will because it is impossible for anybody to resist His will, otherwise, by their definition, He would not be '*sovereign*'. They think therefore that all of us are doing God's will at all times, *even when we sin*. Otherwise, if sin was contrary to His will, then our decision to sin would be to defy His will, which would mean that He was not '*sovereign*'. That is how absurd our conclusions can become when we operate on the basis of flawed human

logic rather than being guided by what the Bible actually says. No person can arrive at John Calvin's conclusions by simply believing what the Bible says.

- g) By the way, this misguided thinking about God's sovereignty would also include every accident, injury or illness and every little action, decision or mistake that anybody ever makes. All of these, including the apparently random bounces of a tennis ball or the mistakes of a typist, are thought to have been *intentionally* caused by God. Indeed, they go further and say that they could not have been prevented, no matter what anybody may have done. In effect, according to that confused human reasoning, we are all just reading from a pre-ordained script, playing the parts that God predestined for us, down to the tiniest details, and we are *unable to alter anything*, however trivial.

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

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

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

Example 6 - balance about Israel and the Church

Then, take the subject of Israel, another subject about which very few people adopt a balanced and properly informed position. To begin with, most Christians, at least in the West, make the error of believing that the Church has replaced Israel and that God no longer has any plans or purposes for the nation or Land of Israel, or the Jewish people as a whole.

This overall error is known as '*replacement theology*'. That view is profoundly wrong, because none of those assumptions are true. That being so, replacement theology is not exactly 'unbalanced' as such. That would not be the best way to put it. It is simply *wrong in its entirety*. So, you could say that it is a very extreme form of imbalance.

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

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

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

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

- a) Israel and the Church are two *distinct and different* things
- b) The Church has *not* replaced Israel
- c) God has specific *plans* for Israel
- d) God has *different* plans for the Church
- e) God loves both Israel and the Church *equally*
- f) That God wants us to *love* Israel and the Jewish people and to bless, support and pray for them
- g) But He does *not* want us to become Jews or to act like Jews

- h) That a Jewish person can only be saved by believing in Jesus, just like those of us who are Gentiles. There is no other way to be saved. Therefore a Jewish person needs to be told the Gospel, and accept Jesus as Messiah, just as much as Gentiles do.
- i) Nevertheless, that a Jew who accepts Jesus as Messiah and is saved *continues to be a Jew*, whilst *also* being part of the Church
- j) *Israel* is very important to God
- k) The *Church* is also very important to God
- l) Therefore we are meant to be interested in, and supportive of, *both* Israel and the Church and to try to see both as God sees them

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

The main reason so many of us go astray, or get deceived, or fail to understand the Bible properly, is that we do not have "*the love of the truth*". That means that we do not love the truth *for its own sake*. Most of us do not pursue, or even want, the truth if it might give us bad news, or tell us things about ourselves that we don't like to hear.

We tend to like preachers and teachers who make us laugh, or make us feel we are doing well and that God is pleased with us. But we don't like those who say critical things, or rebuke us, or suggest that we need to change. Above all, many of us hate being told that we need to repent. We like our sins and don't want to give them up.

But the problem is that repentance is God's main message to us. That is why the word '*repent*' was the very first word spoken in public by both John the Baptist and Jesus. It was also virtually the first word that Peter said in his first public speech after the resurrection. Our problem is that we tend to reject the genuine prophets and teachers that God sends.

We prefer the false, smooth men who are not from God and who don't tell us uncomfortable things. Such men may be our pastors or leaders, or they may be famous preachers with international ministries. However, if all they are doing is giving a popular, comfortable, reassuring message, then you can be quite sure they are not saying the things that God wants them to say.

Consider the following passages which express how appalled God is by false teachers who misrepresent Him and preach things that are not true. It was a major problem in the past, and it is still a major problem today:

¹⁶Thus says the LORD of hosts: "Do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you, filling you with vain hopes; they speak visions of their own minds, not from the mouth of the LORD. ¹⁷They say continually to those who despise the word of the LORD, 'It shall be well with you'; and to everyone who stubbornly follows his own heart, they say, 'No evil shall come upon you.'"
Jeremiah 23:16-17 (RSV)

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

Isaiah 3:9-11 (RSV)

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

Jeremiah 5:31 (RSV)

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

Jeremiah 6:14 (RSV)

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

⁸ Therefore thus says the Lord God: 'Because you have uttered delusions and seen lies, therefore behold, I am against you, says the Lord GOD. ⁹ My hand will be against the prophets who see delusive visions and who give lying divinations; they shall not be in the council of my people, nor be enrolled in the register of the house of Israel, nor shall they enter the land of Israel; and you shall know that I am the Lord GOD. ¹⁰ Because, yea, because they have misled my people, saying, 'Peace,' when there is no peace; and because, when the people build a wall, these prophets daub it with whitewash;

Ezekiel 13:3-10 (RSV)

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

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

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

2 Thessalonians 2:9-12 (NASB)

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

Many of us come to the Bible with our minds closed and our beliefs already set in stone. Due to pride, laziness or complacency, many of us are not willing to be challenged or corrected by what we read. You may have got fixed ideas and opinions that you have formed for yourself, or picked up from others.

If so, then even if you do read the Bible, what it says will just wash over you and roll off again like water off a duck's back. That is not an unusual condition to be in. It is the norm, unless you have the love of the truth and are determined to seek the truth for its own sake, and to accept it, regardless of whether it confirms or contradicts your existing beliefs and practices.

It is rare for a person who holds belief X to read the Bible, and see that it actually says Y, and then to abandon belief X and adopt belief Y in its place. Very few people will do that. Most of us would just

maintain belief X, regardless of what the Bible says. Of those who do that, few are honest enough to admit it to themselves, or even to notice, that they are doing it.

Instead, the average person just unconsciously ignores, or edits out, anything which contradicts his existing beliefs and practices. It is as if he was wearing a pair of spectacles with special lenses that make him blind to anything which is new or challenging, or which suggests that he is wrong. So, it is rare even to notice that the Bible is disagreeing with you or with your denomination.

It is even rarer to be willing to *do* anything about that, i.e. to consciously alter your belief so as to get into line with what the Bible is saying. Doesn't that complacency or obstinacy seem odd to you? Isn't it absurd to prefer to maintain one's own current belief, even when the Bible shows it to be wrong? Surely only a fool would do that?

However, the problem is that a very high percentage of us are fools. At least we are still foolish in this respect, even if we are real Christians. Please refer to Book Five in this series for a detailed discussion of what a fool is, what fools do, and why fools are also to be found inside churches, not just in the world.

Take for example the mistaken belief that the Church has replaced Israel, as we referred to earlier. The only reason that any person would ever hold that view is that they have been *told* that by somebody else. They have either been taught that by their church or denomination or else they have read it in some book.

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

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

How then can a person arrive at the unbiblical belief that the Church has replaced Israel and is now "*spiritual Israel*"? Likewise, how can they form the thought that God no longer has any plan or purpose for the ethnic group that we see before us called the Jews?

More particularly, how can a person *continue in those views* even while reading their Bible, given that the Bible never says any of those things? On the contrary, it actually makes it abundantly clear that the Church is *not* Israel and that God *has not*, and *never will*, either replace or abandon Israel?

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

- a) To assume without question that any belief or view that you hold is obviously correct;
- b) Not even to notice anything in the Bible which contradicts you;
- c) If you do somehow notice a contradiction, then to assume that you cannot be understanding the verse correctly and that its real (or 'spiritual') meaning must actually be in line with the belief you currently hold or have been taught;
- d) To read every verse in the Bible through the lens or filter of your existing view or belief. That filter will modify whatever you read and supply the missing meaning until what you read matches up with what you already believe;

- e) If you do not have the love of the truth you will not allow the Bible verses that you read to be a lens or filter through which you test your existing views. That is what we should always do. The Bible should be the ruler by which we measure, check and correct all our existing beliefs and opinions, not the other way round.

So, we should never allow the views of leaders, our denominational traditions, the books we read, or the sermons we hear, to define the way that we understand the Bible. We must always test all of them against the Bible, not the Bible against them. We must not get our beliefs from any person or denomination. Whoever they may be, their teaching can never be the basis for anything.

No doctrine can ever be based upon, or flow from, the teachings of any person or group. If a thing is not in the Bible, then the best that can be said of it is that it is some man's opinion. That is all. It may be right or wrong, wise or unwise, helpful or unhelpful. But either way, it cannot be treated as if the Bible had said it.

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

Most of us are, to a large extent, imprisoned within our existing set of beliefs, opinions and assumptions. Moreover, there is no mechanism by which we can escape from them if they are wrong, because we don't realise they are wrong. The main reason for that is that most of us never stop and ask ourselves *whether* we really are correct.

We just assume that it is obvious that we are correct. Therefore we do not see any need to challenge or question ourselves, or our views, or the evidence they are based on. Doing so does not come naturally to most of us because our own 'rightness' is assumed as an absolute given.

Therefore, to develop this trait of questioning or cross-examining yourself, you have to *make* yourself do it, even against your own wishes, until it has become a settled habit. It does not come naturally. Even more importantly than that, we need to pray that God will step in and correct us wherever He sees that our beliefs, attitudes or assumptions are wrong.

You need to positively *ask* God to do this. Pray that He will open your eyes so that you can see your own errors and blind spots. You might imagine that that would be a common prayer, made by lots of people all the time. In fact, very few people ever ask God to do that for them.

You are not likely to make such a prayer until it has occurred to you that you *could* be wrong. But most of us do not consider that to be likely, or even possible. I remember meeting a young Mormon in a town centre in the South of England over ten years ago. I attempted to explain the real Gospel to him, as opposed to the distorted Mormon version of it.

His name was 'Elder' Neese, though he was only about 18. He was entirely deaf and blind to everything that I had to say and I concluded by asking him to at least consider the possibility of him being wrong or deceived. I said that at least one of us has to be mistaken. I therefore urged him to be willing to question himself and his beliefs.

But he would not. He saw no need. His eyes were completely closed, and so was his mind. However if he had prayed a sincere prayer to the real God, *not the false god of Mormonism*, then I believe the real God of the Bible would have very willingly opened his eyes for him.

He was an extreme case. But the same basic fault is found in most of us unless we have taken the trouble to develop the love of the truth. If we have that character quality we will be more interested in finding out *whether* we are right than in proving that we already are. I would be most grateful if you

could join with me in praying for that Mormon. He will be in his early thirties by now. He is still on my prayer list. Please pray that God would open his eyes to the real Gospel.

Another extremely important way of finding and eliminating your own blind spots is to ensure that you listen to and read a wide range of Christian teachers/authors. Do not just limit yourself to people who agree with you, or to people from your own church or denomination. That will keep you stunted and prevent you from discovering your own errors or the gaps in your knowledge. Take for example the three main views that people hold as to *when* Jesus Christ will return to the Earth, i.e. whether it will be:

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

These three broad viewpoints are known as:

- a) *Pre-millennialism* – the belief that Jesus will return *before* the Millennium and that He will then cause that period to begin and that *He* will make the world the way it should be;
- b) *Post-millennialism* – the belief that Jesus will only come back to the Earth *after* the Millennium is already over, such that it is up to the *Church* to make this world into a fit place for Him to return to;
- c) *Amillennialism* – the belief that there *won't be any* literal Millennium at all and that the period we are now living in is the period the Bible speaks of.

The first of these viewpoints, pre-millennialism, is the one that I believe in. And I would maintain that it is the view that anybody will naturally arrive at if they take the Bible literally. The other two views, post-millennialism and amillennialism, can only be arrived at as a result of you being *told* about them by somebody else or by reading something *other than* the Bible.

You could never get those beliefs from reading the Bible itself, because they are simply not in there. That then raises the question as to how a person who holds a post-millennial or amillennial viewpoint can manage to read through the Bible without repeatedly saying to himself "*Hang on a moment - this passage that I'm reading doesn't match what I believe*".

The person who holds those views never sees any need to ask himself those questions because:

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

I remember once going to a conference organized by a group of churches which held to the *post-millennial* view. They believed that this world is going to get better and better and that the Church is

going to get more and more victorious. They also believed that we Christians shall therefore take over the governments of the world at some point and hand a ‘Christianized’ world over to Jesus when He eventually returns.

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

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

He became quite agitated at all that and considered me to be ‘negative’ and ‘defeatist’. However, I wasn’t actually being either of those things. It is just that I expect that what will happen is what the Bible *says* will happen, not the things that I would *like* to happen.

I am just being realistic about what is coming. That man had read his Bible many times but had never seen any of these things in it. They simply did not fit in with what he hoped for, and had been taught to expect, and so they didn’t feel comfortable to him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

¹³After they finished speaking, James replied, "Brethren, listen to me. ¹⁴Simeon has related how God first visited the Gentiles, to take out of them a people for his name. ¹⁵And with this the words of the prophets agree, as it is written, ¹⁶'After this I will return, and I will rebuild the dwelling of David, which has fallen; I will rebuild its ruins, and I will set it up, ¹⁷that the rest of men may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who are called by my name, ¹⁸says the Lord, who has made these things known from of old.' ¹⁹Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, ²⁰but should write to them to abstain from the pollutions of idols and from unchastity and from what is strangled and from blood. ²¹For from early generations Moses has had in every city those who preach him, for he is read every sabbath in the synagogues." ²²Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They sent Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren,

Acts 15:1-22 (RSV)

As we saw in the passage above, the early church in Jerusalem had to deal with the contentious issue of whether circumcision was required for Gentile Christians. However, they did so by *discussing* it. And they did all of that openly, in front of the *whole* church, not just among the leaders.

They were not afraid of controversy when it related to important matters of doctrine and they did not hide from it. Moreover, note that in the end it was the whole church, not just the leaders, who *decided* what to do about that controversial issue.

The entire membership was consulted and they listened to speakers from all sides of the debate, but then the entire membership collectively made the decision. The church in Jerusalem in Acts chapter 15 would clearly have given short shrift to the Catholic church's idea of the 'Magisterium' and accepting "with docility" what leaders say.

The only place where I have ever come across genuinely open debate is in political parties. In over 30 years I have never yet seen any free, constructive debate take place in any church. If a discussion begins to get controversial, or even if it might do so, it is generally closed down before it goes any further.

Political parties feel able to tolerate open debate, and even actively welcome it, whereas most churches cannot cope with it at all. A large part of the reason for that is to be found in the unbiblical, hierarchical structure of most churches.

They have paid leaders, usually operating alone as a one-man leadership, rather than as part of a group of elders. Such men tend to see themselves as '*ruling over*' the people instead of being part of them and equal to them. Indeed, they have often been taught at Bible College or seminary to see things that way.

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

Men who go into full time ministry, especially if they have had theological training, are taught to see themselves as a '*clergy class*', appointed by God to rule over the lay people in the church. They don't state any of that formally as the Roman Catholic church does, with its explicit claims about the infallibility of its own teaching when it is given through the '*Magisterium*'.

Yet, in their own way, even the leaders of Protestant, Reformed, Evangelical, Pentecostal and Charismatic churches tend to develop the same 'clergy-minded' view. They gradually come to believe that they are appointed by God to rule over the people and that they receive special guidance from Him, whereas the lay people don't.

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

Therefore many of the **non-Catholic** churches are effectively operating their own '*mini-Magisterium*'. You could perhaps call it '*Magisterium lite*'. They would not go so far as to assert their authority overtly and explicitly, in the way as the Catholic church does.

However, for all intents and purposes, most of the non-Catholic denominations with which I have ever had any involvement could be just as authoritarian and '*Nicolaitan*' as any Catholic priest or bishop. Indeed, some have actually been worse.

Their self-aggrandizing titles, and the haughty claims that they make about themselves give them a high standard to live up to. But many of them know, deep down, that they are not what they are portrayed as being. Therefore, at least in private, many 'clergymen' lack confidence. It is common for them to feel a sense of insecurity and self-doubt and even 'imposter syndrome'.

Sadly, instead of addressing that in a healthy way by re-examining themselves and their own assumptions and beliefs, many of them deal with it by becoming controlling and clamping down on any perceived threat. Their insecurity means that they can't cope with their mistakes, or the gaps in their knowledge, being pointed out or challenged.

Unfortunately, that means that their errors tend to persist, because there is no constructive way for anybody to address them. They may not expressly forbid such correction, in so many words. However, they may as well do so, because if you do ever try to challenge or correct them you will quickly discover that they will not tolerate it, or you.

For example, I once heard a full time, paid church leader preaching a sermon and in it he made certain references to the Church having replaced Israel. He said this in front of that whole church which, by virtue of unbiblical tradition, has no right of reply. A congregation cannot even ask questions while a preacher is speaking.

By contrast, when Jesus taught His disciples, or even large crowds, people regularly questioned Him and He welcomed that. Even today, in Jewish synagogues, the people are free to raise questions and to

‘answer back’ to what the preacher is saying. That is how we should operate, but very few churches do.

At any rate, after the service I went up to him privately, *one to one*, and said, very politely, that I was concerned by what he had said about the Church having replaced Israel etc. I asked him if he could point to anything in the Bible that would justify his assertion.

I also said that as far as I could see, the Bible never says that, even indirectly, whereas it does, repeatedly, say the direct opposite and in express words, not just by indirect inferences. He was immediately uncomfortable and reluctant to discuss it. He just made some vague and unsubstantiated remarks.

For example, he said that “*the 12 apostles were appointed by Jesus to replace the 12 tribes of Israel.*” I then asked him to show me anything from the Bible which says that the apostles were appointed for that purpose. But he couldn’t, or at least he didn’t. It was actually just a personal opinion being presented as if it was a fact.

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

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

Alternatively, it may have been that he didn’t actually *care* whether he was right or wrong and was determined to maintain his opinion regardless. Whatever his precise motives and reasons may have been, the operative point is that he was *not willing* to engage in any debate, however politely it might be conducted.

Yet, it was about a subject which he, not I, had raised. Indeed, he had just preached a sermon on it. Therefore one would presume that he would have been keenly interested in the issue and that he was already thoroughly well informed about it and thus ready to discuss it with anyone.

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

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

I said “*Surely, if you believe me to be wrong you’ll want to correct me, for my sake, so as to help me*”. But they didn’t want to. They actually became irritable and scornful when I tried to offer them evidence to show that Jesus is the Son of God and thus equal to God. One of them dismissed that claim out of hand and replied, as he backed away, “*It’s just ridiculous*”.

However, he had nothing constructive to say about whether or not Jesus is God. Actually, in their case, the main reason why they didn’t want to debate with me was that Jehovah’s witnesses do not come to

your door to help *you*, but to help *themselves*. Theirs is a religion of works which keeps them on a treadmill of knocking on doors so as to earn credit with God.

So, it was all being done for their own benefit, not mine. They weren't concerned for my salvation, but only for their own. They had exactly the opposite attitude to that which we, as Christians, are meant to have when we share the real Gospel. We are to do it for the other person, not for ourselves.

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

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

2 Timothy 3:16-17 (RSV)

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

I have argued that we need to be open to be challenged, questioned, corrected and taught new things. But where is the boundary between, on the one hand, being *closed-minded* and impervious to any new fact or idea and, on the other hand, being so naïve and impressionable as to be "*tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine*"?

We need to avoid both of these wrong positions, so that we are open enough to learn new things and yet wary enough to spot false teaching:

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

Ephesians 4:11-16 (RSV)

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

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

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

- a) It is in the Bible (or at least consistent with what is in the Bible) and we are interpreting it in the right way, according to its plain, literal meaning, unless it is clearly appropriate to do otherwise;

- b) We ensure that we are reading it in accordance with the context of the surrounding verses and chapters;
- c) We have checked to rule out the possibility that its meaning is qualified or made clearer by any other passage anywhere else in the Bible. In other words, the complete context for any verse is the whole of the rest of the Bible. Therefore we need to interpret any verse in the light of every other book of the Bible.

CHAPTER 11

THE STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF VARIOUS VERSIONS OF THE BIBLE AND RECOMMENDED TRANSLATIONS

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

Nehemiah 8:8 (NASB)

Choosing the right Bible translations to use

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

The question for us, therefore, is which of these should we choose, and why? We therefore need to examine the different ways in which people translate the Bible and consider the advantages and disadvantages of each approach. We could briefly summarize the two main approaches as follows:

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

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

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

Translators who take this approach aim to stay as close as they can to the exact words used in the original Hebrew or Greek text of the Bible. They try to avoid the temptation to add in their own thoughts, ideas and preferences. They achieve all this by trying, as far as they can, to translate the text word for word.

By so doing they aim to preserve and convey the same meaning, structure, and even word order, as was used in the original. The principle behind this approach is that the more literal the translation is, the less likely it is to corrupt or obscure the intended meaning of the prophet or apostle who wrote it.

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

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

To change such a detail, whether for the purpose of being ‘gender-inclusive’, or to make it easier to read, runs the risk of altering the meaning. It can remove some nuance, or obscure a fine distinction, from which a careful student of the Bible could have drawn a valid inference.

A lot of truth is gained indirectly by looking closely at such things as tense or gender etc. Therefore it really matters to get them exactly right and not to throw away even the smallest details, however worthy one’s motives might be for altering it.

For one thing, we simply do not have the right or the authority to change God’s Word, even if our aim is to ‘help’ people by simplifying it. We have even less justification if our aim is to make the Bible less likely to offend them, e.g. by removing references to ‘man’ or ‘men’ and putting ‘person’ or ‘people’ instead.

It is possible that in some instances changes of that sort may not do any harm. However, in some situations they could, and we have no right to take any chances about that. Imagine you were given the job of translating the battle orders of Field Marshal Montgomery from English into French.

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

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

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

I don’t have much experience of any foreign language other than French, but even in translating into or out of French, there are complications which mean that sometimes you just cannot use an exact or literal translation. It could even produce nonsense or error if you tried to do so. At the least, it could be cumbersome and may sound odd.

For example if you wanted to translate “*La jupe de ma tante*” from French into English it would look odd if you said “*The skirt of my Aunt*”. It would be clumsy and even incorrect because the structure and word order of French is irreconcilably different from English.

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

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

Nevertheless, having said all that, there are many times where, however odd the translation may sound in English, it is still helpful to be able to see exactly what the original language of the Bible said. Where

the meaning of the verse is complex, or controversial, then a translation which seeks to reproduce it exactly can be very helpful, and even essential.

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

We have seen some of the difficulties that arise when trying to translate literally, word for word. The alternative approach, known as *dynamic equivalency*, attempts to address those difficulties, by choosing not to use the exact words, word order, tenses or genders etc of the original Hebrew or Greek.

Instead, the translators attempt to convey to the reader the overall thoughts and ideas of the original text, even if not expressed in the exact words or structure of the original language. Dynamic equivalence is not my preferred option, because of the dangers it creates.

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

For such people a translation based on dynamic equivalency can be helpful and can make the Bible more accessible. It can even make some of the meaning clearer, by putting thoughts into less complex words or sentences, which amplify the meaning and even explain it.

This is especially so where the original text contains figures of speech, or slang which make sense in Hebrew or Greek, but not when translated word for word. So, for example, if the original Greek text said “*if your eye is good*” it could be helpful for many people if the translation said instead “*if you are generous*”. As we saw in chapter two, that is what that Jewish slang expression means.

So that is what Jesus actually *meant* when He said it. Therefore, to render His expression in those quite different words in English would convey His real meaning, albeit not in His exact *original words*. That's because we have no equivalent phrase in English. To ‘*have a good eye*’ is a slang expression which simply does not exist in English. Thus it would make no sense to us if it was translated literally, without any explanation.

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

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

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

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

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

Although God inspired the original writers of the books of the Bible, He has not necessarily inspired those who do the translating. Sometimes He very obviously hasn't. Therefore, it is up to you to make sure you read the most reliable and accurate translation available.

They differ greatly in their accuracy and in their faithfulness to the original text. Moreover, they vary in accuracy, even within the one translation, because even the best translators make errors and have their '*off days*'.

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

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

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

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

1) The New American Standard Bible (NASB) (1995)

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

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

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

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

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

4) The New King James Version (NKJV) (1982)

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

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

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

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

- a) It is an '*ecumenical*' translation. By that they mean that it was produced by a committee created from scholars from the Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox branches of the church. They may see that as an advantage. However, anybody who loves the truth and wants to see the Bible translated with truth as the main aim, rather than fudge and consensus, will recoil from the idea of an ecumenical Bible, or an ecumenical anything;
- b) It inserts *gender-inclusive* language in many of the verses where the male gender is referred to in the original Hebrew or Greek text. There is no valid reason for doing that. It is taking liberties with the text.

Moreover, they also produce a version of the NRSV (called the NRSV common Bible) which contains the *Apocrypha* and the *Deuterocanonical books* (see below). That fact alone ought to make us steer clear of this translation, particularly as they do nothing to draw attention to the fact that these extra books are *not* Scripture.

On the contrary they give it the title '*NRSV Common Bible*', which strongly implies that all of those extra books are Scripture, when, in fact, they are not. They are just ordinary, man-made works of literature and are not divinely inspired. Their inclusion is therefore sure to mislead some people.

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

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

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

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

The NIV was the result of a major project in the 1970s to translate the Bible into modern English, for both British and American readers. This version aims to steer a middle path between formal, literal, word for word translation and dynamic equivalency.

Thus there is an element of paraphrasing in the NIV, though far less than in some of the versions listed below, which veer heavily towards that. The NIV is easier to read than the six versions listed above, but some of the accuracy is lost. Nonetheless, it is still a reasonably good translation, on the whole.

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

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

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

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

This is a variation of the NIV which was completed in 2005. Like the NIV, it claims to steer a middle path between literal, word for word translation and dynamic equivalency. Even so, it is claimed that 70% of the changes that have been made move it further in the direction of literal word for word translation, rather than dynamic equivalence. So that would be an improvement, at least in that regard.

It also uses the Hebrew word 'Messiah' instead of Christ. That is a helpful change, since that Hebrew title is less misunderstood than the Greek equivalent, 'Christ'. However, one of the weaknesses (in my view) of the TNIV is that it also uses gender-inclusive language, i.e. avoiding masculine words and using neutral "inclusive" words instead. That suggests that both males or females are being referred to, which may not be the case.

That may appeal to some, but it brings with it the serious risk of misrepresenting what God is saying. It's true that sometimes when God says "man" He means mankind, i.e. both sexes. But sometimes He doesn't. Sometimes He is intentionally referring only to men. Therefore to tamper with the wording, for such politically correct reasons, could easily mislead the reader.

The Bible versions in this section may sometimes be easier to read. Indeed, some of them assume that you only have a primary school reading age. However, they are not as accurate as the ones listed 1-7 above. In fact, each of these versions contain a significant amount of very loose paraphrasing.

That means that words and phrases are used which do not actually appear in the original Hebrew or Greek at all. That is the most dangerous feature of all, i.e. *adding* to what the Bible says. This is done because it reflects what the translators feel is the underlying meaning of the original words or phrases used.

At times that can be helpful, and sometimes essential, because Hebrew and Greek are both very different from English and words sometimes have to be inserted to make the sentence make sense. However, it is also dangerous at times.

You can end up missing the precise meaning of some of those words or phrases that were in the original text. It can change the meaning of a whole passage if fine details are added, omitted or altered for the sake of simplicity. That is too high a price to pay just to make the Bible easier to read.

9) The Good News Bible (1966 and 1979)

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

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

Another concern about the GNB is that, since 1979, it has included the Apocrypha and the Deuterocanonical books, which are not part of the Bible. (These are ancient Jewish books which are of historical interest. But they were not inspired by God and are not ‘Scripture’.)

These books were belatedly inserted into the Bible by the Roman Catholic Church in the sixteenth century, as a reaction to the Reformation. But they do not belong in the Bible at all, because they are *not Scripture*. They are not inspired. Thus they contaminate rather than enhance the Bible. Yet they are assumed by many readers to be equal to Scripture, which they aren’t.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

13) God’s Word Translation (GW) (1995)

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

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

This version is also known as the “*Bible for Today’s Family*”. Although it is a new translation in its own right, not just a revision, it is very similar to the Good News Bible (GNB). And it is aimed at an even lower reading age. It veers strongly towards dynamic equivalence and paraphrasing.

It takes further liberties by adding words by way of explanation which are not in the original text. It is one thing to do that in marginal notes, which are plainly the commentator’s view. But it is quite another thing to do it within the text of the Bible itself. That is very dangerous.

Nobody has the right to add words to the Bible, unless they are very clearly implied and are essential to give the correct meaning. However, if the translators are doing it because they wish to give added

explanation, they should limit themselves strictly to footnotes or marginal notes, not within the text itself.

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

This is actually a Roman Catholic Bible. It was produced as a result of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). Although it claims to aim for formal equivalence, i.e. word for word translation, it actually reflects the views and practices of the Roman Catholic Church. It also contains the Apocrypha and the Deuterocanonical books which are not Scripture (see above).

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

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

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

17) The Jerusalem Bible (JB)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

That elongated phrase may well be useful and enlightening. However, it travels far beyond what the actual words of the Bible say. In a sense it is almost a commentary on those words rather than a translation of them. That is fair enough if you *know* that that is what you are getting. In that case, you

may well find it useful. However, it is a danger if you wrongly think that it is a translation of the words actually contained in the Bible.

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

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

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

This book is popular at the moment, but it is *not* an accurate translation of the Bible. I would recommend that you avoid it. Strangely, even the author, Eugene Peterson, expressed his own unease at the idea of The Message being read out in churches as if it was a reading of God's Word. He once said in an interview in Christianity Today:

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

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

You may have heard of a group of people who argue that it is only the King James version of the Bible which can be relied on, and that all other versions are inadequate, or even false. This school of thought is known as the “*King James only*” movement. There are actually many different strands of opinion within that broad group. Some are more extreme than others.

Some even go so far as say that God inspired the King James translators, such that the King James translation itself is the ‘real’ Bible, rather than the original Hebrew and Greek texts. That view is plainly ridiculous. Other advocates of the King James Version are more moderate.

They just feel that the scholarship, faithfulness and sincerity of the KJV translators were higher than anything we have seen since. That may well be true, as the KJV, which closely follows the earlier translation made by William Tyndale, is a superb translation. However, just like all the others, it is not perfect, and it would be foolish to suggest otherwise.

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

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

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

Always read every verse of the Bible in its own context. Find out who is speaking, who is being spoken to, and also who, or what, is being spoken about, and why. It may, or may not, apply to you.

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

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

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

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

Jeremiah 1:19 (RSV)

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

However, having said that, it is entirely possible that God could speak to you individually through that verse by causing it to *come alive* for you personally. The instant you read it you might know in your spirit that God has just spoken to you through it. He does that occasionally, though it is the exception, not the rule.

Nevertheless, where it happens, it is valid. It is definitely one of the many ways that God can speak to us and it would be wrong to deny that. I have myself, on many occasions, had a verse or passage come alive to me, or *leap out* at me, such that I know that God has just spoken *to me* through it, even though, in the Bible, it is quite clearly only promised or said to the person to whom God was speaking.

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

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

As a general rule, in the absence of a clear prompting from God, you should assume, the vast majority of the time, that passages such as the one quoted above where God spoke to Jeremiah, are a message

from God to Jeremiah alone. They are not a message to you personally, except insofar as they are relevant to us all in a general, broad sense.

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

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

It would be very wrong for you to read those verses containing those instructions, which were validly given to the Jewish people, and to assume that God is saying the same thing to you about your enemies, or the people who stand in your way. God did want the Israelites to destroy the Canaanites because they were very wicked and He wanted to judge them. They were also God's enemies and they stood in the way of God's plans for the nation and land of Israel.

However, those points are not true of your enemies or of the people who get in your way at work. Thus to apply such verses to yourself, as if they had been personally written to you, and as if they authorized you to fight and destroy your own personal enemies, would be a grave error. This is not just an academic point. Many people have actually made this very error with these very passages. For example they were used by the Boers in South Africa to justify seizing the land of indigenous black people, as if God had told them to do it.

They are not alone. The same has been done by the British as the Empire was being built and by the Americans as the native Americans were moved off their land and/or wiped out. The mistake has also been made by private individuals who have imagined that those instructions given to Israel applied to them in their own private conflicts and rivalries.

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

Be very careful about seeing personal messages to you in the Bible. It can sometimes occur, but is not the norm.

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

However, you must always put at the centre whoever it is that the passage is speaking to, or about, not yourself. Then ask yourself who is speaking - is it God Himself, or a person on His behalf? Or is it just someone speaking his own opinions, of which God may not necessarily approve?

A good example of this is the book of Job, where a series of different people speak, including God, Satan, Job, Job's wife and Job's four friends. The point is that they, and the statements they make, are

not all equal in accuracy or value. Therefore what they each say is not meant to be treated as being what *God* is saying.

In fact, God specifically tells us in the book of Job that what Job's friends say, which takes up many chapters of the book, does *not* represent God's view. In short, what each of them said was wrong and God wants you to realise that what they said was wrong:

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

Job 42: 7 (RSV)

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

Therefore we would be rather foolish if we relied upon the advice given, and the opinions expressed, by Job's friends. So, we must be very careful indeed about gaining specific *individual guidance* for our personal day to day decisions from reading the Bible.

There is a time and a place for doing that. It can sometimes be valid, but it can also be very invalid, depending on how you go about it. What you *can* validly do is see a passage which sets out a *general principle* and then apply that general principle to yourself. That is legitimate, because you are going *from the general to the particular*.

So if you see a passage which indicates that it is wrong to lie or steal or worry or fear or whatever else, then you can validly say:

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

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

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

You may think that to be an unrealistic and far-fetched example, but there have probably been a great many people who have wrongly thought that God was telling them to build a church building simply because they wrongly applied to themselves an instruction that God gave only to Solomon. Thus we must be very careful indeed before we take specific guidance about our own lives from particular statements made to individuals or groups in the Bible.

The only wise and appropriate way in which it could be done would be where it comes by way of additional confirmation. But that would need to be confirming something which already makes sense and is already evidently God's will for other valid reasons and based on other solid evidence.

A Bible passage should not be relied upon for specific personal guidance in your own individual situation where the passage itself is your *only* reason or basis for thinking that God wants you to do a

particular thing or make a specific decision. The more important or life-changing the step or decision is, the more you would need to see other factors or additional evidence to prove that it is God's will, and the less you would want to rely on a given passage as your only authority for taking a step.

In short, always remember that although, in the broadest sense, you are definitely *one of the people for whom* the Bible was written, that does not mean that it was written *to or about you* in particular. To assume that it was would be foolishly egocentric and would lead you into many errors and deceptions.

Therefore, to summarize, we can say that with any passage that we read we should ask ourselves the following questions, amongst others:

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

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

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

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

APPENDIX ONE

This appendix sets out a large number of verses from the New Testament which use the words *fulfil* or *fulfilled*. Each of these passages refer to events or situations as being the fulfilment of Bible prophecies made in the Old Testament. These were too numerous to place within any of the chapters, but they demonstrate that the concept of prophecies being *literally* fulfilled is the norm within the Bible. That being so, I would contend that we can confidently expect that all those prophecies which are, as yet, unfulfilled will be equally literally fulfilled in the future, just as these have been.

You will note that in each of these cases the prophecy is fulfilled in accordance with the literal, ordinary, plain meaning of the words used. There is no trace of allegory or symbolism in any of these passages. The events prophesied all actually happened, just as stated. Please now examine them for yourself and see whether you agree. For your convenience, I have altered the verses so that the words *fulfil* or *fulfilled* are in capitals.

²¹ *she will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."*

²² *All this took place to FULFIL what the Lord had spoken by the prophet:*

²³ *"Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and his name shall be called Emman'u-el"*

(which means, God with us).

Matthew 1:21-23 (RSV)

¹³ *Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there till I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." ¹⁴ And he rose and took the child and his mother by night, and departed to Egypt, ¹⁵ and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to FULFIL what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, "Out of Egypt have I called my son."*

Matthew 2:13-15 (RSV)

¹⁶ *Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, was in a furious rage, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time which he had ascertained from the wise men. ¹⁷ Then was FULFILLED what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah:*

¹⁸ *"A voice was heard in Ramah,
wailing and loud lamentation,
Rachel weeping for her children;
she refused to be consoled,
because they were no more."*

Matthew 2:16-18 (RSV)

And he went and dwelt in a city called Nazareth, that what was spoken by the prophets might be FULFILLED, "He shall be called a Nazarene."

Matthew 2:23 (RSV)

¹² *Now when he heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew into Galilee; ¹³ and leaving Nazareth he went and dwelt in Caper'na-um by the sea, in the territory of Zeb'ulun and Naph'tali, ¹⁴ that what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be FULFILLED:*

¹⁵ *"The land of Zeb'ulun and the land of Naph'tali,
toward the sea, across the Jordan,
Galilee of the Gentiles—*

¹⁶ *the people who sat in darkness
have seen a great light,
and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death*

light has dawned.”

Matthew 4:12-16 (RSV)

¹⁷ “Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to FULFIL them. ¹⁸ For truly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished.

Matthew 5:17-18 (RSV)

¹⁶ That evening they brought to him many who were possessed with demons; and he cast out the spirits with a word, and healed all who were sick. ¹⁷ This was to FULFIL what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah, “He took our infirmities and bore our diseases.”

Matthew 8:16-17 (RSV)

¹³ This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. ¹⁴ With them indeed is FULFILLED the prophecy of Isaiah which says:

‘You shall indeed hear but never understand,
and you shall indeed see but never perceive.

¹⁵ For this people’s heart has grown dull,
and their ears are heavy of hearing,
and their eyes they have closed,
lest they should perceive with their eyes,
and hear with their ears,
and understand with their heart,
and turn for me to heal them.’

Matthew 13:13-15 (RSV)

³⁴ All this Jesus said to the crowds in parables; indeed he said nothing to them without a parable. ³⁵ This was to FULFIL what was spoken by the prophet:

“I will open my mouth in parables,
I will utter what has been hidden since the foundation of the world.”

Matthew 13:34-35 (RSV)

¹ And when they drew near to Jerusalem and came to Beth'phage, to the Mount of Olives, then Jesus sent two disciples, ² saying to them, “Go into the village opposite you, and immediately you will find an ass tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. ³ If any one says anything to you, you shall say, ‘The Lord has need of them,’ and he will send them immediately.” ⁴ This took place to FULFIL what was spoken by the prophet, saying,

⁵ “Tell the daughter of Zion,
Behold, your king is coming to you,
humble, and mounted on an ass,
and on a colt, the foal of an ass.”

⁶ The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; ⁷ they brought the ass and the colt, and put their garments on them, and he sat thereon.

Matthew 21:1-7 (RSV)

⁵³ Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? ⁵⁴ But how then should the scriptures be fulfilled, that it must be so? ⁵⁵ At that hour Jesus said to the crowds, “Have you come out as against a robber, with swords and clubs to capture me? Day after day I sat in the temple teaching, and you did not seize me. ⁵⁶ But all this has taken place, that the scriptures of the prophets might be FULFILLED.” Then all the disciples forsook him and fled.

Matthew 26:53-36 (RSV)

⁶ But the chief priests, taking the pieces of silver, said, "It is not lawful to put them into the treasury, since they are blood money."⁷ So they took counsel, and bought with them the potter's field, to bury strangers in.⁸ Therefore that field has been called the Field of Blood to this day.⁹ Then was FULFILLED what had been spoken by the prophet Jeremiah, saying, "And they took the thirty pieces of silver, the price of him on whom a price had been set by some of the sons of Israel,¹⁰ and they gave them for the potter's field, as the Lord directed me."

Matthew 27:6-10 (RSV)

²⁷ And with him they crucified two robbers, one on his right and one on his left.²⁸ and the scripture was FULFILLED which says, "He was reckoned with the transgressors."

Mark 15:27-28 (RSV)

¹⁶ And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up; and he went to the synagogue, as his custom was, on the sabbath day. And he stood up to read;¹⁷ and there was given to him the book of the prophet Isaiah. He opened the book and found the place where it was written,

¹⁸ "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovering of sight to the blind,

to set at liberty those who are oppressed,

¹⁹ to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord."

²⁰ And he closed the book, and gave it back to the attendant, and sat down; and the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him.²¹ And he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been FULFILLED in your hearing."

Luke 4:16-21 (RSV)

⁴⁴ Then he said to them, "These are my words which I spoke to you, while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms must be FULFILLED."⁴⁵ Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures,

Luke 24:44-45 (RSV)

³⁷ Though he had done so many signs before them, yet they did not believe in him;³⁸ it was that the word spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be FULFILLED:

"Lord, who has believed our report,
and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?"

³⁹ Therefore they could not believe. For Isaiah again said,

⁴⁰ "He has blinded their eyes and hardened their heart,
lest they should see with their eyes and perceive with their heart,
and turn for me to heal them."

John 12:37-40 (RSV)

I am not speaking of you all; I know whom I have chosen; it is that the scripture may be FULFILLED, 'He who ate my bread has lifted his heel against me.'

John 13:18 (RSV)

²⁴ If I had not done among them the works which no one else did, they would not have sin; but now they have seen and hated both me and my Father.²⁵ It is to FULFIL the word that is written in their law, 'They hated me without a cause.'

John 15:24-25 (RSV)

While I was with them, I kept them in thy name, which thou hast given me; I have guarded them, and none of them is lost but the son of perdition, that the scripture might be FULFILLED.

John 17:12 (RSV)

⁷ Again he asked them, "Whom do you seek?" And they said, "Jesus of Nazareth." ⁸ Jesus answered, "I told you that I am he; so, if you seek me, let these men go." ⁹ This was to FULFIL the word which he had spoken, "Of those whom thou gavest me I lost not one."

John 18:7-9 (RSV)

³¹ Pilate said to them, "Take him yourselves and judge him by your own law." The Jews said to him, "It is not lawful for us to put any man to death." ³² This was to FULFIL the word which Jesus had spoken to show by what death he was to die.

John 18:31-32 (RSV)

²³ When the soldiers had crucified Jesus they took his garments and made four parts, one for each soldier; also his tunic. But the tunic was without seam, woven from top to bottom; ²⁴ so they said to one another, "Let us not tear it, but cast lots for it to see whose it shall be." This was to FULFIL the scripture,

*"They parted my garments among them,
and for my clothing they cast lots."*

John 19:23-24 (RSV)

²⁸ After this Jesus, knowing that all was now finished, said (to FULFIL the scripture), "I thirst." ²⁹ A bowl full of vinegar stood there; so they put a sponge full of the vinegar on hyssop and held it to his mouth. ³⁰ When Jesus had received the vinegar, he said, "It is finished"; and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

John 19:28-30 (RSV)

³⁶ For these things took place that the scripture might be FULFILLED, "Not a bone of him shall be broken." ³⁷ And again another scripture says, "They shall look on him whom they have pierced."

John 19:36-37 (RSV)

¹⁶ "Brethren, the scripture had to be FULFILLED, which the Holy Spirit spoke beforehand by the mouth of David, concerning Judas who was guide to those who arrested Jesus. ¹⁷ For he was numbered among us, and was allotted his share in this ministry.

Acts 1:16-17 (RSV)

But what God foretold by the mouth of all the prophets, that his Christ should suffer, he thus FULFILLED.

Acts 3:18 (RSV)

For those who live in Jerusalem and their rulers, because they did not recognize him nor understand the utterances of the prophets which are read every sabbath, FULFILLED these by condemning him.

Acts 13:27 (RSV)

"for God has put it into their hearts to carry out his purpose by being of one mind and giving over their royal power to the beast, until the words of God shall be FULFILLED".

Revelation 17:17 (RSV)

APPENDIX TWO

I have set out in this appendix a long series of possible verse or passages that you might wish to print off onto card and then cut up and use for Scripture memory. I have organized them into different broad categories. So, some will be useful for evangelism and will help you to reply appropriately when people ask questions or raise arguments about the gospel. Others are of more general application and have to do with various aspects of our lives as disciples.

The final section is intended to be used when you are praying so that you can confess, declare and proclaim God's Word out loud. That will help you enormously because that is how we claim, or appropriate, the truth of God's Word for ourselves. Then we see His promises and statements become a practical reality in our own lives. That is what *confession* is all about. It means *for you to say the same as God says* about any given issue.

It is by saying the same as God says, i.e. by declaring and proclaiming, that God's Word becomes real to us. We are also letting God, the angels, the demons, ourselves and anybody else who is listening, know what we believe and where we stand. It is so important to say out loud what we believe and which of God's promises we are relying on at a particular time. At times of difficulty such declarations need to be made with some boldness and even aggression.

There are times when all the evidence, and all of our circumstances, suggest that our position is hopeless and that we should give up. It is precisely at such times that we most need to cling on to God's promises and assert them, and our faith in Him to keep them. By so doing we can alter the whole spiritual climate surrounding us and see dramatic changes occur in our circumstances.

But even if no change comes, or if it does not come immediately, we still need to maintain our positive, confident confession. If nothing else, we need to let the demons know where we stand and that we will not abandon our hope or our confidence in God and His Word. Please see other books, later in this series, for a much fuller discussion of how confession/proclamation/declaration work and how to go about it in practice.

For those who are reading this in the hard copy of the book, the cards can be obtained by going to the online version of the book. That can be found on our website and is free to download. The website is www.realchristianity.com

Verses dealing with our sin and God's judgment – the “*bad news*”

<p>Ecclesiastes 7:20</p> <p>Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Ecclesiastes 7:20</p>	<p>Genesis 3:17-19</p> <p>And to Adam he said, “Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, ‘You shall not eat of it,’ cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; ¹⁸ thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. ¹⁹ By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Genesis 3:17-19</p>
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<p>Romans 3:23</p> <p>for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Romans 3:23</p>	<p>Isaiah 59:2</p> <p>but your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Isaiah 59:2</p>
<p>Romans 6:23</p> <p>For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Romans 6:23</p>	<p>Hebrews 9:27</p> <p>And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment,</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Hebrews 9:27</p>
<p>Hebrews 10:30-31</p> <p>³⁰ For we know him who said, “Vengeance is mine; I will repay.” And again, “The Lord will judge his people.” ³¹ It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Hebrews 10:30-31</p>	<p>2 Thessalonians 1:8-9</p> <p>⁸ in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. ⁹ They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might,</p> <p style="text-align: right;">2 Thessalonians 1:8-9</p>
<p>Ezekiel 18:4</p> <p>Behold, all souls are mine; the soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is mine: the soul who sins shall die.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Ezekiel 18:4</p>	<p>Ecclesiastes 12:14</p> <p>For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Ecclesiastes 12:14</p>
<p>Matthew 13:49-50</p> <p>⁴⁹ So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous ⁵⁰ and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Matthew 13:49-50</p>	<p>Isaiah 26:21</p> <p>For behold, the Lord is coming out from his place to punish the inhabitants of the earth for their iniquity, and the earth will disclose the blood shed on it, and will no more cover its slain.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Isaiah 26:21</p>

<p>Exodus 32:33</p> <p>But the Lord said to Moses, “Whoever has sinned against me, I will blot out of my book.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Exodus 32:33</p>	<p>Revelation 20:12-13</p> <p>¹² And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done. ¹³ And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Revelation 20:12-13</p>
<p>2 Peter 3:7</p> <p>But by the same word the heavens and earth that now exist are stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">2 Peter 3:7</p>	<p>Acts 17:30-31</p> <p>³⁰ The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, ³¹ because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Acts 17:30-31</p>

Verses dealing with how we can be saved – the “good news”

<p>Romans 5:8</p> <p>but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Romans 5:8</p>	<p>1 Peter 3:18</p> <p>For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit,</p> <p style="text-align: right;">1 Peter 3:18</p>
<p>1 Peter 2:24</p> <p>He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">1 Peter 2:24</p>	<p>1 Corinthians 15:3</p> <p>For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures</p> <p style="text-align: right;">1 Corinthians 15:3</p>

<p>Ephesians 2:8-9</p> <p>⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Ephesians 2:8-9</p>	<p>Titus 3:5</p> <p>he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit,</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Titus 3:5</p>
<p>Galations 2:16</p> <p>yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Galations 2:16</p>	<p>2 Corinthians 5:21</p> <p>For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">2 Corinthians 5:21</p>
<p>Acts 3:19</p> <p>Repent therefore, and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Acts 3:19</p>	<p>John 11:15</p> <p>Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live</p> <p style="text-align: right;">John 11:15</p>
<p>John 5:24</p> <p>Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">John 5:24</p>	<p>Hebrews 11:6</p> <p>And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Hebrews 11:6</p>
<p>1 John 5:11-13</p> <p>¹¹ And this is the testimony, that God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. ¹² Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life. ¹³ I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">1 John 5:11-13</p>	<p>Numbers 23:19</p> <p>God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it?</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Numbers 23:19</p>

<p>1 John 1:9</p> <p>If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">1 John 1:9</p>	<p>Romans 5:1-2</p> <p>Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. ² Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Romans 5:1-2</p>
<p>Romans 5:9</p> <p>Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Romans 5:9</p>	<p>Acts 10:42-43</p> <p>⁴² And he commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead. ⁴³ To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Acts 10:42-43</p>

Verses showing there is only one God and that Jesus is the only way to salvation

<p>John 14:6</p> <p>Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">John 14:6</p>	<p>Acts 4:12</p> <p>And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Acts 4:12</p>
<p>Isaiah 45:5-6</p> <p>⁵ I am the Lord, and there is no other, besides me there is no God; I equip you, though you do not know me, ⁶ that people may know, from the rising of the sun and from the west, that there is none besides me; I am the Lord, and there is no other.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Isaiah 45:5-6</p>	<p>John 3:16-18</p> <p>¹⁶ “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. ¹⁸ Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">John 3:16-18</p>

<p>John 1:12</p> <p>But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God,</p> <p style="text-align: right;">John 1:12</p>	<p>Matthew 10:32-33</p> <p>³² So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven, ³³ but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Matthew 10:32-33</p>
<p>Matthew 7:13-14</p> <p>¹³ “Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. ¹⁴ For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Matthew 7:13-14</p>	<p>Hebrews 9:22</p> <p>Indeed, under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Hebrews 9:22</p>
<p>Hebrews 10:10-12</p> <p>¹⁰ And by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. ¹¹ And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. ¹² But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Hebrews 10:10-12</p>	<p>Hebrews 5:9</p> <p>And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Hebrews 5:9</p>
<p>1 Timothy 1:15</p> <p>The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">1 Timothy 1:15</p>	<p>John 8:24</p> <p>I told you that you would die in your sins, for unless you believe that I am he you will die in your sins.”</p> <p style="text-align: right;">John 8:24</p>
<p>1 Timothy 2:5-6</p> <p>⁵ For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, ⁶ who gave himself as a ransom for all, which is the testimony given at the proper time.</p> <p>1 Timothy 2:5-6</p>	<p>Isaiah 43:11</p> <p>I, I am the Lord, and besides me there is no savior.</p> <p>Isaiah 43:11</p>

<p>Isaiah 45:22</p> <p>“Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Isaiah 45:22</p>	<p>John 10:9</p> <p>I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">John 10:9</p>
<p>1 Corinthians 3:11</p> <p>For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">1 Corinthians 3:11</p>	<p>Acts 10:42-43</p> <p>⁴² And he commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead. ⁴³ To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Acts 10:42-43</p>

Verses concerning our lives as disciples and how we now need to live and think

<p>Luke 14:33</p> <p>So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Luke 14:33</p>	<p>Micah 6:8</p> <p>He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Micah 6:8</p>
<p>Jeremiah 33:3</p> <p>Call to me and I will answer you, and will tell you great and hidden things that you have not known.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Jeremiah 33:3</p>	<p>Isaiah 41:10</p> <p>¹⁰ fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Isaiah 41:10</p>

<p>Joshua 1:8</p> <p>This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Joshua 1:8</p>	<p>Psalm 1:1-2</p> <p>¹ Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers;</p> <p>² but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Psalm 1:1-2</p>
<p>Psalm 27:1</p> <p>The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?</p> <p>The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Psalm 27:1</p>	<p>Proverbs 3:9-10</p> <p>⁹ Honor the Lord with your wealth and with the first fruits of all your produce;</p> <p>¹⁰ then your barns will be filled with plenty, and your vats will be bursting with wine.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Proverbs 3:9-10</p>
<p>2 Corinthians 9:6-7</p> <p>⁶ The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. ⁷ Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">2 Corinthians 9:6-7</p>	<p>Acts 1:8</p> <p>But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Acts 1:8</p>
<p>Matthew 28:19-20</p> <p>¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Matthew 28:19-20</p>	<p>Philippians 2:3-4</p> <p>³ Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. ⁴ Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Philippians 2:3-4</p>
<p>1 Peter 5:5-6</p> <p>⁵ Likewise, you who are younger, be subject to the elders. Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.” ⁶ Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you,</p> <p>1 Peter 5:5-6</p>	<p>Romans 8:28</p> <p>And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.</p> <p>Romans 8:28</p>

<p>Romans 12:2</p> <p>Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Romans 12:2</p>	<p>Psalm 29:2</p> <p>Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name; worship the Lord in the splendor of holiness.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Psalm 29:2</p>
<p>Psalm 31:23-24</p> <p>²³ Love the Lord, all you his saints! The Lord preserves the faithful but abundantly repays the one who acts in pride. ²⁴ Be strong, and let your heart take courage, all you who wait for the Lord!</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Psalm 31:23-24</p>	<p>Psalm 33:17-19</p> <p>¹⁷ The war horse is a false hope for salvation, and by its great might it cannot rescue. ¹⁸ Behold, the eye of the Lord is on those who fear him, on those who hope in his steadfast love, ¹⁹ that he may deliver their soul from death and keep them alive in famine.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Psalm 33:17-19</p>
<p>Psalm 34:7</p> <p>The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him, and delivers them.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Psalm 34:7</p>	<p>Psalm 37:8-9</p> <p>⁸ Refrain from anger, and forsake wrath! Fret not yourself; it tends only to evil. ⁹ For the evildoers shall be cut off, but those who wait for the Lord shall inherit the land.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Psalm 37:8-9</p>
<p>Luke 14:11</p> <p>For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Luke 14:11</p>	<p>Ecclesiastes 12:13-14</p> <p>¹³ The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. ¹⁴ For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Ecclesiastes 12:13-14</p>
<p>Proverbs 25:26</p> <p>Like a muddied spring or a polluted fountain is a righteous man who gives way before the wicked.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Proverbs 25:26</p>	<p>Proverbs 20:6</p> <p>Many a man proclaims his own steadfast love, but a faithful man who can find?</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Proverbs 20:6</p>

<p>Joel 3:2</p> <p>I will gather all the nations and bring them down to the Valley of Jehoshaphat. And I will enter into judgment with them there, on behalf of my people and my heritage Israel, because they have scattered them among the nations and have divided up my land</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Joel 3:2</p>	<p>Hebrews 12:1-2</p> <p>Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, ² looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Hebrews 12:1-2</p>
<p>Psalm 41:1-3</p> <p>Blessed is the one who considers the poor! In the day of trouble the Lord delivers him; ² the Lord protects him and keeps him alive; he is called blessed in the land; you do not give him up to the will of his enemies. ³ The Lord sustains him on his sickbed; in his illness you restore him to full health.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Psalm 41:1-3</p>	<p>Isaiah 66:2</p> <p>All these things my hand has made, and so all these things came to be, declares the Lord. But this is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Isaiah 66:2</p>
<p>Romans 5:3-5</p> <p>³ Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, ⁴ and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, ⁵ and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Romans 5:3-5</p>	<p>Philippians 4:4</p> <p>Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Philippians 4:4</p>
<p>Hebrews 12:3-4</p> <p>³ Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted. ⁴ In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Hebrews 12:3-4</p>	<p>Hebrews 12:5-6</p> <p>⁵ And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons? “My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. ⁶ For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives.”</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Hebrews 12:5-6</p>
<p>Proverbs 24:16</p> <p>for the righteous falls seven times and rises again, but the wicked stumble in times of calamity.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Proverbs 24:16</p>	<p>1 Samuel 16:6-7</p> <p>⁶ When they came, he looked on Eliab and thought, “Surely the Lord's anointed is before him.” ⁷ But the Lord said to Samuel, “Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him. For the Lord sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.”</p> <p style="text-align: right;">1 Samuel 16:6-7</p>

<p>Hebrews 12:28-29</p> <p>²⁸ Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, ²⁹ for our God is a consuming fire.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Hebrews 12:28-29</p>	<p>Luke 12:2-3</p> <p>² Nothing is covered up that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known. ³ Therefore whatever you have said in the dark shall be heard in the light, and what you have whispered in private rooms shall be proclaimed on the housetops.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Luke 12:2-3</p>
<p>Psalm 32:10-11</p> <p>¹⁰ Many are the sorrows of the wicked, but steadfast love surrounds the one who trusts in the Lord.</p> <p>¹¹ Be glad in the Lord, and rejoice, O righteous, and shout for joy, all you upright in heart!</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Psalm 32:10-11</p>	<p>Matthew 12:36-37</p> <p>³⁶ I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, ³⁷ for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.”</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Matthew 12:36-37</p>
<p>Deuteronomy 4:9</p> <p>“Only take care, and keep your soul diligently, lest you forget the things that your eyes have seen, and lest they depart from your heart all the days of your life. Make them known to your children and your children’s children</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Deuteronomy 4:9</p>	<p>Proverbs 16:32</p> <p>Whoever is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he who rules his spirit than he who takes a city.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Proverbs 16:32</p>
<p>Proverbs 11:2-3</p> <p>² When pride comes, then comes disgrace, but with the humble is wisdom.</p> <p>³ The integrity of the upright guides them, but the crookedness of the treacherous destroys them.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Proverbs 11:2-3</p>	<p>1 Samuel 2:30</p> <p>Therefore the Lord, the God of Israel, declares: ‘I promised that your house and the house of your father should go in and out before me forever,’ but now the Lord declares: ‘Far be it from me, for those who honor me I will honor, and those who despise me shall be lightly esteemed.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">1 Samuel 2:30</p>
<p>Jeremiah 17:7-8</p> <p>⁷ “Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord.</p> <p>⁸ He is like a tree planted by water, that sends out its roots by the stream, and does not fear when heat comes, for its leaves remain green, and is not anxious in the year of drought, for it does not cease to bear fruit.”</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Jeremiah 17:7-8</p>	<p>Deuteronomy 8:5-6</p> <p>⁵ Know then in your heart that, as a man disciplines his son, the Lord your God disciplines you. ⁶ So you shall keep the commandments of the Lord your God by walking in his ways and by fearing him.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Deuteronomy 8:5-6</p>

<p>Luke 9:23-25</p> <p>²³ And he said to all, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. ²⁴ For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it. ²⁵ For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself?</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Luke 9:23-25</p>	<p>Colossians 2:6-8</p> <p>⁶ Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, ⁷ rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving. ⁸ See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Colossians 2:6-8</p>
<p>Psalm 141:3</p> <p>Set a guard, O Lord, over my mouth; keep watch over the door of my lips!</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Psalm 141:3</p>	<p>Psalm 51:15-17</p> <p>¹⁵ O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise. ¹⁶ For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it; you will not be pleased with a burnt offering. ¹⁷ The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Psalm 51:15-17</p>
<p>Proverbs 24:10</p> <p>If you faint in the day of adversity, your strength is small.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Proverbs 24:10</p>	<p>Proverbs 25:28</p> <p>A man without self-control is like a city broken into and left without walls.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Proverbs 25:28</p>
<p>Mark 11:23-25</p> <p>²³ Truly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, ‘Be taken up and thrown into the sea,’ and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says will come to pass, it will be done for him. ²⁴ Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. ²⁵ And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses.”</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Mark 11:23-25</p>	<p>Ecclesiastes 7:21-22</p> <p>²¹ Do not take to heart all the things that people say, lest you hear your servant cursing you. ²² Your heart knows that many times you yourself have cursed others.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Ecclesiastes 7:21-22</p>
<p>Proverbs 28:18-20</p> <p>¹⁸ Whoever walks in integrity will be delivered, but he who is crooked in his ways will suddenly fall. ¹⁹ Whoever works his land will have plenty of bread, but he who follows worthless pursuits will have plenty of poverty. ²⁰ A faithful man will abound with blessings, but whoever hastens to be rich will not go unpunished.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Proverbs 28:18-20</p>	<p>1 Chronicles 28:9</p> <p>“And you, Solomon my son, know the God of your father and serve him with a whole heart and with a willing mind, for the Lord searches all hearts and understands every plan and thought. If you seek him, he will be found by you, but if you forsake him, he will cast you off forever.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">1 Chronicles 28:9</p>

<p>Psalm 119:71</p> <p>It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I might learn your statutes.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Psalm 119:71</p>	<p>Psalm 145:18-20</p> <p>The Lord is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth. ¹⁹ He fulfills the desire of those who fear him; he also hears their cry and saves them. ²⁰ The Lord preserves all who love him, but all the wicked he will destroy.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Psalm 145:18-20</p>
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Verses concerning prayers, praise, proclamation, declaration and confession

<p>Psalm 32:7</p> <p>You are a hiding place for me; you preserve me from trouble; you surround me with shouts of deliverance.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Psalm 32:7</p>	<p>Psalm 42:11</p> <p>Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Psalm 42:11</p>
<p>Psalm 46:1-2</p> <p>God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. ² Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea,</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Psalm 46:1-2</p>	<p>Hebrews 10:23</p> <p>Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Hebrews 10:23</p>
<p>Psalm 18:3</p> <p>I call upon the Lord, who is worthy to be praised, and I am saved from my enemies.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Psalm 18:3</p>	<p>Psalm 144:1-2</p> <p>Blessed be the Lord, my rock, who trains my hands for war, and my fingers for battle; ² he is my steadfast love and my fortress, my stronghold and my deliverer, my shield and he in whom I take refuge, who subdues peoples under me.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Psalm 144:1-2</p>

<p>2 Chronicles 20:22</p> <p>And when they began to sing and praise, the Lord set an ambush against the men of Ammon, Moab, and Mount Seir, who had come against Judah, so that they were routed.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">2 Chronicles 20:22</p>	<p>Psalm 100:4</p> <p>Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise! Give thanks to him; bless his name!</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Psalm 100:4</p>
<p>Psalm 113:1-3</p> <p>Praise the Lord! Praise, O servants of the Lord, praise the name of the Lord! ² Blessed be the name of the Lord from this time forth and forevermore! ³ From the rising of the sun to its setting, the name of the Lord is to be praised!</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Psalm 113:1-3</p>	<p>Psalm 116:7</p> <p>Return, O my soul, to your rest; for the Lord has dealt bountifully with you.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Psalm 116:7</p>
<p>Psalm 121:1-3</p> <p>I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come? ² My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth. ³ He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Psalm 121:1-3</p>	<p>Psalm 122:6-7</p> <p>Pray for the peace of Jerusalem! “May they be secure who love you! ⁷ Peace be within your walls and security within your towers!”</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Psalm 122:6-7</p>
<p>Psalm 139:23-24</p> <p>Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! ²⁴ And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Psalm 139:23-24</p>	<p>Psalm 141:4</p> <p>Do not let my heart incline to any evil, to busy myself with wicked deeds in company with men who work iniquity, and let me not eat of their delicacies!</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Psalm 141:4</p>
<p>Psalm 141:10</p> <p>Let the wicked fall into their own nets, while I pass by safely.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Psalm 141:10</p>	<p>Ephesians 1:17-19</p> <p>that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, ¹⁸ having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, ¹⁹ and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Ephesians 1:17-19</p>

<p>Psalm 56:4</p> <p>In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I shall not be afraid. What can flesh do to me?</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Psalm 56:4</p>	<p>Revelation 12:11</p> <p>And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Revelation 12:11</p>
<p>Psalm 146:1-2</p> <p>Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord, O my soul! ² I will praise the Lord as long as I live; I will sing praises to my God while I have my being.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Psalm 146:1-2</p>	<p>Psalm 34:1</p> <p>I will bless the Lord at all times; his praise shall continually be in my mouth.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Psalm 34:1</p>
<p>Psalm 95:1-3</p> <p>Oh come, let us sing to the Lord; let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation! ² Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving; let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise! ³ For the Lord is a great God, and a great King above all gods.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Psalm 95:1-3</p>	<p>Psalm 98:8-9</p> <p>⁸ Let the rivers clap their hands; let the hills sing for joy together ⁹ before the Lord, for he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with equity.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Psalm 98:8-9</p>
<p>Numbers 20:16</p> <p>And when we cried to the Lord, he heard our voice and sent an angel and brought us out of Egypt. And here we are in Kadesh, a city on the edge of your territory.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Numbers 20:16</p>	<p>Numbers 10:35</p> <p>And whenever the ark set out, Moses said, “Arise, O Lord, and let your enemies be scattered, and let those who hate you flee before you.”</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Numbers 10:35</p>
<p>Psalm 145:1-3</p> <p>I will extol you, my God and King, and bless your name forever and ever. ² Every day I will bless you and praise your name forever and ever. ³ Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised, and his greatness is unsearchable.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Psalm 145:1-3</p>	<p>Psalm 125:1-2</p> <p>Those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion, which cannot be moved, but abides forever. ² As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the Lord surrounds his people, from this time forth and forevermore.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Psalm 125:1-2</p>

<p>Psalm 119:18</p> <p>Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of your law.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Psalm 119:18</p>	<p>Psalm 119:36</p> <p>Incline my heart to your testimonies, and not to selfish gain!</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Psalm 119:36</p>
<p>Psalm 119:89</p> <p>Forever, O Lord, your word is firmly fixed in the heavens.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Psalm 119:89</p>	<p>Psalm 119:112</p> <p>I incline my heart to perform your statutes forever, to the end.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Psalm 119:112</p>
<p>Psalm 3:3-6</p> <p>But you, O Lord, are a shield about me, my glory, and the lifter of my head. ⁴ I cried aloud to the Lord, and he answered me from his holy hill. ⁵ I lay down and slept; I woke again, for the Lord sustained me. ⁶ I will not be afraid of many thousands of people who have set themselves against me all around.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Psalm 3:3-6</p>	<p>Psalm 103:1-2</p> <p>Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name! ² Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Psalm 103:1-2</p>
<p>Psalm 20:6-8</p> <p>⁶ Now I know that the Lord saves his anointed; he will answer him from his holy heaven with the saving might of his right hand. ⁷ Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the Lord our God. ⁸ They collapse and fall, but we rise and stand upright.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Psalm 20:6-8</p>	<p>2 Timothy 4:18</p> <p>The Lord will rescue me from every evil deed and bring me safely into his heavenly kingdom. To him be the glory forever and ever. Amen.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">2 Timothy 4:18</p>
<p>Psalm 145:18-20</p> <p>¹⁸ The Lord is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth. ¹⁹ He fulfills the desire of those who fear him; he also hears their cry and saves them. ²⁰ The Lord preserves all who love him, but all the wicked he will destroy.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Psalm 145:18-20</p>	<p>Psalm 99:1-3</p> <p>The Lord reigns; let the peoples tremble! He sits enthroned upon the cherubim; let the earth quake! ² The Lord is great in Zion; he is exalted over all the peoples. ³ Let them praise your great and awesome name! Holy is he!</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Psalm 99:1-3</p>

<p>Psalm 35:1-3</p> <p>Contend, O Lord, with those who contend with me; fight against those who fight against me! ² Take hold of shield and buckler and rise for my help! ³ Draw the spear and javelin against my pursuers! Say to my soul, “I am your salvation!”</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Psalm 35:1-3</p>	<p>Psalm 9:1-2</p> <p>I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart; I will recount all of your wonderful deeds. ² I will be glad and exult in you; I will sing praise to your name, O Most High.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Psalm 9:1-2</p>
<p>Psalm 104:33-34</p> <p>³³ I will sing to the Lord as long as I live; I will sing praise to my God while I have being. ³⁴ May my meditation be pleasing to him, for I rejoice in the Lord.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Psalm 104:33-34</p>	<p>Jeremiah 20:11</p> <p>But the Lord is with me as a dread warrior; therefore my persecutors will stumble; they will not overcome me. They will be greatly shamed, for they will not succeed. Their eternal dishonor will never be forgotten.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Jeremiah 20:11</p>
<p>Psalm 108:3-5</p> <p>I will give thanks to you, O Lord, among the peoples; I will sing praises to you among the nations. ⁴ For your steadfast love is great above the heavens; your faithfulness reaches to the clouds. ⁵ Be exalted, O God, above the heavens! Let your glory be over all the earth!</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Psalm 108:3-5</p>	<p>1 Chronicles 29:13</p> <p>And now we thank you, our God, and praise your glorious name.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">1 Chronicles 29:13</p>
<p>Psalm 118:6-8</p> <p>The Lord is on my side; I will not fear. What can man do to me? ⁷ The Lord is on my side as my helper; I shall look in triumph on those who hate me. ⁸ It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to trust in man.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Psalm 118:6-8</p>	<p>Psalm 118:17</p> <p>I shall not die, but I shall live, and recount the deeds of the Lord.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Psalm 118:17</p>

Blank cards in which you can write your own preferred verses
